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On resilient parasitisms, or why I’m skeptical of Indigenous/settler reconciliation

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ABSTRACT

Political reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settler nations is among the major ethical issues of the twenty-first century for millions of Indigenous peoples globally. Political reconciliation refers to the aspiration to transform violent and harmful relationships into respectful relationships. This essay discusses how efforts to achieve reconciliation are not feasible when settler nations and some of their citizens believe Indigenous peoples to be clamoring for undeserved privileges. Settler colonialism often includes the illusion that historic and contemporary settler populations have moral grounds for their mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. This illusion masks historical and ongoing practices of settler colonialism that thwart effective practices of reconciliation.

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I was originally motivated to write this essay after reflecting on a recent and rather brief encounter. As a Potawatomi relative, scholar, and activist seeking environmental justice, I regularly work with or speak to nonIndigenous policy, advocacy, and academic audiences on environmental justice issues. One time, I had given a presentation on the ethics of collaboration in environmental initiatives and spent some time on the topic of political reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the US settler nation.

Political reconciliation refers to the aspiration to transform violent and harmful relationships into respectful relationships. Respectful relationships are morally grounded, e.g. trustworthy and accountable, and just, e.g. economically fair and mutually empowering. Importantly, they are preventative of harms stemming from ongoing discrimination, e.g. police violence and child abuse, and the impacts suffered today from long legacies of discrimination, e.g. intergenerational trauma and racist educational institutions.

A small part of my presentation covered some of the demands on the US that Native people have made for years – which, as I clarified at the time, represent just one aspect of Indigenous aspirations and plans for reconciliation. Among the demands I touched on were the following: improving how US federal, state, and local governments honor treaty rights and political agreements; promulgating and reforming laws and policies to stop violence against Indigenous bodies; fostering accountable consultation processes with Indigenous governments; and increasing US support for Indigenous peoples’ education, economic well-being, healthcare, and cultural revitalization.
During a break after the presentation, an employee of a US government agency pulled me aside. They told me that they were certainly big advocates of Indigenous peoples’ rights and the importance of reconciliation. However, they thought that some of the demands I discussed were not convincing because the demands sounded like Indigenous peoples were clamoring for ‘undeserved privileges’. In an advisory tone, seemingly parental in effect, they told me that Indigenous peoples would never be respected if their demands came across as ‘parasitic’ on the US and its citizenry.

These micro-aggressive types of encounters are (unfortunately) all too typical in my line of work. Yet after this encounter in particular, I wondered about the psychologies, cultures, and historical memories that could even make it possible for someone to believe – even slightly – that Indigenous peoples are ‘parasitic’ on the US settler nation. Did they not know the history of US settlement in North America?

In this essay, I reflect specifically on whether reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settler nations is even feasible in contexts where at least some people are capable of accusing Indigenous peoples of clamoring for ‘undeserved privilege’. Ironically, if we think clearly about the facts, it’s precisely settler nations who’ve set up a parasitic system – that is, a parasitic system of domination. In what follows, I’ll sketch how it’s this system that makes it possible for settler nations and some of their citizens to dare to act in ways that treat Indigenous peoples as parasitic on them. I’m skeptical of any attempts at reconciliation that fail to end the parasitic aspects of power.

I’ll first discuss what reconciliation means to me and show some concerns I have about how settler nations have approached reconciliation. I’ll conclude with some remarks about one of the criteria that must be met for reconciliation to be feasible: settler nations and their citizenry must come to terms with their own participation in parasitic domination. This essay offers general theoretical claims in the spirit of advancing further discussion on Indigenous/settler reconciliation, and lacks the space to articulate a more developed philosophy and argument. Since I work in the context of the US, my perspective is shaped by my US-based experiences and most of my examples are about the US.

By ‘settler nations’, I’m referring to the communications, institutions, rules, and actions of governments and organizations. The governments and organizations originate from the processes of invasion and permanent settlement in territories where other populations were exercising self-government at the time. The US, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia are settler nations, and exercise governance across economic, educational, cultural, social, and many other sectors. Corporations, counties, non-profits, and municipalities are among the organizations that operate through the legal orders of settler nations and exercise influence over how governance occurs across the sectors just referenced (e.g. corporate lobbying, local government authority).

‘Indigenous peoples’ refer to the populations who exercised self-government prior to periods of invasion and permanent settlement. Indigenous peoples continue to exercise self-government today in their original territories or in territories to which they have been displaced by settler nations and some of their citizens. Indigenous peoples include specific self-governing peoples or nations (as some identify), such as the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi and the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and the larger relations they may be part of, such as Anishinaabe/Neshnabé peoples (which include diverse Potawatomi, Odawa and Ojibwe communities, peoples, and nations).
Settler nations typically wield disproportionate power over Indigenous peoples. Settler nations’ power is expressed through their militaries and police, financial wealth, and control over institutions (e.g. education, media, courts, etc.). Their power is also solidified by the fact that other nations globally recognize the settler nations as the preeminent government authorities in their regions (instead of recognizing Indigenous peoples as such).

Today, many citizens of settler nations such as the US or Canada – whether they descend directly from the invaders or early settlers – enjoy privileges including economic security, healthcare, cultural integrity, and land access. These privileges are made possible through the power settler nations exercise. The exercise of such power is possible in the first place owing largely to settler nations’ historic and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands and settler nations’ historic and ongoing violations of Indigenous rights and self-government.

Settler nations and their citizens are responsible for endorsing or failing to reform laws, policies, economic practices, and cultural norms that are violently anti-Indigenous. In national contexts such as the US or Canada, it’s widely documented that Indigenous peoples endure horrific abuses, including high incidences of police brutality, incarceration, sexual assault, murder and going-missing, environmental injustices, denial of cultural integrity, food insecurity, homelessness, and psychological violence.

While the focus here is on Indigenous/settler relations, a richer analysis of reconciliation necessarily includes peoples and populations whose oppression by settler nations is connected – in numerous ways – to Indigenous land dispossession. In the US, for example, slavery and racism against African-Americans and US imperialist violence in the global south intersect fundamentally with US domination of Indigenous peoples. There are aspirations of reconciliation relating to these experiences of oppression, such as the Greensboro (North Carolina) Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to heal relationships between African-American and white communities.

Indigenous/settler reconciliation is among the major ethical issues of the twenty-first century for millions of Indigenous peoples globally. Indigenous peoples everywhere continue to propose and lead approaches to reconciliation. These approaches include reforming national constitutions to respect Indigenous legal orders and democratic voices, establishing or renewing treaty relations that support justice, and the creation of truth-telling commissions and restorative justice processes that privilege healing, accountability, and territorial reclamation. Consider some examples.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Whanganui Iwi has worked to create innovations within the settler nation’s legal system to protect the Iwi members’ historic, cultural, spiritual, social, and cultural relationships with the Whanganui River – a river that has suffered pollution and degradation by New Zealand settlers (Morris and Ruru 2010). As part of the Iwi’s larger efforts, one recent success has been the securing of personhood rights for the river under New Zealand law in 2017 (Ruru 2018).

The Navajo Nation has appealed to its own traditions of peacemaking as a way to improve justice. Peacemaking focuses on healing, community-building, and restorative justice, which differ from US imposed or influenced policing and courts that are adversarial and top-down in their authority. The Nation has worked to further build peacemaking into its formal legal code (Nielsen and Gould 2003; Yazzie 1996–1997).

Tribal leaders in the US context in the 1960s and 1970s pushed US congressional representatives to hold an inquiry into the key issues facing Indigenous peoples, which led to

While settler nations often came to be supportive of some of the approaches just described, their own actions toward reconciliation are often limited. By limited, I mean that they are more symbolic in intent and less about actually transforming the conditions that perpetuate violence, domination, and denial of rights. In the next set of paragraphs, I’ll review several examples of what I mean by limited forms of reconciliation, which include apologies, recognizing Indigenous peoples as ‘semi-sovereigns’, and developing laws or policies that protect Indigenous cultural integrity and cultural heritage. In some of these approaches, it was Indigenous peoples who played active roles at the earliest stages of raising awareness of critical issues needing redress. Yet settler nations and their citizens didn’t follow through in good faith with transformative actions.

To begin with, few people in the US even know that about a decade ago the US Senate Committee on Indian Affairs advanced a joint-resolution to apologize to Native Americans for federal wrongdoings. The resolution ultimately failed to gain support. Of course, even the proposed apology had the following disclaimer that sanctions rigid limits: ‘Nothing in this Joint Resolution – (1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States’ (S.J.Res.14).

US-generated prerogatives for how to implement reconciliation often produce morally horrendous and unjust results. For example, the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act and other laws, policies, and changes were part of sweeping reforms intended to restore some measures of Indigenous self-government, economic and bodily security, and protection of cultural integrity. However, in 1978, the Oliphant versus Squamish case decided that the US wouldn’t endorse tribes’ having criminal jurisdiction over non-tribal members who committed crimes in tribal jurisdictions (Duthu 2008). Sarah Deer’s work shows how this lack of tribal jurisdiction is among the major legal factors contributing to the high incidences of rape against Indigenous women by non-tribal members on reservations (Deer 2015).

Yet Deer documents how US efforts to address this violence included attempts by politicians to cast the US as in the role of saving Indigenous women. Deer discusses how the 2013 reforms to the Violence against Women Act were originally introduced by a senator as the ‘Save Native Women Act’ (96) – a title later changed. According to Deer though, the ultimate reforms nonetheless pertained to rapes committed within domestic situations, which don’t cover ‘acquaintance rape, all child sexual abuse, and all stranger rape committed by non-Indians. The only sexual assault that can be covered is that committed by an intimate partner’ (Deer 2015, 105). Deer shows how some US politicians justified these limits on the idea that tribes are incompetent to run their own police and courts – and the allegation of incompetence is used to justify US supervision and control (Deer 2015).

The Standing Rock Tribe’s resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline involved engagement with several US laws and policies that were probably intended by the US to be reconciliatory in various ways. They include the US duty to consult tribes in advance of impactful government or private actions, procedures that seek to protect Indigenous cultural heritage, and requirements to respect treaty rights and the government-to-government relationship (between federally-recognized tribes and the US).
Yet, the ways these laws and policies are constructed makes it difficult for any tribe to really have a voice and to participate on equal or fair terms with parties such as pipeline builders and US agencies (e.g. the US Army Corps of Engineers (ACE)). Consider how such difficulty played out in ways that worked to portray the tribe as blameworthy for the conflict (instead of achieving reconciliation).

US District Judge Boasberg, upon denying the Tribe’s request to temporarily halt pipeline construction, stated that ‘Tribal and NHPA (National Historic Preservation Act) Section 106 consultation was adequate and the Tribe largely refused to engage in consultations’ (205 F. Supp. 3d. 4, 76). Or, in another case pertaining to legal and political standing, one North Dakota politician stated,

This isn’t about tribal rights or protecting cultural resources. The pipeline does not cross any land owned by the Standing Rock Sioux … To suggest that the Standing Rock tribe has the legal ability to block the pipeline is to turn America’s property rights upside down. (Cramer 2016)

Yet the Tribe and its supporters have valid legal and policy claims that they were not sufficiently engaged or allowed to voice concerns meaningfully. For example, ACE’s 100 page Environmental Assessment focused too much on the fact the pipeline is ‘technically’ off the reservation (instead of focusing on the pipeline’s threats to the main water source of the Tribe), it was not sufficiently transparent or consultative, it failed to acknowledge treaty rights and treaty history, and it excluded multiple considerations that would affect the Tribes’ concerns about pipeline leaks, environmental justice, and cultural heritage. One consideration involved the fact that the pipeline was rerouted from an older route that would have been closer to the (largely white settler) city of Bismarck (Colwell 2016; Grijalva 2017).

In other settler nation contexts, I see comparable concerns. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Straight Island peoples issued the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017. The statement calls for reform of Australia’s constitution to include an elected commission of Indigenous representatives – ‘an Indigenous Voice to Parliament’ – and a treaty making and agreement process supervised by a new Makarrata Commission. ‘Makarrata’, in the Yolngu people’s language, is a word that means the resumption of acceptable relationships after the occurrence of hostility (Fenley 2011). Megan Davis writes that

[The statement] was a dramatic departure from the conventional wisdom on ‘recognition’. Indigenous people called instead for ‘voice, treaty, truth’: a single alteration to the text of the Constitution enshrining a voice, and extra-constitutional reforms in legislation enabling a Makarrata and, consequently, truth-telling. (Davis 2017)

Davis describes how the Australian government should have been ready for the reforms, since the statement


Yet the Australian government rejected the Uluru Statement as anti-democratic, violating equal civil rights, and unfavorable to the majority of Australians. The rejection can be interpreted as actually blaming Indigenous peoples for requesting privileged treatment.
The Australian Prime Minister stated that

Our democracy is built on the foundation of all Australian citizens having equal civic rights, all being able to vote for, stand for and serve in either of the two chambers of our national Parliament – the House of Representatives and the Senate… A constitutionally enshrined additional representative assembly for which only Indigenous Australians could vote for or serve in is inconsistent with this fundamental principle. (Turnbull 2017)

Despite the Australian government’s investment in meeting with Indigenous peoples over time and desire to receive the statement, Australian politicians rejected it as undemocratic.

In all these brief examples, the following appears to be a good part of what is going on: settler nations’ attempts at reconciliation actually further empower them and their citizens to believe they occupy firm moral grounds in their treatment of Indigenous peoples. Settler Australians get to say that they made a good faith attempt at reconciliation but the ‘demands’ of Indigenous Australians are ‘undemocratic’ and disrupt civil rights. Settler Americans get to say that they did their part to save Indigenous women and made improvements to VAWA. Any further problems or limitations are the result of tribes’ failing in governance capacity or competence (not the US). Proponents of the Dakota Access Pipeline get to believe that it’s the Standing Rock Tribe who seeks to violate the rule of law and simply failed to engage US legal and policy processes. The joint-resolution to apologize to Native Americans, if passed, would have provided a sort of moral ground, so to speak, that settlers have apologized without there being a need or plan for any further transformations in US/Indigenous relationships.

It seems that Indigenous/settler reconciliation amounts to processes that transfigure Indigenous peoples into dependents or special sovereigns who are clamoring for settler nations to grant them undue privileges and benefits. And settler nations and citizens gain additional empowerment – whether through institutions, actions, or communications – to exercise something like a right to judge whether Indigenous peoples are good or bad dependents, sovereigns, or citizens.

In Sarah Deer’s book, The Beginning and End of Rape, she has to remind the readers that it’s the actions of Native women that led to there being even attempts at law and policy reform – since often US politicians and others are more likely to be remembered (Deer 2015). Megan Davis’ reminder to the Australian government and citizenry recalls that Indigenous peoples have been articulating reforms for years, and that the Uluru Statement’s reforms ‘are not new, just newly urgent’ (Davis 2017).

I hope the examples of reconciliation processes are sufficiently clear to show that settler nations and citizens often create the illusion that they stand on moral ground in their treatment of Indigenous peoples. By doing so, these processes overtly and unabashedly intensify at least one system of oppression: settler colonialism. There is a wide range of work on settler colonialism in Indigenous studies and beyond (Lefevre 2015; see a note on pg. 783 in Speed 2017). Here I want to focus on how settler colonialism – when it works to create illusory moral grounds – is a specifically parasitic system of domination. I continue to be skeptical of Indigenous/settler reconciliation processes that don’t change the parasitic dynamics of settler colonialism. I want to convey some of the basis of my skepticism here.

The term parasite has been widely used as a racial slur or derogatory term, as it was used in the brief encounter I described at the start of this piece. I don’t think that it should be a term that is used to stereotype or criminalize individuals. Here, I’m using it
in a technical sense, where parasitism refers to a particular systematic formation of relationships that can be seen in areas such as politics, culture, and economics, among other areas.

From Dictionary.com, a parasite is ‘a living thing that lives in or on another living thing and gets food and sometimes shelter from it and usually causes harm to it’. To speak of a parasitic system (instead of a ‘thing’), I’m speaking of an organization of relationships in areas such as politics or culture that work to enable some living things to live off of and harm others. I want to take this definition of a parasitic system and use it to describe a particular systematic aspect of settler colonial oppression. From now on, when I use the term parasite or parasitism, I’m referring to parasitic systems.

I’ll distinguish between two types of parasitic systems that illustrate two broad but not exclusive types of colonial domination. The first involves a parasite invading and living fully or partially off of a host. The relationship ends when the parasite intentionally or unintentionally kills the host, the parasite runs out of what it needs to live (hence leaving), or the host repels the parasite. The second parasitism involves a parasite invading and living off of a host too. But the goal of the parasite is not just to invade and live off the host, but to become the host – eventually reversing the two roles. The original host is either eliminated, or the new host deprives the original host of its needs, causing rampant suffering.

The first type of parasitism is similar to colonialism in which one group invades another and exploits benefits without actually permanently settling; the second type is settler colonialism. Importantly in this second type, if we attribute some form of moral consciousness to the parasitic system, then we can imagine a case where the original parasite creates the illusion that the original host itself is a parasite that must be killed, controlled, or assimilated. Consider how settler colonialism, as a parasitism of the second type, works in the case of US settler colonialism. Here, I’m going to give a broad account of US settler colonialism based on brief representations of facts and on some of my informed opinions and speculations.

I’ll first fast forward past the transatlantic fur trade to the dawn of US sovereignty and settlement in North America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Diverse US settlers sought to make permanent homes for themselves by accessing the means of their sustenance from the lands and waters. Of course, they used their own knowledge and skills – historic, acquired, and stolen – to metabolize the North American ecosystems they encountered to sustain their settler permanence.

Indigenous peoples’ economies, cultures, religious practices, and political organizations cultivated ecosystems that, from settlers’ perspectives, could be redeployed and reengineered for supporting settler (permanent) sustenance. And some of the main knowledge and skills settlers had were related to how to extract what they perceived in their cultures as resources from ecosystems, how to commodify these resources as money (which is associated with prestige and power), and how to exploit human and nonhuman labor for the sake of intensifying extraction and commodification.

Forest ecosystems, for example, with giant trees, diverse species, and rich soils were massive assets for commercial and subsistence harvesting of plants and animals and deforestation to make way for commercial agriculture and timber sales. Watersheds provided water for drinking and farming, transportation corridors for boats and logging, sinks for waste and pollution, energy for hydropower, trading opportunities that promote the creation of cities and towns, and recreational areas. Since Indigenous peoples didn’t
exploit oil, gas, and coal, settlers perceived Indigenous territories as possessing these assets too.

Settlers must have only understood a few ways to live in ecosystems – namely extraction, commodification, and labor exploitation. And, historically, they held the idea that resources wouldn’t run out or the idea that resource shortages would be solved by new technologies that would (hopefully) appear to make more of the same resources available or allow the tapping of new resources.

US settlers wanted to harness what they believed to be resources and commodify them as assets for sale, financial leverage, and consumption – intensively at the local scale and imperialistically at the global scale, pushing costs down through perpetrating unjust systems such as slavery, land grabbing, flouting treaties, low wage labor exploitation, and financial systems engineering. That is, local extraction had to support local settlement and also generate wealth and US sovereign prowess through strengthening global trade, which, in turn, empowered the US military domestically and globally. Such specific visions and ecological ambitions would have been impossible to achieve without killing Indigenous peoples, dispossessing them of their lands, and diminishing their sovereignty.

Indigenous peoples would have to be removed onto smaller areas of land. They’d have to be killed through the actions of military personnel or of private citizens. It’d have to be the case that the killers wouldn’t face severe legal consequences – if any at all – for their actions. Indigenous peoples would have to be turned into participants of and contributors to US settler colonialism even if they couldn’t benefit as much as white men, such as through forcing Indigenous persons to be farmers or stripping them of their cultures, languages, and knowledge systems in boarding schools and replacing those with skills for low wage labor.

There’s just no way to imagine an alternative where the US is exactly what it is today economically, culturally, and politically without the commission of genocide, unwarranted killing, sexual violence, forced assimilation, child abuse, and economic injustice. My point here is not that US treatment of Indigenous peoples was inevitable in some historically deterministic sense; rather, it’s that the US settler nation and many of its citizens accepted morally horrendous, violent, and unjust visions and ecological ambitions. History did not have to play out this way.

Moreover, given that many settlers desired to stay permanently, instead of extracting and leaving, they had to find a way to make it possible for them to feel that it was morally acceptable to commit genocide, unwarranted killing, sexual violence, forced assimilation, child abuse, and economic injustice – whether one is a US settler politician, church leader, parent, or military officer. After all, they had to think of themselves as good people within their own cultures whose lives were righteous and who could pass on wisdom to future generations and create ways of honoring their ancestors.

Many Indigenous ancestors recognized early on the illusory moral grounds that settlers were employing to shroud their moral accountability. D. Ezra Miller has transcribed some of the speeches made in the 1826 Treaty between the US and the Miami Tribe. One Potawatomi speaker, Awbanawben, calls out US settlers for their moralization of colonialism. ‘You said we couldn’t stay here. We would perish. But what will destroy us? What will perish? But what will destroy us? It is yourselves destroying us …’ (Miller 2016).

Awbanawben is calling out how US settlers were just claiming that Indigenous peoples would perish, without owning up to settler causation of and responsibility for the threat.
Settlers created an illusory moral ground that their desire to remove Indigenous peoples from their homelands was really their attempt to do something good to help stop some inevitable threat of perishing that is (mysteriously) unrelated to settler violence.

That settlers had to think of themselves as moral presents a unique psychological issue that is separate from but – of course – related to the desire for naturalizing capitalist exploitation through ideology. It’s a desire to achieve permanence in other peoples’ homelands, and to create the illusion that settlers are politically entitled and morally/spiritually justified to become the true peoples of the land. It’s a desire to have moral grounds for explaining away and justifying domination, exploitation, commodification, violence, and extraction. There are at least three ways to create and sustain this illusion.

The first way is to ensure that permanent settlement involves terraforming the landscape to reflect settler economies, cultures, and visions for the future so that there are few if any physical or ecological traces of Indigenous economies, cultures, and visions. The terraforming also removes the tangible record for settlers of Indigenous suffering so that settlers don’t have to confront, on a daily basis, visible, and physical manifestations of violence having been committed. This masks the violence, and is part of strategies of writing out Indigenous histories from educational programs too.

Concepts of public lands are good examples of this, such as wilderness areas or national parks, where settlers desire to protect lands that are mythically unspoiled by humans. Then they make these desires real by restricting human activities on them, and calling the resulting ecosystems natural or untrammeled (Woods 2001). John Muir, for example, who is often revered for his appreciation of the ‘natural’ world, advocated that ‘landscape artists’ should be employed to preserve the splendor of Yosemite National Park. Of course, much of what Muir appreciated in the landscape was the result of the burning practices of the Ahwahneechee peoples, who had been violently dispossessed of Yosemite and had ceased burning the area (Johnson 2014).

Similarly, I was recently reviewing a report by the Congressional Research Service in the US that actually claims public lands originated in US states and not Indigenous dispossession: ‘The formation of the US federal government was particularly influenced by the struggle for control over what were then known as ‘western’ lands … The original states reluctantly ceded the lands to the developing new government’ (Vincent, Hanson, and Argueta 2017, 1). In light of examples like this report and John Muir’s recommendation, it shouldn’t be surprising that the next generations of settlers and other beneficiaries of settler colonialism would lack the faintest idea of any prior or continuing Indigeneity and the anti-Indigenous violence of dispossession pertaining to public lands.

A second way is to cast violent military, containment, and other colonial practices as ways of saving Indigenous peoples. For example, the liquidation of Indigenous lands into private property in the nineteenth century, which also involved the breaking up of Indigenous kinship networks and families, was cast as helping Indigenous persons become independent ‘competent’ farmers, and was advocated by settler organizations that often called themselves ‘friends’ (Royster 1995; Stremlau 2005). Even institutions as assimilative and violent as boarding schools were also, of course, seen as civilizing Indigenous peoples (Archuleta, Child, and Lomawaima 2000).

Violent confrontations and forced land dispossession are also often cast as inevitabilities of progress. Thomas Morgan, a US Commissioner of Indian Affairs, wrote in the late nineteenth century that ‘The Indians must conform to the ‘white man’s ways’ peaceably
if they will, forcibly if they must. They must adjust themselves to their environment, and
conform their mode of living substantially to our civilization. This civilization may not
be the best possible but it is the best the Indians can get. They cannot escape it, and
must either conform to it or be crushed by it’ (Bureau of Indian Affairs 1889).

Here, some standard of normalcy is promulgated that has moral value, as indicated by
the use of the term ‘competence’, for example. This is offensive, of course, given its being
deply discriminatory. But then, even if we were to accept, hypothetically, that such nor-
malcy is somehow okay, settler nations and many of their citizens still ignore (1) how his-
torical and ongoing injustice make it hard for Indigenous peoples to achieve parity with
settlers and (2) how arrangements didn’t, even at the time, provide equal and adequate
support for Indigenous peoples to attain normalcy. For example, the US set up a property
and farming system for Native persons in which it was impossible to succeed, that per-
mitted settlers to own millions of acres (often the best ones) of Indigenous lands, and
that sanctioned the stealing of profits owed to Native persons in lease contracts with
settler businesses (Bobroff 2001; Carlson 1981; Gingold and Alexander Pearl 2012;
Royster 1995).

A third way to sustain the illusion lies in the possibility for Indigenous and non-Indigen-
ous beneficiaries of and participants in settler colonialism to claim moral superiority no
matter what political spectrum their views fall on. Proponents of extractive industries
can say ‘the pipeline does not go through the reservation’. More liberal and radical
people can claim that showing up to collective action events, donating money, or roman-
ticizing Indigenous knowledge are sufficient forms of action to warrant the feeling that
they have done as much as they can to support reconciliation and justice.

Environmentalists who support ideas such as wilderness sometimes cannot even feel
any issues about how these ideas contribute to the further erasure of Indigenous peoples – even though many wilderness advocates feel they are Indigenous rights advoc-
cates too. I’ve always thought it’s ironic that some people see recreating in wilderness as a
way to find inner peace or spiritual fulfillment or to celebrate their family and social
relationships. How strange it is that some people would find peace on lands and waters
that the US rather recently dispossessed Indigenous peoples of in violent ways.

When the Trump administration took power in the US, many conservatives rallied
behind ‘Make America Great Again’. They decried the media and opposition leaders as
engaging in ‘fake news’ and disparaged people who publicly drew attention to US
human rights abuses. But this was not the only such movement to restore ‘greatness’. In
response to Trump’s politics, more liberal persons claimed that we now live in times
where there is an unprecedented attack on truth and democracy, which assumes that
there was such a time in which people enjoyed greater political empowerment and
respected truth.

Yet advocates of the idea that Trump’s politics are ‘unprecedented’ are not considering
how no US political regime has treated Native people acceptably in relation to truth and
democracy. For hundreds of years, ‘fake news’ has been a key way to lead political opposi-
tion against Native people. For example, settler newspapers, using false and exaggerated
claims, played major roles in building support for dispossession of the Great Sioux Reser-
vation (Clow 2007). Native people still don’t have sufficient ambit to participate in Amer-
ican democracy, where US congress officially exercises ‘plenary’ power over all aspects of
tribal self-determination (Duthu 2008).
In all of these ways, US settler colonialism is a parasitism of the second type. US settlers sought, and continue to seek, to live off, benefit from, and receive shelter from Indigenous territories in ways that are violent and harmful to Indigenous peoples. But at the same time, US settlers wanted and want to make it morally acceptable to do so. No one wants to perceive themselves as participating in a parasitic system. Hence, it seems to me, they opted to create the illusion that they are the hosts and that Indigenous peoples are parasitic on them.

The illusion engenders a system that is resilient against reconciliation. This is why, for me, it is often true that settler nations and some of their citizens endorse reconciliation approaches that just further entrench the illusion that parasitic systems are host systems. For at least some Indigenous persons, it’s not unreasonable at all to see settler attempts at reconciliation, from apologies to truth and reconciliation commissions, as new forms of the same old system that portrays Indigenous peoples as parasites who clamor for aid and special accommodations from benevolent hosts. The maintenance of this illusion is itself the operation of a parasitic system – a very resilient parasitic system.

Indigenous peoples are portrayed as dependents clamoring for the good graces of settler nations and settler populations, often asking for special privileges and benefits that they don’t deserve. Hence Indigenous reservations or health care programs are granted by the US politicians who, whether in the 1826 treaty or in the reforms to VAWA, see themselves as saving Indigenous peoples. Or, Indigenous peoples are perceived as soliciting special accommodations that are anti-democratic or violate rule of law, among other examples I discussed earlier.

Settler nations continue to depend on Indigenous lands and waters; they continue to create illusions to the effect that they are not so dependent. Or they seek to create the appearance that whatever injustice may have occurred in the past was inevitable. Such an appearance can engender in contemporary settlers a perception that they are relieved from accountability for violence against Indigenous peoples. In light of my encounter described on the first page and what I’ve written subsequently in this essay, I’ll claim this: I don’t think it makes any sense to ask how Indigenous peoples can tone down their demands to sound less like so much clamoring for undeserved privileges. It’s more critical to understand and address why someone, in the first place, could even hear Indigenous demands as clamoring for undeserved privileges.

Are there criteria, then, for distinguishing promising reconciliation processes from morally dreadful ones? If so, the promising ones would have to show at a minimum that they are not simply recapitulating processes of parasitic systems. This requirement is at least one criterion. Reconciliation processes should make the case that there are no reasons for why they are articulated or organized to create and perpetuate illusory moral grounds. Given parasitic systems are biological and ecological, reconciliation processes must always be associated with Indigenous territorial reclamation.

And by reclamation, I don’t mean simply territorial control or access to cultural and economic resources that are still subject to the forces of capitalist exploitation, patriarchy, and colonial domination. Many scholars in Indigenous studies and other fields thoroughly critique such approaches. Reclamation instead must attend directly to how nutrient cycles, ecological processes and flows, and biodiversity support and empower freedom, safety, consent, trust, accountability, and the potential for people to live their aspirations.
I remain skeptical of any attempts at reconciliation that don’t offer direct strategies for how to stop the production of the illusory moral grounds generated by parasitic settler colonialism. I maintain this skepticism whether someone approaches reconciliation as involving small steps over time or immediate sweeping changes.

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