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Geoscience, colonialism, and the energy transition

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The social dimensions of geoscience have received increasing attention over the past several years, beginning to address 40 years of stagnating racial diversity (Bernard & Cooperdock, 2018). A small but growing number of publications and initiatives specifically seek to address historical and ongoing colonialism in the geosciences. Pointing out the colonial origins of the field and the natural sciences more broadly, these works provide alternate practices to unsettle ongoing colonial dynamics in geoscience pedagogy and relationships with Indigenous communities, lands, and knowledges.

We move the discussion beyond metaphorical invocations of decolonization, which obscure the full meaning and power of returning land and life to Indigenous peoples. As the Center for Interdisciplinary Environmental Justice, a collective of natural and social scientists, we ground our perspective in solidarity work with Indigenous resistances to lithium extraction for renewable energy battery storage. We thus extend existing decolonial interventions in geoscience pedagogy, epistemology, and research practices to challenge the project of extracting Earth materials for profit. In the face of climate change, a transition to renewable energy has been framed as an opportunity for geoscience to supply necessary and beneficial raw materials; however, colluding with state and capitalist forces for a techno-centric energy transition reproduces colonial relationships through mining for energy transition minerals and metals and land use associated with large-scale renewable energy farms. A material understanding of decolonization calls for alignment with Indigenous land struggles and challenges the entitlement to and demand for resources.

Bernard, R.E., Cooperdock, E.H.G. (2018). No progress on diversity in 40 years. Nature Geosci.