

ON THE ECOMATERIALITY OF RACIAL-COLONIAL DOMINATION IN RHODE ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

What insights might attending to the cyclical history of colonially imposed environmental change experienced by Indigenous peoples offer to critical intellectual projects concerned with race? How might our understanding of race shift if we took Indigenous peoples' concerns with the usurpation and transformation of land seriously? Motivated by these broader questions, in this chapter, I deploy an approach to the critical inquiry of race that I have tentatively been calling anticolonial environmental sociology. As a single iteration of the anticolonial environmental sociology of race, this chapter focuses on Native (American) perspectives on land and experiences with colonialism. I argue that thinking with Native conceptualizations of land forces us to confront the ecomateriality of race that so often escapes sight in conventional analyses. The chapter proceeds by first theorizing the ecomateriality of race by thinking with recent critical theorizing on colonial racialization, alongside Native conceptualizations of land. To further explicate this theoretical argument, I then turn to an historical excavation of the relations between settlers, Natives, and the land in Rhode Island that is organized according to spatiotemporal distinctions that punctuate Native land relations in this particular global region: the Reservation, the Plantation, and the Narragansett.

Keywords: Racial-colonial domination; environment; land; settler colonialism; violence; dispossession

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, I took a bus from Providence, Rhode Island, to New York City for the People’s Climate March. At the time, the march was the largest and most diverse climate change–related demonstration in history, with an estimated attendance of over 300,000 people and contingents representing an array of interests – from wildlife preservation to prison abolition. Contingents on the frontlines of the crisis, including environmental justice, Indigenous, and other communities first and most affected by climate change, led the march through the streets of Manhattan. One group of women carried a large banner that read, “RESPECT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES RIGHTS/END CO₂LONIALISM.” From their perspective, the proliferation of carbon dioxide (and other greenhouse gases) into the atmosphere and the destabilizing effect it has had on the global climate is inseparable from the ongoing violence of colonialism. By demanding an end to “CO₂LONIALISM,” these women communicated an important point that Potawatomi philosopher [Kyle Powys Whyte \(2016\)](#) would later articulate when arguing that

...climate injustice is a recent episode of a cyclical history of colonialism inflicting anthropogenic environmental change on Indigenous peoples...Climate injustice, for Indigenous peoples, is less about the specter of a new future and more like the experience of *déjà vu*. (p. 88)

What insights might attending to this cyclical history of colonially imposed environmental change experienced by Indigenous peoples offer to critical intellectual projects concerned with race? How might our understanding of race shift if we took Indigenous peoples’ concerns with the usurpation and transformation of land seriously? Motivated by these broader questions, in this chapter, I deploy an approach to the critical, historical, and global interrogation of race that I have tentatively been calling an anticolonial environmental sociology. As a single iteration of the anticolonial environmental sociology of race ([Murphy, 2020](#)), this chapter attends to Native (American) perspectives on land and experiences with colonialism.¹ If climate injustice – and therefore climate change – feels like *déjà vu* for Indigenous peoples, it is because for centuries they have been subjected to and engulfed by racial and colonial configurations of land. Thus, the empirical question guiding my analysis is: how exactly is race, more specifically racialization, implicated in settler-colonial land (re)configurations? To explore this question, I excavate the history of relations between settlers, Natives, and the land, in Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

Why Rhode Island? There are two main reasons, one analytic and the other normative. Analytically, this research could have focused anywhere within the United States, including Hawaii and Alaska, as there is not a single place in the United States or its extended imperial territory that has not been profoundly shaped by the genocide, dispossession, and displacement of Native and other Indigenous peoples. However, as one of the original North American English plantation settlements that later became a state (in the federation of the United States), Rhode Island is situated such that its history provides an ideal context for the inquiry advanced in this chapter. While the European conquest of the

Western Hemisphere and North America was carried out on behalf of multiple imperial powers, it was the Euro-American descendants of these 13 English colonies that would manifest their desire and purported destiny to “overspread and possess the whole of the continent.”² More importantly, though, I am ethically committed to modalities of knowledge production that counter American sociology’s long-standing propensity to hide from its own settler-colonial context.³ For me, a large part of this endeavor means critically engaging with the histories of settler-colonial violence that continue to haunt the places that non-Natives, like myself, have called home in North America. Rhode Island is one such place for me.⁴

In the following, after a theoretical elaboration on the ecomateriality of racial-colonial domination in the next section, I turn to the history of relations between settlers, Natives, and the land, in Rhode Island. Rather than telling a linear history that begins with colonial settlement and works its way forward, my analysis begins in the present and works its way deeper through the layers of this history – deeper into the past. The intention driving this departure from sociohistorical convention is the necessity of foregrounding the persistence of racial violence and its ecomateriality within the settler-colonial order. Countering American sociology’s long-held tendency to relegate Native life and presence to the past, I begin this analysis by thinking about the reservation as a racial and colonial formation that demands sociological attention, especially from an anticolonial (postcolonial or decolonial) approach. Moving deeper into the strata of Rhode Island’s colonial history, I then turn to the invasion of the region by English settlers, emphasizing the material reconstitution of the land at the expense of Natives and their relations with the rest of nature. Finally, digging even deeper, I turn to Narragansett life before engulfment by settler society. This is a reminder that there were other ways of organizing human relations with the land, that produced drastically different environments than that created by settlers. The point is certainly not to romanticize an idyllic Indigenous past, but rather to acknowledge what was lost in the transformation of the lands that Native peoples belonged to into white possessions. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the precolonial, Native mode of life, my intent is to further highlight the racialized organization of land that was imposed by colonial agents centuries ago.

THE ECOMATERIALITY OF RACIAL-COLONIAL DOMINATION: THEORIZING RACIALIZATION, COLONIALISM, AND THE RECONSTITUTION OF NATIVE LAND

As briefly discussed in the introduction, this chapter furthers an anticolonial environmental sociology of race that is empirically anchored in the settler-colonial context of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. Before proceeding to this analysis, I want to further clarify the theoretical intervention motivating the historical inquiry.

Within sociology, a number of divergent theoretical perspectives on race, racism, and racialization abound (Omi & Winant, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2001, 2006; Treitler, 2013; Golash-Boza, 2016), but colonialism and imperialism are often underemphasized in these approaches that characterize the mainstream. At times, when these approaches do discuss colonialism, it is treated as the historical origin of modern racializing processes but not a key component of the ongoing sociological significance of race. In response to this predicament, which is characteristic of the broader imperial episteme within which modern social knowledge is situated (Go, 2016a), scholars have suggested the need for postcolonial and decolonial approaches to sociological study of race capable of apprehending the ongoing importance of empire and colonialism (Go, 2018; Magubane, 2013). For instance, in Go's (2018) recent elaboration of a post-colonial sociology of race, he sets out for tasks: "(1) analytically recover empire and colonialism and their legacies, (2) excavate colonial racialization and trace its continuities into the present, (3) reveal the reciprocal constitution of racialized identities that began under empire, and (4) critique the imperial standpoint and seek out the subjugated epistemologies of racialized subjects" (p. 439–430). This approach to race would build upon the foundations set by anticolonial thinkers like Du Bois (1947/2007b; see also Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020) and Fanon (1961/2004; see also Go, 2016b) among others.

Exemplifying what Cedric Robinson (2000) identifies as the Black Radical Tradition, Du Bois's vast body of work pointed to the centrality of racial/colonial capitalism for understanding modern social relations, at multiple levels of analysis, from the subjective to the structural (Weiner, 2018; Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015, 2020). Consider, for example, his writings on whiteness. "The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing," Du Bois proclaimed (Du Bois, 1920/2007a, p. 29). This "new religion of whiteness" manifested in the belief that

...every great soul the world ever saw was a white man's soul; that every great thought the world ever was a white man's thought; that every great deed the world ever did was a white man's deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man's dream. (p. 30)

Moreover, whiteness gave those believing themselves such "title to the universe" (Du Bois, 1920/2007a). This "consciousness of high descent," as Du Bois called it, "brings a burning desire to spread the gift abroad" (Du Bois, 1920/2007a). Hence, for Du Bois, "the color line" belts the world demarcating whose lives are expendable and exploitable in Europe's project of global domination.⁵ Likewise, in *The World and Africa*, Du Bois counters prevailing thought that rationalized the enslavement of Africa and its descendants by omitting Africa from world history by activating the subaltern standpoint to write a history of the world from the African point of view (1947/2007, p. xxxi). In chapters like "The White Masters of the World" and "The Rape of Africa," Du Bois details the consequences of Europe's global project of racial-colonial domination, paying particular attention to the world historical significance of the trade in African captives and the subsequent colonization of Africa by various European powers.

Nevertheless, like many of the scholars of race to follow him, Du Bois paid far less attention to the Natives of America and their experiences in the history of racial and colonial domination. This is likely because, as one scholar notes,

...by the time Du Bois made his prediction about the color line the frontier had been “closed” for thirteen years, and the massacre at Wounded Knee had effectively ended a generation of continuous warfare between the federal government and [N]ative groups. (Conn, 2006, p. 1)

Thus, while Du Bois was very critical of European colonial endeavors on a global scale, he largely failed to register the settler-colonial situation in the country of his own birth.

“For the most part,” as Wilkes and Jacob (2006) suggest,

...the information that we as sociologists have about race (at least with respect to the US and Canadian contexts) largely comes from studies of African Americans, Asians, Hispanics, and more recent, Whites. (p. 423)

Thus, despite the vital contributions of many Native sociologists, including but not limited to Duane Champagne (1989, 2006), C. Matthew Snipp (1989, 1992), James Fenelon (1998, 2016), Angela Gonzales (2007, 2009), Michelle Jacob (2013), Dwanna McKay (formerly Robertson; 2015), and Vanessa Watts (2013), the critical sociological study of race still tends to sequester Native experiences and perspectives to the margins. However, rather than simply incorporating Native peoples into dominant theoretical frameworks (e.g., racial formation theory, systemic racism, racialized social systems, etc.), I am more interested in considering how Indigenous standpoints can push us toward thinking race otherwise. To this end, I want to explore the idea that there is an ecomaterial – that is to say, an ecological, material, and environmental – significance to race that exceeds the symbolic ascription of physical, cultural, and/or mental differences to discrete “human” bodies or groups for the purposes of social discrimination, exclusion, and/or exploitation. In order to apprehend this ecomateriality, we must attend to the interlaced operations of colonial and racial subjugation, which from certain subaltern perspectives – Native (North American) in this particular instance – were always rooted in the land and its reconstitution by colonial forces.

What I mean to suggest is that from the vantage of the people dispossessed and displaced by settler colonial domination, the imposition of a racial order was never *only* a matter of exclusion or exploitation of certain social groups in an unfolding history of progress toward democracy and freedom. To maintain this way of thinking about race – as simply social exclusion, exploitation, isolation – is to further conceal the fact that the colonial violence of dispossessing Native peoples of their land and life is foundational and not epiphenomenal to the racial/colonial order of the United States (Byrd, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, 2012; Glenn, 2015; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Wolfe, 2016; McKay, Vinyeta, & Norgaard, 2020). Working against this way of understanding race requires taking Native peoples’ conceptualizations of land seriously, thereby also overcoming one of sociology’s “ontological myopias” (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2015). At the same time, this analytic maneuver recognizes that

Europe's conquest of the American continent has been first and foremost a spatial, that is, a global event – the dislocation of Europeans to the Americas and other parts of the planet and the engulfment of natives, their lands, and the resources of those lands. (da Silva, 2007, p. 2)

While decades of research in the subfield of environmental sociology consistently indicates that race plays a definitive role in shaping the quality of environments in which people live, work, and play,⁷ this scholarship often lacks an adequate theorization of race as a sociohistorical phenomenon rooted in colonial domination. At the same time, sociologists focusing on race do not usually contend with how the social organization of human environments and relations with nonhuman natures are entangled with the production and reproduction of racial-colonial hierarchy. Scholars working in both epistemic communities are, therefore, missing a crucial opportunity to broaden their empirical analyses and deepen their theoretical contributions in the study of race. The anticolonial environmental sociology of race advanced in this chapter enacts the sort of bridgework needed to overcome this intellectual divide and its shortcomings (Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2016).⁸ Whereas environmental sociology encourages us to rethink the “social” in light of its embeddedness within a broader biophysical reality (Catton & Dunlap, 1978; Pellow & Brehm, 2013), postcolonial/decolonial sociology invites us to reexamine social relations and knowledge as if imperialism and colonialism matter (Go, 2013, 2016b). Therefore, an anticolonial environmental sociology proceeds by synthesizing the central insights into both approaches, and in doing so, opens up new horizons of socioecological thought and analysis. In short, an anticolonial environmental sociology would approach the study of race by:

- situating human social activity within the manifold of associations that constitute the broader biophysical world;
- engaging with the perspectives and experiences of subaltern people to understand socioecological dynamics from their often overlapping, but sometimes conflicting standpoints;
- excavating the colonial and imperialist foundations and ongoing entanglements of contemporary socioecological situations.

More than anything, it is an approach rooted in the epistemological, ontological, and axiological commitments of anticolonialism, which stands in firm opposition to forms of sociality forged through relations of domination (Murphy, 2020).

In the global present, humankind is increasingly recognized as a geological force capable of altering Earth's integrated physical, chemical, and biological systems. Not only is the climate (i.e., atmospheric condition) changing, with average global temperatures and the intensity of inclement weather events on the rise, but a multitude of nonhuman species are becoming extinct at an accelerated pace, microplastic particles are nearly ubiquitous – from the depths of the oceans to peaks of the mountains, and artificial fertilizers like nitrogen and phosphate leach into ecosystems to devastating effect (Carrington, 2016). All of these

anthropogenic changes to the planetary condition have led some geologists and Earth systems scientists to declare that we have entered a new epoch in Earth's history: the Anthropocene (Lewis & Maslin, 2018). However, to call the most recent phase of Earth's history "the Anthropocene" has rightly elicited criticism for implicating the whole of humanity in the planetary transformations, while neglecting, for example, to account for the political ecology/economy of capitalism (e.g., Moore, 2016, 2017; Malm, 2016), or the racial-colonial history and ongoing dynamics of capitalism (e.g., Verges, 2017; Davis & Todd, 2017; Davis, Moulton, Van Sant, & Williams, 2019; Murphy & Schroering, 2020).

While elsewhere I have sought to think about global climate change and its disparate impact across the color line (Murphy, 2013), and more recently, a coauthor and I have argued for the importance of thinking with the Plantationocene to register how racialism, imperialism, colonialism are implicated in global ecological transformation over the past 500 or so years (Murphy & Schroering, 2020), in the present chapter I work in the same direction as environmental sociologists like Cantzler (2007), Cantzler and Huynh (2016), Hoover (2017), Bacon (2019), and Norgaard (2019) by drawing attention to settler colonialism in the United States.⁹ Whereas Bacon (2019) urges us to consider settler colonialism as an ecosocial structure that produces and maintains colonial ecological violence to the detriment of Indigenous peoples, Norgaard (2019) draws upon decades of work with the Karuk Tribe to theorize "the mutual structures of racism, colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and the natural environment" (p. 27). Although Norgaard (2019) moves environmental sociology and the sociology of race in the right direction, it is important to note the conceptual limitations that arise from the use of racial formation theory. Despite the colonial contextualization of racial formation, and the incorporation of the physical environment into that process, Norgaard maintains racial formation theory's preoccupation with the creation, inhabitation, transformation, and destruction of racial categories. What I am proposing here, by contrast, is that we attend to the materiality of racial-colonial domination more directly, given that long after the various racial categories and identities have emerged and then subsided (e.g. white, black, Native, etc.), the physical transformations to the Earth and Indigenous land will remain. I think that North American Indigenous standpoints offer an important pathway for registering the ecomaterialities of racial-colonial domination because they sensitize us to the importance of land, not simply as the material ground of earthly existence, but as the field of relations between what exists in any given region of the planet.

And how do Native peoples think about land and their relationship to it? V.F. Cordova, a Jicarilla Apache philosopher, writes that Native peoples did not think of their homelands as *something that they owned* but instead as *something that they belonged to* (Cordova, 2007). Thus, as Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) argues, following the lead of Lakota philosopher Vine Deloria Jr., we should not understand land (or place) as *simply* a material object of importance to Indigenous cultures (Coulthard, 2014). Instead, from an Indigenous perspective, land is a field of relationships between heterogeneous things or elements (Deloria, 2003). Reflecting upon the meaning of "land" in his own community, Coulthard (2014) writes,

...“land” (or *dè*) is translated in relational terms as that which encompasses not only land (understood here as material), but also people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on. Seen in this light, we are as much a part of the land as any other element. (p. 61)

Likewise, the relations they cultivated with/in the land are/were an expression of their unique modes of life (Coulthard, 2014). Thus, colonial settlement and occupation of Native lands violently disrupts human relationships with their environments (Whyte, 2018).

Natives living in settler colonial America confront an “alien reality from an early age through a system of compulsory education,” that teaches them “that the earth is a raw material, an enemy to be conquered and used” (Cordova, 2007, p. 124). Their reality, which is based on “the sanctity and meaningfulness of the Earth [and land],” is physically covered over:

More concrete, more asphalt, means progress. This covering of the Earth provides a guarded path on which the European may tread without fear of the wildness and vagaries of the hostile planet. What natural vegetation is allowed is trimmed, controlled, subjected to man’s whims. In the process of paving the earth, the reality of the Native is covered over, made insignificant. “Meaning” is presumed to lie in concrete, glass, iron, measured geometric spaces, and artificial suns to ward off the night. Little wonder that the Native begins to be consumed by a feeling of invisibility. His reality – his world – is literally lost from sight, and his identity is so intricately wound into that of the earth, so, too, is his identity threatened. (Cordova, 2007)

This is precisely why the seizure of Native land by colonial forces “is not merely a change of ownership but a genesis, the onset of a whole new way of being” (Wolfe, 2013, p. 1; see also Wolfe, 2001). Colonialism, aided by the tools of racialization that facilitate(d) European conquest and settlement in the Americas, fundamentally reconstitute(d) the land through relations of domination.

To further explicate this theoretical intervention, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the dynamics between settlers, Natives, and the racialized reconstitution of the land in what is now called “Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.” I employ historical excavation as an analytic strategy that exposes moments in the settler colonial history of Rhode Island to reveal the critical connections between colonization, racialization, and the land.¹⁰ To this end, the following analysis is organized according to three spatiotemporal distinctions that punctuate Native land relations in one particular global region: the Reservation, the Plantation, and the Narragansett.

THE RESERVATION

There is a town in southern Rhode Island named after King Charles II – the monarch that permitted the “planting” of English subjects in the region. It is known for its annual seafood festival, beautiful coastline with a mix of public and private beaches, the Burlingame State Park and Campground, and the Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge. Charlestown, as it has been called since incorporation in 1738, wraps itself, along with its 7,827 mostly white residents,¹¹ around the

Narragansett Indian Reservation (NIR). Engulfed by settler society, these 1,943 acres (3.03 sq. miles) of noncontiguous territory are what remains of the Narragansett tribe's land. More than half of the reservation, approximately 1,250 acres, is forested with Atlantic white cedar, red maple, black, white, and northern red oak, eastern white pine (Tiller, 1996, p. 717). Land is also set aside for a community garden and a field for haying.

The NIR is one of 326 Indian reservations scattered across the United States and one of the few existing in New England.¹² As one of three types of federal reserve lands,¹³ the US government holds approximately 56.2 million acres in trust on behalf of (recognized) tribal entities.¹⁴ These areas range in size and use. For instance, the Navajo Nation Reservation encompasses 16 million acres of land that spans Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, and has a history of mineral extraction dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century (Brugge & Goble, 2002). Then there is the Pit River Tribe whose 1.32 acres of land in California are used as a tribal cemetery. Some reservations are located on the ancestral homelands of tribes, while others were created by the federal government to resettle Indigenous peoples displaced from their original land bases.¹⁵ Of the 5.2 million Native Americans living in the United States today, only 1.1 million (22%) live on tribal lands (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012).¹⁶

While there are approximately 2,400 Narragansett people living today,¹⁷ mostly in Rhode Island, very few live on or near tribal lands. John Brown, a member of Narragansett Tribal Council, along with others, saw this as a problem. He believed that

...the central matter of concern to the Narragansett Indian tribe is that we have a reservation with no one living on it. We have people all over the world and the hope is to bring them back. (Abbott, 1992)

To address this issue, the Tribe sought to provide low-income housing for its members, forming the Narragansett Indian Wetuomuck Housing Authority (NIWHA) in 1987. A year later, NIWHA was awarded \$3.25 million of Indian Housing Block Grant funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to build the Wetuomuck Community Village, consisting of 50 affordable housing units.¹⁸ The Tribe purchased 32 acres of land adjacent to the reservation, in 1991, to build their housing development on, but legal battles quickly ensued regarding whether the construction project had to comply with Rhode Island's state and municipal regulations. In response, the Narragansett petitioned the Department of the Interior of the United States to place the land into trust on their behalf to circumvent the interference of Rhode Island and Charlestown in tribal affairs. Though the lands were placed in trust in 1998, Rhode Island and Charlestown appealed the decision that same year, starting a legal battle that lasted a decade, until 2009 when the US Supreme Court ruled that the lands were illegally placed in trust. In the interim, the Tribe had moved forward on construction plans, building 12 units on the land. For now, these almost-homes sit abandoned (Hess, 2014).

What this conflict reveals is that although the Narragansett have a reservation, the land is not theirs to relate to entirely as they please. Disputes with municipal,

state, and federal governance, whether over the low-income housing development or the construction of gaming facilities on tribal lands, stifle Narragansett sovereignty. Native reservations in North America are pockets of Indigenous resistance and survival, but they are ultimately surrounded by settler society and the ways it distributes and dictates uses of land. The ways that settlers relate to land, defined by utility more than reciprocity, often imperil Native life by distributing hazardous pollutants near or on land reserved for tribal entities (Hooks & Smith, 2004; Hoover, 2017; LaDuke, 2015; Voyles, 2015). And yet, settler colonial regimes of land use have always imperiled Native life, before the advent of toxic industrial production, precisely because settlers have always sought ultimate control of land and the related elements – waters, plants, minerals, animals, human beings – of which the land is composed.

Moreover, settler society yields the power to determine whether the people whose lands it reserves even exist at all in the first place. The Narragansett were not recognized by the federal government as the original people of the region that came to be Rhode Island until 1983. This fact is what the Supreme Court used to determine that the land for their Wetuomuck Community Village was illegally placed into trust by the Department of the Interior. The Court maintained that the Secretary of the Interior could only place lands in trust on behalf of tribes that were recognized as such by the US government in 1934, when the Indian Reorganization Act was enacted (Carcieri & Salazar, 2009). The capacity to recognize or not, and hold land in trust or not, is an expression of the state power settlers exercise to maintain the racial-colonial order. If, as Omi and Winant (2014) insist, race is a way of making people up, then acts of recognition (or not) by the settler colonial state is an overlooked aspect of colonial racialization that is directly related to the ecomateriality of racial-colonial domination.

More than century ago, Rhode Island's settlers decided that the Narragansett no longer existed, so neither did their land.

In 1879, Gideon Ammons, then leader of the Tribal Council, petitioned the state of Rhode Island to assign a committee to investigate the encroachment of white settlers on tribal lands, and the state agreed. Long before Ammons's request, Rhode Island had appointed committees on multiple occasions to investigate the condition of the Narragansett. One such committee reported, in 1831, that the "once powerful nation of the Narragansetts is found to be rapidly verging toward the state of complete extinction" (King, 1831). The precise number of Narragansett was hard to ascertain, but state appointed investigators reported around 150–200, of whom they determined "only five or six are genuine untainted Narragansetts, all the rest are either clear negroes or a mixture of Indian, African, and European blood" (King, 1831).

After discussing the degradation of the Narragansett nation/race, the 1831 report quickly turned to their land. According to the committee's investigation, by this time about half of the land remained in common among the Tribe while another half was divided between individual members and either occupied by them or leased out to settlers. Their productive lands were supposedly

...impoverished by a deteriorating method of cultivation and their once valuable forests [had] become nearly ruined by a destructive method of farming their lands almost yearly with every new growth of sapling timber. (King, 1831)

Living conditions were allegedly poor:

The great mass of them burrow in miserable huts...and are generally destitute of almost everything necessary to make life comfortable being indolent, imprudent, and careless of the morrow they provide little or nothing for their future support. (King, 1831)

To settlers they were “miserable huts,” but to Natives they were a form of domicile that had provided shelter since before settlers arrived. In their colonial gaze, how the Narragansett lived on their reservation lands was deplorable, but it is likely the people were simply trying their best to preserve whatever semblance of life before colonization was possible. “40 years ago,” the report concluded, “this was a nation of Indians now it is a medley of mongrels in which the African blood predominates” (King, 1831). At this time, the committee suggested: a white overseer to manage the tribal financial affairs, the adoption of rules of tribal membership, the elimination of tribal exemption from debt-related lawsuits, and the opening up of Narragansett lands to (white) public use once the tribe was deemed found to no longer exist. Evidently, by the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the settlers of Rhode Island had long considered the Narragansett a vanishing people, incapable of managing their own collective life and land.

Testimonies from the Narragansett during the State’s investigation at the close of the nineteenth century clearly demonstrate that most members of the Tribe were resistant to the assimilationist strategy of abolishing State-Tribal relations and making them citizens. Joshua Noka, a member of the Tribal Council, proclaimed that “under the present existing circumstances, I don’t see anything that would be interesting to me” (Adams, Carmichael, & Carpenter, 1880, p. 32). Noka had no delusions about the settler colonial constraints that would prevent him and other Narragansett from enjoying the white liberties associated with citizenship. He queried, “Now what would be the object in throwing off the tribal authority and come out and be called a citizen, with nothing to do as a colored man?” (Adams, Carmichael, & Carpenter, 1880). Sam Congdon, on the contrary, felt that it was best to abolish tribal relations with Rhode Island because he thought the Tribal Council took advantage of their position of power to make personal profit at the expense of their collective property in land. Of course, the conditions making this kind of profiteering possible had little to do with the council as a means of governance, and everything to do with settlers’ political economy of land ownership that made parcels of the Earth into commodities for market exchange. Unlike Congdon, however, most people felt that citizenship would be detrimental to the well-being of the Narragansett as a whole and understood that it would definitely result in the further loss of land. As strained as their relations to the land were given the constant pressure that settlers exerted from the surrounds – pressure to surrender more land, pressure to disappear into settler society – they were in relation, nonetheless.

Despite Narragansett trepidation, Rhode Island abolished State-Tribe relations, justified by the lack of racial purity the Tribe exhibited during the committee's investigation. "We learn that there is not a person of pure Indian blood in the tribe and that characteristic features, varying all the shades of color, from the Caucasian to the Black race, were made manifest in the several meetings of the Committee," the state insisted (Adams et al., 1880, p. 6). "Their extinction as a tribe has been accomplished as effectually by *nature* as an Act of the General Assembly will put an end to the name. There will evidently be a feeling of regret when the name of a tribe so long known in the history of our State passes from existence" (Adams et al., 1880).¹⁹ In regards to the land, one member of the committee declared that as "long as this tribal property has existence, there are a class of people that are worthless, idle and vicious," regurgitating a long-maintained colonial trope that Native peoples' mode of relating to their homelands, and the myriad beings constituting them, was inferior to that of European settlers (Adams et al., 1880, p. 77). Though couched in the language of regret, settlers did little by way of acknowledging its own involvement in the so-called "extinction" of the Tribe.

It was not "nature" as some divine, transcendent force that was detrimental to the Narragansett; it was the way in which "nature" was organized, according to imperial/colonial wants and needs, that was so destructive to Narragansett life. Obviously, it was English colonists that brought Africans – themselves coerced into alienated relations to the rest of nature in the plantation – to this continent and kept them bound with enslaved or indentured Narragansett people. The Narragansett had clearly formed kin with the displaced Africans among them, but it was white settlers that attached racialized meaning to those relations, and in effect racialized these first peoples out of existence to clear the land of their Native presence. This fact was recognized by the Narragansett themselves at a prior engagement, in 1866, on the matter of State-Tribe relations, when they asked colonizers,

Because, when your ancestors stole the negro from Africa, and brought him amongst us, and made a slave of him, we extended to him the hand of friendship, and permitted his blood to be mingled with ours, are we to be called negroes, and to be told that we may be made negro citizens?. (Denison, 1878, p. 84)

They reminded settlers:

We did not go to the white man, but the white men came to us. When we were powerful and he was weak, he claimed our protection and we extended it. We are now weak, and our grasping neighbors, of a grasping race, are seeking the remaining remnant of our inheritance, and will not give over while an inch of our territory remains to us, and until the members of our tribe are beneath the soil, or are scattered to the winds of heaven. (Denison, 1878)

After scattering the Narragansett to the winds, by racializing them out of existence, a series of meetings were held to determine who could rightfully claim Narragansett ancestry and access to the funds allotted to them in exchange for the sale of reservation lands. In the end, 324 men, women, and children made it onto the final roster, and each was allotted \$16.56.²⁰ The former common lands of

the Tribe were then broken into plots and auctioned off to the public. A total of 46 lots were sold to various parties for a total of \$1,264, some of which were purchased by Narragansett individuals. In 1883, a state-sponsored ceremony was held in commemoration of the passing away of the Tribe. A five-ton granite boulder was erected on a portion of the former reservation near the seashore, which was inscribed, “Fort Ninigret, Memorial of the Narragansett and Niantic Indians, the unwavering Friends and Allies of our Fathers,” and listed the commissioners of the detribalization proceedings (Boissevain, 1975, p. 74).

THE PLANTATION

Less than a decade after the settlers arrived, Miantonomi, a Narragansett sachem (leader), sought alliance with the Montauket (of present-day Long Island) pleading, “So are we all Indians as the English are, and say brother to one another, so must we be one as they are, otherwise we shall be all gone shortly” (Gardener, 1660, p. 25). Recognizing the shifting socioecological landscape, Miantonomi continued,

...for you know our fathers had plenty of deer, and skins, our plains were full of deer, as also our woods, and of turkeys, and our coves full of fish and fowl, but these English having gotten our land, they with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes fell the trees, their cows and horses eat the grass and their hogs spoil our clambanks, and we shall all be starved. (Gardener, 1660, p. 26)

His solution: “fall on and kill men women & children, but no cows for they will serve to eat till our deer be increased again” (Gardener, 1660).²¹ The changes in the land that Miantonomi saw in those first few years of cohabitating with the settlers from across the sea must have been drastic to warrant such a violent solution. It wasn’t long before Miantonomi’s plea for united resistance against the colonizers that Narragansett sachems had welcomed the English to live within their territory.

When Roger Williams and other dissenters from the Massachusetts Bay Colony arrived in 1636, they were (supposedly) greeted with, “What cheer, netop (friend)?” After all, Williams was a familiar face. He had built a relationship with the Narragansett by exchanging goods with them from his trading post at Cocomuscussoc (near present-day North Kingstown). Williams provided European manufactured goods like metal pans, pots, knives, and other tools, while the Narragansett traded furs, corn, and wampum.²² It was in this capacity that Williams developed an amicable relationship with the Narragansett sachems. His relationship with the Narragansett was so good that they gifted him the land for his settlement in 1636. In one of many memoranda on English-Native land dealings, Williams confesses,

I was the procurer of the purchase, not by monies nor payment, the natives being so shy and jealous, that monies could not do it; but by that language, acquaintance, and favor with the natives. (Bartlett, 1856, p. 23)

Elsewhere, he states,

I declare to posterity that were it not for the favor that God gave me with Canonicus [the head sachem at the time], none of these parts, no, not Rhode-Island had been purchased or obtained, for I never got anything out of Canonicus but by gift. (Bartlett, 1856, p. 26)

By 1650, English colonists had established four settlements in Narragansett territory. The land gifted to Roger Williams in 1636 became Providence Plantation. William Coddington and associates settled on an island called Aquidneck by the Narragansett in 1638, which split into the settlements of Portsmouth and Newport. Warwick, originally Shawomet, was settled in 1642 by Samuel Gorton and 11 companions. Each of these settlements, excepting Providence, was founded upon lands procured from Native sachems in exchange for goods. In the case of Newport and Portsmouth, Williams aided Coddington in negotiations with Miantonomi, whereby land was obtained in exchange for 40 fathoms of wampum – in addition to 10 coats, 20 hoes, and five additional fathoms of wampum given to the local sachem and other Native residents for vacating the island (Arnold, 1859, p. 125). In founding Warwick (Shawomet), Gorton and company also negotiated with Miantonomi, and a local sachem named Pomham, acquiring the land for 144 fathoms of wampum (Arnold, 1859, p. 175). To the Narragansett, these exchanges were likely a form of tribute, akin to a formal acknowledgment of permissible land use, while colonists interpreted these “purchases” as changes in exclusive ownership. Deeds written by colonists on behalf of Narragansett leaders legitimated these changes in land ownership. And yet, the deeds themselves needed legitimation. Settlers wrote many memoranda specifying the bounds of lands “purchased” by the colonists, or confirming the legitimacy of the original claim. For example, in one of three other memoranda on how he procured land, Williams states that though he didn’t ever purchase the land, he never

...denied him [Canonicus] nor Miantonomi whatever they desired of [him] as to goods or gifts, or use of [his] boats or pinnace and the travels of [his] own person day and night, which though men know not, nor care to know, yet the all-seeing eye hath seen it and his all-powerful hand hath helped [him]. (Bartlett, 1856, p. 26)

In his mind, Williams’ generosity had resulted in the deed that gave him legitimate title to the land upon which his settlement stood. In 1659, Williams wrote a confirmatory deed on behalf of Caujaniquante stating that,

This land and these appurtenances I hereby confirm to them and their heirs and assignees forever, and that my heirs and assignees shall not molest them nor their assigns forever in any of the lands above said; and that I am always ready to defend their title from the claim of any Indians whatsoever. (Bartlett, 1856, p. 35)

By securing land for their heirs and assignees forever, colonists were also securing their lives and mode of life for the generations to come and at the peril of Indigenous peoples.

Incorporated into a united body politic in 1647, the settlers began legislating quite early. As early as 1640, colonists declared that “Indians” could not hunt, fish, trap wildlife, light fire, nor set up camps upon English occupied land. Four

years later, in 1644, the Narragansett subjected themselves to then King Charles of Great Britain, a political maneuver that they likely thought might circumvent their treatment by the English colonists in their midst.²³ In the end, their subjection to the King could not spare them the loss of their way of life at the hands of colonizers. They might have been the King's subjects, but they were still "Indians," considered uncivilized barbarians by the Europeans eyeing their land. After all, even Roger Williams himself, called friend by (some of) the Narragansett, wrote, "All Indians are extremely treacherous" (Bartlett, 1856, p. 297). In the same letter to the authorities in Massachusetts, Williams continued,

How much nobler were it, and glorious to the name of God and your own, that no pagan should dare to use the name of an English subject, who comes not out, in some degree, from barbarism to civility, in forsaking their filthy nakedness, in keeping some kind of cattle... (Bartlett, 1856, p. 298)

Here, Williams demonstrates how settlers viewed the original inhabitants of the lands they were colonizing. They were considered barbarous because of their mode of life, which did not depend upon the individualized ownership of the sort that the English practiced in domesticating cattle. It also demonstrates fundamental differences in patterns of thought and behavior that constituted very different modes of life on the parts of the English and the Narragansett.

In each colonial settlement, the collective lands "purchased" from Indigenous people were divided among the rest of the settlers as lots owned by individuals. At Providence Plantations, for instance, each of the original 12 settlers paid 30 shillings toward the town stock and Roger Williams was given 30 pounds for orchestrating the whole affair. Newcomers were welcomed into the town if agreed upon by the original settlers, determined by vote. The land was divided into 52 narrow lots of approximately five acres a piece. In addition to these home lots, each of the 52 settlers received a six-acre plot for planting crops, while further lands were set aside for the grazing of cattle and other domesticated animals. There were also tracts of land held in common that were available for firewood or pasturing. In 1636, the town council had mandated fines "in case [inhabitants] do not *improve* their ground at present granted them...by preparing to fence, to plant, to build, etc," signaling townspeople's eagerness to reconstitute the land as they saw fit (Bartlett, 1856, p. 15).²⁴ By the next year, trees were being felled faster than they could be used such that the council mandated that "any timber...lying on the ground above one year after felling, shall be at the Town's disposing" (Bartlett, 1856, p. 16). These initial acts of parceling are important because they are the foundation upon which an entire new mode of life would emerge around individual ownership and white possession.

"Improvement" of the land meant making it useful for the colonial production of commodities. Small farms throughout the colony cultivated crops that could sustain the settled population, in addition to a surplus for export. Corn and cornmeal were the first staples exported, but colonists also grew peas, oats, barley, and hay (Bridenbaugh, 1974). Nonetheless, these few crops weren't the most important commodities produced for export. The colonial transformation of Narragansett land was tied to changes in the land elsewhere, in the other global

regions being engulfed by Europe's extended social and ecological body. Samuel Maverick, an early settler of Massachusetts, commented on Rhode Island's marked transformation by 1660:

It is incredible what hath been done there. In the year 1626 or thereabouts there was not a Neat Beast, Horse or sheape in the Countrey and a very few Goats or hoggs, and now it is a wonder to see the great herds of Cattle belonging to every Towne... The brave Flocks of Sheape. The great number of Horses besides those many sent to Barbados and other Carribe Islands, and withall to consider how many thousand Neat Beasts and Hoggs are yearly killed, and soe have been for many years past for Provision in the Countrey and sent abroad to supply Newfoundland, Barbados, Jamaica, and other places, and also to victuall in whole or in part most ships which comes there. (as cited in [Bridenbaugh, 1974](#), p. 60)

The sheep, horses, cattle, hogs, and goats that colonists brought with them from across the ocean required and precipitated a fundamental reconstitution of the land. Since many of these livestock, sheep, and goats, for instance, eat grasses to the roots, their maintenance and reproduction under the conditions of colonial capitalism necessitated the acquisition of ever-growing swaths of land. Forested land was cleared, and swamps and marshes drained, while English hay and grasses were planted to feed domesticated animals – in addition to the corn that served a dual purpose as human food and livestock feed. In some cases, entire islands in Narragansett Bay – like Goat, Hog, Prudence, and Patience – became pasturelands for colonial livestock, acting as natural enclosures that protected herds from predators like wolves and foxes.

Livestock proliferated the landscape in overabundance such that some colonial settlements made it lawful to kill certain animals, like rams and horses, left unattended too long in town commons ([Pastore, 2014](#)). Colonists were producing so much livestock that they were willing to destroy their own chattels when they became a nuisance to their own towns. Yet, if a Native person caused any harm to these animals, they could be forced into slavery if they could not pay the price of restitution, despite the destruction that these animals dealt to the unfenced cornfields or the clam harvesting areas of the Narragansett.²⁵ And, furthermore, the domesticated animals that settlers introduced to the land produced an exorbitant amount of waste. [Christopher Pastore \(2014\)](#), an environmental historian, estimates that waste from domesticated animals contributed an upwards of 658,000 kilograms of nitrogen into Narragansett Bay in a year.²⁶ By altering the biogeochemical makeup of the land, colonization initiated changes far deeper than what settlers and Natives could have seen or imagined at the time.

Still, for the generation of Narragansett first experiencing subjection to life in an ever-growing English plantation, these changes in the land must have been startling – so much so that they warranted violence against former friends less than a decade after their arrival. Across the land, the intensification of colonial presence, along with the environmental changes that accompanied the plantation, was not only seen but felt, in the penalty of trespass or the decline in once widely available food sources. Moreover, the Narragansett living with/in this initial phase of colonization would have had a vivid memory of life – and the land – before the plantation.

THE NARRAGANSETT

According to oral history, the Narragansett have belonged to their land since “time out of mind” (Geake, 2011, p. 13), while the archaeological record demonstrates human inhabitation reaching as far back as 10–12,000 years (Bernstein, 2006). During these millennia, the Narragansett (as well as the other first peoples of the region) experienced major environmental changes and adapted to them.²⁷ A glacier covered the upper half of the North American continent, including the land now called Rhode Island, until 13,000 years ago when it slowly began to melt. Around 10–8,000 years ago, as the climate warmed and glaciers retreated, a spruce-dominated landscape slowly gave way to deciduous forest, in which mastodon, caribou, moose, and giant beaver lived and were hunted by Narragansett ancestors. Narragansett Bay was also formed during this time from continued sea level rise. About 3,500 years ago, salt water had reached the present head of the Bay, where Providence is now located, roughly resembling its current morphology. Changes in the climate, as well as land and sea patterns, brought further changes in animal and plant populations. Varied fresh and salt water habitats, created by sea level rise, provided ideal conditions for the flourishing of fish, shellfish, and waterfowl, while changes in the forests provided an ideal habitat for deer, bear, wolves, beaver, rabbits, and other small mammals. These environmental conditions provided the opportunity for Narragansett ancestors to establish more permanent communities, in which they no longer had to track large game over vast distances, relying instead on the abundance of food sources found in their environment.²⁸ Sometime around 3,000 years ago, a pattern of life began to develop in Narragansett society that resembled that which European colonists first observed beginning in the sixteenth century.

When the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano (and his crew) sailed into Narragansett Bay in 1524, he found the coasts of the Bay “well peopled, judging from the great number of fires which [he] saw all around its shores” (Verrazzano, 1524/2003, p. 48). Though densely wooded, the land had “open plains 25 or 30 leagues in extent, entirely free from trees or other hindrances” (Verrazzano, 1524/2003). These “open plains” were the result of routinized clearing and burning practices aimed at attracting game to the area by increasing the herbivorous food supply on the ground, thereby multiplying the number of elk, deer, beaver, hare, porcupine, turkey, and quail, which also attracted predators like eagles, hawks, foxes, and wolves (Patterson & Sassaman, 1988). In addition, controlled fires encouraged the growth of strawberries, gooseberries, raspberries, and currants. Therefore, when Verrazano found an abundance of “apples, plumbs, filberts, and many other fruits,” as well as “stags, deer, lynxes, and many other species,” he was observing the products of the Narragansett way of life (Verrazzano, 1524/2003, p. 48). These clearings in the forest also served another purpose, for as Verrazano noted in his time with the Narragansett, “[t]heir food is pulse [corn/maize], as with the other tribes, which is here better than elsewhere, and more carefully cultivated” (Verrazzano, 1524/2003, p. 49).

The cultivation of corn was not always a key part of their life in the region. At some point, oral history suggests, some young Narragansett became restless and

discontent and went in search of something new. This displeased the Great Spirit who had always provided well for the people. As the Narragansett set out for a new and unknown land, the Great Spirit punished them by leading them on and on. Along the way many elders died, leaving the younger generation behind. Fearing that his people would have no elders to guide them, an old medicine man began to teach everything he knew of the laws of nature and the tribe to his grandson. He told him:

In a few more moons, the old things shall pass away and a new world will be yours. You must seek heavenly wisdom early and the great passions of life will unfold to you as nature reveals to the world the glories of its creator. Old heads will pass and soon will depend upon the voices from within in response to the voices about you. You are the beginning of a new era, led by Mother Nature and Father Time.

As part of this new era, a new source of food would come as a blessing from the Great Spirit. When the old medicine man passed, the young nation prayed and waited. One morning as they prayed, a big black crow came from out of the clouds, carrying a kernel of corn in one ear and a bean in the other. The crow said, "Msickquatash," meaning to be cooked together. They blessed the seeds, planted them, and the Great Spirit brought forth a beautiful harvest in the fall, at which time the Narragansett rejoiced. From then on, horticulture was a defining feature of Narragansett society. Another Narragansett story, about a young woman named Morning Star, demonstrates just how central it was.²⁹

Many moons ago, long before settlers arrived, when the Narragansett planted corn to feed the entire village, each year one woman was chosen to oversee the fields. A highly revered role, the matron of the fields was only elected if she had gained the love and esteem of her whole village through unselfish deeds. Like everyone else, a young woman named Morning Star desperately wanted the position, but each year that she worked hard to please others without being chosen, she grew more sensitive, sarcastic, and angry, which only made her less likely to be chosen for the role. Realizing the disappointment his wife felt from years of striving and rejection, Thunder Cloud sought the council of the Great Spirit in the seclusion of the forest. He prayed for a sign, or happening, that would give Morning Star a chance to prove herself. Thunder Cloud received a message from the Great Spirit and started home just as a plague fell upon the Narragansett and a terrible drought set in. The cornfields began to wither and almost everyone fell sick, except Morning Star. She arose at dawn, with the Morning Star, and went up into the hills to fetch water for the fevered tribe and fields, over and over again. Without thinking, Morning Star rose to the occasion, attending with willing hands to the sick and to the fields, all the while praying for rain. Eventually, the sky grew dark, and the rain began to fall. When Thunder Cloud finally made it back the village, he danced around the cornfields that Morning Star had tended while he was away, but he wondered where she was and why she had not joined him in his dance of thanksgiving. Morning Star had completed her last task, and the Great Spirit had taken her to the Unknown, to shine through the doorway of heaven. Every day, before the sun is up, Morning

Star breaks from the portals of night to shed a blessing on day and cornfields everywhere.

This story, passed down generation after generation, from the “great unwritten book of the Narragansett,” is about the origins of the Corn Dance, a ceremonial practice expressing thanks and well-wishes for a good harvest. It also reveals a great deal about the patterns of thought and behavior that characterized their ever-evolving mode of life. While women tended the Earth cultivating corn, beans, and squash for their entire village, men would fish as well as hunt and trap game, although when the time came, everyone helped break up the fields. Thus, sharing, reciprocity, and communality were the central norms governing Narragansett social and ecological relations (Bragdon, 1999). As a founding settler of Rhode Island, Roger Williams observed, “With friendly joyning they breake up their fields, build their Forts, hunt the Woods, stop and kill fish in the Rivers” (Williams, 1643/1866, p. 99) and that

...whomsoever commeth in when they are eating, they offer them to eat of that which they have, though but little enough prepared for themselves. If any provision of fish or flesh come in, they make their neighbors partakers with them. (Williams, 1643/1866, p. 16)

Before the plantation, “there [were] no beggars amongst them, [and] no fatherless children unprovided for” (Williams, 1643/1866, p. 29).

For millennia, the Narragansett (and their forbearers) lived without the possessive individualism that supposes a person can own the Earth, or even a sliver of it (Wallace, 1957; Merchant, 1989). Though there were central figures, or sachems, leading the Narragansett, no one individual owned the land, and thus no individual determined how it was used. Indigenous polities did, however, control territories in which they might grant others the right to use. Williams (and other settlers) observed, “Natives [were] very exact and punctuall in the bounds of their Lands, belonging to this Prince [sachem] or People” (Williams, 1643/1866, p. 95). Narragansett territory stretched the expanse of much of present-day Rhode Island, while the Pokanoket/Wampanoag controlled most of present-day Southern Massachusetts.³⁰ Besides, to the Narragansett, the same ineffable force, or Great Spirit, that had created the people and land, ensured that there was plenty for everyone. More than that, though, they believed the land to be alive with manitos (gods or spirits), present in animals, plants, elements, sky, Earth, and people (Simmons, 1986).³¹ All that they had was given to them by the great southwest deity Cautantowwit, including the corn and beans carried by the crow. Throughout the year, the Narragansett held regular nickommo – feasts or festivities – corresponding to important events like the harvest or times of peril. In one such ritual, believed to promote well-being among the tribe by pleasing the creator, participants offered personal belongings like kettles, animal skins, hatchets, beads, knives, etc. which the powwows, or priests, threw into a great fire and burned to ash (Simmons, 1986). If the Narragansett were willing to sacrifice these important personal possessions, finding replacements must not have been difficult.

In sum, Narragansett land was a patchwork of varying habitats, some of which were consciously crafted in the clearing of forests and planting of crops, all of which permeated with spiritual significance (Cronon, 2003). Lloyd “Running

Wolf” Wilcox, a Narragansett medicine man, described the Narragansett worldview in this way:

The sun and moon are the real clocks upon which the daily, weekly, and monthly year revolves. The sun is the light of our life-it is the most awesome thing any human being has seen. The sun warms Mother Earth and Mother Earth presents herself to Father Sun. The moon brings the ebb and flow of nature. Our ceremony and rituals are tied to this circle of time. We believe in the earth, winds, water, moon and sun. (Lloyd “Running Wolf” Wilcox, 2005)³²

Running Wolf contrasted this mode of being in the world to that of the Christian colonizers whose codified religion “allows them to [tread] on everything in the environment” and also “justified their far-flung goals” of domination (Wilcox, 2005). Reflecting on Narragansett land and life in the twentieth century, Running Wolf said, “We still suffer the great sense of loss” (Wilcox, 2005).

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, consider this: It took the Earth thousands of years to *form* Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. As glaciers advanced then retreated, and sea levels rose, distant relatives of the Narragansett lived through these massive geological changes and adapted to them. By the time Europeans arrived, Narragansett life was deeply enmeshed with the bay. The people became adept sea travelers – with canoes that could carry upwards of 40 people – and skilled harvesters of fish and shellfish. For colonists, the Bay – and land surrounding it – had other uses beyond the sustenance that sea life could provide. It took settlers less than 400 years to completely *transform* Narragansett Bay. Since colonization, the physical structure, hydrology, temperature, ecology, and chemistry of the Bay have been substantially altered: over a 1000 dams were constructed on nearly all of the tributaries leading to the Bay for industrial purposes; most of the Bay’s marshes have been ditched and/or impounded, and the Bay’s wetlands developed; deep channels have been dredged to further support shipping; the largest coal-fired power plant in the Northeast, Brayton Point Station, cycles up to 1.45 billion gallons of seawater in its daily operation, thereby raising the temperature of the Bay; pollution in various forms – nutrient loading from waste water and urban runoff, metal-rich manufacturing wastes, hazardous pollutants from military (naval) activity, petroleum and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, and synthetic organic compounds – have altered the Bay’s biogeochemistry; and commercial fishing has led to a drastic decline in finfish and shellfish populations.³³

In this chapter, I have deployed an anticolonial environmental sociology of race capable of apprehending the anthropogenic environmental changes to Indigenous peoples’ land, much like the transformation of Narragansett Bay, as both cause and consequence of racial-colonial domination. From the perspective of the Indigenous peoples of America, whose modes of engaging with and relating to their environments and the rest of nature, or the land, were profoundly disrupted by the colonization of their lands by European settlers, racial formation

and domination was always an ecological affair. Racialization, then, lurks beneath each wave of Indigenous dispossession and elimination, given that the settlers never intended to share this continent with Natives, seeking rather to establish their own society in a “New World” in which propertied white men would reign supreme. Labeling the Natives of this continent as “savages,” “barbarians,” and “uncivilized” created space between the colonizer and the colonized, the (white) human and the other. This alterity forms the basis upon which the invaders, calling themselves “civilized” and “white,” would come to possess and, thus, completely transform the land. Perhaps more importantly, however, I have argued that thinking with Native conceptualizations of land forces us to confront the ecomateriality of race which so often escapes apprehension in conventional analyses.

If land is viewed as an extension of the social body of relations through which it is constituted, as is the case with many Indigenous worldviews, we are no longer able to think about racialization as something that happens only to the bodies of human beings. What this enables is a different way of recognizing the consequences of raciality in terms of ecomaterial transformations to the land. Raciality spills beyond the boundaries of what is typically conceived of as humanity, taking root in the land as it is transformed, perhaps irreversibly, by the settler society. In this sense, race is not merely a symbolic and economic regime of social exclusion, discrimination, and/or exploitation that can be overcome with multiracial inclusion in the civil, economic, and political spheres of the liberal-democratic order. Race is materially *rooted* in and by the (settler)colonial refashioning of the land, of this Earth. If this is so, then the (only) adequate response to racial-colonial domination is the demand for decolonization, which as [Denise Ferreira da Silva \(2020\)](#) so powerfully asserts is not a call for radical redistribution, but is instead

...a call for the return of the total value extracted under total violence, which includes the very American (Indigenous) and African (enslaved) lives that were taken as well as the pasts, presents, and futures that were no longer because of their obliteration. (p. 50)

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NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter, I will use “Native” to refer to peoples Indigenous to North America.
2. This quote comes from John O’ Sullivan, the originator of the phrase and concept of “manifest destiny,” as cited in [White \(1993, p. 73\)](#).
3. For a critique of settler colonial erasures of place and land in qualitative research, see [Tuck & McKenzie \(2015\)](#).
4. The work presented here builds upon but ultimately departs from my previous work presented in [Murphy \(2018\)](#).
5. In *The World is a Ghetto*, Howard [Winant \(2002\)](#) echoes Du Bois when he posits that modernity is a global racial formation project, by which he means to assert that “modernity itself was...a worldwide racial project, an evolving and flexible process of racial formation, of structuration and signification by race,” wherein, “[t]o identify human beings by their race, to inscribe race upon their bodies, was to locate them, to subject them, in the emerging world order” (30). It should also be noted that some scholars, like Geraldine [Heng \(2011a, 2011b; 2015\)](#), suggest that racialization precedes what we typically conceive of as modernity. Heng argues: “With a long historical view, race theory gains the ability to name laws, acts, practices, and institutions in premodernity for what they are and to grasp the ramifications of what they install, to see the long arc of racial instantiations. The study of racial emergence a la longue durée is then one means to understand if the configurations of power that produce race in modernity are, in fact, genuinely novel. Key propensities in history can be identified, not over a century or two but across a millennium: the modes of apparent necessity, configurations of power, and conditions of crisis that witness the harnessing of powerful dominant discourses – science in the era of high modernity, religion in the so-called Middle Ages – to make fundamental distinctions among humans to which we give the name of race” ([Heng, 2015, p. 360](#)). In a similar vein, [Cedric Robinson \(2000\)](#) argues that racialism is an enduring feature of capitalism, and contrary to many sociological theories of race, he posits that racialism featured prominently in the history of Europe before its imperial-colonial encounter with the rest of the world.
6. I think it is necessary to acknowledge [Andrea Smith’s \(2012\)](#) fraught position as a critical scholar in Native Studies whose identity as a Native woman with Cherokee ancestry has been called into question. As articulated in an open letter from Native/Indigenous women and scholars on this controversy, by “Presenting herself as generically indigenous, and allowing others to represent her as Cherokee, Andrea Smith allow[ed] herself to stand in as the representative of collectivities to which she has demonstrated no accountability, and undermines the integrity and vibrancy of Cherokee cultural and political survival” (“[Open Letter from Indigenous Women Scholars,](#)” 2015). I cite her work here because it makes an important intellectual intervention regarding whiteness, settler colonialism, and racialization.
7. For an in-depth discussion and review of this literature in the United States, see [Taylor \(2014\)](#).
8. [Rodríguez-Muñiz \(2016\)](#) uses the concept of bridgework to denote scholarly attempts at connecting disparate literatures and projects that seek to connect fields. In his chapter, he reflects on the intellectual bridges connecting critical sociologies of race and science and technology studies (STS).
9. I want to acknowledge the issues that scholars in black studies and American studies have raised with settler colonialism as a theoretical framework. Robin D. G. [Kelley \(2017\)](#) points out that the definitive logic of settler colonialism, the logic of elimination, would not work without the exclusion of the African context. He argues that this occlusion “not only obscures its global and transnational character but also eliminates the settler from African history” (269). [Kelley \(2017\)](#) further contends that in South Africa, for example, “the complete elimination of the native was hardly the objective. Yes, the expropriation of the native from the land was a fundamental objective, but so was proletarianization. They

wanted the land *and* the labor, but not the *people* – that is to say, they sought to eliminate stable communities and their cultures of resistance” (Kelley, 2017). Tiffany Lethabo King (2019), on the other hand, argues that settler colonial theory suffers from a sort of colonial aphasia in relation to blackness and slavery. If the colonial situation in the United States, for example, is primarily a matter of land, then what are we to do with the colonization of African bodies? King (2019) argues for the language of conquest because it creates room to think the enslavement of Africans and the settlement of Indigenous lands in the Americas in more inclusive terms that do not subordinate either colonial process to the other. For as Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein, 2016 argue, settler colonial theory can contribute to the sort of colonial unknowing that “renders unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization, occluding the mutable historicity of colonial structures and attributing finality to events of conquest and dispossession” (Vimalassery et al., 2016, para. 1), especially when it is treated as a self-contained type, “rather than a situatedly specific formation that is co-constituted with other forms and histories of colonialism [like slavery], counter-claims, and relations of power” (Vimalassery et al., 2016, para. 11). None of this is to say that we shouldn’t pay attention to settler colonialism. However, we need to be mindful of how settler colonialism is mutually imbricated with other forms of colonialism, empire, and social power. As the reader will observe from the empirical details of my limited case study, it is obvious the dispossession of Native North American land is bound up with the enslavement of Africans in the Americas.

10. As Mayrl and Wilson (2020) demonstrate in their article on the analytic architectures of historical sociology, practitioners tend to deploy a plurality of research strategies in their work. While some scholars analyze secondary histories to build or test theory, others rely primarily upon archival resources taking an in-depth case study approach. Research for this project relied upon secondary materials and existing historiography, but also a range of primary sources – colonial account books, colonial and state governmental reports, town meeting minutes, oral history, diaries, land deeds, city directories, newspapers, etc.

11. The 2010 census shows that only 30 residents were black, 150 were Native American, 50 were Asian, and 127 were Latinx. See US Census Bureau, “Demographics of Charlestown, Rhode Island,” accessed August 29, 2018, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>.

12. In addition to the Narragansett Indian Reservation in Rhode Island, there are small pockets of tribal lands in Massachusetts and Maine. The largest of these tribal areas is 14,000 acres and belongs to the Penobscot Nation in Maine.

13. Public and military land is also reserved by the US government. In total, the US government owns 621 million acres of land. See Carol Hardy Vincent, Laura A. Hanson, and Carla N. Argueta, “Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data” (Congressional Research Service, March 3, 2017).

14. There are 573 American Indian and Alaskan Native tribes (and villages) recognized by the US government as sovereign nations. See “About Us| Indian Affairs,” US Department of the Interior – Indian Affairs, accessed August 29, 2018, <https://www.bia.gov/about-us>.

15. During the nineteenth century, first nations living in the southeastern United States – the Choctaw, Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole, and Chickasaw – were forcibly removed west of the Mississippi river to land designated as Indian territory (encompassing modern-day Oklahoma), as a part the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Seventy-thousand people were displaced in total. See Dunbar-Ortiz (2014).

16. According to the 2010 census.

17. According to the Narragansett Indian Tribe’s website. See Narragansett Indian Tribe (n.d.).

18. See Office of Hearings and Appeals (2012).

19. Emphasis added by the author.

20. However, according to Narragansett oral history, many considered this amount too small to come forward and collect. See Red Wing and Hazard (1936, p. 205).

21. I should note here that apart from Metacom's War, Miantonomi's plan for a united Indigenous front against the white colonizers was never realized, as he was killed in a conflict with the Mohegan tribe of present-day Connecticut not long after making his appeal to the Montauket.

22. Wampum is a traditional bead made from quahog shells that was used to make jewelry but also acted as a currency used in trading relationships. According to Turnbaugh, these European goods were widely used in Narragansett society. Archaeological investigation of mid-seventeenth-century Narragansett grave sites shows a proliferation of European goods. It should also be noted that the Narragansett, like other Indigenous polities, established trade relations with other Europeans, including the Dutch and French. See [Turnbaugh \(1993\)](#).

23. As historian [Pulsipher \(2003\)](#) argues, "Indians recognized the utility of this avenue of appeal and seized it for their own use...This was, in fact, a logical extension of their increasing involvement in intercolonial struggles, where they both used and were used by colonists in their own power struggles" (p. 30).

24. Emphasis added by the author.

25. The colonist Roger Williams observed that of all the English chattel, the Narragansett despised pigs most of all because they dug up and ate the same clams that Natives relied upon. See [Williams \(1866, p. 114\)](#).

26. [Pastore's \(2014\)](#) estimation is based upon figures from 1735, assuming a colonial population of 20,000 with a total of 37,000 animals. Given that each animal produces approximately 50 kilograms of nitrogen a year, of which between 16 and 32% is introduced into a given watershed.

27. Part of the Algonquin language family, the Narragansetts were one of many Indigenous communities living within the region now called Southern New England, including the Pawtucket, Massachusetts, Nipmuck, Pocumtuck, Narragansett, Pokanoket, Niantic, Mohegan, and Pequot. It is estimated that prior to colonization, the region had an upwards of 90,000 inhabitants, with the Narragansett having the highest population. We may never know how many people lived in the region prior to the arrival of Europeans. In the end, however, it doesn't really matter how many people lived here. The quantity of people living on the continent or in the region prior to colonization does not correspond to the gravity of what was lost in colonization. See [Bragdon \(1999\)](#).

28. Archaeological sites dating between 8000 and 3000 years ago are found throughout Rhode Island, including Providence, East Providence, Coventry, North Kingstown, and throughout South County. In Jamestown, there is a site that was in continuous use by people over thousands of years. See [Robinson, Taylor, Kennedy, and Angelone \(2002\)](#).

29. This bit of oral history, as well as the following story, were both recorded in the Narragansett Dawn. See [Mother Glasko \(1935, pp. 22–23\)](#) and [Red Wing & Hazard \(1935, pp. 96–98\)](#).

30. Other Indigenous collectivities that lived in the region include the Niantic, Pequot, and Nipmuck.

31. The Narragansett gave Roger Williams a list of at least 30 manitos of significance.

32. Running Wolf was born in 1933 and died in 2019.

33. See [Kutcher \(2009\)](#).

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