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# Beyond white privilege: Geographies of white supremacy and settler colonialism

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**Abstract**

This paper builds from scholarship on whiteness and white privilege to argue for an expanded focus that includes settler colonialism and white supremacy. We argue that engaging with white supremacy and settler colonialism reveals the enduring social, economic, and political impacts of white supremacy as a materially grounded set of practices. We situate white supremacy not as an artifact of history or as an extreme position, but rather as the foundation for the continuous unfolding of practices of race and racism within settler states. We illustrate this framework through a recent example of a land dispute in the American West.

**Keywords**

indigenous geographies, land disputes, racism, settler colonialism, white privilege, white supremacy, whiteness

**I Introduction**

Drawing from the fields of critical race and ethnic studies and postcolonial theory, we develop two interconnected arguments for the study of race, racism, and privilege. First, we argue for the value and need of developing geographically sensitive theorizations of white supremacy as the animating logic of racism and privilege. Second, we contend that the concept of settler colonialism, as an ongoing mode of empire, has much to offer studies of race and racialized geographies, particularly in illustrating the material conditions of white supremacy. Both conceptual tools complicate common sense temporalities and spatialities: neither white supremacy nor

settler colonialism can be relegated to historical contexts. Rather, both inform past, present, and future formations of race. In expanding this theoretical frame, we engage with recent debates in geography about the materialities of race (Mah-tani, 2014; Slocum and Saldana, 2013; Pulido, 2015) and develop a *historicized*, rather than historical (Schein, 2011), account that locates white supremacy and colonization in the ‘right

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here, right now' (Morgensen, 2011: 52) rather than the past.

As a project of empire enabled by white supremacy, settler colonialism is theoretically, politically, and geographically distinct from colonialism. Rather than emphasizing imperial expansion driven primarily by militaristic or economic purposes, which involves the departure of the colonizer, settler colonialism focuses on the *permanent* occupation of a territory and removal of indigenous peoples with the express purpose of building an ethnically distinct national community (Veracini, 2010; Elkins and Pedersen, 2005; Hixson, 2013; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Seawright, 2014; Pasternak, 2013; Kobayashi and De Leeuw, 2010). Because of the permanence of settler societies, settler colonization is theorized not as an event or moment in history, but as an enduring structure requiring constant maintenance in an effort to disappear indigenous populations (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonialism is therefore premised on 'logics of extermination' (Wolfe, 2006) as the building of new settlements necessitates the eradication of indigenous populations, the seizure and privatization of their lands, and the exploitation of marginalized peoples in a system of capitalism established by and reinforced through racism. Key examples of settler societies include the United States, Canada, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, and Brazil.

In connecting settler colonialism to studies of whiteness and racism in geography, we argue that white supremacy is a critically important yet undertheorized concept, as compared to the more widely recognized notion of white privilege. An emphasis on white *supremacy* rather than white *privilege* is more than just semantics. Rather, white supremacy more precisely describes and locates white racial domination by underscoring the material production and violence of racial structures and the hegemony of whiteness in settler societies. The concept of white supremacy forcefully calls attention

to the brutality and dehumanization of racial *exploitation* and *domination* that emerges from settler colonial societies. While white privilege remains an important analytic frame to analyze the taken-for-granted benefits and protections afforded to whites based upon skin color, the concept of privilege emphasizes the social condition of whiteness, rather than the institutions, practices, and processes that produce this condition in the first place (Leonardo, 2004; Smith, 2012; Pulido, 2015). White supremacy accentuates the structures of white power and the domination and exploitation that give rise to social exclusion and premature death of people of color in settler colonial states (Gilmore, 2002, 2006; Cacho, 2014).

Our analysis begins with a discussion of studies of whiteness and white privilege. We distinguish white supremacy from white privilege and advocate for a broadening of the discussion to take white supremacy more seriously (see also Pulido, 2015; Berg, 2011). Our work should not be read in opposition to understandings of white privilege.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach would undermine the significant and ongoing contributions of this work. However, we do wish to trouble the prominence of white privilege as a theoretical pivot point in geography as well as our own stakes in this intellectual project. Moreover, we do not rehash debates that posit political economic structures and historical materialism against discourse. Instead, we encourage dialogue for critical engagement in theorizing the systematic, enduring production of white racial dominance in settler societies at a moment of heightened political struggle and in an era when neoliberal multiculturalism and post-racial ideologies frame racism in terms of individualized prejudices rather than in terms of enduring structures of white power (Melamed, 2011; Goldberg, 2009; Berg, 2011). Though still theoretically oriented around whiteness, we argue that the concept of white supremacy destabilizes the 'innocence of whiteness' (Leonardo, 2004) and emphasizes the ways whites – including

those who identify as anti-racist – materially, socially and academically benefit in settler societies.

Following this discussion, we present the example of a recent land dispute in the US western state of Nevada that illustrates the important, yet geographically undertheorized, implications of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Settler colonialism as a concept has been developed primarily in Australian and Canadian contexts, and we draw from this example to show how particular ‘colonial moments’ (Kempf, 2010) sustain and strengthen settler logics and white racial domination in the United States. Though our case is focused on the US, it has broad implications for understanding white supremacy and enduring modes of empire. Finally, we conclude with general remarks about the potential geography has to contribute to understandings of white supremacy and settler societies.

## II Beyond white privilege

Whiteness Studies has emerged as an interdisciplinary intellectual project aiming to unmask the power and structural advantages associated with whiteness as a social identity and location (Frankenburg, 1993; McIntosh, 2004 [1988]; Roediger, 1992; Lipitz, 1995; Rothenberg, 2008). Building from expanding research trajectories in critical race theory (e.g. Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) and theories of racial formation (Omi and Winant, 1994), Whiteness Studies reveals the taken-for-granted and normative nature of whiteness and the ways white skin privilege affords racial obliviousness (Rothenberg, 2008; Dyer, 2008). This emphasis calls attention to the simultaneous invisibility and ubiquity of whiteness as a racial position, such that the notion of ‘race’ is applied almost exclusively to non-white people. It reveals how whiteness acts as the unseen, normative category against which differently racialized groups are ordered and valued. As

Dyer (2008: 11) explains, ‘whites are not of a certain race, they are just the human race’.

Other themes within the Whiteness Studies literatures include the shifting historical definitions of whiteness and the processes through which various ethnic and immigrant groups ‘became white’ (Jacobson, 2005; Brodtkin, 2000; Roediger, 1992); the paradox of privilege (Johnson, 2005); and the naturalized social, cultural, and economic power associated with whiteness (McIntosh, 2004 [1988]). Roediger’s (1992) influential *The Wages of Whiteness* develops a historical materialist analysis of the social reproduction of whiteness and the making of the white working class. Roediger (1992) traces the ways in which whiteness became a ‘currency’ through which to access relative class privilege for Southern and Eastern European immigrants experiencing class subjugation and economic insecurity in the US. Indeed, a significant portion of the literature in Whiteness Studies has foregrounded the connections between class and whiteness and the ways the construction of whiteness is embedded within the cultural economy of western modernity (Nayak, 2007; Bonnett, 1997, 2000).

Geographic studies of whiteness contribute to this body of literature in important ways by demonstrating spatial contingency of the social construction of whiteness and privilege (e.g. Bonnett, 1997, 2000; Jackson, 1998; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; McGuinness, 2000; Pulido, 2000, 2002; Peake and Ray, 2001; Winders, 2003; Abbott, 2006; Alkon and McCullen, 2011; Housel, 2009). Scholarship examining geographies of whiteness reveals the sociospatial production of race, situating race within the grounded contexts and spatial hierarchies through which bodies are placed and ordered (Pulido, 2000).

Through these interventions, geographers illustrate that landscapes do not merely reflect racial patterns, but are a fundamental component of processes of racialization. This body of work explores a wide range of themes,

including the production of racialized landscapes (Alderman and Modlin, 2014; Schien, 2006; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000); normative practices and the production of geographies of whiteness (Bonnett, 2000; Pulido, 2000); NIMBYism (and YIMBYism) and the mobilization of white identities in support of exclusionary white spaces (Darden, 1995; Pulido, 2000; Hubbard, 2005; Barraclough, 2009; Bonds, 2013); the way whiteness and landscapes naturalize exclusions and privilege (Peake and Ray, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Inwood and Martin, 2008; Hankins et al., 2012); and the intersections of whiteness and rural class identities (Jarosz and Lawson, 2002; Winders, 2003; Bonds, 2009). This work illustrates the systemic and structural production of white privilege through a range of racist practices. More recently, Baldwin (2012) has explored whiteness in relation to the biopolitics of race in geography, arguing for a focus on 'furity' and the way the 'future is rendered knowable through specific practices' that intervene on the present (p. 173).

However, we argue that within geography there is a blind spot to the ongoing significance of white supremacy and the white racial identities produced through a taken-for-granted logic of settler colonialism. For example, early work in geography on whiteness is largely associated with Alastair Bonnett (1997). Bonnett's work is critical because he opened up the field of critical Whiteness Studies to a range of engagements by geographers who have explored the 'plural constitution and multiple lived experiences of whiteness' (Bonnett, 1997: 196). Additionally, by situating race within imperial projects he argues that geographers' preoccupation with racialized 'Others' reinforced colonial tropes, invisibilized white racial identities, and reinforced assumptions about non-white races and ethnicities as the legitimate, and indeed exclusive, objects of study within scholarship on geography of race. Bonnett's analysis underscores the linkages between imperial ideologies and

practices in shaping the racial imaginaries of the West.

Significantly, Bonnett's (1997) analysis does not distinguish colonialism from settler colonialism, which has implications for the study of whiteness because the two are theoretically and spatially distinct. As Kobayashi and De Leeuw (2010) argue, much of the research on indigeneity and neo/colonialism in geography builds from scholars like Spivak, Said, and Bhabha, who theorize the (post)colonial condition *after* the departure of colonial authorities (see also Byrd, 2011; Gilmartin and Berg, 2007). But what of the indigenous peoples in settler nations who *continue* to live with colonial occupation? While there is much resonance and overlap between the two approaches, questions of dispossession, territoriality and race are different in settler nations where occupation and colonization are ongoing projects. While we respond to Bonnett's (1997) call for more geographically sensitive theorizations of whiteness, we expand this argument by maintaining that it is also necessary to distinguish the production of white supremacy and racial identities in settler states as geographically and theoretically distinct from colonization in non-settler states.

Building on Bonnett's work, Dwyer and Jones (2000) analyze the contingency and socio-spatial production of whiteness, arguing that whiteness is an epistemology, 'a particular way of valuing and ordering social life' (p. 210). We further contend that one cannot make sense of the epistemic norms of whiteness in settler nations without also taking into account the nature of settler colonialism. Theories of whiteness that do not engage with indigenous geographies and the ongoing processes of colonization not only risk reinforcing the disappearance of Native peoples, they minimize the multiple processes of racialization producing race-class identities in these places.

For example, Dwyer and Jones (2000) theorize the production of a white socio-spatial epistemology through a focus on residential segregation

in Lexington, Kentucky. Their analysis is profoundly revealing, demonstrating how whiteness shapes and is shaped by the production of racially ordered spaces and mobilities. How, we ask, might we further theorize a socio-spatial epistemology of whiteness (and, we would argue, white supremacy) through the incorporation of a settler colonial framework? Perhaps we might emphasize that the original inhabitants of what is now called Kentucky were peoples from over 20 different indigenous nations, including the Shawnee, the Cherokee, the Chickasaw, and the Yuchi peoples. We might then discuss how these peoples were forcibly 'relocated' to Oklahoma reservations during the Indian Removal Acts of the 1800s, enabling land speculation and the expansion of slave-supported agricultural ventures that violently remade the state and consolidated white political, economic, and social power. This consolidation continues well into our present day. Starting at this point is about more than building a complete picture of the historical and geographical production of whiteness. Rather, a settler colonial framework enhances understandings of whiteness by revealing how white supremacy is produced through ongoing structures of genocide and indigenous displacement that are concomitantly connected to the continued subordination of black and other non-white racialized bodies.

Thus the analytics of white supremacy and settler colonialism is useful in materially locating privilege in settler states because of their emphasis on the enduring *structures* of genocide and forced labor upon which white power rests. White supremacy, as a concept, has long been a key component of feminist and black radical thought (Mills, 2003; hooks, 1989). However, the concept is often associated with the *de jure* racism of the past (i.e. slavery, Jim Crow) rather than with contemporary, *de facto* racial projects. For instance, in his critical intervention on whiteness, Bonnett mentions white supremacy only once to refer to racial projects

of the 19th and early 20th centuries (1997: 193). This emphasis on an historical understanding of white supremacy rather than an historicized one has the potential to curtail analysis of the way 'institutions or the state' normalize and maintain the 'racialized and gendered economic and political system benefiting the few at the expense of the many' (Smith, 2012: 238). During an era of liberal multiculturalism and (ostensible) decolonization, in which formally colorblind institutions and policies have supplanted *de jure* racism and explicitly racist structures, a focus on individualized identities and experiences elides the systematic marginalization of people of color (Melamed, 2011; Goldberg, 2009; Berg, 2012). That is, in locating privilege at the scale of the individual, efforts to overcome privilege have the potential to leave the underlying structures of racism's 'death dealing displacement[s]' (Gilmore, 2002: 16) largely hidden from view. Furthermore, as both Pulido (2015) and Leonardo (2004) have argued, white privilege allows whites to recognize how they benefit from the color of their skin – the social condition of whiteness – without actually examining the processes and relationships that make such benefits possible. By engaging with whiteness through the logic of settler colonialism and the materiality of state sanctioned and extra-legal production of death, we provide a framework that focuses on white supremacy as an ongoing colonial project.

### III Defining white supremacy

Our engagement with white supremacy begins with Gilmore's (2006) definition of racism as 'the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to *premature death*' (p. 28; emphasis added). Most simply defined, white supremacy is the presumed superiority of white racial identities, however problematically defined, in support of the cultural, political, and economic

domination of non-white groups (Mills, 2003; see also Pulido, 2015). It is white supremacy that makes the differentiated outcomes and exposure (or lack of exposure) to premature death possible in the first place (Leonardo, 2004; Rodriguez, 2011; Pulido, 2015). The naturalization and invisibility of white racial identities and white skin privilege is made possible through the structures and logics of white supremacy. If privilege and racism are the symptoms, white supremacy is the disease. Theorized this way, white supremacy is the *defining logic* of both racism and privilege as they are culturally and materially produced. Moreover, the analytic of white supremacy underscores the historic, material production of white racial domination. As clarified by Leonardo (2004), 'a critical pedagogy of white supremacy revolves less around unearned advantages, or the *state* of being dominant, and more around the direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it' (p. 137, emphasis in original).

The analytic frame of white supremacy connects the discursive construction of race to the structural, material, and corporeal production of white racial hegemony. This locates whiteness more broadly than a collection of unearned privileges and reveals the way white privilege is part of a broader white supremacist, settler socio-spatial dialectic. This material conceptualization situates whiteness as produced by, and producing, socio-spatially contingent modes of production, thus moving away from the twinned dynamics of white privilege/racism as 'problems to be solved' to instead see them as politically productive forces. White supremacy is a central organizing logic of western modernity, legitimating both European colonization and settler projects. It is therefore foundational to the historic development of settler colonial states, but also to contemporary postcolonial societies (Mills, 2003; Hixson, 2013). Rather than being a relic of the past or an ideology of extremists, white supremacy continues to

produce social and spatial relations that frame broad understandings of difference.

A focus on white supremacy thus highlights both the social condition of whiteness, including the unearned assets afforded to white people, as well the processes, structures, and historical foundations upon which these privileges rest. European and, later, North American colonists created and developed a logic of race that placed white, European men at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy and all others in various positions of subordination (Bonnett, 1997; Goldberg, 2002). These imaginations valorized whiteness and sanctioned the violence of white domination, enslavement, and genocide while bolstering Eurocentric understandings of land use, private property, and wealth accumulation (Mills, 2003; Hixson, 2013; Seawright, 2014). This 'white racial frame' (Feagin, 2012: 7) was instrumental in creating the international slave trade, the colonization of large swaths of the globe, and in establishing contemporary heteronormative and patriarchal social relations. White supremacy is not only a rationalization for race; it is the foundational logic of the modern capitalist system and must be at the center of efforts to understand the significance of whiteness (Gilmore, 2006; Inwood, 2013; Du Bois, 1935; Feagin, 2012).

Reframing questions from privilege to supremacy challenges commonsense understandings that associate white supremacy with particular historical moments (i.e. the Reconstruction Era in the US or the colonization of Africa by Europeans) or with white power groups (e.g. Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis) (see hooks, 1989). Such framings treat white supremacy as a historic relic or dismiss the power of white supremacy by associating it with groups and individuals who are outside of the 'mainstream' of society. Indeed, Pulido (2015: 4) argues that the 'caricaturing' of white supremacy is one of the key means through which the ongoing significance of white supremacy is obscured. While few whites openly acknowledge an adherence to a

white supremacist ideology, white racial domination necessitates racial exclusions that can only be made possible through the ‘taking or appropriation . . . of land, wages, life, liberty, community, and social status’ (Pulido, 2015: 4). Our historicized understanding does not locate white supremacy in the past, or within the purview of extremist groups, but instead reveals its stubborn endurance and the ways its everyday logics are reproduced through spectacular and mundane violences that reaffirm empire and the economic, social, cultural and political power of white racial identities. Therefore our account situates white supremacy as foundational and as the ongoing result of the colonial logics that permeate settler societies.

#### **IV Settler colonialism and the foundation of the white supremacist dialectic**

Examining the material conditions of white supremacy requires acknowledgement that large areas of the earth are a product of settler colonialism and that ‘settlement’ in these places – premised on the extermination of indigenous peoples, the occupation of their territories, and the exploitation of others – is an ongoing structure that continues to define socio-spatial development (Harris, 2004; Kobayashi and De Leeuw, 2010; Morgensen, 2011; Hixson, 2013; Veracini, 2013; Smith, 2012; Arvin et al., 2013; Seawright, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2012; De Leeuw et al., 2013; Pasternak, 2013; De Leeuw, 2014; Hunt and Holmes, 2015; Pasternak, 2015). Colonization, from the settler colonial perspective, is a kind of permanent occupation that is always in a state of becoming. This unfolding project involves the interplay between the removal of First Peoples from the land *and* the creation of labor systems and infrastructures that make the land productive. These two processes are interconnected and necessary: land must be cleared of indigenous populations, privatized, and then cultivated and made

profitable through labor exploitation (Arvin et al., 2013). This ongoing project requires the continued displacement of indigenous and other marginalized peoples who are an impediment to capitalist development, as well as particular forms of labor exploitation that extract value from appropriated land (Arvin et al., 2013; Smith, 2012; Kobayashi and De Leeuw, 2010). This ‘white settler epistemology’ (Seawright, 2014) is grounded in racialized and gendered western knowledge systems and the norms of liberal individualism that legitimate privatization and private property rights (Dempsey et al., 2011; Pasternak, 2015) and ‘accumulating wealth and property by extracting it, via labor, from nature or inferior beings’ (Seawright, 2014: 563). Settler colonialism licenses the disappearance of indigenous peoples, the expropriation of indigenous spaces, and makes others infinitely exploitable and/or expendable (e.g. slaves, immigrant labor, prisoners). It is thus foundational in establishing processes that separate humanity into distinct groups *and* placing those groups into a larger hierarchy. The political, economic, and social processes necessary to contain, exterminate, and permanently occupy territory are premised on a continuously reworked white supremacist dialectic that underwrites racial capitalism.

While the identification of distinct human groups dates back to some of the earliest human writings, ‘it was only after European explorers reached the Western Hemisphere’ that any kind of ‘distinction and categorization fundamental to a racialized social structure’ begin to appear and be used to understand human difference (Omi and Winant, 1994: 61). These efforts only intensified as European and later North American colonies and nations turned to the removal of First Peoples and the enslavement of Africans to reap incredible profits out of the lives and work of chattel slaves (Du Bois, 1935). This dialectic drives the socio-spatial logics of contemporary settler colonial nationalism and identity and is not only central to the production of white

supremacist discourses, but the very materiality of whiteness itself. Describing these connections, Charles Mills explains that white American wealth ‘rests on red land and black [and brown] labor’ (2003: 188). An analytic that begins from settler colonialism situates the intersections of political economy and racial identity within a foundational geography underpinned by the eradication and exploitation of particularly racialized bodies. Framed this way, whiteness is more than a mere collection of unearned privileges or assets, but instead is a calling card earned through the blood and sinew of millions of exploitable bodies. Such recognition necessitates not only a radical rethinking of how and where anti-racist praxis must engage with the materiality of inequality (Mills, 2003), but calls into question the very knowledge production of whiteness itself. Whiteness is constituted in and through the bodies, property, land, and labor of people of color and that continues to animate structural inequalities long after the first seizure of indigenous territory or the final slave has been freed.

Because white supremacy is built on and justified by settler colonial discourses and practices, it is a necessary first step to trace the ways white supremacy fundamentally structures space, place and race within settler colonial states. Schein argues that representations of slavery that place the experience of slavery in a historical, rather than historicized, understanding ‘compartmentalize slavery as history, and in so doing relegate slavery to the past, in effect ghettoizing its representation as a part of a socio-economic system that ended 145 years ago’ (2011: 21). In this vein, to examine the historical geographies of settler nations without emphasizing the central and ongoing roles of slavery, genocide, and white supremacy does little to challenge white racial hegemony. As a consequence, settler colonialism is an ongoing *historicized process* (rather than a *historical fact*) that requires the continued disappearance and displacement of myriad

‘undesirable peoples’ from the landscape.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, white supremacy hinges upon multiple, rather than singular, logics that are mutable and grounded in particular historical and geographic contexts. That is, white supremacy makes ‘race’ legible through the logics of anti-black racism, genocide, and orientalism, and these logics shift and become re-signified across time and space (Smith, 2012).

The interactions between hierarchies of people and hierarchies of space create a geographically nuanced white supremacist reality within settler societies. This includes a range of systematized and informal historicized practices that constitute contemporary geographies: indigenous genocide, containment, and land appropriation; slavery; sharecropping; homesteading, immigration policy and racial restrictions on citizenship; restrictive housing covenants, redlining, and federally supported segregation; urban renewal, mass imprisonment and criminalization (to name just a few). In other words, we must move beyond the tendency in geographic scholarship to ‘invoke understandings of race as social construction’ without also focusing on the way racism is sutured to and produces literal death (Mahtani, 2014: 360; see also Slocum and Saldanha, 2013). Analysis of these conditions requires us to view white supremacy not as a static ideology or condition, but to instead focus on its geographic and temporal contingency.

## V White supremacy in a US context

White supremacy within the United States, while broadly related to settler colonial projects in Great Britain, Canada, Israel and Australia, nonetheless manifests itself differently depending on geographically specific, grounded conditions. For example, both Hixson (2013) and Seawright (2014) explore how the idea of *terra nullius* – the notion of ‘empty’ lands – was essential to supporting white settler colonial

projects in the United States and in Australia (see also Harris, 2004; Pasternak, 2015). However, as Hixson clarifies, at various moments the US government recognized indigenous land claims through treaties that were subsequently dismissed or reversed, leading to seizures of land. By contrast, in Australia, Native peoples were conceived as British subjects in order to evade legal challenges to their dispossession (Hixson, 2013). In both instances, white supremacy rationalized state violence, displacement, and dispossession, yet place-specific configurations influenced how the projects took shape. For these reasons, we argue that we need to understand white supremacy as both a *concept* to be analyzed geographically (both historically and contemporarily) and also as a *process* that continues to create common sense understandings of race within settler societies.

This understanding of settler colonialism and white supremacy requires that we move beyond seeing white supremacy as something of the past, and instead moves us to develop an analytics that focuses on how the geography of contemporary settler colonial states is continuously shaped by processes of genocide and forced labor. This violent history of the present is often obscured within contemporary accounts of the settling of the United States. That the slave empires required genocide and cruel and massive engineering projects to ‘rip a million people from their homes, brutally drive them to new, disease-ridden places, and make them live in terror and hunger as they continually built and rebuilt a commodity-generating empire’ (Baptist, 2014: xix) is a story that is largely disappeared from contemporary accounts of the making of the world economy. National mythologies affirm settler histories, sanitizing violent dispossession through narratives of wild, untamed frontiers and rugged white individualism (Harris, 2004).

Such framings bolster white supremacy and distort the fundamental and enduring roles of slavery and genocide in the making and building

of global empires throughout the late 17th through the early part of the 20th centuries (Schein, 2011; Trouillot, 1995; Hixson, 2013; Harris, 2004). For example, and turning more specifically to the United States, popular representations of industrialization and collective understandings of the making of the contemporary economy often ‘emphasize white immigrants and clever inventors, but leave out cotton fields and slave labor’ (Baptist, 2014: xviii). These narratives imply that somehow the rise of the United States as the world’s largest economy was accomplished despite slavery and genocide and not because of it (Baptist, 2014). Additionally, dominant perspectives tend to focus on the way that enslaved and Native peoples were denied access to the ‘liberal rights and liberal subjectivity of modern citizens’ without also focusing on the way that these modern frameworks and interrelated systems killed millions of people and were the result of genocide (Baptist, 2014: xix).

We now turn to our example to explore the ways specific configurations of race, land and power come together in the US West to shape geographically-specific settler colonial logics. We offer this illustration not as an exhaustive account on settler colonialism in the US but as a first step in what we hope is a broader and more sustained interrogation of settler nations as a whole.

## **VI Cliven Bundy and the US settler state**

In the spring of 2014 a long-simmering land dispute between the US federal government and landowner Cliven Bundy, a Nevada rancher, exploded into a media firestorm. While the story is nuanced, put simply, over a 20-year period Mr. Bundy had been grazing his cattle on public lands and consequently he owed the federal government grazing fees. The US Bureau of Land Management (BLM), part of the US Department of the Interior, oversees the

approximately 245 million acres of public lands in the United States, much of which is located in 12 states – including Nevada – in the American West (BLM, 2015). The BLM also manages livestock grazing on such lands in accordance with the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. The federal regulation of grazing on public lands emerged during the era of homesteading in response to concerns of western ranchers about overgrazing. Homesteading and white settlement necessitated indigenous removal, rationalized through the racialized concepts of Manifest Destiny and *terra nullius*, which presumed white entitlement to the ‘empty lands’ of the West (Harris, 2004; Bonds, 2013; Pasternak, 2015). Increased livestock grazing and land degradation associated with this white settlement led to the federal regulation of grazing.

Public land management practices have undergone many revisions since the passage of the Taylor Act, particularly in response to the Endangered Species Act (1973) and the National Environmental Policy Act (1969) (BLM, 2015). A more direct focus on the protection of watersheds and on the arid ecosystems of public rangelands has increasingly put private ranchers advocating for property rights in direct conflict with government efforts to federally regulate and protect public lands (see McCarthy, 2002, for more on these tensions). These struggles have often been animated by a rural white libertarianism grounded in property rights and a deep suspicion of the federal government. According to BLM policy, ranchers interested in grazing their animals on public rangelands must apply and pay for permits and lease agreements that stipulate the terms of grazing approximately every 10 years (BLM, 2015).

Responding to Mr. Bundy’s failure to obtain permitted grazing rights to public lands in Nevada over the course of 20 years, the BLM secured a federal court order and moved to seize his cattle. This touched off a tense standoff as armed, mostly white anti-government activists

descended on the Nevada desert and Mr. Bundy’s ranch and forced the BLM agents to withdraw and abandon their seizure of his cattle. In the process, Mr. Bundy became an anti-government folk-hero, widely promoted on conservative media outlets for his stand against a supposedly overbearing federal bureaucracy that, according to many of his supporters, routinely oversteps the bounds of its authority. As Mr. Bundy’s fame grew and as other media outlets picked up his story, he began to talk about a range of political and social issues outside of government overreach. In Bundy’s now notorious interview with the *New York Times* he was quoted at length:

‘I want to tell you one more thing I know about the Negro,’ he said, Mr. Bundy recalled driving past a public-housing project in North Las Vegas, ‘and in front of that government house the door was usually open and the older people and the kids – and there is always at least a half a dozen people sitting on the porch – they didn’t have nothing to do. They didn’t have nothing for their kids to do. They didn’t have nothing for their young girls to do. And because they were basically on government subsidy, so now what do they do?’ he asked. ‘They abort their young children, they put their young men in jail, because they never learned how to pick cotton. And I’ve often wondered, are they better off as slaves, picking cotton and having a family life and doing things, or are they better off under government subsidy? They didn’t get no more freedom. They got less freedom.’ (as quoted in Nagourney, 2014: A1)

Almost immediately, many of the commentators and conservative politicians who had picked up Mr. Bundy’s banner of less federal intrusion fled, and within short order Mr. Bundy largely faded from public view.<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, common sense framings largely associate white supremacy with extreme events or with extreme views. At first glance, Mr. Bundy’s statements appear to confirm to this notion. That is, his comments about black Americans are extreme and as a consequence

he was marginalized. And yet, his commentary articulates a particular racial worldview that is remarkably common in the rural American West and that has done much to animate conservative policies and the modern right in the United States. Specifically, his statements resonate with efforts to reframe historic understandings of race that were overtly racist, to a 'softer' form of racism that is no less destructive to communities of color (see Inwood, 2015; Gilmore, 2002; HoSang et al., 2012, for a broader discussion). Bundy's comments, while explicitly drawing from racist terminology rather than the racially coded language now more commonly used to signify and spatially fix people of color (e.g. urban poor, welfare queens), resonates with common racial tropes about the so-called culture of poverty. Such beliefs are the driving force behind a whole range of 'race-neutral' practices that have explicitly targeted low-income communities of color (HoSang, 2010). Indeed, Bundy's words reflect a popular discourse that is firmly rooted within mainstream libertarianism and conservative ideology. But what is perhaps most important about this instance is not necessarily Bundy's statements about poor black communities. Rather, what is significant is the way his story and comments – and popular reactions to them – draw from and reinforce particular narratives of whiteness and land ownership that naturalize indigenous disappearance, black subordination, and white racial domination.

We see Bundy's case as illustrative of what Kempf (2010) calls a 'colonial moment'. Colonial moments reinforce and normalize white domination and 'accent the reality of the settler colonial process . . . as a system that depends on the continued occupation of stolen lands' (Seawright, 2014: 563). As Bundy's fame grew and as the land dispute became part of popular discourse, Mr. Bundy's claims to the land were largely unquestioned in the press and little, if any, discussion centered on the legitimacy of Bundy's claims to the very territory on which

his cattle ranch rests. Rather, the focus was on whether or not the federal government had the right to collect fees on public land. And yet, Bundy's connection to that land itself is the result of white supremacy and particular settler histories that have become normalized in the US.

Bundy and his supporters claimed that their right to the federal lands on which his cows graze rests upon the fact that his 'ancestors were LDS [Church of Latter Day Saints], the first white settlers in this part of the country' and that his family are the ones that have made the land productive. Coupled with Bundy's earlier statements about African Americans and slavery, his comments mesh well with Smith's observations that there are three central logics of white supremacy that undergird settler colonialism: genocide, which is the basis of colonialism; slavery, which secures capitalism; and orientalism, which establishes permanent war and empire (2012: 68–9). While these logics shift and intersect across time and space, slavery and genocide are nonetheless the lynchpins of US development, and by intertwining and diverging across geographic and historic contexts they become the foundation of power and privilege on which white supremacy rests. It is what Clyde Woods describes as the central pillar of the American socio-spatial dialectic on which the whole US economic, political and cultural system is built (Woods, 1998: 6). A critical component of a settler colonial framework is examining how these logics become naturalized, normalized, and thus unremarkable.

Mr. Bundy's assumptions about his family's natural right to the land and the popularity of his message about the intrusive federal government are part of the ongoing occupation of the American West and the white supremacy that masks the genocide and dispossession of indigenous peoples that established white settlement and the acquisition of federal lands in the first place. Indeed, Mormons were the first *permanent white settlers* to arrive in Nevada, when, in

1849, many en route to California gold mines established a supply outpost in Genoa, Nevada (Warren, 1992; Miranda, 1997). However, the Paiute, Shoshone, Washoe, and Walapai peoples inhabited Nevada for thousands of years before the 18th century arrival of Spanish explorers and white settlers (Hulse, 2004). The First Peoples inhabiting the Great Basin area of Nevada are thought to have settled in the area some 12,000 years ago (Hulse, 2004). Even before the Mormon settlers arrived, Nevada had a complex imperial history, having been first colonized by the Spanish to become part of the northwest territory of New Spain and subsequently becoming part of Mexico's California territory following the Mexican War of Independence in 1821. Ultimately, in 1848 Mexico ceded this land (then part of the Utah Territory) to the US following the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (Hulse, 2004; Miranda, 1997).

White settlers affiliated with the Church of Latter Day Saints actively engaged in efforts to clear and 'civilize' indigenous peoples living in the Utah Territories and developed specific programs intended to proselytize indigenous populations (Warren, 1992). Mormon settlers have a complex history of anti-black racism, and their view of the institution of slavery changed over time in ways that were very much connected to their desire to acquire and protect territory for settlement. While many early Mormons like Joseph Smith openly opposed slavery in the 1830s and 1840s, these philosophies were tempered by a desire to avoid identification with abolitionists who, like Mormons, were seen as a 'despised minority' (Bringham, 1981: 331). Their anti-abolitionist position hardened as members of the LDS church sought to protect their settlements in the slaveholding state of Missouri, and by the 1850s Mormons had reversed their opposition to slavery. Indeed, in 1852, following the Mormon migration and settlement in the Great Basin area, the state of Utah – with noted Mormon figure Brigham

Young as governor – became the only state west of the Missouri River to legalize slavery (Bringham, 1981). During the decade of the 1850s, anti-black sentiments became codified into church doctrine,<sup>4</sup> the church openly advocated for a reopening of the international slave trade, and the state adopted new restrictions on black political and civil rights (Bringham, 1981). This dramatic shift was animated by both a desire to accommodate a small number of Mormon slaveholders who settled in the West, but also as a means to curry favor with southern slaveholding states advocating for states' rights to govern their 'peculiar institutions' (Bringham, 1981) That is, Mormon leaders saw that protecting slavery might enable them to protect their own contested practice of polygamy in their settled territories.

The unquestioned claims to land articulated by Bundy and his followers erase the indigenous peoples who occupied Nevada for millennia prior to the arrival white settlers and obscure Mormon histories in promoting slavery and in the colonization and genocide of the American West. The point in this brief historical geography is the way it problematizes the naturalized settler colonialist discourses circulated by Bundy, his followers, and the media, and the ways in which these discourses reinforce white supremacy. This is indicative of the way white supremacy naturalizes the ongoing displacement of Native peoples in ways that hide and render silent the geographies of those who lived within the territorial US for millennia.

Naturalized understandings of the US settler histories and white entitlement obscure the processes of exploitation, expropriation, and marginalization that are fundamental to 'white settler epistemologies' (Seawright, 2014). Bundy's sense of his birthright claim to federal lands, even as he laments the use of federal supports for poor persons of color; the armed response of his supporters, who are represented not as terrorists but as patriots;<sup>5</sup> and his appropriation – however fleeting – by conservative

pundits seeking a sympathetic character to champion their political strategies of racialized and classed disinvestment – each of these dynamics saliently demonstrates the continued centrality of settler colonialism and white supremacy in the United States.

In this sense, reactions to Bundy's comments are indicative of broader racialized discourses in the US settler state that condemn racist words while simultaneously ignoring and sustaining white supremacist material practices and the landscapes that emerge from the socio-spatial configurations of settler colonialism and that lead to actual, material death. Moreover, they point to the significance of settler colonialism as a key lens through which to analyze the maintenance and operation of contemporary white supremacy. We draw from Bundy's example because it so saliently illustrates the ways race-class hierarchies meld with land-use histories and practices to differentially produce space and race (Pulido, 2006). Bundy was only 'dismissed' as a radical and outside of the mainstream when he uttered racially reprehensible *individual* views on African Americans. Bundy and his supporters were, in fact, celebrated for their armed confrontation with federal government (e.g. Gearty, 2014; Lee-Ashley, 2014). The fact that he was heralded as an American folk hero by many on the right when engaging in the fight over land claims in the American West, even as his supporters were literally taking up arms against US federal agents, is itself revelatory about the ways that white supremacy and settler logics are naturalized in and through geography and understandings of the landscape. In other words, white supremacy is not only the discursive act (uttering racist sentiments); rather, white supremacy is the *sine qua non* that animates the broader systems of racism that is foundational to understanding the unfolding of race and racism in settler states. By engaging with the theoretical contours of settler colonialism, genocide and

subordination can no longer be construed as unintentional artifacts of history.

A focus on the specific geographic conditions of settler colonialism centralizes the genocidal geographies against Native peoples and the naturalization of what McKittrick (2006) describes as 'black death' in the settling of the United States. Scholarship and understandings of the settling of the US that relegate slavery and genocide to the past through *historic* understandings of these processes has the material effect of 'making black [and, we would add, indigenous] geographies disappear' (Mahtani, 2014: 361). These displacements create 'a particular kind of static knowing – a supposedly objective material determinism' that has the ultimate effect of naturalizing black and indigenous deaths (Mahtani, 2014: 361). As McKittrick argues, contemporary understandings of blackness that locate slavery and the plantation in historic terms 'naturalize the disposed (black subjects) and render the spaces of the dispossessed (black geographies) as always already violent and violated' (2011: 961). Understandings that either ignore settler colonial legacies, or treat these as something that happened in the past, have the effect of:

undermining a rich black sense of place and black geographic knowledges. In other words, the limited means through which we make sense of black lives [and we would add the lives of indigenous peoples] effectively undermines the possibility and potential of a different kind of knowing of black experiences. (Mahtani, 2014: 362)

Perhaps more problematically is the way this reality meshes with contemporary neoliberal understandings of race and conservative political and economic discourse. The violence of state programs – from reservation containment and the denial of indigenous sovereignty, to the gutting of the limited social safety net, which was always already premised on an array of racial exclusions – extends from the marginalization

and displacement of lives that are rendered disposable and unremarked.

## VII Conclusion

We argue that a focus on white supremacy and settler colonialism illuminates the material practices of domination that lead to the exposure to premature death and sustain racism within settler societies. White supremacy is wrapped up in everyday geographies that continue to sustain material advantages of whiteness within settler colonial states. Our focus on white supremacy builds on studies of whiteness and white privilege to refocus discussions around questions of power and violence. While analysis of white privilege in geography reveals the systematized and often taken-for-granted power of whiteness, we argue that white supremacy is a more useful analytic that challenges and destabilizes the geographic reproduction of 'white worlds' (Gilborn, 2004) and white hegemony.

Recent critiques of white privilege underscore the ways whites are implicated in the reproduction of white supremacy and call anti-racist praxis in the context of the privilege literature into question. Perhaps most notably, Robyn Wiegman has been critical of what she calls 'the hegemony of liberal whiteness' (1999: 121; see also Ahmed, 2004, 2012; Giroux, 1997). She contends that while Whiteness Studies seeks to produce a white anti-racist subject that is disaffiliated from white supremacy, this ultimately requires a re-articulation of whiteness, thus reifying the material practices that give whiteness its power and meaning. In other words, seeking to disidentify from liberal whiteness reconstitutes a kind of counter-whiteness that allows white scholars and activists to hold onto the underlying structural condition of white supremacy while disassociating themselves from the 'unearned' privileges of the present.

Similarly, Sarah de Leeuw, Margo Greenwood, and Nicole Lindsey (2013) problematize

the 'good intentions' of liberal scholars and academic policies ostensibly seeking to redress racist and colonial histories (see also Ahmed, 2012; Berg, 2012). They argue that just as racial awareness has given rise to new subjectivities shaped by 'good intentions' and the desire to be anti-racist, subjective investments in unsettling colonialism are both situated within and actively expanding settler colonialism. As with Wiegman's (1999) critique of whiteness studies, De Leeuw, Greenwood, and Lindsey argue that well-intended scholarship and policies – produced through white settler subjectivities and embedded within settler institutions – often rely on gestures rather than structural change, which re-entrenches rather than destabilizes settler social formations.

We are particularly interested in these lines of inquiry as we think beyond white privilege to focus on white supremacy and settler colonialism. Moreover, we've argued that there is much to gain in engaging with the insights of settler colonialism in building a more robustly anti-racist geography (see De Leeuw et al., 2013; De Leeuw, 2014; Hunt, 2014; Hunt and Holmes, 2015; Pasternak, 2015; Dempsey et al., 2011). A settler colonial perspective illuminates the interconnections between colonization and anti-black and anti-indigenous racisms and understands them as an ongoing structure rather than a series of historic events. The example of the Bundy ranch is a 'colonial moment' (Kempf, 2010; Seawright, 2014), illustrating the unremarked 'expansion of the settler state' and the ways in which this social condition is premised on the interconnections of racial hierarchies and place (Arvin et al., 2013: 10). While this instance is grounded in a US context, broader understandings of white supremacy and settler colonialism that engage with processes of colonial dispossession have the potential to broaden anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggles (Inwood and Bonds, 2013). That is, within settler colonial nation-states, one cannot challenge the unfettered accumulation of capital without

also advocating for decolonization, and as a consequence, a robust anti-racist agenda cannot be developed in settler nations without recognizing the material conditions that gave rise to the differentially racialized geographies (Pulido, 2006) of settler nations in the first place.

Finally, the lack of a broader engagement with settler colonialism distorts our understanding of the central and ongoing roles that genocide and slavery play in the continuously and always unfolding white supremacist, settler colonial landscape and leads to incomplete understandings of the role race and whiteness continue to play in our everyday geographies. The idea of race is mediated on and through local histories that not only have come to define different groups, but is also the result of historically grounded structures and struggles (Allen, 2004). These historic struggles are important to contextualize because they form the basis for processes of 'differential racialization' (Pulido, 2006). This shifts focus from the social condition of whiteness and emphasis on individual experiences and unrecognized privileges to underscore the underlying institutions, structures, and power relations that sustain whiteness and its attendant privileges. By placing the genocidal geographies of forced removal *and* slavery centrally, settler colonialism accentuates a historicized focus on the underlying foundations of white supremacy as a continuously unfolding set of social, economic and political processes across the landscape. Seeing white supremacy this way allows us to relationally situate it within different historical and geographical contexts and to examine how it changes and morphs through time and space.

We believe geographers have much to offer broader treatments of settler colonialism and understandings of white supremacy. Anti-racist geographic scholarship can not only problematize settler colonialism, it can also illustrate the ways in which the discipline itself has been complicit with white supremacist settler projects.

Calling attention to the intertwined logics of settler colonialism and white supremacy not only foregrounds analysis of race, but broadens geographic engagements with race beyond the black/white binary that dominates much of the literature on race and racism within Anglo-geographic scholarship. As such, efforts to centralize race within the discipline must consolidate analysis of ongoing processes of colonization in settler nation-states.

Geography, in particular, is well positioned to explore how land use practices and histories connect to the legacies and permanence of these structures and to the development of new understandings of the ways in which genocide, land appropriation, and labor exploitation are tied to white supremacy and other structures of oppression. As a discipline we have much to offer in illustrating the materiality of racism and the uneven geographies of the ill-gotten wealth of colonialism. The effort to contextual settler societies necessarily pushes us beyond a focus on white privilege and instead places emphasis on the white supremacist foundations of the socio-spatial dialectic and the unfolding of space and place across settler colonial nations.

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### Notes

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1. Indeed, we have both drawn significantly from a white privilege theoretical framework in our own research and teaching.
  2. The process of constructing the Other both licenses their removal and legitimates their material death. This can be seen in everything from the murder of Trayvon Martin to gentrification discourses and is central to understanding the way race and identity are put to use to make land and people productive in very specific ways.
  3. While Bundy lost some supporters following these statements, it is worth noting that Republican presidential candidate and Kentucky Senator Rand Paul met with Cliven Bundy for the better part of an hour following a June 2015 campaign stop in Nevada to get Mr. Bundy's perspective on state's rights and federal lands, and that Mr. Bundy still is regularly referenced by many on the right when discussing federal overreach (Lerner, 2015).
  4. Examples of these anti-black sentiments include representations of blacks as a subordinate class of citizens and the prohibition of black admittance to the priesthood and of black missionaries (Bringhurst, 1981).
  5. Indeed, the very fact that Bundy supporters could engage in an armed confrontation with federal authorities is indicative of white supremacy in light of the frequency with which *unarmed* black and brown men and women are killed by the state in their everyday lives. Point-in-fact, the Malcolm X Grassroots Foundation released a report in 2012 that documents the killing of an African American by the police or extra-legal security forces every 36 hours. Additionally, the website [www.killedbypolice.net](http://www.killedbypolice.net) documents that in the first half of 2015 over 600 persons have been killed by police forces in the United States.
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