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The Rest of Us: Rethinking Settler and Native

Robin D. G. Kelley

> Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.
>
> —Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

> Neither the English people themselves nor the masses of imperial subjects could be expected to perpetually accede to the imperial myth of civilizing in the face of the overtly selfish and catastrophic preoccupations of white settler colonists.
>
> —Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*

In Patrick Wolfe we lost an intellectual giant. More than any other scholar, he has emerged as the leading figure in the burgeoning field of settler colonial studies and has done so much to advance its generative theoretical paradigm. We also lost another intellectual giant in 2016: Cedric J. Robinson, whose work challenged liberal and Marxist theories of political change, exposed the racial character of capitalism, unearthed a Black Radical Tradition and examined its social, political, cultural, and intellectual bases, and advanced a concept of racial regimes that deepens our understanding of the historically contingent character of racism. I learned a great deal from both men. When I first read Wolfe's *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*, I found myself returning to Robinson's work, to places where their ideas converge and, especially, where they diverge. Unfortunately, Robinson's absence in the discourse on settler colonialism has, in my view, impoverished much of the work—including Wolfe's outstanding new book. My essay is a modest attempt to wrestle with specific claims in *Traces of History*, with Robinson's insights into race, racial capitalism, and colonialism, as well as traces of South African and European history, informing my critique.

Traces of History expands Wolfe's argument that settler colonialism operates through a "logic of elimination." The destruction or expulsion of indigenous peoples is a continuous feature of settler societies, primarily because they want the land. The logic of elimination is also consistent with forced assimilation as well as state policies that define and protect limited rights for indigenous

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people through the politics of recognition: cultural protections and individual rights in lieu of indigenous sovereignty, land and water rights, and the means of livelihood—a critical point made recently by Glen Coulthard.[1]

Wolfe sets out to interrogate the operations of race making in specific historical processes, in particular, in the always contingent struggles over land, labor, culture, and power. It is important to acknowledge Wolfe's recognition of the fundamental role of race so as to avoid the impulse to pit a racialization framework against a settler colonial one, or to treat white supremacy and anti-Blackness as transhistorical structures that overdetermine myriad processes of racialization. Wolfe, by contrast, argues for the historical specificity and mutability of race or "regimes of race." "There are no grounds," he writes, "for assuming that such striking disparities represent the uniform workings of a discursive monolith called 'race.' Rather, this book will stress the diversity distinguishing the regimes of difference with which colonisers have sought to manage subject populations."[2] A critical insight, especially at a moment when in our zeal for the transnational or our discovery of W. E. B. Du Bois's pithy formulation that the "color line belts the world,"[3] there is a tendency to characterize racial regimes as global constructions by emphasizing what they hold in common. And yet Lorenzo Veracini correctly points out that because the dynamic between colony and metropole renders settler colonialism inherently transnational and transcultural, its historiography "should be also considered in the context of its global development."[4]

I want to suggest that by not incorporating more of the globe in his study, Wolfe's particular formulation of settler colonialism delimits more than it reveals. As he writes in the introduction: "The role that colonialism has assigned to Indigenous people is to disappear. By contrast, though slavery meant the giving up of Africa, Black Americans were primarily colonised for their labour rather than for their land."[5] The statement is problematic for two reasons. First, it presumes that indigenous people exist only in the Americas and Australasia. African indigeneity is erased in this formulation because, through linguistic sleight of hand, Africans are turned into Black Americans. The Atlantic Slave Trade rips Africans from their homeland and deposits them in territories undergoing settlement and dispossession, but renaming severs any relationship to their land and indigenous communities. Limited by a thoroughly materialist framework, Wolfe misrecognized, and unwittingly contributed to, what was clearly a process of elimination: eliminate the culture, identity, and consciousness while preserving the body for labor. This is not the same as assimilation, which imagines disappearance through integration. Nor did it fully succeed. As

Robinson explained, "The cargoes of laborers also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity. These cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks—men, women, and children separated from their previous universe. African labor brought the past with it, a past that had produced it and settled on it the first elements of consciousness and comprehension."[6]

Consequently, settler colonialism on the African continent falls out of Wolfe's purview. Setting aside the long and tragic history of extractive processes like rubber production and mining in the Congo, which required both land and labor, we must acknowledge those African colonies where white settlers had come to stay: namely, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Kenya, and Algeria. Wolfe was aware of these societies as well as the fact that the formative work in settler colonial studies focused on southern Africa,[7] but he excluded Africa because it did not fit his definition of settler colonialism, which rests fundamentally on the logic of elimination. South Africa—a nation with the largest and most established white settler population—in Wolfe's view falls squarely in the category of the imperial forms of colonial domination imposed on the entire continent. I suspect that Wolfe's reasons for exclusion have more to do with the toppling of formal settler rule than whether settlers came to stay. If apartheid were still in place, he may have included it in *Traces of History*. Nevertheless, the exclusion of southern Africa and similar social formations from the definition of settler colonialism not only obscures its global and transnational character but also *eliminates the settler* from African history.

In South Africa white settlement was both a structure and a process, not an event. But 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. Robinson identified this process as the destruction of the African and "the invention of the Negro." What Robinson described in 1983 bears some resemblance to Wolfe's conception: "In destroying to replace, this logic encompasses more than the summary liquidation of Indigenous people."[8] But what is being destroyed—or at least attempted—are metaphysical and material relations of people to land, culture, spirit, and each other. In this sense, Wolfe's insistence that elimination "should be seen as an organising principle of settler colonial society" holds true for settler societies in Africa, from South Africa to Algeria.

Focusing simply on the question of land and labor, let's look at a few examples from South Africa. The initial settlement of South Africa in the seventeenth century resembles the North American or Australian model. Under the auspices of the Dutch East India Company, Dutch settlers, German Lutherans, and the French Huguenots went to Cape Colony as farmers and waged war on the Khoisan population to dispossess and enslave them, though many died from the same conditions that killed native people in the so-called New World. With native labor in short supply, they imported slaves from West Africa. However, the company's monopoly on trade limited commodity prices and rendered settler farms unprofitable, until the export market opened up in Java and other parts of Asia. As the colony became more prosperous by the early eighteenth century, European immigration increased and Dutch farmers (Afrikaners) moved farther into the interior. The company granted Afrikaner farmers on the frontier the right to form "commandos," which waged war with the indigenous population over grazing land. Since it was difficult to bring enslaved Africans into the interior, a law was passed in 1775 permitting Afrikaners to "apprentice" all captured Africans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, although this form of enslavement did not solve the colony's perennial labor shortage.

A trade depression in the 1770s followed by defeats in a series of frontier wars with the Xhosa people adversely affected Cape farmers, who, in keeping with the era of bourgeois democratic revolutions, demanded free trade and an end to the Dutch East India Company's monopoly. Ultimately, the British seized Cape Colony with the support of the Afrikaner settler population, but the decimation of the Khoikhoi population and the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 only exacerbated the ongoing labor shortage. They tried importing white indentured laborers, but the costs proved prohibitive, and many ran away into the interior and set up their own farms. By the early nineteenth century, the Cape Colony had to create an elaborate system of coercive labor control, pass laws, and labor contracts, which became even more crucial with the abolition of slavery in the Cape in 1833.

Settler expansion and the discovery of mineral wealth created three more colonies—Natal, Orange Free State, and the Transvaal. All three were also beset with labor shortages and depended on the coercive arm of the state to help transform indigenous Africans into a proletariat. In Natal, for example, the settler state introduced a system of "native locations" or reservations, designed not to sustain the population but to force people to sign long-term labor contracts to survive. As sugar production increased, so did the labor demands,

compelling the British to employ what had become its global labor policy in the postabolition era: import contract labor from India, China, and other parts of Asia. In the Orange Free State, taxation and coercion were employed to dispossess Africans and turn them into agricultural laborers or tenant farmers. However, an enterprising African peasantry adapted to the market economy and thrived, particularly after the diamond rush to Kimberly. Because they competed with white farmers who needed labor and demanded higher prices for their goods, laws were passed prohibiting African land ownership and imposing more stringent systems of contract labor. Likewise, commercial agriculture dominated the Transvaal economy until gold was discovered there in 1886. Mining companies and white farmers conspired to pass laws prohibiting Black land ownership and squatting, and in order to ensure a racially segmented labor force, the state denied Black workers the right to strike and reserved all skilled jobs for whites only. With the unification of South Africa in 1910, local policies of expropriation became the national policy, culminating in the Land Act of 1913, extending the reserve system of Natal and Cape Colony to the rest of the country. The law forced Africans to live in the reserves, squeezing 87 percent of the population onto 13 percent of the land and ensuring a consistent flow of labor to mines and white farms.[9]

Obviously, the history of settler colonialism in South Africa is far more complex and, in fact, the rise of the Afrikaner National Party in 1948 and the introduction of apartheid, and ascent of the Rhodesian Front in southern Rhodesia in 1962, signaled a *strengthening of white settler rule* just as most African colonies were achieving independence. The growth in manufacturing increased US investment in mining and finance, and urbanization attracted a new wave of European immigration.[10]

By eliding settler colonialism in Africa, *Traces of History* not only fails to account for labor regimes in which the native is simultaneously "eliminated" and exploited; it forecloses a discussion of what it means to *decolonize* settler societies. In Algeria, Kenya, and Mozambique, decolonization involved the withdrawal of settlers who had never intended to leave, whereas in Zimbabwe and South Africa the white settler population continues to exist but no longer rules. Whether the structure of settler colonialism persists or can ever be fully dismantled is a critical source of debate in the historiography. "If settler colonization," Veracini writes, "is an ultimate colonising act where settlers envisage no return, settler colonialism still tells a story of either total victory or total failure. Discontinuing settler colonial forms requires conceptual frames and supporting narratives of reconciliation that have yet to be fully developed

and narrated. Nation building in formerly colonized contexts can be difficult, but at least it can be conceptualized; enacting genuine postsettler passages in white settler nations is another matter."[11] The question, in other words, is far from being resolved, especially if we understand decolonization as a process rather than an event. In South Africa, decolonization was not achieved with the election of Nelson Mandela; it is an ongoing process requiring truth and reconciliation. For others, decolonization is envisioned in the African National Congress's (ANC) 1955 Freedom Charter, which adopts a socialist vision of restoring the land and wealth to the people, an industrial democracy based on the nationalization of resources and shared governance. There is also a neoliberal version of decolonization based on a multicultural framework of tolerating difference and equal political rights for all, but as Veracini argues, it "allows for an expanded definition of who can claim belonging to the settler body politic that leaves settler colonial structures unchallenged."[12]

What about Europe? If settlers always come from elsewhere, how far is elsewhere? Can we think about the legacies of settler colonialism in Europe itself? In *Black Marxism*, Robinson argues that racialization within Europe was very much a *colonial* process—one involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy. He reminds us that driving German colonization of central Europe and "Slavic" territories was the ideology of herrenvolk, which "explained the inevitability and the naturalness of the domination of some Europeans by other Europeans."[13] He argues that modern European nationalism was bound up with these racialist myths—herrenvolk, Anglo-Saxonism, Celtism, Aryan and Nordic myths, and so forth, and that the history of colonialism begins in Europe—and continues in Europe well after New World settler colonialism, well after the Berlin Conference, and is a principal feature in *both* world wars.

Robinson illustrates his point by examining the shifting, and increasingly violent, character of English colonization of Ireland in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Planters and farmers from Scotland and the western counties of England settled large swaths of land—by some estimates 260,000 Protestant colonists—followed by the rebellion of 1641 and deepening repression of the Irish (known as the Penal Era). What he describes echoes Wolfe's descriptions of the racialization of indigenous peoples by dispossession, except they cannot be entirely disappeared. Those who are not killed are dispersed, often ending up as indentures on ships to the New World or migrant labor on the English mainland. Robinson observes that these historical experiences shaped Irish nationalism and determined the Irish relationship with their English working-class counterparts. And he goes on to show how the Irish came

to be understood as "an inferior race." The main point, as Robinson puts it, is that "the tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones."[14]

But here Wolfe would disagree with Robinson. Though both Robinson and Wolfe treat race as a "trace history," the former pushes the genesis of racialism much earlier, even before the first signs of merchant capital in the thirteenth century, whereas the latter (Wolfe) sees race as "a distinctive configuration of ideological elements that we do not find configured in this way before the late eighteenth century." For Wolfe, race comes into being "with the shift from mercantilism to an industrial economy, which transformed colonial social organisation in the century following the Enlightenment."

The problem with this formulation, of course, is that it will almost always see the *enactment* of race making occurring outside Europe, by way of encountering the other, and the idea of race a product of Enlightenment rationality and scientific classification, rather than see both processes as deeply embedded in Western civilization. This bifurcation separates or occludes the processes of dispossession, racialization, and colonization within Europe from the settler colonial project. To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that Robinson treats racialization as transhistorical, fixed over time; rather, for him, it is extremely unstable and always changing. And he, too, traces the genesis of modern racism to the eighteenth century.[15] In fact, Robinson insists that while the power of racial regimes is real and formidable, they are surprisingly unstable. He writes: "The covering conceit of a racial regime is a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly. But racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition."[16]

This is the sort of history Patrick Wolfe begins to write in *Traces of History*, and he does so brilliantly. But I do think it demands a wider geographic optic. The study of settler colonialism in Africa avoids the tendency to reduce Africans to the category of slave labor, to ignore how the principle of terra nullius was applied to parts of Africa, and challenges the assertion that settlers want land and not indigenous labor, or that settler rule is almost indestructible. And to turn the lens to settler regimes inside Europe may help us understand the dynamic and shifting categories of class—or how it is possible to move from native to colonized, to dispossessed, to proletarian, to unfree laborer, to settler (and from "Black" to "white") in a single generation.

Finally, I think Wolfe's framework of settler colonialism can benefit from reading Robinson, Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century*, and more recently Lisa Lowe's *Intimacies of Four Continents*. Taken together, they reveal how the system of extracting surplus emerged within a logic of racial hierarchy and racial subjugation that dragged Africans, Asians, and "Europeans" proletarianized by enclosure to the lands of the Americas, Australia / New Zealand, parts of South Asia and Africa, and the eastern Mediterranean—where indigenous people were dispossessed, enslaved, or exploited by other means. Backed by the rule of law, the state employs violence to discipline, to reclassify, to criminalize, and to destroy sovereignty and create disorder. Enclosure is part of this process of war—war on the Commons, which ultimately turns part of the expropriated into a proletariat (that includes *European* industrial, maritime, landless rural labor, prostitutes, beggars); a portion into settlers who become key characters in *Traces of History*; a portion sent to the workhouse; a portion hanged, drawn, and quartered, or broken on the wheel, that ultimately serve to terrorize those who resist the new discipline.

And yet the terror never succeeded, not then and certainly not now. It is not succeeding in Standing Rock; it is not succeeding in Palestine; it is not succeeding in the ghettos and barrios of North America or the favelas in Brazil; and it will not succeed under the current racial regime's authoritarian turn. Wolfe's final words with which he closes the book may be his most prescient and most valuable: "The incompleteness of racial domination is the trace and the achievement of resistance, a space of hope."[17] But perhaps more than hope, it is a space of decolonization. If we agree with Cedric Robinson on the fundamental instability of racial regimes and envision decolonization as a process and not an event, then all these struggles may be seen as part of a global assault on settler rule. The "trace," then, is both the refusal to accept the permanence and terms of settler domination, and the memory/dreams/fantasy of life before and beyond invasion. It is precisely this space, a space Emma Perez calls the "decolonial imaginary," where subjugated people dream of liberation, "where resistance is possible, perhaps even making revolution possible."[18]

Notes

1. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

2. Ibid., 3.
3. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," *Colliers*, October 28, 1906, 20.
4. Lorenzo Veracini, "'Settler Colonialism': Career of a Concept," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41.2 (2013): 314.
5. Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 2.
6. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 121.
7. "Settler colonialism" was applied to certain African colonies beginning in the early 1970s, though its definition was still in formation and therefore sharply contested. It functioned as a conceptual framework to understand the challenges of decolonization, the relationship between settler economies and imperialism, and the peculiar development of class and race relations in colonies with a permanent white settler population. But teasing out these debates and reconstructing the application of settler colonialism to the African context is not my intention. For an excellent genealogy of the settler colonial concept, see Lorenzo Veracini, "'Settler Colonialism': Career of a Concept," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41.2 (2013): 313–33; for examples of some of this formative work, see Arrighi Emmanuel, "White-Settler Colonialism and the Myth of Investment Imperialism," *New Left Review*, May 1, 1972, 35–57; Kenneth Good, "Settler Colonialism in Rhodesia," *African Affairs* 73.290 (1974): 10–36; Good, "Settler Colonialism: Economic Development and Class Formation," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 14.4 (1976): 597–620; Werner Biermann and Reinhart Kössler, "The Settler Mode of Production: The Rhodesian Case," *Review of African Political Economy* 7.18 (1980): 106–16; and Ronald Weitzer, *Transforming Settler States: Communal Conflict and Internal Security in Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
8. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 33.
9. Much of this history is drawn from the following: John Higginson, *Collective Violence and the Agrarian Origins of South African Apartheid, 1900–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Colin Bundy, *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation, and Apartheid* (Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2012); Alfred Tokollo Moleah, *South Africa: Colonialism, Apartheid, and African Dispossession* (Wilmington, DE: Disa, 1993); Clifton Crais, *The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770–1865* (Johannesburg: Witswatersrand University Press, 1992); Robert Carl-Heinz Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1834* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994); Leonard Guelke and Robert Shell, "Landscape of Conquest: Frontier Water Alienation and Khoikhoi Strategies of Survival, 1652–1780," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18.4 (1992): 803–24. For a fascinating case study of dispossession and settler colonialism in nineteenth-century and contemporary South Africa, see Edward Cavanagh, *Settler Colonialism and Land Rights in South Africa: Possession and Dispossession on the Orange River* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).
10. Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Philip Bonner, Peter Delius and Deborah Posel, eds., *Apartheid's Genesis, 1935–1962* (Braamfontein, South Africa: Ravan, 1993); Alois S. Mlambo, *A History of Zimbabwe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 126–46; David Martin and Phyllis Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1981), 67–68.
11. Lorenzo Veracini, "Settler Colonialism and Decolonization," *Borderlands e-journal* 6.2 (2007), ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/1337. See also Thiven Reddy, *South Africa, Settler Colonialism, and the Failures of Liberal Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2015); Mahmood Mamdani, "When Does a Settler Become a Native? Reflections of the Colonial Roots of Citizenship in Equatorial and South Africa," Inaugural Lecture as A. C. Jordan Professor of African Studies, University of Cape Town, May 13, 1998, www.bard.edu/hrp/resource_pdfs/mamdani.settler.pdf; Raef Zreik, "When Does a Settler Become a Native? (With Apologies to Mamdani)," *Constellations* 23.3 (2016): 351–64.
12. Veracini, "Settler Colonialism and Decolonization."
13. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 27. I am also indebted to Roii Ball, a doctoral student in history at UCLA, who is working on German colonialism in eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
14. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 39, 26.
15. This was a central point in his discussion of Othello in *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, where he distinguishes the eighteenth century as a period in which representation of the Moor undergoes a

radical shift, from tragic hero to Black villain. See Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

16. Ibid., xii.
17. Wolfe, *Traces of History*, 272.
18. Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 110.