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ARTICLE



## Settler colonialism as eco-social structure and the production of colonial ecological violence

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### ABSTRACT

Settler colonialism is a significant force shaping eco-social relations within what is called the United States. This paper demonstrates some of the ways that settler colonialism structures environmental practices and epistemologies by looking closely at some of the institutional practices of state actors, and at the cultural practices of mainstream environmentalism. By considering a range of settler projects aimed at Indigenous erasure and highlighting linkages between these projects and eco-social disruption, I also advance the term colonial ecological violence as a framework for considering the outcomes of this structuring in terms of the impacts on Indigenous peoples and communities.

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In the United States, settler colonialism structures political and social life through the ongoing appropriation and occupation of Native land, and is culturally enforced through practices that actively obscure or erase Indigenous peoples – an effort to complete via ideological and cultural means the work of earlier failed attempts at total physical genocide (Wolfe 1999; Coulthard 2014; Fenelon and Trafzer 2014; Tuck and Wayne Yang 2013).<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously subject to erasure are the processes of settler colonialism itself (Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2011). Yet, settler colonialism pervades contemporary US society, functioning in politics, law, education, and culture. Indeed, its traces can be found across all levels of analysis from the international to the interpersonal, thus there is ample reason to consider settler colonialism's influence over a host of social and political institutions. However, because settler colonialism's fundamental goal is the ongoing appropriation of Indigenous land and resources by and for the benefit of settlers it is an especially important lens for thinking about eco-social relations (Coulthard 2014; Norgaard, Reed, and Bacon 2018).

Looking at a few highly illustrative examples of state power and the development of settler-colonial resource management policy as well as at the settler-colonial culture which pervades US environmentalism, I will demonstrate that settler colonialism is an eco-social structure, which produces/maintains drastic and enduring inequalities between settlers and Native peoples. This structure disrupts Indigenous eco-social relations,<sup>2</sup> and in so doing produces what I call colonial ecological violence,<sup>3</sup> which results in particular risks and harms experienced by Native peoples and communities.<sup>4</sup>

### Settler colonialism in US environmental sociology

While the concept of settler colonialism occupies a relatively robust position in anthropology, geography, and history as well as in Canadian and Australian sociology, US sociology has only begun to grapple with the concept relatively recently (e.g. Steinman 2012; Steinmetz 2014; Glenn 2015; Fenlon 2015; Bonilla-Silva 2016; Cantzler and Huyhn 2016; Norgaard, Reed and Bacon 2018). Throughout US sociology, deep and sustained sociological engagement with contemporary US Indigenous life has been uncommon.<sup>5</sup> This is apparent in both the published sociology literature and the status of contemporary US Indigenous research and researchers within the American Sociological Association.

One of the most visible and sustained engagements with settler colonialism in US sociology was the intellectual exchange between Glenn (2015), Fenelon (2015), Steinman (2016) and Bonilla-Silva (2016), which moved the conversation about settler colonialism forward in the area of race and ethnicity. Though not working in the area of environment, the exchange between these scholars necessarily addressed issues of eco-social relations demonstrating the centrality of this issue in settler colonialism and scholarship aimed at explaining this structure. For example, Glenn's (2015) attention to the imposition of cultural values that transform land into property, and Fenelon's (2015) important interventions regarding issues of homeland defence, territoriality, and the colonial-capitalist exploitation of land and labor.

The centrality of land and territory in settler colonialism quite simply cannot be ignored. Regardless of subfield or discipline, the issue of land is raised time and time again because it is unavoidable in conversations about Indigenous peoples. For this reason, it is surprising how slow an analysis of settler colonialism has been to percolate into US environmental sociology. Scholars like Julia Cantzler and Kari Norgaard have demonstrated a lasting commitment to making inroads in this area, and their work comprises a significant portion of environmental sociology focused on Indigenous peoples within the United States. Cantzler's (2007) analysis of the Makah whaling conflict raised important concerns about the ideological and "moral" conflicts between protreaty and mainstream environmental groups. She has also contributed to comparative analyses of environmentally centered conflicts between indigenous peoples in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Cantzler 2011). Norgaard's work – along with her various colleagues – has expanded the research on food sovereignty (Alkon and Norgaard 2009; Hormel and Norgaard 2009) and drawn important connections to the sociology of the family (Willette, Norgaard, and Reed 2016), emotions (Norgaard and Reed 2017) and race and gender (Norgaard, Reed, and Bacon 2018).

Within the environmental subfield, studies of particular tribal conditions and conflicts have laid essential groundwork for drawing connections between the practices of settler-colonial states and institutions and the structuring of eco-social relations (e.g. Norgaard, Reed, Van Horn 2011; Cantzler 2007; Deutsch 2017). More broadly, Dorceta Taylor's (2016) analysis of the rise of the US conservation movement has provided important insights into how race, class, and gender inform the development of US environmentalism, while also considering settler colonialism as part of conservation's eco-social project. Other recent publications have aimed to tease out the relationship between settler colonialism, decolonization, and environmental justice (e.g. Clark 2002; Cantzler and Huynh 2016; Pellow 2016).

### Settler colonialism and eco-social structure

While it has been clearly demonstrated how racism, sexism, capitalism, and a host of other forces structure eco-social relations, especially the generation and maintenance of inequalities through the disproportionate distribution of environmental benefits and burdens (e.g. Taylor 2000; Taylor 2016; Brulle and Pellow 2006), I contend that these structures are themselves – in the US context – tied to settler colonialism. Since the wealth and power of the United State as a state is grounded in the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands, I consider settler colonialism – though always in connection with other forms of domination – the primary force shaping eco-social relations in this country.<sup>6</sup>

### Settler colonialism and elimination

Scholars in both Native Studies and Settler Colonial Studies have given special attention to settler colonialism's aspirations of self-supersession by which the division between colonizer and colonized is effectively erased from public consciousness, conferring "native status" upon the settler population and state (Veracini 2011). This is a process Wolfe (2006) describes as "elimination of the native" a primary drive through which settler colonialism asserts itself destroying to replace. In accordance with these aspirations, Native Americans in the United States have been subjected to numerous attempts at elimination.<sup>7</sup>

The first and most obvious of these are the attempts at physical elimination through genocide. This includes massacres (e.g. Wounded Knee, Sand Creek), and the less well-known practices of sterilization (Lawrence 2000; Torpy 2000). Through programs of assimilation, the US government attempted to culturally eliminate Native Americans. A clear example of this is the boarding school system which explicitly sought to, in the words of Richard Henry Pratt, "kill the Indian to save the man" (Jacobs 2006). Politically, policies of termination sought to eliminate Native peoples as unique political groups (Fixico 1986). At the same time, sociocultural norms tend toward the discursive elimination of Native people and the erasure of settler colonial processes Table 1.

Generally, US culture and education, through dual processes of underrepresentation and misrepresentation, generate and reproduce a public lack of understanding about both Native peoples and the processes of settler colonialism (Shear et al. 2015; Johnston-Goodstar and Roholt 2017). The bulk of the dominant culture's knowledge about Native peoples comes from sources that are not Native-made, and reflect neither Indigenous epistemologies nor realities (Leavitt et al. 2015; Fryberg 2008).

These forms of elimination inscribe themselves on the land and fundamentally inform perceptions of place. Ways of relating to place and environment contribute to social identities and cultures; simultaneously they are informed and constrained by sociological processes (Coté 2010; Smith 2012; Berkes 2012; Norgaard and Reed 2017). If you live in the United States ask yourself these questions: Whose traditional

**Table 1.** Settler-colonial elimination projects.

Form of Elimination	Examples
Physical/Genocide	Massacres Forced/Coerced Sterilization
Cultural/Assimilation	Boarding schools "Indian offences"
Political/Termination	Ending political status Voiding/Not affirming treaties
Discursive/Erasure	Underrepresentation Misrepresentation

territory am I living on? How many federally recognized tribes are in my state? What are their names? If you are like the majority of people I've asked over the years, you struggled to answer. Indeed, I have met very few people who can easily name the traditional peoples of the land they live on. Fewer still know the treaty, treaties, or acts of Congress, which enabled their town or city to be developed. This substantial knowledge gap, even among highly educated people, is consistent with settler-colonial goals of erasure.

### ***Interpersonal/organizational culture and practice: settler colonialism and US environmentalism***

Even deeply committed environmentalists with a stated commitment to place often have difficulty when it comes to questions that touch upon the settler-colonial structuring of those very places they are committed to. This results not only from widespread erasure but also from the settler-colonial roots of US environmentalism. These roots and their lasting impacts are important if sociology wishes to have a better understanding of the way settler colonialism structures eco-social relations. Thinking of eco-social disruption as purely the product of aggressive extraction, or capitalist expansion is not sufficient.

Mainstream environmental movements – particularly those with wilderness, conservation, preservation, and reform frameworks – are epistemologically bound up with settler colonialism. They rely on Western science and law as their foundation for identifying and addressing environmental concerns, and in general exhibit no explicit concern for social justice, nor any acknowledgment of Indigenous peoples as contemporary members of the world, but rather frame their arguments around generalized human mismanagement of the Earth's natural resources. Thankfully this is changing, albeit slowly. Yet, consider this type of phrasing, common across a wide range of environmental discourses, which lays the blame for environmental crisis indiscriminately on all humans: "Few problems are less recognized, but more important than, the accelerating disappearance of the Earth's biological resources. In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it is perched" (Miller and Spoolman 2012, 48). Or, "[T]hus human beings are now carrying out a large scale geophysical experiment of a kind that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in the future. Within a few centuries we are returning to the atmosphere and oceans the concentrated organic carbon stored in sedimentary rocks over hundreds of millions of years." (McKibben [1989] 2006)

A closer look at statements made by foundational figures in these movements further demonstrates the presence of settler colonial tendencies inherent in

each group. Histories of US environmentalism often begin with the conflict between conservationists and preservationists. While these two approaches to the environment differed in important ways, both were deeply entrenched in settler-colonial ideologies and practices. The conservation movement emerged within a discourse of nationalist expansion and white racial decline (Cronon 1996; Dunaway 2000). Advocates of this position promoted deeper incursions into Indigenous lands while also calling for responsible management of resources. Influential conservationist Madison Grant was deeply committed to both the conservation of land and to pseudoscientific forms of racism which advocated the conquest of the continent by the "Nordic type." Grant's (1933) position regarding Native peoples may be summed up by his claim that "no one who knew the true nature of the Indian felt any regret that they were driven off" (164).

The stamp of settler colonialism is also apparent on the programs and discourses put forth by the preservationists. The US movement for preservation emerged within the cultural context of developments such as transcendentalism which embraced a spirituality that encouraged wonder at and care for creation (Brulle 2000). Much of the work of the preservation movement centers wilderness, an idea which itself is the product of a worldview alien to Indigenous peoples whose homes are the very places the term is now so emphatically attached to (Cronon 1996; Spence 1996). One of the dominant figures of this movement is John Muir, who remains well known for the critical role he played in promoting the preservation of so-called wild places. What is less acknowledged is the way his work encouraged members of settler society to venture out into places they had not previously gone, further displacing Native peoples (Spence 1996). Also less acknowledged is that Muir was an active participant in discourses which romanticized Native peoples at some moments only to demean and dehumanize them at others. In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir writes:

How many centuries Indians have roamed these woods nobody knows, probably a great many, extending far beyond the time that Columbus touched our shores, and it seems strange that heavier marks have not been made. Indians walk softly and hurt the landscape hardly more than the birds and squirrels, and their brush and bark huts last hardly longer than those of wood rats, while their more enduring monuments, excepting those wrought on the forests by the fires they made to improve their hunting grounds, vanish in a few centuries (Muir 1911, 73).

This quote, while on the surface relatively benign compared to the words of Grant, is similarly steeped in the idea of inevitable erasure of Native peoples.

Lesser known, but highly influential in his time, Samuel Bowles also contributed to the settler-colonial character of the wilderness preservation movement. In *The Switzerland of America: A Summer Vacation in the Parks and Mountains of Colorado*, Bowles (1869) proclaimed, “We know they are not our equals [and] that our right to the soil, as a race capable of its superior improvement, is above theirs; ... let us act directly and openly. ... Let us say to [the Indian] ... you are our ward, our child, the victim of our destiny, ours to displace, ours to protect” (124).

Contemporary mainstream environmentalism bears the lasting impressions of these origins, and over the years each generation has contributed to the settler-colonial character of the movement. In general, US environmental groups have tended to be oblivious toward Native peoples and/or settler-colonialism, or have draw upon perverted images of an “ecological other” via tropes such as the “noble savage,” which has deep roots in the work of early environmentalists and depends upon the limited knowledge of the settler populace regarding the real lived experiences of Native peoples (Smith 2012; Leddy 2017). The pattern of discounting Indigenous epistemologies and practices is visible everywhere in environmentalist discourse, though perhaps it is most starkly evident in Aldo Leopold’s famous claim that “[t]here is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it” (Leopold 1987). Published in 1949, in *A Sand County Almanac*, this claim entirely ignores millennia of Indigenous land tenure as well as the social and cultural ethics of Indigenous peoples regarding the treatment of the land.

Equally troubling are the assertions of later scholars who acknowledge the existence of Native peoples but have difficulty recognizing the intense coloniality of their claims-making. Consider Roderick Nash’s (1985) contention that “the gospel of ecology should not be seen so much as a revolt against American traditions as an extension and new application of them – as just another rounding out of the American Revolution” (179). In this essay, Nash claims that America is inherently about expanding the provision of liberty to various groups of people, and that ultimately it would be in keeping with this tendency to extend rights and liberty to the environment. While Nash does not completely ignore the existence of Native peoples, he does not acknowledge that the continued existence of the United States represents not a provision of liberty for Native peoples but rather an ongoing settler-colonial occupation of Indigenous territory with increasing incursions into that territory. This type of assertion continues into the 21st century. In a 2014 opinion piece published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Nash writes “[w]hen we go to designated wilderness we are, as the 1964 act says, ‘visitors’ in someone else’s home. As such there are

house rules to be followed.” This statement is particularly interesting since Nash is by no means talking about the human beings whose homes the US government was literally redefining with the Wilderness Act (Spence 1996). Like Nash, Bill McKibben also writes in detail about the American “National Project” and the American Revolution in *The End of Nature* ([1989] 2006) and in *Eaarth* (2010), but in neither book does he actively engage in any analysis of settler colonialism, or contemporary Native peoples.<sup>8</sup> In *Eaarth*, McKibben does make a passing reference to “the decimation of the Indians” but nothing more (118).

Alternatively, US environmentalists have a strong tendency toward the haphazard taking up, misattributing, and misappropriating of Native ideologies and practices. Evidence of this trend can be found throughout a wide range of cultural productions generated by the wilderness, preservation, and deep-ecology frames. A famous example is Gary Snyder’s use of “Coyote,” and the elevation of this trope by figures central to the development of Deep Ecology such as Bill Devall (1980). While Snyder does credit Warm Springs people as the source of his knowledge about coyote, the poem itself, and the deployments of the trope within deep ecology thereafter, do more to elevate a particular form of spiritually eclectic settler environmentalism than they do to acknowledge Indigenous peoples. In the settler-colonial context, these usages of Native stories, symbols, and images serve to obscure both the historic events related to colonization and the ongoing occupation of Native lands.

While these practices are mobilizing for some, the cultural productions and discourses described above also suggest the way settler-colonial interests and perspectives have structured the environmental movement. Mainstream environmentalisms’ public and political discourses frame environmental problems as a human-versus-nature conflict. These discourses impose a particular vision of eco-social relations broadly on all human beings. Namely, these discourses suggest that all humans (or at least those who do not identify as environmentalists) participate in eco-social relationships based on appropriation and exploitation, in which the ecological drivers of identity go unnoticed and are taken for granted. Such assertions disregard the vast differences between human communities with respect to both decision-making power and eco-social norms.

### **State power: US settler-colonial environmental practice and policy**

Although the particulars of settler-colonial eco-social structuring differ from place to place, and have shifted over generations, ultimately the pattern remains: settlers expropriate land and resources from Indigenous people, disrupting Indigenous cultures, economies, and conceptions of kinship and

personhood (Baldy 2013; LaDuke 1999, 2005; Cotè 2010; Norgaard and Reed 2017). Settler-colonial impositions cannot be sufficiently understood as the result of a particular episode, or single set of practices relegated to the past – such as the Dawes Act, or the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from Yosemite National Park – but are instead a set of ongoing and unequal conditions, which have informed a myriad of settler approaches to environment within the United States, ranging from the most callously exploitative to the most ardently preservationist (Wolfe 2006; Taylor 2016; Holleman 2017).

This eco-social structure relies on forces of both cultivation (programs, policies, and discourses promoting settler expansion) and discipline (organizations which generate and enforce prohibitions on land access and use) which shape eco-social relations in ways that meet settler interests at the expense of Native peoples. One telling example of this is the history of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), which has received some detailed analysis by legal scholars (e.g. Newell 1997; Shepherd 2001). Established in 1902 as a response to increased settler demands for water, the Reclamation Service was charged with developing and maintaining water projects in the west (Newell 1997). While the BOR facilitated increasing colonial occupation and land-use conversion throughout the west by providing access to heavily subsidized water, irrigation projects serving Indigenous peoples remained under the control of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The water projects undertaken by the BIA were often never completed, and to make matters worse, the BOR actively “sought waters that were potential sources for Native American projects, in order to lay claim to those waters before BIA could begin projects” (Newell 1997).<sup>9</sup> Not only did the BOR appropriate water resources for settlers at the expense of Indigenous peoples – a hydrocolonization – but they also play a pivotal role in the development of large dams which continue to wreak lasting devastation on Indigenous eco-social relations.

The BOR is just one example of how settler-colonial state interventions continue to structure eco-social relations. Similarly, the U.S. Forest Service’s role in prohibiting culturally specific land management practices (Norgaard 2014; Baldy 2013), state government policies that attempt to limit treaty-guaranteed rights to hunting, fishing, and gathering on ceded territories (Whaley and Bresette 1994; Nesper 2002), and the decision to place particularly polluting military installations or waste disposal facilities in close proximity to reservation lands (Hooks and Smith 2004) all demonstrate the way state power facilitates the dispossession of Native peoples and the disruption of Indigenous eco-social relations. These patterns of practice all disproportionately benefit settler institutions while burdening Indigenous peoples.

## Colonial ecological violence

What I have presented above comprises only a tiny fraction of the myriad ways contemporary eco-social relations within the United States are subject to the structuring force of settler colonialism. But what of the outcomes for Native peoples? To answer this, I find it useful to consider again the many forms of elimination deployed in the United States, and to think about how each has a connection to questions of environment Table 2. As the table suggests, the mechanisms of eco-social disruption are numerous: land is redistributed, privatized, polluted, and renamed with generally no input or consent on the part of the original inhabitants; the value of places and beings are redefined by the culture of the colonizers. These contribute to an array of harms, and can emerge from either ferocious cruelty, characterized by “emotional and celebratory assaults on the body,” or through callous cruelty, which is bureaucratized and distant (Collins 1974).

Contemporary forms of land management, such as the development of the BOR described above, do the work of eco-social disruption without the explicitly stated intent to commit violence, yet with highly destructive results for Native communities. By foreclosing the possibility of relationships with and responsibilities to ecologies, land management under settler colonialism contributes to physical, emotional, economic and cultural harms. I contend that these eco-social disruptions generate colonial ecological violence, a unique form of violence perpetrated by the settler-colonial state, private industry, and settler-colonial culture as a whole.

While some scholars have understandably focused on genocide and ecocide in their analyses of the relationship between native peoples and environmental practice (e.g. Grinde and Johansen 1995; Brook 1998), I would like to offer “colonial ecological violence” as a term that allows for a broad analysis of the diverse ways settler colonialism disrupts Indigenous eco-social relations, and generates specific risks and harms for Native peoples and communities.

### *A case for ecological damage as violence: native claims about land, identity, and life*

To understand the equation of eco-social disruptions with violence it is vitally important that scholars take seriously the words of Indigenous scholars, activists,

**Table 2.** Examples of eco-social aspects of elimination.

Form of Elimination	Eco-Social Examples
Physical/Genocide	Poisoning of food/water Taking of water
Cultural/ Assimilation	Disruption of ecological knowledge The Dawes Act and loss of tribal land holdings
Political/ Termination	Post-termination land losses Loss of usufruct treaty rights
Discursive/Erasure	Renaming of culturally significant places Repurposing of culturally significant places

and cultural producers who for generations have expressed the central importance of land in their identities and lives (e.g. LaDuke 1999; LaDuke 2005). All around the world, Indigenous people have given voice to the critical relationship between themselves, their people, and their land. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) describes how Western conceptions of space have contributed to the mischaracterization of Indigenous peoples, and have transformed Indigenous conceptions of space not only through the ferocious violence of removal and ecological damage, but through the renaming of places. Smith writes:

Renaming the land was probably as powerful ideologically as changing the land... newly named land became increasingly disconnected from the songs and chants used by indigenous peoples to trace their histories, to bring forth spiritual elements, or to carry out the simplest of ceremonies (54).

This focus on place renaming as colonial ecological violence is echoed by Indigenous scholars in Canada and in the United States (Coté 2010; LaDuke 2005). In *All Our Relations*, LaDuke (1999) presents case after case of Indigenous peoples explaining the value of land and the need for ecological integrity. One especially clear articulation of this comes from a 1997 interview with Lennie Butcher (Anishinaabe).

They cut down all the trees, the fir trees, all of them, and then they say we can't practice our way of life. All these plants are given to us as medicines from the sweatlodge, and this is who we are. We are this land and everything that comes from it (134).

If sociology attends to narratives like this, it becomes clear just how firmly enmeshed identity is with eco-social relations, and highlights the significant risk posed by eco-social disruption.

### **Colonial ecological violence, slow violence, and public health**

Currently, there is a robust analysis of Native health, welfare, academic achievement, etc. which fails to account for the role of eco-social relations (Bacon, Jacob, and Gonzales in preparation). Ultimately this lack of attention generates work which pathologizes Native peoples (Tuck 2009). Given the centrality of land in producing wealth, health, and cultural identity it stands to reason that a body of literature dedicated to crises such as Native suicides or addiction which does not acknowledge the ongoing appropriations of Native lands, or the disproportionate ecological burdens born by Native peoples cannot adequately account for the causes of those crises.

Attention to colonial ecological violence then may be an important frame for bringing together analyses of Native health with environmental sociology.

Because the concept of colonial ecological violence is broadly defined and flexible, there is room within the concept to consider both spectacular forms of violence – the obvious and often instantaneous episodes of damage – and slow forms of violence, which occur more-or-less invisibly over long durations of time (Nixon 2013).

Certainly, there must be attention paid to the ferocious and spectacular assaults on Native people through environmental damage. Some examples include the forced removals of peoples from their homelands as well as instances when war was overtly waged on Native peoples through direct assaults on the environment, such as the willful destruction of bison herds, and the more recent shows of militarized force in the service of extractive industries such as the conflicts over the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipeline. Yet, while these examples and others like them surely have enduring cultural, economic, and social impacts as well as far-reaching historical roots, spectacular instances of violence are not the full story. There ought to be attention to the long-term implications of such violences and attention to instances of slow violence: the poisoning of communities, the economic and health repercussions of resource depletion, and the emotional and identity impacts of desecrated sacred sites, to name but a few examples.

Thankfully, some scholarship generated in the area of mental health research further demonstrates the logic of understanding eco-social disruption as a form of violence. Consider Brave Heart and DeBruyn's (1998) study, which asserts "historical unresolved grief ... has created intergenerational trauma" among Native peoples.<sup>10</sup> This trauma and related patterns of self-destructive behavior have been linked to "conflicts between American Indian traditional cultural values, practices, beliefs and those of the majority culture" (Whitbeck et al. 2002). Since a strong component of many Indigenous cultures is a robust relationship to place (LaDuke 2005; Berkes 2012), it serves to reason that forced removals, settler resource appropriation, and the ecological damage perpetrated by US settler colonial society contribute significantly to the "conflict" between "traditional cultural values" and "those of the majority culture" that Whitbeck et al. (2002) describe.

While the emotional impacts of ecological damage are not the explicit focus of most mental health research on American Indian and Alaska Native communities, a relationship between eco-social disruptions and negative emotional impacts can be extrapolated from some of those studies' results and recommendations. For example, in a study of 287 American Indian adults, Whitbeck et al. (2002) noted that although the stress of cultural conflict is correlated with depression, participation in cultural activities is correlated with prosocial behaviors, and those

who participated in cultural activities showed resistance to the “psychologically harmful” effects of discrimination. Some examples of cultural activities from the study include ricing, spearfishing, hunting, sugaring, and berry picking. Ongoing ecological decline and/or further settler-colonial appropriation imperil these cultural activities. As such, how could ecological damage not be a threat to Indigenous wellbeing?<sup>11</sup>

The connection between land loss and negative health impacts is also supported by a quantitative study of 354 Native adults from across the United States. In this study, stress related to land loss or land-based microaggressions (such as colonial renaming of important sites) significantly contributed to negative health outcomes. The authors state “our findings suggest that historical traumatic land-based assaults may make much more than a modest contribution to mental health risk” (Walters et al. 2012).

In a study of mental health among Lakota men and boys, Brave Heart et al. (2012) explore the role of collective historical trauma in the lives of contemporary Lakota men. Although the article primarily focuses on how shared histories of violence, sexual abuse, and poverty contribute to increased rates of suicide, addiction, and depression, the loss of land figures prominently. One respondent states “I think losing the land was the most traumatic.” The authors go on to illustrate that the loss of the buffalo and land traumatized Lakota peoples (particularly men) not only because it resulted in a loss of traditional ways of life, but because such a loss is perceived as a failure to uphold the sacred responsibility Lakota people have to the land.

This sense of failure not only generates the despair described by Brave Heart et al. (2012), but also drives active resistance to settler-colonial disruptions of Indigenous eco-social relations. Although colonial ecological violence has separated many people from their sacred places, distorted the history of land tenure, and brutalized the ecology that upholds all life, there are many Native people who resist these forces, which continually degrade the environment. However, this resistance requires Native peoples to take great risks in their attempts to fulfill their responsibility to defend their land, water, and non-human relatives (Norgaard 2014; Norgaard and Reed 2017).

Those who attempt to meet their eco-social obligations often find themselves in direct conflict with well-armed and well-funded forces who seek to exploit the natural world. Protecting the sacred is criminalized under settler-colonial law, and those who fight back against colonial ecological violence are often threatened, attacked, and imprisoned. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples continue to oppose colonial ecological violence ideologically, culturally, and materially. Clear evidence of this resistance has been presented in the recent cases of open opposition to Keystone XL, Oak Flat, and the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Beyond protests, Native peoples also resist colonial ecological violence through numerous initiatives and activities, including efforts to maintain traditional practices. This too is often criminalized through restrictions on hunting, fishing, gathering, and burning. This criminalization of traditional practices is widespread as, Leaf Hillman (Karuk) explains:

In order to maintain a traditional Karuk lifestyle today, you need to be an outlaw, a criminal, and you had better be a good one or you'll likely end up spending a great portion of your life in prison. The fact of the matter is that it is a criminal act to practice a traditional lifestyle and to maintain traditional cultural practices necessary to manage important food resources or even to practice our religion (qtd. Norgaard 2014, 23).

Lennie Butcher shares a similar experience. As an Anishinaabe man who hunts and gathers in his traditional territory, Butcher has been repeatedly arrested for violating the settler-colonial laws imposed upon him. Butcher says “I wasn't born to be rich. I was born to live a good life ...I hunt all over. I don't believe the white man has the right to stop us” (qtd. LaDuke 1999, 133).

Through their resistance, Native peoples have called attention to settler-colonial land management as an attack on Indigenous peoples. For example, Chief Caleen Sisk of the Winnemem Wintu has described dams as “weapons of mass destruction” (qtd. Bacher 2014). Like numerous tribes in the west, the Winnemem Wintu have survived not only waves of intense state-sanctioned physical violence and land appropriation, but also the disruption of their sacred relationship with the river and the salmon. The ecological damage created by large dams disrupts the physical, spiritual, economic, and emotional health of Indigenous peoples and represents an insidious yet ever-present form of colonial ecological violence.

The concept of eco-social disruptions as violence against Native peoples is nothing new, since Native people have long been making these types of claims, but I hope that the term “colonial ecological violence” will provide sociologists with a useful framework for considering the various harms and risks that settler-colonial norms and practices regarding the environment generate for Indigenous communities.

## Moving forward

There is a need for more sociological research that considers settler colonialism and colonial ecological violence, not only by environmental sociologists but also by the discipline more broadly. For example, sociologists interested in violence and intergroup relations might develop a rich analysis of what drives the perpetration of colonial ecological violence. Although industry and government have the most



power in performing acts of colonial ecological violence, everyday practices and settler-colonial cultural norms also contribute. How might this be linked with other analyses of culture, power, and violence? For example, there is a robust literature addressing the connections between hegemonic masculinity and violence within the United States. As such, it would be worthwhile to consider how in the United States, particular forms of ecological practice are simultaneous displays of hegemonic masculinity and settler-colonial domination.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, there is ample room to consider how white supremacy and settler colonialism coauthor various practices and ideologies regarding land use.

Given the settler-colonial structuring of US environmentalism there is also a need for research into conflicts and solidarity between Native peoples and non-Native environmental movements. Although the need for collaboration between people concerned with ecological health may be greater than ever, contestations persist between Indigenous peoples and environmental movements.

Indigenous-led movements and settler-led movements for environmental protection have experienced the most direct conflicts around issues of hunting, fishing, and gathering rights. In her work regarding the Makah whale hunt, Charlotte Coté (2010) notes, “whaling opponents generated a discourse against Makah and Nuuchahnulth whaling that overlooked and ... discredited the cultural significance of our decision to revive our whaling practices” (165). Like during earlier antisealing and antifishing protests conducted in part by animal rights activists and deep ecologists, the exercise of treaty-protected rights generated sometimes violent rhetoric and actions. Members of Greenpeace openly contested the authenticity of Native people who would engage in commercial hunting or fishing (Cantzler 2007). Similarly, in the Wisconsin struggle over spearfishing, anti-Indian rhetoric often contained elements of environmentalism, which depicted Native peoples wishing to exercise treaty rights as cultural impostors who would destroy the ecology of the north woods (Whaley and Bresette 1994; Nesper 2002). Despite this, we have witnessed increasing collaboration particularly around climate change and pipeline resistance (Lipsitz 2008; Grossman 2017). Scholars interested in environmental movements could develop a robust literature addressing the challenges and outcomes of these solidarity efforts.

What I have suggested here are just a few of the possible directions scholars could take in bringing the theory of settler colonialism to bear on our work in environmental sociology. In truth, the possibilities are far more numerous. Steinmann (2012) contends that sociology’s “inattention [to settler colonialism] reflects limitations of the existing conceptualizations of both the nature of power and domination in the United

States and of political power and contestation more generally” (1074). This is certainly true with regard to our thinking about the environment. As rich as environmental sociology’s analyses have been around issues of capitalism, they have yet to adequately address the appropriations of land and resources, which allowed capitalism to take root on this continent. Work in the areas of environmental, climate, and food justice will also gain from a more rigorous grappling with questions of settler colonialism.<sup>13</sup>

Just as the introduction of the New Ecological Paradigm revolutionized sociology as a discipline, encouraging a fuller consideration of the natural world as a salient feature in social life, so too will attention to settler colonialism enrich and strengthen sociology’s understanding of eco-social relations, the environmental challenges we face, and the possibility for sociology’s contribution to eco-social transformation.

## Notes

1. The economic partner of settler colonialism in the United States is capitalism and there is much work needed to tease out how settler colonialism and capitalism support and structure each other particularly in their conflicts with traditional Indigenous socio-ecologies.
2. When I refer to Indigenous eco-social relations I intend this term to be closely aligned with what is often called Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) but with an added emphasis on the social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of human-nature relations (which are also inherent in TEK, but tend not to be emphasized). I also include other forms of eco-social relations, which may not be strictly “traditional” by some definitions.
3. While I began developing this concept in 2013, it first appeared in print as part of a collaboration with Dr. Kari Norgaard, Reed and Bacon (2018).
4. While I see the wisdom in avoiding damage-centered research, I cannot ignore the very real risks posed by land occupation and ecological degradation. I believe this term will complement works by Fenelon (1998), Coulthard (2014), and Brooks (1998) whose writings have demonstrated connections between land, settler colonialism, and violence.
5. Outside of demographers – who have long seemed interested in sizes of Native populations – some clear exceptions exist (e.g. Fenelon, Steinman, and Norgaard).
6. There is a need for work analyzing how the settler-colonial structuring of eco-social relations impacts inter-group relations in the United States. I do not simply mean between Native groups and environmental organizations, nor even between Native peoples and settlers, but more broadly. I believe that settler colonialism plays a role in structuring other forms of hierarchical social relations within the United States. Just as scholars like Coulthard and Fenelon have drawn ample connections between settler colonialism and capitalism, I would suggest that since settler colonialism is a system which imposes and naturalizes various other systems of

power – class, race, heteropatriarchy – it is a structure that ought to be included in all intersectional analyses (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013).

7. I wish to acknowledge that extensive work in the area of tribal self-determination, which is in many respects still accelerating. Nothing in this paper should be understood as ignoring or contradicting this, but rather as an effort to call attention to how settler colonialism has in many ways attempted to impede Indigenous life, rights, and sovereignty (Deloria and Lytle 1984; Smith and Warrior 1996; Bruyneel 2013).
8. Since the Dakota Access struggle, McKibben has been more active in talking about Native peoples, but it is a sad comment on the state of environmentalism that it took such a massive act of resistance to awaken anything more than romantic nostalgia for Indians in the environmental community.
9. Although tribal water rights were upheld in the 1908 ruling *Winters v. United States*, enforcement has been irregular, and the BOR has repeatedly undertaken projects harmful to Native peoples.
10. Intergenerational trauma itself is initiated by spectacular and traumatic episodes (e.g. genocide, forced removal, and interpersonal violence) yet the pernicious effects of this trauma passed on to future generations might be thought of as a form of slow violence to the extent that it is the ongoing long-term effects of events and processes no longer apparent yet undoubtedly harmful.
11. Ecological damage, taken to extremes, is clearly a threat to the well-being of everyone alive but in this case, I am pointing to the loss of culturally important sites and species which people from the dominant culture might not notice the loss of or feel imperiled by regardless of actual risk.
12. Some studies already suggest this connection without explicitly considering the relationship to settler colonialism (e.g. Bell and York 2010; Miller 2004).
13. While advocating for sociological work in these areas I acknowledge that this work is well underway in other disciplines (e.g. Baldy 2013).

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