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Introduction: Rethinking Blackness and Indigeneity in the Light of Settler Colonial Theory

Circe Sturm

This special issue of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* explores the intersections of blackness and indigeneity, including how these forms of personal and political subjectivity converge and diverge, and how they continue to structure Indigenous political claims and lived community. Unlike previous work on the topic, this collection considers this subject from two primary analytic and theoretical frames, those of critical race theory and settler colonialism. Here, critical race theory refers not only to the work of critical race theorists that emerged from legal studies, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, and Cheryl L. Harris,¹ but also a much broader body of scholarship that addresses as its primary subjects race and racialization (David Theo Goldberg, George Lipsitz, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and Denise Ferreira da Silva,² as well as racial formation (Michael Omi and Howard Winant).³ Settler colonialism's diverse set of theoretical framings and orientations will be discussed below in more detail.

In the last twenty-five years, race has become a central concern of scholarly disciplines within the social sciences and humanities. Yet despite this shift in focus, relatively little attention has been paid to how issues of race and racism play out among Indigenous people in the United States. One concern has been that in paying attention to race, scholars might privilege civil rights over sovereignty—meaning they might inadvertently treat tribal nations as racial minorities rather than as sovereign

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peoples with political rights that transcend racial struggle. Obviously, attending to race and racism does not necessarily lead to an embrace of liberal civil rights discourses and agendas. Yet fears that race might eclipse sovereignty, or even ignore settler colonialism—a thoroughly racialized process—continue to influence the field in a way that obscures the common ground of Afro-descendant and Indigenous experience, such as land dispossession, political marginalization, and a shared desire for sovereignty and self-determination. In the wake of this analytic divide, even less attention is given to how blackness specifically structures or delimits Indigenous life, as blackness and indigeneity are often taken to be competing identities that cannot exist within the same individuals and communities without friction. This volume seeks to take the next step in pushing forward our theoretical conversations about blackness and indigeneity. Rather than assuming that anti-Black racism, as well as that directed against Indigenous people, are problems of the past or irrelevant to contemporary Indigenous political status, this volume pays critical attention to how blackness intersects with Indigenous sovereignty, authority, identity, and lived experience.

Fortunately, scholars have begun to recognize the limits of privileging either race or sovereignty, as well as the need to explore what is, in fact, a much more complex and mutual history. Scholarship in the past few decades, especially since the early 2000s, has taken much-needed steps to recover this entwined history and to offer new critical insights. For example, in *Confounding the Color Line*, James Brooks brought together a mostly historiographic collection that considered Black and Native interactions, as well as the experience of Black-Indian individuals;⁴ Jonathon Brennan followed suit with *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote*, a book that made a case for an Afro-Native literary tradition;⁵ and Gabrielle Tayac specifically focused on making Black-Indian lives visible in compiling her “IndiVisible” exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution.⁶ Tiya Miles and Sharon Holland, in *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds*, focused on the African diasporic experience in the Americas from a cultural studies perspective, paying particular attention to the emotional valences that colored these intimate conversations.⁷ All these valuable contributions lay the groundwork for what we offer in this collection, analyses that synthesize and engage with contemporary theoretical issues in the field. As mentioned, our principal analytic themes are critical race theory—especially that attending to the specificity of blackness—and settler colonial theory. This special issue differs from other collections addressing blackness and indigeneity because it takes up the topic after settler colonial theory has deeply impacted the field of Native American and Indigenous studies.

In general, settler colonialism refers to a specifically Western European form of imperialist expansion that involves permanent settlement on Indigenous lands in the creation of a new settler state. The United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are all considered classic examples of settler colonialism; although originally coined in the Israeli-Palestinian context, the concept is now being applied to a variety of geopolitical settings.⁸ There are several variants of settler colonial theory, but the most influential has been the work of Australian historian Patrick Wolfe.⁹ According to Wolfe, settler colonialism is distinct from franchise colonialism because the key natural resource at stake is Indigenous land. This geopolitical fact leads to a “logic

of elimination” whereby Indigenous people and their political and cultural institutions must be eradicated—typically through combined processes of genocide, forced removal, and assimilation—because their very presence on the land poses a threat to the new social order.¹⁰ Settler colonialism is also distinct in that it is a “structure, not an event,” meaning it involves ongoing structural conditions of oppression in which settlers actively maintain rights of occupation in the present; thus, settler colonialism cannot be relegated to the past.¹¹ Part of the power and appeal of settler colonial theory is that it asserts Indigenous continuity in the face of ongoing, systematic attempts at political erasure. It also centers Indigenous perspectives, focusing attention on land dispossession, as well as the struggle for political authority.

Despite its valuable insights, settler colonial theory has created a wedge of sorts in regard to race and how we conceive of settlers as distinct from Indigenous people.¹² If you are not Indigenous, the theory suggests, then you are a settler—a category that is usually assumed to be occupied by Western Europeans and to represent a possessive investment in whiteness and white forms of political governance, though not exclusively. For example, in seeking their own political freedom and economic opportunity, immigrants of color might take advantage of Indigenous land dispossession and thus would also be considered settlers.¹³ Even African Americans can be cast a similar light, despite the fact that their ancestors were brought to these shores in shackles under brutal conditions of chattel slavery. This settler/Indigenous binary raises serious concerns about where settler colonial theory places non-Native minorities, especially African Americans, in terms of power dynamics. Though several scholars have tried to refine settler colonial theory and address these concerns, the question lingers whether African Americans occupy a position of settler privilege vis-à-vis Indigenous people.¹⁴ In this special issue, we consider critical race theory and settler colonialism in tandem in the hopes of challenging some of the racial assumptions that underlie settler colonial theory and pushing the analysis of blackness and indigeneity in new and more productive directions.

Addressing such a complex topic as blackness and indigeneity in this manner necessarily evokes competing epistemological frames and ontological orientations, which are readily evident in the articles included in this special issue—a curated collection of theoretical commentary, scholarly essays, research articles, personal narratives, dialogic conversations, experimental writing, and methodological interventions. The first article, “Settler Unfreedoms” by Shanya Cordis (sociology and anthropology), is an extended debate with the major theories, critics, and topics within the field that provides a theoretical framing for the collection as a whole. Indeed, all of the contributors to this special issue engaged with Cordis’s work as they revised, and her interventions were key in helping to orient our own reflections. Although not case-specific nor ethnographic in approach, Cordis’s essay draws on numerous examples from different geopolitical contexts (including Guyana, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States, i.e. Brooklyn, Hawai’i, and the Cherokee Nation). Viewing these examples through the combined lens of settler colonial *and* racial logics, or, as Cordis puts it, “settler racial logics,” she offers new and much-needed theoretical insights about blackness and indigeneity. In particular, Cordis interrogates the distinctions between

land and labor, raises questions about the nature of sovereignty, establishes the need for a yet more critical assessment of white settler subjectivity, and insists on the overall importance of embodied subjectivity to any analysis of the topic. We anticipate that Cordis's article will excite readers as well as set the tone for the collection as a whole.

The next three essays are organized along chronological lines, exploring historical examples from the nineteenth century to tackle basic theoretical assumptions about Black and Indigenous experience during this period. "Racial-Settler Capitalism: Character Building and the Accumulation of Land and Labor in the Late-Nineteenth Century," by Sarah E. K. Fong (American studies and Ethnic studies), examines how the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (Virginia) and the Haskell Indian Industrial Institute (Kansas) combined manual labor, vocational training, and moral-religious education for Black and Indigenous students as they sought to prepare them to participate in the evolving structures of late-nineteenth-century racial capitalism. Fong asks how these institutions leveraged the discourses of rights, citizenship, and Christian morality in their attempts to produce disciplined citizen-subjects, reify United States racial hierarchies, and advance United States settler colonialism. She specifically engages the colonality of being as a relational framework for considering blackness and indigeneity, and in doing so, offers an insightful comparative analysis of subject-oriented modes of racial and colonial governance. In considering the Haskell and Hampton schools together, she puts into conversation the rarely explored topic of Black and Indigenous schooling to show how the disciplinary power of racism and colonialism work in tandem to sustain an overall system of racial settler capitalism.

The third essay likewise finds that blackness and indigeneity, as well as racialization and colonialism, are not mutually exclusive categories of experience. In "Reading Bodies, Writing Blackness: Anti-/Blackness and Nineteenth-Century Kānaka Maoli Literary Nationalism," Joyce Pualani Warren (English) identifies the intersections of blackness and indigeneity in the nineteenth-century writings of Kānaka Maoli political leaders. These Native Hawaiian leaders invested in the Native Hawaiian body as an epistemological tool and symbol of their sovereignty, because they viewed sovereignty as being rooted in the physical body's connections to Pō, the cosmogonic blackness which began the universe and from which all Kānaka Maoli genealogically descend. The essay explores the power of inscribing blackness on the body in the form of traditional tattooing, as well as the parallels between this embodied practice and their own written, political discourses on blackness. As with other contributors, Warren challenges an assumption taken for granted in the field by examining a particular context in which blackness is not distinct, but rather a co-constitutive and foundational element of indigeneity.

The author of the fourth article in this special issue, William Felepchuk (Indigenous and Canadian studies), highlights the common ground of Black and Indigenous experience in the context of Canada, a place where anti-Black sentiments and policies are often overlooked. Exploring how necropolitics intersects with colonial and racial violence, "Racial Necrogeographies in a Settler Colony: The Life and Death of Nineteenth-Century Burial Places in Rural Ontario" specifically considers the intimate colonality of white settler attempts to erase Black and Anishinaabe burial

places while they carefully protected their own. Felepchuk argues that assaults on the colonized and racialized dead represent white settler anxieties at their most raw and visceral, and that an understanding of settler colonialism is incomplete without considering the enmeshed dehumanization of both Black and Indigenous communities in such necropolitical contests. In making his case, Felepchuk shows yet another way to illuminate the dynamics of racialized settler capitalism.

Approaching our topic from different disciplinary perspectives, the last three essays in our collection move from the nineteenth century into the present. The article by Reid Gómez (Literary and Ethnic studies), “Silko’s Vévé and the Web of Differing Versions,” follows Felepchuk’s contribution because in speaking to the complexities of Black and Indigenous experience, it too addresses the agency of the dead. Gómez’s essay turns to Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead*, a canonical text in American Indian literature that claims that “no outsider knows where Africa ends or America begins.”¹⁵ Gómez focuses on Silko’s character Clinton, a descendant of slaves and the first Black Indian. Gómez understands his notebooks and radio broadcasts to be deep meditations on the entanglements of history and story, slavery and colonization, blackness and indigeneity. What makes Silko’s novel so powerful is her argument that history is simply the most complete collection of stories, and stories are spirits that roam and haunt the earth. Taking inspiration from Silko, Gómez offers insights into the complexity of Black and Indigenous experience by breaking with scholarly tradition and utilizing storytelling not as a metaphor, but an actual method. In doing so, she showcases how stories, especially those that speak with ancestors, work together in a world where truth resides in the connective spaces between differing versions of experience.

The two concluding essays offer methodological and theoretical interventions into the present—a moment when difficult but productive conversations are most needed. In “Land of Opportunity: Anti-Black and Settler Logics in the Gentrification of Detroit,” Jessi Quizar (Ethnic studies) examines the increasingly common practice in anti-gentrification activism of claiming that gentrification of Black neighborhoods is a reiteration of settler colonialism. Native critics have pushed back against these metaphors as abstractions and false equivalencies to the concrete conditions of settler colonialism. Yet in Detroit, gentrifying discourse frequently draws on the language and logic of settler colonialism in narratives about the city. Quizar explores how terms and logic that were used to rationalize the theft of land from Native Americans are now being applied to a predominantly Black city. She further proposes that shifting white interests in Black land have led to a borrowing of longstanding logics used to dispossess Native peoples, and that the reiteration of these settler colonial logics in Detroit to explain and justify gentrification works to validate land grabs in the city and further erase claims to the city from both Black and Indigenous people, who are now attempting to form coalitions with one another. Quizar’s article offers not only a contemporary example of Black and Indigenous solidarity, but also a geographically specific case through which to analyze shifting forms of Black racialization using settler colonial theory as a framework.

The final article in our collection, “Settler/Colonial Violences: Black and Indigenous Coalition Possibilities through Intergroup Dialogue Methodology” by Kelsey Dayle John and Kimberly Williams Brown (Education and Women’s and Gender studies), offers a feminist dialogic approach to decolonial praxis for both Black and Indigenous peoples. More specifically, it offers a methodological intervention and way forward for approaching difficult conversations about Black and Indigenous experience. By using a dialogic writing style, the authors maintain important distinctions while also setting a foundation for possible solidarities that both inform and strengthen the goals of Black and Indigenous sovereignty. Their narrative of questions illustrates how Black and Indigenous identity are connected to material and intellectual resources such as land, natural resources, education, and labor. Those connections inevitably lead them to examine the use of borders that restrict, protect, and divide ways of knowing and being. Thus, they employ a transnational feminist lens to talk through the crossing, maintaining, and breaking down of different types of borders (i.e. reservations, tribal enrollment, education access, diversity, national borders, intellectual borders) under settler colonial conditions. They end by considering what happens to Black and Indigenous alliances when land is considered as the central issue, rather than state surveillance and identities. Finally, they aim to raise a few connections between different systems of violence within franchise colonialism and settler colonialism that Indigenous and Black peoples might resist collectively—namely, land extraction and labor exploitation.

Overall, contributors to this collection have approached the difficult subject of how blackness and indigeneity relate to one another in the light of settler colonial theory from a wide variety of academic disciplines, as well as personal locations. In our conversations with one another, we expressed how the tensions surrounding this topic have deeply impacted, delimited, and inspired our work.¹⁶ Yet we also learned of our shared hope that the field was now ready for an intervention that might move us towards greater compassion and understanding. Taken as a whole, we offer our essays in this spirit to help illuminate the porous and problematic formation of blackness and indigeneity as they are understood within the perspective of settler colonialism, and to more deeply probe the possibilities of a shared political life that might unsettle the racial and colonial logics underpinning our societies.

NOTES

1. For important collections of critical race theory see *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (New York: New York University Press, 2001); *Critical Race Theory: Key Writings That Formed a Movement*, ed. Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 2005); and Cheryl I. Harris, “Critical Race Studies: An Introduction,” *UCLA Law Review* 49, no. 5 (June 2002): 1215–40.

2. David Theo Goldberg, *Racial Subjects: Writing on Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1997); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); and Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

3. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

4. *Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America*, ed. James F. Brooks (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

5. *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature*, ed. Jonathan Brennan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

6. Gabrielle Tayac, *InDivisible: African-Native American Lives in the Americas* (Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in association with the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 2009).

7. *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country*, ed. Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

8. See J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's critical genealogy of settler colonial theory, "A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>.

9. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999); Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>.

10. Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," 387.

11. *Ibid.*, 388; Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event."

12. Two occasions in particular stand out when the tensions over this topic were most apparent. The first was the publication of Jared Sexton's provocative essay, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 31–56, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-066>. The second was during the Fifth Annual Critical Race Studies Symposium that took place from March 3 to April 2, 2011 at University of California at Los Angeles. Co-sponsored by UCLA's Law School and American Indian Studies Center, the topic was "Race and Sovereignty."

13. In particular, see work on Asian immigration in the Hawaiian context: Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.26.2.b31642r221215k7k>; *Asian Settler Colonialism: Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i*, ed. Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

14. For more on how scholars have intervened in settler colonial theory around the topic of race, and specifically blackness, see Shanya Cordis's article in this special issue.

15. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 421.

16. We presented our works-in-progress at the 2019 annual meetings of the America Studies Association in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Our panel, "Black and Red Call and Response: Grounds We Build and Fight On," took place on November 8 and was organized by Reid Gómez. Six of us were present for the occasion, but many more of our contributors participated in conversations that happened beforehand.

An important voice in this process was Joanne M. Braxton, a religious studies and medical humanities scholar, who intended to contribute the volume but was forced to withdraw due to health reasons. For an example of Braxton's work along these lines, see her essay, "Red-Black Spirit Medicine: Origins of the Weyanoke in the Chesapeake, 1619–present," co-sponsored by African Diaspora Religions and Indigenous Religious Traditions units, 2017 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, MA, November 18–21, 2017.

