

Ignorance, Colonialism and the Environment—Why It Starts with Me

“As Paulo Freire shows so well in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressor's tactics, the oppressor's relationships.” (Audre Lorde, 1984)

One of the central tenets of the environmental justice movement is that degradation of the land and its resources is simultaneously social injustice against its peoples. The two go hand in hand and are systemically related. (Bryant, 1995)

I am interested in looking at the oppressor side of these issues. What can we say about the patterns of oppressors when thinking about dominion over nature and its peoples? Ignorance is one of the key features of pattern of oppressor. There are various forms of ignorance that could be investigated. Using the model of Charles Mills as he talks about racial ignorance (Mills, 2008) I will focus on the idea of invested ignorance (Townley, 2011), or ignorance constructed by domination (Sullivan, 2007). This form of ignorance misrepresents reality in ways that sustain privileges of those in power. I will be applying this concept of vested ignorance to situations of dominion over nature and its peoples.

Colonialism is a practice of domination—the conquering of people and land with the subsequent settling of a portion of the conquering population on that land. I am trying to think about my environment in Northwestern MN. What are the patterns of colonialism here? The colonized peoples are Native Americans, specifically the Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) and the Dakota (Sioux). But does it make also sense to think about the oppression of colonialism as it relates to the land? Is the degradation of the land and its resources also a product of colonialism? I will argue that the vested ignorance of the colonizer functions in the same way with respect to the people and the land.

This project benefits from taking a local approach to these issues. I will begin with my environment. I will look at my colonial history. I will attempt to unpack my vested ignorance. The goal is to bring to light at least one of the features of the oppressor (ignorance) that is deep within. (Lorde)

Sources:

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