

# Unsettling decolonizing geographies

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Published in *Geography Compass*, 12(7)

## Introduction

This paper begins in room 1014 in a high-rise tower on Burrard Street, a place where we are discussing processes of writing a paper about decolonization and its increased uptake within the social sciences and the discipline of geography.<sup>1</sup> We are scanning databases and journal articles while thinking about the discipline's colonial history, about colonial geographies of the present day, and about roles and responsibilities of geographers in efforts increasingly framed by the concept of decolonization (Noxolo, Raghuram, & Madge, 2012; Raghuram, 2009). The paper, simultaneously and inseparably, begins on unceded territories of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, territories now known to many and named as Vancouver. These territories are spaces in larger and ongoing legal and jurisdictional wranglings and contestations between Indigenous peoples and various levels of governments in Canada, governments many Indigenous peoples argue are not representational of Indigenous nations and are not working with or toward the best interests of Indigenous peoples (see Coulthard, 2014; Hunt, 2014a, 2014b).

Two specific people are writing this paper. Neither of us are members of the Musqueam, Squamish, or Tsleil-Waututh Nations. We have our own unique genealogical, historical, and contemporary relationships to this place. We exist together in a shared context of settler colonialism, but our relationship to that context is different. One of us (Sarah de Leeuw) is the daughter of settler-immigrants. Her father was born in The Netherlands. She grew up in remote northern communities mostly located on unceded territories of the Haida and Kistsum Kalum Nations. Much of her professional, academic, and activist life has been spent in comparatively remote geographies, often working with feminist and Indigenous-focused organizations. She is a creative writer who engages questions of colonial power and violence through poetry and literary non-fiction. One of us (Sarah Hunt) is a scholar-activist of Kwagiulth (Kwakwaka'wakw) and Ukrainian and English ancestry. She grew up living primarily in Lkwungen territories, spending her teen years living on the Songhees reserve in what is now known as Victoria, BC. Her scholarly and community works concern questions of law, justice, violence, and power in colonial relations, including a focus on politicizing intimate, everyday spaces of resistance and resurgence.

As we write, Indigenous peoples are facing mass arrests in Standing Rock North Dakota for protesting corporate and state violence in the form of pipelines built without consent through their lands, waterways, and sacred sites. In Canada, the federal government is mounting a national inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, an inquiry many feminist Indigenous activists and organizations feel is an inadequate response to interpersonal and systemic violence faced by too many Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people. Racialized gender violence is integrally related to Indigenous struggles over land and self-determination, not only in the US and Canada but globally. In 2016, Honduran Indigenous Lenca leader Berta Cáceres, who founded a movement against land dispossession, was shot to death for protesting against mining and dams in her country.

To not acknowledge these contexts risks perpetuating the idea that writing and knowledge is not produced *in places*, many of which are forged in ongoing colonial violence toward Indigenous

peoples (Smith, 1999; Goeman, 2013; L. Simpson, 2014). Even if we were not inhabiting a specific place of contemporary settler colonization, the complex and interdigitated nature of globalization and neoliberalism mean that profits and accumulations drawn from settler colonial geographies implicate people and places beyond specific state borders (see, for instance, Harsha Walia, 2013). To not acknowledge who we are, or to leave unspecified our authorial position in relation to this paper and events unfolding all around us, is to risk perpetuating the idea that writing and knowledge is not produced *by people* who occupy specific temporal and sociocultural positions, positions often bound to or by colonialism. Acknowledging that knowledge is always situated, always implicated in formations and systems of power, is –as other critical activist feminist scholars have long pointed out (Haraway, 1988)– an important step in writing about and envisioning practices of decolonization.

The concept of decolonization is complicated and contested (Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Part of this paper's work is to provide a nuanced understanding about the diversity of meanings and expressions of decolonization both within geography and within the lives and struggles of Indigenous peoples on whose lands settler colonial nations are built. Making visible places where knowledge is produced, and who produces it, is an important place-based and *anticolonial practice* (which is different than a *decolonizing practice*) at the heart of our questioning how the discipline of geography continues to enact particular practices and ways of knowing. With this said, we are also cautious about unfettered self-reflexivity and re-centering the feelings and emotions of (often White) settler non-Indigenous subjects (see, for instance, Bondi, 2009; Kobayashi, 2003; Noxolo, 2009) who despite (or perhaps in part because of) critical self-reflexivity continue to maintain discursive and material power in myriad spaces. Despite disciplinary growth in conversations about non-Indigenous Whiteness and decolonization, and alongside a growing focus by geographers on Indigenous geographies, we argue that geography remains at risk of normalizing non-Indigenous ways of knowing and being and perpetuating colonial power. This paper is expressly concerned with decolonization in reference to relationships and places of settler geographies and geographies of Indigenous peoples, geographies with complicated and overlapping histories, subjectivities, laws, nomenclatures, politics, communities, and boundaries. As such, while inviting geographers living and working in non-settler colonial contexts to extend and engage with our analysis within their own geographically specific relationship to historic and ongoing colonization, this paper considers the specificity of unsettling geography within settler colonial contexts.

We begin with a brief survey of how and where decolonization, in all its various lineages, tenses, and iterations, has traveled through the discipline of geography. We then offer a critical analysis of decolonization in relation to interrogating settler colonial power, including theories and praxes of engaging with Indigeneity and Indigenous peoples and places. We pointedly ask if the concept of decolonization is doing the work implicit in its meaning. In Section 2 of the paper, we explore Indigenous geographies, what they mean, and to whom they have those meanings. We then turn to Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous ways of being and living in the world, problematizing how within more purely conceptual realms, and often by non-Indigenous peoples and geographers, these can be uncoupled or disconnected from the way decolonization is circulated and lived. We conclude with cautions and suggestions, based especially on provocations of Indigenous scholars, about ways geographers might unsettle our work in ongoing efforts toward decolonizing our discipline.

## **2) The Movement of Decolonization as a Concept in Geography**

Decolonization is far from a fixed concept with clearly delineated associated practices. Decolonization cannot even be understood as pertaining *specifically* to Indigenous peoples and places (hence, our narrowed focus in this paper to settler colonial contexts where the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is more acute). Instead, decolonization has been deployed as a more generalized means of interrogating ways that knowledge-making practices marginalize or discount specific people and places, especially by privileging what might be generalized as “western” (often Euro-white) knowledges over “southern” (often racialized) ways of seeing and knowing the world (see, for instance, Smith, 1999; Radcliffe, 2005; Radcliffe, 2017). Indigenous geographies and “southern” geographies do not map neatly onto one another. Decolonizing might thus be understood as tracking from and into two different, yet sometimes interrelated, domains. Within those two domains, decolonization roughly has an affinity with postcolonial theory or is paired with concepts of anticolonialism or the decolonial—often framed with critical race theory—in settler colonial occupied space. Decolonization traced to postcolonial theory, as recently argued by Ann Laura Stoller, calls for some problematizing:

Despite the warnings of those who rightly insist that [postcolonial theory] is not a time period but a critical stance [...] the term “postcolonial” often references a critical perspective on a past colonial situation (too easily made distinct from our own) or on those who bear the costs of living in a space that was once colonial and is no more (emphasis added; 2016, pg. 4).

Even when metonymically problematized as (post) colonial, ‘post’ colonial, or post-colonial, we agree with those who emphasize the everyday pervasive *present-tense* and presence of colonial power, who note it is a colonial present/presence that ‘should command our political work and analytic attention’ (Stoller, 2016, pg. 4). However the concept is finessed, the bottom line is temporal, and affective spaces continue to exist in which colonialism endures: the concept of ‘post’ risks eliding colonialism’s enduring presentness and presence (Stoller, 2016). Postcolonial theory does not adequately account for, nor seek to grapple with, the material and intellectual nature of colonial power in settler colonial contexts, contexts in which Indigenous peoples continue to assert their self-determination despite ongoing dispossession.

Still, postcolonial theory remains an established and productive domain of many geographers. Emerging as an intellectual space in which subaltern, often racialized, people can deconstruct and contest colonial thought and structures of power (see, for example, Fanon, 1963; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; and Bhabha, 1994), postcolonial theory offers, especially for those not focused on spaces of ongoing settler colonialism, a means to critique colonial power. In some cases, especially by undertaking close or counter readings of colonial discourses, power, and texts (McEwan, 2003; Nash, 2002), this includes deploying concepts of decolonization (Blunt & McEwan, 2003; Gilmartin & Berg, 2007; Radcliffe, 2005). For more traditional postcolonial theorists of geography, decolonization is often a process by which specific spaces (usually nation states and countries) achieve independence from former or imperial colonial powers, often through revolution or armed resistance. In this context, decolonization extends to knowledges and cultures of people but still suggests a devolution of empires more generally (see “decolonization” in Castree, Kitchin, & Rogers, 2013, n.p.): The concept is intrinsically linked to liberation of people and places which can then be read and theorized geographically. Decolonization in this context is certainly acknowledged to be uneven, its duration, depth, and nature differing across different spaces and different times (see Watts, 2009). Within these frameworks, however, decolonization still remains principally *read* and *thought* about through texts and cultural archives (for instance, maps or papers from colonial offices). These modes of understanding colonialism and decolonization are in tension with emphasizing the lived and living voices and experiences of

colonized subjects, especially in Indigenous and settler-colonist occupied spaces (Clayton, 2000; Clayton, 2003; Harris, 2002).

More recently, geographers working with postcolonial theory have extended decolonization to an ethical imperative (Gilmartin & Berg, 2007). Working especially in areas of more-than-human or animal geographies, geographers voice a need to decolonize both our discipline *and* postcolonial theory by placing and engaging Indigenous worldviews (Gergan, 2015; Thomas, 2015). Decolonization thus conceptualized has seen some uptake by geographers working on geopolitics of ecology and the Anthropocene (Sundberg, 2013; Collard, Dempsey, & Sundberg, 2015). Decolonization in these postcolonial contexts references something more than an imperial power exiting from a colonized space or cultural context: Still, the concept dwells mostly in theoretical terrains, in efforts to decolonize knowledge as opposed to decolonizing present-day peoples and places (see, for instance, Jackson, 2014; Gergan, 2015). Decolonization associated with postcolonial theory, in other words, dwells predominantly in semiotic conceptual realms of rhetoric: It thus risks being little more than a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Decolonization is increasingly being taken up by geographers considering Indigenous and settler colonial spaces and by “critical” geographers (sometimes critical feminist queer antiracist; see, for instance, Peake & Sheppard, 2014; Hunt & Holmes, 2015). Many Indigenous peoples, including scholars and geographers in the Americas, Northern Europe, Australia, and New Zealand (to name a few places), argue that these spaces are definitely not “post” colonial in any way and thus cannot be adequately understood through postcolonial theory. Decolonization in this context responds to long-standing critiques of postcolonialism having limited on-the-ground or applied material consequences in and to real places and peoples. These critiques also note a fixing or even a (re)centralizing of colonial power, a lack of ability to see entirely past understandings of peoples and places existing *beyond* reference to colonialism (de Leeuw, 2012). Within geography, understandings of decolonization outside a postcolonial framework are manifesting as concerted efforts to acknowledge the impossibility of *actual* decolonization (Cameron, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and as calls to recognize decolonization requiring grounded material practices, activism, or a lived reality. After all, argue geographers concerned with the permutations of decolonization, settler colonialism is a lived present-day and active everyday force across myriad contemporary geographies and it bears down unevenly but especially on Indigenous peoples (Laing, 2012). These more critical interrogations of colonial power sometimes manifest as a (re)focusing on the White supremacy of settler colonial power. This allows geographers to understand and center race and racism in conversations about decolonization and offers means to enact practices concerned with unequal power relationships, especially as those power relationships are territorialized and embodied (Berg, 2012; Bonds & Inwood, 2015; Shaw, 2006). Importantly, a number of Black geographers and geographers of color have deployed decolonial approaches *across* settler colonial and other contexts, including theorizing antiblack violence in North America as inherently connected to transatlantic slavery (McKittrick, 2013), theorizing care ethics in the global North as both emplaced and interwoven with global migration (Raghuram, 2016) and unsettling geographies of responsibility via postcolonial interventions that foster agency across uneven geographies (Noxolo et al., 2012). These scholars reshape decolonial and postcolonial imaginaries through constructions of race and gender which unfold *across* settler colonial, postcolonial, and other spaces.

What then are geographers doing specifically within this critical, often activist oriented, realm of decolonization as a decolonial or anticolonial (as opposed to postcolonial) project? How might that work be pushed further or conceptualized more critically? We next review a series of decolonization geographic projects and discussions referencing settler colonialism and

Indigenous geographies, asking of that work how it might be extended or how it might more fully account for Indigenous peoples and places.

### **3) Geographies of Decolonization and Anticolonialism**

This section begins with a caveat: A growing and impressive number of geographers around the world are Indigenous peoples, geographers who bring to the discipline rich and embodied Indigenous knowledges (see, for instance, Daigle, 2016; Goeman, 2013; Hunt, 2017; Simmonds, 2016; Johnson, Cant, Howitt, & Peters, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Johnson & Larsen, 2013; Louis, Johnson, & Pramono, 2012). Like the majority of geographers in all areas of the discipline, however, geographers working with decolonization and anticolonialism in specific reference to geographies of Indigenous and settler colonial subjects tend to be non-Indigenous and often White (Delaney, 2002; McKittrick & Peake, 2005). These non-Indigenous often White geographers primarily attend to decolonization and anticolonialism in three somewhat separate but overlapping ways. First, and with gestures to postcolonial theory but moving in somewhat different ways by pushing beyond the purely semiotic and epistemic, geographers interrogate *settler* colonial power and call for the decolonizing of systems that reinforce *settler* colonial power. Indigeneity and Indigenous geographies, we suggest, are central to this work and it thus leads quickly into a second domain of geographic scholarship concerning decolonization: Critical efforts to decolonize ourselves as geographers and to decolonize our discipline as a whole. A third line of work manifests as attempts to decolonize geographic research methods and to articulate anticolonial behaviors and techniques. Work in all three domains of these decolonizing-geography projects focus on spaces where Indigenous and non-Indigenous settler subjects continue to actively navigate colonial power.

Settler colonialism has unique specificities that positions it outside colonial geographies theorized through broader tenants of postcolonial theory. Settler colonialism is an ongoing structure (or series of structures and systems) that becomes divested from an external imperial or secondary governing structure. Settler colonialism operates and accrues power more locally, through non-Imperial settler subjects actively amassing and controlling land and resources beyond the edges of traditional empire (Harris, 2004), especially by making effort to eliminate Indigenous presences in an ongoing fashion (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonial formations differ from colonialism. The latter is a project focused on economic accumulation reliant on peoples and communities dominated by an imperial force which then vacates: Because Indigenous peoples have no other homeland either to reference or return to, their lands, worldviews and ways of being are, within settler colonialism, actively and continuously under attack (Byrd, 2011; Smith, 1999; Wolfe, 2006). Geographers working on decolonization within settler colonialism thus actively name and critically consider how settler colonialism functions in an ongoing way to dispossess and settle Indigenous peoples and geographies at all scales (de Leeuw, 2016; Harris, 2004; de Leeuw, 2009; Blomley, 2003; Pasternak, 2014). They seek to understand the spatialization of settler colonial power in the hopes of undoing at least some of its resiliency. In many cases, by documenting the way settler colonial power ascends to unquestioned normalcy and recirculates as natural and given, the decolonizing project becomes one of suggesting counter realities or alternative ways of knowing and being. This is especially the case when those alternative ways are put forth by Indigenous peoples, but sometimes as they are considered by settlers (Sparke, 1998; Braun, 2002a, 2002b; Cameron, 2015).

Other scholars name geography—as a sociocultural and physical space, but also as a discipline—as fundamental to settler colonialism and the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples and places (Blomley, 2003). To address this, geographers interrogate settler colonial power itself,

making effort to locate it and then to destabilize its operations and foundations (Barker, 2012). This leads to insistences that geographers should pay far more attention to Indigenous peoples and places in order to decolonize ourselves and our colonial privilege, the spaces in which we live and work, and our discipline writ large (Barker & Pickerill, 2012; Hunt, 2014a, 2014b; Johnson et al., 2007; Shaw, Herman, & Dobbs, 2006). In this context, many geographers (and specifically non-Indigenous geographers) name and position *ourselves* in relation to settler colonial power, offering self-reflective insights about being principally White (Delaney, 2002) and/or settler, non-Indigenous subjects intent on doing some anticolonial good, however subjective the concept of “good” might be (Berg, 2012; de Leeuw, Greenwood, & Lindsay, 2013).

Decolonization demands acknowledging multiple ways of knowing and being, especially those of Indigenous peoples and systems. It espouses efforts of undoing the privileging of non-Indigenous settler ways of knowing above those of Indigenous peoples. Decolonization as such is a more cerebral and reflective effort, a more introspective (to the discipline) call to re-think geographic knowledge, to ask what space is open (or not) in our discipline for Indigenous voices and ways of knowing. In this sense, decolonization is also and still a domain of mostly non-Indigenous settlers. Indigenous epistemologies are considered, literatures and voices of Indigenous peoples and communities are cited or drawn upon, and critical interrogation of existing geographic scholarship—with suggestions for improvement—is undertaken (see, for instance, Peters, 2000). Still, in developing critical theories about settler colonialism, decolonial geographers often continue to engage *concepts of indigeneity* rather than Indigenous peoples themselves, their scholarship, their lived experience, and knowledge contributions (Radcliffe, 2017). Outputs of this disciplinary decolonization tend to take the form of published scholarship and conversations between geographers and other academic scholars, outputs that might mean more to (again primarily White) non-Indigenous academic geographers than to Indigenous peoples and communities.

Slightly differently, in so far as the work focuses on methods, are decolonizing *practices*. Decolonizing practices in geography have seen a significant growth in the last 6 or 7 years. Geographers occupied with decolonizing geographic practices work at doing more than *theorizing* settler colonial power: They instead want to change the very ways that geographic knowledge is produced, often looking at geographic tools and calling for practices to be undertaken in partnership with Indigenous peoples and communities (Giles & Castleden, 2008; Indigenous Peoples Specialty Group [IPSG], 2010; Louis & Grossman, 2009). Here, geographers tend to link decolonization with methods and practices such as community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) (see, for instance, *The Canadian Geographer*, Summer 2012), auto-ethnography, storytelling, or digital stories (Sloan Morgan et al., 2014). Some also suggest ways to critically (counter) map Indigenous spaces, place names, and topologies (Johnson et al., 2005; Louis et al., 2012; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). Others emphasize pedagogical and educational strategies that emplace and privilege Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing and being in order to change the way future generations of geographers' work (Godlewska, Moore, & Bednasek, 2010; Johnson et al., 2005). Fundamentally, many of the decolonizing geographic practices aspire to material and lived changes—that range from small local changes to larger goals of territorial reclamation—in the fabric of settler colonial places and spaces. These practices rest on assumptions that ubiquitous settler colonial power results in the sublimation of Indigenous peoples, places, and ways of knowing and being and that it must be actively challenged.

Importantly, geographers are also decolonizing the discipline through the creation of collaborative writing and organizing practices in which Indigenous and settler scholars work side by side in disrupting normative power dynamics in the very spaces in which geography reproduces

itself. This work has included developing decolonizing frameworks in organizing conferences which were previously asserting criticality (centering feminist, queer, anti-capitalist, critical race approaches) absent a significant consideration of settler colonialism (“Decolonizing Cascadia? Rethinking Critical Geographies” conference organizing committee, 2014). Further, collaborative dialogue and writing among Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars is a growing practice in which dynamics of colonialism, decolonization, and Indigenous resurgence can be thought through in order to make visible some of the tensions in decolonizing work on the ground and in everyday life (Holmes, Hunt, & Piedalue, 2015; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; de Leeuw, Cameron, & Greenwood, 2012.) While some of this work is difficult to find in standard search engines due to its circulation among more localized networks—a purposeful effort to produce research outcomes for the communities they are about—other publications have been written for scholarly audiences. As discussed by Coombes, Johnson, and Howitt (2014), unsettling community-based research and publication with Indigenous communities requires “a new relational ethics which unsettles any remaining binaries that survived the qualitative revolution in human geography: Ethics becomes method; data becomes life; landscape becomes author’ participants become family” (p. 850). Geographers have reflected on their own relational processes for truly shifting power of authorial voice within collaborative research (McLean, Howitt, Colyer, Raven, & Woodward, 2016; Woodward & Marrfurra McTaggart, 2016); for example, working in the settler colonial context of Australia, geographers Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd, and Sandie Suchet-Pearson have worked to center the agency of Indigenous peoples and places by making the place itself, Bawaka Country, the lead author in several research publications (see Bawaka Country et al., 2013, 2014, 2016). While this work is by no means complete, nor without potential for scrutiny in the future, it does signal concrete practices meant to disrupt normative colonial ways of thinking and being.

Geographers theorizing and enacting what they name as decolonization—especially non-Indigenous settler geographers—tend to have in common a series of *ideals* that they gesture toward. Such gestures, however, are often still decoupled from actual Indigenous peoples, voices, and places: While there may be a stated allegiance with Indigenous communities and scholars sometimes things as simple as locating oneself in an active colonial context, citing a significant number of Indigenous scholars, or including Indigenous voices, is lacking. Non-Indigenous geographers working on decolonizing geographies idealize a kind of hybrid scholar-activism that privileges on-the-ground anticolonial work focused on unsettling the supremacy of settler states: Here, geographers might be participating in rallies or anticolonial online communities; they might be protesting pipelines, organizing in support of land defense (McCreary & Milligan, 2014; Pasternak, 2014), working with Indigenous youth organizations or even working with other settlers toward “culturally safe” interactions (Matthews, 1998). Still, it is important to consider the limits of these aspirational practices to truly decolonize a field which is largely enacted by White scholars living off the spoils of colonialism, including White settler scholars, and in which Indigenous presence is largely facilitated by, or filtered through, non-Indigenous “experts.”

Decolonization as it is increasingly being deployed by geographers seems to rest on ideas about (and only to a very limited extent, concrete practices for) building relationships with Indigenous peoples and communities while simultaneously and continuously addressing social power formations and identity politics that have always privileged White non-Indigenous subjects (Panelli, 2008). These ideals are laudable: The question becomes, however, are geographers achieving success? Are power dynamics shifting? Should we be thinking and *acting* even more critically? Is there more we can do if we are to continue to deploy, with ever-growing usage, the concept of decolonization? To answer these questions, we turn next to the voices and words of Indigenous activists, scholars, artists, and thinkers, the vast majority of whom are thinking and working in eminently geographic realms.

#### 4) Indigenous Geographies of Decolonization: Taking/Making Space

Alongside geographers engaging Indigenous peoples, places, and knowledges, Indigenous scholars have in the last decade claimed and created space within the discipline for Indigenous bodies, voices, and concerns. Refusing to be defined in colonial terms or in relation to colonial power, Indigenous peoples inside and outside the academy have undertaken cultural and political revitalization, also known as Indigenous resurgence (Borrows, 2002; Coulthard, 2014; L. Simpson, 2011). Indigenous scholars and activists working outside geography have taken up decolonization and resurgence in ways that critically intervene into how geographers understand the spatiality of colonization. The necessity of geographers' engagement with critical Indigenous studies is evident in recent AAG sessions dedicated to interrogating key texts by Indigenous theorists—for example, see the reviews of *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* in the *AAG Review of Books* 4(2). An examination of Indigenous geographers' work and Indigenous geographic knowledges and practices illuminates a persistent gap between the range of decolonial approaches outlined above and the materiality of ongoing colonial violence and dispossession (both of land and life).

Indigenous scholars and their allies within the discipline of geography have worked for several decades to create spaces in which Indigenous geographies, as a sub-discipline and an area of study on its own terms, can flourish (for more on this history, see Hunt, 2017; Cameron, de Leeuw, & Greenwood, 2009). As Indigenous peoples around the world continue to live the impacts of historic and ongoing dispossession, facilitated through the imposition of Western cartographic imaginaries and other means, Indigenous geographers have undertaken a twofold decolonial project: 1) asserting a presence of Indigenous geographies within the predominantly White Western-centric discipline and 2) upholding Indigenous spatial knowledge and place-based practices on their own terms. Although Indigenous geographies emerged in the 1960s, it was not until the 1990s that distinct spaces dedicated to indigeneity formed, largely through the work of Indigenous geographers and those working closely with Indigenous people and communities (Hunt, 2017). Indigenous geographies specialty groups are now present within geography associations around the world,<sup>2</sup> with an explicit agenda to further decolonial work through the centering of Indigenous perspectives. Concerned with the politics and practices of knowledge production, these professional groups raised the profile of Indigenous scholars within geography and brought Indigenous methodologies and ethics to bear on decolonial research agendas (for example, see the AAG IPSG discussion paper on research and Indigenous peoples, Louis & Grossman, 2009, and subsequent declaration of key questions about research ethics of Indigenous research, IPSG, 2010). Publications focused on collaborative practices developed among Indigenous peoples and academics deepened geography's understanding of Indigenous peoples' negotiations of community relations and academic norms (Johnson & Larsen, 2013). Still, especially in academic publications, even co-authored publications between non-Indigenous academics and Indigenous community members often serve the interests of academics more than community members (see, for instance, L. T. Smith, 1999 or Eve Tuck, 2009). Producing peer-reviewed publications is not the only way to work collaboratively with Indigenous communities. Working on non-peer reviewed publications, supporting community grant applications, supporting court and legal demands, developing toolkits and handbooks, supporting curriculum, or simply following Indigenous prerogatives—all of these can be undertaken at the behest of and under the guidance of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Critical Indigenous scholarship in recent decades reflected the urgent mobilization of Indigenous communities for the rights, self-determination, and survival of Indigenous peoples in the face of ongoing settler colonial violence. Importantly, this work is grounded in a politics of the



present and future, emerging within an understanding that settler colonialism is persistent, relentless, and normative. Much of this scholarship is concerned with theorizing the spatiality of Indigenous knowledges. These are centered on the ability to maintain land- and water-based practices through which Indigenous knowledge is fostered—or what Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) calls “grounded normativity” and/or “modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time” (p. 13). Indigenous scholars and activists articulate culturally specific place-based practices and philosophies on their own terms, pushing beyond the limitations of colonial frames in which an equation of “indigenous” with “nature” has been a mechanism of discounting Indigenous peoples as modern political subjects. Indigenous scholarship provides a diversity of grounded geographic work, including works focused on Indigenous women's understandings of place (Kermoal & Altamirano-Jimenez, 2016), the transformative decolonial nature of Indigenous philosophical traditions and land-connected practices (L. Simpson, 2014), and the spatiality of expressions of Indigenous law (Borrows, 2010). Indigenous scholars theorize ways settler colonial relations continue to disrupt Indigenous peoples' sense of place, centering culturally distinct Indigenous epistemologies in order to counter homogenizing racial categorizations of Indigenous peoples within colonial frames (Byrd, 2011). Critical Indigenous scholarship seeks to decenter colonial frames of knowledge and to make Indigenous peoples lived realities more visible on their own terms as an expression of self-determination. Significant focus is given to the everyday, ongoing, relational nature of Indigeneity: For instance, Indigenous creative writers like Lee Maracle write expressly about Indigenous community irrespective of non-Indigenous peoples (Maracle, 1993) while Indigenous scholars like Tuck (2009), Borrows (2010), and L. Simpson (2014) consider lived Indigenous law, praxis, philosophy, everydayness, and place without reference to non-Indigenous peoples or ways of thinking.

The question of Indigenous peoples' everyday practices—practices lived *in place*—is more than ideas or ideals: Given Indigenous lives, communities, languages, and cultures continue to bear the burden of settlement, material survival is at stake. This work has the potential to challenge, disrupt, or *unsettle* normative disciplinary areas of study, including the production and reproduction of borders that cut across Indigenous political orders and territories (A. Simpson, 2014), the nature of urban space and processes of urbanization and urban planning (Peters & Andersen, 2013; Porter & Barry, 2016; Wensing & Porter, 2015), the spatiality of colonial governance as understood through everyday assertions of Indigenous self-determination (Daigle, 2016), and settler colonialism as a gendered form of spatial violence (Goeman, 2013). While (often White settler) feminist geographers sought to understand ways that racial and gendered discourses of settler colonialism naturalize colonial violence (especially toward Indigenous women), Indigenous scholars argued the silencing effects of extending colonial frameworks that continue to define Indigenous people solely through victimization (Dean, 2015; Tuck, 2009). Indigenous academics and community researchers alike thus focus on simultaneously understanding ongoing interpersonal and systemic violence *and* the everyday nature of resistance. Community researchers have investigated interrelated expressions of violence on the land and violence toward Indigenous bodies (Women's Environmental Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network, 2016) as well as anti-violence strategies that center Indigenous cultural practices rather than state-based solutions, posing significant challenges to theorists of the spatiality of race, gender, and settler colonialism. By insisting on their agency, survivance and futurity, geographic work by Indigenous peoples, both within and outside the academy and focusing on embodied theorizations of daily life, challenges geographers' notions of settler colonialisms' spatiality and of contemporary Indigeneity.

Indigenous spatial theories and place-based practices inside and outside the academy raise significant questions about the inherent limitations of decolonial geographies, which continue to decolonize through re-centering settler voices. Indigenous peoples' own theorizations of space, place, and power continue to resist the closure of settlement despite its ongoing violence, demonstrating the need to imagine decolonization as more than simply theorizing and challenging settler colonialism or settler colonial thought. Indeed, Indigenous geographies continue to exceed the limits of knowledge enframed by colonization alone, insisting on knowledges of resurgence, resistance, and Indigenous refusal (A. Simpson, 2014). How, then, do we go about unsettling decolonizing geographies?

## **5) Unsettling Authoritative Knowledge Moves: Where To From Here**

Rather than relying on the labor of Indigenous peoples, settlers should undoubtedly play a key role in efforts to 'decolonize' (see Rose-Redwood, 2016 on settler responsibilities to go beyond the politics of recognition in toponymic politics). Nevertheless, decolonizing efforts across disciplinary boundaries continue to grapple with the tensions inherent in a project always at risk of reproducing its own imperialist authority. What does it mean for decolonization to be taught within the discipline of geography through citational and pedagogical practices that continue to center White settler scholars over Indigenous scholars? What does it mean for decolonization to become normative in geography departments and programs with few (if any) Indigenous professors? What are the limits of a project seeking to decolonize geography but absent of Indigenous peoples as experts or theorists? If Indigenous peoples and places continue to be *subjects* within scholarly contributions of settler geographers seeking to decolonize, is any decolonization really being done? What does it mean to read, write, and teach about decolonization absent of significant relationships with Indigenous peoples on whose land our universities are situated?

Through our own collaborative, relational writing practice, we aim to demonstrate in this paper the necessity of geographical praxis that unsettles our own authority to theorize what decolonization means in the places in which we live and work. In order to unsettle the project of decolonizing geography, we urge our colleagues to politicize their own situated position on stolen or colonized land and to reflect on how many geographies and positionalities around the world exist because of, or have profited from, colonial violence. As Anishnaabek author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) writes,

If the academy is concerned about not only protecting and maintaining Indigenous intelligence, but revitalizing it on Indigenous terms as a form of restitution for its historic and contemporary role as a colonizing force (of which I see no evidence), then the academy must make a conscious decision to become a decolonizing force in the intellectual lives of Indigenous peoples by joining us in dismantling settler colonialism and actively protecting the source of our knowledge—Indigenous land. (p.22)

How can we have conversations about decolonization that begin with a relationship to people and places about which and from which we write? We challenge geographers to ask themselves how much they know about the current and historic concerns of the peoples on whose lands they live and work, and whose knowledges, histories, and lives they study (or choose not to study), and to consider how their own departments and programs can materially support local and international movements for decolonization of Indigenous lands and life. For scholars living in settler colonial contexts, but working with Indigenous communities elsewhere, we challenge you to develop an unsettling praxis that accounts for your multiply-situated responsibilities as

interconnected, just as international Indigenous struggles are interconnected. We contend that many of our insights will be useful for scholars working in the UK or other not-settler colonial contexts that nevertheless have intimate, historic, and ongoing relationships to colonization that requires a geographically specific consideration of what it means to unsettle yourself, your department, and your discipline. Further, we suggest that it is necessary for geographers to do this decolonial work through solidarity practices that do not just result in publications or CV entries but through a qualitative shift in how geography (as discipline, as program or department) imagines itself. We offer this as a challenge without end, without resolution, within and in relation to all contexts of enduring settler colonialism.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of our families, communities, and kindred colleagues. We appreciate the feedback of reviewers and guidance of editors. Part of this research is supported by the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research: combating colonial violences is much needed in all aspects of health practice and research.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. Our observation is born out in publication metrics about the use of “decolonizing geographies” or the use of “decolonization” more broadly in geography. A search of geographic publication trends in Web of Science shows a marked increase in the term “decolonizing” from almost no incidences in the 1990s to growth of more than 45 publications per year in 2015. (Search carried out on 11 November 2016, with search terms “decoloni\*” and “geograph\*.” Total 418 records). Further evidence can be seen in the 2017 chair's theme for Annual RGS/IBG conference in London: the theme was “Decolonizing Geographical Knowledges: Opening Geography Out to the World,” underscoring the ascendance of decolonization to a central position in the discipline.
2. For links to websites of current Indigenous specialty groups, visit [indigenougeography.net](http://indigenougeography.net).

## **Biographies**

Dr. Sarah de Leeuw is an Associate Professor with the Northern Medical Program at UNBC, the Faculty of Medicine at UBC. Trained as a researcher and creative writer, her creative and academic work sits at the crossroads of social-cultural geography, health humanities, social determinants of health, and critical decolonizing methods and methodologies.

Dr. Sarah Hunt is an Assistant Professor of Critical Indigenous Geographies with First Nations and Indigenous Studies and the Department of Geography at UBC. She is Kwagiulth (Kwakwaka'wakw) from Tsaxis and has spent most of her life as a guest in Lkwungen territories. Sarah's scholarship in Indigenous and legal geographies critically takes up questions of justice, gender, self-determination, and the spatiality of Indigenous law. Her writing and research emerge within the networks of community relations that have fostered her analysis as a community-based researcher, with a particular focus on issues facing women, girls, and Two-Spirit people.