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# Settler Unfreedoms

*Shanya Cordis*

If the public realm is reserved for the bourgeois citizen subject and the private realm is inscribed by freedom of property ownership and contractual transaction based upon free will, then in what space is the articulation of the needs and desires of the enslaved at all possible? How does one contest the ideological codification and containment of the bounds of the political?

—Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*

My essay's title is both an attunement to the settler colonial hauntings that shape our current political landscape and an invocation of Saidiya Hartman's groundbreaking book, *Scenes of Subjection*. In it, she traces the quotidian legacies of violence from plantation life to the emerging legal regimes undergirding modern liberalism and its self-possessed white property-owning subject. The construction of such "formations of terror," as she describes, is deeply gendered and "establishes an inextricable link between racial formation and sexual subjection."<sup>1</sup> Hartman's work reveals the ways in which liberal notions of freedom, liberty, and property are engendered by and extend the *unfreedoms* constitutive of chattel slavery. Freedom as such hinges on the expulsion of the enslaved Black body. Beyond gratuitous forms of violence visited upon the captive body/flesh, the most insidious legacies of colonialism and slavery is how these unfreedoms haunt the political imaginaries we aspire to create.

In what follows, I examine how settler colonial theory has been increasingly taken as the departure point for theorizing indigeneity and blackness. While the framework disrupts Native erasure, the language of "incommensurability" or "theoretical impasse,"

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which has been increasingly deployed to make sense of the relationship between and particularity of blackness and indigeneity, extends settler logics, or what I refer to as *settler unfreedoms*. This, in part, stems from settler colonial theory's racial assumptions. It also emerges from a prevailing treatment of the political realm of sovereignty, what I later discuss as sovereign in/capacity, as it relates to the possibilities of Black and Indigenous political recognition in a settler colonial state.

Further, this essay considers how settler colonialism operates through the spatial dis/location of Black bodies, or *interrupted bodies*. Current articulations of settler colonial theory perpetuate this dis/placement through an implicit association of Blacks as dislocated or attenuated settlers or exploited laborers, eliding the intersection of blackness and indigeneity or Black indigeneity.<sup>2</sup> Naming this absented presence is a twofold objective: (1) examining the *particularity* of the gendered Black body within settler colonial processes, and (2) excavating how colonial racial logics, or incognito investments in whiteness, continue to operate within struggles for sovereignty and calls for Indigenous-led decolonization. By attending to the body and spatial orderings in relations to the land, we may discover new horizons of possibilities that do not equate with settler logics and relationality, such that seemingly disparate experiences of subjection can be brought into dialogue to inform a new political ontology. If we interrogate the position of blackness, and anti-blackness and racial slavery in particular, through the lens of sovereign in/capacity, we reveal the stakes and possibilities of thinking about where Black peoples figure in sovereignty struggles between settler states and Indigenous peoples, understood as partially imbued with sovereign recognition as nations.

## MY ANCESTORS STILL SPEAK

I began this essay in 2014, yet it wasn't until 2016 that I submitted it to a special journal issue for review. It would be another three years before I revisited the piece, having since whittled away the excesses that prevented me from writing my truth and entering into what has been, at times, tumultuous terrain. I come to this work as a queer Black and Indigenous woman (Warau/Lokono). And while I do not proclaim a privileged intermediary ontological space, my particular position—as Black *and* Indigenous—has been largely erased in conversations on blackness and indigeneity. I arrive at this intellectual juncture through a particular lived knowledge—namely, that my corporeal and metaphysical bodies are on the line, interpellated as desirable object, consumable, conquerable, and expendable. This self-reflection is not written without pondering what it means to use my body in the service of yet another labor—that of making visible the ways in which whiteness and anti-blackness continue to operate, both within our communities and our theorizing of the Black-Indian-Settler encounter.

Rather than ascribe to theorizations of decolonization that rotate on a binary axis of subjects as either Indigenous or colonial settlers, I am deeply invested in wrestling with the political possibilities of what Gargi Bhattacharyya calls “perverse imaginings,” or the imaginings of collective liberation beyond the confines of what we perceive possible within and outside of settler notions of legible political power, for example, recognition, citizenship, rights.<sup>3</sup> That is, collective liberatory pathways

that forgo reform and hegemonic discourses that further bind to call into being a different language and vocabulary; a different praxis. To envision an existence for our collective communities is a radical imperative, as settler colonial violence and terror fundamentally function on and through Black and Indigenous bodies. It is ephemeral, yet undeniably material: fleshy.

I write as a scholar-activist-poet dedicated to the political project of truth telling, what Black feminist Audre Lorde denotes as the political reclamation of the erotic—the place of power residing in the sacred feminine, or the known unknown, a radical space for reclaiming all of one’s selves.<sup>4</sup> This political subjectivity coheres the spiritual, emotional, and political—and, I would add, the space of creative imagining. Settler colonial power seeks to dispossess, erase, and subdue, with the intention of distorting and killing this feminine space of power. It is our capacity for relational connection to ourselves and with others that is inherently sundered through parasitic structures of settler colonialism. The project of creative imaginings supersedes the immediacy of responding to oppressive whiteness. It is an unmediated praxis and grounding between Black and Indigenous peoples, one that honors the stories and connections our communities have shared for generations.

My own story begins in Brooklyn, born to a Black mother, a first-generation New Yorker living in the wake of our family’s exodus (like countless others) from the US South, and a Black/Lokono and Warau Indigenous immigrant father from Guyana. The second eldest of six, my experiences as a Black and Indigenous child was underscored by an intense desire to belong that was naturally exacerbated by interactions I had with teachers and fellow students. School curricula itself, functioning as an extension of the settler state, facilitated pervasive narratives in which conquest, genocide, and slavery provided the backdrop against which the nation of the “free” birthed itself and eventually triumphed over its horrific past to become an exceptional space of freedom, liberty, and justice. While my own intimate proximity with poverty, anti-blackness, and gendered racism attested to the US state formation as predicated on settler violence and racial terror, this historical narrative imagined both Indigenous conquest and slavery as divergent horizons that had receded into the past. Shared, alternate histories of Black and Indigenous peoples across the Americas could only be understood as fanciful narratives or historical curiosities. Though contemporary scholarship has begun to address this historical gap,<sup>5</sup> these seemingly structural alterities are entrenched in the public (and political) imaginary.

As the only Black child in my classes, I felt a keen sense of alienation. Expected by my white teachers and peers to speak as a representative for the Black collective even as I was verbally ridiculed for asserting my Black-Indigenous background, I embodied for them a dissonance both discursive and cognitive. Overt attempts to discipline me made their discordant state manifest. These included leveraging colonial historical records against my passed-down oral histories and demanding public demonstrations of my knowledge about my Warau/Lokono ancestry: Did I ever live on a reservation? Did I speak my Native tongue? Did I practice traditional religious and/or spiritual practices? Above all else, the darkness of my skin solidified the color line, as it did not equate with the quintessential Indian image. Ostensibly, the curliness of my hair also

betrayed me. My phenotype marked the boundary of rigid racial lines because Indians did not look like me. As a structuring force of US social and political consciousness, the Black-white binary, real and imagined, not only ensures Indigenous erasure from the landscape, but also effaces those who embody the spaces between. I often encountered outright hostility for my self-identification, which others claimed as evidence of internalized anti-blackness or the romanticized trope of “playing Indian” and the underlining charge of racial deception and inauthenticity.

Discovering countless others who occupied a similar transgressive space helped me to see that my story mattered and to recognize how the logic of hypodescent continues to be a powerful ideological force mobilized against and within Black and Indigenous communities. I share this because I believe, as my ancestors have shown me, that stories are healing. I share this because our current theoretical dialogue on the relationship between racial slavery, conquest, and genocide within settler colonial theory (in spite of increasing complications of the relationship between race and indigeneity), relegate these structures of oppression to separate spheres. But also because there remains a deep silence around the way anti-blackness continues to underpin notions of decolonization that privilege indigeneity, as cordoned off from blackness, and thus render Black indigeneity as quandary or threatening to the political distinction of Indigenous sovereignty.

Moreover, the particular forms of erasure I continue to experience simultaneously occur in white settler and Indigenous spaces. A long history of settler racial logics and colonial recognition politics, in which some Native community members have had to prove their degree of Indianness through the logic of blood quantum, remains a powerful ideological and material force. This has been central to, but not exclusive of, the struggles of descendants of the most prominent Indigenous nations, including the five tribes—the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles—communities that engaged both in African chattel slavery and alliances with their Black counterparts. While this plays out differently in non-Anglo contexts, there are similar tensions around the interplay between indigeneity and blackness that have significant implications for recognition and land rights throughout the Americas.

The *placing* of blackness outside of the purview of indigeneity (and by extension sovereignty), whether through racial logics that posit Black peoples as solely *racialized* subjects and not *depoliticized* subjects, hold deep political implications. Silencing my experiences of anti-blackness and specific forms of anti-indigeneity has not prevented others from attempting to write and speak for me. If dispossession, beyond being a word that encapsulates Black and red suffering, means being *dis-possessed* of oneself, of the land, of history, of subjecthood, then possession for me fundamentally entails a spiritual and bodily reclamation and healing. The corporeality of my body speaks, and it is the body which must be (re)centered within our theoretical and decolonial projects. Theorizing occurs in/from, not beyond, the body. Colonial gendered violence has continued to operate on the bodies of generations of women and men in my family as well as my own. It is the embodied experience which enables me to attend to the affective spiritual dimensions of that violence, toward a politics of redress that speaks to simultaneity.

## ON THE USE OF SETTLER COLONIAL THEORY

In the inaugural introduction for the *Settler Colonial Studies* journal, Lorenzo Veracini outlines settler colonialism as a particular differentiation insofar as “colonizers and settler colonizers want essentially different things.”<sup>6</sup> Whereas colonialism erects and maintains permanent categories of difference between the colonizer and the colonized through racial logics, settler colonialism is distinct, even antithetical, from colonialism, though it may overlap, intersect, and operate alongside or even replace franchise colonialism. Rather than a distant occurrence, settler colonialism flags the ways that colonial relations of power continue to shape and inform existing power regimes, fortified and reinforced by colonial and imperial logics (the sovereignty of the colonial state, and later nation-state). The structures of settler colonialism continue to have institutional power from the perspective of the Indigenous; the colonizer’s driving imperative of the colonized “you, work for me,” whereas the settler colonizer commands, “you, go away.”<sup>7</sup>

As Patrick Wolfe states, settler colonialism is a structural force unfolding through the “logic of elimination” in outright naked violence (genocide) or assimilationist practices and policies toward Native peoples.<sup>8</sup> The dissolution of Native societies animates new settler sovereignties, providing the material basis (land) from which the settler claims property ownership of *terra nullius*, or empty territory. If subsuming Native/Indigenous geographies—epistemologically informed ways of relating to the land and to one another as relational rather than *product*—under settler logics enables the replacing of the Native, it is the acquisition of land that engenders the structural expansion of settler society. The replacing of the Native by the settler, such that the settler comes to *be* Native, through renaming and the recuperation of the Indian as a symbolic expression of difference from the “mother country” or colonial metropole, facilitates remaking the Indian through settler optics as non-modern, backward, and an impediment to the progress of the nation-state. Natives become foreign in their own homelands.

Invasion, or the collision of distinct worlds, is not simply a historical event but also specific social and political formations with continuity across time and space as a structuring force “deployed in the grammar of race.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas Indigenous peoples were eliminated—not as a conquered people, but as a conquerable people, based *partly* on race—Blacks were racialized as chattel slaves in which “slavery constituted their blackness.”<sup>10</sup> Yet it was more so what their respective bodily elimination and subjection enabled—access to land or territoriality and labor for the expansion of the settler landscape. The antithetical triangulated relationship between settlers, Blacks, and Indigenous peoples or “structures of alterity,” which continually marked Black bodies for labor and Indigenous bodies for literal and symbolic death, quite literally birthed the settler state. As Tuck and Yang argue, slavery within settler contexts is distinct in that while “the slave is a desirable commodity” the violence enacted upon their bodies ensured their dislocation from the land as the slave’s person is settler property—a violence of “keeping/killing the chattel slave [that] makes them deathlike monsters in the settler imagination.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite the structural position of the slave as “deathlike monsters,” the slave primarily figures here as a site of exploitative labor.

Scholars have since taken up settler colonialism to examine how non-white, non-Indigenous peoples that arrived to Indigenous territories under conditions of slavery and indentured servitude enact settler forms of power that displace Indigenous peoples.<sup>12</sup> For example, in the US settler context of Hawaii, scholars have worked to deconstruct the enmeshed relations between Kanaka Maoli Indigenous peoples, haoles (white settlers), and “locals,” an amalgamation of Asian and Pacific Islanders.<sup>13</sup> This scholarship has roundly argued that while displaced or arrivant populations arrive under conditions of violent dispossession, they may enact the settler script or become complicit with settler colonialism to gain political purchase and inclusion as propertied citizens of the nation-state, extending Native erasure.

Others have relegated people of color to the status of settler by the mere fact of living and owning land appropriated from Indigenous peoples and through seeking participation in settler notions of citizenship and rights that have historically been denied to Indigenous peoples.<sup>14</sup> Jodi Byrd's *Transit of Empire* deploys the term “arrivant colonialism” to draw attention to the ways racialization and colonization work together to secure Anglo-American imperial and state dominance.<sup>15</sup> Borrowing the term from Caribbean poet and scholar, Kamau Brathwaite, she examines the horizontal relationships between Indigenous peoples and racialized peoples, whom she refers to as “arrivants”: primarily peoples of African descent whose presence in Turtle Island is a result of slavery. Importantly, Byrd counters the notion that this horizontal relationship must be zero-sum struggle for position within the colonial power structure. However, the racial formation of the Indigenous subject is unproblematic, particularly given its focus on the Caribbean context of Guyana and its unique racial and political formation.

Shona Jackson makes a similar argument regarding the context of Guyana to show how marginalized Creoles—descendants of enslaved Africans and indentured Indians—may enact a mode of being and subjectivity as “subaltern settlers” which may work in tandem with “techniques of settler belonging.”<sup>16</sup> In tracing the unquestionable displacement of Indigenous peoples in the context of Guyana (and the Caribbean more broadly), the term *subaltern settlers* aims to capture the power differentials that exist between white settlers, enslaved Africans, and indentured Indians. If we follow Jackson's argument, Creoles inherited settler/colonial power structures, reproducing Indigenous subjugation in their anticolonial struggles.<sup>17</sup> Although these respective arguments move us closer to rethinking the structural racialized underpinnings of settler colonialism, they rotate around the identification of the settler, and the degrees to which non-white racialized others enact settler processes, while presuming a stabilized notion of the Indigenous subject.

As Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel rightfully caution, this settler/Indigenous binary may devolve into discursive rhetoric that serves as “a distraction from critiques of how gendered dispossession, neoliberal migration policies and masculinist, capitalist white supremacy are linked.”<sup>18</sup> In their embodied reflections, they posit that settler subjectivity and exercise of power not only emanates from erasure of the Native, but also from the refusal to engage with the historical configurations that make possible one's position within Native lands, as “this not knowing, this forgetting of our own histories, just supports the claiming of space and

place” regardless of “direct colonial actions or just settling.”<sup>19</sup> I reiterate the connection here between embodiment and the logics of possession (of land, of other bodies) to argue that the uncritical reflection on one’s positionality in relation to the production of knowledge enables the expansion of white settler logics. In the field of settler colonial studies and presumed engagements of its framework, this might look like an intellectual interrogation of the self that does not translate to a political praxis that decenters whiteness.

Entangled within this question of historical amnesia and indirect and direct complicity in perpetuating colonial relations is the flattening of power relations that exist within the term “people of color” when referring to non-white, and presumably non-Native, groups. Beyond collapsing both forcibly displaced peoples and those with relative agency under attenuated categories of the settler, the conflation of colonization, racial slavery, and capitalism leads to a lack of distinction between Black and other non-white groups within its “people of color” framework. However contingent or conditional, this umbrella term for marginalized racialized groups elides the particularity of racial slavery, “that structure of gratuitous violence in which a body is rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged.”<sup>20</sup>

In Jared Sexton’s terms, “*people-of-color-blindness*, is a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of “people of color” to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of anti-blackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy—thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others.”<sup>21</sup> A more relational analysis of the historical difference of the structural position of Blacks would entail a refusal to reduce the specificity of anti-blackness as an analogy of Black suffering, as is the case in liberal discourses that conflate the political impetus of distinct social movements, for example, referring to the fight for same-sex marriage as the new civil rights movement or the exploitation of migrant workers as the “new slavery.” A careful attention to the distinct, yet related threads of settler violence and oppression is further elided through reactive charges of “Oppression Olympics” or reductive analyses of the experiences of racialized non-Blacks and immigrant or migrant populations.

Emerging scholarship has sought specifically to trouble the contentious framings of blackness and indigeneity through an analysis of the seemingly disparate political ontologies of Black and Indigenous communities. Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence gesture toward the complexities of Black-Indigenous contemporary relations and offer a critique of Black political thought. From a comparative analysis of US and Canadian settler states, they note that Black thought in Canadian and US writing “highlights a fundamental contradiction”—the simultaneous attempt to reference Indigenous presence even as the scholarship normalizes colonial relations.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Black struggles for freedom under colonialism often reinscribe the ongoing theft of Indigenous land. For example, enslaved Blacks traversed the Underground Railroads across cross-border reserves to claim land dispossessed from Indigenous peoples, what they pinpoint as a marker of their status as “ambiguous settlers.”<sup>23</sup> They readily acknowledged the limited agency available under conditions of slavery, as fugitive slaves who obtained land were often displaced by white settlers or subject to racial



terror. For Amadahy and Lawrence, the Black and Indigenous juxtaposition is more common in the United States context, where the reality of Black and Indigenous ties and relationships under colonization and slavery are framed in separate spheres of existence. They critique African American discourses' articulation of racialized Blacks as "the quintessential racial 'other,'" which they posit has been embraced by "progressive" whites in other settler nations and deployed to erase enduring colonial forces to which local Indigenous peoples are subjected.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, Cory Snelgrove and colleagues conclude that settler colonial studies "highlight the incommensurability between Indigenous struggles, and for instance, civil rights projects."<sup>25</sup> Despite the multiple geographic and geopolitical differences that exist within engagements of settler colonial theory—for example, the United States, the Caribbean, Hawaii, Canada—the language of incommensurability as it relates to Black and Indigenous political struggles speaks to certain tendencies within Indigenous/Native studies and Black studies to reify notions of indigeneity and diaspora as separate and presumably antagonistic political projects. Within this framing of incommensurability between Indigenous struggles and civil rights projects, Black political struggles prefigure as largely having internalized settler colonial epistemologies, even in the most progressive antiracist politics. This understanding of the political projects of racialized Black peoples in relation to Indigenous political struggles for recognition and sovereignty has particular ramifications for Black Indians, and for those who exist within/between the Black-white binary.

While the scholarship has aimed to trouble the assumption of the white settler in its consideration of how race abets settler colonial processes, race is displaced from the analytic frame in order to foreground the depoliticization of Indigenous status as sovereign peoples with sovereign power over their lands. Yet such a framing of race and indigeneity *overdetermines* the ascription of race to certain bodies, namely, the figure of the enslaved Black body and non-white racialized others. This has political repercussions for envisioning decolonial politics that addresses the legacies of racial slavery.

Furthermore, it overlooks the ways in which Indigenous peoples have also reproduced and internalized colonial and imperial epistemologies. For example, Circe Sturm's critical analysis on the Cherokee Freedmen case illustrates the imbrications between race and indigeneity, in which the expulsion of Black descendant citizens from the Cherokee Nation highlights how colonial logics of race simultaneously reveal the constraining force of the settler state and the complicity of the Cherokee nation with settler logics in its struggles for sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> This case not only reveals the vexed question of how to construct forms of sovereignty that do not reproduce settler colonial recognition, heteropatriarchy, and hierarchical intragroup relations, but also within its contradictions rests an interconnected, but often overlooked, point about settler conferral of sovereign capacity through its discourse of recognition. That is, the structural positioning of being distinct groups imbued with a particular legibility as recognized political subjects within settler legalities, of being recognized as holding or being, at least partially, a sovereign subject. Beyond those who occupy the space between the red-Black binary, this raises the dire question of what political redress looks like for Black peoples if

appeals to discourse understood as emanating from settler frameworks—for instance, civil rights and citizenship—merely reproduce settler power.

What of the excesses that fall out of theorizations of settler colonialism and, by extension, the political visions that depart from this framework as its terrain of negotiation? What violences are rendered invisible in our complicity with those framings of blackness and indigeneity that render the Native/Black subject incommensurable? What, to the Black body (the position of blackness), is redress? The particularity of blackness, not as the quintessential racial other, but rather as an integral axis of white supremacist expansion, complicates our assumption that decolonization grounded in Indigenous epistemologies necessarily grapples with the contours of political redress for Black peoples—a point that becomes readily apparent when we consider the enslaved Black female body and the structuring force of plantation logics that form an integral axis of conquest of the so-called New World.

### INTERRUPTED BODIES, OR SOVEREIGN IN/CAPACITY

Hortense Spillers' seminal *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* outlines the specific "spatialtemporal configuration" of Black womanhood, in which Black women are rendered illegible through colonial techniques of naming that simultaneously render her a lexical and literal quandary. Spillers discusses how the racialized boundaries of the making and unmaking of gender under conditions of chattel slavery sundered kinship relationships for the enslaved African, such that the relationship between the enslaved female and her progeny was structured through the regime of property. What Spillers pinpoints as the relative genderlessness of the Black female body—the raced-sexed-gendered nexus of the captive female body—"locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange."<sup>27</sup>

Following Spillers, the targeting of the gendered female Black body, situated as unbounded lasciviousness and the specter of unmoored femininity, reveals the libidinal space of settler subjectivity—those largely unconscious fantasies, desires, and fears overdetermined by structural underpinnings regarding the dis/placement of blackness. As Hartman suggests, this construction is entangled with pleasure, terror, and property, what she refers to as "the erotics of terror."<sup>28</sup> Their respective works are useful for thinking through the gendered spatial *and* political project of settler colonial processes and render visible the ways that settler expansion functions through and on the Black body as a "unit of space."<sup>29</sup> That is, it is not necessarily the labor produced by Black bodies, but rather the body dispossessed of itself that produces the plantation as the grounds through which the settler self-actualizes and facilitates the ongoing process of settlement. From the perspective of the Black body, Tiffany King's reconceptualization of "clearing" highlights the constitutive workings among slavery, capitalism, genocide, and settler colonialism. The biopolitical loci of settler place-making is engendered through the mining of the capacities of the enslaved Black female body as fungible property to ensure the replicated status of enslaved bodies. The Black female body constitutes the machination of slavery.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, King argues that blackness, beyond theoretical frameworks of racial slavery and anti-Black racism, must also be considered in relation to ongoing processes of settler colonialism, as “both slavery and settler colonialism structure modernity and need to be fully conceptualized as forms of power that help constitute Blackness.”<sup>31</sup> This genealogy of Black feminist scholarship conjures the possibilities for a more expansive, intersectional analysis of settler colonialism, such that a deeper interrogation of Black dispossession—Black womanhood specifically—is possible. The work of Spillers highlights the misnomer of the Black settler, as the very body of the enslaved Black female forms the pivot upon which notions of gender, womanhood, and the human are constructed. As the body to be (dis)possessed, the unfettered self-actualization of the settler functions as a parasitic relationship that self-actualizes through the interruption of the capacities of the Black female body.

According to its etymological origins, to “interrupt” means to break the continuity of a line or surface; to obstruct, impede, or to hamper. To think of white settler expansion through the lens of interruption emphasizes how settler subjectivity occurs—through interrupting and breaking in on the self-actualizing practices of othered bodies in order to maintain the coherence of whiteness. Attending to the structuring ideological force of whiteness entails excavating what settler colonialism disallows in the assignation of spatial capacities—that is, the processes and practices of self-making, self-determination, or the capacity to construct a language and mode of being outside of settler structures. Thus, a critically expansive theorizing of the logics and processes of settler colonialism necessitates excavating the ground of whiteness and reframing our understanding of race and blackness in relation to settler and Indigenous ontologies. It means disrupting settler racial and spatial logics—troubling what McKittrick poignantly illustrates is typical of settler violences, the active workings that render Black lives “ungeographic.”<sup>32</sup>

Afro-pessimism, a field of thought that builds on the extensive scholarship of Orlando Patterson on the slave as socially dead, interrogates the very notion of the political—the sphere of civil society and its tenets of freedom, citizenship (and sovereignty)—as predicated on blackness as an ontological impossibility. As a framework and critical lens that interrogates the conditions of enslavement, “the afterlife of slavery,” from the perspective of the Black (slave), Afro-pessimism has engaged and critiqued settler colonial theory through a distinct, triangulated formula that considers the White/Master/Settler, Savage (Indigenous Peoples), and Black/Slave. Frank Wilderson’s *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and Structures of US Antagonism* argues that the expulsion of the Black from the realm of the human provides the fulcrum upon which white/settler subjectivity, or the Human, is constructed. It is the negation of blackness and anti-Black violence that organizes the social and political order, in which the Black non-subject has no spatial capacity in the settler state. Accordingly, the assignation of racial slavery to the axis of labor within settler colonial frameworks misrecognizes the conditions of racial slavery because the “dispossession of labor power, at the site of the wage relation, is an important but ultimately inessential form of dispossession.”<sup>33</sup> The nothingness, the non-beingness of the slave, then, cannot be captured within settler paradigms.

Similarly, Jared Sexton boldly states,

What can be done to a captive body? Anything whatsoever. The loss of sovereignty is a *fait accompli*, a byproduct rather than a precondition of enslavement. Genocide is endemic to enslavement insofar as slavery bans, legally and politically, the reproduction of enslaved peoples *as peoples*, indigenous or otherwise, whether they are removed from their native land, subjected to direct killing, unlivable conditions, or forced assimilation; or they are kept in place, allowed to live, provided adequate means, or supported in their cultural practices.<sup>34</sup>

The construction of the White/settler/master is fundamentally related to the elimination of the Native, but also established through “the permanent seizure of the body essential to enslavement.”<sup>35</sup> For Sexton, settler colonial studies’ distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism enables the centering of genocide and/or conquest of the Native, yet elides the presence of blackness as constitutive of settler colonialism by locating slavery as a process of colonization. As Sexton notes, “settler colonial studies emphasis on blackness and slavery, as part of the triangulation of settler colonialism, elides the “true horror” of slavery, not simply as a historical occurrence, but as the fulcrum upon which the human, or in this instance the settler/master comes to know itself. That is, the afterlife of slavery and the continual negation of blackness as nonhuman is apparent in the ways that Black death and terror from spectacular forms of violence—whether through police violence, extrajudicial murders, incarceration and the fortification of the prison industrial complex—is the site of consumption and fodder for white/settler subjectivity.

Yet, much like settler colonial theory, Afro-pessimist scholarship’s engagement with race and racial logics reproduces a hegemonic reducibility to the corporeal body and its fleshiness. This line of thinking persists despite longstanding critiques against essentializing notions of race and renders it difficult to hold in tension the relational amalgamation of anti-blackness, anti-indigeneity, orientalism, and whiteness as global orientating forces.<sup>36</sup> Framing these constitutive ideological forces as such, I argue, moves us away from the ontological inevitability that plagues settler colonial and Afro-pessimist scholarship alike: namely, the ascription of blackness as tethered to colonial logics of labor and as colonial assimilated subjects, and the reduction of Black worldviews, geographies, and cosmologies to the space of the perpetual “wretched,” “deathlike monsters” or what McKittrick pinpoints as a “linearity . . . that is informed by, and inevitably leads to unending Black-death.”<sup>37</sup> This is critical not only for thinking about the need to bring blackness back into settler colonial frames, but for rethinking the space of conquest *and* the plantation as simultaneously land-space-time configurations constitutive of (white) settler subjectivity. A movement away from this linearity would mean attending to the ways Black life flows in and through Black death.

Though Afro-pessimism has been critiqued for inverting settler colonial theory’s placement of the quintessential “Native Other” with the “enslaved Other,” to dismiss this framework as a theoretical fad or devoid of political impetus would be to disregard its broader implications for thinking through Black and Indigenous liberation. Its meditation on racial slavery fundamentally asks us to interrogate the *positioning* of

blackness and Black bodies in relation to the notion of sovereignty. Whereas settler colonial processes target Indigenous peoples on the basis of being sovereign subjects, or at least partially recognized as holding sovereign capacity, the violence Black peoples experience must be understood as a settler ascription of sovereign in/capacity: the lack of recognition of humanness, legibility or holding any coherence as political subjects. This point is more fully realized when we consider the parameters and, ultimately, the illegibility of the race-gendered-sexed nexus of Black womanhood and girlhood within the settler colonial project—at the center of the settler structure, yet invisible within it.

I gesture toward in/capacity, not in terms of agency, but as fungible flesh imagined to be devoid of sovereign alterity. Sovereign in/capacity, or settler processes that actively seek to interrupt the possibilities of spatial coherence of the Black body—whether through processes of racialization or gender—render them untethered, not as unsovereign, but as “unknowable.”<sup>38</sup> This corresponds with the violence Native women experience as a “settler field of complementarity.”<sup>39</sup> As Audra Simpson asserts, the settler imperative “to kill” the Native works through the gendered targeting of the Indigenous body.<sup>40</sup> Read as embodying sovereign alterities threatening to the very notion of settler existence, Indigenous women become subject to settler violence because of their relationship to/with the land and their political status. Their proximity to the settler’s drive for land and territory renders women vulnerable to a structural and necessary form of violence for settler statecraft. The targeting of Black and Indigenous women—exemplified through the disappearing of Black and Indigenous women and girls—is not coincidental and correlates to the settler desire for body/flesh, lands, resources, and capacities.

The larger point I seek to make here is that the reproduction of settler colonial theory’s framing of Black bodies as outside the purview of sovereignty has been implicitly unproblematized in Indigenous studies’ distancing of race and anti-blackness from (and not just adjacent to) Indigenous political subjectivities. This is visible to me as a Black and Indigenous woman in contexts where whiteness remains viscerally unmarked or uninterrogated—incognito—not merely as an ideological or theoretical concept, but also through forms of legible embodiment, as my blackness signals (an) other form of bodily precarity.

Indeed, Black and Indigenous liberation are intimately bound to one another. What contours this coalitional space forms in practice is critical, especially when we consider the scarce possibility for reconciliation between settler states and Indigenous peoples and the structurally antagonistic positioning of Black peoples. As Frantz Fanon has argued, violence may no longer function as the primary means through which colonial sovereignty exercises its presence; insidiously, the settler’s terrain of recognition (and negotiation) makes us willing participants in our own dispossession, such that the colonized locates and can only imagine liberation within the paradigms created by her oppressor. Effectively, this extends what Jaskiran Dhillon identifies as “new state assemblages.”<sup>41</sup> This rightfully raises significant concerns regarding the dire material conditions and political possibilities for Black and Indigenous peoples when the state has situated itself to be the only (legible) game in town.

My argument is not a reinvigoration of a distinct political project of Black sovereignty grounded in nationalist rhetoric, but rather indexes the structural positioning of Black peoples in struggles between the US/Canada settler state and Indigenous peoples that rotate around the possibility of political recognition to ask, can sovereignty be recuperated at all? How might the space of illegibility, specifically a place in which Black and Indigenous women are unknowable in specific and related ways, form the terrain from which disruptive possibilities and futurities emerge? The unknowability of this terrain gestures beyond the proscribed sovereign in/capacity of Black and Indigenous peoples within the settler order, of what is allowable and permissible, and stretches toward praxes of freedom grounded in the materiality of the racialized and gendered body. It is informed by the social and political conditions of Black and Indigenous peoples and fosters political flight that emphasizes refusal and fugitivity.<sup>42</sup> As Manu Vimalassary argues, the separating of the figure of the fugitive slave (exemplified in the legacies of Harriet Tubman) from colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands in US sovereignty and state formation is a “colonial unknowing” that displaces Black relations to place and kin that disrupted colonial impositions.<sup>43</sup> Tracking the figure of the fugitive highlights how Black radical liberation has always existed outside of the confines of the legible, a politic that has resonance for Indigenous resurgence that privilege the refusal to be knowable, or at the very least, fully capturable within the confines of settler paradigms.<sup>44</sup>

Rethinking our relationships to settler statecraft and each other requires critically refashioning our relations toward one another, through divestments from current settler and capitalist paradigms of freedom and toward the necessary disruption of cis-heteropatriarchal notions of politics-as-usual. This rethinking calls for us to truly grapple with the reproduction of settler logics of race in our discussion of blackness and indigeneity and to think through a decolonial praxis that unwittingly situates Black politics as an extension of settler logics. Whether we consider contemporary Indigenous resurgence movements like Idle No More and Standing Rock, Black social movements like Black Lives Matter, or campaigns that highlight gendered violence against Black and Indigenous women such as #SayHerName and #MMIW-MissingMurderedIndigenousWomen, all are historically situated, with each carrying both limitations and political visions, yet they point toward dying worlds. Beyond a radical rethinking of indigeneity, these new horizons necessitate revisioning our notions of decolonization beyond colonial recognition or liberal discourses that engender settler unfreedoms.

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## NOTES

1. Saijiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 85.

2. For a similar interrogation of the impossibility of Black indigeneity, see Robin D. G. Kelley, "The Rest of Us: Rethinking Settler and Native," *American Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2017): 267–76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2017.0020>. Tiffany Lethabo King makes a similar critique in the over-determined (and limiting) rhetoric of labor in relation to the Black body through an expansion of Black fungibility, as an extension of settler colonial expansion; see *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

3. I borrow the term "perverse imaginings" from Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Tales of Dark-Skinned Women: Race, Gender and Global Culture* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1998).

4. Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984).

5. Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Stephanie Latty, Megan Scribe, Alena Peters, and Anthony Morgan, "Not Enough Human: At the Scenes of Black and Indigenous Dispossession," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 129–58, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcrit-ethnstud.2.2.0129>.

6. Lorenzo Veracini, "Introduction," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

8. Patrick Wolfe "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.2.2.0129>.

9. *Ibid.*, 387.

10. Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 6, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>.

11. *Ibid.*, 6.

12. *Ibid.*, 1–14; Dean Itsuji Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters: A Thought Piece on Critiques, Debates, and Indigenous Difference" *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, nos. 3–4 (2013): 280–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.810697>; Hokulani K. Aikau, "Indigeneity in the Diaspora: The Case of Native Hawaiians at Iosepa, Utah," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2010): 477–500; Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura, *Asian Settler Colonialism from Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

13. Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters," 280–94; Fujikane and Okamura, *Asian Settler Colonialism*.

14. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization," 1-40; Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, "Decolonizing Antiracism," *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2005): 120–43.

15. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

16. Shona Jackson, *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 61.

17. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully engage Jackson's theoretical argument, yet her focus on the geographical context of Guyana as a "subaltern settler society" attests to the saliency of questioning whether settler colonial studies can "travel" to other geopolitical contexts: in particular, Caribbean and Latin American contexts where slavery and plantation societies were integral to the construction and expansion of Euro-modernity, and Black-Indigenous relations have been differentially shaped by colonialism, racial logics, and imperialism.

18. Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel, "Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 1–32, 15.
19. *Ibid.*, 20.
20. Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2009-066>.
21. *Ibid.*, 48.
22. Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, "Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada: Settlers or Allies?" in *Breaching the Colonial Contract: Anti-Colonialism in the US and Canada*, ed. A. Kempf (Berlin: Springer Science + Business Media B.V., 2009), 105–36, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9944-1\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9944-1_7).
23. *Ibid.*, 121.
24. *Ibid.*, 123.
25. Snelgrove, et al., "Unsettling," 8.
26. Circe Sturm, "Race, Sovereignty, and Civil Rights: Understanding the Cherokee Freedmen Controversy," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. (2014): 575–98, <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca29.3.07>.
27. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 457.
28. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 81.
29. Tiffany King, "In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes," PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2013, 7.
30. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 46–47.
31. King, "In the Clearing," 27.
32. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.
33. Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 178.
34. Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* (2014): 583–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514552535>; emphasis mine.
35. *Ibid.*
36. For a more sustained critique of the relationship between orientalism, whiteness, and a reconsideration of race as solely static embodiment, see Sarah Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68, 160, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700107078139>.
37. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 10.
38. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 457.
39. Shanya Cordis, "Forging Relational Difference: Racial Gendered Violence and Dispossession in Guyana," *Small Axe* 60 (November 2019): 18–33, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-7912298>.
40. Simpson, Audra, "The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2017).
41. Jaskiran Dhillon, *Prairie Rising: Indigenous Youth, Decolonization, and the Politics of Intervention* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 9.
42. Shanya Cordis, "Sovereign (In)capacity: Possibilities of Black and Indigenous Futures," *Public Seminar*, September 6, 2018, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2018/09/sovereign-incapacity/>.
43. Manu Vimalassery, "Fugitive Decolonization," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (October 12, 2016), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633284>.
44. Audra Simpson, "The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of 'Refusal': Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia," *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 18–33.



