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What Is Settler Colonialism? (for Leo Delano Ames Jr.)

Maya Mikdashi

Ancestors. From author's archive.

Under siege, time becomes a location solidified eternally
Under siege, place becomes a time abandoned by past and future
—Mahmoud Darwish, *State of Siege*[1]

give me a color
to step in
a color for my
table a color to trash
my hand in
my inner swirls
are gray with yesterday's promises
becoming today's raining wail
—Wendy Rose[2]

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Almost every year, for the week of the Fourth of July, my family makes the twelve-hour drive from their homes in Michigan to what they call their "farm." The land has been in my family since the 1854 Treaty of La Pointe between the Ojibwe and the United States. That treaty created the Bad River Tribe Reservation on Lake Superior. My family has papers "proving" their rights to land that borders Bear Creek. These documents include lists of names, maps, kinship charts, and blood arithmetic. They are all authorized by the stamps and seals and signatures of the Office, and later the Bureau, for Indian Affairs and the US federal government. According to the treaty, federal government retains ultimate ownership over the land, which has been "leased" to Native Americans and their heirs "forever."

Thus, land ownership and inheritance constitute a legal relationship to the earth that indexes the near annihilation of Indigenous philosophies and ways of life. Indeed, the project of making White men out of Native Americans was to a large extent predicated on the injunction to "own" property individually.[3] More than three hundred years ago, John Locke commenced a history of liberalism by putting forth theories and practices of labor, land, individuality, and ownership. Progress and private property came together. By linking one's relation to the land to one's civilizational status, the birth of liberalism was also a turning point in the legality of dispossession and genocide.[4] Today, this process continues. With the passing of generations, reservation land is continually fragmented and parceled into smaller pieces, effectively diluting the collective bargaining rights of Indigenous peoples. Each time reservation land comes to be inherited, the US federal government has the right to perform an "audit" of the new generation. Many people sell. Others are subject to the federal government's determination of being ineligible for Indian inheritance.

The question that titles this article is deceptively simple. It invites answers that do not, and cannot, exist. One can only address the remainder of a settler-colonial project, particularly one as successful as the United States. To write and think on these continuously dividing remainders is, as Gayatri Spivak calls "Ghostwriting," an:

> attempt to establish the ethical relation with history as such, ancestors real or imagined. The ethical is not a problem of knowledge but a problem of relation. . . . You crave to let history haunt you as a ghost or ghosts, with the ungraspable incorporation of a ghostly body, and the uncontrollable, sporadic, and unanticipatable periodicity of haunting, in the impossible frame of the absolute chance of the gift of time, if there is any.[5]

It is impossible to write about that which cannot be known, and yet there is an ethical imperative to do so. In looking for answers to the question of settler colonialism, I have only a narrative, one that tries to resist the seduction of identity-based claims and yet writes through and pauses on identity's shadows, reversals, and ambivalences. The intimacy and obligation of ghostwriting, and the expectation of failure entailed within it, animates this piece of writing. The ghosts here are not only my grandfather, his mother, or my Native American and Palestinian comrades, family members, and loved ones. The ghosts are everything that happens in the act of writing itself, the affective registers of documenting, living, dying, and struggling with the question and the successes of settler colonialism.

How, and why, does one write about the remainder?

My great-grandmother was a Native American, a member of the Chippewa nation. As a child she was removed from her family to an off-reservation boarding school run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. There, she was "educated" into womanhood, civilization, and Christianity because a piece of paper, the contents of which her mother denied, deemed that she had enough drops of white in her red blood to warrant this privilege.[6] She was not alone. Generations of Indigenous children were removed from their families, languages, religions, and life-worlds in a government policy to end Indigenous social reproduction, an important technology of cultural genocide. After she was released from the boarding school, she married a White man and had several children, living on and off the reservation throughout her life. One of her sons was my grandfather, who recently passed. He was, in his words, "a White Indian."

Some of my grandfather's nieces and nephews still live on the reservation year-round. My grandfather's allotment is lush and overgrown. One house and several trailers occupy the inhabited part of the allotment, which borders Bear Creek. The rest of the land is prohibitively thick with trees, weeds, and plants. As a child, summers in Michigan were our family's intermittent respites from wartime Beirut. I never heard the word *reservation* when describing this land all those summers. Instead, my uncles would speak about hunting and fishing on "the farm," and my grandfather would boast of his seemingly never-ending house and trailer repairs. My favorite stories were those that featured the visits of bears, moose, and deer onto our farm. Clearly, this was not Beirut. Hearing my grandfather speak of the time that beavers built a lodge on Bear Creek, I imagined our farm to be something exotic, gentle, and beautiful.

As I grew older, I began to wonder why we called it "the farm." What were the politics of this naming? What histories of discrimination, disassociation, and assimilation does the articulation entail? What does it mean to be a White Native American, as my grandfather said he was? As a child his classmates called him "red" and "chief," but later as an adult he was known and recognized as a White middle-class factory employee, a carpenter, an amateur musician, a photographer, a poet, and a World War II veteran. With age he grew more attached to his genealogy and family history. On the chestnut dining room table that hosted the family's annual Thanksgiving Day feasts, he would unravel the skin-thin paper that held the hand-drawn imprint of our family tree. Pointing to my mother's name, he would tap his finger at the space just below to locate where my name belonged. It was important to him that his grandchildren's names be drawn onto this family tree. These were blood ties that, once drawn in ink, had a legal and genealogical function. But there is also intimacy formed in together claiming this genealogy. For my grandfather, documenting kinship and blood quantum was inextricable from his mortality.

This moment of commemoration that we shared was one location of the ambivalence that I inherited from my grandfather. For most of his life he had denied that he was anything other than White. My grandmother, though, still insists that in the town where they met and courted: "Everyone knew he was an Indian." Scarred by the inherited memories of his mother's forced removal from her family and to a government-run boarding school, as well as the discrimination that marked his own childhood in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, he did not tell his children that they were part Native American. It was his sister, born on the Bad River reservation and residing there, who told my mother and her siblings about their bloodlines. She unfolded a proud ancestry that stretched for centuries, explaining their direct descent from Great Chief Buffalo. My grandfather was livid when he found out; he was convinced that his children would be mercilessly harassed and discriminated against once they returned home to Michigan. His logic was that if they did not know they were part Indian, they could not be made to feel less worthy. For decades, he refused to talk about his family's history, the choices he had made, and how he had navigated his life.

Growing up in Beirut, Lebanon, I knew my mother was part Chippewa, but this genealogy did not register with any more resonance than the fact that she was also part Swedish. The Indian statues, dolls, and beadwork that increasingly adorned my grandparents' home were as unremarked upon as the American flag hanging from the front porch and the never-ending assortment of Ronald Reagan (and, later, the George W. Bush) calendars that hung on the refrigerator. As my grandfather aged, he surprised himself with a desire to narrate his history as the life of a Native American. He acknowledged that his life had been easier than that of some of his siblings because he could pass as White. He began speaking of his mother and his grandmother, of being bullied at grade school, and his service in the US Army during World War II as the first moment of acceptance. He allowed himself to narrate his life as that of a Native American; this was in part driven by the need of passing the cherished "farm" to his children as well as the US government's obstacles in the face of each new generation's "inheritance" of Native American land. His attempt to recapture memories long suppressed was also an attempt to be more open, towards the end of his life, with his loved ones. Perhaps he feared that his death would seal the erasure of this family history, and thus he struggled to let this past live on in his children and grandchildren. Perhaps he just felt guilty for all those stories he made sure his mother would not tell his children, her grandchildren. This was an urge to archive the fragments that he could still remember and animate. This was, as Derrida writes, the desire for an impossible permanence—a continuously fading indelible mark. It was the death drive in action.[7]

His return to his past and genealogy happened as I studied and later taught the Native American genocide in courses on colonialism, law, and power at Columbia University. On my visits to Michigan, he shared the Bad River Tribe newsletters he had compiled during his latest trip "up north." He would unfold centuries-old pieces of paper, allotments to my ancestors carrying the presidential seal and signatures of three different US presidents. He would lay out maps of the reservation and its contraction over the nineteenth century as logging interests and settlers chipped away at the Treaty of La Pointe. He was impressed by my knowledge of Native American genocide and by my desire to know, and ask, about his and my family. Towards the end of his life, he wanted his grandchildren to acquire their tribal membership cards and, more broadly, to ensure the continued inheritance of Native land. I was still ambivalent.

Sometimes my ambivalence would transform into anger, such as when I turned down a "minority" scholarship at Columbia University. When I applied for graduate school I was not yet versed in American identity politics and diversity initiatives at American universities. Not realizing the import of my actions, I classified myself as an "other": an Arab/Swedish/Native American amalgamation. Of course, I was only able to forgo the scholarship because it represented "additional" funding to the standard graduate school package at Ivy League institutions. I thought I had been earmarked for these funds as an Arab in America. When the administration made it clear that the scholarship was contingent on my identification as a Native American and only once I could "prove" that I had applied for tribal membership, I balked. I was not born, raised, or educated in the United States and I am in no way representative of the experiences of Native Americans. Due to continued structural oppression and the extreme poverty that pervades reservations, a minority of Native Americans attends four-year colleges. Even fewer attend elite higher education institutions such as Columbia University. Furthermore, it is a violence to consider Indigenous peoples one minority among many others in a multicultural state. Native Americans are not hyphenated Americans; they are not a particular or singular American cultural group. They did not arrive in ships or planes from other parts of the world. This world was not new to them. Instead, Native Americans are the remainders of nationalism's and patriotism's ongoing holocaust in the United States,[8] as critical scholars such as Ward Churchill and Robert Williams have underscored.

Behind this anger, and perhaps in some ways fueling it, there is an inexplicable sense of guilt. Do I have a right to be angry? Who am I to feel self-righteous about this history? After all, I am the granddaughter of a man who did not speak of his Native ancestry to his children in his attempts to protect them and himself from what had already hurt him. I am the daughter of one of those children, his daughter, who lived the past thirty-two years in Lebanon. I grew up thinking about, and struggling against, settler colonialism in Palestine, not the United States. In fact, it was through Palestine that I came to rethink and question my mother's family history. It was after working in refugee camps in Beirut—and questioning the seeming permanence of Palestinian dispossession—that I began to query the use of the words "the farm" to connote land that by then I knew rested on a reservation. It was when I understood that Israel is a settler colony that I came to see the United States as the same.

Still, lurking behind the gloss of comparative analysis and beneath this cutaneous layer of rationality, there is unease and self-doubt. How can I claim this history as my own when I know what the scars of dispossession and ethnic cleansing look like? Why do I feel the ongoing *nakba* (the catastrophe) that was (and is) the settling of the United States when I have not paid its price? Do I deserve to feel anything beyond intellectual outrage when I read about the massacres, displacements, and exterminations of Native Americans, particularly in the pristine classrooms of an Ivy League institution named after Christopher Columbus? I grew up in an upper-middle-class family in Beirut. I always said that, if anything, I was an Arab with an American background. While in the United States, I am always insistent that I am Arab, no matter what I may look like. I never think to complicate perceived whiteness in any other way and because of this I am part of the multiple erasures that together constitute whiteness—as both a phenotype and an ideological tool of oppression.[9] In fact, the power of whiteness can be measured by both how my grandfather actively invested in it as a project and how I actively try to divest from its perception in a War on Terror–era United States. This power is also laid bare on a reservation, where phenotype lends itself to discourses on authenticity, privilege, class, and belonging.

Since moving to the United States more than a decade ago, I have inverted my childhood migration pattern, returning home to Beirut every summer. This year, for once in the United States and not in Lebanon during the month of July, I joined my family on their annual trip to the Bad River reservation on Lake Superior. I was nervous as I watched the Upper Peninsula—with its beaches, rivers, and towns named after Native American tribes and personalities—behind the windows of an air-conditioned car. There was water everywhere, water that had surprised me as a child with its sweetness during my first and only trip to the reservation. I was raised on the Mediterranean, and at the time, my nine-year-old self could not comprehend that a body of water could be so large, so overwhelming, and not be filled with salt. I did not believe that these were lakes at all. Opening my mouth, I had expected bitterness. I was wrong.

I had not been to the reservation since then. In addition to watching my feet walk over sand through the cold beauty of Lake Superior's water, I have exactly five memories from that trip. One: being taken to a gathering that brought together Chippewa from several reservations in the United States and Canada. I remember trying to mimic the movements I saw before a bonfire as my mother looked at me with equal measure amusement and disapproval. Two: my mother pointing out a picture of my grandfather's ancestor, Big Chief Buffalo, at the Ojibwe museum and telling me without words that it meant something. Three: my grandfather picking me up and lowering me onto a canoe with an older man who harvested wild rice onto a pile near my feet as we made our way down the Bad River. A leech fastened to my arm. Four: my grandmother taking me into her bedroom and showing me a nineteenth-century bible written in Ojibwe that had been in my grandfather's family for generations. Five: my grandmother removing a tick from my leg and squeezing it dead between her fingers as I cried in a dance around her and my grandfather, my protectors.

More than twenty years later I was in the passenger seat again driving to the reservation. I told myself that this year I would apply for my tribal membership card in honor of my grandfather, who had passed away two years earlier. I called in advance and was assured that, given my genealogy, the application process was mostly a formality. I imagined the paperwork. I thought of the offices. I contemplated visiting an elder in order to receive an Ojibwa name, as my cousins had done years ago. I knew that my grandfather had wanted me to become a member of the tribe. I knew that towards the end of his life he bristled at his family's understanding of the reservation as a vacation spot—an understanding that he himself had promoted for decades.

It was a somewhat typical Fourth of July vacation: five days of barbecues, fishing, swimming, American football, mosquitoes, bonfires, and fireworks that were advertised almost pornographically with the American flag and images of the American armed forces. Those missiles and rockets and firecrackers exploded in the sky above Bear Creek and on the land that borders it. During those five days, I learned that those who reside on the reservation year-round look upon my family, and other occasional visitors, with suspicion. I learned that you can buy one-dollar plastic bottles of mixed alcohol at the same store that you can buy "Bad River Reservation" sweatshirts made in Pakistan. I learned that you must carry a tribal membership card if you wish to visit Round Rock Beach, perhaps the least developed and most beautiful lakeshore beach I have ever seen. I was warned that because I did not yet have a tribal membership card "the Indians" might tell me to leave with less than kindness. I was told to stay close to my aunt's husband, a Mexican American, so that people would be less suspicious of me. "They always think I'm Indian," he laughed by way of explanation. On that beautiful beach I learned that I could be the object of distrust when I approached a child to help her skip a rock. Her mother ran to pull her away from my smile.

On the reservation I learned that you have to order your family's wild rice a year in advance so that the man with the canoe can factor you into that season's harvest. I learned that the wild rice that is sold in expensive packaging in supermarkets across the United States is nothing but the rebranding of settler colonialism. I learned that power also functions through the calculation of nourishment into calories and through food distribution, a lesson that both Gazans and Native Americans know all too well.[10] In fact, hummus is to Palestine what wild rice is to Native America. As Israel continues to claim the Palestinian kitchen as its own, the United States, with confidence and bravado, subsumes Native America's corn, wild rice, quinoa, cranberry, cornbread, and turkey into a national cuisine. In the United States, settler colonialism has been so complete and so successful that the world has forgotten that South Africa, Canada, Australia, and Israel are all modified reproductions, different variations of the triumphant American model. The world has forgotten that people learn from each other, and that techniques and lessons of genocide have always traveled in well-cut suits and rational arguments and paperwork and handshakes.

On returning from the reservation, I learned that people—well intentioned people—will ask if you "have seen Indians, what did they look like, and how many," as if you had been on a field trip or to a zoo. I learned that people want you to take pictures.

On the drive back to Michigan, I tried to explain settler colonialism to my cousin's sons who have now made the trip to "the farm" several times. I attempted to put Patrick Wolfe's lessons into a language fit for a car trip and two hyperactive seven- and thirteen-year-old boys. I failed. I gestured to what it means to live in a settler colony whose crimes have been normalized, justified, and forgotten. I gestured but could not say. I did not have a vocabulary; there is no dictionary to speak the languages of histories that are not History. There is no melody for this melancholy. Instead, I looked for a way to describe the weight, the sadness. I found only a metaphor, a tautological comparison: hummus is to Palestine as wild rice is to Native America. It was, of course, insufficient.

Israel is not the United States. Comparative analysis is always as much about difference as it is about similarity. Centuries of ongoing struggle separate the experiences of the Indigenous peoples of Palestine and the Americas. Both peoples struggled, fought, and tried to maintain their ways of life. Both were divided into ever-smaller groups and lands and categories. Both were branded less human and less-deserving terrorists than their Euro-American counterparts who had progress on their side. Both people's lands were signed away by imperial decrees and later by state law. Indigenous peoples' lands in Palestine and the Americas were occupied by well-armed civilian settlements whose population slowly and furiously ate away at the landscape until they found themselves surrounded.[11] Both Palestinians and Native peoples signed treaties and more treaties and then more treaties. A reservation is a Bantustan is a refugee camp is Area A is an allotment is Native title is Gaza. But there are important differences.

While settler colonialism has succeeded in both contexts,[12] Palestine is still embroiled in what Wolfe has called the "the frontier stage."[13] The extent to which settler colonialism will succeed in historic Palestine is not yet clear, and Palestinians have not yet learned the terrifying grammar of the term *negative demographics*. To compare the two uncritically is a disservice to both peoples. While my grandfather half-remembered his mother's partial memories of hearing about Wounded Knee, I have streamed the Israeli siege and bombardment of Gaza live from half a world away.[14] Palestinians and Native Americans share a technology of rule to which they have been and continue to be subjected. But Palestinians are not faced with the silent decline of demography; their languages are not forgotten and their culture has not been reduced and commodified into Halloween costumes, major sports mascots, and Walt Disney cartoons. In Palestine, the present is still contested, and the history of Israel-Palestine is an intellectual and political battlefield.[15] In the United States, the present is not controversial. In fact, it is "controversial" to demand attention and a modicum of justice for Native American lives and histories. Even American activists for Palestine forget that in order to see genocide and the wages of settler colonialism, they need only drive to the nearest Native American reservation. We refuse to believe that those of us who live today in the United States are continuing to settle Native land, and that even the ability to be a politically progressive—or even radical—citizen of the United States is built on a continuing genocide and settler project that is made, and remade, invisible. We forget that American complicity in Israel's crimes is not only built on tactical, strategic, and politically engendered alliances, but also on the affective registers of a shared settlement project. We forget that ideological and political commitments are, deep down, affective states.[16]

Settler colonialism is wanting to believe, with Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, that "writing is a small ant which bites extinction. Writing is a bloodless wound."[17] Today I write knowing that I will fail, but that writing under the sign of failure is the only thing we can do when the ghosts of the future and of the past are pressing against us.[18] Still, I know that I will fail. Did he?

There will be no grand theoretical claims or strong interventions. There are no answers to the question of settler colonialism. Or at least, the answers are deceptively simple. There are no definitions, only descriptions: Settler colonialism is criminalization—drunks, drug addicts, and terrorists. It is the miscreant, the danger and the distrust in Lid, in Sabra, and on the Bad River reservation. It is signs on a reservation decrying alcoholism, domestic violence, and untreated illness. It is being displaced from Palestine and from one refugee camp to another in Lebanon. It is Pine Ridge, where the life expectancy is half the national average. It is how these spaces open up to others, where the White Indian and the moderate Palestinian reside. It is the world blaming Palestinians and Indians for infighting, for violence, for laziness. It is finding the cause in "their culture." It is minority scholarships given to those who have maybe been once to a reservation, but have the requisite blood quota to allow a university to claim diversity points. It is referring to ancestors as "immigrants" without a second thought or any ill intention. It is not believing that you are now a settler and that to be a settler on Indigenous land does not require consent, merely birth or a passport.[19] It is the American, and the Israeli, dream. It is the bliss of an untroubled mind. It is blood as fetish, the double helix as a history that has been made through forcing the braille of blood to speak a particular language.[20]

Settler colonialism is an inherited silence where you know memories are supposed to be. It is knowing that these memories have been purposely excised due to pain and the hope for a better future, if only the next generation could just forget.[21] It is a man aging into regret for having shut out his children and grandchildren from his life and the lives of his loved ones. It is his granddaughter wanting to go back in time to hurt whoever hurt him decades ago. It is the proliferation of documents and of bureaucracy. It is opening a locked suitcase and finding papers, land allotments, and photos of relatives you have never seen. It is exploring these photos, wondering about the names of the people in them, knowing that even if you knew those names you would not know how to pronounce them or understand their meaning. It is understanding that these family documents and photos could be in a museum; there they would be made to tell a story outside the twinned nature of nation building and genocide.[22] It is thinking that your brother has the same shaped eyes as a great-grandmother and then admonishing yourself for seeing a likeness that seems impossible. It is picking at a scab. It is waiting to feel something beyond anger and guilt, and feeling slowly consumed by the weight of that waiting.

Settler colonialism is uncertainty, looking for someone to share this uncertainty with, and finding that the people around you are no longer interested in reflection. They are perplexed that you have *all of these questions*. They are tired of all this past, all these half-truths and quarter-memories.[23] It is feeling denied, but not knowing what of and having no way to find out. It is knowing that it is too late. It is being bloated with a sadness that cannot speak. It is joking with friends that one-eighth of you (the right leg, perhaps?) is Native. It is laughing with my grandfather at the perceived superiority of my grandmother's Swedish DNA, a superiority that is clearly manifest in my tall, broad, and blonde aunts and uncles. It is guilt and self-doubt breaking the surface of political conviction. It is self-berating, estrangement, and the gulf that opens when a sign remains but the referent is lost. It is being haunted on a highway as the names of towns that carry the mark of vanquished peoples pass too quickly to memorize or write down. It is the proliferation of division, between gringos, mixed-bloods, and Indians, and between Palestinian Israelis, Palestinians, Palestinian refugees and Palestinian citizens (and refugees) of first world countries.[24] It is self-preservation at the expense of group cohesion. It is the seduction of passing as White, as heterosexual, as a "good and moderate Palestinian," as middle-class. It is a desire to be recognized as what others understand as normal. It is a picture of a smiling grandfather, happy on his land, framed in death by the feathers with which loved ones continue to commemorate him.

It is tourism in Jerusalem, yachts at the edge of Round Rock beach on Lake Superior, the confidence of national holidays being celebrated across a Native American reservation, where the fireworks are the best and most explosive that American money can buy. It is the old city of Haifa, preserved as if a museum installation, lit up at night to cast light on roads that map out the land in Hebrew letters. It is the anger, frustration, and terror you feel when looking into the face of a refugee whose mother was a refugee whose mother was a refugee who was born in Acre. It is a people without a land, whose land was taken by other people. It is generations of waiting to go home to a home that no longer exists. It is locked suitcases under a bed. It is treaties. It is federal law. It is Native law.[25] It is constitutions. It is land as a prison, as a refugee camp, as a reservation; land as an internationally recognized fact.[26]It is the structure of siege. It is generations who have gone and taken their secrets with them.[27]

It is intending to apply for tribal membership, wanting to honor your grandfather by claiming the space his finger tapped on years ago under your mother's handwritten name. It is knowing that this reservation land will one day be yours, if you want it, and that this land is heavy. It is feeling unworthy of this history and of this ongoing struggle. It is feeling small, insignificant, and diluted. It is turning away from the entrance of the tribal offices in an ambivalence that is stretched thin between anger and guilt. It is failing your grandfather and hoping to displace this failure onto him. It is wanting to make the dead speak. It is inheritance.

Settler colonialism is the history of a family welded together by natives and settlers. It is the logic of superiority, of primacy, of genocide. It is the colonization of memory and of events that come to be known as "History." It is visiting a reservation or a refugee camp and wondering how this could have been your life. It is being thankful that this is not your life and that this is only a visit or a passion, an act of activism, a choice to be here. It is realizing that this confidence in one's place has been bought with the logic and practice of settler colonialism. It is wanting answers to inquiries you cannot, and probably will never, articulate. It is seeking epiphany through writing and finding only the proliferation of questions, of doubts, and of buried histories. Like these questions, and more than anything, settler colonialism is ongoing.

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