



Beyond Land Acknowledgements: What is Decolonizing Work Without a Conscious Connection to the Land?

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When institutions of education such as Cerritos College proclaim a land acknowledgement, we speak of the indigenous peoples who cared for the land for millennia before the institution existed. In the case of Cerritos College, it is the Tongva/Gabrieleño and

Acjachemen people who are recognized to have inhabited and stewarded the land in our Southern California region for at least 10,000 years. What is often left unsaid is that this period preceded the arrival of invaders that decimated the ecosystem with invasive grazing cattle, obliterated the human population with disease and violence, and recreated the landscape and social systems to serve the interests of profit and power for a few. Today, there is a push for academia to “decolonize”, yet we are quick to move away from the tangible realities of the land to more abstract applications of “decolonization” such as syllabi construction that represents a diversity of voices, classroom practices that encourage a structural awareness of historical inequities, challenging traditional relationship dynamics amongst pupils and faculty, and general examinations of hierarchy and power in pedagogical approaches. While these are no doubt well-intentioned and important aspects of decolonization work, I wonder, **what is decolonization work that doesn't prioritize a conscious connection to the physical, living land upon which we stand?** Not just in a passing statement, but in a visceral and tangible way that requires us to look up from our screens and textbooks to the living world around us and to be in relationship with one another in ways largely unprecedented in our society.

Decolonization work requires us to move beyond a statement of recognition of the historical caretakers of the land, who were displaced and nearly eradicated in the interests of western expansion and greed, toward an accountability to and responsibility for the land we occupy and to those who continue to steward the land with cultural wisdom from time immemorial. **This requires an active assessment of our present-day relationship to that land and the indigenous stewards of it.** What do the bees, trees, and flowers tell us? How can we better listen to the indigenous people who are sharing their stewardship wisdom? What can be said of the air, the water, the soil under our feet, or perhaps the lack thereof? Is our relationship with these natural elements as toxic as the colonial treatment of indigenous

communities? What does the concrete, asphalt, and plastic turf masquerading as verdant life tell us about the state of the land and our relationship to it? How are we taking responsibility for healing relationships with the original caretakers of the land? What do rising oceans, record-breaking droughts, historic flooding, mass species extinction, and a warming planet tell us about the impact of a few hundred years of capitalist human activity? What are indigenous people asking us to do about it? These environmental conditions come at the heels of the near eradication of native peoples who coexisted in relative harmony and balance with their local ecosystems for at least ten times as long as our present day society has, since European invaders first landed on the shores of what we today call California. We must first recognize this true history before earnestly taking on the responsibility for our collective futures.

A historical tactic of colonization was to “kill the Indian, save the man”. This was done through a systematic denigration, oppression, and replacement of cultural values, historical wisdoms, and spiritual practices which resulted in a fundamental disconnection between people and the land. It supplanted ideals that promoted universal welfare of all living things in favor of hierarchical preferences for the hoarding of wealth and resources by a few while indoctrinating and subjugating the masses to labor under a system that ignored natural, biological, and ecological realities of balance, finite resources, and universal interdependence.

Decolonization work requires an awareness of our society's interconnectedness with the land and its original stewards. A brief investigation will reveal that our society, with its roots in Western European colonization and racial capitalism has completely exorcized nature from humanity, relegating it to some place that we can find only by driving an hour or more away from the communities in which most of us live our day-to-day lives, or as something that we can control and exploit primarily for our personal benefit. This social construct of nature as being separate and secondary to humans has misled us to deprioritize our environment and misperceive ourselves as disconnected from it. **Nature is not outside of us. We are nature.**

When I travel with Environmental Club students to hike in nature preserves and engage in habitat restoration work, a common observation that students make is the difference in the economic and racial composition of the adjacent communities. We know that communities of color and low-income communities are not only exposed to more toxic pollutants in the air, soil and water, but also have few to no options for accessing natural green spaces in their local communities. Unfortunately, these are luxuries afforded by the most affluent and privileged in our society and are often restricted from access by indigenous communities for cultural practices. **We have an opportunity to create a restored**

landscape on our own campus that promotes equitable access to the beauty of the natural habitat that belongs in this region. In doing so, we can regain the connection to the land that is so lacking and urgent in these times of ecological crises and honor indigenous peoples.

The effort required to restore this connection may seem daunting, and indeed does require profound reflection, confrontation of the status quo, and further education. Importantly, this work must be done in community with others and thankfully, we need not reinvent the wheel as indigenous elders and culture bearers still hold the answers we need to fulfill this task.

On October 7th, 2021, Falcons Rising hosted a conversation entitled, "Honoring the Land and All the People On It", moderated by then environmental club President Morgan Darraugh and the ASCC Sustainability Director Hector Ledesma (both who have since successfully transferred to four year institutions - Yay!). The panel included representatives from local grassroots environmental organizations such as The Sunrise Movement and Happy City Coalition, as well as Tongva/Chicana elder Gloria Arellano and Acjachemen Culture Bearer Rebecca Robles, co-founder of Friends of Puvungna. Puvungna is the site of an ancient Tongva village and home to sacred ceremonial and burial sites, occupied by Cal State Long Beach. Friends of Puvungna's mission is to, "Protect, preserve and enhance the lands of Puvungna to its natural, historical state and open-space and provide the necessary means to protect and preserve the cultural resources on the land." When Rebecca was asked what Cerritos College can do to honor Indigenous peoples and land, she stated that beyond instituting land acknowledgements, **we should plant more native plants on campus.**

The wisdom of this response is supported by the scientific research that establishes that native plants require less water, require no chemical pesticides, provide habitat for pollinators and native animal species, and make the land more resilient to climate change while also mitigating its effects. The financial benefits to the campus include water savings, fewer expenditures on chemical pesticides, and a minimized need for fossil-fuel guzzling and carbon-emitting mowing and gardening equipment. The health of facilities employees who otherwise are exposed to the toxic fumes from gardening equipment and carcinogenic pesticides would also be better protected by a native plant campus. Other added benefits of more native plants for the campus community include learning spaces for environmental science majors and other disciplines, wildlife viewing which helps to promote physical, mental and emotional health, cooler temperatures which makes the outdoor environment on campus more inviting and fosters social connection, and a grounded sense of what truly belongs on the land the campus stands on. Additionally, by restoring native plants to the landscape, Cerritos College can be an important cultural resource for indigenous cultural

practitioners who have difficulty accessing grasses for basket weaving, plants for medicine, food, and for producing other cultural materials.

Do we have the courage to imagine a decolonized campus that fosters habitat for native species, indigenous people, and engenders the many aforementioned benefits to the campus community? While the goal of replacing most non-native plants on campus with native plants, as Rebecca suggests, may appear to some as an unrealistic goal, it is nonetheless a fundamental and holistic way to honor the native land we stand on and all the people on it. We can start with a small section of the campus that is the newly designated Native Plant Sanctuary.

If you would like to support the effort to decolonize our campus landscaping by planting native plants, learn more about [volunteer](#) and education opportunities related to the Native Plant Sanctuary, and be in community with others working to incorporate the Native Plant Sanctuary into classes, clubs, and campus activities.

