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The Political Creation of the White (Settler) Subject, hold the Bacon

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This paper is part of a chapter of a book manuscript I am presently writing. The book is entitled: Settler Memory: The Disavowal of Indigeneity in the Political Life of Race in the United States, to be published in the Critical Indigeneities Series of The University of North Carolina Press. Please do not cite without author's permission.

## **Introduction**

Save for work in Indigenous studies and settler colonial studies, Indigenous people and settler colonialism are often an afterthought, if thought about at all, in the study of race in the United States. I write this as I sit in my office surrounded by books and articles on racial politics, history and theory, many of which have shaped my grasp of the history and present of race, racism, and racial and ethnic politics in the United States. However, what persists in even the best of these works is a difficulty in how to position, analyze, and synthesize Indigeneity and settler colonialism in relation to the history of white supremacy and, in particular but not exclusively, the status, experiences, and politics of Black people, and the notion of Blackness itself. This is not a condemnation, as the multi-disciplinary work that falls under the general umbrella of critical race theory and history, political theory, and political science sheds insight on some of the most pressing and complicated issues around the history and present of white supremacy in the U.S. context. Rather, it is a statement that speaks to the power of the dominant terms of American race politics such that so many of the influential theorists, scholars, and writers who do important work to expose and critique white supremacy tend to do so within parameters that implicitly presume but cannot constitutively address settler colonialism, white settler identity, and Indigeneity.<sup>1</sup> The result is a critical and analytical discourse concerning race that runs up against its own limitations and in so doing does not draw a fuller and more complex

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<sup>1</sup> It is not a coincidence that some of the best work on the problems with the way in which Indigenous politics is misunderstood due to being constrained by and assimilated to the US racialization framework come from theorists who work within the fields of Indigenous and Settler Colonial studies. Kim TallBear, Jodi Byrd, and Rob Nichols are three such scholars, and it is also not a coincidence, I believe that the first two are Indigenous scholars and the latter is non-Indigenous born and raised in Canada. It is rare that those fully trained in the U.S. context draw out this dynamic of Indigeneity and its relationship to US racialization and race politics. See Tallbear (2013); Robert Nichols. "Contract and Usurpation: Enfranchisement and Racial Governance in Settler-Colonial Contexts." In *Theorizing Native Studies*, by Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith. (Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2014), and Jodi Byrd. *Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

picture of its own subject matter, which is the study of racial inequities, politics, and relations in and of the United States.

In this essay, which is large section of one chapter of my in-progress book manuscript, *Settler Memory*, I am interested in exposing these limitations, revealing the place and role of settler memory in a few notable works in the study of the history of race in the United States, and considering what it would mean analytically and politically to refuse the work of settler memory in this regard. Settler memory refers to the way in which a settler society habitually articulates collective awareness of the past of settler colonial violence and dispossession and in the same moment disavows the political relevance of this memory by erasing the presence of Indigenous people as contemporary agents, and of settler colonialism itself. What I call the ‘work of settler memory’ refers to a process of remembering and disavowing Indigenous political agency, colonialist land dispossession of and violence towards Indigenous people. For this essay, while there is a wide range of works from which to choose, I have greater interest in those histories and studies written by authors who express their knowledge of and yet also inability to adequately acknowledge the relationship of Indigeneity and settler colonialism to the political life of race in the United States. For it is in such studies and with such writers that we can discern the power of the constraints around race discourse and politics in the United States. In this sense, I see this as more of a project of drawing out and extending that which is implicit and submerged in some of the major works and premises of the study of race in the U.S. context. Without seeing and accounting for it we cannot account for the persistence of the foundation and structure of anti-Blackness, white supremacy and settler colonialism in and of the United States.

I argue that the corollary to anti-blackness in the U.S. racial context is not anti-Indigeneity, simply put, but rather what I call necro-Indigeneity, a term which refers to the

production of the absence of Indigenous people through death and disappearance. I derive this phrasing out of the concept of necropolitics, first defined by Achille Mbembe to refer to “the contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics)... Necropolitics and necropower [account for]...the new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*.”<sup>2</sup> In this regard, necro-Indigeneity goes beyond even the notion of Indigenous people being positioned as “asterisk peoples...footnotes in the dominant paradigm,” to recall Eve Tuck’s and K. Wayne Yang’s important formulation,<sup>3</sup> as it takes up a central role as the rarely seen, structural support of the white-Black racial binary, the U.S. racial hierarchy and thus the American polity itself. Necro-indigeneity is a key component of white settler-ness because it is central to the settler practice of honoring or memorializing the “dead” as part of establishing the status and belonging of whiteness on dispossessed land. It thereby constructs Indigeneity today as eliminated, or to be eliminated – marked for death by settler life. Consider the concept of necro-Indigeneity in relation to Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s claim that “Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>4</sup> Anti-Black racism is “vulnerability to premature death” and necro-Indigeneity is the presumption of death already enacted, or to be marked for death not premature, but overdo – the *living dead* in Mbembe’s words - to complete the work of the settler project. This dynamic is more predominant in the United States than other settler contexts I would

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<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe (translated by Libby Meintjes). “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* Vol. 15, #1. (2003): 39-40.

<sup>3</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang. “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1, No. 1. (2012): 22, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007): 28

suggest because while the logic of elimination is inherent to any settler society, the white-Black binary so dominates as to hegemonically narrow the limits of racial politics and discourse.

In this essay, I examine and draw out the modes through which Indigeneity and settler colonialism are attended to by a few key, influential authors in their works on race in the United States. I do so by examining the origin stories they tell regarding the history and present of race more generally, and as it concerns specific transformative moments in the political life of race in the United States. I note the manner in which the dynamic here is not one of erasure or amnesia, but rather an active articulation of knowledge and then an implicit and sometimes explicit move to not acknowledge the political impact of Indigeneity and settler coloniality for how we understand and live race in the United States. For this paper, I drill down specifically on a historical event that many race studies scholars deem to be a central, formative moment. This is Bacon's Rebellion from 1675-77, which has taken on a powerful mnemonic function as the moment when the "white race" was invented. Before doing so, I cannot emphasize enough that my attention to particular authors, arguments and works in the general area of U.S. race studies is not about exposing or condemning them as hostile to Indigenous concerns or being in favor of settler colonialism. I have selected the writing of authors who are in some way attentive to Indigenous history and concerns, but due to the constraints of race discourse and politics in the United States run up against the limits of what their analyses could pursue, discover and reimagine.

*The Political Creation of the White (Settler) Subject, hold the Bacon*

I turn first to how Michelle Alexander attends to Indigeneity in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, published in 2010. I choose to start with

*The New Jim Crow* for the very fact that it has achieved the rare feat for an academic book of having immediate and significant impact not only with students and scholars across the country, but also outside academia as a widely discussed book that has informed and shaped how we speak about incarceration and the racial order, especially as it concerns disenfranchising and subordinating Black Americans. The deserved popularity of the book matters only to the degree that it helps demonstrate that the settler memory practice of expressing knowledge without political acknowledgement of Indigeneity and settler colonialism is not marginal to the public discourse on race in the United States. It impacts the analysis and narratives of central and influential writers on the matter.

In Alexander's book, Indigenous people and the history of colonial violence and displacement make two notable, connected appearances, both occurring in the first chapter when she sets out the origin story for her narrative of the history that connects chattel slavery, the creation of the political meaning of race, the formal Jim Crow era, and the modern era of the prison industrial complex (the *new* Jim Crow era). The first appearance, which I spend less time on here, reflects the increased effort by contemporary scholars of race in the United States to *not* separate Indigenous and Black histories, thanks in part to the work of historians such as Winthrop Jordan and Edmund Morgan. The second appearance follows shortly thereafter and focuses on the precise collective memory of the origins of race in America through the story of Bacon's Rebellion.

First, in her discussion of the 'birth of slavery' as a geopolitical, social and economic matter, Alexander attends to the inter-relationship of the violence toward bodies and land:

The demand for land was met by invading and conquering large swaths of territory. American Indians became a growing impediment to white European "progress," and during this period, the images of American Indians promoted in books, newspapers, and magazines became increasingly negative. As sociologist Keith Kilty and Eric Swank have

observed, eliminating “savages” is less of a moral problem than eliminating human beings, and therefore American Indians came to be understood as a lesser race – uncivilized savages – thus providing justification for the extermination of the native peoples.

Here, Alexander builds on the insights from the historical scholarship on slavery to make clear that the kidnapping of African people and their descendants to become slaves in the so-called New World required the seizure of land, in ever greater amounts, from Indigenous people. Alexander acknowledges and incorporates into her narrative of the ‘birth of slavery’ the historical, political and socio-economic inter-relationship between the practices of enslavement and settler colonial conquest. At the same time, this specific narrative ends with her reproducing a necro-Indigenous notion of Indigenous people as existing in the U.S. narrative as those sacrificed in the past, but whose legacy and agency does not inform the present. Thus, the place and experience of Indigenous people and settler coloniality are recalled here to serve a critical function in the political life of race in the United States, and that is to be the people and nations historically sacrificed as part of the violence of dispossession that was necessary for the creation of chattel slavery. After this sacrifice – this ‘extermination’ in U.S. collective memory – Indigenous people and settler coloniality fade in to the background in the narrative of enslavement, racism, racial injustice and anti-Blackness in the nation. Alexander is not celebrating this sacrifice, of course, but in this text the role of Indigenous genocide is mnemonically naturalized as a foundational feature of the origin story of U.S. white supremacy. It is a feature that then has no shaping influence on the rest of the book’s narrative regarding the politics of race, the racial order, and the carceral state in the United States.

What we see in Alexander’s text and what can be witnessed more generally in U.S. race studies is an inability to carry the story of settler colonialism and Indigenous presence beyond the memory of a foundational role in the origin story of racism in and of the United States. This

dynamic can be seen even more clearly and comprehensively in the popular left to liberal memory of the origin story of a formative political struggle that shaped the meaning of race, the racial hierarchy, and the racial binary that we live with this to this day, as the tale is told. I refer here to what has become the holy mnemonic touchstone of U.S. critical race studies; that is, Bacon's Rebellion of 1675-77.

This brings us back to Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*, who immediately followed up her discussion of the more general role of the dispossession and "extermination" of Indigenous people in the birth of slavery with a more in-depth discussion and assessment of the historical impact of Bacon's Rebellion. This is the story, as Alexander puts it, of "Nathaniel Bacon," a "white property owner in Jamestown, Virginia, who managed to unite slaves, indentured servants, and poor whites in a revolutionary effort to overthrow the planter elite."<sup>5</sup> Alexander is not a scholar of this particular rebellion or 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia, nor does she claim to be, but as with her initial discussion of the "extermination of the native peoples" as a foundational memory of the origins of chattel slavery, the specific historical moment of Bacon's Rebellion has also become *de rigueur* in contemporary liberal-left narratives of racialization in the United States. Alexander sets out the story of the rebellion for her readers as follows:

Varying accounts of Bacon's Rebellion abound, but the basic facts are these: Bacon developed plans in 1675 to seize Native American lands in order to acquire more property for himself and others and nullify the threat of Indian raids. When the planter elite in Virginia refused to provide militia support for his scheme, Bacon retaliated, leading an attack on the elite, their homes, and their property. He openly condemned the rich for their oppression of the poor and inspired an alliance of white and black bond laborers, as well as slaves, who demanded an end to their servitude. A number of the people who participated in the revolt were hanged [Bacon himself died of dysentery]. The events in Jamestown were alarming to the planter elite, who were deeply fearful of the multiracial alliance of bond worker and slaves. Word of Bacon's Rebellion spread far and wide, and several more uprisings of a similar type followed.

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander (2010): 24.



The next and critical step in this particular origin story concerns the formalization of the political purpose of race. As Alexander explains, the planter class responded by taking a “step that would later come to be known as a ‘racial bribe’”:

Deliberately and strategically, the planter class extended special privileges to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves. White settlers were allowed greater access to Native American lands, white servants were allowed to police slaves through slave patrols and militias, and barriers were created so that free labor would not be placed in competition with slave labor. The measures effectively eliminated the risk of future alliances between black slaves and poor whites. Poor whites suddenly had a direct, personal stake in the existence of a race-based system of slavery. Their own plight had not improved by much, but at least they were not slaves. Once the planter elite split the labor force, poor whites responded to the logic of their situation and sought ways to expand their racially privileged position.<sup>6</sup>

Alexander’s outline of Bacon’s Rebellion is a condensed version of the events as drawn from her main source, Edmund Morgan’s 1975 book *American Slavery, American Freedom*.<sup>7</sup> Positioned early in the first chapter of *The New Jim Crow*, it is also the final time in the book in which Indigenous people or anti-Indigenous actions and violence make an appearance in any way that is significant to the narrative and overall argument. Alexander is far from alone in this regard generally and in terms of the tale she tells about the history and political and racial meaning of Bacon’s Rebellion. Her narrative follows a familiar and well-worn path in left-liberal critical race histories of the U.S. context. It is the work of settler memory that keeps readers from steering off the course set by this path, as we can see in the way in which the Rebellion’s story is so often replicated by race studies scholars.

Edmund Morgan’s account of Bacon’s Rebellion is one of the most cited by those who discuss the rebellion. In his chapter on the rebellion in *American Slavery, American Freedom*, Morgan provides detailed attention to the important role and presence of Indigenous nations,

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander (2010): 25.

<sup>7</sup> For his detailed history of Bacon’s Rebellion see “Chapter 13: Rebellion,” in Edmund Morgan. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975).

including the Susquehannah, Piscataways, Occaneechees, and Doegs. In so doing, Morgan is clear about Bacon's overt anti-Indian sentiments and the fact that what ignited the rebellion as much as anything was that Virginia colonial governor William Berkeley refused to commission Bacon to lead his men in an attack against local Indigenous people – "to make war 'against All Indians in general.'"<sup>8</sup> After narrating the rebellion's demise, Morgan concludes the chapter by noting the "obvious lesson in the rebellion. Resentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class. For men bent on maximum exploitation of labor the implication should have been clear."<sup>9</sup> The lesson for white elites was that "resentment of an alien race" that fueled Bacon's violent anti-Indian crusade, for which he mobilized white poor, indentured servants and Black slaves, could be turned into white resentment of Black people by way of laws, policies, economics and social practices. These laws and practices racialized Blackness as signifying an enslavable people and thus a people who whites, with impunity, could treat violently. For the white poor, the promise of the "racial bribe" was, in the least, to not be slaves, to have some standing and promise of safety in relationship to the law, and to be deputized into the emergent white settler statism to "police slaves through slave patrols and militias," as Alexander accurately put it. On this point, but even more directly, Theodore Allen in *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* argued that the rebellion was critical for *inventing* whiteness itself as a category and political identity with status and standing vis a vis Black people, in particular. As Jeffrey B. Perry notes in the introduction to a new edition of Volume 2, Allen's "major thesis" was that:

the ruling class invented the "white race" as a social control mechanism in response to labor solidarity as manifested in the later, civil war stages of Bacon's Rebellion (1676-77). To this he adds two important corollaries: 1) the ruling elite deliberately instituted a

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<sup>8</sup> Edmund Morgan. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975): 5.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan (1975): 10.

system of racial privileges in order to define and establish the “white race”; and 2) the consequences were not only ruinous to the interests of African-Americans, they were also “disastrous” for European-American workers, whose class interests differed fundamentally from those of the ruling elite.<sup>10</sup>

One can find a similar pattern in how the Bacon’s Rebellion story is told and the meaning discerned from it in the work of other influential authors on the history of race in the United States.

In her canonical 1990 article, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America,” Barbara Fields’ brief tale of the rebellion begins with “reprisals by Indians, who understandably resented this encroachment by the aliens” and ends with the “suspicion and fear of the growing white lower class in the mind of the rich and powerful.”<sup>11</sup> In his 2004 book *The Abolition of White Democracy*, Joel Olson begins with “hatred of Indians” as “an implacable enemy” and concludes his extended discussion of the rebellion with the ultimate consequence of it being that “poor whites traded class solidarity for whiteness and its accompanying privileges... The civil rights of the colonist not only served as the basis for American citizenship; they were simultaneously privileges reserved for the white race.”<sup>12</sup> In more recent works, Ibram Kendi’s *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (2016) begins with Berkeley seeking to avoid a “war with neighboring Native Americans” and Bacon writing Berkeley that “the discourse and earnestness of the people is against the Indians,” and ends with “poor Whites had risen into their lowly place in slave society – the armed defenders of planters – a place that would sow bitter animosity between them and enslaved Africans.”<sup>13</sup> We also find an

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey B. Perry. “Introduction,” to Theodore Allen. *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Verso, 2012): x.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Jean Fields: “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America”, *New Left Review*, Issue 181 (May/June 1990): 105.

<sup>12</sup> Joel Olson. *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 34, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibram Kendi. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. (New York: Nation Books, 2016): 53-4.

example in a 2018 book, Asad Haider's *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*, which as the title indicates is concerned with the politics of race and class in our moment. Haider sets out the ground of historical knowledge one needs in order to be able to grasp the present political context, and in so doing argues that "what really changed everything was Bacon's Rebellion in 1676." His brief discussion of the rebellion that 'changed everything' begins with a "brutal attack on Indigenous populations" and ends with "the insurrectionary alliance of European and African laborers was a fundamental existential threat to the colonial ruling class, and the possibility of such an alliance among exploited peoples had to be prevented forever."<sup>14</sup>

Each of these writers – as with Winthrop Jordan, Alexander, Morgan and Allen before them – are aware of Indigenous people's presence, and to different degrees address and concur with the claim that the history of the genocidal violence and territorial dispossession against Indigenous people was key to creating the United States. None of them are unaware of this historical fact. This is not about ignorance or forgetting/amnesia. However, it is also the case that due to the constraints inherent to the key categories and dynamics that shape the politics, discourse and study of race in the United States – especially but not only that of the white-Black binary that is produced and reproduced through the habitual mnemonic retelling of this story – Indigeneity and settler coloniality rarely make the final cut when it gets to the concluding section on the wider political meaning of the formative origin story of Bacon's Rebellion. The point of the Bacon Rebellion story almost always concerns the implications for white and Black people as racialized subjects, and almost never as regards Indigenous people and the emergent United States as a settler colonial society. In short, we often find that even the most cutting edge thinkers on race in the United States "dropped Indians" from their narratives, to recall Winthrop Jordan's

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<sup>14</sup> Asad Haider. *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018): 55.

telling phrase from *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*.<sup>15</sup> There is a fairly consistent settler memory pattern to how this works in the deployment of Bacon's Rebellion as an origin story in the political life of race in the United States.

The pattern starts with a direct acknowledgement and account of the anti-Indian roots of Bacon's Rebellion – including the settler desire for Indigenous people's land, violent conflict with some Indigenous nations, and the anti-Indian sentiment of, in particular, white settlers led by Bacon. It then shifts focus on to what we would call today a cross-race class-based coalition among white (or sometimes called English or Euro-American to denote non- or pre-racialized identities prior to the invention of whiteness) and Black (or African) poor, indentured workers, and slaves uniting under Bacon's leadership to refuse Berkeley's and the Virginia elite's constraints on their actions and desires, be it for land, power or violence against Indigenous people. The next step is that the cross-race working class coalition that is initially directed towards Indigenous people eventually turns against the elites, and violently so, leading Berkeley to escape to England for his life and the rebels to burn Jamestown to the ground. The narrative then transitions to the next stage as the rebellion nears its symbolic end, with its leader Bacon dying of disease and the Virginia elite mobilizing their soldiers to quell the uprising, and “one of the last rebel holdouts was a band of eighty slaves and twenty English servants,”<sup>16</sup> to quote Cedric Robinson, from his 1997 book *Black Movements in America*. This “eighty slaves and twenty English servants” figure, which Robinson gleans from Morgan's book, is an oft-cited mnemonic device in this origin story, as it calls forth the imaginary of the lost possibility of a pre- or non-racialization form of class unity against elite economic and political power. For example, in “The Case for Reparations,” Ta-Nehisi Coates discusses a 1704 Virginia law that

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<sup>15</sup> Jordan (1974): viii.

<sup>16</sup> Cedric Robinson. *Black Movements in America*. (New York & London: Routledge, 1997): 9.

further codified Black people as enslaved property subject to the most horrific forms of state-sanctioned punitive violence, and he follows this up by noting that “there would have still been people alive who could remember blacks and whites joining to burn down Jamestown only twenty-nine years before.”<sup>17</sup> His insight about this historical transition from rebellion to institutionalized chattel slavery points to the final element of this pattern: white status over and against Black people is codified along the lines of who can be enslaved and who cannot, who polices whom, who can engage in racial and sexual violence with impunity and who is the subject of this violence. Through this process the white-Black binary begins to be institutionalized in law, governance, economics, and social relations in what would eventually become the United States.

Actually, there is one more element in the pattern. It does not happen after the fifth one but rather slowly over the course of the entire narrative. This is the element by which the presence of Indigenous people and the settler violence and racism toward Indigenous people that was remembered as critical to the start of this formative moment for the political life of race slowly disappears, becoming a faint trace by the end of the tale. All told, the settler memory pattern of Bacon’s Rebellion is a critical, if unmarked, feature of this origin story in U.S. race studies that starts with Indigenous presence and anti-Indian sentiment and ends with the creation of the white subject and the Black other. The path of this story is so well-worn in our time that it is now less a path than a fully paved road with guardrails to keep readers from veering off course from the historical lessons of this moment, which concern the creation of the white-Black binary via the racialization of Blackness as enslavability, the demise of a cross-racial working class movement, and the invention of whiteness as a privileged political status.

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<sup>17</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates. “The Case for Reparations,” as reprinted in *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World, 2017): 181.

J. Kēhaulani Kauanui is among the few writers – not surprisingly an esteemed Indigenous studies scholar – who has discussed how, and at what expense, Bacon’s Rebellion so often plays a key role in the story of race in the United States.<sup>18</sup> In a piece for a symposium on the life and work of Patrick Wolfe, Kauanui aptly summarizes the situation as it concerns much of the left historiography of Bacon’s Rebellion:

Scholars and activists alike have perpetuated some romanticized accounts of the rebellion as a historical moment when poor Africans and Europeans united to fight their common exploiters (the English elite). Other accounts narrate it as a missed opportunity, given that poor Europeans eventually went the ‘white way,’ joining elites against those increasingly racialized as ‘black. Thus the Rebellion is also told as a genealogy of ‘whiteness’ as a racial category and the ‘hidden origins’ of race-based chattel slavery.... Today, Bacon’s Rebellion is often evoked among the white Left as a reminder that elites will divide and conquer, keeping whites and Blacks from unifying. But what drops out in this lamenting account is that they were allied in challenging the English elites through their united efforts to commit genocide against indigenous peoples. This settler colonial context—imbricated with the North American institution of slavery—is often erased.<sup>19</sup>

Kauanui hits the nail on the head in describing most left-liberal scholarly accounts of Bacon’s Rebellion as “romanticized.” The idea of romanticizing history speaks to the fundamental and political role of memory. What we are witnessing here is the work of habit-memory not that of active recollection, given the consistency with which the pattern of the narrative of Bacon’s Rebellion is reproduced by numerous scholars. The habit versus active recollection distinction is important because it speaks to the power of collective memory in affirming the dominant presumptions, terms, constraints and possibilities in the politics of race in the United States, to

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<sup>18</sup> J. Sakai is another such writer, in Chapter 2, “Struggles & Alliances,” of *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat from Mayflower to Modern*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014, originally published in 1983 under the title *Mythology of the White Proletariat: A Short Course in Understanding Babylon*): 25-37 for discussion of Bacon’s Rebellion. Sakai, however, is concerned with what he deems to be the false assertions of cross-racial class unity that masked white settler bourgeois aims of the likes of Bacon. And while valid, his claim that “there was no Black and White unity” because “those Afrikans who signed up in his army didn’t love him, trust him, view him as their leader, or anything of this kind,” (36) is premised upon an understanding of coalitions that does not inherently involve parties to coalition doing so as part of their own calculations and interests. As well, Sakai is not really addressing the role of Bacon’s Rebellion in the politics of memory in the contemporary age.

<sup>19</sup> J. Kēhaulani Kauanui. “Tracing Historical Specificity: Race and the Colonial Politics of (In)Capacity,” *American Quarterly*. Vol. 69, #2 (June 2017): 261.

the point that some of the sharpest scholars in the field reproduce it even while taking some sort of account in their narratives of Indigenous presence and anti-Indigenous actions and sentiments. It is the seeing and disavowing of Indigeneity that we must take note of in discerning the implications of the settler memory pattern here, and in this important regard my assessment of what is at work here differs a bit from that offered by Kauanui.

While I concur with much of Kauanui's reading and am inspired by her call to redress how the rebellion is understood and deployed for contemporary political and scholarly purposes, I argue that it is important to see that this is not a matter of erasure but rather of a simultaneous presence and absence of Indigeneity and settler colonialism, and the role of disavowal for producing the wider political meaning for the story of race in the United States. An account that focuses on erasure conveys the idea that the anti-Indian violence of Bacon and his comrades has been left out of these "lamenting accounts," as Kauanui put it. But excerpts from multiple authors on the rebellion show that they all, to some degree, incorporate Indigenous presence and settler violence and territorial invasions against Indigenous people as important starting points in their narratives. If the problem is erasure, then it can begin to be resolved by demanding presence in the narrative. However, Indigeneity and settler violence are both present and absent in the almost ritualistic re-telling of the tale of Bacon Rebellion. The disavowal is reflected in the dearth of arguments that make the case for the long term implication and meaning of Indigenous presence and settler actions during Bacon's Rebellion. Refusing the work of settler memory in the lessons drawn from Bacon's Rebellion is not about refusing erasure. Instead, what is required is working with what is there in the narratives and engaging in a recuperative theorization about what the absence *and* presence of Indigeneity and settler violence and territorial invasion means for, among other things, the "genealogy of whiteness," the roots of anti-Blackness, and the



“missed opportunity” for a different form of coalitional politics that, as Kauanui rightly notes, are among the key insights race scholars pursue by deploying the rebellion.

For this recuperative theorizing, I focus on Theodore Allen’s aforementioned work, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2*. This volume, published in 1997, builds on the insights of Jordan, Morgan and the wider historiography and archives concerning slavery and race in the United States. Allen’s central argument is that the white race was *invented* intentionally for the political and economic purpose of maintaining social control over, in particular, white labor, and Bacon’s Rebellion was critical to this invention. This book and specific argument have helped shaped the thinking of critical race theorists and political theorists studying race and class, with Joel Olson and Asad Haider, to name but two, making Allen’s insight a fundamental premise and plank of their own work. I do not refute Allen’s general argument or challenge his reading of the archives, as the case he makes is persuasive and grounded. However, the absence *and* presence of Indigeneity and settler colonialism in the text places a limitation on the book’s insights and contributions; a limitation that reflects and also reproduces the constraints in U.S. race politics and discourse as popularly conceived.

Allen does not engage in Indigenous erasure in the book, as it includes a chapter on “Euro-Indian Relations and the Problem of Social Control” (Chapter 3) as well as numerous references to Indigenous people’s presence and settler violence and invasionary actions against Indigenous people. Rather, his chapter on the “Rebellion – and Its Aftermath” epitomizes the simultaneous absence and presence of Indigeneity and settler coloniality that serves as the hidden backbone of U.S. race politics, discourse and collective memory. Allen begins the chapter by directly asserting his knowledge of the presence of Indigenous people and anti-Indian violence in

Bacon's Rebellion, and also his explicit disavowal of any significant long term meaning that one can draw from this presence in the origin story of the white race in the United States.

In Allen's words, "...I have centered my attention on the second, civil war phase of Bacon's Rebellion – April 1676 to January 1677 – rather than the first anti-Indian phase – September 1675 to April 1676."<sup>20</sup> He does so for four reasons, the first of which is a lack of sources from the Indigenous perspective, followed by these three:

...the basic Indian policy of the English ruling elite was motivated not primarily by consideration of social control over exploitable Indian bond-labor in Virginia, but rather a desire to exclude the Indians from English-occupied territory.

..."white-race" identity was not the principle for which freeman were rallied for the anti-Indian phase of Bacon's Rebellion. The 'not-white' and 'redskin' classification of the Indian in Anglo-America would be the outcome of the invention of the white race, a transmutation of the European-American that had not been accomplished in 1676.

...and final consideration is that Bacon's Rebellion was not primarily an anti-Indian war, although that was the tenor of the first call to arms by frontier plantation owners such as Nathaniel Bacon and William Byrd, capitalists recently arrived in Virginia.<sup>21</sup>

Just so he is clear on the matter, Allen then states why the Indigenous/anti-Indian part of this origin story has nothing, in and of itself, to teach us today: "The lesson of history to be drawn from the anti-Indian phase of Bacon's Rebellion is clear and retains its relevance today. The European occupation of Indian lands shows that, from Columbus to Custer, the bourgeois eye looks upon progress and genocide indifferently, as incidental aspects of the process of the accumulation of capital; the anti-Indian phase of Bacon's Rebellion was merely another example of that lesson."<sup>22</sup> I re-examine Allen's words here as written, making no additions or amendments to the historical record.<sup>23</sup> I do so to show how, first, the absence/presence of

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<sup>20</sup> Theodore Allen. *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Verso, 2012): 204.

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Allen. *The Invention of the White Race, Volume 2: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Verso, 2012): 204-5

<sup>22</sup> Allen (2012): 205

<sup>23</sup> For a rigorous and detailed history of the role and activities of Indigenous nations and people during Bacon's Rebellion that attends to the archival material that other studies of the rebellion either ignored or did not

Indigeneity is critical to the invention of the white race not despite but *because* of Allen's disavowal, and second, that refusing this form of settler memory opens up the meanings of, among other things, anti-Blackness and the memory of lost opportunities in ways that can help us think through and acknowledge the political implications of the mutually constitutive relationship between white supremacy and settler colonialism.

Allen starts by clarifying that the motivation of the English ruling elite was the problem of labor, not land, and thus Indigenous people's presence as obstacles to territorial expansion rather than as "bond-laborers" requiring social control removes them from being politically pertinent to the purpose and meaning of the Rebellion. Allen knows about and in the same breath disavows Indigenous removal – the "desire to exclude the Indians from English-occupied territory" – as having any constitutive significance for how we understand the Rebellion's relationship to race. The disavowal of the relevance of settler desires for territory for the political life of race in the United States produces the notion that the interests and identity of the emergent white masses were, and are, constituted around matters concerned with labor, not also land. As a consequence, then, what we see foreclosed here is any political thought toward considering the implications and potential radical imaginary concerning the mutually implicated relationship of labor to land; of the inter-relationship of bodies, human and non-human, to territory. When one considers the relationship of racism and colonialism to environmental destruction, as a clear matter of contemporary urgency, one can discern a constraint imposed on the radical imaginary one can draw out of the lessons of Bacon's Rebellion and a different way to think of the lost opportunity it represents – less about coalitions in and of themselves than about the matters around which people could coalesce to envision and enact a more liberated future. As such,

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find, see James D. Rice's excellent essay, "Bacon's Rebellion in Indian Country," *The Journal of American History* Vol. 101, #3. (December 2014): 726-750.

Allen's is not an incidental disavowal, nor is it an erasure or a simple absence. The work of settler memory leads Allen to see the matter at hand and then produce it as a productive absence – a disavowal that shapes what counts as the political components, indeed the contours of what defines the political itself, of this *invented* white race. Allen splits off the politics of labor from that of land regarding how this political struggle implicated and shapes groups as differentially interested racialized subjects – as political subjects with distinct interests that became defined and read through their racialized bodies.

Here we see how splitting off of labor from land shapes political subjectivity in political memory, for Allen's analysis is most concerned with constraining the meaning of the invented white race to labor interests, the legacy of which he and aforementioned others say we live with to this day. We see this when he asserts that “white-race” identity was not the principle for which freeman rallied for the anti-Indian phase of Bacon's Rebellion. To Allen, the roots of the conflict that would lead to the invention of the white race were settler colonial desires for territory and the conflicts with Indigenous nations that were fueled by and that further fueled vicious and violent anti-Indian sentiment. Allen sees and acknowledges the motivating principle of settler identity at this stage, but this is a settler identity that he splits off from that of white race identity as part and parcel of splitting off the politics of land from the politics of labor. Settleness and whiteness are distinct for Allen, and for others who follow this lead in understanding the political life of race in the United States. To Allen, these settlers were not white when they attacked Indigenous people. They were pre- or non-racialized settlers who become white through aligning with English elites to distinguish themselves as superior to Black people (and thus through the production of institutionalized anti-Blackness itself). Then, as a consequence of this “transmogrification of the European-American,” a racialized anti-Indianism

takes form as part of a hatred for all non-whites. I do not refute Allen's claim that this transformation to whiteness had not been accomplished by 1676, but it is not clear as to why settler anti-Indianism is not then deemed a constitutive root of this emergent invention of the white race, of this 'transmogrification.' The logical, historical and political core of Allen's claim is that the invention of whiteness is a product of the effort to resolve conflicts, reconcile competing claims, and dissolve threats to elite interests. This process of racial creation through and as a means to address conflicts fits well with Michael Omi and Howard Winant's definition of race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies."<sup>24</sup> In other words, the racialization of bodies is a product of politics and the demands of political, economic and symbolic interests, not a product of biology or essence. Thus, in Allen's specific terms, we get the invention of whiteness through the process by which Virginia elites broke the English-African labor coalition of Bacon's Rebellion, but not in advance of it. Whiteness and Blackness, and thus anti-Blackness as a designation tied to enslavability, are thereby co-produced in this political moment, out of which we get the white-Black binary. By reading the "'not-white' and 'redskin' classification of the Indian in Anglo-America" as a by-product rather than a central product (like whiteness, Blackness and the white-Black binary) of turning the European-American into the white race, Allen disavows how settler desires and aims are also constitutive of this whiteness, of what I call white settler-ness. This disavowal does not make settler desires disappear, but rather makes them faint traces of whiteness, there but not there and even more dangerous for that reason. By leaving settler-ness to lurk in the shadows of whiteness, Allen is disavowing how settler desires and actions shape and fuel anti-Blackness as well. Settler desires for claim and control over land and bodies are at the

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<sup>24</sup> Omi and Winant: 55.

root of the production of white standing that formalizes Black anti-citizenship, dehumanization, gender and sexual subjugation, and enslavability. This matters politically because Allen's disavowal shapes for his contemporary audience what does and does not count as the politically pertinent factors that comprise and maintain the white race. He thereby helps define the key pillars of whiteness that need to be critiqued, opposed, and dismantled in an anti-racist, especially abolitionist, politics. Struggles over land are thus not deemed to be among the pertinent political lessons one can garner from the left-liberal memory of Bacon's Rebellion, and thus they do not shape a sense of the importance of decolonization as accompanying an abolitionist politics. It is the disavowal of the relevance of settler anti-Indianness that proves key to the production of the meaning of whiteness here for Allen, whereby settler territorial desires and the violence that goes with them are acknowledged as settler but not white desires and are thereby produced as ancillary to, a byproduct of, the white-Black binary that frames the politics of race in our time.

Allen's clarification that the motives of English elites centered around the politics and economics of labor not land, and that anti-Indianism was not a white racial view because there was not a white race at the time, allows him to make the claim that "Bacon's Rebellion was not primarily an anti-Indian war" even if that was the basis of "first call to arms" by Bacon and his fellow "recently arrived" (as in settled) capitalists. "Not primarily" is the operative phrase here, for it accedes to the knowledge which is undeniable, and produces the faint trace of settler-ness in relation to whiteness as with Indigeneity in relation to U.S. race politics and discourse. Anti-Indianism was the starting point for "frontier plantation owners," but it is the political meaning of this motivation that then recedes to the background, the there-but-not-there, "not primarily," which is the product of the successful work of settler memory. This disavowal allows Allen to

keep his readers focused on why the Rebellion is relevant to them today, for to recall David Thelan's insight noted in Chapter 1, the issue here is "not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time." Allen and those who build on his work are focused on, and I want to suggest politically constrained by, the left memory that sees the missed opportunity here as solely one of potential labor solidarity across English/White and African/Black lines.

Allen makes his disavowal of the contemporary relevance of settler views and actions and of Indigeneity crystal clear in the follow up to his four points when he explains that the violence required for territorial expansion and the accumulation of capital is not unique to this rebellion – as this violence spans from Columbus to Custer. Across this historical span, in which Bacon's Rebellion stands as "merely another example," anti-Indian violence is an "incidental aspect" to the "bourgeois eye" that naturalizes genocidal violence as a necessary element of "progress," and thereby he places it into the "indifferently" perceived background of American collective memory. There is no contending with Allen's point about the long span of settler colonial genocidal violence against Indigenous people in the name of, most notably, territorial dispossession, capital accumulation and imperial national expansion. However, the fact that Allen's narrative remembers the *long duree* of anti-Indian settler violence only further underscores the power and importance of the disavowal he goes at lengths to make in order to detach settler colonial imperatives and actions from the invention of the white race, the emergence of the white-Black binary and the political use of race to fracture class-based alliances and movement. For these latter three are the sacrosanct lessons modern race theorists are supposed to receive and reproduce as they return edified from their holy pilgrimage to the mnemonic burning bush that is Bacon's Rebellion.

The role of memory is critical to keep in mind here because Allen's message to his readers concerns, in his words, that which "retains its relevance today." The disavowal of the historical and contemporary political relevance of anti-Indian actions during Bacon's Rebellion is the work of settler memory that limits the political meaning of whiteness and race politics today, including what fuels anti-Blackness, the race/class divide, and also the lessons one can take about missed opportunities for radical political coalitions. As to the latter point, Kauanui suggests that one consequence is that "[i]nstead of seeing Bacon's rebellion as a missed opportunity for poor European and poor Africans, the historical event reveals a lost chance for alliance politics between African and Indigenous peoples."<sup>25</sup> Before even considering what else the historical events of this period might reveal to us and whether she is right or wrong in this historical claim, Kauanui's urgent gesture points toward the deeper underlying problem, which is that the very idea that Bacon's Rebellion could offer us any lessons at all for Black and Indigenous collaboration is foreclosed in advance. This is because such a notion, and others like it such as that concerning land and land relations amongst human and nonhuman bodies, has been disavowed from the mnemonic imaginary of this popular origin story in U.S. race politics and history; not even available for wider thought and debate.

As it concerns land and its relationship to labor for example, the perennial settler memory left-liberal argument is one that often creates a false dichotomy between land and labor by constructing political interests and subjectivities defined around labor for Black and white people, (e.g. working class claims in tension with racial claims, role of enslavement, the afterlife of slavery, mass incarceration as modern slavery etc) and around land for Indigenous people (e.g. claims concerning territorial dispossession, role of genocide, assertions of sovereignty etc.) This

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<sup>25</sup> Kauanui (June 2017): 262.



split persists because, as Alyosha Goldstein puts it, “dispossession as a social relation of deprivation, impoverishment, and displacement suggests a constitutive relationship between land and bodies that is often overlooked.”<sup>26</sup> In the case of the political life of race in the United States, what Goldstein calls the “not given” and what I call that which is made absent due to the productive disavowal of Indigeneity and settler coloniality is:

precisely the sociality of land and bodies — the restless and multiple stories of place, the agonistic possibilities of collective life otherwise. Land and embodiment precede and exceed the logics of dispossession, logics that presuppose and work to produce possession, property, and the social relations of differential racialized value. What manner of nourishment and habitation allows for subsistence and resistance? What forms of anticolonial materialism take shape in struggles against the perpetual hunger, disposability, displacement, and distribution of early death cultivated by the reciprocities of colonization and racial capitalism?<sup>27</sup>

In other words, how can one split off land from labor when the bodies that labor rely upon are produced as particular subjects through their relationship to land and to non-human bodies, just as the meaning of the land is also defined in relationship with and through the meaning making by human beings in economics, law, politics and culture? Building upon Goldstein’s insights then I claim that what is lost here to the political imagination through this dichotomous land and labor construction of the collective memory of such moments as that of Bacon’s Rebellion is the potentiality of coalitional claims and imaginaries of more liberated futurities based upon acknowledging the mutually intertwined relationship of land and labor, and even more generally that of the health, safety and activities of human and non-human bodies in relationality with land and one another. Marking this loss, however, also points to the potential for recuperative gains by, in this case, refusing the work of settler memory that narrows the horizon of imagining who

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<sup>26</sup> Alyosha Goldstein. “The Ground Not Given: Colonial Dispositions of Land, Race, and Hunger,” *Social Text* 135. Vol 36, #2. (June 2018): 85.

<sup>27</sup> Goldstein (June 2018): 101. In making this argument, Goldstein draws upon Robert Nichols’ close and insightful re-thinking of the concepts of primitive accumulation, dispossession, and land theft, in “Disaggregating primitive accumulation,” *Radical Philosophy* 194 (Nov/Dec 2015): 18-28.

or what counts as the subjects of politics and the parties to and the interest they have in these subjects.

My aim in this essay was not to get Bacon's Rebellion historically *correct*, so to speak, but to loosen the constraints of the story of this rebellion so as to allow for pursuing untapped mnemonic possibilities in the ill- or under-considered inter-relationships staring us right in the face in the archival materials and secondary readings we have. Thus, the debate about the Rebellion is not really *about* the Rebellion, for as Justin Leroy aptly notes, "Turning to history is not an attempt to recover hidden pasts; rather, it offers a body of evidence that we can marshal against ways of unknowing that are actively and aggressively produced."<sup>28</sup> The one corrective I make here is that I do not see this approach as a turning to history so much as turning to memory, for the re-memorializing of the rebellion's narrative provides a vehicle for reshaping contemporary imaginaries, possibilities and critiques in a world in which scholars and activists are constantly searching for ways to assess and re-figure the terms and practices of solidarity, collaboration, coalitions, and thereby also that which tends to divide and undermine these efforts. To account for the role of settler desires, anti-Indianism, territory and Indigenous presence as also important lessons of the Bacon's Rebellion story upsets the solidification of the meaning of this memory for the political life of race in the US. It compels a reframing of the political interests at work in the production and maintenance of white racial identity and the roots of anti-Blackness, and the role of Indigeneity and settler colonialism in this process.

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<sup>28</sup> Justin Leroy. "Black History in Occupied Territory: On the Entanglements of Slavery and Settler Colonialism." *Theory & Event* Volume 19, Issue 4, 2016.