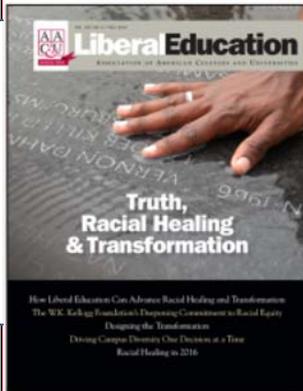




Association of American Colleges & Universities

A VOICE AND A FORCE FOR LIBERAL EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Fall 2016, Vol. 102, No. 4

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Why Decolonization?

By: Terry Cross

Most people do not think of the United States as a colonial power, and so they might wonder why decolonization is included as a vital component of the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation (TRHT) enterprise. Decolonization is usually thought of as getting rid of colonization, or freeing one sovereign nation from the control and rule of another. Colonialism is a multidimensional process that involves the economic, cultural, legal, and ideological domination of one people over another. It is an extreme form of exclusion that, by definition, denies the existence, reality, and legitimacy of the colonized population.

In the contemporary US context, these concepts apply to the situation of some 567 American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, Indigenous Hawaiians seeking federal recognition as the Sovereign Kingdom of Hawaii, and all sixteen US territories. In the case of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, and that of the US territories, each has an Indigenous government that retains sovereign status—that is, the right to self-government. Yet in each case, that sovereignty is limited by the colonial power. For federally recognized tribes, the government-to-government relationship is constitutionally established. However, colonialism has far greater reach than its impact on sovereignty. Colonialism imposes control on the very hearts, minds, and spirits of the colonized. The cultures, languages, religions, natural resources, and lifeways of Indigenous peoples have been, and continue to be, suppressed; in some cases, they have been extinguished, and in others exploited for the benefit of the dominant population.

The framework of colonialism is found today in a system of laws that serves the interests of the dominant population at the expense of Indigenous populations. For example, despite having their own laws, law enforcement agencies, and courts, American Indian tribes cannot prosecute a non-Indian for crimes (including child abuse) committed on tribal lands. Similarly, territories that are home to large military installations cannot prosecute US military personnel for crimes against their people. Control of food and water provides another stark example. The Alaska Native Village of Nanwalek looks out over the richest halibut fishery in the world—its traditional fishing ground—yet tribal members cannot commercially fish there, and even subsistence fishing is highly regulated.

Postcolonialism is another concept that is sometimes used to describe these circumstances. Postcolonialism refers to the socioeconomic, cultural, and legal legacy of colonialism. This legacy appears in various forms, such as cultural genocide, forced assimilation, historic trauma and grief, and the suppression of the colonial story to the point of denying or rendering Indigenous culture invisible. However, the term “postcolonialism” implies that colonialism has ended. In the United States, colonialism is still alive and functioning, though it

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is seldom referred to as such. Today, the manifestations of colonialism include health and social disparities that are ignored or accepted as normal. Unemployment on Indian reservations can range between 50 and 80 percent, for example, and youth suicide for males is nearly eight times the national average. Such problems would never be tolerated in mainstream communities. This living legacy sends a message to the colonized that their value is less than that of the dominant population.

The TRHT enterprise seeks to jettison the false paradigm of a race-based hierarchy of human value. This includes the false hierarchy established by colonialism. Today, Indigenous peoples in the United States are rejecting colonial lies. It is not okay to take lands that do not belong to you; it is wrong to exploit the natural resources of others; it is immoral to commit cultural genocide; and it is an atrocity to take children for the purposes of control and assimilation, even under the pretense of rescue. TRHT seeks to shed light on these persistent practices and to support decolonization wherever the value of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and governments is denied, and whenever people are deprived of the full right and expression of human dignity.

Terry Cross is founding director of the *National Indian Child Welfare Association*.

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