Colonialist and Decolonial Metaphors

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1 Introduction

Tuck and Yang state that metaphor 'invades decolonization', they use a metaphor to lament metaphors (2012: 3). So does Kyle Powys Whyte (2018), who warns against 'reconciliation', which is also a metaphor. Tuck and Yang understand decolonisation spatially, an approach that should discourage metaphorical usages. A few decades earlier, in a widely cited article, Rayna Green could not have been more explicit in also rejecting metaphor on anticolonial grounds: 'metaphor signs the real Indian's death warrant' (1998: 37). While Green had used a powerful metaphor to refuse metaphors, Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino in a recent intervention have argued that Tuck and Yang are being analogical, that they 'fold slavery into settler colonialism'. Garba and Sorentino refer approvingly to Frank B. Wilderson's denunciation of 'the ruse of analogy' (2020: 765-6). Indeed, Garba and Sorentino conclude that '*slavery is (nothing but) metaphor*' (2020: 766, emphasis in original; on slavery and metaphor, see also Blackett, Duquesnoy 2021). This is because while Tuck and Yang can recover land from metaphor, the slave has no substantive object obfuscated by metaphorical constructions. Garba and Sorentino also do not believe in the 'labor theory of slavery'; they believe that the 'slave position' exceeds a demand for labor (2020: 772). They conclude that '*the excision of metaphor from settler colonialism is necessarily the excision of slavery*'

(2020: 776, emphasis in original). It is an impasse: if for Tuck and Yang 'to be non land' is to be anti-Indigenous, for Garba and Sorentino to be 'anti-metaphor is to be anti-Black' (2020: 776).[2]

This paper's section 2 argues that metaphors and colonial phenomena are related. The operation of metaphors and related political and ethical implications have been the subject of significant scholarly enquiry in literary studies and the philosophy of language (see Sacks 1978, Johnson 1981, Kovecses 2010, Felski and Stanford Friedman 2013, Donoghue 2014). This paper relies on this work and focuses in particular on the implications of metaphor for the study of colonialism and for the struggle against it. The focus is therefore on metaphor and other associative figures of speech and thought like analogy, synecdoche, metonymy, and simile. The focus is on figurative association, and while it is acknowledged that different figures of speech operate differently, a capacious understanding of metaphor is here adopted to harness metaphor's power for decolonial rather than colonial uses ('harness', of course, is a cheap metaphor, but I am using it deliberately to make a point, which is another metaphor). This latter argument is presented in this paper's third section.

2 Colonialism and metaphor

We must talk about metaphors and other rhetorical figures, and colonialism, and its histories, and about the way we craft our decolonial practices. It is a current affair. Warwick Anderson has recently offered an argument for pursuing this line of inquiry and action (2020). Sarah Launius and Geoffrey Alan Boyce have also recently reminded us that Indigenous peoples are literally and not metaphorically colonised (2021). Similarly, Elizabeth Strakosch and Alissa Macoun have also warned against 'slippages' into metaphor (which is a metaphor). Addressing the particular position of Indigenous populations facing the recent COVID-19 pandemic, Kaitlin Curtice and Esther Choo in a *Lancet* comment have emphasised the urgency of supporting Indigenous efforts to respond to the compounding challenges of the legacies of colonialism – poor health, poor services, and poverty – and

the recent viral outbreak. They have done so in a language rich with metaphors: Indigenous peoples were 'left *behind*', and 'left *out* of the first *wave* of relief', while, as they note, as 'the *burden* of COVID-19 increases among Indigenous communities, it will invariably take a *toll* on elders, who are the *reservoirs* of language and history' (Curtice, Choo 2020, emphasis added). Launius and Boyce refuse metaphor and argue that colonialism is literally happening, while Curtice and Choo embrace metaphor and identify colonial 'legacies', the metaphorical ties that bind the present to the past.

Colonialism and metaphor are especially related. Metaphors are technical devices that enable the articulation of a new predicament by way of referring to past experience. We recurrently appraise colonialism metaphorically: metaphors are inherently spatial, as they carry over 'the name of something onto something else' (this was Deridda's intuition), and so is colonialism, a circumstance defined by movement across space (see Patton 1999). According to some renditions of colonialism, including that of the United Nations since the 1950s, colonialism is defined by the 'blue water' that separates colony and metropole, a metaphor, whereas the British colonialists would talk about a 'saltwater fallacy' when referring to American attitudes towards their formal empire, which they wanted to disestablish. Empires thrive on analogies (Satia 2021).[3] Even Patrick Wolfe's famous quip that 'settler colonialism is a structure, not an event', which could be seen as the founding statement of settler colonial studies as a field of research (1999: 2), was a metaphor. Its purpose was to translate Indigenous dispossession from the past to the present and to emphasise the current urgency of decolonisation.

Besides, the colony is almost inevitably defined synecdochically. 'Colony' derives from *colere*, the Latin term for cultivating. It is a synecdoche: it is the act performed in a given locale that defines the whole place. The colony raises the food that will feed another place, for example, in ancient Rome's understanding of colonial relations, an urban setting to which the colony is subjected. The colony is thus less than a place, less than an assemblage of culture, people, and territories.

It is an entity defined and understood exclusively by the tradeable commodity that it can offer (exclusively here means both that the colony is defined by what it can offer to the detriment of everything else, and that it offers what it offers to the exclusive benefit of the colonising metropole). 'Madeira' (timber in Portuguese) was the first colony of western Europe's first colonising power; 'Brazil' was a particular type of timber; the 'Slave Coast' was in western Africa; the fabled 'Spice Islands' were mind-bogglingly far but worth crossing two oceans to reach them; the 'Gold Coast' says it all; and so does the island of Tobago. And then there were the 'Ivory Coast', the 'Sugar Islands', and I could go on. Even 'Greenland' was a synecdoche and an advertising device. A Viking entrepreneur called Erik the Red had called it this way to attract settlers, who in his words 'would be more eager to go there because the land had a good name'. He had been banished from Iceland because of a little killing, which is not good advertising if you are a real estate developer.

Sometimes it goes the other way, and it is the colony that names a specific commodity: 'candy' comes from Candia, the ancient name of the island known today as Crete. The crusader king of England got some candy there on his way back home from Palestine and everyone was impressed. 'China' is porcelain that is manufactured in a particular locale. 'Demerara' is a particular quality of sugar, but also the colony where it comes from. 'India pale ale' identifies a particular quality of alcoholic beverage (it had to be stronger than usual to make transporting it possible and worthwhile). And cheap 'Manchester' replaced India calico as free trade provisions replaced protective tariffs. Sometimes it is the obstruction to colonial commodification that names the location. The Romans did not bother with conquering 'Hibernia' because it allegedly was, as the name implied, a land of eternal winter. The 'Canary Islands' are named after noisy dogs – the Romans did not conquer them either. The 'Tierra del Fuego', a burning land, did not look very promising to the Spanish *conquistadores*. And the 'Pirates' Coast' wasn't that promising either. The extractive underpinning of all these metaphors is obvious. Colonies can be harvested or plundered, the colonised peoples can be taxed, ripped off, robbed, and exterminated,

but it is what comes out of them that defines them as political entities. The colony is nothing but a trove of commodities to be mobilised in international networks of exchange to the exclusive advantage of the coloniser.

But when the commodity that is coveted cannot be mobilised, like when the colonisers want land, metaphorical usages travel with the colonisers that intend to stay – the settlers. Lands that are to be colonised are 'virgin' soil, their possession has remained unconsummated – they are unfenced *terra nullius*, like an unprotected woman can be seen as *femina nullius*. In 'frontier' circumstances the land is to be 'opened up', which sound ominous; if some colonisers monopolise it, other colonisers argue that the land should be 'unlocked' – remove the chastity belt! Moreover, when it is land that is coveted, the 'Indigenous policy' of the settler polity is shaped by fundamental metaphors involving disease: the quarantine station model that underpins Indigenous containment in reservations, the intensive care unit model that justify sequestering Indigenous individuals in institutions like missions and boarding schools, and the deliberate contagion that underpins assimilationist policies aimed at scattering Indigenous families in the wider settler community. The prison is never far in this context.

Metaphors, however, can also describe the consummation of colonialism. A colonial process that has run its course is understood as the 'tide of history'. Finding against the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal claimants, Justice Olney of the federal Court of Australia concluded in 1998 that the 'tide of history' had 'washed away' their native title ('Members of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Community v Victoria & Ors' 1999). This is a very colonialist end of colonialism, but there are also neocolonialist metaphors. A new policy decided upon by the greatest colonial power of all was represented as an unstoppable 'wind of change' on a continental scale: decolonisation. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom went to South Africa in February 1960, the year that would become the 'year of Africa', to convey this metaphor to the members of a parliament stacked with white settlers. The settlers believed that they were appropriately sheltered from the wind. They

were already enforcing apartheid, but also declared a republic and exited the British Commonwealth as a further windbreak. Of course, it was a misleading metaphor, and in a sense the settlers were right. In some ways they were facing the wind as well as sitting on a volcano. They eventually decided to accommodate, and democracy erupted in a controlled fashion a generation later. Today, the German government insists on a very poorly chosen metaphor in order to avoid talking about reparations for the colonial genocide German forces perpetrated in Namibia at the beginning of the twentieth century. 'Healing the wounds' is to them preferable to 'reparations', which they feel would be a more explicit admission of guilt and constitute a precedent. The Namibian negotiators have called their German counterparts out ('Namibia Rejects Germany's Reparations Offer for Genocide').

3 Decolonial metaphors?

The language of colonialism routinely deploys colonising metaphors, especially when dealing with anticolonial insurgencies, as recently compellingly reconstructed by Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, who explored colonialist representations of anticolonial violence as a cancer, an infection, or an epidemic (Raza Kolb 2021), but thinking metaphorically can also be a productive decolonial exercise. Metaphors are powerful heuristic devices and can support a revolutionary decolonial pedagogy.

Metaphors that spread virally and infect received narratives can indeed have liberatory effects. After George Floyd was publically murdered in Minneapolis in May 2020 an unprecedented shift in public sentiments accompanied demonstrations organised by the Black Lives Matter movement. It became a global movement that exceeded the United States, and Australia also witnessed a spate of well-attended demonstrations in every capital city. Jennifer Mills has insightfully analysed the Australian reverberations of this global movement (she also linked this movement to the social consequences of the lockdowns that followed the spread of the COVID pandemic):

> 'I can't breathe' [Floyd's dying words, but also the dying words of many other victims] was spelled out at the Black Lives Matter protest in

Meanjin (Brisbane) on 3 June with 433 candles: 432 for the Aboriginal people who have died in custody since the royal commission ended in 1991, and one for George Floyd. When asked about the protests, prime minister Scott Morrison said: 'We don't need to draw equivalence here'. But to many, the patterns are obvious. Organiser Bo Spearim told NITV [the National Indigenous TV network]: 'Aboriginal people, black people, Indigenous people, we've made that connection' (Mills 2020).

The politics of comparisons emerge clearly: Morrison feared that we should say that Aboriginal people can't breathe like Floyd could not, while the connection Spearim celebrates is an analogy according to which Indigenous peoples must fight settler colonialism *like* Black people must fight white supremacy.

White people in the US supported the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020; white people did not support its predecessors (it is not just anecdotal evidence, and this support has been measured; see Cohn, Quealy 2020). What can explain this sudden shift in public attitudes? Perhaps an analogy can, or, rather, a newly acquired ability to translate experience *by way of analogy*, which is not a metaphor but is a related figure of speech. My suggestion is that the lockdowns that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic may have made many more sensible to the constraints to personal mobility and to the concerns for personal safety in public spaces that black people have endured for centuries (my point is that this sensibilisation may be seen as one factor among many contributing to this attitudinal shift and we should not forget that the COVID pandemic also and simultaneously deepened existing inequalities and social divisions). But this analogy works the other way around too: and white Americans are, as Anna North noted in a *Vox* article, 'less likely than other racial groups to routinely wear masks' (2020). A collective, widespread, dogged and very *political* determination to flaunt social distancing measures and not wear protective face masks, especially in the US, can be interpreted as a deliberate and public attempt to refuse being treated *like* black people, a stance that follows the unconscious but very real recognition that public safety measures that apply to all extend to all the structural

limitations that normally apply only to racialised constituencies.[4] Strangely, the racial dimension of the politicisation of mask mandates has been relatively absent from public debate.

This transformation should not be overstated: white supremacy is traditionally reinforced when white people interpret social or legal constraints on their autonomy as a form of oppression similar to that experienced by blacks. But this transformation is also significant, because Jim Crow measures were routinely uttered in the language of public prophylactics (as colonialist a metaphor as can be), and because, as anyone who has even only skimmed Fanon's work would know, the dehumanising experience of racialised blackness under colonialism can be summarised as that of being compelled to wear a mask (see Fanon 2019). Jair Bolsonaro's and Donald Trump's reluctance to be seen wearing one is, as far as they are concerned, reasonable, even if they would not be able to articulate why. Likewise, housing minister Yaakov Litzman of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox party resigned his post in the Israeli government protesting against the reintroduction of a COVID-related lockdown (see Holmes 2020). He couched his protest in the language of Jewish religious freedoms, but the point is that extended lockdowns are normally reserved for Palestinians living under occupation. Beyond Black Lives Matter and COVID-19, but in the context of a similar argument and referring to the current late neoliberal conjuncture, Achille Mbembe also describes in his recent *Critique of Black Reason* a new dispensation for all with reference to the historical experience of colonialism. He notes that now 'for the first time in human history the term "Black" has been generalised' (Mbembe 2017: 6).

An unprecedented extension of subjection and the potential for new decolonising solidarities constitutes a momentous shift. Analogy, and a solidarity premised on a commonality of subjection may enable decolonial opportunities and passages (a note of warning: allyship is not enough, and we should be wary of generalisations leading to nasty 'all lives matter' arguments, privileging instead 'all lives that are treated as if they were disposable matter' arguments). One crucial example of

the power of analogy in enabling anticolonial struggles comes from occupied Palestine and elsewhere. In recent decades the Palestinian resistance against the occupation has been systematically represented *by way of analogy* to other struggles: that of Black South Africans against apartheid and segregation, that of other the Indigenous collectives of the settler societies fighting dispossession and settler colonial domination, and that of Black Americans facing militarised police repression, especially after extended protest against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 (see Davis Bailey 2015; and the articles collected in Erakat, Lamont Hill 2019). In all these cases, it is analogy that establishes the structures of feeling that then enable identification with the oppressed. Solidarity is a material consequence that follows analogy; the commonality of subjection is real and yet it needs to be translated.[5]

As French sociologist Colette Guillaumin explained, sexual appropriation and colonial appropriation operate in analogous ways; it is appropriation that constitutes racism and sexism as unequal relations. Guillaumin concluded in the 1960s and 1970s that 'racism' and 'race' *follow* a relationship of appropriation (i.e., colonialism), and that the choice of focusing on a signifier (i.e., the colour of one's skin, or sex) depends on a specific relation of subjection (see Guillaumin 1995). For her, it is racism as an ideology that creates 'race', not the fact of racial difference that prompts racism. In other words, it is not because someone is black that they are appropriated and enslaved; on the contrary, it is because they are appropriated and enslaved, that is, because they are colonised, that they are 'black' and their colour becomes significant. There is a material and relational foundation in the construction of racial difference, she argued, and 'race' only acquires a specific meaning in the context of a relation of appropriation. Guillaumin is therefore suspicious of identity politics and related revendications of difference: for her, what raced (and sexed) collectives have in common is not that they are different but that they are appropriated. Analogy is for her the way out in solidarity; a literal revendication of difference is for her a dead end. Metaphor undoes *without subsumption* the incommensurability that separates distinct

experiences of subjection.

4 Conclusion

So, are metaphors colonialist or decolonial; are they progressive or reactionary? The scholarly interpretation of Nietzsche's understanding and embrace of metaphor has extensively faced the latter problem but found no resolution (see Patton 1999). So I am in good company if I provisionally conclude that they can be both and that it depends. Metaphors draw attention to the similarities that exist between distinct things, but similarity is not identity, and as Nietzsche concluded even perception and language are born in metaphorical processes – if anything, it is decolonization that invades metaphor, not the other way around. For Nietzsche truth itself was a 'mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people' (1976: 46-7). There is no resolution: metaphors can be used to denounce colonialism – Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsch for example liken the spread of European lifeways to an infection (and note that 'Eurocentrism has *infected* subjectivities all over the planet' (2018: 178, emphasis added) – and they can be deployed to obfuscate *and* to evasively respond to decolonial demands, or even used as weapons of oppression (as for example Anne McKlintock famously noted of the notion of 'sexual purity' in colonial contexts (1995: 56).

We should reconcile a decolonial refusal and a decolonial embrace of metaphor. We should refuse metaphors that obfuscate and reclaim the literal meaning of decolonisation as we deploy the power of metaphor (for a compelling reclamation of literality that relies on metaphors, see Freeman 2019). Attention to the operation of metaphors is in itself an exercise in revolutionary and decolonial pedagogy that unveils the operation of colonial ideologies, an exercise that may be pursued simultaneously with the retrocession of land that is the focus of Tuck and Yang's rejection of metaphor.[6] The former is also a moment of

liberation, the moment when we collectively interpret the world so that we can then change it, the moment when we move away from a diagnostic framework (i.e., how colonialism destroys) and embrace a prognostic one (i.e., how we develop the metaphors that will undo colonialism). We should not form two opposing parties, the 'literalists' vs. the 'metaphorists'. On the contrary, we should consider whether the proposition that 'decolonisation is not a metaphor' could be interpreted as 'decolonisation cannot be only a metaphor', and whether metaphors could be used for genuine decolonial purposes. In other words, we need to know about the metaphors we survive by so that we can craft the metaphors we will respond with.

Endnotes

1   Lorenzo Veracini teaches history and politics at the Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. His research focuses on the comparative history of colonial systems. He has authored *Israel and Settler Society* (Pluto Press 2006), *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Palgrave 2010), *The Settler Colonial Present* (Palgrave 2015), *The World Turned Inside Out* (Verso 2021), and *Colonialism: A Global History* (Routledge 2022). Lorenzo also co-edited *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (2016), manages the settler colonial studies blog, and was Founding Editor of *Settler Colonial Studies.*

2   Garba and Sorentino blame settler colonial studies 'and its satellites' for their failure to 'reckon with the metaphoricity of slavery', but of course Tuck and Yang are critical of settler colonial studies too (2020: 777).

3   The 'blue water' thesis was ultimately an excuse to justify contiguous or semicontiguous colonial land conquests (was not crossing land or crossing shallow waters with an invading army as colonial as heading further afield?). It was an interested argument, and both the Americans and the Soviets approved, which in the 1950s was quite something.

4   White American resistance to mask mandates might be interpreted in the context of a long-lasting history of racist opposition to the welfare state. What is/was unprecedented in the politics of COVID would then fit in with an established pattern of racist structures of feeling.

5   The notions of an emerging global 'Third World' and the promise of decolonisation in the 1950s were also similarly constituted on an analogy. The capitalist world was the aristocracy, and the Moscow-aligned 'second' world was the clergy. The emerging postcolonial nations were the Third World/Third Estate, the agents of revolutionary action. This concept was built on analogy, but it wanted to be a prophecy too. 'Third World' ended up as synonymous with poverty and dysfunction. Now the 'Global South' has replaced it.

6   Then again, what is exactly to be 'retrocessed'? Land-as-property, as in settler ontologies, or what in Australian parlance is referred to as Indigenous 'Country' together with the 'relationship-based' focus of Indigenous approaches to environmental management? On this issue, see, for example, Carroll 2015, especially p. 8.

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