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Settler Colonialism

"A Structure, Not an Event": Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui

ABSTRACT J. Kēhaulani Kauanui discusses the distinctive shifts toward examining Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism as 'a structure, not an event.' Kauanui argues that a substantive engagement with settler colonialism also demands a deep rethinking of the associated concept of indigeneity—distinct from race, ethnicity, culture, and nation(ality)—along with the field of Native American and Indigenous Studies.

I begin this essay¹ by unpacking what I mean by "enduring indigeneity" in my title and what that means to an understanding of settler colonialism. Here I use it in two senses: first, that indigeneity itself is enduring—that the operative logic of settler colonialism may be to "eliminate the native," as the late English scholar Patrick Wolfe brilliantly theorized, but that indigenous peoples exist, resist, and persist; and second, that settler colonialism is a structure that endures indigeneity, as it holds out against it.

Wolfe's essay "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native"² is often cited as the principal work representing the concept and theory of the settler colonial analytic. And although Wolfe insisted on making it clear time and again that he did not create the field of settler colonial studies—that Native scholars did—within the field of American Studies (as just one example), he tends to be most frequently cited as if he had. Indeed, this one article of his (although not his first writing on the subject, nor the last) also seems to be the most cited, perhaps because it offers so much in one piece by distinguishing settler colonialism from genocide, contrasting settler colonialism from franchise colonialism, and—through comparative work focused on Australia, Israel-Palestine, and the United States—showing how the logic of settler colonialism is premised on the elimination of indigenous peoples.

As Wolfe noted, because settler colonialism "destroys to replace," it is "inherently eliminatory but not invariably genocidal."³ He was careful to point out that settler colonialism is not simply a form of genocide, since there are cases of genocide without settler colonialism, and because "elimination refers to more than the summary liquidation of Indigenous peoples, though it includes that."⁴ Hence, he suggested that "structural genocide" avoids the question of degree and enables an understanding of the relationships between spatial removal, mass killings, and biocultural assimilation.⁵ In other words, the logic of elimination of the native is about the elimination of the native *as native*. And yet, to exclusively focus on the settler colonial without any meaningful engagement with the indigenous—as has been the case in how Wolfe's work has been cited—can (re)produce another form of "elimination of the native." Because settler colonialism is a land-centered project entailing permanent settlement, as Wolfe points

out in this same essay, “Settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event.”⁶

In this essay, I want to revisit the oft cited phrase from Wolfe’s work—that settler colonialism is a structure not an event—to explore why it is that the same locution often seems to stand-in for a serious engagement of his theory and is also perhaps the most neglected aspect of his theory. Moreover, I want to feature a discussion of indigeneity as a counterpart analytic to settler colonialism and offer some of my critical reflections as to why any meaningful engagement with theories of settler colonialism—whether Wolfe’s or others’—necessarily needs to tend to the question of indigeneity. Settler Colonial Studies does not, should not, and cannot replace Indigenous Studies.

At a panel during the 2015 annual meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA), “The Settler Colonialism Analytic: A Critical Reappraisal,” Alyosha Goldstein identified how Wolfe’s project has been reduced to this phrase, among a couple others, and how this reference has come to index a certain approach within American Studies, among other fields.⁷ Goldstein has identified some of the problematic aspects of this institutionalization of the work as a subfield, including the effects when these refrains become extracted and circulated; they foreclose or bracket other formations—such as franchise colonialism and slavery—in ways that may sidestep how they are not only entangled, but also are co-constituted. He also noted that shallow references to the theory too often treat it as a self-contained type that can travel, or that it is totally discrete, rather than intertwined with other social processes. Goldstein also suggested that the ways in which the citational practice of the theory is enacted tends to produce a binary of settler and native.⁸

In the context of American Studies, Robert Warrior laid out the relationship between Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) and Settler Colonial Studies, “and also the enthymemic context of raising the issue, American studies.” In “Settler Colonial Studies and Native American and Indigenous Studies,” a position paper presented at the 2015 annual meeting of the ASA, he documented the ratio of Settler Colonial Studies panels and Indigenous Studies panels on the annual programs of the ASA since 1997. Warrior explained, “I had a growing anxiety, however (based not just on the program committee meeting, but from other conversations and observations), that the rise of Settler Colonial Studies has become—not everywhere by any means, but in some circles—an answer to the chronic need for more attention to and awareness of Native and Indigenous studies.”⁹ He identified two exceptional years when there were more Native-focused sessions, both of which he links to the presence (and labor) of indigenous scholars: at the 1998 meeting in Seattle, which he attributed largely to Ned Blackhawk’s role on the program committee (while he was a graduate student), and a decade later in 2008 at the meeting in Albuquerque when Philip Deloria was president.

That Settler Colonial Studies seems to have gained more traction than NAIS within the field of American Studies is perhaps ironic given that it was NAIS scholars who arguably introduced settler colonialism as an analytic to the field of American Studies in the first place. And this was because NAIS was not being taken seriously enough in the ASA, and American Studies as a field has privileged the frameworks of postcolonialism and multiculturalism. Also, within works attentive to minoritarian discourse, indigeneity is rarely distinguished from race if mentioned at all. For years, it seemed as if scholars—not only in American Studies, but in related fields, as well as even (or especially?) American history—could barely speak of US colonialism. Warrior mentioned the “slog” of helping American Studies figure out what its relationship to Native Studies can and should be. Indeed, Warrior has been a key scholar in this endeavor.

The 2002 annual meeting of the American Studies Association included a panel, “American (Indian) Studies: Can the ASA be an Intellectual Home?,” which featured Robert Warrior, Jean O’Brien, and Philip Deloria. This set of presentations, later published as a forum in the *American Quarterly*, examined the question of whether or not the association in particular, and therefore the field in general, was conducive for the growth and development of Native Studies. As one answer to the question, by 2005, Warrior set out to launch a steering committee to found a new association—that which became the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA), founded in 2008.¹⁰

Why have few scholars taken up the question of indigeneity when it is something that implicates most aspects of American culture, politics, policy, and society because the United States is a settler colonial state? How can one understand the US Republic without accounting for the violent removal of the original occupants, indigenous peoples—the preexisting sovereign nations? Since attentiveness to indigenous peoples always entails an examination of prior occupancy, sovereignty, and nationhood, many scholars have arguably relegated it to the field of Native American Studies. Certainly, the study of indigenous peoples is foundational to American history, culture, society, and politics. Understanding settler colonialism as a structure exposes the fact that colonialism cannot be relegated to the past, even though the past-present should be historicized. The notion that colonialism is something that ends with the dissolving of the British colonies when the original thirteen became the early US states has its counterpart narrative in the myth that indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended.

Works on local settler history and settler governmentality explain the structure. Jean O’Brien, in *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England*, theorizes the persistent myth of the vanishing Indian.¹¹ She argues that local histories became a primary means by which European Americans asserted their own modernity while denying it to Indian peoples. O’Brien examined more than six hundred local histories from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. Ranging from pamphlets to multivolume treatments, these narratives shared a preoccupation with establishing the region as the center of an Anglo-Saxon nation and the center of a modern American culture. They also insisted (often in lamenting tones) that New England’s original inhabitants had become extinct, even though many Indians still lived in the very towns being chronicled. Erasing and then memorializing Indian peoples also served a more practical colonial goal: refuting Indian claims to land and rights. O’Brien found that in order to convince themselves that the Indians had vanished despite their continued presence, local historians and their readers embraced notions of racial purity rooted in the century’s scientific racism and saw living Indians as “mixed” and therefore no longer “truly Indian.” Adaptation to modern life on the part of Indian peoples was used as further evidence of their demise. But Indians did not—and have not—accepted this effacement. This formula persists as a pervasive part of the contemporary normalization of settler colonialism.

Taking settler colonialism as a structure seriously allows US scholars, for example, to challenge the normalization of dispossession as a “done deal” relegated to the past rather than ongoing. Mark Rifkin’s *Settler Common Sense* is useful here.¹² He examines how, even while settler colonialism can be characterized as a structure, a system, and a logic, affective networks need to be explored as part of understanding how settler colonial governmentality comes to be lived as the self-evident condition of possibility for (settler) being. Examining how canonical American writers take part in the legacy of displacing Native Americans, he asks, how do varied administrative projects of settlement and accompanying legal categories, geographies, and subjectivities become part of the everyday life of non-Natives? Rifkin addresses that feeling of givenness and the kinds of

social trajectories from which it emerges and which it engenders. Instead of suggesting that quotidian forms of settler sensation, self-hood, and possession follow obviously from policy and official legal mandates, he argues that the (shifting) boundaries of settler governance help provide orientation, inclination, and momentum for non-Native experiences of the everyday.

What does it mean to engage the assertion that settler colonialism is a “structure not an event”? One obvious case is the Nakba as an ongoing process—rather than an isolated historical moment of catastrophe marking the 1948 Palestinian exodus, when Jewish Zionists expelled more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs from their homes and homeland during the war that forged the state of Israel.¹³ In North America, there are numerous attempts to remove indigenous peoples from their lands for corporate resource extraction ranging from oil to minerals and water, causing environmental devastation with genocidal implications. One example is Alaska’s Bristol Bay mine project, which has been described as “Ground zero for the next big environmental fight.”¹⁴ It is a dispute over a proposed copper and gold mine near Alaska’s Bristol Bay—a remote area that is home to several Alaskan native villages and nearly half of the world’s sockeye salmon. Six native governing entities have asked the EPA to invoke its powers under the Clean Water Act to block the mine on the grounds that it would harm the region’s waterways, fish and wildlife.¹⁵

On the flip side, in asserting indigeneity as a category of analysis, the question of its substance always arises. Just as critical race studies scholars insist that race is a useful category that is a distinct social formation rather than a derivative category emerging from class and/or ethnicity, indigeneity is a category of analysis that is distinct from race, ethnicity, and nationality—even as it entails elements of all three of these. However, indigenous peoples’ assertions of distinction and cultural differences are often heard as merely essentialist and therefore resembling static identities based on fixed inherent qualities. As such, what remains for some scholars as well as national and international governmental actors is the question as to whether indigeneity has any substance that can be used as a foundation to make a claim. In terms of both cultural and political struggles, one of the tenets of any claim to indigeneity is that indigenous sovereignty—framed as a responsibility more often than a right—is derived from original occupancy, or at least prior occupancy. Like race, indigeneity is a socially constructed category rather than one based on the notion of immutable biological characteristics.

But taking up indigeneity as a category of analysis is not one and the same as the study of indigenous peoples. For example, within the fraught debates about US immigration policy, bringing indigeneity into the frame necessarily exposes nativism and how it undergirds the US as a settler colonial society. In another example, during Occupy Wall Street, indigenous activists and critics challenged the use of the term “occupy” in relation to an actual history of settler colonial occupation. As Joanne Barker has fiercely noted, this indigenous dispossession was the historical precondition for Wall Street itself—a street with a wall built by the Dutch, in part, to keep the Lenape people out of their homeland in what became lower Manhattan—what has become a metonym for the US finance industry—all built on indigenous dispossession.¹⁶ This history and present perfectly illustrate what Wolfe meant by settler colonialism as “a structure, not an event.” Still, it cannot be a stand-in for the other Lenape histories and for focus on their culture and life ways. Meanwhile the Lenape people self-govern outside of their traditional homeland of Manahatta (now known as Manhattan)—as far as Kansas, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and other cities—where they continue to exist as native governing entities—while other clans of the Lenape remain in their expansive traditional territory from other parts of what is New York, through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware.¹⁷

Since settler colonialism is a structure and not an event, and because indigenous peoples are still subject to that structure—an ongoing genocidal project—NAIS must be engaged in relation to Settler Colonial Studies for any meaningful examination of the US state in the context of American Studies, Cultural Studies, and other related fields.

[Editors' note: Responses to this piece by Beenash Jafri ("[Ongoing Colonial Violence in Settler States](#)") and Melissa Gniadek ("[The Times of Settler Colonialism](#)") are published in *Lateral* 6.1 (Spring 2017), with [a response by Kauanui](#).]

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Notes

1. This essay is based on comments presented on a roundtable, "New Directions in American Studies," held at the 2014 annual meeting of the American Studies Association. [↗](#)
2. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 387–409. [↗](#)
3. Ibid, 387. [↗](#)
4. Ibid, 390. [↗](#)
5. Ibid, 403. [↗](#)
6. Ibid., 388. Wolfe's earlier work also advanced the same analysis: "The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event." See *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London and New York City: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998), 2. Wolfe's first book provided a history of settler colonialism in Australia through a history of anthropology that explores the links between metropolitan anthropological theory and local colonial politics from the 19th century up to the late 20th century, settler colonialism, and the ideological and sexual regimes that characterize it. The work is an incisive analysis of the politics of anthropological knowledge given its production through the historical dispossession and continuing oppression of indigenous peoples. [↗](#)
7. Also, Wolfe did not coin the concept of settler colonialism, although through his work, the analytic has gained important traction and visibility. That work includes his long time, direct intellectual engagement with scholars in Native American and Indigenous Studies, enabling an ongoing conversation—much of which has been US-based—which has enabled visibility in the American Studies context. US-based Palestinian academic and civil servant Fayeze Sayegh first used the concept in his 1965 work, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965). Notably, French Marxist scholar Maxime Rodinson addresses it in his book *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Monad Press, 1973). And Palestinian scholar Rosemary Sayigh used the framework of settler colonial in her 1979 book, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries; A People's History* (London: Zed Books, 1979). Japanese American scholar J. Sakai also included some treatment of the concept through his 1983 Marxist focus on white workers in *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* (PM Press, 2014). In 1992, Kanaka Maoli scholar and activist Haunani-Kay Trask wrote about "settlers of

color” in Hawaii and their complicity with colonial structures of domination in “Settlers of Color and ‘Immigrant’ Hegemony: ‘Locals’ in Hawai’i,” *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 1-24. Later, by 2008, Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Y. Okamura co-edited the volume *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai’i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), which took up Trask’s challenge by documenting the role of Asian locals in Hawaii in relation to Kanaka Maoli. See also, Lorenzo Veracini, *Israel and Settler Society* (London: Pluto Press, 2006). Notably, Nira Yuval-Davis and Ella Shohat, among others, have consistently delineated the distinctions between the postcolonial Third World and the still colonized Fourth World in their respective works, which point to the differences between franchise colonialism and settler colonialism. Nira Yuval-Davis, *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage, 1995); Ella Shohat, “Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial,’” in *The Pre-Occupation of Post-Colonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzhal-Khan and Kalpana Rahita Seshadr (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 126-139. [↗](#)

8. Some have also argued that Wolfe’s theory sets up a white-black binary that does not resemble other contexts, as though his most cited article applies this to the three case studies he focuses on. His discussion of this binary is specific to his discussion of the United States as he examines the contrasting racialization of indigenous and African peoples. In the case of Australia, the term “black” refers to indigenous peoples—whether hurled as a pejorative by settler descendants or embraced by those who are Aboriginal—and for that reason it cannot be said to be part of a black-white binary. And in the case of Israel/Palestine, there is no operative racial binary between those who are Israeli and those who are Palestinian since one can obviously be both Jewish and Arab, and the dividing line is based on a Zionist appropriation of Judaism—between those who are Jewish and those who are not. This is not an Anglo-specific theory, since the three cases studies Wolfe examines together—Israel/Palestine, the United States and Australia—include colonial settlers who are other than Anglo, namely Celts and Ashkenazi Jews. Additionally, Wolfe responded to the charge of perpetuating a binary between settler and native with his recently edited volume, *The Settler Complex: Recuperating Binarism in Colonial Studies* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2016). [↗](#)
9. For a critical examination of this split in the Palestinian context, see Rana Barakat, “Writing Palestinian History: Settler Colonialism versus Indigenous Studies,” Conference Paper for “Zionism as a Settler Colonial Movement,” held by Mada al Karmil, Arab Center for Applied Social Research, December 16, 2015, Ramallah, Palestine. Also, for a look at the ongoing political contestation over the use of the settler colonial analytic in Palestine, see Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziada, “Acts and Omissions: Framing Settler Colonialism in Palestine Studies,” *Jadaliyya*, January 14, 2016, accessed January 14, 2016, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23569/acts-and-omissions_framing-settler-colonialism-in- [↗](#)
10. Notably, two of those on the ASA session (Warrior along with O’Brien) co-founded the association with me and three other colleagues, K. Tsiangina Lomawaima, Jace Weaver, and Ines Hernandez-Avila. And perhaps ironically—or maybe not at all—it was during an ASA meeting (2005) when Warrior and O’Brien invited me to team up with them to build NAISA. [↗](#)
11. Jean M. O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). [↗](#)
12. Mark Rifkin, *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). [↗](#)

13. For works that historically document and theorize the Nakba, see: Walid al Khalidi, "Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18, no. 1, Special Issue: Palestine 1948, (Autumn 1988), 4-33; Walid al Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2006); Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of Palestinians: the Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Thought* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948 and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Elias Khoury, "Rethinking the Nakba," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Winter 2012), 1-18; Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: One World Books, 2008). [↗](#)
14. Juliet, Eilperin, "Alaska's Bristol Bay Mine Project: Ground Zero for the Next Big Environmental Fight?", *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2013, accessed January 12, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/alaskas-bristol-bay-mine-project-ground-zero-for-the-next-big-environmental-fight/2013/06/01/c4f528e6-ca00-11e2-9245-773c0123c027_story.html. [↗](#)
15. Ibid. [↗](#)
16. Joanne Barker, "Manna-Hata," *Tequila Sovereign*, October 10, 2011, accessed January 12, 2016, <https://tequilasovereign.wordpress.com/2011/10/10/manna-hata/>. [↗](#)
17. For more information, one can look at the work of the Manhattan-based Lenape Center, "a non-profit organization based in the ancestral Lenape island of Manhattan whose mission is continuing the Lenape cultural presence." Accessed January 25, 2016, <http://www.thelenapecenter.com>. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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