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Decolonize Like Me

Jamie John

Colonization starts when I wake up. I wake up in a colonial settlement with man-made borders with an imperialist government that has repeatedly tried to eradicate my culture, my language, my heritage, and my history. The U.S. government has yet to uphold any treaty agreed to in the last 400 years with indigenous tribes all over the continent. It divides me and those like me by a tool called “blood quantum” to measure how Indian one is and how legitimate one’s heritage can be in the eyes of those who persecute them. I am surrounded by invaders because the geographical space of the reservation I was confined in is now a fraction of a fraction of what it used to be, even when not so long ago, this all was once Indian country.

It started when I was six and found myself learning about a foreign ship that brought invaders instead of learning about the people and the civilization who cultivated the land before they ever set foot here. I was taught about the triumph of how those from the whole world away did away with the barbarism and savagery that they saw in me.

It starts when I think about the earth that lives under our feet. The earth that we know how to care for, the corn we grew and nurtured, and all of our knowledge that was given no respect in the face of others and is still brushed away because of ignorance.

I think about my brothers and sisters all over the nation who had to face The National Guard at Standing Rock, those who fought for their sacred site at the Black Hills this year and are still doing time for protecting the land they came from. I think about all my past aunties and uncles who were kidnapped to have the long hair that held their strength cut from their heads and made to wear colonial clothes of one color. It starts when I speak to others in English, knowing that I cannot speak my own tongue and knowing those who did speak it years ago were beaten and bruised when they did. I speak a settler tongue, an indigenous citizen in a settler state built upon bodies that share my blood, and still finding the strength to connect with what my ancestors fought so hard to keep alive for me and others like me.

It starts when I think about forced removal from our own earth mother, from our own families, from the things that gave us our way of life and the insidious intention to pull us away from one another as a way to assimilate us. The way policy had

been made to weed out the indigeneity in all of us, to leave us landless, without heritage, and without any backbone to stand up for ourselves when we know what's happening to us is wrong, from the way we're nationally policed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the rate at which indigenous women are going missing and/or murdered, our water and food supplies being poisoned and reduced, and no one to care for us in times of need but ourselves.

Decolonizing means living with all of this and seeing how it impacts our people today, it's the ugly side of seeing how white supremacy has seeped into our way of life like poison to water. It shows up in how we talk about ourselves as if we're not good enough because of what our communities look like and put ourselves down or avoid topics of indignity in colonized spaces and internalizing the avoidance of what we could be outside of the structures that white supremacy has displayed for us to model after. It takes root in things like the systems in our tribal governments, the things we have to do in order to provide for our people that exist within these colonized structures, and how truly uncomfortable it can be when you have to still participate in those structures when you start decolonizing.

I know it's made to seem like a moment now but the commitment to decolonizing is hard. And sometimes it doesn't end when I think about all that we have to fight for still and all the hard work we must do, both individually and collectively, to build upon the foundation of our sovereign nations and to have the nations our people can be proud of. And sometimes it hurts thinking about the work that still needs to be done as someone who wants a different, better nation that my people can look towards and see a future where we are valued just as we come.

I want a future that includes sovereignty, liberation, true freedom on our land, I want our own systems that place value on our own knowledge, traditions and teachings. A future that includes collective care and looking out for one another, a place where I can come to and feel welcomed and at home and a place that teaches people to be proud of their indigenous heritages before the world teaches them to be ashamed of it.