

Character and . . .

Play

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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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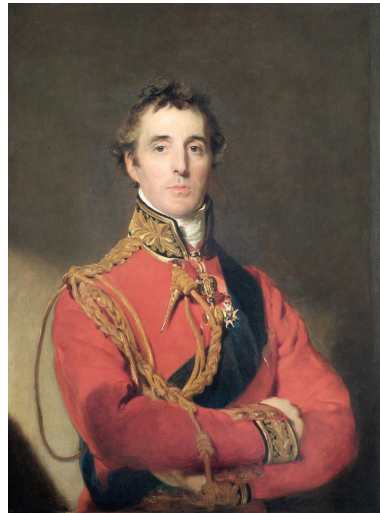
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Turning Poison into Medicine

Play and Decolonizing Our Future

Naaman Wood

There is a quotation attributed to the first Duke of Wellington,¹ and it goes like this: “The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.” His assertion suggests that sites as innocuous as playgrounds are important for us to take seriously because they are sites of formation. Formation implies that what we do in our daily lives helps us become the kinds of people we will be in moments of decision. Pastor and theologian Sam Wells says, “one cannot understand Waterloo without understanding Eton. In fact, what went on at Eton was more important than what went on at Waterloo.”² The playground is more important than the battlefield because once the moment of crisis is upon us, the battle is, in effect, already won or lost. The time for preparation is over, and we have no choice but simply to be who we are. The task, then, is to become the kind of person who will make good choices in those moments of crisis.



Sir Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington

In my experience, jazz musicians also value becoming certain kinds of people. One evening at the Village Vanguard, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis played a solo rendition of the ballad, “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You.” Journalist David Hajdu recounts,

When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement . . . “I don’t stand . . . a ghost . . . of . . . a . . . chance . . .” The room was silent until, and at the most dramatic point, someone’s cell

phone went off. . . . People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment—the whole performance—unraveled.³

Marsalis then made a choice that surprised the audience. He quoted the cell phone's ringtone, note for note, and improvised on it. The audience that had disengaged now drew all their attention back to the music. He returned to the final phrase of the ballad, and when he played the last two notes of the melody, "with . . . you . . . '[, t]he ovation was tremendous."⁴




Wynton Marsalis

What makes Marsalis' response unique is his ability, as another jazz great, Herbie Hancock, once said, "to turn poison into medicine."⁵ Whether it is the playground or practice room, I think we should take our preparation and virtue formation seriously because it can help us become the kinds of people who possess the desire and skill to turn poison into medicine. The work in *Character and...Play* can help us in the task of becoming that kind of people, but a little ground clearing is in order regarding the relationship between play and the essays in this volume. The authors, as a group, implicitly asked the question, "What is play (or playfulness) for?", and they applied their answers to music, science, games, race. The authors are implying that play (or playfulness) can help us become different kinds of people, a people capable of virtues like self-reflection (Bryant), hospitality (Eby), imagination (Halstoos), and curiosity (Kleinschmit). I want to take their work one step further. In becoming different kinds of people, these virtues that emerge from play can help us make a different, better world than the one we currently live in.

I begin by asking the question, "What world do we live in?"⁶ I have become convinced that we live in a social world of profound injustice and violence, and the term *colonialism* is the most helpful way to frame our current circumstances.⁷ I then turn to the question, "Can these essays help us make a different, better world?"⁸ The authors in this volume have helped me see more clearly that the answer to that question is "Yes." Self-reflection, hospitality, imagination, and curiosity can help us live more fully into that different, better world, which I take to be a decolonial world.

What World Do We Live In?

Instead of rehearsing the history of violent acts that European settlers enacted upon Indigenous peoples, I want to explore how that colonial reality gave to us some vices that define our social reality today. I will assume the historicity of three overarching acts of violence internal to colonialism: the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the theft of their land, and the enslavement of Indigenous peoples from Africa. These acts were the express intent of our European ancestors. Their intent transformed Indigenous lands into the New World and did so through ownership and objectification. Several key figures in the colonial process produced at least three identities and three corresponding vices: the merchant gave us the vice of utility; the soldier, a desire for safety; and the missionary, the practice of relentless evaluation. Those vices are still with us today, and they constitute, in part, the legacy of colonialism we carry with us.



We should take our preparation and virtue formation seriously because it can help us become the kinds of people who possess the desire and skill to turn poison into medicine.

The realities of genocide, land theft, enslavement are not unintended consequences of settler activities; to the contrary, European Empires and the church intended that colonialism encompass those acts. As Indigenous legal scholar Steven T. Newcomb (Shawnee/Lenape) argues in his book *Pagans in the Promised Land*, the Church and Empire collaborated together as a means not only of accomplishing the task of colonization but also of creating the legal and religious legitimacy for their violence. The Church named and sanctioned the Imperial desire to exploit, enslave, and commit genocide.

Such sanction appeared as early as 1452, when Pope Nicolas V issued a papal bull entitled *Dum Diversas*. Addressed to King Alfonso V of Portugal, Pope Nicolas authorized Portugal “to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans.” Furthermore, Nicolas authorized Alfonso to take possession of “all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.”⁹ When European Empires entered new lands, they did precisely as the pope said.¹⁰



Pope Nicolas V and King Alfonso V of Portugal

These edicts provided what is often referred to today as the Doctrine of Discovery, whereby the Church legitimated the founding violence that enabled European colonizers to establish dominance over Indigenous peoples and lands.¹¹ Later, the Church rejected the legitimacy of these edicts, but by that time the damage had been done.¹²

Additionally, settlers transformed Indigenous lands into a New World, marked by ownership and objectification. For the Indigenous peoples, the land, plants, and animals were all relatives, all living within a harmonious web of interdependent relationality.¹³ Settlers reconfigured the world from relationality between subjects to ownership of objects. To Indigenous peoples, owning land made as much sense as owning one's grandmother. Settlers transformed relatives, like land, plants, and animals, into objects. They owned land, livestock, and agriculture first, then people. Because Indigenous people were considered savages and the enslaved Africans considered only good for slavery, white settlers transformed them into objects, too. White settlers created a world in which they were the only true subjects. Everyone else were now objects to be owned or controlled.

The merchant gave us the vice of utility; the soldier, a desire for safety; and the missionary, the practice of relentless evaluation.

Using ownership and objectification, the forces of Empire, Christianity, and Capitalism developed three identities—soldier, missionary, and merchant—and corresponding vices. As theologian Willie James Jennings argues, these three colonial figures “created or recreated much of life in the New World—which is our world.”¹⁴

One of the key figures in objectification was the merchant. For the merchant, persons “serve two purposes: they are nodes or sites for exchange (e.g., producers and/or consumers), or they are tools to be employed by others.”¹⁵ Through the merchant, we live today in a capitalist way of relating to others, a way that sees others in terms of their usefulness or utility to us.

Second, the soldier secured safety for the merchant and the missionary, for Capitalism and Christianity. For the sake of safety, the soldier remains vigilant against a world of threats, especially the threat of Indigenous and enslaved peoples, their cultures, and their ways of life. Jennings notes, “The way of the soldier denies love of the other and the way of the merchant disciplines that love, binding it only to the other’s utility.”¹⁶

Third, the missionary viewed Indigenous peoples as both “demonic” and “culturally deficient.”¹⁷ As a result, missionaries “entered the worlds of [I]ndigenous peoples in an unrelenting evaluative mode, as eternal teachers with eternal students.”¹⁸ Taken together, the merchant, soldier, and missionary gave us utility, safety, and evaluation, respectively.



Indigenous Americans working a Spanish Mission

Those vices are part of our contemporary social existence, negatively impacting minority communities. While a full accounting of these vices is outside of the scope of this essay, I offer three representative examples.

First, the recent anxiety over ChatGPT in educational settings reveals how utility is with us today.¹⁹ Some educators worry that students will use OpenAI to cheat on writing. I think that anxiety arises out of the confused purposes of education. In our aspirations, education helps students become better people. However, education in the United States is caught within the vice of economic utility. One of the main reasons people pursue higher education is that it often results in higher wages and economic mobility. Utility, in many cases, motivates students to consider technologies like ChatGPT as viable ways to receive higher grades and, in the long term, make more money.

In addition, our desire for safety manifests in realities like mass incarceration, which have created harmful, disproportionate outcomes for communities of color. Much of the political rhetoric around law and order focuses on safety. The claim is, often, that tough-on-crime policies will produce safer communities by keeping criminals in jail. However, these policies have historically criminalized communities of color at disproportional rates.

Modern mass incarceration is said to have begun with the Johnson administration's War on Crime, which focused surveillance on communities of color.²⁰ During the 1970s, the Nixon administration rebranded Johnson's policy into a War on Drugs. Richard Nixon's domestic policy advisor, John Ehrlichman, claims that the policy explicitly targeted people of color. "We knew we couldn't make it illegal," he said, "to be either against the [Vietnam W]ar or [B]lacks, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and [B]lacks with heroin and then criminalizing them both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. . . . Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."²¹

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration introduced sentencing disparities between crack and powder cocaine,²² which punished Black crack cocaine users far more severely than powder cocaine users, who were often white. The Clinton administration also developed harsher minimum sentences for non-violent drug offenses, again disproportionately imprisoning Black and brown Americans.²³

When the Johnson administration began its War on Crime, the US had around 50,000 prisoners. In 2020, we had 1.2 million prisoners.²⁴ The majority of those prisoners are Black and Latinx.²⁵ These policies have, in effect, criminalized Black and brown peoples, to encourage feelings of safety for white settlers.

Regarding the third vice of evaluation, social media is perhaps one of the most discussed areas of self-evaluation. Studies note how social media can negatively impact body image issues and lead to depression, anxiety, and self-harm.²⁶ While research does not establish that social media directly causes these negative impacts, there are significant (but small) correlations between the rise of mental health issues and social media.

One explanation for these correlations lies in the way self-evaluation commonly takes place. Social media often presents images of perfect lives and bodies. Such images misrepresent the difficulties many of us face. Although we might know that the images others post do not fully represent reality, it can be difficult not to feel inadequate, less than, or disgusted with ourselves. Such comparisons are fundamentally evaluative and can be unrelenting, unceasing, merciless, and seemingly impossible to stop. While the content is vastly different, the structure of this experience is not unlike the ways colonial missionaries saw Indigenous peoples as lacking and perpetually inferior. Social media encourages us to internalize a sense of lack and inferiority.

I am convinced that genocide, land theft, and enslavement are the foundations upon which our world is built. Today, our world is a world of ownership and objectification, and we are, largely speaking, a people who live inside the realities of utility, safety, and unceasing evaluation. Colonialism and its legacies are the poison that we must try to turn into medicine. I think the essays in this volume can help us in that task.

Genocide, land theft, and enslavement are the foundations upon which our world is built.

Can These Essays Help Us Make a Different, Better World?

These essays can help us attend more deeply to our self-reflection, hospitality, imaginations, and curiosity, and, as a result, do so to help us co-create a better, different, and decolonial world.

Self-Reflection


Mary Bryant’s wonderful essay reflects on the role games can play in human flourishing, grappling with the gains and losses of gameplay. Like nearly all forms of cultural expression, games can sometimes assist us in leading better lives. As social activities, games provide the opportunity to “practice being good sports and to deepen our friendships.”²⁷ Evidence also shows that board games can help combat dementia, depression, heart problems, and keep up our cognitive awareness. Play also improves creative thinking, problem-solving, motivation, and has been “linked to learning to be less aggressive and developing life skills and risk management.”²⁸

Games can, however, cause us harm. Games can trigger dopamine releases that can lead to compulsive or addictive relationships with gameplay. “An estimated 1.96% of the world’s population,” Bryant tells us, “suffers from video game addiction,” which the World Health Organization describes as “gaming disorder.”²⁹ Which is to say, games, like all formational practices, are not technologies of certainty. They do not automatically make us people of helpful or harmful character. To my mind, it is probably best to say that play exists in a dense web of culture, gender, economics, and race, and all those factors interact in complex ways to form us into complex people.

For me as a reader, part of what makes her essay powerful is her self-reflective framing of play, particularly around cultural formation. Bryant comes from a Danish immigrant community, a sect known as the Pious or

Sad Danes, who believed that activities like gameplay and dancing were not activities faithful Christians should do. Even though she knows, intellectually, that one can be a good Christian and play games, she sometimes gets “a nagging feeling” that she should not. She guesses that such negative bodily responses “must run in the family,” because her mother “still hesitates to sit down to play a game rather than do something ‘useful.’”³⁰ What is true for Bryant and her mother is true for many of us.

Our cultures, especially our white Christian cultures, have (mal)formed us so deeply that we internalize harmful messages about ourselves and the world, and we do so not necessarily intellectually, but at a bodily level. Trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem writes that much of our orientation to the world takes place at the deep, precognitive sites of our bodies, our reactions, and our over-reactions. In analyzing the ways police officers kill unarmed Black men, he notices how a police officer’s body will react out of fear, as though it is in danger, and immediately respond with lethal force.³¹ In some instances, such reflective bodily responses can help protect us. However, as the widespread killing of unarmed Black men and women demonstrates, white settlers’ bodies have been (mal)formed to value their own safety at the expense of others.



White settlers, as a group, need to undergo a decolonization of our embodied responses of moving through the world.

Bryant and Menakem convince me that when we think about decolonization, part of decolonizing means that white settlers, as a group, need to undergo a decolonization of our embodied responses of moving through the world, which can be and often are calibrated toward harm. To reflect on our bodily formation is to resist the vice of the soldier, to resist that our safety is more precious than the safety of others.

Additionally, Bryant’s self-reflection with language acquisition also demonstrates how a decolonial future must be for us a multi-lingual future. Using Duolingo, Bryant kept up an impressive 411-day streak, with lots of gems to boot. Her accomplishments did not necessarily produce long-term responses of joy or pride. Through attending to her bodily reactions, she noticed that her play was “joyless, fruitless” and also “monotonous, pointless.” This led her to quit Duolingo and take up a more traditional-type program through her library. “My study has now gone from gameplay to work,” she says, “but it is fun work.”³²

Part of what I take from Bryant is that the work of decolonialism is an active embrace of a world with many languages. One of the key biblical passages that presents God's good future as a multi-lingual future is John's vision from Revelation 7, in which peoples bring the fullness of their cultural formation into the presence of God. If white settlers are to live as though the vision of Revelation 7 can break into our current moment, then it would be deeply beneficial for white settlers to learn at least one language other than English. To learn another people's language is to position ourselves away from the vice of the missionary. Instead of being eternal teachers, we can take up the posture of a learner of another culture and people. And as Bryant's experience shows, this work of learning can be for us the work of joy.



The masses coming together in Revelation 7

Hospitality

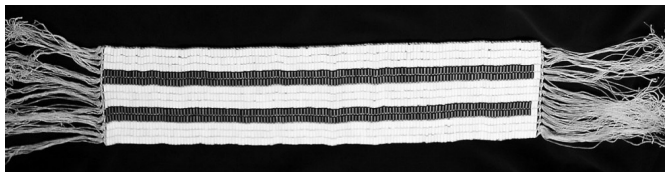
Kristen Eby's thoughtful reflections on hospitality show how complex such acts can be, primarily as she focuses on how hosts and guests co-create hospitality together. She defines hospitality in a distinctly Christian sense, as a biblical call to "welcome and serve those in need," whether the need is for food, shelter, or beauty.³³ In the case of musical performances, hospitality demands that both host and guest, both performer and audience, engage in certain kinds of work. Most often, the performer offers the gift of art, and the audience offers the gift of attention. Hence, hospitality is an act of co-creation between guests and hosts. As any performer knows, the enthusiastic attention (or lack thereof) that an audience brings to a performance can dramatically impact the performer, and in those acts, the audience's gifts can make or break the act of hospitality.³⁴ To be a good guest to a performer means, in effect, being a host to the host. The roles of host and guest flow in and out of each other and are not unidirectional.

To take these reflections and put them in political terms, Eby's account of hospitality helps us see more clearly how God in Christ takes up the role of guest, whose example white settlers would do well to inhabit. In the incarnation, the Creator of all things, the One whom we might think of as the Host of hosts, is first a guest. Jesus was a guest in Mary's womb. The

one who creates and sustains all things was, in fact, co-created by her body and sustained by the nourishment of her breast, without which the Creator would have died. And while the biblical witness does not give any accounts, Mary most certainly reared and taught Jesus, the Word, how to speak and how to participate in Jewish culture and ways of life. In these ways, the Most High God inhabited the virtues of relationality and vulnerability and took on the role of learner. What is true of Jesus can most certainly be true of us.

This is particularly important to remember when white Christian settlers are engaged in social justice work. We might think that a mission trip or a ministry is an act of hospitality, in which the white settler Christians are hosts. However, like Jesus' situation, the opposite is often the case. The communities we supposedly serve often host white settlers at great cost to themselves, performing all kinds of labor, perhaps without us knowing or understanding. In those situations, we would do well to follow the example of Jesus, who entered into a relationship, who became vulnerable, and who took the posture of a learner. Such postures can help white settlers resist the vices of the missionary as teacher and not learner; the soldier, obsessed with safety and not vulnerability; and the merchant, interested in utility and not relationship.

Furthermore, in reframing ourselves as guests within our own acts of service, white settlers can also reframe our social, cultural, and political identity, as a guest people in need of a host. In colonial times, settlers travelled across oceans with the intent to exploit Indigenous lands; however, in many places, Indigenous peoples made treaties with settlers in good faith efforts at sharing life on the land. The Two-Row Wampum is often cited as the first treaty (early 1600s) made between Indigenous peoples and European settlers—in this case, between the Mohawk and the Dutch.³⁵ Within the oral tradition of the treaty, the Two-Row Wampum established a relationship of equals, using a metaphor of brothers and their attendant responsibilities based on their experience on the land. Because the Mohawk “had lived in the Mohawk River Valley region for thousands of years,” they possessed “the knowledge, resources, and infrastructure the newcomers needed to survive and succeed in the area.”³⁶ Hence, their responsibility was one of an elder brother who helped their younger brother thrive on this new land.³⁷



Two-Row Wampum belt

The relationality of a partnership of equals with certain responsibilities of labor suggests a linkage between Indigenous hosts and their settler guests. While the language of brotherhood is not precisely the language of hospitality, the relationships between elder and younger brothers set up expectations akin to some of the work that hosts and guests perform for each other. It is certainly not the case that settlers had nothing to offer and the Mohawk had everything. However, the treaty established a relationship in which the settlers were the equivalent of guests on the land the Mohawk had lived in harmony with for thousands of years.

Christian settlers have the opportunity to return to the spirit of the treaty, a spirit in which we can co-create a familial relationship, a hospitable way of treating each other and the land.

Since the time of the treaty, the vast majority of settlers have forgotten that we are guests, forgotten that we are younger brothers to our Indigenous elder brothers. As a result, we have behaved (and continue to behave) in ways unbecoming of family members and the hospitality we should have been giving to each other. White Christian settlers have

the opportunity to return to the spirit of the treaty, a spirit in which we can co-create a familial relationship, a hospitable way of treating each other and the land. We can resist the temptations of utilizing our Indigenous family members, like a merchant might, or teaching Indigenous peoples, like a missionary might.

Imagination

Brian Hallstoos' remarkable essay describes how playfulness, and lack thereof, took place in the life of Solomon "Sol" Butler. The first Black graduate of Dubuque College, Butler pressed the school toward greater racial inclusion in the wake of World War I. Butler, and other students from oppressed communities, recognized that the creation of "meaningful social bonds" was and is one of the key factors in overturning racial injustices.³⁸ This was particularly important for white students, who likely held unconscious or conscious racial stereotypes. White hearts and minds needed transformation, and Butler likely played a key role in that change. He not only represented Black folks as capable of virtue, wit, and hard work, but he also displayed the qualities of playfulness, delight, and joy in social situations.

Dubuque College was not, however, free from racial injustice. Hallstoos notes Butler was not immune from an annual hazing ritual, where freshman students abducted and, often, mistreated seniors. A photo from Butler's senior year hazing shows him in chains, sitting next to a white student.³⁹ Butler's hazers might have claimed the hazing was all in good fun. Nevertheless, his hazing took place in the Jim Crow era, during a period of racial massacres and riots across the US, like the Red Summer in Butler's future home of Chicago. It is difficult to imagine that Butler did not feel the weight of that violence in his own abduction.



Chicago race riot of 1919

In the midst of that injustice, I take from Hallstoos that what Butler was doing when he and other students created “meaningful social bonds”⁴⁰ with white students in a Jim Crow era is this: they were helping white settlers imagine a different future. The task of imagining a different future is a monumental task. Certainly, that future must include massive systemic changes to institutions like government, education, economics, prisons, and the like. Systemic change is essential.

Part and parcel of systemic change is also individual, personal, spiritual change. For generations in this country, white settlers have been formed in such a way that it is difficult for us to imagine a future that is life-giving for everyone. This is why the phrase “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” has purchase for so many of us.⁴¹ We need imaginations like that of the prophet Isaiah. He imagined a future where all forms of violence had come to an end, where, for example, wolves lay down with lambs.⁴² We need an alternative formation that helps us imagine unthinkable futures, like a world without the violence inherent in realities like Capitalism or Colonialism.

In that context, one example of Butler's shared joy reminds us that our present joy can be a sign of a better future awaiting us. In one telling passage, Hallstoos comments on one particular photograph of Butler, who dressed up like a professor and mocked the “affectations of a pompous scholar or dandy.”⁴³ The photo captures interplay between Butler and the photographer, an interaction of sheer joy. Hallstoos writes, “We see in their frenetic energy one source of their joy: the indulgence in a playful spirit. It is this spirit that Sol helped spark.”⁴⁴ Whether we understand play as a

moment of pretending or merely idle fun, it can function as a formational practice that leads to one of the most important social bonds: joy. Playing at shared joy can be for us part of the preparation such that when times for joy arrive, we can be the kind of people who participate graciously in the joy of others and our own.

Clearly, the shared joy between the photographer and Butler did not end racism. We still live, by and large, in the racialized and colonized world Butler and the photographer lived inside of. However, witnessing joy like we see in this photo or, better yet, practicing joy with others across lines of division—whether sexual, racial, or in regard to gender, ability, age, or class—can remind us that a better future can break into our present reality, if only we co-create it with others. The relationality of shared joy can help us resist the temptation of the merchant, who views others only in terms of utility.

Curiosity

In an analysis of the scientific community since 1950, Adam Kleinschmit traces the evolution and impact of the value of productivity over and against curiosity. Kleinschmit describes a pivotal moment before World War II, when scientific exploration had a different character. At that time, scientists existed with modest support from university budgets. As a result, the community valued curiosity, accepted failure as part of the process, and made groundbreaking discoveries. However, during the war, government support pulled scientific research into the orbit of violence, developing war-time technologies like computers, radar, jet engines, and vaccines. Over time, the massive amount of public funding transformed science from a culture of curiosity to a culture of productivity.

The effect on scientific discoveries has been monumental. Since World War II, the rate of transformative, groundbreaking scientific discoveries has declined precipitously, despite exponential progress in more established fields of science. Kleinschmit argues that the current competitive funding mechanisms create incentives for scientists to ask conservative and narrow questions, ones that make the outcome of their findings more predictable and less prone to failure. As a result, scientists are unwilling to risk their funding on pursuing “transformative discoveries” that might push “science and technology in new directions,” precisely because failure would endanger future funding and, ultimately, their viability as scientists.⁴⁵

In contrast to a culture of productivity, Kleinschmit demonstrates how the curiosity-driven science of Hungarian-American biochemist Katalin Karikó

saved numerous lives. Karikó's curiosity led her to study synthetic mRNA; however, her peers considered her work unrealistic and impractical, as evident by the high number of her rejected research proposals. Those rejected proposals led to multiple academic demotions and eventually to her leaving academia altogether. However, her discoveries on these matters were foundational to the mRNA-based vaccines developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Had she not been curious about mRNA and not been willing to fail and be demoted along the way, many more of us would have died. If curiosity and failure are, indeed, integral to new discoveries, I want to suggest that they are essential to bringing decolonial futures into being.

Curiosity can help white settlers cope with the reality that, on our path to a just future, we will make mistakes, and when we fail, we must have the capacity to begin again. Maori filmmaker Taika Waititi describes the colonial context in which curiosity might function. *The Hollywood Reporter* invited Waititi to make a keynote address at a Diversity and Inclusion event. In a comical tone, he bemoaned these types of events, because white settlers tend to invite oppressed people to recount and offer solutions to colonialism, sexism, and racism. Waititi opines, "[Stop] making us come and tell you about the problem and how to fix it. You fucking broke it. You fix it."⁴⁶ As the audience laughed, the filmmaker elaborated on his point.

The problem of colonialism is akin to an individual (i.e., white colonizers) breaking into someone's home (i.e., Indigenous peoples), stealing all their belongings, setting the house on fire, and burning it to the ground. As white settlers grapple with the fact that our ancestors performed thievery and destruction, diversity and inclusion events



House on fire

communicate an absurd reality. It is as if the white colonizers come to the Indigenous people and say, "Okay we need to have a little talk about this. . . . Now, you're going to rebuild your house. . . . [W]hat can we give you to help rebuild your house that we burned down?" In a mocking tone, Waititi says, "You build the fucking house. You burned it down. I'll come back and hopefully you get it right."⁴⁷

As more laughter unfolds, Waititi makes an astounding turn. “And if you don’t get it right,” he says in a somber tone, “then we’ll try again. . . . It’s a long journey, so we’ll stumble. We should stumble together.”⁴⁸

Drawing from both Waititi and Kleinschmit, I think curiosity can help sustain white settlers as we engage in the task of rebuilding the house we burned down and, when we get it wrong, when we make mistakes, we can, in good faith, begin again. Because colonialism is such a powerful and long historical process, we, as a people, will not rebuild the house overnight, perhaps not even in our lifetimes. Rebuilding the house is multi-generational work, and mistakes are inevitable. White settlers can often feel paralyzed by mistakes and feelings of failure. However, we can choose to approach those feelings and mistakes with curiosity, in the same way Katalin Karikó approached her mRNA research.

Curiosity is not the solution in and of itself, but it can help us resist internalizing those feelings of being a failure and develop the capacity, over time, to rebuild again and again. We will not get it right the first time. But, as Karikó and Waititi illustrate, curiosity and an acceptance of failure will, in all likelihood, lead to the discoveries of what will work. Along the way, we will stumble, but stumbling is not something white settlers do on their own. It is a reality performed in community. Curiosity and stumbling together can help us resist the vice of the missionary, who only teaches and never learns, and the vice of the merchant, who only uses and never enters into relationality.

Conclusion

Empire and its legacies of utility, evaluation, and safety are a colonial poison that we must work toward turning into medicine. I believe we can do good decolonial work with the tools the authors addressed in each of their essays: self-reflection, hospitality, imagination, and curiosity. Because many of our crises flow from the injustice of colonialism, decolonial work is essential for all of us, whether we are settlers, immigrants, or are Native to this land. And that work takes place on the level of everyday, mundane, ordinary locations and activities, like playground, practice rooms, games, scientific experiments, musical performances, or going to university. Everyday life is where we practice the skills and dispositions that can help us become the kind of people who can turn the poison of colonialism into medicine.

Everyday life is part of the point of the Duke of Wellington’s phrase, although the legacy of Eton represents one final temptation we must resist. When the Duke’s phrase caught on, it was likely less about playgrounds and more

about the training that the elite school Eton College provided to the wealthy families. But it was not merely the generation who fought at Waterloo. Eton has educated prime ministers, actors, authors, and royalty, Princes William and Harry included.⁴⁹ Its headmaster was once said to be the “tutor to England’s establishment.”⁵⁰

Everyday life is where we practice the skills and dispositions that can help us become the kind of people who can turn the poison of colonialism into medicine.

In 2019, however, a political movement developed to do away with all schools like Eton, a movement called “Abolish Eton.” While the movement failed, it did provoke reactions from alumni. One alumnus equivocated about his experience at Eton, saying that he would not send his children there because the school is “far too

expensive and sheltering.” However, he described his time there as “some of the best years of my life, and I wouldn’t be the person I was without it, so it’s tough to say I wouldn’t go there again. It’s a poisoned chalice. . . .”⁵¹

There is more than a hint of determinism in his statement, and it is a determinism that, I think, any decolonial journey needs to resist. The past is certainly the past, and we cannot change it. However, we are neither prisoners of our history nor are we determined by it. This is part of the logic of the resurrection. Our colonial past does not define our future any more than death did for Jesus. Like death, Empire does not have the final word.

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Notes

1. The phrase is likely an apocryphal statement, attributed to the first Duke of Wellington. See, for example, *Time*, “Duke Didn’t Say It” and Eton College Collections, “Eton, the First Duke of Wellington and the Battle of Waterloo.”
2. Wells, *Improvisation*, 74.
3. Hajdu, “Wynton’s Blues.”
4. Hajdu.
5. Hancock, “Playing Wrong Notes.”
6. This question is inspired by biblical scholar N.T. Wright’s worldview questions, particularly his question “What time is it?” See Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 443, 467–72.
7. An important theological insight from Saint Augustine of Hippo, helps frame the theological importance of Colonialism. When Augustine turned his gaze on the Empire of his day, the Roman Empire, he understood that the conditions of injustice were laid at the foundation of Rome’s history. Rome began when Romulus murdered his brother Remus. Romulus’s fratricide is Rome’s original sin. That foundational violence animated, for Augustine, the entire history of Rome, such that nothing existed outside of that originating act. In fact, Augustine claimed that “Rome never was a republic,” because its founding violence made that society nothing less than a thief. Augustine, *City of God*, 2.21. See also Warner and Scott, “Sin City,” 860. As

Christians, it is vital that we talk about our current moment in ways that follow what Augustine says about Rome. Everything we experience on this land is grounded in the three forms of foundational violence—genocide, land theft, and enslavement—which established the society we live in today. What is true of Rome is true of the United States, Canada, and many other settler colonial states, like Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Taiwan. And that truth has to be dealt with if we want a different, better future.

8. This question is in the spirit of the communication theory known as Coordinated Management of Meaning. Communication scholar W. Barnett Pearce describes humans as curious participants in a social world that we co-create with others. Because we make our social world with others, we have the option to make our world a different, better world than the one we currently inhabit. See Pearce, *Making Social Worlds*, xi.

9. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land*, 84.

10. Several other papal bulls affirmed, expanded, and refined *Dum Divertas* In 1455, Pope Nicolas issued *Romanus Pontifex* as an affirmation of *Dum Diversas*. It also extended and specified King Alfonso's dominion. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI wrote *Inter Caetera*, describing how Empires would negotiate with each other over lands they encountered through colonization. According to theologian Damian Costello, European Empires were not "dependent on the Church for its legitimacy;" nevertheless, Church and Empire "constructed a type of divine sanction for a campaign won by military force." Costello, "Revisiting the *Requerimiento*," 194–96.

11. Between 1823 and 1832, Justice John Marshall's U.S. Supreme Court issued three decisions that used the Doctrine of Discovery as justification to dispossess Indigenous peoples of land. As recently as 2005, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg echoed Marshall's language, refusing to recognize the Oneida Indian Nation's claims to land in New York State. In this sense, the Doctrine of Discovery is part of the story white settler colonial governments still use to justify their theft of Indigenous land. The story of legitimacy allays, in part, settler anxieties about our current status of illegal presence, ownership, and violence. For a more detailed analysis of Ginsburg's decisions effecting Indigenous peoples, see Goldberg, "Finding the Way."

12. Chappell, "Vatican Repudiates 'Doctrine of Discovery.'"

13. Little Bear, "Jagged Worldviews Colliding," 79.

14. Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 68.

15. Jennings, 71.

16. Jennings, 72.

17. Jennings, 73, 79.

18. Jennings, 79.

19. Ceres, "ChatGPT Is Coming."

20. Flamm, "From Harlem to Ferguson."

21. Baum, "Legalize It All." Some have argued that this is an oversimplification. See, for example, Lopez, "Nixon's War on Drugs."

22. Morrison, "50-Year War on Drugs."

23. Biale, Hinton, and Ross, "Discriminatory Purpose," 129–31; Lopez, "Controversial 1994 Crime Law."

24. Carson, "Prisoners in 2020," 1–3.
25. "Blacks, Hispanics."
26. For reviews of the literature on social media and mental health, see, for example: Keles, McCrae, and Grealish, "Systematic Review"; Odgers and Jensen, "Adolescent Mental Health"; Meier and Reinecke, "Computer-Mediated Communication." For popular pieces on the connections between mental health and social media, see for example: Greenspan, "Social Media Can Harm Kids"; The Learning Network, "What Students Are Saying About How Social Media Affects Their Body Image."
27. Bryant, "Gameplay and Human Flourishing," 18.
28. Bryant, 26.
29. Bryant, 25.
30. Bryant, 16.
31. Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*.
32. Bryant, "Gameplay and Human Flourishing," 28, 15, 29.
33. Eby, "Performance, Play, and Hospitality," 44.
34. Eby, 51.
35. Hill and Coleman, "Two Row Wampum," 1.
36. Hill and Coleman, 12.
37. Hill and Coleman, 12.
38. Hallstoos, "Defusing Racism," 59.
39. Hallstoos, 69
40. Hallstoos, 59.
41. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 1. In the opening of his book, Fisher uses the phrase initially to describe apocalyptic cinema of the early 2000s. The phrase also describes our collective and individual settler identities and imaginations.
42. Isaiah 11:6 (New Revised Standard Version)
43. Hallstoos, "Defusing Racism," 61, 62.
44. Hallstoos, 62.
45. Kleinschmit, "Transformative Discovery Science," 80, 95.
46. Waititi, "Hollywood's Issues."
47. Waititi.
48. Waititi.
49. Hancock, "Most Successful Men."
50. "Headmasters."
51. Lott-Lavigna, "We Asked Etonians."

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