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## REFUSING THE UNIVERSITY

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The fundamental problem is not that some are excluded from the hegemonic centers of the academy but that the university (as a specific institutional site) and academy (as a shifting material network) themselves cannot be disentangled from the long historical apparatuses of genocidal and proto-genocidal social organization.

*Dylan Rodríguez (2012, p. 812)*

What happens when we refuse what all the (presumably) ‘sensible’ people perceive as good things? What does this refusal do to politics, to sense, to reason? When we add Indigenous peoples to this question, the assumptions and histories that structure what is perceived to be ‘good’ (and utilitarian goods themselves) shift... (refusal) may seem reasoned, sensible, and in fact deeply correct. Indeed, from this perspective, we see that a good is not a good for everyone.

*Audra Simpson (2014, p. 1)*

This analysis turns upon a theorization of the academy as *an arm of the settler state*—a site where the logics of elimination, capital accumulation, and dispossession are reconstituted—which is distinct from other frameworks that critique the academy as fundamentally neoliberal, Eurocentric, and/or patriarchal. I argue that this shift opens up more possibilities for coalition and collusion within and outside the university. I am particularly interested in examining the relationship between abolitionist and decolonial theorizations of the academy as articulated through Black radicalism and critical Indigenous studies, respectively.

Historically, the university functioned as the institutional nexus for the capitalist and religious missions of the settler state, mirroring its histories of dispossession,

enslavement, exclusion, forced assimilation and integration. As noted by Craig Wilder (2014), author of *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, the academy was both a “beneficiary and defender” of the same social and economic forces that “transformed the West and Central Africa through the slave trade and devastated indigenous nations in the Americas” (pp. 2–3). He writes:

American colleges were not innocent or passive beneficiaries of conquest and colonial slavery. The European invasion of the Americas and the modern slave trade pulled peoples throughout the Atlantic world into each other's lives, and colleges were among the colonial institutions that braided their histories and rendered their fates dependent and antagonistic. The academy never stood apart from American slavery – in fact it stood beside church and state as the third pillar of a civilization built on bondage.

(Wilder, 2014, p. 11)

Across the text, Wilder similarly registers (albeit unevenly) how the academy also never stood apart from the genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. All of which illuminates the university's history as long-time accessory in the perpetuation of settler crimes against Black and Indigenous humanity.

Despite this history, student protest and charges of racism within the settler academy are often met with surprise and disbelief.<sup>1</sup> For example, when protests erupted in early November 2015 at the University of Missouri, they were reported as “exploding” from a series of racial “incidents” and not as a response to the relentless, decades-long, history of indiscretions of white supremacy that has characterized the campus since 1950, when the first Black student was admitted; this, despite the fact that students organized under the hashtag #ConcernedStudent1950. Months of student and faculty protests, including a hunger strike by student leader Jonathan Butler, went relatively unnoticed<sup>2</sup> in the national media, until the football team (players and coach) staged a boycott calling for President Tom Wolfe's resignation; the next day, Wolfe stepped down.

The students at Missouri inspired others and across the 2015–2016 academic year, students at over 80 other colleges and universities issued sets of demands, registering their shared refusal to absorb the high cost of institutional racism upon their minds and bodies.<sup>3</sup> Together the young people of #ConcernedStudent1950 and #BlackLivesMatter led a co-resistance movement that disabused the nation of its post-racial fantasy, exposing the apparatuses of state violence and institutional negligence predicated upon antiblack racism. As each day seems to bring a new campus disruption, it is increasingly evident that what is at stake is a fundamental condition, a structure—and not a momentary crisis or incident—an event. Which is to say, within settler societies, the university functions as an apparatus of colonization; one that refracts the “eliminative” practices, modes of governance, and forms of knowledge production that Wolfe (2006) defines as definitive of settler

colonialism. All of which raises questions of whether the university-as-such is beyond reform; if it should be abolished or perhaps more mercifully “hospiced” toward a timely and apposite death (de Oliveira Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew, & Hunt, 2015).

In his incisive essay “Black Study, Black Struggle” (2016),<sup>4</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley not only argues that the university is beyond reform but also that reformist strategies and politics may be complicit in the struggle against antiblack racism. He writes:

the fully racialized social and epistemological architecture upon which the modern university is built cannot be radically transformed by ‘simply’ adding darker faces, safer spaces, better training, and a curriculum that acknowledges historical and contemporary oppressions. This is a bit like asking for more black police officers as a strategy to curb state violence.

(Kelley, 2016)

As such, he is both skeptical and critical of student desires to belong—to *be of* the university—and of reform-based justice projects focused on making the university “more hospitable for Black students” (Kelley, 2016).

Kelley is clear that his intent is not to question, “the courageous students who have done more to disrupt university business-as-usual than any movement in the last century” but rather to draw attention to the “contradictory impulses within the movement,” identified as “the tension between reform and revolution, between desiring to belong and rejecting the university as a cog in the neoliberal order” (Kelley, 2016). Writing from a space of both empathy and exigency, Kelley’s article reads as a kind of radical-love letter to student activists, urging them to think carefully about what it means “to seek love from an institution incapable of loving them.” Instead, he challenges them to (re)connect their activism to their intellectual lives and points to the long history of street-to-campus activism as well as Black scholar-activists who worked to repurpose university resources toward their own needs. He offers the Mississippi Freedom Schools, Black feminist collectives (e.g. *Lessons from the Damned*, 1973) and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s (2004) theorization of the “undercommons” as examples of “fugitive spaces” where students and faculty work to cleave study and struggle, where they can be *in* but not *of* the university.

Kelley’s critique of recognition-based reform projects resonates with critiques of the *politics of recognition* as articulated within critical Indigenous studies (CIS).<sup>5</sup> Whether through the legal apparatus of “federal recognition” or discursive petitions for acknowledgement, struggles for Indigenous sovereignty have been deeply shaped and curtailed by the politics and discourses of recognition. Rooted in liberal theories of justice, CIS scholars argue that “recognition”—as an equal right, a fiduciary obligation, a form of acknowledgement—functions as a technology of the state by which it maintains its power (as sole arbiter of recognition) and, thus,

settler colonial relations (see Coulthard, 2007, 2014). In her groundbreaking book, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*, Audra Simpson (2014) posits a *politic of refusal* as a political alternative to recognition, accounting for the multiple ways in which the Haudenosaunee generally, and Kahnawá:ke specifically, have continually refused various forms of colonial imposition from the Canadian and American governments (including citizenship), and that these refusals are constitutive of Haudenosaunee nationhood (Innes, 2015). Since the publication of this seminal text, theorizations of “refusal” have proliferated,<sup>6</sup> with conceptualization of the construct as a form of politics, a methodological stance, and an aesthetic.

While Kelley doesn’t frame his analysis around the constructs of *recognition* and *refusal* per se, his analysis shares a common conceptual ground, particularly around the rejection of liberal theories of justice that center respect for cultural difference over critiques of power. Moreover, since Kelley wrote his essay, over 100 more Black people have been killed by police, college campuses remain a volatile terrain of struggle, and thousands of Native peoples from over 300 nations and their supporters gathered on the lands of the Oceti Sakowin in defense of water and Indigenous sovereignty. The cumulative and ongoing violences of a nation built upon Black death and Native erasure urge renewed thinking about the relationship between radical and decolonial struggles, both in and outside of the academy. I am particularly interested in examining the promissory relationship between Black radical and critical Indigenous frameworks as both help to imagine life beyond the settler state and its attendant universities. In so doing, I am aware of the tensions and antagonisms between Black and Native experience as produced through the distinct but related frameworks of white supremacy and settler colonialism. To some degree, this distinction marks the edges of the binary that marks the difference between subjectivities produced in and through relationship to land and those produced under and through significations of property.

As noted by Patrick Wolfe (2006), Black and Native peoples have been differently racialized in ways that reflect their roles in the formation of U.S. society. Since enslaved Blacks augmented settler wealth they were subject to an *expansive* racial taxonomy, codified in the “one-drop rule” whereby any amount of African ancestry made a person “Black” (i.e., more enslaved peoples = more settler wealth). At the same time, since Indigenous peoples impeded settler wealth by obstructing access to land, they were subject to a calculus of *elimination*. That is, increasing degrees of non-Indian blood or ancestry made one less “Indian” (i.e., more Indians = less settler wealth). This distinction continues to structure Black and Native experience, producing particularities that reveal the limits and aporias of both settler colonial and race theories, particularly when imposed upon each other.

Thus, while Native peoples are racialized, race is not the primary analytic of Indigenous subjectivity nor is racism the main structure of domination; that

would be settler colonialism. Moreover, while questions of Native subjectivity are taken up within the fields of critical ethnic and American studies, both offer ill-fitting explanatory frameworks for Native peoples who are neither “ethnic” nor “American” but rather members of distinct tribal nations with complicated histories and relationships to both citizenship and the nation-state. At the same time, the permanence of antiblackness troubles the settler analytic, calling into question the Indigenous/settler binary and the indiscriminate folding of the experience of “racial capture and enslavement into the subject position of settler” (Day, 2015, p. 103). That said, the current manifestations of antiblackness also reveal the limits of race discourses, suggesting the need to ground analyses in the broader logics of accumulation. The above tensions and intersections demonstrate the need for greater interchange as well as raising the following questions:

- What kinds of solidarities can be developed among marginalized groups with a shared commitment to working beyond the imperatives of capital and the settler state?
- What are the critical distinctions between decolonial struggle for Indigenous sovereignty and radical justice projects for abolition, which is to say between those shaped by genocide, erasure, and dispossession and those by enslavement, exclusion, and oppression?

While the above questions guide this inquiry, I am centrally interested in how they play out on the ground, particularly in the university setting. Specifically, I aim to expand upon Kelley’s analysis—his radical-love letter—by bringing it into conversation with critical Indigenous theories, offering a decolonial love letter. I draw from both theoretical frameworks as a means of thinking through how we might work “within, against, and beyond the university-as-such”—to, in effect, *refuse the university*.

Finally, given the urgencies of the moment I feel compelled to journey through Kelley’s conceptual triumvirate—love, study, struggle—with even greater vigilance for places of refuge, points of co-resistance, and spaces for collective work.

Toward that end, I begin with articulating the particularities of settler colonialism and Native elimination. In the section that follows, I examine liberal theories of justice as the underlying structure operating within the politics of recognition. Next, I discuss the academy as an arm of the settler state and the ways in which it refracts settler logics and the politics of recognition. In the final section, I examine emergent scholarship on the politics of refusal as a field of possibility for building co-resistance movements between the Black radical and critical Indigenous traditions as well as others committed to refusing the settler state and its attendant institutions.

## The Particularities of Settler Colonialism and Native Elimination

In contrast to other forms of colonialism, “settler colonies were not primarily established to extract surplus value from Indigenous labor” (Wolfe, 1999, p. 1) but rather were premised upon the removal of Indigenous peoples from land as a precondition of settlement. Settlers, moreover, “sought to control space, resources, and people not only by occupying land but also by establishing an exclusionary private property regime and coercive labor systems, including chattel slavery to work the land, extract resources, and build infrastructure” (Glenn, 2015, p. 54). Thus, while white supremacy, patriarchy, neoliberalism and other technologies of domination may render the contours of settler colonialism more visible (and in some ways function as co-constitutive logics), a settler colonial framework represents a particular set of relations, one that originates with the theft of Indigenous land and the “remove to replace” logics that enable that theft (Wolfe, 1999, p. 1). A logic that, in short hand, Wolfe refers to as one of elimination (Wolfe, 2006, p. 387).

As evidence of ongoing “Native elimination,” consider the following: (1) that at this moment of Black Lives Matter the ongoing police violence against Indigenous peoples (killed at a higher rate than any other group)<sup>7</sup> has been virtually absent from public discourse; (2) that Rexdale Henry, Sarah Lee Circle Bear, Paul Castaway, Allen Locke, Joy Ann Sherman, Christina Tahhahwah, Myles Roughsurface, and Naverone Christian Landon Woods were all killed by police around the time of the street-to-campus protests but were rarely added to the running list of victims; (3) that in states with large American Indian populations, racial profiling takes the form of police targeting vehicles with reservation-issued license plates; (4) that in Canada, Indigenous peoples, particularly those who live in the more rural Western provinces, suffer higher rates of police stops, profiling, incarceration, sentencing, and killings;<sup>8</sup> and, (5) while the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada has reached epidemic proportions—estimated at 4,000 over the last 30 years—it continues to receive limited attention. As a result, Native peoples across the continent have also taken to the streets with the #IdleNoMore, #AmINext, and #NoDAPL movements leading the way.

If nothing else, the Black Lives Matter and NoDAPL movements not only illustrate how, 500 years post settler invasion, Indians are still being eliminated and the “violence of slave-making” is ongoing (Wilderson, 2010, p. 54). They also substantiate the profound insight of Patrick Wolfe’s (2006) apothegm that settler colonialism is a *structure* and not an *event* (p. 388). That is, beyond an event “temporally bound by the occurrence of invasion,” settler colonialism is a “condition of possibility that remains formative while also changing over time,” which is to say, that it is a structure (Goldstein, 2008, p. 835). This construction shifts current understanding of ongoing Black death and Native elimination from being anomalous—moments of disruption along an otherwise linear path of racial progress—to being



endemic; a congenital feature of a state built upon the “entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1).

For Native peoples, the structures of settler colonialism precipitate distinctive forms and modalities of Indigenous resistance. Struggle, in this context, is organized around *decolonization*—a political project that begins and ends with land and its return. As such, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that struggles for decolonization are not simply distinct from social justice projects but rather are incommensurable. They write, “decolonization (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted on pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks”<sup>9</sup> (p. 3). According to the authors, the difference between *decolonial* and *critical, anti-racist, justice* frameworks is that the former seeks “a change in the order of the world” while the latter desires reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> And, the very nature of settler colonialism precludes reconciliation.

While the authors do not parse the underlying political theory among frameworks, doing so allows for a more layered analysis of critical and/or anti-racist frameworks. If the aim is to create greater possibilities for co-resistance, it is important to consider how political theory reconfigures the broader construct of justice. It is worth questioning, for example, whether the supposed incommensurability between decolonization and other frameworks is, in part, more fundamentally underwritten by the distinction between liberal theories of *justice as recognition* and critical Indigenous theories of *justice as refusal*. While “justice” is not an Indigenous construct, the work of CIS scholars carefully parses “the network of presuppositions” that underpin *liberal* forms of “political theory, social theory and humanist ethics” from Indigenous forms and discourses (Povinelli, 2001, p. 13). Similarly, while Kelley’s framework is decidedly “anti-racist,” he critiques the limits of liberal race discourses and the politics of recognition, embracing instead the elements of refusal within the Black radical tradition. All of which suggests the need for closer examination of liberal political theory, state formation, and the genealogy of recognition.

## Liberal Theories of Justice and the Politics of Recognition

Theories of recognition emerged in response to political processes undertaken in “transitional nation-states” (i.e. those moving from a state of war toward democracy) where demands for recognition were levied as a means of ushering in that transition (Kymlicka & Bashir, 2008, p. 3). Within this context, (state) recognition assumed many forms (e.g., truth and reconciliation commissions, reparations, formal state apologies) that are elucidated through various liberal discourses such as healing, trauma, and memory (p. 6).<sup>11</sup> The prevailing idea is that the recognition and affirmation of cultural difference must precede and/or serve as a precondition of relations of equality, freedom, and justice.

More recently, recognition-based politics have migrated to established Western democracies such as Australia, Canada, and the United States as increasing demands

to reconcile Indigenous claims to nationhood with state sovereignty have emerged (Coulthard, 2007, p. 438). This development in Indigenous politics has drawn renewed attention to some of the classic literature on recognition (e.g., Butler, 1990; Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 1992, 1996; Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, Gutmann, & Taylor, 1994). Though varied, these works made an important intervention in established theories of identity development, initiating a shift away from atomistic to dialogical models, which underscore the ways in which identity formation does not occur in isolation but rather through complex relations of recognition (Taylor et al., 1994). In so doing, acts of recognition—of acknowledging and respecting the status, being, and rights of another—became integral to theories of justice. Stated differently, political theories of recognition help to expose the conditions of oppression that arise when individuals are denied the equitable grounds upon which to formulate healthy notions of self as a result of a given society's dominant and exclusionary patterns of interpretation and valuation (Baum, 2004, p. 1073). Taylor et al. (1994), in particular, consider the significant impact of non-recognition and misrecognition on marginalized peoples and their potential to produce crippling forms of self-hatred. As such, he argues that “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need” (p. 26).

As policies and politics of recognition have come to increasingly condition Indigenous-state relations, there has been a corollary increase in scholarship examining their impact. Indigenous scholars, in particular, have developed trenchant critiques of recognition, accounting for the failure of liberal theories of justice to address asymmetries of power. In his groundbreaking text, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) builds upon the work of Fanon, arguing that while recognition draws attention to the role of misrecognition in reinforcing colonial domination, the breadth of power at play in colonial systems cannot be transcended through the mere institutionalizing of a liberal regime of mutual recognition. In short, he exposes the limits of recognition-based politics for restructuring Indigenous-state relations, as it leaves intact the state's role as arbiter and therefore ultimately reproduces the very configurations of colonial power that Native peoples seek to transcend. Indeed, given that the state emerged through the criminal acts of genocide, land dispossession, and enslavement and the legal fictions of “discovery” and “terra nullius,” its own legitimacy is what should be at stake, not the sovereignty of Indigenous nations.<sup>12</sup>

That said, Coulthard (2014) does not dismiss the significance of the “psycho-affective attachment” to colonialist forms of recognition and the ways in which such desire is cultivated and internalized. Specifically, he points to Fanon's “pains-taking” articulation of the multiple ways in which such feelings of “attachment” are cultivated among the colonized, particularly through the unequal exchange of institutionalized and interpersonal patterns of recognition between the colonial society and the marginalized. Sara Ahmed (2004) similarly theorizes the production of psychic forms of attachment or desire through what she terms



the “affective economy,”<sup>13</sup> examining its function in the reconsolidation of the (neoliberal) nation-state. To clarify, the affective economy is one of the central mechanisms through which subjects become “invested emotionally, libidinally, and erotically” in the collective (Agathangelou et al., 2008, p. 122). In the context of Indigenous-state relations, Wolfe (2013) writes about “inducements” as a tool of the affective economy through which the desire for recognition has been cultivated. He writes, “from the treaty era onwards Indigenous peoples have been subjected to a recurrent cycle of inducements” extended in the form of allotments, citizenship, and tribal enrollment that have continuously served to entice Native peoples to “consent to their own dispossession” (p. 259). When recognition comes in the form of economic gain for individuals, Coulthard (2007) argues that it carries the potential for creating a new (Aboriginal) elite whose “thirst for profit” comes to “outweigh their ancestral obligations” (p. 452).<sup>14</sup> In other words, he suggests that people who are held hostage do not make “choices”—adaptation while under threat of annihilation is nothing more than a ransom demand. Agathangelou (et al.) similarly theorizes the affective economy as transpiring through what she defines as an “imperial project of promise and non-promise” (p. 128)—a process through which a series of (false) promises are granted to certain subjects that is reliant on another series of (non)promises made to (non)subjects upon whom the entire production is staged (p. 123). Her work helps us understand the ways in which revolutionary and redistributive yearnings that would challenge the foundations of the U.S. state, capital, and racial relations have been systematically replaced with strategies for individualized incorporation in the settler order.

In the following section, I graft these critiques of recognition onto Kelley’s analyses of students’ desire for institutional recognition. I am particularly interested in the ways in which such demands are also conditioned by and through liberal theories of justice that ultimately sustain relations of institutional oppression. I start the section with a brief history of how the academy refracts settler logics and then move on to a discussion of how such logics and history continue to be played out, particularly through the affective economy of desire.

## The Settler Academy and the Politics of Recognition

It was not until the dawn of the African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954) that the underlying justification for institutional exclusion and segregation of Black students was broadly questioned as incompatible with the norms of liberal democracy. During this time, the university became one of the primary sites of struggle and social transformation. In “Black Study, Black Struggle,” Kelley recounts the rich tradition of Black studies as it emerged through the “mass revolt” of “insurgent intellectuals” committed to the development of “fugitive spaces” not just outside, but also in opposition to, the Eurocentric university. He cites the works of James Baldwin, Ella Baker, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, C. L. R. James, and Cedric Robinson, among others, as the “sources of social critique” that helped to

inspire alternative spaces like the Mississippi Freedom Schools. The aim was not simply to offer a broader, more inclusive curriculum, but rather to design one that examined power along the axes of race and class, developing “trenchant critiques of materialism” that helped to challenge “the myth that the civil rights movement was just about claiming a place in mainstream society” (Kelley, 2016). The desire, as articulated by Kelley, was not for “equal opportunity in a burning house;” rather, “they wanted to build a new house.”

But since the settler university can only “remove to replace,” it was not long before the revolutionary and redistributive aims of Black radicalism were supplanted by and absorbed within the political project of liberal pluralism, transposing the anti-capitalist critique with a politics of recognition. In other words, through the structures of settler logics, the demands of #ConcernedStudent1950 are only legible as the desire for recognition and more “intense inclusion” (Kelley, 2016). While demands for safe spaces, greater diversity, mental health counseling, curricular representation, and renamed campus buildings are hardly inconsequential, they also have the potential to function as inducements. Thus, just as recognition-based politics impede Indigenous struggles for decolonization, they also constrain efforts for more a radical vision for Black study and struggle within and against the university. In other words, the settler state has an array of strategies—recognition being one of them—to placate dispossessed people while evading any effort to change the underlying power structure.

Despite all the handwringing by university officials, within the context of the liberal academy, discourses of recognition garner wide appeal as they provide a means for neatly bracketing what are fundamentally complex and ongoing sets of power relations. Such demands mark a definitive endpoint to a history of wrongdoing as well as a means for moving beyond that history (Corntassel & Holder, 2008). Consider, for example, the growing wave of colleges and universities seeking to reconcile their involvement in the slave trade. The University of Alabama (2004), the University of Virginia (2007), and Emory University (2011) have all issued formal apologies. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill erected a memorial, Washington and Lee removed all its confederate flags, and the College of William and Mary launched an investigation into its history of complicity. Brown University launched one of the most comprehensive projects that included a commissioned three-year study, an acknowledgement, a memorial, and an endowment for Providence public schools. While the symbolic importance of such projects should not be underestimated, they should also be understood as a first step toward restructuring material conditions. For example, consider that though it has been 15 years since the Brown study was launched, only 7.3% of their student body and 4% of its faculty are currently African-American. And, no institution to date has offered reparations.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, recognition not only continues to serve as the dominant institutional framework for addressing structural racism but also, as noted by Kelley (2016, para. 7), student activists now parrot the discourses of recognition and thereby

unwittingly participate in their own continued marginalization. A thematic analysis of the current compilation of student demands from across 70 institutions shows that 88% demanded either changes to curricula or diversity training (especially for faculty); 87% demanded more support for students of color (i.e., multicultural centers, residence halls, financial aid, mental health services); 79% demanded greater faculty diversity; and 24% desire apologies and acknowledgments. This breakdown suggests that the central organizing principal for demands is indeed the desire for a more “hospitable” institution. Yet, it isn’t so much the nature of the demands that Kelley takes issue with but rather their persistent framing through the discourses of *personal* trauma (emphasis in original) and the potential to “slip into” thinking about “ourselves as victims and objects rather than agents” (Kelley, 2016). In some instances, faculty have joined students, sometimes issuing their own demands for recognition. Most often, faculty demands are organized around issues of tenure, the exploitation of contingent faculty, and increasing violations of academic freedom, which disproportionately impact women and faculty of color.

One of the most recent and widely celebrated texts to narrate both the struggle and political project of women of color in the academy is entitled *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). According to the authors, the central aim of the text is to provide a space for women to “name their wounds in order to heal them” and their collective demand is for future generations of women of color to enjoy “more fulfilling, respectful and dignified experiences” (p. xx). The 30 personal narratives of the contributors each capture the visceral nature of racism and sexism as played out upon their bodies. The importance of putting a face to what often goes unnamed and dismissed cannot be underestimated. This underscores the effect of non- and misrecognition as not only dehumanizing but also cumulative; as Kelley notes, the “Trauma is real” (2016, para. 23). While these aims are indisputable—everyone deserves respect and dignified experiences at work—the political project seems to end there.

Among the 100-plus recommendations made in the final chapter, “Lessons from the Experience of Women of Color Working in Academia,” none of them calls for collective action against the neoliberal capitalist or settler logics that situate women in asymmetric relations of power in the first place. Their main contention is not with the structures and systems of domination that gave rise to the university, but rather with women’s inability to fully participate in them (and thus have access to the inducements associated with its recognition). This aim is most evident in the following passage:

The essays in *Presumed Incompetent* point... toward the Third World Feminist recognition that the business of knowledge production, like the production of tea, spices, and bananas, has an imperialist history that it has never shaken. Inventing the postcolonial university is the task of the twenty-first century. We can only hope that this task of decolonizing American academia

is completed before the tenure track itself disappears. Otherwise scholars in the next century may confront another ironic example of women finally rising in a profession just as it loses its prestige and social value.

*(Niemann, 2012, p. 499)*

Ultimately, the demand for belonging and inclusion—for presumed competence—is mobilized through a politics of recognition that not only legitimates the institutions' power over women of color but also mistakes the formation of an intellectual elite (even if it is elite of color) for radical social change.

### Academic Refusal and the Possibilities of Co-Resistance

In the broader field of critical theory, the work of Marcuse (1964) is central to theorizations of refusal. His central argument is that in modern capitalist societies—where worth is equated with the “reproduction of value” and “extraction of profit”—human beings only exist as “an instrumental means” of capital and, within this context, “simply to exist, *to be*, is an act of refusal” (Garland, 2013, p. 376). As such, refusal should not be confused with “passive withdrawal or retreat” but rather understood as an active instantiation of “a radically different mode-of-being and mode-of-doing” (p. 375). Frank Wilderson (2003) troubles the capitalist foundation of refusal from the standpoint of Black subjectivity. Specifically, in distinction to what he refers to as the “coherent” subjects of anti-capitalist struggle (e.g., the worker, the immigrant, the woman), Wilderson posits the “incoherence” of Black subjects (i.e., the unwaged slave, the prison slave) as destabilizing, as “the unthought” of historical materialism (pp. 21–22). He writes:

Black liberation, as a prospect, makes radicalism more dangerous...not because it raises the specter of an alternative polity (such as socialism or community control of existing resources), but because its condition of possibility and gesture of resistance function as a negative dialectic: a politics of refusal and a refusal to affirm a “program of complete disorder.”

*(Wilderson, 2003, p. 26)*

Within this context, Black refusal is theorized as “an endless antagonism that cannot be satisfied (via reform or reparation)” (Wilderson, 2003, p. 26).

Taking into account the power relations of both capitalism and white supremacy, Indigenous scholars posit refusal as a positive stance that is:

less oriented around attaining an affirmative form of recognition... and more about critically revaluating, reconstructing and redeploying culture and tradition in ways that seek to prefigure... a radical alternative to the structural and psycho-affective facets of colonial domination.

*(Coulthard, 2007, p. 456)*

In this way, Indigenous refusal both negatively rejects the (false) promise of inclusion and other inducements of the settler state and positively asserts Indigenous sovereignty and peoplehood. In *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014), Audra Simpson theorizes *refusal* as distinct from resistance in that it does not take authority as a given. More specifically, at the heart of the text, she theorizes refusal at the “level of method and representation,” exposing the colonialist underpinnings of the “demand to know” as a settler logic. In response, she develops the notion of *ethnographic refusal* as a stance or space for Indigenous subjects to limit access to what is knowable and to being known, articulating how refusal works “in everyday encounters to enunciate repeatedly to ourselves and to outsiders that ‘this is who we are, this is who you are, these are my rights’” (Simpson, 2007, p. 73).

Mignolo (2011) and Quijano (1991) similarly take up *refusal* in relation to knowledge formation, asserting Indigenous knowledge itself as a form of refusal; a space of *epistemic disobedience* that is “delinked” from Western, liberal, capitalist understandings of knowledge as production. Gómez-Barris (2012) theorizes the Mapuche hunger strikes as “an extreme bodily performance and political instantiation” of refusal, an act wherein their starving bodies upon the land literally enact what it means to live in a state of permanent war (p. 120). Understood as expressions of sovereignty, such acts of refusal threaten the settler state, carrying dire if not deadly consequences for Indigenous subjects. As noted by Ferguson (2015), “capitalist settler states prefer resistance” because it can be “negotiated or recognized,” but refusal “throws into doubt” the entire system and is therefore more dangerous.

While within the university the consequences of academic refusal are much less dire, they still carry a risk. To refuse inclusion offends institutional authorities offering “the gift” of belonging, creating conditions of precarity for the refuser. For example, refusal to participate in the politics of respectability that characterizes institutional governance can result in social isolation, administrative retribution, and struggles with self-worth. Similarly, the refusal to comply with the normative structures of tenure and promotion (e.g., emphasizing quantity over quality; publishing in “mainstream” journals) can and does lead to increased marginalization, exploitation, and job loss.<sup>16</sup> And, in a system where Indigenous scholars comprise less than 1% of the professorate, such consequences not only bear hardships for individuals but also whole communities. That said, academic “rewards” and inducements accessed through recognition-based politics can have even deeper consequences. As Jodi Byrd (2011) reminds us, the colonization of Indigenous lands, bodies, and minds will not be ended by “further inclusion or more participation” (Byrd, 2011, p. xxvi).

The inspirational work of Black radical and Indigenous scholars compels thinking beyond the limits of academic recognition and about the generative spaces of refusal that not only reject settler logics but also foster possibilities of co-resistance. The prospect of coalition re-raises one of the initial animating questions of this chapter: What kinds of solidarities can be developed among peoples with a shared



commitment to working beyond the imperatives of capital and the settler state? Clearly, despite the ubiquitous and often overly facile calls for solidarity, building effective coalitions is deeply challenging, even among insurgent scholars. Within this particular context, tensions between Indigenous sovereignty and decolonial projects and anti-racist, social justice projects, raise a series of suspicions: whether calls for Indigenous sovereignty somehow elide the *a priori* condition of blackness (the “unsovereign” subject),<sup>17</sup> whether anti-racist struggles sufficiently account for Indigenous sovereignty as a land-based struggle elucidated outside regimes of property, and whether theorizations of settler colonialism sufficiently account for the forces and structures of white supremacy, racial slavery, and antiblackness.

Rather than posit such tensions as terminally incommensurable, however, I want to suggest a parallel politics of dialectical co-resistance. When Black peoples can *still* be killed but not murdered; when Indians are *still* made to disappear; when (Indigenous) land and Black bodies are still destroyed and accumulated for settler profit; it is incumbent upon all those who claim a commitment to refusing the white supremacist, capitalist, settler state, to do the hard work of building “interconnected movements for decolonization” (Coulthard, 2014). The struggle is real. It is both material and psychological, both method and politics, and thus must necessarily straddle the both/and (as opposed to either/or) coordinates of revolutionary change. In terms of process, this means working simultaneously beyond *resistance* and through the enactment of *refusal*—as fugitive, abolitionist, and Indigenous, sovereign subjects.

Within the context of the university, this means replacing calls for more inclusive and diverse, *safe spaces* within the university with the development of a network of sovereign, *safe houses* outside the university. Kelley reminds us of the long history of this struggle, recalling the Institute of the Black World at Atlanta University (1969), the Mississippi Freedom Schools, and the work of Black feminists Patricia Robinson, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Haden as inspirational models. As a contemporary model, he references Harney and Moten’s vision of the undercommons as a space of possibility: a fugitive space wherein the pursuit of knowledge is not perceived as a path toward upward mobility and material wealth but rather as a means toward eradicating oppression in all of its forms (Undercommoning Collective). The ultimate goal, according to Kelley (2016), is to create in the present a future that overthrows the logic of neoliberalism. Scholars within Native studies similarly build upon a long tradition of refusing the university, theorizing from and about sovereignty through land-based models of education. Whereas a fugitive flees and seeks to escape, the Indigenous stands ground or, as Deborah Bird points out, “to get in the way of settler colonization, all the native has to do is stay at home” (as cited in Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). The ultimate goal of Indigenous refusal is Indigenous resurgence; a struggle that includes but is not limited to the return of Indigenous land.

Again, while the aims may be different (and in some sense competing), efforts toward the development of parallel projects of co-resistance are possible through vigilant and sustained engagement. The “common ground” here is not necessarily



literal but rather conceptual, a corpus of shared ethics and analytics: anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-colonial. Rather than allies, we are accomplices—plotting the death but not murder of the settler university. Toward this end, I offer some additional strategies for refusing the university:

First and foremost, we need to *commit to collectivity*—to staging a refusal of the individualist promise project of the settler state and its attendant institutions. This requires that we engage in a radical and ongoing reflexivity about who we are and how we situate ourselves in the world. This includes but is not limited to a *refusal* of the cycle of individualized inducements—particularly, the awards, appointments, and grants that require complicity or allegiance to institutions that continue to oppress and dispossess. It is also a call to refuse the perceived imperative to self-promote, to brand one's work and body. This includes all the personal webpages, incessant Facebook updates, and Twitter feeds featuring our latest accomplishments, publications, grants, rewards, etc. etc. Just. Make. It. Stop. The journey is not about self—which means it is not about promotion and tenure—it is about the disruption and dismantling of those structures and processes that create hierarchies of individual worth and labor.

Second, we must *commit to reciprocity*—the kind that is primarily about being answerable to those communities we claim as our own and those we claim to serve. It is about being answerable to each other and our work. One of the many things lost to the pressures of the publish-or-perish, quantity-over-quality neoliberal regime is the loss of good critique. We have come to confuse support with sycophantic praise and critical evaluation with personal injury. Through the ethic of reciprocity, we need to remind ourselves that accountability to the collective requires a commitment to engage, extend, trouble, speak back to, and intensify our words and deeds.

Third, we need to *commit to mutuality*, which implies reciprocity but is ultimately more encompassing. It is about the development of social relations not contingent upon the imperatives of capital—that refuses exploitation at the same time as it radically asserts connection, particularly to land. Inherent to a land-based ethic is a commitment to slowness and to the arc of inter-generational resurgence and transformation. One of the many ways that the academy recapitulates colonial logics is through the overvaluing of fast, new, young, and individualist voices and the undervaluing of slow, elder, and collective ones. And in such a system, relations and paradigms of connection, mutuality, and collectivity are inevitably undermined. For Indigenous peoples, such begin and end with land, centering questions of what it means to be a good relative.

Toward this end, I have been thinking a lot lately about the formation of a new scholarly collective, one that writes and researches under a *nom de guerre*—like the Black feminist scholars and activists who wrote under and through the Combahee River Collective or the more recent collective of scholars and activists publishing as “the uncertain commons.”<sup>18</sup> If furthering the aims of insurgence and resurgence (and not individual recognition) is what we hold paramount, then perhaps one

of the most radical refusals we can authorize is to work together as one; to enact a kind of Zapatismo scholarship and a *balaclava politics* where the work of the collectivity is intentionally structured to obscure and transcend the single voice, body, and life. Together we could write in refusal of liberal, essentialist forms of identity politics, of individualist inducements, of capitalist imperatives, and other productivist logics of accumulation. This is what love as refusal looks like. It is the un-demand, the un-desire to be either *of* or *in* the university. It is the radical assertion to be *on*: land. Decolonial love is land.

## Notes

- 1 Consider, for example, the discourse of “surprise” evident in this reporting of the protests: [www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/college-newspaper-editors-on-race-and-racism-on-their-campuses/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/college-newspaper-editors-on-race-and-racism-on-their-campuses/)
- 2 The *Washington Post* reports that on the Friday prior to the announcement of the boycott, there were “a few hundred tweets about the University of Missouri” and by Sunday, there were “nearly 16,000.” [www.bustle.com/articles/122644-a-timeline-of-the-university-of-missouri-events-shows-the-discussion-about-campus-racism-isnt-over](http://www.bustle.com/articles/122644-a-timeline-of-the-university-of-missouri-events-shows-the-discussion-about-campus-racism-isnt-over)
- 3 The subsequent murders of Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Walter Scott, and Rekia Boyd among others\* only further kindled what became an unremitting cycle of protest moving between street and campus. \*Note: I feel the necessity to mark the effort to try to keep up with the growing body count of Black men and women killed by police as I wrote and revised this chapter. As the effort proved increasingly and depressingly futile, I decided to insert the term, “among others.”
- 4 This article appears in the *Boston Review*, an online publication that does not include page numbers. It will be referenced throughout the chapter as Kelley (2016).
- 5 The primary concern of CIS is Indigenous resurgence and decolonization. Toward that end, it undertakes (Western) critical theory as a means of “unmapping” the structures, processes, and discourses of settler colonialism; at the same time, it works to disrupt and redirect the matrix of presuppositions that underlie it (Byrd, 2011).
- 6 See, for example, a special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* dedicated to the topic: McGranahan, C. (2016). Theorizing refusal: An introduction. *Cultural Anthropology*, 31(3), 319–325. Retrieved from <https://culanth.org/articles/817-theorizing-refusal-an-introduction>
- 7 According to a Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice analysis of Centers of Disease Control and Prevention data, Native Americans account for 1.9% of all police killings while they make up only 0.8% of the population. In comparison, African-Americans make up 13% of the population and 26% of police killings.
- 8 In Saskatoon, Canada, there is also a legacy of “starlight tours” spanning roughly 1990–2010, whereby Saskatoon police officers arrested Aboriginal men, drove them out of the city, and abandoned them. The number of victims dying of hypothermia as a result of these “tours” is unknown.
- 9 It should be noted that the authors do not distinguish between liberal and radical justice projects in their analysis, other than to name both as incommensurable with decolonial projects.

- 10 Tuck and Yang (2012) clarify that reconciliation, “is about rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future” (p. 35).
- 11 Consider, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in South Africa following apartheid and in Chile after the Pinochet regime.
- 12 Scholar-activists of the “Undercommoning project” similarly claim that “the university has always been a thief, stealing people’s labor, time and energy” and thus “charge that the university-as-such is a criminal institution.” <http://undercommoning.org/undercommoning-within-against-and-beyond/>
- 13 Ahmed (2004) argues in *Affective Economies* that “emotions do things” (p. 119). Specifically, the circulation and mobilization of emotions (e.g., desire, pleasure, fear, hate) work to bind subjects with communities. In so doing, they function as a form of capital “produced only as an effect of their circulation” (p. 120).
- 14 For example, with regard to the promise project of gay marriage, Agathangelou, Bassichis, & Spira (2008) describe how liberal theories of justice manifest through the individual inducement of marriage (that functions as a false promise) and how this affective economy not only sustains material relations of oppression but also serves to domesticate the “gay agenda.” They write: “We... locate the mobilization of highly individualized narratives of bourgeois belonging and ascension within a larger promise project that offers to some the tenuous promise of mobility, freedom, and equality. This strategy is picked up in a privatized, corporatized, and sanitized ‘gay agenda’ that places, for example, gay marriage and penalty-enhancing hate crime laws at the top of its priorities. It has been this promise project that has been crucial in rerouting so much of queer politics and longing from ‘Stonewall to the suburbs’” (pp. 123–124).
- 15 After it came to public light that Georgetown University sold 272 enslaved men, women, and children (the youngest was 2 months old) back in 1838 in order to avoid bankruptcy (sale proceeds are estimated at \$3.3 million in today’s dollars), University alumni helped launch the “Memory Project,” an initiative dedicated to tracing and locating living descendants of those sold. There has been some discussion of reparations in this particular case, but so far nothing has come to fruition.
- 16 According to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Blacks make up approximately 5.2% of faculty nationwide.
- 17 As discussed by Jared Sexton in: Sexton, J. (2016). The *vel* of slavery: Tracking the figure of the unsovereign. *Critical Sociology*, 42(4–5), 583–597. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0896920514552535>
- 18 Authors writing under this *nom de guerre* recently published *Speculate This!* (Duke University Press, 2013).

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