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Locating Settler Colonialism in Early American History

Jeffrey Ostler

IS settler colonialism simply a trendy buzzword, or will it become an enduring and useful concept in North American history in general and early American history in particular? Recent criticisms (some seen in print, some heard in conference sessions and hallways) object to theorizations and applications of settler colonialism that appear reductionist and teleological, arguably leave little room for contingency, and risk reversing advances in the field that highlight Native agency and resist declensionist narratives of Native disappearance. Other critical commentary seems to imply that settler colonialism may be a useful framework (at least for some times and places) if modified and more carefully applied, while still other commentary suggests that the concept is more or less useless, if not dangerous, and should be encouraged to expire.[1] Whether or not criticisms of settler colonialism will lead to the concept's elimination is anyone's guess. In my view, however, the concept is useful not simply as a theoretical construct but because it identifies an actual historical phenomenon. For that reason, it should be interrogated and refined, but it should also be retained. In other words, in the same way that scholars who object to particular theories of capitalism seldom deny capitalism's reality, problems in theorizing settler colonialism do not mean that it does not exist. If settler colonialism is a name for an actual historical phenomenon, where and when can it be found in early American history?

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[1] For criticisms and reservations about settler colonialism, see Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel, "Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 1–32; Tim Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 297–310; Andrew C. Isenberg and Lawrence H. Kessler, "Settler Colonialism and the Environmental History of the North American West," *Journal of the West* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 57–66; Patricia Limerick, "Comments on Settler Colonialism and the American West," *Journal of the West* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 90–96; Daniel K. Richter, "His Own, Their Own: Settler Colonialism, Native Peoples, and Imperial Balances of Power in Eastern North America, 1660–1715," in *The World of Colonial America: An Atlantic Handbook*, ed. Ignacio Gallup-Diaz (New York, 2017), 209–33.

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One place is in the founding of the United States, a process beginning with the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and ending around twenty-five years later with the Constitution's ratification. Although some accounts of the coming of the American Revolution continue to focus exclusively on matters of taxation and urban protest, a growing body of scholarship, partly inspired by a general recognition that American Indians are central to early American history, has emphasized the role of the 1763 Royal Proclamation, which restricted western settlement and created uncertainties for speculators in Indian lands.[2] Although this scholarship has not necessarily invoked the concept of settler colonialism, it leads to the conclusion that a central purpose of the founding of the United States was to secure the freedom to convert Indian lands into private property, a process that meant, to use settler colonialism's terminology, the elimination of Indigenous people. This purpose was revealed during the Revolutionary War through U.S. military operations against Native nations that aimed not simply to defeat Indians allied with the British but to destroy Natives' resistance to colonial settlement in general and thus gain control over their lands.[3] The importance of obtaining Native lands was also evident in the making of the Constitution, which established mechanisms for funding a national army to subjugate the multinational confederacy (including Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, Ottawas, Potawatomis, Miamis, Chickamauga Cherokees, and others) formed to defend its Ohio Valley territories in the late 1780s and early 1790s.[4] Combined with the Northwest Ordinance (1787), which allowed new states to be admitted "on an equal footing" while at the same time sanctioning genocidal war against Native nations that resisted U.S. demands for their lands, the Constitution's federalism provided a framework for containing tensions between frontier/localism on the one hand and metropolitan/national authority on the other. In doing so, the nation's founding document created the cohesion necessary to pursue elimination.[5]

[2] See Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 3–38; Colin G. Calloway, *The Scratch of a Pen: 1763 and the Transformation of North America* (New York, 2006), 98–99.

[3] Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750–1804* (New York, 2016). Taylor writes that "the Patriot cause merged a frontier hunger for Indian land with a dread of British power" (ibid., 251).

[4] George Ablavsky, "The Savage Constitution," *Duke Law Journal* 63, no. 5 (February 2014): 999–1089.

[5] For the Northwest Ordinance, see Roscoe R. Hill, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789* (Washington, D.C., 1936), 32: 334–43 (quotation, 32: 339). For the generally overlooked "just and lawful war" clause of the Northwest Ordinance sanctioning genocidal warfare against resisting Indians, see Jeffrey Ostler, "'Just and Lawful War' as Genocidal War in the (United States) Northwest Ordinance and Northwest Territory, 1787–1832," *Journal of Genocide Research* 18, no. 1 (February 2016): 1–20.

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To identify the elimination of Native people as central to the United States' founding does not mean that they were actually eliminated. Although the United States claimed a good portion of eastern North America, its ambitions often exceeded its capacity, especially in its early years. But the United States was nothing if not relentless, and even after military failures, most notably the Native confederacy's defeat of Arthur St. Clair's army in 1791, the federal, state, and territorial governments continued to mobilize fresh bodies for war and thereby wear down Native resistance. Using treaties as a mechanism for dispossession, the United States chipped away at Native lands in the Southeast, the Ohio Valley, and the lower Great Lakes region. After the Louisiana Purchase, U.S. officials began to prepare for the removal of most eastern Native nations by obtaining land cessions from nations west of the Mississippi and trying to persuade eastern nations to move west. But the United States lacked the capacity to force Indians west until the 1830s and 1840s. Even then, removal was an incomplete process. Many Native people and communities west of the Appalachians and in upstate New York successfully resisted removal, while others on the Eastern Seaboard were exempt from the policy, their lands so diminished as to make removal unnecessary.

A snapshot of eastern North America taken at any particular time from the 1780s to the 1850s, then, will reveal a variety of experiences and interactions. Some of these, such as a U.S. commission threatening leaders of a Native community with genocidal war if they failed to comply with demands to cede a substantial portion of their land or hundreds of people dying on any one of the dozens of trails of tears of the 1830s and 1840s, clearly reveal a national commitment to elimination. Any snapshot, though, is also likely to show Native communities engaging the surrounding capitalist economy, selling hogs, cotton, grain, maple sugar, lead, baskets, fish, feathers, medicinal plants, and peltries in local, regional, and national markets. It will also show Native people selling their labor, sometimes by the day or season, on small farms or large plantations or in urban households, and sometimes for longer periods in military service or on whaling vessels. Depending on when the snapshot is taken and its precise angle, an image might reveal little in the way of eliminatory processes and perhaps suggest that settler colonialism is only one of many frameworks for understanding U.S.-Indian relations. But an analysis resting on synchronic pictures prevents us from discerning broader trends over time. By 1850, the United States had removed roughly three-quarters of the Native population living east of the Mississippi in 1830 (and had caused great loss of life in doing so).[6] With the exception of Ojibwe communities in north-

[6] Jeffrey Ostler, *Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas* (New Haven, Conn., 2019), 361.

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eastern Minnesota, Native communities east of the Mississippi had lost almost all of their original territory (though many remained on greatly reduced land bases). Settler colonialism was not total, but the United States had to a significant degree achieved what it had intended at its founding: the replacement of Indians with its own citizens, many owning enslaved people.

If a case can be made for the applicability of settler colonialism anywhere in early American history, it would have to be in the early republic and antebellum United States. But can it be found in earlier times and places, and, if so, was it significant? Historiographical developments over the past thirty years that have identified middle grounds of mutual accommodation and Native grounds of Indigenous autonomy and power suggest that settler colonialism may be at most a minor theme for continental North America in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and much of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[7] These historiographical developments also caution against embracing settler colonialism as an overarching framework lest it revive discarded narratives of powerful colonizers acting on largely victimized Native communities. If anything, much of the recent work on North America seems to add to or reinforce our knowledge of relationships that cannot easily be characterized as settler colonial in nature. The outpouring of literature on the European enslavement of Native people (the "other slavery"), for example, appears to reveal a logic of exploitation characteristic of extractive colonialism rather than a logic of elimination (even though enslavement had eliminatory consequences).[8] Similarly, scholarship focusing on trading economies and Native labor in industries such as whaling identifies relationships that may be colonial but not settler colonial.[9] Nonetheless, although only a minority of Native communities in North America were directly affected by settler colonialism in the

[7] Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia, 2006); Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2007); Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, Conn., 2008).

[8] Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717* (New Haven, Conn., 2002); Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012); Margaret Ellen Newell, *Brethren by Nature: New England Indians, Colonists, and the Origins of American Slavery* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2015); Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered History of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston, 2016). For extractive colonialism and other forms of colonialism, see Nancy Shoemaker, "A Typology of Colonialism," *Perspectives on History* 53, no. 7 (October 2015): 29–30.

[9] Nancy Shoemaker, *Native American Whalemen and the World: Indigenous Encounters and the Contingency of Race* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2015); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indigenous Prosperity and American Conquest: Indian Women of the Ohio River Valley, 1690–1792* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 2018).

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seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, settler colonial projects had broad reach and uniquely totalizing ambitions that made them more consequential than a simple calculation of their presence at any given time might indicate.

Native people themselves recognized early on the potential of settler colonialism to overwhelm and destroy their communities. As early as 1642, the Narragansett sachem Miantonomi famously warned Indians in southern New England that "these English having gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes felled the trees; their cows and horses eat the grass, and their hogs spoil our clam banks, and we shall all be starved."[10] By the time Miantonomi spoke, as an impressive and rich literature over the past generation has fleshed out, Native nations in the region had developed elaborate economic and political alliances with different groups of colonists and were deeply divided among themselves.[11] But as important as it is to recognize cross-cutting alliances, conflicting agendas, and internal divisions, a historiographical takeaway that stops at these complexities obscures deeper structures and broader trajectories. Miantonomi's words can be read as an empirical account of conditions in a limited portion of New England and a failed plea for unity at a particular moment in time, but they might also be understood as prophecy: they identified processes that would continue to gain momentum and lead to greater Native unity, culminating in a war of resistance (King Philip's War in 1675–76) and, by the mid-eighteenth century, the massive dispossession of Native communities in southern New England. In the late 1820s, when the Pequot scholar and activist William Apess wrote of the "unfortunate aborigines of this country . . . driven from their native soil by the sword of the invader," he offered a reading of the history of New England that might be dismissed as reductionist if provided by a historian today, but Apess's account, as Miantonomi feared, was not wrong.[12]

[10] Lion Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres" (1660), in Charles Orr, ed., *History of the Pequot War: The Contemporary Accounts of Mason, Underhill, Vincent, and Gardener* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1897), 142–43, quoted in Julie A. Fisher and David J. Silverman, *Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts: Diplomacy, War, and the Balance of Power in Seventeenth-Century New England and Indian Country* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2014), 49.

[11] See for example James D. Drake, *King Philip's War: Civil War in New England, 1675–1676* (Amherst, Mass., 1999); Jenny Hale Pulsipher, *Subjects unto the Same King: Indians, English, and the Contest for Authority in Colonial New England* (Philadelphia, 2005).

[12] William Apess, *A Son of the Forest: The Experience of William Apess, a Native of the Forest, Written by Himself*, in *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, ed. Barry O'Connell (Amherst, Mass., 1992), 61 (quotation). For a detailed community study of the processes of dispossession emphasizing Native agency, see Jean M. O'Brien, *Dispossession by Degrees: Indian Land and Identity in Natick, Massachusetts, 1650–1790* (Cambridge, 1997).

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Many early Americanists might agree that settler colonial processes were at work in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century New England and other places along the Eastern Seaboard (although in some of those locations it took the form of plantation agriculture using enslaved labor). But can settler colonialism be found beyond the Atlantic seaboard during this period? Most of what we see is something else. It is hardly a secret that, as late as 1750, almost all of the continent west of the Appalachians was controlled by Native nations. Native ways of life had been affected by Europeans through the introduction of horses and firearms, exposure to crowd diseases such as measles and smallpox, and Native participation (sometimes unwilling) in emerging markets for peltries and slaves. One could find Spanish forts, outposts, and missions in the borderlands of La Florida, the Gulf Coast, Texas, and New Mexico; French trading posts in the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley; and British trading posts in the eastern Great Lakes region and the "backcountry" of the British colonies, but these small areas of occupation hardly seem to be instances of settler colonialism. As recent scholarship has emphasized, European traders should be seen less as indicators of European power and more as dependents in a Native world, and the claims of European empires should be seen as fragile, if not chimerical altogether.[13] Some colonial enclaves outside the British colonies—the Saint Lawrence River valley and Louisiana—might be considered settler colonies, though the population within these two areas engaged in agricultural production grew slowly and remained modest at midcentury.[14]

Despite settler colonialism's modest on-the-ground presence in the mid-eighteenth century, Native people in much of the continent were being affected by it indirectly. As noted above, European projects of enslaving Native people do not appear to be settler colonial since enslavers did not intend to permanently occupy the lands of the people they were encouraging Native raiders to enslave. But categorizing these projects solely on the basis of their "supply side" overlooks how enslavement was

[13] Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia, 2012); Michael A. McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (New York, 2015).

[14] Although French Louisiana had a relatively small population (4,100 slaves; 3,300 settlers; and 600 soldiers in Louisiana in 1746) and engaged in trading relationships with many Native communities, settler encroachment on Natchez lands sparked a genocidal war. See Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Williamsburg, Va., and Chapel Hill, N.C., 1992), 65–76, 80. Allan Greer shows that although French settlement in the St. Lawrence Valley could accommodate Native communities, over time the slow growth of a settler population in the first half of the eighteenth century led to escalating dispossession. Greer, *Property and Dispossession: Native, Empires, and Land in Early Modern North America* (Cambridge, 2018), 177–87.

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fueled by settler demand. In some cases—such as the Saint Lawrence Valley or New England—enslaved Indians were exploited in European colonies that were not fundamentally structured by slavery (societies with slaves), and in other cases—such as Jamaica, Martinique, or Barbados—they were exploited in European colonies that were fundamentally structured by slavery (slave societies). Regardless of this distinction, however, all these colonies were permanent and therefore constructed in places of prior and ongoing Indigenous elimination. Similarly, the fur trade depended not just on an Atlantic mercantile economy but also on bases in North America that often took on a settler colonial character. As time went on, traders in deerskins and beaver pelts promoted the agricultural potential of Indian lands, recognizing as they did the possibility, inherent to European colonization of the western hemisphere, of permanent European agricultural colonies replacing Indigenous communities.[15]

Beyond quantifying the extent of settler colonialism at any particular moment, there is a deeper question of its origins and trajectory. Any historical account of settler colonialism must analyze developments late in the chronology claimed by early Americanists, such as the explosion of Anglophone settler populations and the emergence of legal regimes establishing settler sovereignty and denying Indigenous sovereignty and full ownership of their lands in the early nineteenth century.[16] But in the same way that historians of capitalism would not limit their analysis to the Industrial Revolution, a fully historical account of settler colonialism needs to go back in time to the seventeenth, sixteenth, and perhaps earlier centuries.

Does settler colonialism provide a framework for early American history? If what is meant by a settler colonial framework is that all work in the field must either be grounded in its explicit narrative or be in theoretical engagement with it, the answer must be no. There is so much rich and diverse work in #VastEarlyAmerica that it would be a mistake to prescribe a single framework for containing it all. In other words, early American historians should keep doing what they are doing, whether it can be framed in terms of settler colonialism or not. But if what is meant by a settler colonial framework is that our general thinking about major trends over time should account for settler colonialism as a growing presence

[15] See for example James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999), 295: Merrell notes that the trader George Croghan described Indian country as the "best pasture in the World."

[16] For the Anglophone population explosion, see James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783–1939* (New York, 2009); for the emergence of "perfect settler sovereignty," see Lisa Ford, *Settler Sovereignty: Jurisdiction and Indigenous People in America and Australia, 1788–1836* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), 183.

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with uniquely totalizing capacities and ambitions, then that sort of framework provides an opportunity, not a burden, to early Americanists. Given early American history's chronological and geographic sweep, the field is particularly well positioned to historicize settler colonialism by considering its origins and analyzing its development over time, taking into account how it intersected with other forms of colonialism and how it was shaped by the actions of Native peoples themselves as they analyzed what they were up against and took action to avoid elimination.

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