



# Postcolonial Environmentalism ?

## What is settler colonialism?

Colonialism is the practice of occupying someone else's land and exploiting it. This often included taking partial or full political control, or even establishing long-term settlements to ensure control. When colonialism involves long-term settlement, this is called 'settler-colonialism'. Even people who did not voluntarily come to a colonised space, such as forced labourers, are considered settlers. Non-indigenous Americans, Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders and others who acknowledge on-going colonial occupation of the lands they live in often refer to *themselves* as 'settlers', thus acknowledging the indigenous view. As part of this, they also often acknowledge the original names of areas, their stewards and the treaties that should have assured this stewardship or the sovereignty of an indigenous group of people.



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## Post-colonial Environmentalism?

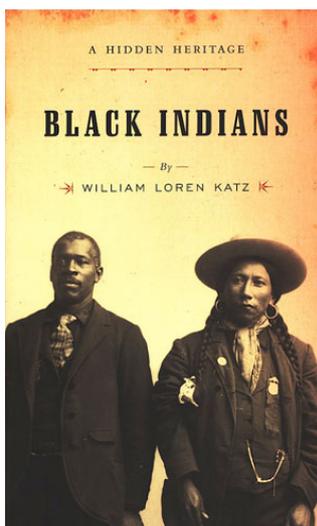
Why do people talk about ‘postcolonial environmentalism’ - and why is there a question mark after the title? To give you a sense of the debate, I am going to use the case of the Dakota Access Pipeline Protests as an illustration. One sentence that may serve as a guide: *You don’t just walk into a natural environment, but always also a history.*



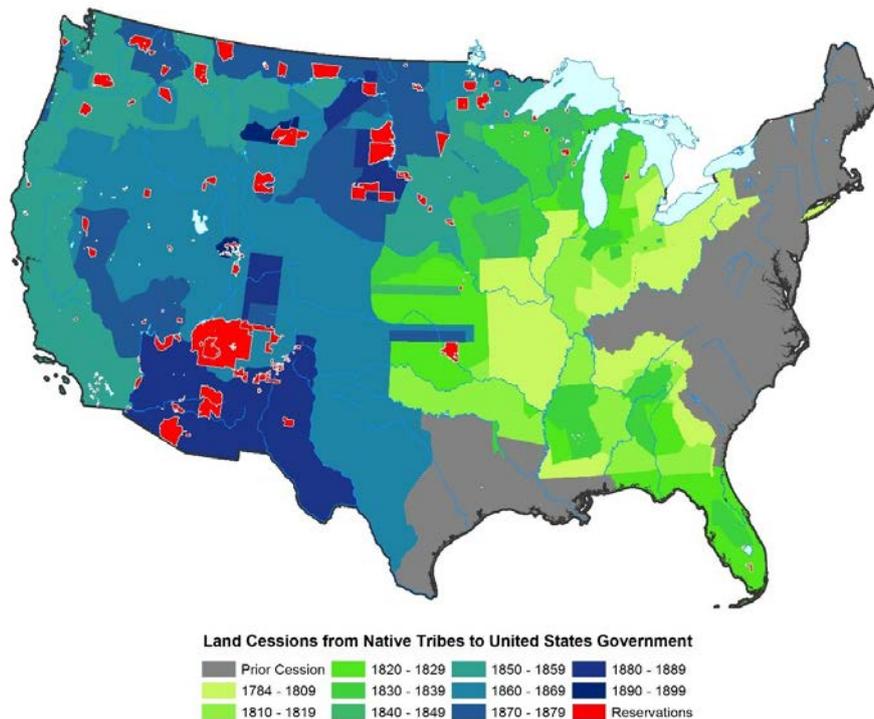
Image source: ACLU.org

### A short history of US colonialism

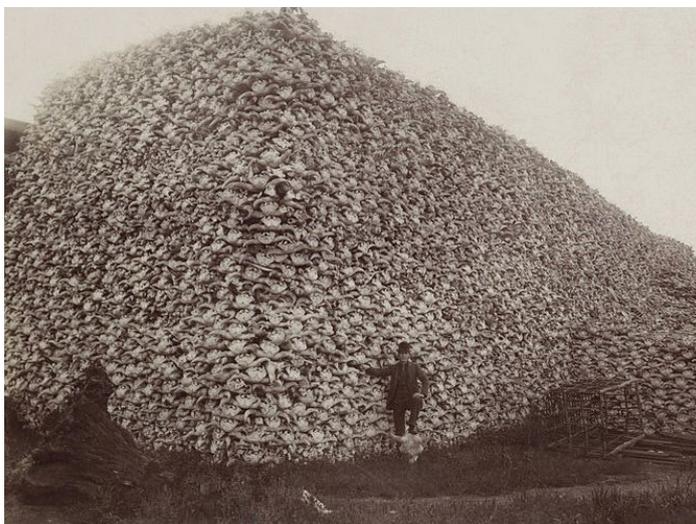
Native Americans have endured a long and violent history of settler colonialism since their “discovery” by Europeans (note: check out the Niño Brothers – Christopher Columbus’ Black Spanish navigators and crew). As Christians, Europeans first had to process the shock of finding an unfamiliar land and people. The pope, however, swiftly decided that European monarchs should proceed to claim the ‘New World’ and its people. In particular, Britain, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain lay claim to the Americas. Approximately 90% of indigenous peoples are enslaved and killed in large numbers (see Koch et al, 2019), but they also resist, trade and form alliances. The Americas are progressively populated by mass immigrations of Europe’s and Asia’s poor (immigration from Asia, especially China, is later curbed by European settlers), and also by forced migrations from Africa (slavery).



The unequal make-up of the new arrivals leads to some notable alliances between Native Americans, African slaves and indentured Europeans. In order to prevent such alliances, policies are put in place that elevate the status of White Europeans and impose inherited enslavement upon indentured Black workers. After France loses American territory through the Haitian Revolution and the sale of Louisiana (check out the work of geographer Karen Salt), the US declares war with Britain (1812-1815), in part to move beyond established western boundaries of the new nation-state. Some Native Americans (e.g. Shawnee) form a confederacy and ally with the British. When the British are defeated, “the treaty of Ghent establishes firm borders between British Canada and the United States, ignoring Native land claims. No longer checked by British competition, the United States begins removing Indians to western lands.” (see Standing Rock Syllabus). In 1816 Native Americans are banned from trading with partners outside the US.



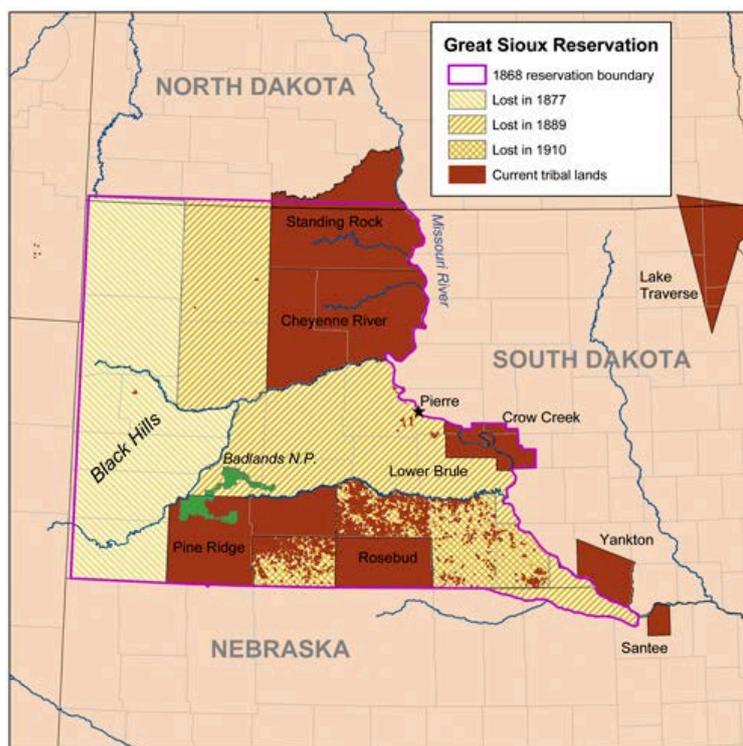
The Fight over Native American sovereignty and independence (1823-32) ends in Indians being treated as ‘domestic *dependent* nations’. This means that the US has the right to govern Native Americans and their interrelations. For this purpose, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (still active) is founded in 1824. Between the years 1835 -1861 discoveries of gold and other valuable resources on designated Native American territories lead to more systematic annihilation that willfully ignore existing contracts. This is done through bounty placement, forced removals (e.g. Trail of Tears) and organized genocide (“total war”) of Native Americans and their food sources (image: bison mass killings, 1877).



During the American Civil War (1861-1865), Native nations and forces fight for both the Union and Confederacy in order to preserve their lands and sovereignty. However, further land is taken away from Native Americans (e.g. Mississippi), especially since, after the end of the American Civil War, more land is needed with the abolition of slavery.

A notable event that directly connects to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests is the Great Sioux Uprising (1862-1864) against settler encroachment, lack of payment for Native lands, railroad construction and disregard of treaties. This results in further forced relocations. This period also marks the beginning of forced assimilation through boarding schools to exterminate Native American language and culture (American Indian boarding schools were started in 1860): “Kill the Indian, save the Man”. Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, around 1 million Native American children were re-educated and abused in such ‘schools’. Similar programmes were in operation in Canada, Australia and other colonized lands.

After the war, the legal status of Native Americans is further diminished when US citizenship is granted to US born black Americans, but not Native Americans (they did not get citizenship until 1887, if they lived separately from tribes, or until 1924, regardless of location or tribe). As a consequence of their marginalization, Native Americans became romanticized as archaic nature loving warriors, and their surviving cultures were caricatured and selectively commercialised and consumed (see “Native American” festivals in Czech Republic, Germany etc). To this date, Native Americans are fighting for sovereignty and religious freedom.



**The Standing Rock Indian Reservation** (size: 9,251.2 km<sup>2</sup> = 3,571.9 sq miles) is located in North Dakota and is home to mostly Hunkpapa, Sicasapa and Yanktonai Lakota. It was split off in the 1890 break-up of the Great Sioux Nation by the US government, as the government wanted to prevent tribal alliances. The partly anti-colonial, partly assimilatory ‘Ghost Dance’ Movement develops around the ideas of “prophet” Wovoka/Jack Wilson. The movement frightens the Bureau of Indian Affairs and gatherings of Native Americans become placed under high levels of surveillance. One such gathering becomes the site of the Wounded Knee massacre of 300 unarmed Lakota.

Native Americans are further subjected to what geographers call ‘environmental racism’ (Bullard, 1983) and ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011). Native American lands often become dumping grounds for hazardous waste or polluting industries (e.g. radioactive waste, waste incinerators). Further environmental abuse includes nuclear weapons testing, mining and damming. ‘Environmental racism’ also disproportionately affects the African American population in the US, as well as other poor communities and communities of colour around the world, including the UK (ethnicity being the most determining factor).

## The rise of indigenous power



The 1960s and 70s saw the rise of the Red Power Movement, which included groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM – see flag), the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) and Indians of All Tribes (IOAT). Although treated akin to a terrorist threat by the US government (like the Black Power Movement) - AIM member Leonard Peltier remains

a political prisoner until this day - the Red Power Movement achieved concrete improvements of the situation of Native Americans. For example, it raised awareness of the Native American situation for other Americans and gained many non-Native allies, for example, by re-occupying key sites of Native American history such as Wounded Knee. More importantly, there was a regained sense of pride in Native American heritage as well as important legal (re)gains. During your degree, you are likely to come across Red Power intellectual Vine Deloria Jr (1933-2005), a multi-disciplinary academic from the Standing Rock Reservation who wrote many books and essays such as *Research, Redskins and Reality* (1991). His works are foundational texts in research methods and academic work around colonialism, spirituality and indigenous struggle.

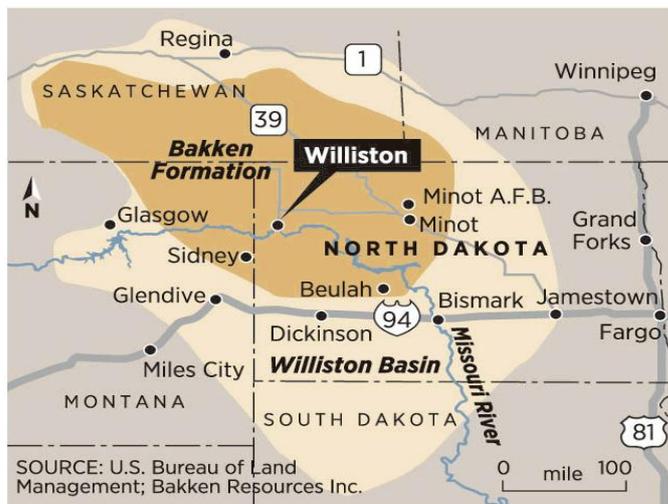


In 2007, the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people* was published and marked a milestone for many people who continue to live under conditions of colonialism. While the UN cannot enforce these rights, the declaration can be used by indigenous people in the fight for recognition and sovereignty (e.g. in

the US – see image of Native American leaders with the Obamas). It includes:

- Rights of self-determination
- Rights of indigenous individuals and people to protect their culture
- Indigenous peoples' right to own type of governance and economic development
- Health rights
- Land rights, including reparation, return of land, environmental issues

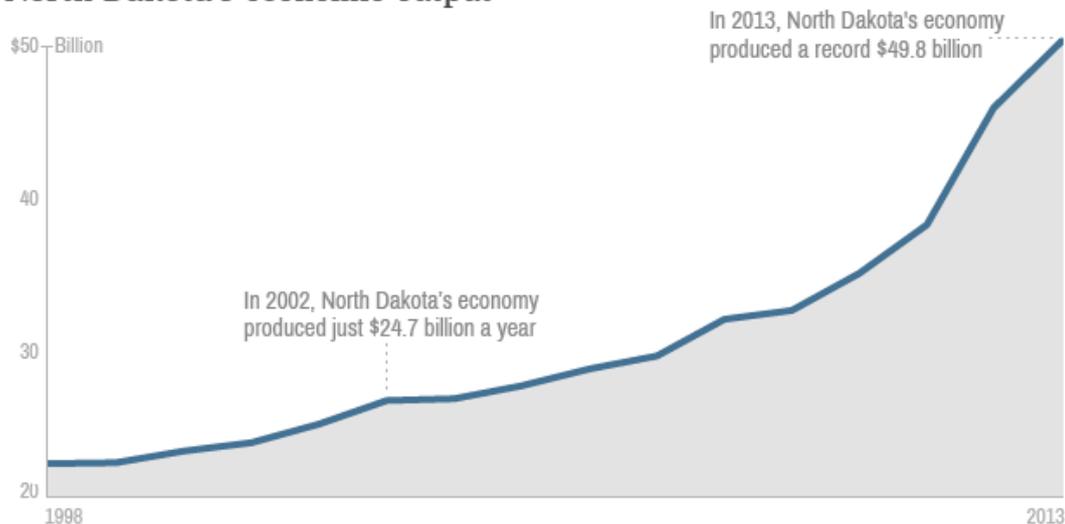
## What does the Dakota Access Pipeline have to do with all of this?



With the discovery of the Parshall Oil field in 2006 and US shale gas reserves, an oil boom began in North Dakota. It was largely enabled by the US government and its desire to have resource independence from other countries (especially Middle East, Venezuela), but also by advancements in extraction technologies. The impact on North Dakota is remarkable:

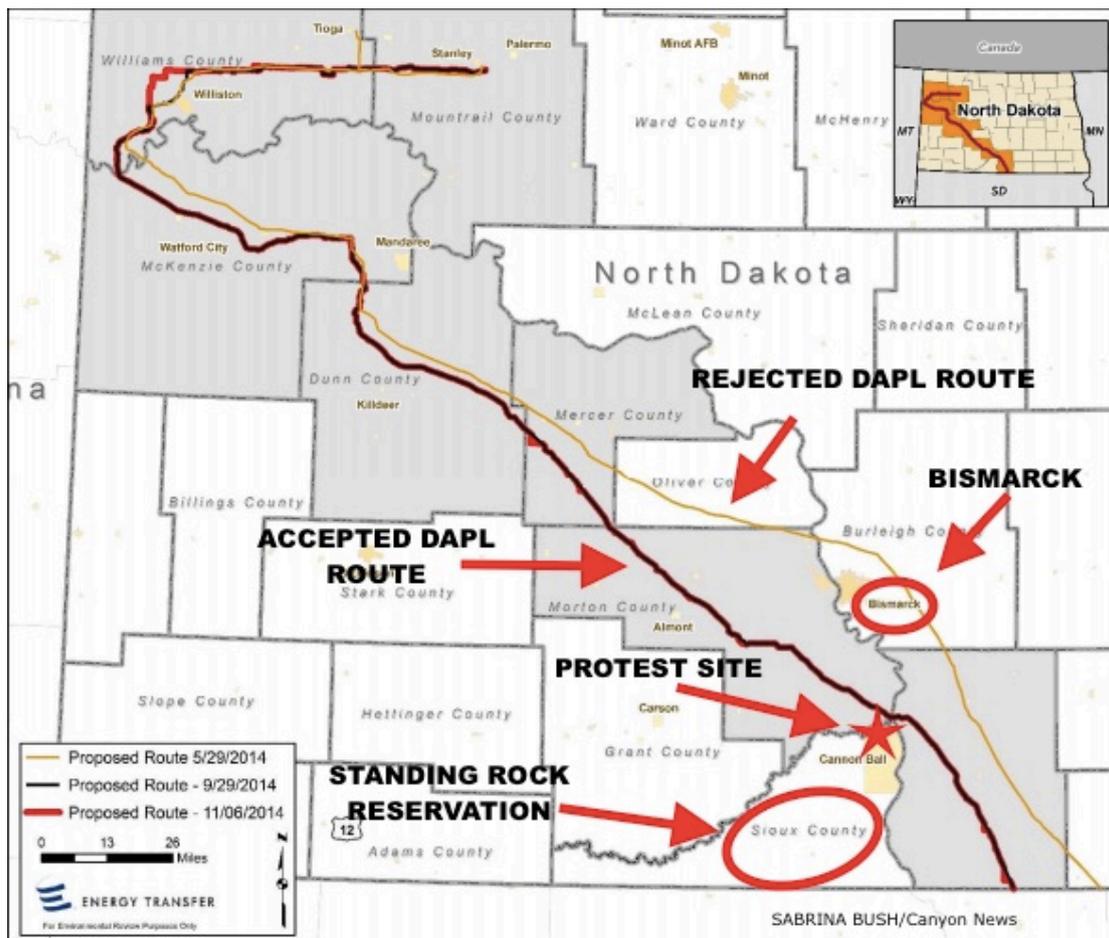
a state with a poor population of around 700,000 now has a budget surplus of several billion (!). The downsides of this development include problems such as water shortage, sewage, housing provision and crime, especially sexual violence against Native American women and children (including human trafficking).

### North Dakota's economic output



The Dakota Access or Bakken Pipeline is a 1,172-mile-long (1,886 km) underground oil pipeline that transports oil from the Bakken Oil Fields (Stanley, North Dakota) to oil tank farm near Patoka, Illinois – via South Dakota, Iowa (see next page). It is designed to transport as many as 570,000 barrels per day and has been operational since June 2017. It cost around \$4 billion to build. Pipelines are generally controversial, because they have a high occurrence of leaks. For example, the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) has reported more than 3,300 incidents of leaks and ruptures at oil and gas pipelines since 2010. Entire academic and professional journals are dedicated to the environmental and operating hazards of oil pipes. But environmental impact is not the only issue that is at the forefront of the 'No DAPL' protests. It is treated as an issue of environmental racism. Why?

Here is the pipeline's proposed route versus its accepted route:



The pipeline was first supposed to run close to North Dakota's capital of Bismarck, whose population is 93% white. After white residents protested, the pipeline was rerouted closer to Native American lands (see protest site marking). In addition, Native Americans protest the project due to a traversal of burial grounds, inadequate consultation during the permitting process, general concerns about climate change and expansion of oil infrastructure, as well as fear of leaks into tribal water supplies (e.g. Missouri river, several lakes). In the case of a leak into rivers, the water supply of up to 17 million people could be affected.

In total, the protest lasted from Spring 2016 (youth protest) to Spring 2017, where the pipeline was put into operation (despite leaks during the testing phase). After an initial absence of the media, wider coverage of the protest resulted from skirmishes between Native American protesters and private security. Coverage intensified when the US Army was later called to intervene and some army veterans joined the Native Americans in protest and apologized for their historical involvement in crimes against Native Americans (similar apologies were performed at the Keystone XL pipeline protest site, most notably by the 'Cowboys and Indians Alliance'). That the pipeline is now in operation does not mean that the challenges have stopped, but that they have changed in nature.

## What is so remarkable about this protest?



The protest is frequently cited as an exemplary case of ‘post-colonial environmentalism’, because of the sort of alliances that were forged, and the kinds of strategies that were utilised. Further, the colonial history of the US played a central role in how the DAPL project unfolded. This included alliances with national and international indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, including US Army

veterans, Black Lives Matter, queer communities, Asian Americans, Hawaiians, Palestinians. There were teach-ins around the world that focused on US colonial history and indigenous rights, as well as environmental justice. The *Standing Rock Syllabus* that emerged around teach-ins in New York, continues to be a valuable teaching resource. In addition, many musicians – both Native and non-Native, US and non-US, known and less known – contributed songs in different genres from hip hop to folk. This further contributed to the protests entering popular culture, in addition to the many actions particularly by young Native Americans such as Oceti Sakowin youth running 2000 miles from Standing Rock to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers HQ in Washington DC.



*"My tribe is Crow, and our traditional enemies are the Lakotas, and they shared a [peace] pipe together at [Standing Rock]. They haven't done that in a long time." Supaman (Rapper).*

## Environmental Movements & Race

Examples such as Standing Rock also raise questions around environmental movements as a whole. Who and whose environment are they fighting for – and what sort of concepts are they fighting with? Such questions have especially occupied environmentalists who have often felt excluded by the ‘White liberal’ priorities (there are strong parallels with the feminist and LGBT+ debates around race and class). You may have seen these debates being played out in the media and social media around the Extinction Rebellion movement (XR). One of the points of criticism has been their use of arrests, while simultaneously celebrating the police – a strategy that may play out alright for middle class White environmentalists, but not, for example, Black environmentalists or any socio-economic background.



Further, there is widespread anger at White environmentalists accusing ‘people of colour’ of lacking concern for environmental issues (“concern gap”, “concern deficit”). After all, Black, Asian and Indigenous peoples have been protesting the environmental abuse of Europeans/Whites for a very long time, and are continuing to die for their activism (e.g. environmental activists in the Amazon or Nigeria’s oil delta). There has also been activism in many other places in the world that had nothing to do with White people initially, but inspired global environmental

practices, such as the Chipko movement in India in the 1970s. In the UK, the Green Party has widely known Black and Asian representatives, most famously “Magic Magid” (Magid Magid) who sits in the European Parliament and was elected Lord Mayor of Sheffield, or local politicians such as Esther Obiri-Darko. These are on-going debates that will evolve over the course of your degree, so keep an eye out for related commentary.

### **Geography and Environmental Racism: some pointers**

How have geographers engaged with environmental racism? Not enough! But: there is a growing body of work on this, both in physical and human geography

#### *Human Geography*

- June Rubis on Indigenous forest conservation strategies
- Robert D. Bullard (sociologist and honorary geographer)
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore (mostly works on prison abolition, but also Blackness and geography/environment)
- Michelle Daigle on Indigenous water governance
- Patricia Noxolo on Caribbean In/Securities
- Mabel Denzin Gergan on race and environmental disaster, water governance
- Julian Agyeman on sustainability
- Laura Pulido on Latin American communities
- Kathryn Yusoff on the ‘Black Anthropocene’
- Yasmin Gunaratnam & Nigel Clark on race and climate change
- Andrew Baldwin on forest governance

#### *Physical Geography*

- Marc Tadaki on environmental evaluation
- Stuart Lane on the Detroit Geographical Expedition
- Karletta Chief on water resources
- Indigenous/Black STEM Networks

## So, what is Post-colonial Environmentalism?

You will not only come across the term 'postcolonial' environmentalism, but also related terms such as 'postcolonial ecology'. You will find these terms attached to case studies from across the world, whether it is conservation efforts in Kenya or hurricane defences in the Caribbean. Often this simply means that the colonial history of a place has been taken into consideration. As you will hopefully have gathered from this lecture and zine, current environmental controversies can have roots that reach hundreds of years, sometimes thousands of years, into the past. This does not mean that problems don't change (though sometimes they really don't!), but that their effects ripple on and make a situation much worse.

Despite this acknowledgement of continuing colonial violence, the term has been criticized for not going far enough and, more problematically, for concealing our current geopolitical and environmental condition through the hopeful prefix 'post'. For many academics or activists, 'postcolonial environmentalism', however, emphasises that colonialism has not ended, since how we presently act towards our environment and 'developing' nations – is still very much colonial: we carry on exploiting land and resources as if we can just move on to somewhere else. Some people describe the present as 'neo-colonial', often pointing to how many 'developed' nations still dictate the environmental use of 'developing' nations.

Still other critics find that 'postcolonial environmentalism' is inappropriately attached to only former colonies and not the environment of the colonisers. Since so many things in the coloniser's environment are shot through with colonial history, shouldn't the term 'postcolonial' also be applied more universally? Aren't we replicating colonial violence if we again designate certain spaces as different?

As some people find the term useful and others don't, one could say that 'postcolonial environmentalism' encompasses both a concept AND a debate. The question mark after this term is the most important thing that I want you to take away from this lecture: the term, as well as the actions one should undertake to shape a truly 'post-colonial' environment, are under constant discussion – a discussion that is shaped by the people who are still affected by colonialism, but also by people like you and me, whose lives are also entangled in colonial legacies.



I will leave you with some songs, videos – and the Standing Rock Syllabus:

**Stand Up / Stand N Rock #NoDAPL**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Onyk7guvHK8>

**A Tribe Called Red x Prolific The Rapper - Black Snakes (Remix)**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nh\\_HCqp3sd0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nh_HCqp3sd0)

**Standing Rock by Trevor Hall**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyzzEnRR8f8>

**Tanya Tagaq** (interesting interview with the Inuk throat singer):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkD00mGqBxE>

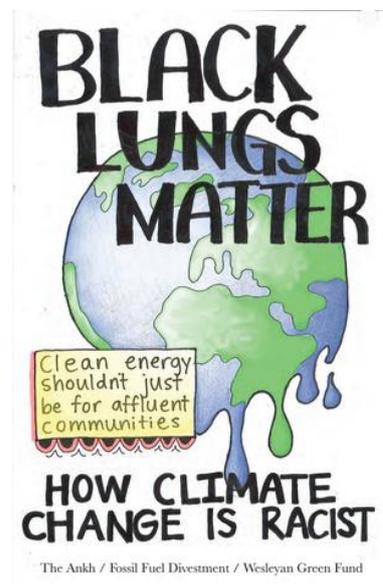
**Interview with Jasilyn Charger from Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe** ('One Year at Standing Rock') (2017): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yb9HHtye1Tk>

Al Jazeera (2016) **What is Environmental Racism?**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrbeuJRPM0o>

**Standing Rock Syllabus**

<https://nycstandswithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>



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Image: DAPL Oceti Winds. Adam Alex Johannson  
Indian Country Media Network