

Racial Justice and the Reminders of U.S. Settler Colonialism¹

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After four years of the Trump Administration's rule, it is evident to most Americans that racial political conflict and racial inequality continue to play important roles in U.S. political life. The point of departure for this paper is that the struggle for greater racial equality and justice in the United States is not a recent phenomenon but has been largely stymied since the late 1960s. That is, after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – two key laws that secured a higher level of formal legal equality, as well as increased political participation and electoral representation for racialized groups in the U.S. – little progress has been made toward the equally urgent goal of demolishing the structural foundations of racial hierarchy in the United States. As a consequence, racialized inequalities of wealth, health and social respect have continued unabated through the following decades (see, e.g., Harris and Curtis 2018, Schmidt et al., 2010: Chapter 7).

A growing corpus of scholarship has demonstrated that this systematic structural inequality has been generated and is maintained by an array of institutions, geographic spaces, and cultural formations that, through the historical development of the U.S., created social contexts resulting in, shaping and perpetuating racial inequality throughout the country (see, e.g., Hayward 2013, Katznelson 2005, Lipsitz 2011, Roithmayr 2014, Rothstein 2017). Among the most important of these have been Indigenous dispossession and genocide, racial slavery, racial segregation, racial discrimination, racial violence, racialized public and private institutions and organizations, racialized criminal justice policies, racialized immigration policies, and the maintenance of economic structures and rules that perpetuate racial inequalities. The cultural formations of racial hierarchy have included racializing narratives of disparagement, stigmatization and exclusion that have co-produced mentalities of “othering” (powell 2015) that have infused the media and public documents, as well as interpersonal discourse, through which Americans apprehend most of our social and political world. These racialized institutional, geographic and cultural formations constitute the social contexts into which Americans are born or naturalized and which inform our implicit understandings of reality with racialized distinctions among people, forming the tacit knowledge with which we make meaning of the world around us. In turn, these implicit, unconscious understandings constitute habitual ways of seeing “race” that are very difficult to dislodge and change (see Sullivan 2006).

Racial inequality continues to be reproduced through this interlocking and self-reinforcing system of racial hierarchy that affects all people in the U.S. and it seems evident that significant structural change will be necessary before a greater degree of racial justice can be achieved in the U.S. polity (see, e.g., Flynn et al. 2017). In response to these inegalitarian realities, multiple political campaigns for racial justice have emerged over the past fifty-plus years, the most recent of which was the outpouring of outrage generated by the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020, and the ensuing demonstrations of public support for

the Black Lives Matter movement that followed on the heels of that widely witnessed police murder. Other examples of movement campaigns for racial justice include the struggle against carceral racial injustice toward both Blacks and Latinx (see, e.g., Alexander 2010, Stevenson 2014), the campaign for reparations for racial slavery (see, e.g., Darity and Mullen 2020), the campaign for immigration reform (see, e.g., Chávez et al. 2015, Gonzalez 2014, Ngai 2004, Sampaio 2015), and a revived discussion of racial integration as a necessary foundation for racial equality (see, e.g., Anderson 2010, Stanley 2017).

One of the greatest obstacles to success facing the campaigns against structural racial inequality is widespread White opposition to measures that might actually bring about greater racial equality in the U.S. While many White Americans, particularly Democrats, have shifted recently toward greater willingness to entertain arguments for structural egalitarian racial change, there remains a large and intransigent body of White Americans who believe that racial equality already exists in the U.S., and that efforts to realize greater racial equality render Whites as a victimized and unjustly treated racial group (see, e.g., Abrajano and Hajnal 2015, Bobo 1997, Hajnal 2020, Jardina 2019, Stanley 2017). Any successful major national effort to eradicate racial hierarchy and achieve racial justice will entail creating widespread understanding of why this social transformation is urgently necessary in the U.S. and why and how racial justice would benefit the entire country, including White Americans. It would also require an enduring political commitment on the part of a strong majority of Americans. In the face of long-standing White opposition, the question of how to create such a widespread understanding and political commitment should be among the highest priorities in U.S. public life. Getting to that widespread understanding, I believe, will require a fundamental transformation in American understandings of who we are and how we can flourish as individuals and as a political community. Such a monumental transformation will not involve merely minor adjustments in White public attitudes and opinions.

In short, while racial justice in the U.S. will require fundamental structural, institutional, and cultural changes, these will not be possible without a significant change of self-understanding on the part of most White Americans, and indeed all people who have been socialized in an American self-understanding. This paper aims to explore and explicate one fundamental change in perspective that I believe will work to help move the country toward such a transformation. This will involve shifting Americans' understandings of the country's political development from an American Exceptionalist interpretation to one in which we recognize ourselves as a White settler colonial country badly in need of decolonization. That is, settler colonial structures and the racializing mindset that undergirds those structures continue as fundamental, but largely unrecognized, obstacles to racial justice in the U.S. Understanding these realities is a beginning but necessary step toward that goal.

Race and American Exceptionalism: the Dominant Understanding of U.S. Development

The story of the U.S. through which most Americans are taught by educators and the public media to understand themselves as a nation is the American Exceptionalist narrative that the meaning of the United States is found in the struggle for freedom and equality. Ignoring

earlier commercially based English settlements in Virginia, the story suggests that America “*really*” began with the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in 1628, and the Mayflower Compact’s model of self-governance by a devout and freedom-seeking people. The meaning of America is found in the phrases of the Declaration of Independence declaiming to the world that no government is just unless it is based on the consent of the governed, and that Nature’s laws decree that all people are created equal and should enjoy the freedom to pursue their happiness as they see fit. In this frame, racism and the processes and structures of racialization were a tragic aberration from the nation’s true meaning, virtually an historical accident generated by the unfortunate reality of racial prejudice among forebears who were less enlightened than most of us in our time. In this understanding, racism is most centrally a matter of individual prejudice and interpersonal discrimination. While these unfortunate attitudes and behaviors have yet to be fully eradicated from American life, this story is a tale of progress, meaning that America’s true egalitarian meaning has already been realized or is well on its way toward realization; that racism is certainly much less prevalent today than it was a century – or even half a century – ago. It’s just a matter of time before education and enlightenment will eradicate the last remaining traces of racism from the country’s life.²

In addition to this founding narrative, the U.S. as a *nation of immigrants* makes up an equally compelling part of the American Exceptionalism story. In this part of the narrative, having secured their independence from Great Britain through the war of independence, the founders set about spreading the blessings of their liberty by inviting others to join the American experiment through immigration. While non-British migrants were recruited to some of the U.S. colonies prior to 1776, European immigrants began coming to the U.S. in large numbers in the 1820s, following the Napoleonic wars and the onset of upheavals wrought by the industrial revolution in Europe. According to historians Dinnerstein and Reimers (2009), the period from the seventeenth through early twenty-first centuries occasioned “the greatest migration in the history of the world,” as more than 100 million people moved from their countries of origin to migrate to another country, and a majority of them came to the U.S.A. (Dinnerstein and Reimers 2009: 1). By the early twentieth century American scholars and public intellectuals routinely described the U.S. as a “great melting pot” and a “nation of immigrants,” the latter phrase memorably enshrined as the title of John F. Kennedy’s widely circulated presidential campaign book (Kennedy 1958).

The immigration narrative is a central component in the American Exceptionalism understanding of the U.S. in that the country’s uniqueness is marked not only by its commitment to core public values of freedom and equality, but also by its unparalleled openness to people of other nations seeking those values for themselves. In addition to offering unique levels of freedom, equality, and democracy to its people, the U.S. has provided an unprecedented and unmatched degree of hope and opportunity to people from throughout the world seeking escape from religious, economic, and political oppression. Accordingly, a large proportion of Americans trace their ancestry to immigrants who migrated to the U.S. in response to these opportunities.

In the immigration narrative, nativist racism is understood again as a tragic aberration from the country’s core values, and the true meaning of the country is symbolized by the

stirring lyrics of invitation enshrined on the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Though some potential immigrants have been excluded from these opportunities, and many who did immigrate faced nativist and racist stigmatization and discrimination, eventually immigrants have assimilated and been accepted as fully American members of the nation. Over time, this formula has succeeded in making the United States a world power second to none and emulated by the peoples of other nations across the globe.

Racialization and The Settler Colonial Frame of U.S. Political Development.

Though the American Exceptionalism story of race is without doubt the dominant narrative among Americans, a long line of scholars has argued that racialization is not an aberration but lies at the heart of the country's meaning and political development. From W.E.B. DuBois (1920, 1995, 1997) in the early to mid-twentieth century to Wilderson's (2020) articulation of Afropessimism in the present, a number of anti-racist writers have worked to make this clear. This essay will not take up this large corpus of rapidly expanding literature but aims to begin working out the implications for racial justice of a *settler colonial* understanding of U.S. racialization and racial hierarchy. What are the implications for the project of realizing racial justice that stem from a settler colonial understanding of U.S. society and political development?

The central idea of the settler colonial narrative is that the United States, along with other settler colonial societies,³ can be understood best as a country formed by the migration of a group of people from one political-cultural community to another territory in order to "settle" it by taking control of the territory and removing its previous inhabitants. Conceptually, settler colonialism is distinguished from both *immigration*, which involves migrating to become part of another preexisting political community, and from the conventionally understood *extractive form* of colonial rule, in which a dominant power takes control of the population of a conquered territory to extract its resources and/or to counter a rival's military threat. Settler colonists, in contrast, see themselves as settling "in virgin or empty land" to remain there permanently (Elkins and Pederson 2005: 2). They have no intention of joining the preexisting political communities whose territories they aim to dominate, nor do they wish to rule the Indigenous populations of those territories for the exploitive purposes of their homeland. The settlers' outlook toward those whose land they take is based on "... a logic of elimination and not exploitation: they wished less to govern indigenous peoples or to enlist them in their economic ventures than to seize their land and push them beyond an ever-expanding frontier of settlement" (Elkins and Pederson 2005: 2).

The keystone to this narrative frame is the view that, as Wolfe (1999: 163) has put it, settler colonialism is best understood *not as a series of events* that can be relegated to the past, but as a *structure*, a patterned set of power relationships (between peoples, and between people and the land) that has not disappeared along with the demise of the so-called wilderness frontier. From the perspective of this frame, to understand the settler colonial structure is to comprehend the singular significance of the expropriation of *land* to be controlled by settlers and enabled by the dispossession and displacement of Indigenous populations. In this interpretation, understanding the place of race in American politics

involves grasping that a central structural reality – *racialized control of the land* – remains at the heart of the U.S. racial hierarchy.

As noted, a central conceit in the settler colonial project is the notion that the land being expropriated by settlers was empty before the settlers gained control of it. Land that was clearly occupied by others when they arrived was perceived as empty through a systematic devaluation of the land's previous occupants. The Indigenous peoples who lived on the land were defined as pagan savages who lived without civilization, without proper religion, without authoritative political institutions, and who had no understanding of how to appropriately value land so that it could be employed productively toward progress and prosperity.

Given these beliefs, settlers could imagine that the Indigenous peoples had no legitimate claim to sovereign control of the land they occupied and that the settlers' own progress required their removal. Legally, the settlers' claim to the land was legitimized for U.S. political development by Chief Justice John Marshall's ruling in the unanimous U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Johnson and Graham's Lessee v. M'Intosh* (1823). Marshall reasoned in that case that "the United States has plenary (virtually absolute) authority over Indian nations on the basis of a discovery of the North American continent by Christian people," legal scholar Newcomb writes. And Marshall's reasoning "*continues today* as the cornerstone of Federal Indian law" (Newcomb 2008: Kindle Loc. 347; emphasis added). The basis for Marshall's decision was that the Doctrine of Discovery, whereby European Christian nations claimed sovereign jurisdiction over pagan lands they "discovered," had been inherited by U.S. authorities from the British upon national independence and from the French in the case of the Louisiana Purchase (see, e.g., Miller 2008: Chapter Three).

Critical race scholar Saito (2020) has extended this analysis to argue that Marshall's decision in the *M'Intosh* case founded the right to own property in the U.S. on racialized premises that would later undergird a whole range of structural premises for extending and perpetuating racial hierarchy. Marshall reasoned, she states, "that because American Indian nations could not 'dispose of the soil at their own will, to whomsoever they pleased,' they could not have owned it" (Saito 2020: Kindle Loc. 819). On the basis of Marshall's reasoning, Saito argues that U.S. settler colonialism embedded within its understanding of the social world "racist stereotypes . . . that were as essential to Angloamerican transformation of land into property as they were to the construction of enslaved persons as property" (Saito 2020: Kindle Loc 831-840).

This interpretation of the U.S. as a settler colonial society involves a critically important *temporal extension* that goes beyond the conventional understanding of most Americans that the "colonial" period in the U.S. ended when the American colonists successfully declared their independence from their British rulers and the former colonies became a separate country. Once independent of Great Britain, that is, most Americans implicitly saw themselves as a "post-colonial" nation. In contrast, the settler colonial narrative claims that settler colonialism in the U.S. did not end with the American Revolution but was continued as an imperial project far into the future. What independence meant, in the settler colonial

narrative, is that the White settler colonists, now “Americans,” *replaced* their British rulers as masters of this imperial project.

There is a rapidly expanding scholarly literature documenting and articulating the claim that the founders did not abandon the settler colonial project upon U.S. independence, but continued its expansionary and exclusionary logic well into the future. Thus, Frymer’s *Building an American Empire* (2017) argues that imperial expansion was a central aim of the U.S. founders and that this ambition is best understood as a settler project in which both *land* and *race* played central roles. That is, conscious of the new country’s weakness relative to European powers and the dangers of living amongst large numbers of Indigenous people, the founders sought to vastly increase the new nation’s territory to create an “empire of liberty” (in Thomas Jefferson’s words). This aspiration, in turn, was understood to require that such vastly increased land be settled by an equally vast population of *White, European* settlers, a consistent requisite that sometimes limited the extent to which the new country’s territory could be enlarged. Frymer’s analysis is centered on the dynamic of institutional state-building in a context in which the country’s leaders were constrained in reaching their expansionary territorial goals by their simultaneous project of restricting citizenship to members defined as White: “National leaders were not just fueled by manifest destiny and imperial conquest, but they were also limited in their efforts to expand to territorial acquisitions that could be settled by white majorities” (Frymer 2017: 15). Frymer traces this imperialist project of White settler colonialism to the end of the nineteenth century, when U.S. territory had expanded to incorporate all of the contiguous forty-eight states in North America, plus Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and a number of smaller island territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific. In addition to the Louisiana Purchase, the processes of acquiring control over this immense territory included a war of conquest and annexation of nearly one-half of Mexico’s territory (1846-48) and a war with Spain (1898), as well as deadly military campaigns against the Indigenous populations of North America, Hawaii, and the Philippines. On the U.S. mainland, White supremacy was extended territorially through the Homestead Act of 1862, which provided private ownership of 160 acres of conquered and annexed land to White immigrant settlers who paid a small registration fee and then “improved” the land through the construction of buildings, the planting of crops, and the raising of domestic animals over a period of years.

In every case, the structure of settler colonialism involved a racialized White supremacist domination of Indigenous nations and other peoples of color. Several recent books by political scholars (e.g. Dahl 2017, Olson 2004, Rana 2010) employ a settler colonial frame to document and explicate that the meaning of “democratic freedom” and “popular sovereignty” in the development of U.S. political thought was based upon the presumption of the White supremacist racialized subordination and/or political exclusion of peoples of color. The roles of people of color who lived in these conquered and annexed territories were distinctly and perpetually subordinate and excluded from many aspects of national membership. Thus, when most Indigenous peoples in the U.S. south and west proved unliable to work for others at farm labor, African slaves were imported (and “bred”) for the purpose. Following the rescinding of Reconstruction policies after the Civil War, White southern domination of both southern and national political institutions ensured that the

emancipated slaves and other peoples of color would continue in racially subordinated roles of labor for White planters and their successors (see, e.g., Richardson 2020). Mexican workers too were imported to supplement those already living in the region annexed from Mexico, establishing long-term patterns of circular migration serving the needs of western ranchers, farmers, and mining companies, and managed by the U.S. Border Patrol. And Chinese workers were imported as well, initially to help build the first transcontinental railroad.

In light of historical evidence supporting the settler colonial frame for U.S. political development, the *immigrant nation* narrative regarding the development of the U.S. takes on a different hue. As noted above, the Homestead Act of 1862 played a central role operating in tandem with the military expansion of U.S. territory, bringing millions of European immigrant settlers to populate and economically develop the territory through settler colonial structures, extending and perpetuating White supremacy. Equally important to the Homestead Act of 1862 were several Congressional Acts providing U.S. railroads – privately owned – with large tracts of land taken from Indigenous peoples to be sold to settlers to generate capital for the railroads’ development, thus providing access to markets for goods produced by immigrant settler homesteaders. Thus, while the American Exceptionalism narrative portrays immigrants as freedom-loving and opportunity-seeking individuals flocking to realize the American Dream – a story wholly without reference to settler colonialism – the settler colonial narrative understands the massive importation of White Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a key factor in the realization of the country’s racialized imperial aspirations. Without huge numbers of White immigrants, the White American nation would have been virtually stalled along the Eastern seaboard.

It is important to emphasize that the American Exceptionalism version of the immigrant nation story has operated powerfully to deflect U.S. public attention from the realities of settler colonialism as the foundation for U.S. political development. The historical reality is that the U.S. sought only “White” immigrants from its earliest days, as documented in the fact that one of the first laws adopted by the first U.S. Congress was a naturalization policy restricting naturalized U.S. citizenship to “free white” persons, a law that was not nullified until 1952 (Takaki 1993: 400). And the centuries-long process of embedding the settler colonial structure of White supremacy across the North American continent involved the recruitment and assimilation of millions of European-origin immigrants to participate in this process as U.S. territory expanded westward to the Pacific.

My own White settler colonial family history provides a telling example of how this process worked, including the absence of any understanding of the family’s role in the settler colonial political development. As learned in my youth, my family’s story is embedded in that of the Mennonite branch of the Protestant Reformation, a branch with beginnings in the early sixteenth century in both Switzerland and the Netherlands. A Dutch priest named Menno Simons became an early leader of the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands, and it was his given name that was tagged for the new faith’s name. Persecution by both Catholic and established Protestant churches⁴ led to many of the group’s members moving to West Prussia’s (now Poland’s) Vistula River Valley in the seventeenth century and then

to south Russia (now Ukraine) in the eighteenth century. By the early 1870s, however, rising Russian nationalism and foreign policy conflicts in Europe led the Czar to scuttle policies exempting Mennonites from military service and cultural assimilation, and as a result many Mennonites began to look elsewhere for places to settle.

Meanwhile, by 1874 the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad had been given over three million acres of public land in Kansas – taken from Indigenous nations – to build a railroad that would follow the route of the Santa Fe Trail to the southwest. Selling the land to immigrants became a primary means of raising funds to build the railroad, and the settlement of immigrants would provide the railroad with customers needing to ship their goods to markets in the east. Knowledgeable of the Mennonites' interest in moving to a country where they could farm and live apart and without military obligations, a Mennonite-origin agent was dispatched by the railroad to the Molotschna Colony of Mennonites in south Russia to recruit immigrants to Kansas. Among those recruited were my great grandparents, on both sides of my nuclear family. The AT&SF Railroad helped my ancestors and their fellow migrants travel from New York harbor to Kansas and upon arrival they were put up in railroad-built temporary quarters until they could choose land to purchase from the railroad and then settle into their new homesteads. Having little money to spend, many of the Mennonite settlers constructed dugout quarters in the prairie land until they could afford to construct more permanent dwellings.

Less than two decades later, my father's four grandparents left Kansas for Oklahoma to participate in one of the last "land rush" events in this territory resulting from the dispossession of Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribal lands in Washita County. While Oklahoma had been designated as "Indian country" in the 1830s, where eastern tribes were forced to move via the "Trail of Tears" and were promised the land forever, in 1887 the Dawes Act became law, aiming to force the assimilation of the Indigenous populations and the destruction of their political and cultural communities. The Dawes Act allotted 160 acres to each enrolled tribal member, with the remaining Indigenous lands made available to White settlers under the Homestead Act of 1862. Five years after the Dawes Act was enacted, the Indigenous reservations in western Oklahoma were opened up for White settlement and my great-grandparents were among a number of Mennonites farming in Kansas who made the trip by horse and buggy to participate in the "land rush" in Washita County.

The point of this foray into family history is that my great-grandparents were eager participants in the settler colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands in both Kansas and Oklahoma in the late nineteenth century. Along with millions of other European immigrants, my ancestors took their places as settlers in a settler colonial society. While they were pacifists and did not engage in the physical violence entailed in dispossessing the Indigenous peoples' land in either state, they were nevertheless the first White settlers on what had been Indigenous land in both cases. And by virtue of their White privilege as European immigrants, they took possession and developed the land in the "American" way – i.e., individual ownership of private property, raising livestock and crops for market sale – thereby helping to build the settler colonial structures that continue to dominate "Turtle Island" (the term for North America used by many Indigenous people).

During my childhood in California, my mother sometimes recalled having grown up on a farm in Washita County, Oklahoma and having been terrified as a child by the sounds of a Cheyenne pow-wow drifting across the land from the nearby remnant of the Cheyenne reservation. And yet: the family story through which I was taught to make sense of my life and my place in the world focused on my membership in a persecuted religious group that immigrated to America, finding freedom and opportunity here. And not one word, or even hint, in the story referenced the family's participation in the dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands and the construction of settler colonial structures. This is how the story of the U.S. as a "nation of immigrants" and a land of freedom and opportunity works to erase from public consciousness the continuing realities of settler colonialism in U.S. society and polity.⁵ Until this settler colonial story is recognized, acknowledged and owned by the American people, I am persuaded the country will never be able to fully realize racial justice.

The Racialized Structure of U.S. Settler Colonialism.

What does it mean to say that U.S. settler colonialism established racialized *structures* that remain in place in the twenty-first century to undergird the perpetuation of racial hierarchy in the country's social and political life? At the heart of the settler colonial project, as noted above, is the *racialized control of land*. That is, Indigenous peoples are coercively displaced from the land on which they have lived their lives – often for many centuries – with the land becoming the property of White settlers. As such a European form of individual land ownership replaces previous – mostly communal – social and cultural formations through which land was understood and experienced by its inhabitants. The control of the land is *racialized* in that the previous way of life on the land practiced by the Indigenous peoples is disparaged and demeaned as that of "savage," "primitive," lesser beings who do not deserve to continue a way of life that obstructs the transformation of the land into European style enclosed and privatized property that is commodified and that sustains commodified agriculture and other marketized practices (see, e.g., Bhandar 2018). Racialization entails a perception of the Others as so essentially different and inferior that they cannot possibly live as equals among the dominant racial group. This perception of inherent inferiority becomes the basis on which members of the groups so Othered are subordinated and excluded from equal membership in the political community. In this sense, cultural disparagement is essentialized as a set of inherently unworthy characteristics of a racialized group, along with markers of physical appearance.

Again and again through the long period during which the lands that became the contemporary U.S. were transformed into settler colonial private property, Indigenous peoples found themselves constrained to ever smaller portions of the territories in which they had lived so that their ways of life were increasingly difficult, and often impossible, to practice. Added to this experience of dispossession and deracination were the intense pressures to assimilate to "American" ways of life imposed by government officials and private White settlers (see, e.g., Ellinghaus 2017). These pressures are exemplified by the Congressional practice of assigning Christian missions to tribal groups – aimed at "civilizing" them into Christianity and western cultural practices – to help fulfill the U.S. government's treaty-engendered trust obligations to tribal nations. It is also exemplified by

the 1887 Dawes Act that sought to push Indigenous persons onto parcels of individuated and commodified land with the remainder of Indigenous tribal land sold off to White settlers (as noted above); the establishment of Indian boarding schools in which Indigenous youths were taken from their families and tribal surroundings and endured educational processes of westernization involving the deliberate eradication of their languages and cultural practices; as well as by the mid-twentieth century Termination policy under which tribal governments were to be “terminated” and Indigenous people were induced to move to urban areas with promises of government arranged employment (see, e.g., Treuer 2019).

None of these policies were fully successful, however, as the Indigenous nations fought against them to survive. Moreover, Indigenous peoples have continued to insist that their sovereignty as independent nations be respected inasmuch as their communities predated the arrival of settler colonists in North America (see, e.g., Treuer 2019). As a result, the U.S. continues to function as a settler colonial society, with Indigenous peoples’ territories being confined to the relatively miniscule reservations found throughout U.S. territory. Meanwhile, the racialized settler colonial structures of private property dominate the land and way of life in nearly every corner of the country, maintained through settler control of the governments organized to enshrine and protect these structures. Though people of color are no longer precluded from citizenship or ownership of property, the vast majority of private property in the country continues to be owned and controlled by the descendants of White settler colonists and the country’s racial hierarchy operates to maintain White supremacy over time.

While Indigenous peoples continue to live under racialized settler colonial structures, it is important to emphasize that other people of color also continue to live in racialized geographic spaces and structures that were created to segregate and subordinate groups that were imported for purposes of enriching White settler society through their labor. In particular, many African Americans and Latinx people live in segregated neighborhoods that restrict their opportunities for social mobility in multiple ways and make them much more likely to experience environmental degradation and health damage, as well as being subject to the racialized ravages of the carceral state (see, e.g., Hayward 2013, Schmidt 2021).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic and its economic, social and health repercussions have highlighted dramatically the degree to which these groups continue to suffer from racially hierarchical structural inequality. That is, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a dramatically higher incidence of the disease among Blacks, Latinx, and the Indigenous population than is true of the White population, with death rates more than double that of the White population. These alarming disparities in disease and death are attributed to the effects of racialized structures of disparate impact such as overcrowded housing, lack of access to personal and private means of transportation, employment disproportionately restricted to low-paid “front-line” work with high exposure to communicable disease such as food production and distribution, transportation of consumer goods, low-end service occupations, health care, emergency services, etc. Moreover, Asian Americans have been

subjected to racially motivated violence and racist attacks engendered by Trumpian efforts to pin blame for the pandemic on Asians, particularly Chinese.

Nearly all Americans live among these racialized structures and the practices that sustain them, affecting not only the racialized populations disparaged, dominated and excluded by White supremacy, but diminishing the well-being of the entire populace, as well as the well-being of the planet. Among the entire panoply of destructive social constructions are structures and practices involving land-use and ownership, natural resources extraction, transportation, manufacturing, marketing and shipment, corporate personhood, exclusion of most negative externalities from accountability for commercial practices and market transactions, and much more. These are remainders of settler colonialism in that they operate from the same assumptions, preconceptions and logics that informed the development and expansion of settler colonialism as a set of structural relationships between people and between people and the land. Accordingly, this essay turns next to a critical analysis of those assumptions and preconceptions.

Racialization and the Settler Colonial Mindset.

What is it about the country's settler colonial heritage that remains to undergird and maintain racial hierarchy and racialization in the U.S.? As noted above, an important and formidable obstacle to the political project of racial justice in the U.S. is the long-standing opposition by many White Americans to policy measures and social changes that might lead to an end to racial hierarchy. Popular understanding of the U.S. as a settler colonial society might be helpful in diminishing White political opposition. This is so because fully understanding the realities of settler colonial structures and practices may enable White Americans to perceive their injustice, as well as the self-defeating nature of the assumptions and beliefs that underlie settler colonialism. To elaborate, my central argument is that deconstructing White opposition to racial justice will entail not only a reformulated narrative of the country's history but coming to a critical understanding of the *settler colonial mentality* that sustains its racialized settler colonial structures and stands as an important obstacle to their demolition. Here I seek to clarify what I mean by the "settler colonial mentality" and how it sustains those structures and practices of racialization.

As I have argued elsewhere (Schmidt 2021), I believe that humans gain understanding of the meaning of our lives and the social structures in which we live through absorbing the stories, images, and frames of reference that are embedded in the cultures in which we grow up. Living in and through our culture enables us to make sense of our lives and to orient ourselves toward the purposes that seem important in those contexts. The interactions between ourselves and our social contexts constitutes our way of life. To what extent, and how, is our way of life in the U.S. informed by settler colonialism, and how does this way of life contribute to the perpetuation of racialization and racial hierarchy? The argument I want to develop here is that the mindset of U.S. settler colonialism was itself derived from a particular social context – a time and place and cultural formation – that had immense consequences for the entire world, and that these consequences continue to play out in highly destructive ways to this day. Indeed, those consequences threaten not

only to perpetuate racial hierarchy, the characteristics and effects of which are sketched above, but the very survival of our species and many others as well. That is, there are good reasons to believe that the settler colonial mindset informs not only continued racial hierarchy, but the very practices leading to climate change and environmental devastation.

Political theorist James Tully suggests that settler colonialism is based on a basic preconception of human *independence* that he contrasts with the fundamentally opposite preconception of *interdependence* characteristic of Indigenous peoples (Tully 2018: 90). The Indigenous way of life is articulated by them, he says, in terms of “gift-reciprocity relationships and cycles of life” fundamentally different from those of the settler colonial mindset. “This is a basic mode of being-in-the-world with other living beings; a reciprocal and interactive relationship of ongoing sensuous attunement, disturbance, and re-attunement by means of our pre-reflective, embodied, and reflective senses, perception, and cognition” (Tully 2018: 89). Tully argues that this primary relationship between human beings and between humans and the living earth is an *ethical* relationship. That is, these interdependent relationships entail “shared responsibilities to reconcile unsustainable relationships” between humans and with the other beings with whom we share the living world (Tully 2018: 89). I will return to these ethical themes below, but for now it is important to sketch out the ways in which the oppositional settler colonial mindset apprehends the relationships between humans and between humans and the living earth, and the consequences of that mindset in the development and maintenance of racial hierarchy and racialization.

What Tully describes as the “independence” frame of the settler colonial mindset is at the core of liberal culture of *individualism* in the U.S. This frame rests on uncritical assumptions that *separation* is the fundamental reality of human life and that *control* is the key to survival and flourishing within that reality. Contradicting the core beliefs of most Indigenous cultures throughout the world, Europeans came to see themselves as separate beings – separate individuals – who must develop mastery over their environments (including other people) not only to survive, but to pursue fulfilling lives. These are key preconceptions underlying much of modern western thought, and can be found articulated as early as the writings of Bacon (2015 [1620]) and Descartes (2008 [1641]).⁶ In a nutshell, the basic premise is that humans are separate from each other and from nature, that nature operates according to its own laws that can be understood through the application of human reason employing the scientific method, and that the purpose of such understanding is to give humans control – “dominion” – over the natural realm so that its resources can be exploited and bent to increase human prosperity and comfort.⁷

Rather than seeing themselves and their lives as deeply interconnected with other people and the natural and constructed environments in which they live, many modern western people – and especially those socialized in the liberal culture of the U.S.A. – have been shaped by social forces to perceive themselves as individuals who must fashion themselves into successful people who can compete with others for material, emotional and symbolic goods that will yield some measure of happiness in life.⁸ The social contract theory of government that has played such an outsized role in U.S. political development, from

Jefferson's Declaration of Independence to the present, is a political expression of this basic presumption.

How do these fundamental preconceptions become manifest in settler colonialism and in the political project of White supremacy? In line with the sketch at the outset of this essay, Tully suggests that the first manifestations of settler colonialism in North America involved dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their land following their racist assumptions that the Indigenous were uncivilized savages who did not properly use the land on which they lived. "Proper use" of land – based on the supposition of the inherent separation between humans from each other and from the land – involved installing private property to replace communal land practices, thereby undermining the Indigenous way of life. As Tully puts it: The settlers' ". . . specific and unique property system is based on the presupposition that the earth belongs to humans as their commodifiable private property, for sale on the market like any other commodity" (Tully 2018: 103).

Tully begins his narrative of settler colonial development with the Enclosure movement in England which was then "spread around the world by Western imperialism and colonization" (Tully 2018: 103-4). Drawing on Karl Polanyi's now-classic analysis of the "great transformation" to market society (Polanyi 2001 [1944]), Tully marks out a four-step process by which the unsustainable and racialized settler colonial structures were put into place in North America.

First, in violently removing Indigenous peoples from their historic lands and practices, the settlers destroyed traditional ways of life centered on the ethic of reciprocity that had been developed over several millennia to sustain relationships between Indigenous communities and with the ecosystems in which they lived. Second, in carving up the land into commodifiable parcels of private property, the settlers destroyed complex webs of interdependence that sustained both human and non-human life. Third, by commodifying human labor – the "productive capabilities of human beings" – the settlers generated practices of objectification and abstraction that made traditional ways of life and culture unsustainable. And fourth, settler colonists "extracted and alienated" intersubjective, everyday practices of self-governance to centralized powers, atomizing citizens to become mere voters, thereby destroying the practices and knowledge needed for self-government. Moreover, the destructive effects of these four processes of extractive transformation, he notes, have been "externalized" as costs for which no one is responsible in the market system's accounting practices.

Tully argues that these four processes have created a "super-predatory system" that has led to twin crises of sustainability in relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as between humans and the living earth. Further, he insists that these twin crises of sustainability must be addressed together and not separately. We cannot resolve our alienated, injurious, unjust and conflict-generating human relationships without attending to our destructive relationships with the ecosystems that sustain all life; nor can we address the crisis in our relationship with the living earth without reconciling our human-to-human relationships.

In light of this analysis, it is important to explore here the ways in which the installation of this settler colonial way of life generated and sustains practices of racialization and the structures of racial hierarchy. Perhaps no critic has illuminated these connections more powerfully than political theorist Michael Rogin (1987), who drew on psychoanalytic literature to argue that the propertied individualism of American liberal culture engendered psychic derangements in its settlers that were manifested in both repressed envy and violent rage against Indigenous peoples who refused to “grow up” and assume the responsibilities of individual self-sufficiency. Citing Tocqueville, Rogin writes that liberal society generates not strong individuals but conformists who are internally divided and weakened by their own beliefs in rugged individualism and self-making. Adopting a paternalistic self-conception in relation to Indigenous peoples, some early nineteenth century American public officials sought to “civilize” the Indians into liberal adulthood through coercive means. To illustrate, one Indian agent quoted by Rogin urged the U.S. government to “push improvement on them by education, alienation, and individuation” (Rogin 1987: 48). Having promised individual freedom to the Indigenous, Rogin says, “the most important individual freedom offered Indians was freedom from communal land ownership” (Rogin 1987: 47).

Underlying the settlers’ centuries-long war against the Indigenous, Rogin claims, was a “regressive impulse” of repressed desire for union with others and with nature herself:

Indians were in harmony with nature; lonely, independent, liberal men were separated from it, and their culture lacked the richness, diversity, and traditional attachments to sustain their independence. The consequences were forbidden nostalgia, for the nurturing, blissful, and primitive violent connection to nature that white Americans had to leave behind. (Rogin 1987: 135).

In Rogin’s analysis, the violent destruction of Indigenous people across the nineteenth century was a response to projected Indian vengeance stemming from White settlers’ own repressed rage at their separation from Mother Earth and her “primitive” people.

Turning to the settlers’ racialization of the African-origin population, it is instructive that Morgan’s now-classic study of the beginnings of racial slavery in the early Virginia colony found that the racial hatred organized and directed by the colony’s elites toward African-origin slaves was adapted to deploy against Blacks the intense animosity toward the Indigenous population that had developed from the violent encounters with Indigenous groups trying to defend their lands and ways of life (Morgan 1975: 328). And Rogin’s analyses of White responses to the country’s Black population follow lines similar to his interpretation of White envy/hatred toward Indigenous peoples. That is, Rogin sees racial hatred toward Blacks as derived from Whites’ psychic projections of their own envy, fear and rage in the form of stereotypes of Black indolence, criminally violent savagery, and sexual predation (Rogin 1998: 77). Thus, Rogin finds, “Chattel slavery, the expropriation of Indian and Mexican land, and the repressive use and exclusion of Chinese and Mexican American labor were the conditions of American freedom rather than the exceptions to it” (Rogin 1998: 77).

It is important to stress that the racialization of Indigenous and Black people in the early U.S. established a means by which White supremacy could be maintained even in the face of efforts at cultural assimilation by racialized groups. Thus, for example, a significant portion of the so-called “five civilized tribes” in the U.S. southeast (i.e., Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole) attempted to adapt to their White neighbors by adopting practices of private property, European styles of dress and food preparation, written alphabets and political constitutions, the English language, and in some cases Christianity, but they were nevertheless stripped of their lands and forced to move – with great loss of life – to Indian territory in the early nineteenth century. Based on the perceived physical markers of racial identity, White settlers were enabled by “racial scripts” (Molina 2014) to define not only Indigenous peoples, but Blacks, Latinx, Asian Americans and others as inherently “other,” and therefore subject to Whites’ fear and loathing quite apart from these groups’ cultural adaptations.

Another anti-racist scholar, John A. Powell,⁹ has similarly traced the roots of U.S. White racism to the weaknesses and pathologies of the isolated modern White self at the core of the settler colonial mindset. In *Racing to Justice* (2015), Powell argues: “Without an examination of the construction and presence of whiteness, and specifically the role of whiteness in the formation of the modern separate self, inequitable arrangements based on fear and exclusion will endure” (Powell 2015: xvii). Building on multiple intellectual sources, but especially psychoanalysis and Buddhist thought, Powell argues that human beings are not ontologically separate beings but interdependent “interbeings” (Powell 2015: 212). Despite this, the ideology of the separate and isolated self was dominant in modern western thinking and lies at the root of racialized social structures formed to protect the fragility of the “empty” White self (Powell 2015: Chapter 6). He argues that the political deployment of the “race card” works so well in U.S. politics to stymie transformative egalitarian change because of the fragility of the White self, a fragility that stems from the emptiness of a racially based White identity that is “foundational for us as a country.” Positing the centrality of identity politics in the U.S., Powell claims that “issues of being will usually trump issues of interest” (Powell 2015: 141). The racialized structures – i.e., institutions, public policies, social practices – that maintain and perpetuate racial hierarchy, Powell asserts, were constructed and are maintained to protect this fragile isolated White self that plays such an outsized role in U.S. society. For Powell, it is no coincidence that the modern White self was born in an historically distinct “cauldron” in which also were born the modern concepts of “freedom, democracy, liberalism, citizenship, private property, the modern nation-state, and individualism. . .” (Powell 2015: 153). Their common roots came to inflect each of those concepts with racialized meaning. Thus: “Inasmuch as we are inheritors of the modern self, born in the Enlightenment, we are inheritors of a racialized self” (Powell 2015: 153).

Tully claims that we cannot resolve these alienated, injurious, unjust and conflict-generating human relationships without attending to our destructive relationships with the ecosystems that sustain all life; nor can we address the crisis in our relationship with the living earth without reconciling our human-to-human relationships. Instead of “*Belonging-to*” each other and to the living earth, the settler colonial mindset fantasizes that humans

can have “*Mastery over*” those from whom they imagine they are separate (Tully 2018: 103-104). That settler colonial way of life, Tully insists, is unsustainable, having consequences that threaten all life through environmental catastrophe and have brought perpetual conflict, pain and inequality to human relationships. The practices of this “vicious” way of life must be transformed through “virtuous” practices of reconciliation with humans, with other living beings, and with the ecosystem that sustains all life. The observable reality is that we humans are not separate from the living earth or from each other. What sustains us as individual beings intertwines us and our fates with all with whom we are co-dependent: interdependence is the human condition.

That being so, Tully argues that reconciliation toward sustainability requires that we practice the *ethic of reciprocity*, an ethic developed and practiced traditionally by most Indigenous cultures. The ethic of reciprocity is based on acknowledgment that each participant in the natural world receives gifts from others that must be recognized, respected and shown gratitude for, and that these gifts make each being responsible for giving in return to help sustain the circle of life. All who are interdependent are responsible for the wellbeing of the others. Using this ethic of reciprocity as a touchstone, Tully argues that reconciliation requires practice and not only thought and discussion. We learn what is necessary to sustain the common good (and thereby our individual good) through practicing the ethic of reciprocity, through “*being the change* by acting and interacting in conciliatory, symbiotic, and co-sustainable ways in our everyday activities with each other and the living earth” (Tully 2018: 114, emphasis added).¹⁰

Notes on a Path Toward Racial Justice

Returning to the question of racialization and racial justice in the context of the settler colonial mindset, the preceding critical analysis opens possibilities for developing a new narrative pathway toward racial justice that needs to be elaborated and made persuasive to the larger public. In regard to human relationships Tully’s focus is on the need to reconcile the Indigenous populations with the non-Indigenous populations of North America, which he argues can only come about when we seek a simultaneous reconciliation between humankind and the living earth. This important insight, I believe, needs to be pursued and elaborated by racial politics scholars and activists who are committed to understanding and realizing racial justice in the U.S. and beyond.

That is, I believe that scholarship on racial hierarchy and racial justice needs to be integrated within a larger settler colonial frame for better understanding the relationships and the stakes at the heart of these long-standing phenomena in U.S. politics. Saito makes the same point in suggesting that it is

helpful to conceptualize racialization and racial hierarchy as a function of colonialism – settler colonialism in our case. To the extent that racism serves to consolidate colonial rule, its dismantling will require decolonization, and we will need new narratives that accurately reflect this relationship in order to envision liberatory options. (Saito 2020: Kindle loc. 1019-28).

One possibility for accomplishing this is to further develop and elaborate the critical narrative sketched above, one that builds on the inescapability of our inherent

interdependence with each other and with the natural world of which we are a part. As Socrates taught in Plato's *Apology* and *Crito* more than two millennia ago, our lives are inextricably intertwined, and we cannot make ourselves better off by making those around us worse off. Acknowledging and internalizing this conception of who we are is the first step in opening the door to a more fundamental understanding of the nature of racial injustice and the necessary path toward racial justice.

Put differently, I am arguing that racial injustice and hierarchy derive from the *misperception* that White racial identity and the "othering" of people of color enhances the lives of White people by enabling them to control, exploit, demean and exclude racialized peoples. This misperception is based on the equally false understanding that we are separate from one another, that our lives are independent of each other's lives rather than interdependent. It is the same misperception that has led to the settler colonial structures and practices, outlined above, that have diminished the quality of human existence and devastated the living earth over the past five centuries, threatening a sixth mass extinction.

The implications of this analysis are profound. Ending racial hierarchy and racial injustice more generally will require us to adopt a new way of life based on a fundamentally different understanding of our relationships with other humans, other living beings, and the living earth. What might such a way of life entail, and how might it lead to greater racial justice? In this regard, I know of no other life path more promising than one based on the gift-reciprocity ethic hinted at above. Central to the ways of living developed by many Indigenous peoples, the gift-reciprocity ethic begins from a recognition of our lives' dependence on the living earth, on other living beings, and our fellow humans. It requires, as well, our gratitude for the gifts we receive from all of these with whom we share existence, and dedicated effort to reciprocate the gifts we have received from all of these through gifts of our own to them.

Reciprocation, however, requires deep humility because – as in the teachings of many Indigenous cultures – humans are latecomers to the cycle of life. The length of our existence on the planet is miniscule compared to virtually all other forms of life, and consequently we are "apprentices" in understanding and contributing to this cycle. Yet our capacity to make things happen in the world, enabled by our outsized brains (see, e.g., Dilworth 2010), has had highly destructive impacts on the world and on all its living beings, particularly in recent centuries. It was the blind arrogance of modern western culture that led European imperialists to believe that they knew how to live better than older Indigenous cultural communities. As Tully has argued (2018), our task as apprentices in living is to learn from those who have come before us – not only from the humans who came before us, but from all living beings of the "animate earth" (Harding 2009) who have learned through trial and error how to maintain a cycle of life that nourishes and regulates interdependence, seeking to repair the inevitable breaches before they become too destructive.

Humility is also necessary, I argue, in sustaining human relationships according to the gift-reciprocity ethic. The settler colonial mindset has produced not only the imminent threat of a sixth extinction, but self-destructive hyper-individualism, competitive greed, the

misperception that power through domination is the path to human flourishing, and – *not least* – the curse of racial injustice. When it comes to racial injustice it seems clear that White power is clueless as to how to repair the breach, or even to recognize and acknowledge the breaches that have occurred. White power also appears to be blind to its own self-destructiveness.

The path to racial justice, in this view, lies in fully recognizing that the settler colonial mentality has resulted in an enormous heritage of pain and loss that requires reparative healing. And it means learning a new way of life that is based on full recognition of our interdependence and *being the change* that is called for by the gift-reciprocity ethic. In relation to racialization and racial injustice, this means becoming aware of the multiple forms of harm caused by the settler colonial way of life and a resolute commitment to repairing the harms to racialized peoples, as well as to those who believe they are White. There is much reparation work to be done in regard to racial injustice. I will not here try to sketch out detailed examples of all this work that is so urgent.

Rather, I will close by suggesting that the undertaking of such work, gaining an understanding of what needs to be done, is not something that can be done by individual scholars working alone in our heads and on our computers. This is something that urgently requires dialogue and democratic public engagement. “Being the change” means that we must focus on understanding *together* the damages wrought by four hundred years of settler colonial mentality in action. And we must work together to understand how to repair these damages to the lives of our fellow humans – Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian/Pacific American, indeed, to the lives of all of us – and to begin the reparation work to be done. This means working with and through our formal political institutions to adopt transformative egalitarian and earth-restorative public policies, but also working as “Gaia citizens” of the living earth (see, e.g., Tully 2016). In practice, Gaia citizenship means engaging in a collaborative life of active participation in forms of “glocal” self-governance focused on establishing and maintaining ways of living together (with other humans, with other beings, and with the living earth) in ways that maintain sustainable interdependencies, that repair the inevitable breaches that occur when interdependent yet dynamic beings live together, and that follow the gift-reciprocity ethic of gratitude and responsibility.

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¹ This paper begins with an acknowledgement that it was written on land taken by force from the Catawba Nation in the eighteenth century.

² Perhaps the fullest succinct articulation of this story is found in Glazer's 1978 attack on Affirmative Action programs, in *Affirmative Discrimination* (Glazer 1978).

³ Per Hixson (2013), these include Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, and South Africa. I make no effort here to justify the inclusion of these countries as settler-colonial societies; they are noted only for illustrative purposes.

⁴ Biblical literalists, perhaps the primary sources of the group's persecution were its beliefs in pacifism, that only adult baptism is valid, and that true Christians should remain apart from "worldly" people.

⁵ For a deeply insightful, if abstract, analysis of the instantiation of "colonial unknowing," see Vimalassery et al. (2016), and additional essays in this special issue.

⁶ That is, in one of the foundational philosophical acts of the modern age, Descartes famously posited that the most fundamental truth of existence could be established by separating his consciousness from all connections to "exterior" reality, which he defined as including even his own body, concluding that "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes 2008 [1641]: 22). Even before Descartes' famous thought experiment, Francis Bacon had proposed a new method for acquiring human knowledge that involved a systematic set of techniques for grasping the laws of nature. "Human power," Bacon claimed, is derived from human knowledge, "for where the cause is not known the effect cannot be produced. Nature to be commanded must be obeyed" (Bacon 2015 [1620]: Kindle loc 7630). For Bacon and those that followed him, scientific method involves separating ourselves from nature so as to methodically study its laws from the outside, leading progressively to human power *over* nature, for the benefit of humankind. For Descartes, the promise of this new form of scientific method was to make humans "the lords and possessors of nature" (quoted in Wolin 1969: 1066). In short, the modern (Western) mind is one that aims to wrest power from nature in order to bring progress and prosperity to ourselves, and thereby to our species, and we do this through methods based on the presumption that we can separate ourselves, the better to dominate our environment.

⁷ A classic book-length critique of these assumptions can be found in Leiss (1994).

⁸ A remarkable statement written by an early nineteenth century architect of American Indian policy states: "We have, to begin with, the absolute need of awakening in the savage Indian broader desires and ampler wants. . . . In his dull savagery he must be touched by the divine angel of discontent. . . . Discontent with the teepee and the starving rations of the Indian camp in winter is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers – trousers with a pocket in them, and with a *pocket that aches to be filled with dollars*" (quoted by Rogin 1987: 48).

⁹ powell spells his name consistently in lower case, and that usage is replicated here.

¹⁰ In her remarkable series of essays, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), indigenous philosopher and biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer provides multiple examples that cannot be recounted here of the practice of reciprocity

between humans, “more than humans,” and the Earth herself. See especially her essay on “The Gift of Strawberries,” pp. 22-32.