

Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming

Kim TallBear

In February 2017, the *Washington Post* began regularly using on its website a new slogan, “Democracy dies in darkness.” What melodrama for a capitol newspaper of a nation born of and sustained by genocidal “darkness” at home and overseas! One presumes the cherry-picked tragedy that prompted the slogan was none other than the presidential election of Donald Trump. But it is not only explicit white supremacists emboldened by Trump, nineteenth-century Indian killers, or today’s CEOs at the helm of resource-extraction companies who have accepted Indigenous elimination as the collateral damage of settler-state development. The evildoers of history, neo-Nazi demonstrators, and oil and gas companies sending dogs to attack unarmed Indigenous people resisting pipeline development are just easier targets for progressive critique. While the foundation of Indigenous elimination is one of white supremacy, it is not only white people in power who work to eliminate or erase Indigenous peoples. Dreaming, even in inclusive and multicultural tones, of developing an ideal settler state implicitly supports the elimination of Indigenous peoples from this place.

Scientists, technology developers, and environmental and social policymakers support alternately extracting or “stewarding” natural and human resources toward the goal of maintaining privilege in the United States and other settler states such as Canada. This has worked to eliminate Indigenous peoples, either explicitly or implicitly, as we and the remains of our ancestors continue to be removed from traditional homelands for both purposes. Whether the settler state wants to farm, build a mine or a city, pump oil, or cordon off a national park, the “resources” used to build these nation-states include the lands, waters, and other-than-human beings with whom Indigenous peoples are co-constituted. Indigenous peoples came into being *as* Peoples in longstanding and intricate relation with these continents and the other life forms here. Many Indigenous people have been eliminated. And for those of us who remain, our intimate relations with these lands and waters continue to be undercut and our memories

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relentlessly erased when the extractive nation-state continues to be dreamed. The late nineteenth-century assimilative mantra “Kill the Indian, save the man” implies not simply an attack on our cultures but more precisely an attack on the relations—both human and other-than-human—that make us who we are.

Central to the American Dream and to justifying the simultaneous genocide of humans and other-than-humans in the so-called Americas is the “animacy hierarchy” that places some beings below others. Strictly speaking, the ideas of being *animate* and *inanimate* posit categorical divides between entities—those seen to be alive and those deemed as not living, a divide defined organismically in dominant thinking. But Mel Chen, in the book *Animacies*, explains dominant cultural ideas that point to more gradation around greater and lesser relative degrees of sentience, aliveness, (self-)awareness, and agency among different entities. This hierarchy is actualized through the associated verbs/adjectives “animate” and de-animate” that refer to the greater and lesser aliveness attributed to humans over other-than-humans, to animals over plants, etc. The animacy hierarchy also de-animates many humans, including Indigenous and Black people, by placing them below the Western and often male subject.¹ I am indebted to Chen’s work on animacy for helping me think through the long assault on all of our relations—the beings who have co-constitutively inhabited these continents for millennia.

In rejecting the binaries of *life versus not life* and *humans versus nature*, as well as other more graduated Eurocentric hierarchies of life, I foreground an everyday Dakota understanding of existence that focuses on “being in good relation.” This analytical framework is at the center of my critique of the grand narrative of American exceptionalism. It is also translatable (not perfectly, of course) among different Indigenous traditions, and I welcome conversation with other Indigenous frameworks of relationality. Thinking in terms of being in relation, I propose an explicitly spatial narrative of *caretaking relations*—both human and other-than-human—as an alternative to the temporally progressive settler-colonial *American Dreaming* that is ever co-constituted with deadly hierarchies of life. A relational web as spatial metaphor requires us to pay attention to our relations and obligations here and now. It is a narrative that can help us resist those dreams of progress toward a never-arriving future of tolerance and good that paradoxically requires ongoing genocidal and anti-Black violence, as well as violence toward many de-animated bodies. The path toward the supposed democratic promised land of settler mythology is in everyday life a nightmare for many around the globe. American democracy not only “dies in darkness.” It is ever formed of hierarchical violence.

We require another narrative path to help us abandon the American Dream. A relational web framework can also articulate obligations across the generations, or over *time* if one is attached to that idea. However, I emphasize material connectedness among many generations: those whose bodies may now/still exist

within organismically defined understandings of life, those entities that do not meet that definition, and other bodies whose materiality has been transferred back to the earth and out into that web of relation, or whose bodies are not yet formed of already existing matter. I focus here, not then. How do we relate well in this place without that inherently eliminatory dreaming?

States (and Provinces) of Indigenous Elimination

In *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, Aileen Moreton-Robinson clarifies the irrevocable link between the maintenance of the US state and ongoing Indigenous elimination:

Migration, slavery, and the dispossession of Native Americans [were] integral to the project of nation building. Thus the question of how anyone came to be white or black in the United States is inextricably tied to the dispossession of the original owners and the assumption of white possession. . . . The United States as a white nation-state cannot exist without land and clearly defined borders; it is the legally defined and asserted territorial sovereignty that provides the context for national identifications of whiteness. In this way I argue that Native American dispossession indelibly marks configurations of white national identity.²

Yet Indigenous erasure is pervasive even in critical accounts of US empire, as Moreton-Robinson points out. Even progressive thinkers who otherwise link race, nation, class, immigration, and global capitalism fail to include Indigeneity within their analyses. Indeed, we are inundated in the United States and Canada with Trump-related media following the 2016 election. How much of it laments this moment, and sometimes even the US imperialistic moments that led here, *without* mentioning settler colonialism? Moreton-Robinson explains: “The conceptual links between the privileges and benefits that flow from American citizenship to Native American dispossession remain invisible. Instead, slavery, war, and migration are the narratives by which the historically contingent positionality of whiteness unfolds.”³ Whiteness and its nationalist and imperialistic violence, constituted within a binary of white versus Black, are analyzed and critiqued sufficiently in many minds without the need to recognize Indigenous dispossession. “Perhaps,” Moreton-Robinson surmises, “the selective historical amnesia displayed is partly the result of scholars not being epistemologically and ontologically open to being a disoriented, displaced, and diasporic racialized subject whose existence within the nation-state is predicated on the continuing divestment of Indigenous peoples’ sovereign rights.”⁴ Thus, even progressive national narratives imply that Indigenous peoples are inevitably vanishing, which does not square with Indigenous peoples’ own will to self-determination, our resistance to

state assimilation, and our demands therefore for ongoing access to and control over homelands and territories that are essential to our constitution as Peoples. No wonder our erasure is so common. Our demands are a threat to any vision of the settler state, whether Trump's vision or the visions of his many critics.

I am a Dakota woman who hails from both a South Dakota reservation and the relatively populous urban Indigenous community of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. I now live on the Canadian prairies, where Indigenous peoples constitute a higher percentage of the population than they do in the coastal areas of Canada. For over two decades I have worked with US tribes and other Indigenous communities across North America and globally on various environmental, science, and technology projects. I have been an Indigenous studies professor for over ten years at institutions in Arizona, California, Texas, and Alberta. From these vantage points, I see a pervasive will to eliminate Indigenous peoples, both physically and conceptually. US Americans deny we are here when they forget to name or reference us, whether in discussions of foundational moments in US history or of the latest US census and poverty statistics, or when they note all the groups they desire to be included in a multicultural future. When we are mentioned it is most often as artifacts of a waning time.

Non-Indigenous Americans build on the trope of the vanishing Indian, thus establishing us as a historical resource to own, distort, and exploit for their own well-being. For example, they get titillated when they wear us in caricature as sports mascots. They claim our metaphorical skins as *their* heritage. Americans appropriate the Indigenous dead in literal ways, too. They like to claim us as ancestors, translating that into being “part” Native American. Witness the Cherokee great-grandmother phenomenon, especially common in the US South, in which many Americans—Senator Elizabeth Warren among the most famous—claim Cherokee ancestry, often without documentation and always without lived kinship with Cherokee communities.⁵ An unproven family myth is sufficient evidence for them. In the case of Warren, her claims have been thoroughly *disproven* by Cherokee Nation genealogists, yet she continues to assert her right to claim a Cherokee lineage.⁶ This pattern is repeated among other well-known and lesser-known claimants of Indigenous lineages.⁷ No one will take their family stories from them!⁸

Similar unfounded ancestry claims are made with increasing frequency in Canada, most prominently in the eastern provinces. Previously identified white people and Black people (but mostly whites) are claiming to be Indigenous, most often “Métis,” because they might have a long-ago ancestor in their lineage. In this case, such claimants are compounding the harm of claiming to be Indigenous in a way that contravenes a living Indigenous community's own definition of itself. They also conflate having “mixed” Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry with being “Métis,” thus inappropriately racializing the category. The Métis Nation is rather a specific Indigenous People that has its ethnogenesis in

the Red River Valley (in what is present-day Manitoba) in the nineteenth century. It is not a unique ancestral “mixedness” (are not many peoples “mixed”?) that defines the Indigenous Nation that calls itself Métis but rather its existence as a People with a culture, language, and politics that developed out of very specific historical circumstances in a particular place.⁹ Non-Indigenous people claiming to be Métis misunderstand it as a label that they can appropriate to refer to having any North American Indigenous ancestry, actual or mythological. They hijack a term for their own purposes—a term firmly established for one and a half centuries that an Indigenous People articulates in its ongoing self-determined governance and cultural structures. Adam Gaudry and Darryl Leroux, among other prominent Indigenous studies scholars such as Chris Andersen, are mounting a sustained critique of this appropriation in Canada. They label the phenomenon “settler self-Indigenization” after Stephen Pearson’s use of the term in a 2013 issue of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*.¹⁰ There is so much claiming of Indigenous ancestors and history by non-Indigenous people as *their* history, as anchoring *their* right to represent and identify Indigeneity in their own bodies and lives while they very often do not have actual relations with living Indigenous communities.

It is telling that when contemporary topics—such as the Charlottesville Nazi demonstration at Confederate monuments and counterprotests, or the Trump/North Korea spat—are at play, *living* Indigenous communities’ interests and presence in the affected geographies go unreferenced. Did we hear anything in mainstream media about Indigenous peoples and the role of the Confederacy, the Civil War, and the historical legacy of the South in Indigenous genocide and ongoing dispossession? Did we hear anything in mainstream or even progressive media about the Indigenous peoples living in the Pacific where the United States and North Korea might take their bombastic warring to the level of nuclear confrontation? How much do we hear about Indigenous peoples’ interests in discussions of immigration and deportation in the United States and Canada, or related to Trump’s dystopian proposed wall on the US/Mexico border?

In his book *Playing Indian*, historian Philip J. Deloria cites British writer D. H. Lawrence’s early twentieth-century analysis of an “essentially ‘unfinished’ and incomplete” US American consciousness that produced “an unparalleled national identity crisis.” Lawrence wrote: “No place exerts its full influence upon a newcomer until the old inhabitant is dead or absorbed.” The “unexpressed spirit of America” could not be fulfilled without Indians being either exterminated or assimilated into white America.¹¹ Of course, it is not only white people who are Americans, and it is not only whites who would be Indians. The foundation is white supremacist, but many twenty-first-century multicultural citizens would aim to be our rightful inheritors.

I have written elsewhere that Indigenous people are like “the others” in the 2001 film by the same name.¹² Nicole Kidman’s character, Grace, cannot remem-

ber that she and her children have died: she smothered them and shot herself in a fit of lonely madness after her husband was killed in World War II. Throughout much of the film, she and the audience believe that “the others” that she hears and her children see are ghosts. Like Grace, settler-colonial culture is in denial of the unspeakable acts that commenced its present delusional state of being. Just like Grace cannot understand “the others” as living, settler states have difficulty remembering that Indigenous people actually live. Indigenous genocide is the genesis of settler states. Yet it is incomplete. Indigenous people must be de-animated if the appropriations are to continue and if settler states are to maintain dominion. The settlers hear us go bump. They are terrified of the moral and literal claims we make on the grounds of their country. As Grace denies “the others,” Indigenous voices and movements are denied as merely noise from the national house settling, not real(istic) demands at all. When Grace finally remembers her violent acts, she is horrified. It dawns on her with sickening force that she was a murderer and “the others” are neither apparitions nor aberrations in an otherwise moral and orderly world. The others are in fact the living. They are the most ordinary forms of all. Grace and her spirit children are the differently animated (I won’t call them ghosts!) who disrupt the space of the living. We see earlier in the film that Grace cannot leave. There is an impassable mist around the grounds of the house. Perhaps we can read in it a useful cliché of the mists of time. There is no going back, no leaving. She and her children must make accommodation, cede space, live here with the living.

Demographics and Indigenous Eliminations in the United States and Canada

I got tired of being treated like a ghost in the United States. I moved to Canada, which is not nearly far enough away. But Indigenous peoples are more seen in Canada, for better and for worse. I wonder if my ghost metaphor fails me here. Are Indians north of the 49th parallel not quite ghosts but rather still seen, more literally, as on the verge of death? On the life side of that precipice in the land called Canada, there is vibrant Indigenous media, more Indigenous coverage in mainstream media, a visible national Indigenous arts scene, and the fact that Indigenous peoples are less absorbed into a spectrum of official “minority” categories than we are in the United States. In Canadian law and the census, Indigenous peoples have a different categorical status, separate from “visible minorities,” which are defined as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race.”¹³ On the other hand, the US Census recognizes six racial categories, one of which is “American Indian and Alaska Native,” also abbreviated AIAN. This has important structural implications.

However, with the red/white race line being more prominent in the upper latitudes, explicit forms of anti-Indigenous racism are more visible. It is easier

to see in Canada ongoing literal elimination—actual physical assault against Indigenous bodies. This is not to say that the proportional statistics of violence against Indigenous bodies in the United States are very different than in Canada. In areas of the United States where Indigenous people constitute a significant minority, we also suffer the highest rates of poverty, racist violence, police profiling, etc. But Indigenous people constitute a much smaller percentage of the overall US population. And overall numbers matter in terms of the national visibility of Indigenous peoples and our circumstances. Racism against Indigenous peoples is a clear and visible attribute of the national racial landscape in Canada, whereas it tends to be less visible nationally in the United States. In Canada's 2011 National Household Survey (NHS), 4.3 percent of respondents reported an "Aboriginal" identity.¹⁴ In the United States, only 0.9 percent of 2010 US Census respondents marked "American Indian and Alaska Native [AIAN] alone." An additional .07 percent reported AIAN "in combination with one or more other races."¹⁵ I have only begun to understand comparative US and Canadian anti-Indigenity, but considerable research and lived experience in the United States also inform this preliminary assessment.

In the United States, on the other hand, the Black/white race line is a far more prominent feature of the country's racial landscape, including in foundational literature on race. Indeed, 13 percent of 2010 US Census respondents reported a Black identity, with an additional 1 percent reporting "Black in combination with one or more other races."¹⁶ In Canada in 2011, Black-identified people accounted for only 2.9 percent of the total population.¹⁷

The relatively greater visibility of Indigenous people in Canada is evident in relentless national coverage of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW), a problem so chronic that it has its own acronym and national inquiry. A specific case that helped instigate that inquiry was the 2015 murder in Winnipeg, Manitoba, of fifteen-year-old Tina Fontaine from Sagkeeng First Nation.¹⁸ Her alleged killer, then fifty-three-year-old Raymond Cormier, was secretly recorded confessing to wanting to have sex with her and stating that that is why she "got killed." Undercover tapes captured him saying that "he'd bet the girl was killed because he found out she was only 15 years old. 'I drew the line and that's why she got killed,' he said." There was no direct admission of guilt.¹⁹ Cormier maintained throughout that he did not know she was underage when he pursued her sexually. Her many photos on the Internet show her to appear quite young, even childlike. She also weighed less than eighty pounds. There was no forensic evidence of Cormier's involvement, or eyewitnesses. He was acquitted in February 2018.²⁰ Another Anishinaabe woman, Barbara Kentner, died of injuries after a trailer hitch was thrown at her from a passing car in Thunder Bay, Ontario.²¹ Eighteen-year-old white male Brayden Bushby has been charged with second-degree murder in her death and awaits trial as of this

writing.²² Thunder Bay has a notorious problem with passers-by yelling racial epithets at Indigenous people and throwing things at them from car windows. Journalist Tanya Talaga wrote a 2017 book about seven Indigenous high school students found dead in Thunder Bay between 2000 and 2011, including five found in local rivers.²³ There is also notable violence against Indigenous men in Canada. A recent high-profile case was the August 2016 killing of twenty-two-year-old Cree man Colten Boushie by white farmer Gerald Stanley. The defense hinged on the white farmer's right to protect property, including the right to kill an unarmed Indigenous man. Boushie had been riding with friends in a car that broke down on Stanley's property. Stanley testified in his trial that he feared the possibility of theft. There has been a rash of farm equipment thefts in Saskatchewan, and the stereotype is that Indigenous people are responsible. Despite shooting Boushie in the back of the head while he was unarmed and possibly unconscious, Stanley was acquitted of second-degree murder by an all-white jury in Battleford, Saskatchewan, on February 9, 2018. After the verdict was read, shouts of "Murderer!" were called out, and the jurors scurried or ran from the courtroom under armed guard. Saskatchewan is a relatively heavily Indigenous-populated province, with 15.6 percent of residents identifying as Aboriginal.²⁴ The venomous desire for Indigenous death continued in online hate speech after the verdict. Boushie's death was openly celebrated by anti-Indigenous people on Twitter and in a Facebook group called "Farmers with Firearms."²⁵

Vigils and days of action were held by Indigenous people in cities across Canada in the following weeks. Observing little accountability for ongoing white-on-Indigenous violence—whether individual or structural—Indigenous people across Canada recognize that the onslaught of hate against them and their children is sanctioned by the Canadian legal system.

I do not downplay the ongoing literal killing of Indigenous people. Rather, I emphasize that the appropriation of Indigenous identities and representations is a critical form of dispossession, and not less important as some commentators like to assert—e.g., "Don't we have more important things to worry about" than Native American mascots or Elizabeth Warren's Cherokee claims? It seems easier for people to understand the links between land dispossession and the physical elimination of Indigenous people: fewer Indigenous people historically meant more land for settlers. However, representational assaults and identity theft seem harder to comprehend as violent dispossession. But such acts are co-constituted with physical violence against Indigenous bodies and theft of material resources. The diverse ways of dispossessing Indigenous peoples are historically linked, each made more possible by settler-state institutions and individual citizens who seek (knowingly or not) the ongoing systemic elimination of Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada.

Settler Relations as Property

In conversation with Moreton-Robinson's important work on race and Indigeneity in settler-colonial contexts, I emphasize not literal killing here (linked to land as property) but two perhaps less widely understood forms of dispossession: (1) what I would refer to as the settler dispossession of Indigenous peoples, including our relations and other-than-human relatives—a dispossession that always aids settlers' appropriation of land—and (2) the appropriation of Indigenous history and identities. These property claims shore up the social and sometimes material well-being of non-Indigenous communities and individuals and help them both to justify past resource appropriation and to perpetuate it in novel ways today. Further, the dispossession of relations is tied to settler identity appropriation as settler definitions of family and relatedness come to redefine Indigenous identity.

These forms of disruption—both the appropriation of our social representations and the undercutting of our social relations of all kinds—with other-than-human relations, with place, with one another: these aggressive, persistent disruptions are *ownership* claims. They aid non-Indigenous people in their desire to belong to this land. In place of *active relating*—whether with living Indigenous communities and our other-than-human relatives here—non-Indigenous claimants to our representations, histories, and ancestors *affect a relationship of ownership or possession* with our biologicals (i.e., blood, DNA, and lineal biological descent narratives) and with place.²⁶ This sounds a lot like the settler state's imposition of compulsory settler monogamy and state-sanctioned marriage, institutions that rescript *relations* in ways that intimately co-construct them with/as private property. I write about the colonial role of settler monogamy and marriage elsewhere.²⁷ But it occurs to me in this writing that not only are *whiteness and the privileges it confers a valuable form of property*, as Cheryl Harris brilliantly theorized in 1993; *settler relations with both humans and other-than-humans are also enacted as property relations*.²⁸ Within an Indigenous logic of relationality, this makes settlers very bad kin.

In *The White Possessive*, Moreton-Robinson's analysis focuses on the dispossession of land. While I attempt to think whenever possible in terms of human *relating* with both human and other-than-human relatives rather than anyone's possession of them, terms such as “dispossession” and “property,” which convey ownership, may be the best we can do in English. (Moreton-Robinson acknowledges the ontological challenges as well.) Thus, the issue is not only that material dispossession of land and “resources” builds the settler state but also that “dispossession” undercuts co-constitutive relations between beings. Property literally undercuts Indigenous kinship and attempts to replace it. It objectifies the land and water and other-than-human beings as potentially owned resources. One can see the settler property regime undercutting kinship

between Indigenous people, too, as when Colten Boushie was ripped from this life, his family, and his community by a settler hell-bent on protecting literal property and, as Harris would note, that settler's white privilege as property. Boushie is of course a recent instance in a long line of Indigenous people violently torn from their kin, whether through massacre, dislocation, kidnapping, or incarceration in settler-state institutions. One can also see Indigenous relations with place overturned by the settler-state imposition of private property, co-produced with nuclear family forms and compulsory conversion to Christianity.

The Settler State Cannot Be Decolonized

University of Manitoba Indigenous studies professor Niigaan Sinclair—ironically, the son of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair—was quoted in a *CBC* article the day after Stanley's acquittal for the killing of Colten Boushie was delivered in Saskatchewan: "This is a night when you want to give up hope. This is a night when you believe, what's the point of it? What's the point of trying to change a country that doesn't want to change?"²⁹ Some white people, clearly invested in redeeming the nation-state, lamented Sinclair's words on Twitter and all too predictably offered a naïve liberal correction to his clearly heartbroken questions. They tweeted at him sentiments such as "We have to hope! Vote!" Voting for settler-state political candidates might lessen the suffering of some. But that is a low baseline and misses an important anticolonial point that can be drawn from Sinclair's and other Indigenous heartbreak across Canada after Boushie's death and the Stanley verdict. As George Lipsitz explains, expounding on Chandan Reddy's idea of "freedom with a violence":

Aggrieved groups are encouraged to seek inclusion and equality rather than justice. Desires for self-determination and dignity become channeled by the power structure into demands for roles inside oppressive systems rather than for changing those systems themselves. . . . Individuals from aggrieved groups can secure a small measure of inclusion by agreeing to participate in the state's violence against those outside the nation.³⁰

I often think of and sorrowfully lament how many Indigenous people, people of color, and other poor people have too few choices but to don a military uniform and fight US wars of aggression around the world. What I took from Sinclair's words in his moment of pain was a sense of hopelessness in the structure of the nation-state. The conceptual freedom I take from his words sparks me to continue thinking and hoping beyond the irredeemable state.

Radical Hope

Losing hope in the state redeeming itself is for me a move toward what Junot Díaz calls “radical hope.”³¹ In February 2018, I gave a keynote at the biennial conference of the Disasters, Displacement, and Human Rights Program (DDHR) of the University of Tennessee. The symposium description explained that “moments of transition bring about crisis, uncertainty, and even opportunity” and posed the question, “What factors shape whether a transition is a crisis or an opportunity, and in whose eyes?”

In a September 14, 2017, interview with Krista Tippett on the *On Being* podcast, Díaz essentially answered that question when he explained two entangled ideas, “misalignment” with the mainstream “emotional baseline” and the notion of “radical hope:

When we think about the state of the world . . . Trump is the latest, awful . . . turn. But . . . the world has been in an awful state for a long time. . . . I would not say that this is a different order of madness. I think it is a sharpening of the already present madness. . . . To point out that there [are] continuities is not to deny that there [are] new and novel aspects to this present terror. But ultimately . . . how are you conceptualizing this challenge? . . . The ability to do what our societies seem incapable and unwilling to do is important. . . . [T]here is nothing, I would argue, more critical than to be misaligned . . . with the emotional baseline of any mainstream society.³²

The emotional baseline with which I am misaligned is the incessant dreaming, in whatever political tone, of a successful settler state. Díaz then explained his idea of “hope”: “I do trust in the collective genius of all the people who have survived these wicked systems. I trust in that. I think from the bottom will the genius come that makes our ability to live with each other possible. I believe that with all my heart.” I will myself to have this kind of radical hope. What is the alternative? This crisis or transition time in the United States and Canada, and globally, offers an opportunity to cease cultivating a misplaced love for the state no matter the party in power. This moment offers an opportunity, if we choose to see it that way, to be misaligned with the emotional, intellectual, and (un)ethical baseline and narrative of those who hold power. Instead, we can have radical hope in a narrative that entails not redeeming the state but caring for one another as relations.

American and Canadian Dreaming Is Indigenous Elimination

We must strike blows whenever possible to the dominant narrative of a multicultural and supposedly progressive (always progressing toward greater good)

settler state. That narrative misguides us in our “genius” and in our ability to live with each other. Díaz explains that he is a child of Blackness, and “Blackness was not meant to survive.”³³ Indeed, settler-state dreaming is predicated on the extraction of resources from Black bodies, until they are dead, and from Indigenous lands, thus requiring our death, either literally or symbolically, in order to dispossess Indigenous peoples of our life-giving relations with these lands. Yet just as Díaz reminds us that Black people have survived and sometimes thrive, so have Indigenous peoples.

Yet in the months following the US election, I have read denial after implicit denial of Indigenous presence and experience in this land, including by friends and esteemed colleagues, mostly in the United States but also in Canada. Neil McKay, Spirit Lake Oyate citizen, Turtle Mountain Chippewa descendent, and University of Minnesota Dakota language instructor, opened the American Anthropological Association (AAA) meeting in Minneapolis on November 26, 2016, with a traditional welcome. Just a couple of weeks after Trump’s election, McKay pointed out that “our [Dakota] perspective is a little bit different because we have always been here.” This moment was not new. He reminded the thousands of anthropologists in that cavernous auditorium of the *ongoing* US American genocide and occupation: “This is Dakota land and you are illegally occupying it.” McKay spoke of treaties made between the Dakota and the United States—all violated by the Americans. He challenged people to learn about those treaties. Still, he welcomed people to our homeland, just as our ancestors did. It was so good to hear his words, many of them in Dakota. “We are still here.”³⁴

The sound of his footsteps still echoed on the stage when the following speaker, an anthropologist in an AAA leadership position and with the greatest of progressive intent, I am sure, took the microphone. She began to speak of this new and terrifying moment! Like so many other Americans—of all genders and races, religions and persuasions, in the press, on blogs, Facebook, Twitter—she spoke in an alarmist tone of regressed American democracy, of sliding backward, of needing to rally together in progressive action to recover what has been *lost*.

To lament the current moment in a way that dreams of US redemption is to sustain that fundamental condition of US existence—ongoing Indigenous elimination, a genocide that is simultaneously human and other-than-human and that has proceeded apace in the so-called Americas for 527 years and counting. To lament the Trump presidency via recourse to the dream of a better United States, or a better Canada, is to contribute to that elimination. These settler states and Indigenous genocide are co-constitutive. An *explicit* white supremacist inhabits the White House. Again. The United States and Canada celebrate many “founding fathers” who were of the same ilk. But Indigenous elimination did not cease under supposedly more enlightened, even antiracist, presidents or prime ministers. They have all defended inherently eliminatory settler states.

Settler colonialism as a structure must feed off Indigenous dispossession. It is not its only food, but it is a required nutrient. Without it, these states become weakened and will eventually pass away.

Cloaking oneself in a mascot caricature or myths of a Cherokee great-grandmother or Aboriginal ancestor several centuries ago does not undo complicity in eliminatory nationalism. It is yet more elimination. Representational appropriation, like appropriation of land and biological resources (our very DNA), is also a manifestation of White possessiveness, one that simultaneously renders us as fundamentally other according to a binary of alive versus dead/vanishing. Moreton-Robinson explains, “At an ontological level, the structure of subjective possession occurs through the imposition of one’s will-to-be on the thing that is perceived to lack will, thus it is open to being possessed.”³⁵ It is key to this line of thought that Indigenous people are often referenced as being “close to nature,” for as Moreton-Robinson points out: “Being perceived as living in a state of nature relegates one’s existence to being an inseparable part of nature and therefore incapable of possessing it.”³⁶ Instead, we Indigenous people *are possessed* like the land. Of course, we recognize our intimate relations in what others call “nature.” What we reject is the possessiveness associated with the hierarchy of human and nonhuman. As Koyungkawi poet Linda Noel explains: “I don’t mind being ‘close to nature.’ But I know what *they* mean when they say that, and it’s not what I mean.”³⁷

Twenty-First-Century Relations: Making Kin

If one refuses Indigenous elimination and a de-animating possession of us, then a new redemptive narrative, a different creative move, is required. If you/we are to live together in a good way here—as kin or as Peoples in alliance with reciprocal responsibilities to one another and to our other-than-human relatives with whose land, water, and animal bodies we are co-constituted—the American Dream in any form, whether White supremacist or “progressive,” cannot be our guiding hope. An important part of dismantling US hegemony and oppression is turning our eyes away from that story and toward another. This is no sudden move, and US exceptionalism, though it has suffered hard blows these past two years, will not be let go easily. Neither will Canadian exceptionalism be let go easily—especially with the big, bad threat to the south. We should be practicing in every possible moment small acts of visionary resistance and deep narrative and ontological revision that forgo the relentlessly violent love for the nation-state in favor of loving and caring for our relatives, both human and other-than-human, whose lives depend upon these lands.

Some may think that the twenty-first-century state has moved beyond coercive tactics that constructed nonwhites as “others” to be either killed or assimilated. We hear so much talk of diversity and inclusion. Ongoing US mili-

tary and police violence against those others disrupts that fantasy. But even the state's "multiculturalism," in which we see small tolerances for, say, Indigenous languages, the beating of drums, and the burning of sage in carefully contained moments, represents the idea that Indigenous people should be *included in* a nation that is assumed to be a done deal, its hegemony forever established. Indigenous peoples tend to have less interest in incorporation *into* a (liberal) settler worldview than in pushing for thriving Indigenous societies.

I propose *making kin* as an alternative approach to liberal multiculturalism, for righting relations gone bad. I have recently listened more closely to colleagues who focus on Indigenous kinship. Robert Alexander Innes, author of *Elder Brother and the Law of the People: Contemporary Kinship and Cowessess First Nation* (2013), blurs the lines between Indigenous peoples as dynamic kin groups and as "nations," with the latter term implying more cultural or even biological/racial stasis.³⁸ His work opens my mind to a new way of reading people-to-people relations as also potentially making kin. Gabrielle Tateyuskaskan, a Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate citizen, writer, and artist, also asks us Dakota to pay more attention to kinship in our analyses of the historical tensions that led to the 1862 war between our Dakota ancestors and settlers in what is today Minnesota. Tateyuskaskan reminded us one summer at our annual Oak Lake Writers' Society tribal writers' retreat in Oak Lake, South Dakota, that Dakota and European descendants were already heavily entangled through marriage and family at that time. This could explain my ancestor Chief Little Crow's misplaced expectations of kinship from newer arrivals who became settlers. I have since revisited sources on the 1862 war and now see Little Crow's efforts to make kin with other Dakota and with settlers where I had previously overlooked them. Tateyuskaskan calls for a more complex analysis of 1862 that highlights the political economy of war and conflict. How did the big capitalists in the Twin Cities benefit from and foment racial strife? The Dakota-US War of 1862 can be read in relation to perpetual US warfare designed to maintain empire and with corporate profit at the heart of it.

Calling non-Indigenous people into kin relations as a diplomatic strategy is a new and discomfiting idea to me, even while it may be an idea that was once common among my ancestors. While Indigenous families regularly make kin with white settlers and other non-Indigenous peoples, we do not anymore foreground this as diplomacy. We have focused since the early twentieth century more on tribal or Indigenous nation-building rhetoric and strategies that include reservation-based, urban, and national Indigenous institutions and self-governance structures. Making kin is making people into familiars in order to relate. This feels like a creative alternative to nationalist assertions of inherent sovereignty. It seems fundamentally different from negotiating relations between those who are seen as different—between "sovereigns" or "nations," especially when one of those nations is a heavily militarized and racist empire.

I recall Little Crow's kin-making a lot these days as I ponder the genocidal actions of the US settler state. I consider how things might have been different had more newcomers respected long-established ways of relating already in place. What if settlers had not been dead set on cultural evangelizing through governance, religion, and science? Making or creating kin can call non-Indigenous people (including those who do not fit well into the "settler" category) to be more accountable to Indigenous lifeways long constituted in intimate relation with this place. Kinship might inspire change, new ways of organizing and standing together in the face of state violence against both humans and the land. Thinking through the lens of kin in our understanding of relations between peoples, we might chip away at racial structures produced in concert with white supremacist states' nation-building, structures that kill Indigenous and other racialized and "othered" people. Like my Dakota ancestors, I am heartbroken at the world, both at home and abroad, that the racist settler state continues to build. I have come to see both kinship's historical veracity and its generous strategic advantage.

Harvard's Cornel West wrote in *The Guardian* on November 17, 2016, post-election:

We [must] build multiracial alliances to combat poverty and xenophobia, Wall Street crimes and war crimes, global warming and police abuse—and to protect precious rights and liberties. . . . [W]e must be a hope, a participant and a force for good as we face this catastrophe.

But Dr. West also spoke of "*our* democracy . . . slipping away." In his recognition of the many diverse peoples in the United States and abroad who have been wronged by US neoliberalism, not once did he reflect on Indigenous peoples, though the dispossession of our homelands is fundamental to providing the literal ground on which he lamented democratic loss.³⁹ Cornel West, like many of his fellow Americans, erases Indigeneity in the most inopportune times. Still, I stand with him in "multiracial alliance." But even more, I stand in alliance with relatives—both human and other-than-human—who suffer across the planet from the violence that is the American Dream.

In order to sustain good relations among all the beings that inhabit these lands, we must undercut settler (property) relations. Instead of killing the Indian to save the man, we must turn the ontological table. The twenty-first-century mantra must be to kill the settler and save us all. Or as my Indigenous studies colleague and Lakota relative Nick Estes put it in an email to me, we must commit "settler ontocide." This does not, of course, mean literal killing. It means ridding ourselves of the category of the settler along with its discourse of white supremacy and assertions of an inherent right to these lands and waters. This distinction is so obvious to Indigenous thinkers and the Black decolonial schol-

ars we also cite, but as Menominee scholar Enāemaehkiw Kesīqnaeh writes, the settler has “a deeply ingrained fear that in the revolution all that they have done will be visited back upon them by the global majority with great ferocity.”⁴⁰ How lacking in imagination and radical hope is the settler and his state.

NOTES

1. Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). I also have more to say on animacy and Indigenous standpoints in my chapter “Beyond the Life/Not Life Binary: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryo-preservation, Interspecies Thinking, and the New Materialisms,” in *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World*, ed. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 179–202.

2. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 51.

3. *Ibid.*, 55.

4. *Ibid.*, 61.

5. Circe Sturm, *Becoming Indian: The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-First Century* (Santa Fe, NM: School of Advanced Research Press, 2011).

6. Twila Barnes, “Elizabeth Warren Information,” *Thoughts from Polly’s Granddaughter*, <http://www.pollysgranddaughter.com/p/elizabeth-warren-information.html>, accessed March 15, 2018.

7. Kim TallBear, “Molecular Death and Redface Reincarnation: Indigenous Appropriations in the US and Canada,” in *Indigenous Foucault*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu and Chris Andersen, forthcoming.

8. ElizabethforMA, “Elizabeth Warren’s Speech to the National Congress of American Indians,” YouTube video, February 14, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAxHa92QmTc&feature=youtu.be>.

9. Chris Andersen, “From Nation to Population: The Racialisation of ‘Métis’ in the Canadian Census,” *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 347–368.

10. Stephen Pearson, “‘The Last Bastion of Colonialism’: Appalachian Settler Colonialism and Self-Indigenization,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 168, quoted in Adam Gaudry and Darryl Leroux, “White Settler Revisionism and Making Métis Everywhere: The Evocation of Métissage in Quebec and Nova Scotia,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 116–142. Also see Chris Andersen, *Métis: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

11. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), 40, quoted in Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 4.

12. TallBear, “Beyond the Life/Not Life Binary.”

13. See Government of Canada, “Employment Equity Act, S.C. 1995, c. 44, Assented to 1995-12-15,” <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/e-5.401/page-1.html?fbclid=IwAR2bq5CMY4mIA6zLKhCOJwaDaEG99UIyYr2cdaVK1U57qiPL8sYWRpoKUFw#h-1>, accessed February 11, 2019.

14. Statistics Canada, “Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: First Nations People, Métis and Inuit Aboriginal Peoples in Canada; First Nations People, Métis and Inuit,” 2011, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/99-011-x2011001-eng.cfm>, accessed February 12, 2018.

15. US Census Bureau, “American Indian and Alaska Native Population 2010, 2010 Census Briefs,” January 2012, <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/c2010br-10.pdf>, accessed February 11, 2019. While the 2010 US Census shows a 39 percent increase in the American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) population over the 2000 census, it is important to see the figure in the context of “playing Indian,” as historicized in Philip Deloria’s 2008 monograph of that title,

and also in relation to the “racial shifting” analyzed by Circe Sturm in her 2011 ethnography *Becoming Indian*. It is not uncommon, for example, for non-Indigenous people to claim a tribal identity (most often Cherokee), based on fabricated or inconclusive evidence of ancestry alone. The 2010 US Census for the first time allowed multiple race boxes to be checked. Analysts have noted significant in-migration to the AIAN category by people who previously identified with other racial categories. I find the lower AIAN population estimates more convincing.

16. US Census Bureau, “Race: The Black Population: 2010, 2010 Census Briefs,” September 2011, <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf>, accessed February 11, 2019.

17. See Statistics Canada, “Table 2: Number and Distribution of the Population Reporting an Aboriginal Identity and Percentage of Aboriginal People in the Population, Provinces, and Territories, 2011,” <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/2011001/tbl/tbl02-eng.cfm>, accessed February 11, 2019.

18. Katie Dangerfield, “How the Tragic Death of Tina Fontaine Helped Spark the MMIWG Inquiry,” *Global News*, February 23, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/4043492/tina-fontaine-march-mmiwg-inquiry/>.

19. See *Canadian Press*, “Tina Fontaine’s Death and Raymond Cormier’s Trial: What the Jury Heard,” February 22, 2018, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/tina-fontaine-s-death-and-raymond-cormier-s-trial-what-the-jury-heard-1.3815361>, accessed February 11, 2019.

20. See *Wikipedia*, “Death of Tina Fontaine,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Tina_Fontaine, accessed March 12, 2018. Also see Cameron MacLean, “Jury Finds Raymond Cormier Not Guilty in Death of Tina Fontaine,” *CBC News*, February 22, 2018, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/ramond-cormier-trial-verdict-tina-fontaine-1.4542319>.

21. Emma Prestwich, “Barbara Kentner, Indigenous Woman Hit by Trailer Hitch Thrown from Car, Dies,” *Huffington Post*, July 4, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/07/04/barbara-kentner-indigenous-woman-hit-by-trailer-hitch-thrown-fr_a_23015814/.

22. The trial is expected to take place in 2019.

23. Tanya Talaga, *Seven Fallen Feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2017).

24. Statistics Canada, “Table 2: Number and Distribution of the Population Reporting an Aboriginal Identity and Percentage of Aboriginal People in the Population, Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2011,” 2011, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-011-x/2011001/tbl/tbl02-eng.cfm>, accessed February 11, 2019.

25. Jason Warick, “No Hate Speech Charges Laid in Colten Boushie Case,” *CBC News Saskatoon*, February 18, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/colten-boushie-hate-speech-charges-1.3989413>, accessed February 11, 2019.

26. Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Also see Kim TallBear, “Genomic Articulations of Indigeneity,” *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 4 (2013): 509–533.

27. Kim TallBear, “Making Love beyond Settler Sex and Family,” in *Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations*, ed. Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 145–164.

28. Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1710–1791.

29. Niigaan Sinclair quoted in Aiden Geary, “‘I Don’t Have Any Hope Tonight’ Says U of M Native Studies Prof after Gerald Stanley Acquittal,” *CBC*, February 9, 2018, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-leaders-gerald-stanley-colten-boushie-not-guilty-1.4529777>.

30. George Lipsitz, “The White Possessive and Whiteness Studies,” *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 46.

31. Krista Tippett, “Junot Díaz: Radical Hope Is Our Best Weapon,” *On Being*, September 14, 2017, <https://onbeing.org/programs/junot-diaz-radical-hope-is-our-best-weapon-sep2017/>.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. Neil McKay spoke to an audience who at the previous year's meeting had brought to an association-wide vote a proposal to support the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. But American conversations in support of BDS rarely acknowledge ongoing US occupation and the US settler playbook that Israel seems to be copying.

35. Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 50, 114.

36. *Ibid.*, 117.

37. Linda Noel, Christine Hamilton, Anna Rodriguez, Angela James, Nathan Rich, David S. Edmunds, and Kim TallBear, "Bitter Medicine Is Stronger: A Recipe for Acorn Mush and the Recovery of Pomo Peoples of Northern California," in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirksey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 159.

38. Robert Alexander Innes, *Elder Brother and the Law of the People: Contemporary Kinship and Cowessess First Nation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013).

39. Cornel West, "Goodbye, American Neoliberalism: A New Era Is Here," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/17/american-neoliberalism-cornel-west-2016-election?CMP=share_btn_tw.

40. Enāemaehkiw Kesīqnaeh, "Indigenous Revengence: The White Fear of Savage Reprisal," *Maehkōn Ahpēhtesewen* (blog), May 26, 2016, <https://onkwehonwerising.wordpress.com>.