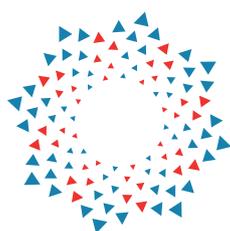


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

What is Decolonisation Asking of Us?

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The following text has been drafted in support of Forum's IVCO conference 2021 and the ongoing efforts of its partners to explore emerging opportunities as well as challenges for volunteering for development. The text focuses on (the difficulties of) decolonisation with reference to scholars who are publishing on this topic.

In their seminal paper 'Decolonisation is not a metaphor', Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang (2012) discuss the 1990 movie 'Dances with Wolves' starring Kevin Costner. In the movie Costner plays Lieutenant Dunbar, a Union soldier in the post-US Civil War era who befriends and helps protect a community of Lakota. In terms of the story's arc and 'to the point of being able to dance their dances' Dunbar is changed through his encounter with the Lakota. He is able to go anywhere and be anything. Assuaged of settler guilt and assured of a future, he 'becomes without becoming' (Ahmed cited in Tuck and Yang, p. 14). The Lakota meanwhile, depicted as a noble and dying race, pretty much remain as they were; there to be known and consumed; good Indians who enable the white man's transformation and confirm his position as hero of the story.

For Tuck and Yang (see the original paper for deeper decolonial analysis of the film) the Dances with Wolves arc is an example of decolonisation accomplished before it has begun, and through the indigenised consciousness of the settler himself. Building on this example of what Dunbar is able to do, (and the implications of same), they go on to problematise the easy adoption of decolonising discourse by different fields, and the ways in which it has begun to supplant prior ways of talking about many things including 'social justice' and 'change'.

'Decolonisation,' they write 'which we assert is a distinct project... is far too often subsumed into the directives of (other) projects, with no regard for how decolonisation wants something different than those forms of justice' (p.2). The joining (of decolonisation) into our spaces, warn Tuck and Yang, cannot be too easy, too open, too settled.

In presenting their own decolonial perspective, the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective recall Tuck and Yang in a recent paper, reminding us 'to ask questions about what assumptions, politics, and theories of change inform the invocation and desire for decoloniality and decolonisation in each context of use' (Andreotti et al, 2021).

Pashby and collaborators (2020) concur with this need for care around terms such as decolonisation and decoloniality. It is all too easy, they posit, to conflate decolonial approaches that challenge the continuity of the modern/colonial imaginary with critical approaches that seek to reform it.

Some more thoughts on decolonisation and decoloniality

How might the field of 'volunteering for development' (which typically enjoys [and asserts] an air of neutrality and benevolence) meet the growing calls for decolonisation? Will the field, like Dunbar, make moves to uphold its innocence? Will it render decolonisation 'accomplished', and all without having to cede or change much?

Inclusion is one of the central themes of the upcoming IVCO conference. How are we preparing for the deliberations? Are we readying ourselves for the presence of that which was formerly excluded? Are we readying ourselves for such presence to really change things? What would make this kind of necessary and seismic shift, possible?

As Tuck and Yang remind us, decolonisation is unsettling. It is not a metaphor for all other things we want to do improve our models but rather about 'the repatriation of Indigenous land and life' (p.1). It is also about the current system's limits and its harmful tendencies and it is about circularities in thinking/reasoning. How do we find ourselves continually returning to where we were - nothing ceded, entitlements and privileges intact?

Can we learn to identify, interrupt, and be taught by such circularities? Can we observe them in ourselves and the spaces in which we move? Can we learn to generate and hold on to unresolvable paradoxes, namely how to dis-invest from the continuity of current models while working within them and enabling something very *different* to emerge? (Andreotti et al, 2021).

Other kinds of questions to hold in mind (emerging of late from various critical and decolonial traditions including Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures) include:

- How to get closer to the edge of another possibility, holding conversations that don't end up over-determining the direction?
- How to interrupt harmful desires which we hold on to; harmful desires which hide behind promises of entitlements and securities?
- How to cultivate capacity for (more) honesty?
- Who is deciding? In whose name? For whose benefit? How come?

Such questions, if practised regularly, can support the disruptions and transformations necessary for a decolonising journey. They require practice however ... and stamina for discomfort. Indeed perhaps it is only once we understand the *difficulty* of decolonisation, the difficulty of transcending our rootedness in the modern-colonial imaginary, that something different will become possible (Pashby et al, 2020).

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