



## Decolonizing Refugee Studies, Standing up for Indigenous Justice: Challenges and Possibilities of a Politics of Place

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*ABSTRACT, This paper interrogates the challenges and potentials for solidarity between refugees and Indigenous peoples by bringing decolonial, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist critiques in different parts of the world, including in white settler colonies and in the Third World, into conversation with each other and with Refugee Studies. The first section of the paper offers two analytical steps towards decolonizing mainstream Refugee Studies. The first step involves identifying, analyzing and problematizing what we may call “an elephant in the room,” a parallax gap between Refugee Studies and studies of International Politics. The second analytical step is problematizing and challenging the popular discourses of charity and gratitude that dominate refugee discourses and narratives in the Global North. The second section of the paper engages in a more direct and detailed discussion about challenges to and possibilities for solidarity between refugees and Indigenous peoples. Articulating historical and contemporary parallels between refugee displacement from land and Indigenous dispossession of land, this section demonstrates that there are nevertheless no guarantees for political solidarity. It argues that potentials for solidarity are contingent on a politics of place, as articulated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars; and also possibly on a reconceptualization and reorientation of refugee identity different from the ways it has been constituted in colonial discourses.*

**KEYWORDS** refugee studies; international politics; imperialism; Indigenous justice; politics of place

Despite their disparate histories and geographies, and variations in their positionalities, refugees and Indigenous peoples share experiences of displacement as well as a problematic, subordinate relationship to the nation-state. In recent decades, the expansionary, predatory nature of global capitalism and a planetary crisis of climate change have posed additional economic and environmental threats to dispossess and displace peoples. These threats, as well as the global rise of nationalism, militarism,

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ISSN: 1911-4788



authoritarian populisms and white supremacy mean that solidarities between and among marginalized peoples and groups have gained a new urgency.

In recent years, the term *decolonization* has been used most commonly to address and undo processes of Indigenous colonization in white settler colonies. Historically, however, the term has been used in relation to a variety of anti-colonial struggles and processes in Africa and Asia.<sup>1</sup> By applying the term decolonization to Refugee Studies and dominant refugee discourses, this paper attempts to recover and develop a wider transnational analytic, to bring decolonial, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist critiques in different parts of the world, including in white settler colonies and in the Third World, into conversation with each other. Relying on critical, anti-imperialist observations made in the post-Cold War period that have largely escaped attention in academic and political discussions, I suggest that currently there are obstacles to such conversations, primarily rooted in the ways mainstream Refugee Studies and dominant refugee discourses approach refugee issues and construct refugees. As an essential analytical step towards reflecting on the relations and tensions between refugee and Indigenous justice issues, therefore, the paper starts with proposing ways to decolonize Refugee Studies.

Bhupinder Chimni (1998, 2009) has argued that Refugee Studies, and more recently Forced Migration Studies, have been largely Euro/North centric in their institutional structure and orientation. Ironically, even as the vast majority of the world's refugees live in neighbouring countries in the Global South, major research centres and key journals in the field are located in the Global North, most theorizing is done in Western/Northern countries, and solutions are articulated in "north-dominated international governmental and non-governmental organizations" (Chimni, 2009, pp. 16-17). Based on Chimni's observations, it is possible to elaborate that one of the most important implications of this North centrism in Refugee Studies has been that the issues discussed and solutions offered are connected to the politically and geopolitically defined interests, priorities and concerns of Northern countries: their "security," their sovereignty, their resources (or lack thereof), their policies and institutions, their "culture," their labour market needs, and their "refugee crises." In contexts where there is partial, selective or conditional acceptance of refugees from the Global South, the issue is once again presented as Western compassion, generosity or "hospitality to strangers."

At the analytical level, I argue that the North centrism of Refugee Studies has two major implications that lead to colonization of Refugee Studies and refugee discourses. The first is an "elephant in the room," an unacknowledged, unproblematized, but ubiquitous presence of International

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<sup>1</sup> See Fanon (1966) for the early conceptualization of the term "decolonization." In recent years, we continue to see the term used in relation to the independence struggles of formerly colonized states and regions in Africa and Asia. See, for example, Bogaerts and Raben (2012) and Hargreaves (2014).

Politics and International Political Economy, and a curious *parallax gap* between Refugee Studies and studies of International Politics,<sup>2</sup> which lead to implicit presumptions of innocence regarding the role of powerful Northern states in the making of refugees. Of course, international relations and imperialism are not the only factors in refugee production. Exclusionary and authoritarian nationalisms in post-colonial states and the comprador bourgeois relationship of Third World elites to global capitalism play very important roles in forced migration. This paper, however, focuses on international relationships, as it is the focus missing in the academic literature and in popular discourses. Another implication of this bias has been the tendency in Northern discourses to approach refugee protection in a charity framework, one that enables not only an evasion of accountability regarding the conditions of refugee production, but also the expectation of gratitude from refugees, as wards of Western states if they are given protection.

In parts of my discussion problematizing the charity discourses regarding refugees, I rely heavily on Critical Refugee Studies scholars, specifically those who have been writing from the Vietnamese diaspora. As opposed to tendencies in *mainstream* Refugee Studies to conceptualize “refugee lifeworlds... as a problem to be solved by global elites” and to be blind to and to take international power relations for granted, *Critical* Refugee Studies approaches refugee studies as a “site of social, political and historical critiques that when carefully traced make transparent processes of colonization, war, and displacement” (Critical Refugee Studies Collective, n.d.).

As I try to demonstrate below, challenging the analytical gaps and biases in mainstream Refugee Studies and discourses has the potential to bring Refugee Studies into closer discussion with, and more likely to learn from, Indigenous knowledge and politics. Engagement with Indigeneity could potentially inform and enrich Refugee Studies and discourses in two major ways. First, it could help push the focus in conceptualizations of refugee justice to go *beyond* policies, practices and experiences of protection or exclusion in migration and diaspora, to *also* address displacement and injustices in the international politics of refugee production. Second, Indigenous knowledge could inform a *place-based* episteme that helps to challenge the logic and discourse of the grateful refugee and also to inspire and inform alternative political subjectivities and collective political visions of another world beyond colonialism, imperialism, interventionism, war, capitalist expansion and environmental degradation. These would be decolonial collective visions that would help people imagine “how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term “parallax gap” from Harald Bauder (2011). Bauder mentions that even though “in settler societies like Canada the Aboriginal and immigration narratives are factually closely related” (p. 517) they are separated in public and academic discourses. Drawing on Zizek, Bauder names this separation a parallax gap and proposes to close it.

nonauthoritarian, non-dominating, nonexploitive manner” (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016, p. 254).

The paper is organized into two main sections. The first section addresses steps towards decolonizing Refugee Studies and refugee discourses in order to challenge the *parallax gap* and the charity framework, and to bring refugee justice into conversation with Indigenous justice. The second section directly engages with challenges to and possibilities for solidarities between refugee and Indigenous justice. Articulating parallels between factors contributing to production of refugees and Indigenous dispossession, this section argues that there are nevertheless no guarantees for political solidarity. Potentials for solidarity are rather contingent on a *politics of place*, as articulated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars; and also possibly on a *reconceptualization* of refugee identity and experiences different from the ways they have been constituted in colonial discourses.

The paper focuses on refugees and forced migrants, as opposed to all migrants, immigrants, “arrivants,”<sup>3</sup> or settlers in settler colonies. This is different from the tendency in the recent literature to discuss im/migrant – or specifically, racialized im/migrants – more generally. Even though a rigid and dichotomous distinction between forced and voluntary migration is not valid in relation to real life experiences of many migrants, a general category of im/migrants, even non-white im/migrants, is very diverse in their class status (also including business class investors), their motivations for migration, their privileges in transnational mobility, and chances and conditions of belonging in diaspora. For this reason, I suggest that a focus on refugees may be particularly relevant and advantageous in attempts to bring Indigenous and migrant justice issues into conversation with one another. By definition, refugees are people who have been forced to leave their place of origin. It can be argued that compared to other groups of migrants, the category of refugee more clearly and profoundly represents a sense of loss, an unresolved and grievable relationship to the places they come from, similar to experiences of land dispossession of Indigenous peoples. While this focus is specific, my use of the concept is also wide and flexible, going beyond the narrow boundaries of “refugee” in international law and conventions, and including those forced out of their lands due to economic deprivation, “development” projects, climate change, etc.

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<sup>3</sup> The term is Jodi Byrd’s. She uses the term in her *Transit of Empire* (2011) to distinguish between white settlers and racialized settlers.

## **Decolonizing Refugee Studies I: Naming the “Elephant in the Room” and Addressing the Parallax Gap between Refugee Studies and International Politics**

Bhupinder Chimni (1998, 2009) has argued that there has been a paradigm shift in Refugee Studies in the post-Cold War period. One of the dimensions of this paradigm shift has been the tendency to underestimate the significance of external factors and to rely only on “internalist interpretations of the root causes of refugee flows which la[y] the blame at the door of the postcolonial societies and states” (Chimni, 1998, p. 351). What is especially ironic about the post-Cold War period is how the tendency to keep analysis of International Political Economy, International Politics, and specifically imperialism, out of Refugee Studies precisely corresponds to a world context that has witnessed an intensification of corporate globalization and escalation of Western political and military interventions.

Since the early 1990s, Northern nations and NATO have been conspicuously present on the world stage, actively intervening in the politics of Southern nations and contributing to destabilization of vast regions. Especially consequential for several Southern countries since the 1990s have been so-called “humanitarian interventions” – typically, military operations – used as a pretext for regime change. Curiously, in this very context, critical analysis and reaction to some imperialist interventions has been rather mute, most notably in cases of Yugoslavia, Haiti, Libya and Syria.<sup>4</sup> The changes since the early 1990s have been legitimized through what has been called the “new ideology of imperialism” (Furedi, 1994) that started to gain force right after the end of the Cold War. Whereas an explicit defence of imperialism had lost moral and intellectual legitimacy for the decades following WWII, there were efforts by Western ideologues since the 1980s to “morally rehabilitate imperialism” by “discredit[ing]” the Third World, “intellectually annihilat[ing] Third World nationalism” (Furedi, 1994, pp. 101, 110). It is interesting how this ideology became influential even among respectable mainstream organizations. Emerging in the mid 1980s as an offshoot of the highly respectable humanitarian organization *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF), *Liberté sans Frontières* (LSF), for example, attacked Third Worldism in two ways. It rejected Northern responsibility for Third World poverty and underdevelopment and challenged anti-colonial notions of self-determination as a foundational human right (Whyte, 2019). By the 1990s “the ever strengthening consensus” in the West was that “the problems of the Third World stem from its moral and cultural limitations” (Furedi, 1994, p.

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<sup>4</sup> The mutedness, or at times, the confusion, in responses to these cases constitute a stark comparison with the reaction to the 2003 Iraq War which was interpreted by most critics as an imperialist war. Anti-imperialist critiques of interventions in the former Yugoslavia, Haiti, Libya and Syria, however, have been very few and far between. Some exceptions are analyses provided by Ali (2000) and Johnstone (2002) on Yugoslavia; Engler and Fenton (2005) and Gordon (2010) on Haiti; and Engler (2012) on Libya.

98). It was, therefore, “*not colonialism but decolonization* that [was] likely to be treated as problematic” (Furedi, 1994, p. 98; italics in original).

The perspective that has dominated Northern interpretations of some of the Southern conflicts of the last few decades is not just “internalist,” but also one that emphasizes the “irrational and uncontrollable” nature of conflict, assumed to be based (only or mainly) in ethnic and “cultural” differences. Using a colonial, or what we may specifically call an Orientalist lens on Third World conflicts, this perspective sees the countries and peoples in the South as unable to govern themselves.<sup>5</sup> The recent proliferation of a vocabulary in International Politics which speaks of “failed” and “rogue states” in the Global South and “humanitarian interventions” and a “Responsibility to Protect” by the global North,<sup>6</sup> suggests that countries and regions in the global South are perceived as the main source of violence in the world – both in relation to the people living there and as a threat towards the global North – while imperial violence is invisibilized, normalized and legitimized. As James Paul, the former executive director of the New York-based Global Policy Forum expresses, the official discourse in Europe frames the civil wars and economic turmoil leading to the exodus of refugees from Africa and elsewhere on “fanaticism, corruption, dictatorship, economic failures and other causes for which they [the Europeans] have no responsibility” (Deen, 2015). As this official discourse stays “silent about the military intervention and for change in which Europeans were major actors, interventions that have torn refugees’ homelands apart and resulted in civil war and state collapse,” Paul offers the term “regime change refugees” as a corrective to the dominant perspective on refugees (Deen, 2015).

In academic and popular narratives of International Politics in recent decades, some stories of civil war, genocide and displacement have been widely circulated, but others have hardly been mentioned. Whereas specific narratives about Rwanda, (former) Yugoslavia and Syria, for example, have been repeatedly told, there has hardly been any attention paid to the genocide going on in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since the 1990s. In relation to the countries whose stories of genocide and displacement have been told, there is only one narrative that overwhelmingly dominates the interpretations of what has happened and why. This narrative carefully omits any possibility that Western countries or North-dominated international institutions may bear responsibility for the root causes and tensions leading to or the exacerbating the conflict. Thus, if there are scant references to Belgian colonialism in the making of Hutu-Tutsi tensions in Rwanda, there is hardly any discussion of the more recent role that international financial institutions have played in creating and perpetuating the conditions for ethnic tensions (Chimni, 1998; Collins, 2002). The latter has also rarely been mentioned in

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<sup>5</sup> See Said (1978, p. 33). Also see Andreasson (2005), on how Orientalism has been used in relation to Africa.

<sup>6</sup> The “Responsibility to Protect” is a doctrine that has been part of international law since 2005.

the case of the ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia (Chimni, 1998). Also rare have been narratives that focus on the active political and military roles that NATO and individual Western states have played in the continuation – rather than peaceful resolution – of civil wars in Yugoslavia (Ali, 2000; Chimni, 1998; Gibbs, 2009; Johnstone, 2002) Libya (Engler, 2012), and Syria.

Despite the existence of a parallax gap, references to International Politics are not altogether missing in Refugee Studies. There are indeed a few collections in the discipline of International Relations that specifically focus on the relationships among forced migration, refugees and international relations (Betts, 2009; Betts & Loescher, 2011; Münz & Weiner, 1997). Informed by the realist perspective in International Relations, however, many of the contributions in these volumes reflect and perpetuate a Northern securitization bias in their approach to refugee issues. Rather than assuming responsibility for the emergence or exacerbation of conflicts, this perspective assigns and advocates for a central role for the North to “solve” the problems through various interventions, including militarized “humanitarian interventions” for regime change and “economic reconstruction” integrating the country further into global capitalism. When refugees are mentioned in this perspective – as in the foreign policies informed by them – they are treated as “pawns and not concerns,” using violations of their human rights to “justify violence and naked exercise of power” (Chimni, 2000, p. 253).

In many cases, the claims to “humanitarianism” in foreign interventions go side by side with the rejection of refugees at the borders of the same countries that participate in “humanitarian” missions. The contradiction between these two positions is not problematized, but is often taken for granted in the mainstream of academic research and public discourses. Commenting on the Afghan War and the “humanitarian” concern in Britain for Afghan women, Gary Younge in *The Guardian* exposes the ironies of this concern:

So we murder and maim in the name of the common good – not so much a war as a humanitarian effort with the unfortunate side effects of death and destruction. And should those who we seek to protect [by our international military actions] arrive on our shores, all apparent concern evaporates in a haze of xenophobic bellicosity. Whatever compassion may have been expressed previously is confiscated at the border. As soon as they touch British soil they go from being a cause to be championed to a problem to be dealt with. We may flout international law abroad, but God forbid any one should breach immigration law here... We love them so we bomb them; we loathe them so we deport them. (Younge, 2002)

Critical voices that see and problematize the ironic connections and contradictions between foreign policy and refugee policy have often been marginalized in public discourse. One could argue that the parallax gap enables, as it also disguises, the irony in a period of (reconfigured and re-emboldened) imperialism that there are, on the one hand, *no borders* for Northern foreign policy, its economic policies, and political and military

operations around the world, but *absolute borders* when it comes to decisions regarding acceptance or rejection of migrants and refugees, who are often themselves displaced and dispossessed by *no border* foreign policies.

## **Decolonizing Refugee Studies II: Challenging Discourses of Charity and Gratitude**

The second step in decolonizing Refugee Studies and refugee discourses would involve interrogating the kinds of subjectivities and relationships imposed on refugees. In the absence of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist perspectives in International Politics and International Political Economy, refugees are perceived either as threats and burdens, or as helpless victims dependent on Northern charity. In fact, there is a direct relationship between the absence of critical perspectives on Western foreign policy, economic policies and wars, and the dominance of a charity framework in discourses of refugee protection. Based on implicit assumptions of a Manichean world neatly divided between “refugee producers and refugee havens” (Nguyen, 2018, p. 469) – conceptualized in a South-North axis – even “refugee-friendly” liberal-humanitarian perspectives do not see the so-called “refugee crisis” as related to foreign policy. They rather see it as one of inevitable difficulties and shortcomings in adjusting policies, institutions and resources in countries facing sudden, unexpected, large influxes of refugees (Belanger & Saraçoğlu, 2019).<sup>7</sup> The charity discourse posits the Global North as *absent* and *innocent* in the production of refugees, and as benevolent and generous if – and to the extent that – it may choose to provide any protections. In the logic of charity, benevolence is discretionary and may therefore be extended, as it may also be equally “legitimately” denied.

Several researchers have pointed out a serious deterioration in the image and status of the typical refugee figure in the post-Cold War period. During the Cold War, European refugees escaping from the other side of the “Iron Curtain” were depicted as heroic individuals exercising political agency. Perceived as people who had “a past, a story and a voice all of which were used to validate the West in its ideological war” (Johnson, 2011, p. 1020), they were seen as ideal subjects for resettlement and naturalization in Western countries (Johnson, 2011; Pupavac, 2008). Even though the attitude toward Third World refugees ranged from welcoming to ambiguous and outright exclusionary, there seemed to be some ideological value to refugees for most of the Cold War period. The post-Cold War era witnessed not only

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<sup>7</sup> Belanger and Saraçoğlu (2019) focus on a non-Western case of imperial aspirations, that of Turkey in relation to Syria. They point out that Turkey’s interventionist “neo-Ottoman” policies in the Syrian civil war have meant that Turkey cannot simply be characterized as a benevolent “passive recipient” of Syrian refugees. Based on Turkey’s political and geopolitical interests and goals, they argue that the “refugee crisis” in Turkey needs to be understood also as crises of Turkish politics and foreign policy.

the loss of the ideological value of refugees (Castles, 2003; Johnson, 2011), but also increasingly racialized, victimized and feminized depictions of Third World refugees as faceless, nameless, undifferentiated masses of humanity, lacking political agency and political voice (Johnson, 2011). New discourses associated refugees from the Global South with “mass movements, economic opportunism and threats to security,” helping generate and legitimize concerns about “the sanctity of borders” (Johnson, 2011, p.1023). Along with the diminished humanity, or even outright criminalization of refugees, it has not been surprising that refugee policies in the Global North shifted in this period from enabling resettlement and integration to tolerating detentions and deportations, or at best emphasizing “preventive protection,” or temporary protection and repatriation (Chimni, 2009; Johnson, 2011).

I argue that the charity discourse constructs refugees as colonial subjects, and re-colonizes them in a second way, after the violence of their displacement and dispossession. The charity framework denies responsibility for production of refugees – and can therefore legitimize denial of protection – and defines for the recipient what the nature and conditions of “protection” will be. Typically, it demands from refugees a confirmation and legitimization of power relations. This framework creates an enormous societal “appetite for refugee gratitude often leav(ing) no room [among refugees] for other emotions such as bitterness, resentment and anger” (Nguyen, as cited by Gallagher, 2016). Gratitude is perhaps the main affect expressed in post-war refugee narratives (Nguyen, 2013), often ironically towards the very state that has waged the war. The charity framework makes the expectation and compulsion to express gratitude so powerful that even for refugees whose displacement has been caused by imperial wars, such as Vietnamese refugees in the U.S., “war sufferings remain unmentionable and unmourned” (Espiritu, 2006, p. 329).

There is, however, an additional element of colonization about the charity logic and the expectation of gratitude following from this logic, something more sinister than simply silencing and patronizing refugees. Perhaps most negatively consequential in terms of the potential for solidarities with Indigenous peoples is that the charity framework demands that refugees internationalize and celebrate the national myths and ideologies of the receiving state. As powerfully expressed in *Critical Refugee Studies*, “the refugee’s thankfulness could be dangerously appropriated to justify American neo-imperial ambitions in the past, present, and future” (Nguyen, 2013, p. 201). In what she calls “‘we-win-even-if-we lose’ syndrome,” Yen Le Espiritu (2006) demonstrates how, decades after the Vietnam War, the U.S. media has manipulated the figure of the “good” and “grateful” refugee to turn the humiliating and difficult memories of “a controversial, morally questionable and unsuccessful” war (Espiritu, 2014, p. 1), where the U.S. was “neither victorious nor liberator,” into a war that was “necessary, just and successful” (Espiritu, 2006, p. 329).

In 2015, the Harper government, not otherwise known for refugee-friendly policies, passed the *Journey to Freedom Act* to commemorate “the exodus of Vietnamese refugees and their acceptance in Canada.” Analyzing the parliamentary debates preceding the passing of the Bill, Ang Ngo (2016) argues that the discourse of the grateful refugee employed in these debates emphasized narratives of refuge and refugee success, and avoided any emphasis on the violence of the Vietnam War and Canada’s role in it that led to the exodus of refugees in the first place (p. 71). What Vinh Nguyen (2018) observes in relation to the commemoration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “fall of Saigon” in Canada are articulations simultaneously of gratitude for freedom (here) and condemnation of communism. As a “migration narrative that charts the movement from communist oppression to capitalist freedom,” this narrative revises history and passes “as an *explanation* for the [Vietnamese] diaspora” (Nguyen, 2018, p. 466; emphasis in original) of the 1970s and 1980s.

Also writing on Vietnamese refugees in the U.S., Mimi Thi Nguyen discusses how the liberal discourse of freedom functions both as a form of subjection and subjectivization (2012, p. 17); how ‘the “gift of freedom” has subjected the Vietnamese to the violence of war in the name of freedom; and how, as refugees, it continues to constitute them as racialized – but enthusiastic – subjects of liberal empire. Focusing on three Vietnamese refugees, Nguyen demonstrates the ironical positioning of refugees in relation to the imperial state. First discussed is Kim Phuc, the Vietnamese girl whose photograph of having been burned by napalm became one of the iconic images of civilian suffering during the war. As a refugee, the adult Phuc became an ambassador of forgiveness, “whose pardon absolves an empire of the criminality of war,” and whose “grace becomes that which she recompenses liberal empire for the gift of freedom – *even napalm*” (Nguyen, 2012, pp. 86-87; emphasis in original). The other two figures Nguyen discusses represent a more direct participation in U.S. national and imperial projects. These were Vietnamese refugees who became prominent in the media during the “War on Terror,” one as the architect of the *Patriot Act* and the other as a weapons designer for the U.S. military (Nguyen, 2012).

Critical refugee studies reveals how refuge is often “employed by the state to legitimize its nationalist projects of violence – of colonial and capitalist accumulation – at home and abroad” (Nguyen, 2019, pp. 126-127). Contrary to refugee narratives that celebrate upward mobility and assimilation into the nation-state, this kind of analysis offers valuable steps towards decolonization of Refugee Studies and dominant refugee discourses. When combined with critical, anti-imperialist perspectives on International Politics, such an analytical and political project of decolonization has the potential to bring refugee and Indigenous issues and politics into closer affinity.

Decolonizing Refugee Studies and refugee discourses brings them into a discussion with Indigenous politics, partly because it helps define the refugee experience in more holistic terms, *beyond* one limited to the diaspora –

focusing on what happens after the escape, on issues of refugee agency and survival as well as challenges of legal status, labour market status, racism, etc. – to *also* emphasize displacement from land. This approach addresses the root causes and injustices of refugee production, and the mournability of the loss – of homeland, popular sovereignty, peace, and overall relationship to the place from which one has been displaced. Even as he warns against the problems of collapsing Indigeneity and diaspora, Daniel Coleman (2016) emphasizes their relationship, especially when diaspora is interpreted to be a space of forced displacement:

These two cultural formations – Indigeneity and diaspora – are deeply related to one another because the scandal of diaspora arises from people’s displacement from nativity and natality. That is to say, our sense of the injustice that occurs when people are forcibly displaced arises from the principle of priority, that people should have the right to govern themselves on their ancestral lands. (p. 62)

### **Refugees and Indigenous Justice: Challenges and Potentials for Solidarity**

Meaningful commonalities and parallels in the experiences of displacement, colonization and racialization by Indigenous peoples and refugees mean that there are grounds for a politics of solidarity between them. In recent decades, the accelerated threats of climate change, capitalist and imperial expansionism, and politics of authoritarian nationalist populisms and white supremacy, have added to the necessity, urgency and desirability of solidarities across their disparate histories and geographies. In this section, I discuss the potentials for and challenges to solidarity. My argument is that potential affinities and solidarities between groups cannot simply be treated as academic or intellectual matters, guaranteed by objective observable parallels between (some of) their experiences. Solidarity is rather contingent on *politics*, a transformative, anticolonial *politics of place* which can both address common problems and enable dreams of a collective future based on new principles, radically different from the ones established by settler colonialism. After discussing challenges to solidarity the following section elaborates on the potentials for solidarity between refugees and Indigenous peoples: through a politics of place as articulated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous intellectuals, and reorientation of refugee identity.

Historically, we can identify a number of meaningful parallels and relations between developments in Europe and colonization of the Americas. Commenting on the commemorative events marking 500 years of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas, Ella Shohat (1992) points out that there has been no acknowledgement, even in the counter-quincentenary events, of the relation between two important events that took place in 1492. Reminding us that 1492 was the year when approximately three million Muslims were defeated and around 300,000 Jews were expelled from Spain, Shohat argues that the

correspondence between the two 1492s was not accidental, but rather politically, economically, and ideologically linked. The “discovery” of the Americas, according to Shohat, was made possible largely by the wealth confiscated from Jews and Muslims in Spain. Clarifying that she is not suggesting an exact equivalence between the treatment of Muslims and Jews in Spain and of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, Shohat nevertheless argues that there was a significant relationship between the two. In addition to the economic linkages between the two events, she discusses how “European Christian demonology pre-figured colonialist racism” (Shohat, 1992, pp. 96-97), and how the discourses about Muslims and Jews constituted some of the elements of the racism against Indigenous peoples.

Some historical scholarship discusses how the “enclosure movement” which involved capture of the Commons and the dispossession, impoverishment and eventual proletarianization of the peasantry, first took shape in Britain and then became the model for colonization in North America, Africa, India and Oceania (Greer, 2012; Thompson, 1993). However, historical experiences of oppression in Europe (e.g., for the Irish during the potato famine, the dispossessed peasantry or the working classes) have not translated into a solidaristic relationship to Indigenous peoples among Europeans migrating to the colonies. Rather, those oppressed in Europe have turned into settler colonizers, invested in the settler colonial project as both an individual and collective solution to the social and economic crises they faced in Europe.

Even for recent refugees from the Third World, acknowledging their own colonial or post-colonial experiences in the countries of origin and experiences of exclusion and racism in diaspora provide no guarantees that they would necessarily identify with an Indigenous project of decolonization. Daniel Coleman (2016) suggests that the goals of refugees and migrants are often expressed in a “politics of inclusion,” whereas those of Indigenous peoples are expressed in a “politics of separatism and sovereignty” (p. 62). He specifically mentions tensions between Indigenous commitments to literal places as compared to “diasporic distrust of nativism and its reputed essentialism” (Coleman, 2016, p. 61).

Settler colonialism often involves complex and contradictory relationships between colonialism and racialization, placing racialized groups in a precarious continuum of racial hierarchy, rather than in a simple dichotomy against white settlers. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) observe that in settler colonial states, “the refugee/immigrant/migrant is invited to be a settler in some scenarios, given the appropriate investments in whiteness, or is made an illegal, criminal presence in other scenarios” (p. 17). We can think about the “model minority” discourse as one of the ways in which racialized groups may be seduced to adopt settler subjectivity. As Nishant Upadhyay (2016, 2019) demonstrates, myths of “model minorities” are typically constructed against a backdrop of *unmodel-others*. Whereas some authors emphasize the presence of the Black-other in the making of model minorities in the U.S.,

Upadhyay underlines the ubiquitous presence of the Native-other in Canada and the U.S. He suggests that “complicity and opportunistic alliances between whites and non-Indigenous and non-Black racialized communities (re)produce not just anti-Black racism and white supremacy but settler colonialism and anti-Native racism as well” (Upadhyay, 2016, p. 252). However, as Tuck and Yang’s (2012) statement above suggests, processes of racialization operate in ways that never guarantee safe and equal belonging, even for “model minorities.”

Bonnie Honig (1998) argues that dominant American discourses on immigrants often contain expressions of *xenophilia* side-by-side with expressions of *xenophobia*. She demonstrates how the figure of the “good” immigrant is often used to celebrate the virtues and values attributed to the nation, to show the disenchanted that the regime is worthy, and to discipline the poor, domestic minorities, and unsuccessful immigrants, by showing them that the system is fair. Honig also argues, however, that “*nationalist xenophilia tends to feed and nurture nationalist xenophobia as its partner*” (p. 3, emphasis in original). We could argue that in the absence of an anti-hegemonic project of solidarity, a *dance* of xenophobia and xenophilia in nationalist discourses may potentially work to spread and strengthen the hegemony of settler colonialism, through the insecurity, anxiety, and desire for belonging it produces among racialized immigrants.

Despite tensions and challenges to solidarity, there have been a number of individual and collective attempts – with varying degrees of success – by some migrant justice activists in the Canadian context to build solidarity with Indigenous activists (Fortier, 2015).<sup>8</sup> Migrant justice activists who have attempted these initiatives of solidarity often come from Open Borders and No Borders perspectives.<sup>9</sup> As we see in the development of a Canadian debate, however, some formulations of No Borders have led to specific tensions with Indigenous politics.

In 2005, Indigenous scholar Bonita Lawrence and anti-racist scholar Enakshi Dua published a co-authored article that critiqued anti-racist theory and practice for excluding Indigenous peoples and perspectives. They argued that one of the main tensions between the two was based on “the postcolonial emphasis on deconstructing nationhood” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 131), which negatively impacted Indigenous politics. Lawrence and Dua warned that the tendency of these theories of nationalism to “denigrate nationalism as representing only technologies of violence,” or to ‘reif(y)... categories that can degenerate into fundamentalism or “ethnic cleansing”’ (2005, p. 131)

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<sup>8</sup> Fortier (2015) demonstrates how migrant justice activists have changed their slogans in order to make linkages to Indigenous politics and establish alliances with Indigenous activists. It seems, however, that none of the slogans have resonated successfully with Indigenous activists.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to recognize that Open Borders and No Borders positions are theoretically, philosophically and politically informed and inspired by a variety of perspectives, including political and economic liberalism (Bauder, 2015). Only some of these perspectives prioritize a politics of anti-racism and migrant justice.

have particularly negative ramifications for Indigenous peoples living under colonialism. A response to this article by Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright (2008/2009) reiterated a rather over-general(ized) and absolute critique of nationalism and sovereignty and argued for “decolonization without nationalism” (pp. 121, 128). Stating that naturalizing Indigenous connection to the land constituted *autochthonic* thinking (assuming being native to a specific area), they critiqued Indigenous claims to belonging and ownership of a place. Arguing that this thinking is (always and necessarily) embedded in and in turn fosters capitalist globalization (p. 124) and “neo-racist politics,” they suggested that it hinders more egalitarian and universalistic visions of redistribution.

This rather generalized, absolute critique of any and every form of nationalism denies any liberatory potential to (any kind of) nationalism and any notion of sovereignty. Conceptual equation of imperial, anti-colonial Third World and Indigenous nationalisms implies that they are all (equally) delegitimized. Not only does this position overlook the nuances and sophistication of Indigenous debates on sovereignty, it also potentially silences and disarms some of the contemporary critiques and politics against imperialism in the Third World. While it is of utmost importance to exercise caution and vigilance against potential tendencies in nationalism towards “violent nativism” and “essentialist sovereignty” (Coleman, 2016, p. 73), these dangers are not present in the approaches current Indigenous theorizing and activism take in relation to land and sovereignty. What we can observe instead are elements that open the way towards a solidaristic politics of place.

Contrary to fears of particularistic, parochial and xenophobic expressions of identity based in ethnicity, conceptions of Indigenous identity and visions of Indigenous politics and sovereignty articulated by leading Indigenous intellectuals and activists emphasize an oppositional, anti-colonial *political* identity. There are no simple or exclusive references to either ethnicity or “tradition” in the way two leading Indigenous scholars in Canada, Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, for example, define *Indigeness*. Openly arguing against ethnic and Indigenous identities as artificial and state-created identities, Alfred and Corntassel (2005) use the term *Indigeness* in clearly contextualized and political terms, defining it as “an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism” (p. 597):

It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world. (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 597)

Glen Coulthard (2014) and Andrea Smith (2011) vigorously criticize essentialist conceptions of Indigenous identity. Coulthard (2014) articulates a scathing critique of the false promise of recognition in the *colonial* politics of reconciliation recently dominating settler-Indigenous relations in liberal

Canada. Smith (2011) criticizes the approach to Native Studies, popular among some native and non-native scholars alike, that is preoccupied with identity and cultural representation. She agrees with Sandy Grande who finds this approach to be “obscur[ing] the social and economic realities facing Indigenous communities, substituting a politics of representation for one of radical social transformation” (Smith, 2011, p. 56).

Glen Coulthard (2010) clarifies that the conception of land or place in Indigenous politics and ethics is very different from a thing or object over which Indigenous peoples would claim exclusionary rights. Instead,

it ought to be understood as a field of “relationships of things to each other.” Place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world... This, I would argue, is precisely the understanding of land and/or place that not only anchors many Indigenous peoples’ critique of colonial relations of force and command, but also our visions of what a truly post-colonial relationship of peaceful co-existence might look like. (Coulthard, 2010, pp. 79-80)

Glen Coulthard and Leanne Simpson (2016) call for a politics informed by the ethical frameworks of “grounded normativity” and “place-based solidarity”:

Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests. Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which we practice solidarity. (p. 254)

Elaborating on “grounded normativity,” Simpson (2017) clarifies that it generates alternative conceptualizations of nationhood and governmentality that “aren’t based on enclosure, authoritarian power and hierarchy” (p. 22). Taiaiake Alfred (2010) envisions decolonization as a common future of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, which would be based on a radical imagination, a different set of values and principles than the ones Canadians and Americans have and continue to live with:

Would it be possible for people cultured in the North American mainstream to reimagine themselves in relation to the land and others and start to see this place as a real, sacred homeland, instead of an encountered commodity destined to be used and abused to satisfy impulses and desires implanted in their heads by European imperial texts?... In order to decolonize, Canadians and Americans have to sever their emotional attachment to their countries and reimagine themselves, not as citizens with the privileges conferred by being a descendent of colonizers or newcomers from other parts of the world benefitting from White imperialism, but as human beings in equal and respectful relation to other human

beings and the natural environment. This is what radical imagination could look like. (pp. 5-6)

As the above discussion clarifies, there are strong perspectives and arguments in Indigenous thought that address and counter what Coleman (2016) calls “diasporic distrust of nativism and its reputed essentialism” (p. 61). Non-indigenous scholars have also articulated thoughts on a politics of place. Arif Dirlik (2001) argues that a politics of place can be an alternative to what he problematizes as the two dominant and competing political logics of the present: essentialist identity politics and ethnic nationalism, on the one hand; and placeless politics of neoliberal imperial cosmopolitanism and globalism, on the other. Advocating for a form of politics informed by places, Dirlik and Roxann Prazniak (2001) distinguish “place-based politics” from essentialist “place-bound” nativism or ethnicist politics (p. 11). Their notion of place parallels Coulthard’s (2010) notion of place as “a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world” and as “a field of ‘relationships of things to each other’” (pp. 79-80). Defined as a metaphor for groundedness, rather than as geographic location, Dirlik’s (2001) notion of place defies parochial boundaries and reified identities: “place as a metaphor suggests groundedness from below, and a flexible and porous boundary around it, without closing out the extralocal, all the way to the global” (p. 22).

Place-based thinking allows for a political consciousness that is based on a historicized and contextualized understanding of the relationships between people and the environment, and among and between different peoples who have co-existed and interacted in places over time. Place-based politics may bring people together not only around various shared concerns – ecological, social, economic and political – but also on the basis of “recognition of a common destiny at the local level” (Dirlik & Prazniak, 2001, p. 10) and a desire to resolve issues democratically. Dirlik and Prazniak (2001) explain that the reason they prioritize place-based politics is “not to close out options for action at the level of national or global spaces, but merely to reassert the priority of place-based practices for any democratic resolution of the problems of livelihood and social coexistence” (p. 11).

As articulated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, intellectuals and activists, place-based thinking and politics allow for ways to remember, acknowledge, and address historical tensions and injustices among peoples, while also enabling an imagination of a just and peaceful co-existence and a different relationship to land. The kinds of visions offered by Indigenous scholars for decolonization and sovereignty summarized earlier provide glimpses into what a politics of place in settler colonies may potentially look like. These visions are radically different from those of (neo)liberal multiculturalism which promises reconciliation and peaceful co-existence, but leaves existing socio-economic structures and power hierarchies unquestioned and intact.

The possibility and will on the part of refugees to participate in a politics of place with Indigenous peoples may depend partly on a reconceptualization and reorientation of their identity as refugees. Vinh Nguyen (2019) offers the notion of *refugeetude* as a potential pathway to solidarity. “[C]halleng[ing] conventional understandings that confine refugee to a legal definition, short time frame, and pitiful existence,” “a cloak that can easily be shed with the coming of refuge,” Nguyen (2019, p. 111) suggests that the notion of *refugeetude*, referring to “a continued state of being and a mode of relationality” offers “a critical reorientation, an epistemological shift in how we think about and understand the category refugee.” With the “intensified production and criminalization of refugees” (p. 111) in the present conjuncture, Nguyen emphasizes that many refugee stories are not about “successful integration and gratefulness towards the nation-state,” but rather about “socioeconomic and affective precarity” (p. 123). Acknowledging that many refugees may indeed yearn for national belonging and therefore accept assimilation, Nguyen nevertheless sees *refugeetude* as *not* “subscrib(ing) to what Arendt calls a ‘false’ or ‘insane’ optimism, in which refugees hold out hope for total assimilation into a national body politic” (pp. 121-122). Instead, he suggests that *refugeeness* may be “a catalyst for thinking, feeling, and doing with others – for imagining justice” (p. 111). Drawing and building on Hannah Arendt, for Nguyen “the keeping of *refugeeness* affords the refugee a more expansive vision of history and politics.” (2019, p. 123). It is through this vision that “refugee subjects can make crucial linkages between themselves and others who have undergone and are undergoing similar experiences within the ‘national order of things,’ including migrant, undocumented, racialized, and Indigenous groups” (Nguyen, 2019, pp. 123-124).

The concept of *refugeetude* can contribute to a reconceptualization of the identity and experiences of refugees in a direction that decolonizes them, potentially freeing them from the discourses of charity and gratitude discussed earlier. The complexities and contradictions offered by *refugeetude* provide some potential – without any guarantees – to start conversations and acts of solidarity around visions of justice among various groups in settler colonies who have various complicated histories and contentious relations with the imperial and national state.

### **Conclusion: The “Right to Escape” and the “Right to Stay Put”**

I have suggested that engagements between refugee and Indigenous notions of justice would benefit from an analytical perspective (and politics) that challenges compartmentalization and binary thinking, bringing experiences of anti-colonialism in the Americas and other white settler colonies into conversation with the Third World. Such engagements would need to be done not through “colonial equivocation,” as an immigrant or refugee “move to

innocence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, pp. 17-19), but rather by recognizing the specificity of decolonial thought and struggles in different contexts, avoiding “collapsing the different systems of colonialism [and contemporary imperialism], their distinct histories and racial formations” (Tabar & Desai, 2017, p. xii).

Refugee Studies separated from International Politics and International Political Economy, deprived of a critical (and specifically, anti-imperialist) analysis of international politics, would at best produce a liberal approach to refugee movements emphasizing individual freedoms, rights to mobility and a “right to escape” (Mezzadra, 2004). Unproblematizing and perhaps normalizing escape, this approach fails to connect with and address Indigenous concerns about land and sovereignty. I suggest that decolonizing refugee studies *also* needs to involve analysis that engages with causes of refugee flows and a politics about changing the world in a positive direction to prevent the urgent need for such flows. The latter would need to be a transnational, but also a place-based politics. As Dirlik and Prazniak’s (2001) grounded but also porous notion of place suggests, there is no contradiction between the two. This is a politics that can confront colonialism and ongoing imperialism, as well as inequalities and environmental catastrophes at local, national and global levels. It would also need to be a politics that engages with rights to self-determination and inclusive popular, democratic sovereignty. This means that, as much as a “right to escape,” a decolonized refugee studies also needs to insist on what we may call a *right to stay put*. In expanding their notions of justice, and envisioning, imagining alternative futures of co-existence, refugee discourses have a lot to learn from, and be inspired by, Indigenous thought and politics.

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