
Refusing the Settler Society of the Spectacle

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Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between Guy Debord’s notion of spectacle and settler colonialism, exploring the role that spectacle plays in the solidification of the settler state and the consolidation of whiteness. In so doing, it examines contemporary depictions of Native peoples in the mainstream media, with a particular focus on coverage of Indigenous peoples at Standing Rock and the #NoDAPL prayer camps. Ultimately, I argue that the ongoing production of spectacularized “Indians” functions to erase the lived experience of Indigenous peoples and, in so doing, serves as a transit for settler colonial relations.

Keywords

Spectacle • Settler Colonialism • Neoliberalism • Whiteness

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#NoDAPL anti-colonial struggle is profoundly anti-capitalist. It is the Frontline. It is the future (Estes 2016)

I used to tell people when I was young who asked, ‘what do you Indians want?’ ‘the right to be left alone to live’... now I don’t see that as an option. Now we must do our best to live and show the rest of the world how to live. (Ladonna Brave Bull 2016)

Water Is Life

This simple but profound refrain became the rallying cry for the #NoDAPL movement (At its height, #NoDAPL was a global movement, drawing Indigenous peoples and allies from across the world; from New Zealand, Canada Australia, Ecuador, Peru, Hawaii, Mexico, and Belize among other nations.). The Lakota peoples and their allies gathered along the Mni Sose (Missouri River) and on the lands of the Oceti Sakowin (The Great Sioux Nation) to defend water and life. Led by Native youth and women, water protectors put their bodies on the frontlines of a 241-year war (and counting) against the ever-encroaching settler state. In this most recent battle, the objective was to block the Dakota Access Pipeline (re)routed by the Energy Transfer corporation to pass under Lake Oahe (the tribes water source) and across the Treaty lands and burial grounds of the Lakota peoples. Indigenous struggles to defend water, land and other relations operate well beyond the left-right continuum of American politics. It’s always been “Indians” vs. settler, regardless of political party (Consider, for example, that under President Obama – often viewed as the #NoDAPL savior – US oil production grew to reach 9.4 million bpd in 2015; the largest domestic oil production increase during any presidency in US history.). This is why the colonialist project is about elimination. Not assimilation. Not incorporation. Not accommodation. It is also why, for Indigenous peoples, the struggle is not grounded in claims for recognition or reconciliation. It is about refusal. Refusal equals life.

Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between spectacle (Among the various theorizations of spectacle (e.g., Barthes, Crary, McLuhan), this chapter draws heavily upon the work of Foucault and Debord. Specifically, Foucault’s understanding of spectacle in terms of surveillance and Debord’s notion of spectacle as ideological, more broadly linked to capitalism, market consciousness, and a “society of the spectacle” figure prominently.) and settler colonialism. I am particularly interested in the role that spectacle plays in the solidification of the settler state and the consolidation of whiteness, particularly as intensified under neoliberalism. Moreover, while the implications of settler colonialism for Native peoples are or, should be, self-evident, I also consider the implications for the nonindigenous settler subject. As Memmi posits, “the benevolent colonizer (To be clear, Memmi’s notion of the “benevolent colonizer” is a referent to the self-effacing colonizer who refuses the ideology of colonialism but still lives within its confines (Memmi, p. 64). In contemporary parlance, they might be considered white allies.) can never attain the good, for his only choice is not between good and evil, but between evil and uneasiness” (Crary 1989, p. 87). Throughout this chapter, the spectacular portrayal of Indigenous peoples generally and of the #NoDAPL prayer camps more specifically, serves as a site in which to explore the contours of this “uneasiness.”

Writing in the late 1960s, French theorist Guy Debord penned his cautionary text the *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), wherein he laments the displacement of

“authentic” social relations with their false representations under advanced capitalism. He writes, “In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into representation” (#1). Bracketing his modernist discourse, the deeper salience of Debord’s analysis is its marking of the move from life in a market *economy* to life in a market *society* and the shifts that engender the “degradation of being into having” and from having to appearing (#17). He writes:

... (Spectacle) is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality. In all of its particular manifestations – news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment – the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. . . In both form and content (it) serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system (#6).

Considering that his treatise was written well before the digital age and hyperreality of the twenty-first century, the corpus of Debord’s argument remains remarkably prescient. Under neoliberalism, the speed, scope, and power of spectacle has only intensified, reconfiguring the very character of life as not only conditioned by consumerism and commercialization but largely replaced by, exchanged for, and even rejected in favor of its more spectacular simulations. Think, for example, of the blurring lines between “real” and fake news and “real” and digital lives. Under spectacle-capitalism virtually every institution, every mode of being has been commodified to the point where it isn’t only that *everything* is for sale but that life itself is monetized and only worth living if it is on display (Consider for example the ways in which sex (e.g., Grindr, Tinder), love, and intimacy (e.g., eHarmony, cuddle businesses) and even marriage (e.g., Married at First Sight, the Bachelor) have not only been commodified but also put on display.). As Gamson (Gamson 2011) observes, we have moved beyond the notion that “everyone gets fifteen minutes of fame” into a time when “everyone already is a star” (p. 1068). Consider, for example, the rapid proliferation of social media celebrities (Consider, for example, the phenomena of the YouTube celebrity with personalities such as PewDiePie amassing 54.1 million “followers” and a net worth of \$15 million for being a “foul mouthed” video-game commentator. Such “celebrities” are beginning to surpass the wealth and popularity of “traditional” Hollywood stars. See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/03/why-youtube-stars-popular-zoella>) who generate large fandoms, millions of followers and dollars, from simply “sharing” curated and staged slices of their lives.

While life in the infinite public raises a variety of important questions about what it means to be human, my central concern remains with how the culture industry (re) produces exhibitions of self and other that works to consolidate whiteness and secure settler futurity (I understand the motif of “futurity” – with an intellectual genealogy that traces back to John L. O’Sullivan’s, treatise on manifest destiny – as an exclusively settler construct that is incommensurable with Indigeneity.). That is, insofar as spectacle is contingent upon the radical reification of self, an overvaluing of the present, and rupturing of relationality, it becomes the perfect theater for producing anchorless (neoliberal) subjects whose every desire is increasingly

structured by capital. As it forecloses relationality by normalizing disconnection, it effects an erasure of Indigenous peoples who continue to define themselves through relationship – to land, to history, to ancestors, to all our relations.

Consider, for example, how the water protectors at Standing Rock were only rendered visible through spectacle (According to Fairness and Accuracy in Media (FAIR), by September of 2016, of the three major broadcast news networks, only CBS filed a story on Standing Rock. Moreover, that story aired at 4 a.m. and was actually a re-reporting of a 48-word NPR story. FAIR also noted that while NPR's original version featured Amy Goodman's footage of the unprovoked attack on the protectors, CBS chose to exclude it.). That is, until and outside of the widely-circulated images of armored vehicles, riot police, water cannons, war bonnets, teepees and painted ponies, the Lakota peoples hardly existed, virtually erased from public consciousness (It should be noted that the few articles published in the press on this history were written by Native American scholars. For example, see: Nick Estes, "Fighting for Our Lives: #NoDAPL in Historical Context" (The Red Nation 2016) and Julian Brave NoiseCat and Anne Spice, "A History and Future of Resistance" (Jacobin Magazine 2016). Also, while independent media (e.g., Unicorn Riot, Anti-Media, AJ+) provided coverage, they also deployed spectacle as a means of drawing attention. As reported by Anti-Media, "Where the mainstream media failed, the independent media relentlessly covered the protests." Livestream coverage of the spectacular attacks was indeed *relentlessly* posted, often creating confusion about the level of violence at the camps. The nonspectacular reality was that the overwhelming majority of time at the Oceti Sakowin encampment was spent in prayer, cooking, training, eating, laughing, building, teaching, working, washing, cleaning, singing, listening, reading, and tending.). That is, except when needed as stand-ins for the "shame" of America. The reality, however, is that Standing Rock, from the Ghost Dances (1800s) to the occupation of Wounded Knee (1973), has long served as a site of collective, anti-colonialist, anti-capitalist Indigenous resistance and, that time and again, the *Oceti Sakowin* have stood on the front lines, protecting against the forces of US imperialism. Lost to the compressed space of spectacular time is the architecture of settler violence – Red Cloud's War (1866–1868); the War for the Black Hills (1876); the Indian Appropriations Act (1877); Wounded Knee (1890); the Dawes Allotment Act (1887); the Flood Control Act (1944); the Indian Relocation Act (1956) – and the multi-layered history that provides the context for what should have been the one and only #NoDAPL headline – "Unceasing Settler Violence Masquerading as Democracy Continues to Dispossess Native peoples."

Context and Definitions

In an effort to underscore the significance of historical context as an effective fetter against spectacularization, I include in this section, a definition of terms. More specifically, one of the consequences of living in a society where spectacle "inverts the real" is the loss of coherent narratives and an ability to distinguish between what is "real" and what is simulacra (Baudrillard 1994). This postmodern condition has

only been exacerbated by the 24/7 cycle of digital and social media. Danish scholars Vincent Hendricks (Hendricks also coined the term “post-factual democracy” (Hendricks 2013).) and Pelle Hansen (2014) argue that while knowledge production has always been shaped by the social sphere, the “infostorm” wrought by modern technologies has significantly “amplified” the distortion of truth, “making us more vulnerable to err than ever and on a much larger scale” (First posted on December 18, 2013 in “The Conversation” <http://theconversation.com/all-those-likes-and-upvotes-are-bad-news-for-democracy-21547> and then later in his book *Infostorms* (Hendricks and Hansen 2014, p. 2).).

Insofar as the “infostorm” also ushered in a decline in fact-based news reporting, the proliferation of corporate funded “research,” and the overall googlization of society, it stands to reason that a return to “facts” and scholarly research is in order. As such, in the interest of clarity and with recognition of the importance of context, history, and intellectual genealogy, I provide definitions for the following key words as they appear in this text: Native American, American Indian, Indigenous; Settler/Settler Colonialism; Neoliberalism; Whiteness; and, spectacle/spectacular.

Native American, American Indian, and Indigenous Peoples

The terms Native American and Indigenous peoples are used almost interchangeably to refer to all those who “exercised powers of self-governance prior to colonization by and, incorporation into, the modern nation state” (Grande and Nichols 2014). Use of the term “American Indian” is generally reserved for specific references to the current 566 “federally recognized” tribes in the United States (In the United States, tribal sovereignty is the inherent authority of Indigenous nations to govern themselves. As “domestic dependent nations” the United States is also obligated to provide federally recognized tribes necessary services, including the provision of education and health care. Beyond issues of law and treaty rights, there are other forms of sovereignty that Native peoples exercise and demand, which are inextricably connected to each other. For example, in her work on Papua New Guinea, Paige West 2010, 2012 accounts for how the loss of sovereignty over land and biodiversity is connected to the loss of representational sovereignty. See, for example, the work of Scott Lyons (2000) on rhetorical sovereignty and Michelle Raheja (2011) and Mishuana Goeman (2013) on semiotic and representational sovereignty.). In theory, federal recognition grants American Indians political sovereignty (Native American sovereignty – the right of tribes to make their own laws and be governed by them – predates the formation of the United State and is still recognized through treaties that were negotiated on a “government to government” basis.) as well as other treaty rights through their government-to-government relationship with the United States. Thus, unlike other marginalized groups (e.g., African Americans, women, immigrants, LGBTQ), the axis of oppression for American Indians shifts from one of “racist exclusion” to that of “forced incorporation” (Rifkin 2011, p. 342). This distinction, in turn, gives rise to political projects organized around struggles for autonomy as opposed to demands for inclusion (i.e., enfranchisement, civil rights).

Settlers and Settler Colonialism

As argued by Rachel Flowers, it is important to refer to “non-Indigenous” peoples as “settlers” since it serves to denaturalize and politicize “the presence of non-Indigenous people on Indigenous lands” (Flowers 2015, p. 33). Drawing upon the seminal work of Patrick Wolfe (2006), I distinguish settler colonialism from other forms of colonialism as follows: (1) it is “first and foremost a territorial project” where land (as opposed to natural or human resources) is the precondition; (2) the priority is to eliminate and remove Indigenous peoples in order to expropriate their lands; and, (3) since “settlers come to stay,” strategies of elimination are not simply deployed at the time of invasion but rather serve as a structuring logic. Thus, as noted by Wolfe, settler colonialism is a structure and not an event” (2006, p. 388). Meaning, beyond the initial event of invasion, it “persists as a determinative feature of national territoriality and identity” (Rifkin 2013, p. 324).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an economic and political project that has unfolded over the past 25 years or so based on the theory that markets and competition, offer the most efficient and democratic means of improving society. In practice, however, neoliberal policies (e.g., deregulation, privatization) have contributed to the highest level of inequality and greatest concentration of wealth and power in the top 1% of the population since the Gilded Age (Bartels 2008). The concentration of economic wealth and political power under neoliberalism was recently confirmed in a study by Gilens and Page (2014), who after conducting a comprehensive analysis of national policy (1981–2002), found that in the United States, elites, and special interest groups drive policy over the will of the “general” people (read: non-elites). As a result, they have concluded that the United States is no longer a functioning democracy.

Whiteness

I use whiteness (as opposed to white supremacy or white privilege) in this chapter as a way to signal a connection to the discourses of whiteness as they emerged through critical race theory (CRT). Within the frameworks of CRT, whiteness is understood as a “socially significant structure that mitigates life chances in American society” (Guess 2006, p. 650). Founding CRT scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) argues that whiteness is best thought of as a form of property that carries material and symbolic privilege (e.g., job security, access to real estate, conceptions of beauty) that is conferred to whites, those passing as white, and “honorary” whites. Harris situates the origins of “whiteness as property” in the systems of domination (i.e., slavery, colonialist dispossession) that created “racially contingent forms of property and property rights” (p. 1714). As such, she argues that whiteness is codified into law and, thus, remains a defining and enduring characteristic of American democracy.

Spectacle

In general terms, the notion of spectacle invokes images of excess and extravagance. As a construct developed by Debord, it builds upon Marx's theories of alienation, commodity fetishism, and reification to describe the, "social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (4).

More critically, it is understood as a tool of pacification and depoliticization, "integrally connected to Debord's formulation of separation" (Best and Kellner 1999, p. 133). That is, it is through the passive consumption of spectacles that one is "separated from actively producing one's life" (133). Moreover, insofar as spectacle is related to "the business of selling novelty" it has an interest in annihilating historical knowledge, the central means by which novelty can be judged (Crary 1989, p. 106). Crary (2000) examines twenty-first century manifestations of spectacle, particularly as a mode of "contemporary" or non-coercive power. For Crary (and Baudrillard), the emergence of mass media blurs the boundaries between spectacle and spectator, the ubiquity of which begins to desensitize rather than evoke emotionality from the spectator.

The keywords are foundational to the grammar of US empire and as such help to inform and deepen our understanding of the structures and processes of settler colonialism. In the following section, I draw upon this base to explore the more particular relationship between spectacle and whiteness.

Spectacle and the Consolidation of Whiteness

Debord's central thesis or provocation is that life in a "commodity-saturated, mass-mediated, image-dominated and corporate-constructed world" engenders an increasingly isolated, alienated, and passive citizenry that unwittingly relents to a groupthink of market consciousness disguised as individual agency (Kaplan 2012, p. 458). His analysis illuminates the inherent paradox of spectacle; despite (or because of) its intention to illicit emotion and (re)action, spectacle produces alienation and passivity. Particularly in a mass-mediated, hi-tech society, the sheer volume of content alone can produce a deadening effect. But spectacle is both dialectical and self-perpetuating. Meaning, the resulting (individual and social) ennui searches for relief from the deadening effect and, in so doing, activates the production of ever more spectacular imagery, generating an endless and alienating cycle of (simulated) life in search of the "real." As the search intensifies, so does the desire for anything perceived as "authentic" – authenticity is the antidote (For early and consistently excellent discussions of the desire for "authentic" nature and culture see the work of Dean MacCannell 1976.).

It is this cycle – the positioning of spectacularity against "authenticity" and authenticity as the antidote to the (post)modernist condition – that compels this analysis, particularly in the wake of #NoDAPL. For as long as "Indians" have been situated as the (authentic) anti-modern subject, "Indian-ness" has perennially served as a favored foil (antidote) for whiteness. While many Indigenous studies scholars have examined the ways in which Native identity is appropriated in the service of

white identity formation (e.g., Berkhofer 1987; Deloria 1969, 1998; Huhndorf 2001), my interest is cast more broadly. That is, beyond questions of white identity formation: How does the expressed desire for the imagined Indian serve the propertied interests of whiteness, which is to say settler statecraft? To explore this question, I begin with more mundane expressions of Indian-as-spectacle and move toward their deeper implications.

Currently, there are 20 reality shows in circulation that stage interventions (read: provide antidotes) for the normative hegemony of white-middle-class life by depicting life on the “frontier” or “the wild.” (Among the current shows are: *Survivor*, *Colonial House*, *Alaska Bush People*, *Frontier House*, and *Man vs. Wild*.) Through their ubiquity and popularity, such shows evidence the extent of settler-desire for the imperialist fantasy of “pre-modernist” times at the same time they appease settler supremacy. They refract what McLintock (McClintock and Robertson 1994) refers to as “panoptical time,” (More specifically, McLintock (1994) defines panoptical time as “the image of global history consumed – at a glance – in a single spectacle from the point of privileged invisibility” (p. 128).) a key component of imperialist discourse that situates progress as fundamentally contingent upon on a “shadow other,” which is, of course, the savage (Pardy 2010). Indeed, as noted by Rosaldo (1989) “In this ideologically constructed world of ongoing progressive change, putatively static savage societies become a stable reference point for defining. . .civilized identity” (p. 70). Native peoples are so much “a shadow” that with the exception of one show (*Frontier House*) they are not even present – literally eliminated from settler view. In this sense, progress is the central character, so critical to settler mythology that it drives a deep-seeded need to continually perform the fabled journey from savage to civilized over and over again; settler-subjects playing out fantasies of the colonial encounter as theater.

There was one reality show about Native peoples – *Escaping Alaska* – which, depicted five Alaska Native youth (identified as “Eskimos”) “secretly” plotting to leave their families and homeland in order to experience life in the lower 48. True to Debord’s thesis, the society of the spectacle can only produce grotesque caricatures. In this instance, Inuit youth are depicted as members of a virtual cult that apparently holds their members’ captive and in complete ignorance of the “outside” world. Baloy (2016) theorizes the oscillation between the complete erasure and hyperreality of Indigenous peoples in terms of “spectrality” (i.e., a state of haunting). She deploys the term “holographic Indigeneity” to describe the phenomena of Native peoples hyper-visibility “from some angles” and invisibility from others – always a constant presence even in moments of apparent absence (p. 209).

Lakota scholar Phil Deloria (1999) documents how the oscillation between settler desire and repulsion for Indian-ness has manifested through the long-standing practice of “playing Indian.” Dating back at least as far as the Boston Tea Party (1773) when the “Sons of Liberty” staged their protest wearing headdresses and war paint, Deloria demonstrates how the spectacle of “playing Indian” has been a persistent feature of the search for “authentic” American identity. The advent of digital technology and social media has only enabled the speed and scope of this cultural spectacle, producing an abundant archive of Indians of the settler imagination. Baloy’s (Baloy 2016) research

demonstrates that, indeed, the main source of people's information on and experience with Indigeneity comes through media. Thus, from Victoria's Secret models in full headdress to grotesque sports mascots and fans in red-face, settlers play out their "uneasiness" with the violence of the settler project in full, spectacular display.

In theorizing the space between spectacle, cultural politics and neoliberalism, Giroux (2009) draws upon the insights of British media theorist Nick Couldry (2008) who discerns, "every system of cruelty requires its own theatre" (p. 3). As noted by Couldry, while some forms of cruelty depend on secrecy, *systems of cruelty* require legitimation via public and "ritualized performance" (p. 3). Using settler colonialism as an illustrative example, his reasoning would go something like this:

- (a) Settler colonialism is a system of cruelty.
- (b) The "truths" of which are unacceptable to democratic society if stated openly.
- (c) Those truths must be "translated into ritual that enacts, as 'play', an acceptable version of the values and compulsions on which that cruelty depends" (p. 3).

Reality television is one example of the "theater of cruelty" wherein the rituals of everyday life under settler colonialism are "enacted as play" in order to "legitimate its norms, values, institutions, and social practices" (Giroux 2008, p. 224).

Though often dismissed as innocent fun, mediated performances that erase or perpetuate gross caricatures of Native peoples have *systemic* impact. Unfortunately, this impact is typically framed in psychological terms, playing out something like this: (1) Offending settlers are called out on their racism; (2) they attest to their good intentions and express desire to honor and respect the lifeways of Native peoples as well as regret for hurt feelings; (3) Native "victims" of said "honoring" (re)register their feelings of offense and outrage, often citing harm to their self-esteem and identity formation; and (4) Rinse. Repeat. While I ultimately urge moving beyond this psychologizing discourse, I want to be clear that research evidencing the latent, direct, and collateral damage of racial stereotyping is both chilling and definitive (see Pewewardy 1991, 2004; Fryberg and Markus 2004; Fryberg et al. 2008). The bullying, harassment, and discrimination that occur as a result of the regular and persistent misrepresentation of Native peoples are an affront to their dignity and to the democratic aspirations of the nation. That said, I argue that an exclusive focus on the psychological is deeply insufficient and perhaps complicit in maintaining imperialist relations and discourses.

The preoccupation with psychological trauma draws attention away from the material conditions of Indigenous peoples and violent strategies of the settler state (i.e., dispossession). The violence of this erasure is captured in Rosaldo's (1989) notion of "imperialist nostalgia," which links settler desire for an imagined past to a politics of death and mourning (p. 107). As Rosaldo (1993) writes:

... someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. ... people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature. In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination. (pp. 69–70)

As theorized by Baloy (2016), the dialectical relationship between spectacle and imperialist nostalgia provides the conceptual frame through which settlers imagine Native peoples. That is, as mediated, spectacularized versions of “the Indian” dominate the collective consciousness of settler society, it functions to erase the lived experience of Indigenous peoples: hypervisibility = invisibility. In other words, spectacle facilitates “imperialist nostalgia” and the passive consumption of Indigenous performance at the expense of *actual* Indigenous voices and histories.

In terms of Standing Rock, Baloy’s work also helps explain the relative invisibility of the Sioux peoples and Indigenous water protectors as well as the hypervisibility of the more spectacular “#NoDAPL “warrior.” Indeed, from the beginning of the encampment (April 1, 2016) to the moment that the Army Corps of Engineers announced the (temporary) denial of the easement, mainstream media as a whole, essentially covered three (spectacular) events: (1) the police use of water cannons on protectors in subfreezing temperatures (November 21, 2016); (2) the arrival of thousands of veterans (December 2, 2016); and, (3) the “victory” celebrations following the Army Corps of Engineers announcement (December 4, 2016). While spectacle clearly drew their attention, FAIR reports that more often than not, the coverage was “limited, biased, and/or inaccurate” (For example, FAIR condemned the New York Times headline that read, “16 Arrested at North Dakota Pipeline Protest as Tensions Continue,” noting that there had been more than 470 arrests. They also called out the framing of events as a “clash” between protesters and police by NPR, CBS, and ABC writing: “This ‘clash’ framing – also utilized in headlines on CBS (11/20/16) and CNN (11/20/16) – implies a parity between police in military vehicles, employing water cannons, tear gas, pepper spray, rubber-coated bullets, and concussion grenades (one of which may have cost an activist her arm), on the one hand, and basically unarmed civilians on the other (Police say one officer was hit in the head by a thrown rock).” And finally, FAIR took issue with the Washington Post headline (11/21/16) framing the attack from a police perspective: “Police Defend Use of Water Cannons on Dakota Access Protesters in Freezing Weather”) Water protectors were consistently misrepresented as protestors (not protectors), agitators, and trespassers engaged in a “clash” with Morton County officials and Energy Transfer Partners; such false equivalences between unarmed peaceful protectors and heavily armed officers and their billionaire corporate backers can only be drawn through erasures of history and power. The gestalt of such coverage serves to perpetuate the myths of the settler project: the vanishing Indian, the benevolent colonizer, justified conquest, and the liberal (settler) state as the epitome of progress.

Spectacle and the Solidification of the Settler State

While Indigenous peoples have long lived the material realities of US imperialism, settlers are only recently beginning to contemplate the impact of authoritarian rule and capitalist accumulation. In the last 5 years alone, there has been an explosion of activism in the United States and across the world. Movements such as #Occupy

Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, #NoDAPL, and more recently #Antifa have not only brought important issues to light but also changed public discourse. Phrases such as, “We are the 99%,” “I can’t breathe,” and “water is life” have been burned into the collective consciousness of the nation in a way that suggests there is no turning back. The academy followed trend, publishing important research that provided an evidentiary basis for the commonsense claims of activists.

Among the more effective scholarly interventions is the work of French economist Thomas Piketty and author of, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2014). In his almost 700-page tome, Piketty examines an impressive array of data to draw inferences about the evolution of inequality and growing concentration of wealth. His main finding is that while inequality is an inherent feature of capitalism (because inherited wealth will always grow faster than earned wealth), it can be effectively mitigated through state intervention. Absent such intervention, however, he predicts that inequality will continue to rise, putting the democratic order at risk. Though Piketty’s work has been met with a fair amount of critique, a recent study by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality (2016) supports his findings, drawing a close relationship between federal economic policy and equitable wealth distribution (For example, the report shows that among Anglophone countries (i.e., the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Germany), the United States has the highest rate of inequality.). Considered alongside the Gilens and Page (2014) report that draws a statistically significant relationship between wealth and political power, such findings are foreboding. Indeed, the recent declaration by the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP) that the state of North Carolina is no longer a democracy (According to the report, the state’s overall electoral integrity resembled those in authoritarian states and “pseudo-democracies” such as Cuba, Indonesia, and Sierra Leone.) provides a window to the new age of oligarchy emerging from the structures and policies of neoliberalization enacted over the past 30 years.

Despite the growing public awareness, economist Paul Krugman observes that the average citizen cannot comprehend the depth of the inequality, which is to say the actual distance between the lived experience of the “average citizen” and the ultra-wealthy. I argue that this is due, in part, to the highly mediated and spectacular display of wealth. For example, while it seems as though we have constant and ready access to the “real” lives of the Kardashians or the “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills,” what we actually see is the spectacle of wealth – the lavish parties, ostentatious homes, and exotic vacations – not the lived experience. Their outrageous wealth is both mitigated and normalized through the familiar tropes of social life – family drama, sibling rivalry, romance gone bad, and struggles with addiction. The overriding but subliminal plotline is that, underneath it all we are the same. Lost to the veil of spectacle is the understanding that extreme wealth is contingent upon extreme poverty; hidden from view are all the forms of labor and extraction that enable the cruel disparity.

Within this context, it is not surprising that the rise of Trump (As reality TV star turned President, Trump epitomizes Debord’s connection between commodity-spectacle and celebrity. He writes, “Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images

of possible roles...government power assumes the personified form of the pseudostar...a star of consumption gets elected as a pseudo-power over the lived" (60).) has also emerged in and through spectacular theater. Of particular note is his penchant for post-election rallies: 18 and counting. While it is not at all unusual for a sitting president to hold such rallies, the general purpose is to "create a new sense of shared national unity, rather than to show a divided country" (As stated by presidential historian Robert Dallek in the Washington Post article, "The Election is Over but the Trump Rallies Continue," https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-election-is-over-but-the-trump-rallies-continue-the-president-elects-fans-turn-out-for-him-in-ohio/2016/12/01/00e25946-b7dd-11e6-959c-172c82123976_story.html?utm_term=.1548a75ad0ea). As examined by public policy expert Robert Reich, Trump's rallies deviate from this norm in the following ways: (1) they are only held in states where Trump won; (2) rather than deliver a call for unity, their purpose is more to wind up the base and rally "the movement"; (3) rather than "shift from campaigning to governing," they mimic his pre-election rallies; and, (4) rather than use them as a forum to "forgive those who criticized him during the campaign, he employed them to settle scores" (Reich 2016) (See, "Why President Trump Will Continue to Hold Rallies," <http://robertreich.org/post/154643782110>). While such theatrics may indeed lather his base, the spectacle whiteness obfuscates its material realities.

It is precisely because Trump shares little else with his base, that the presentation of his own whiteness has to be so spectacular. It is the theatrics that obfuscate the chasm of inequality that stretches between him and the "average" settler. He is a multi-billionaire who inherited much of his fortune, attended elite, private schools, and never had to work a day in his life. His support for DAPL wrapped in a discourse about jobs, the "American" economy and the "good" people of North Dakota is a thin shroud over his real commitments: oil and profit. The oil dominance of his cabinet – Rex Tillerson, CEO of Exxon/Mobil as secretary of State; Rick Perry, former governor of oil-rich Texas as head of the Department of Energy – and his own holdings in DAPL pipeline builders, Energy Transfer Partners, reveal his actual "base." The drama of the spectacle is necessary to draw attention away from the economic abyss that is the \$20,789 per capita income of households in Bismarck, North Dakota, and Trumps reported \$3.5 billion net worth.

The intensification of cruelty under neoliberalism has brought with it a renewed press to draw the liberal subject (i.e., "benevolent colonizer") into its theater, raising the bar for even more spectacular productions of American exceptionalism, which is to say settler supremacy. As observed by Giroux (2008), "What is often ignored by many theorists who analyze the rise of neoliberalism is that it isn't only a system of economic power relations, but also a political project of governing and persuasion intent on producing new forms of subjectivity and particular modes of conduct" (p. 224). Indeed, the construction of the settler state has, at every stage, relied on identity and cultural politics for its reconsolidation, requiring and soliciting certain ways of being, desiring, and knowing at the same time it destroys others (Agathangelou 2008; Duggan 2012). Productions in its theater of cruelty rely on spectacle to obscure and "smuggle" past the violent rituals of settler colonialism as normative.

For example, it is not difficult to see how Trump rallies set the stage for the normativization of white supremacy as “alt-right” or even “white nationalism” expressed in slogans such as “Make America Great Again.” The consequences of which gave rise to one of the most brazen, public displays of white supremacy and consolidation in a long time: the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina. Despite the fact that the rally resulted in the death of Heather Heyer and injury of 19 other rally protestors, Trump has continually insisted that there was violence and culpability on “both sides.” Such false equivalences are issued as code to his white supremacist base to draw back and inward, to circle the wagons once again, around who is what counts as white, as superior, as manifest destined colonizer.

Ultimately, however, as Memmi (1991) argues, “colonization can only disfigure the colonizer” (p. 147). As he sees it, the settler subject has only two choices, both of which are equally “disastrous”: the acceptance of “daily injustice” for one’s own benefit on the one hand or a “never consummated self-sacrifice” on the other (pp. 147–148). And, since a life of guilt, shame, and anguish is virtually “unlivable,” Memmi surmises that the colonizer will typically choose to “confirm and defend the colonial system in every way” (p. 147). That said, he also wonders, “but what privileges, what advantages, are worth the loss of his soul?” (p. 148). And therein lies the essence of settler “uneasiness.”

The apparent hopelessness of the settler problem raises important questions about the structure and potential of social movements, coalition building, and the possibility of transformation. Questions asked with even greater urgency as the United States joins the global, right-wing turn toward authoritarian populism.

Indigenous Refusal and the Twenty-First-Century Ghost Dance

As articulated by Indigenous scholars, Julian Brave NoiseCat and Anne Spice, “At Standing Rock, the audacious vision for an indigenous future, handed down from Wounded Knee and global in force, is alive and well.” In order for this “audacious vision” to be fully realized, it is up to all of us to see and work past the glimmer of spectacle, to resist the cult of the immediate, and to do the more deliberative work of history, earnestly connecting past with present. This requires a collective refusal to participate in the theater of cruelty and choose instead to dismantle the settler consciousness that enables it. Such efforts entail working beyond and below the surface, keeping an eye toward the process by which relations of mutuality are either abandoned or eroded by relations of capital – to in effect, decolonize.

Within this struggle, Indigenous nations, peoples, and knowledge are crucial, not because they hold any magic or “ancient wisdom” but because they represent the most enduring and resilient entities that present a competing moral vision to the settler order. Despite myriad struggles, Native peoples have maintained their autonomy and political sovereignty for centuries, confounding the infamous Thatcherism, “There is No Alternative.” And insofar as current patterns of thinking and being have contributed to the existing political, economic, and environmental crises of our time, it is incumbent upon all of us to protect the complex ecologies that sustain

Indigenous communities. That said, I want to be clear that by “protect” I do not mean appropriate, mimic, exploit, or put on display. I mean to create and sustain the conditions under which such communities continue to survive and thrive.

Settlers desiring to be accomplices in the decolonial project need to assume the stance of advocate (not spectator) for Indigenous rights and perhaps more importantly, for *whitestream transformation*. Within activist spaces this means demonstrating a willingness to stand on the front lines to help contain the metastasizing neoliberalism. As argued by Glen Coulthard (2014), “For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die” (p. 173). This also necessarily demands a prior rejection of liberalism. Particularly now, as pundits and scholars begin to dissect the “success” of #NoDAPL, it is important to register the long-understood failures of liberal politics and belief in reform – of the liberal subject, of capital, of the state – through “peaceful” action and “rational” discourse. Any movement that does not first recognize the irrationality and violence of the settler state and its envoys is by definition anti-Indian.

It means recognizing that “the movement” is not (only) about the present but rather demands both history and a ground(ing) that is both literal and metaphoric. The guiding vision is not human centered or derived but rather comes from land and all that sustains it. The less quoted, second half of Coulthard’s (2014) assertion is, “for capitalism to die, we must actively participate in the construction of Indigenous alternatives to it” (p. 173). The Indigenous project is not defined by liberal or juridical notions of justice. Indeed, liberalism’s reliance on the fantasy of the benevolent state and its refusal to relinquish the idea of a “new social order, built in the shell of the old,” ultimately solidifies the settler state. The so-called progressive movements built on liberal ideas give rise to organizing strategies held captive to the “reign of the perpetual present.” Such politics were epitomized by the Occupy Wall movement – its never-ending process of agenda building, leaderless and lateral structure and non-prescriptive slogan, “What is Our One Demand?” – all suggest an allegiance to the liberal ideal of freedom as individual liberty.

In contrast, Indigenous struggle is built on history and ancestral knowledge. It is informed by original teachings and the responsibility to uphold relations of mutuality. Attention to these teachings requires resistance and refusal of the fast, quick, sleek, and spectacular in favor of the steady, tried, consistent, and intergenerational. It is the replacement of “to each his own” and “may the best man win” with “we are all related.” As Debord observes, the spectacle is “the reigning social organization of a paralyzed history, of a paralyzed memory, of an abandonment of any history founded in historical time” and, thus, “is a false consciousness of time” (158). We must refuse this false consciousness.

In the end, refracting liberal, social justice movements through an Indigenous lens compels us to be attentive to both the larger ontological and epistemic underpinnings of settler colonialism; to discern the relationship between our struggles and others; to disrupt complicity and ignite a refusal of the false promises of capitalism. This level of clarity removes the messy and participatory work of agenda setting that liberal movements insist upon, because, the agenda has already been set – a long time ago. It is about land and defense of land. Land is our collective past, our present, and our future. This is our one demand.

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