

ANTI-INDIGENOUS BIGOTRY

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Anti-Indigenous Bigotry: An Introduction

In the 1820s, French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville traveled throughout the young United States documenting how democracy functioned in this new society. Traveling from the Northeast to the Deep South, this deep ethnography of a nation-state and the meaning of democracy would be published in the now important, *Democracy in America* (1835). While historians and political theorists repeatedly cite the many pages in which he discusses political theory, they often ignore the importance of the chapter on the three races; that is, how Tocqueville believed Black, Indigenous, and white Americans would live collectively on this land. He didn't think that it was possible long-term. Tocqueville concluded that Black people would forever be oppressed and Indigenous peoples would ultimately disappear because white Americans deemed both of these groups as inferior.² Unfortunately, the ongoing discourse of Indigenous peoples' inevitable disappearance remains a core feature of American life.

Anti-Indigenous bigotry has been a foundational ideology and practice in the creation of U.S. democracy. Through wars, genocide, land expropriation, a violation of treaties, and now the fact that many Americans know little to nothing about contemporary Indigenous life demonstrates the profound impact that structural bigotry has shaped the thoughts and policies of non-Indigenous peoples. But first, we want to define anti-Indigenous bigotry in structural terms.

When defining anything about the experiences of Indigenous peoples, we must first deal with the question of land, in particular settler colonialism. Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues that settler colonialism is “the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.”³ Moreover, settler colonialism is the idea that settlers come from a foreign land without permission, occupy Indigenous people's land with the goal of eliminating the Indigenous population. Importantly, the settler population's goal is to dispossess the Indigenous population of their land and personhood. Thus, anti-Indigenous bigotry is the land usurpation, laws, policies, and meta-narratives that persist in telling the general American public that Indigenous peoples are no longer here, and they died a long time ago. In this way, it is not only about the loss of land but the creation of narratives that further the ongoing process of settler colonialism and anti-Indigenous bigotry. It is an ongoing and persistent practice buoyed by the settler state in education, policies, and in popular culture.

Narratives of dispossession have long shaped the relationship between Europeans and Indigenous nations prior to the creation of the United States. Through narratives of discovery, European writers “performed discovery, and advanced claims of possession, by identifying, naming, and describing the people and places of the New World.”⁴ In doing so, this discourse “appropriated indigenous people and

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²Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 320.

³Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 2.

⁴Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America*, eds. Daniel K. Richter et al. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 36.

space by placing them under the gaze of Atlantic World empires.”⁵ These narratives of dispossession were not only imagined in Europe for the purposes of colonization, but seamlessly merged into the fabric of American democracy.

The idea of the “vanishing Indian” has been an essential mechanism through which U.S. democracy has developed. It was about creating notions of civilized and uncivilized, or who should belong and who cannot; it is about creating fictional boundaries of who has the right to full citizenship and who does not.⁶ Indeed, even civil and human rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. understood that the foundations of structural bigotry were rooted in Europeans’ decimation of Indigenous peoples. King wrote in *Why We Can’t Wait* (1964), “[o]ur nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society.”⁷ King correctly asserted that “[o]ur literature, our films, our drama, our folklore all exalt” the bigotry experienced by Indigenous peoples within popular culture.⁸ King describes here what historian Philip Deloria has labeled “playing Indian,”—a phenomenon in which white Americans have performed or dressed up as Indigenous peoples at different stages in U.S. history.⁹ They “played Indian” in order to construct themselves as white and as a democracy, similar to how they constructed their notion of belonging through Black Americans.

The problem of anti-Indigenous bigotry will persist as long as we don’t come to terms with the longer history of Indigenous dispossession. If we are truly to recognize Indigenous peoples today, we need to understand history, require teaching Indigenous history and contemporary culture in K-12, and honor the treaties. Non-Indigenous Americans must understand the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. Finally, a public apology backed by federal will to stop the production of pipelines would further the cause of Indigenous sovereignty and will assist greatly in allowing Indigenous nations to thrive.

The Sites of Anti-Indigenous Bigotry

The sites of anti-Indigenous bigotry are wide and vary, given that there are over 500 federally recognized tribes, hundreds of state-recognized tribal nations, and many non-recognized nations. But if we could sum up three core areas where this bigotry happens on a large scale we would argue that it happens in the areas of permanence, property, and pervasiveness. Anti-Indigenous bigotry is a permanent feature of American culture, politics, and society at large. How we understand private property and how it is accumulated in the long history of Indigenous land usurpation. Anti-Indigenous bigotry, or the invisibility of Indigenous peoples is so pervasive that many Americans hardly even know anything about Indigenous peoples, often assuming that we all live on reservations. Even immigrants who have escaped violence or simply sought new opportunities—the American Dream—perpetuate Indigenous erasure. The circumstances that displaced refugees or others forced to travel to the U.S. and settle

⁵Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations*, 36.

⁶Jean M. O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*, eds. Robert Warrior and Jace Weaver (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiii.

⁷Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 120.

⁸King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 120.

⁹Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 191.

because of U.S. Empire in their home countries should consider also their relationship to Indigenous nations. The question they should ask themselves, though, is what is my relationship to Indigenous nations and how can I feel safe and still critically interrogate American exceptionalism. Using phrases such as “We are a nation of immigrants” might sound nice, but it erases Indigenous peoples, the original people of the land, upon whom others have now settled.¹⁰

Property. Because the United States is built on coercing Indigenous peoples out of land for the expansion of the U.S. nation state, the idea of private property is rooted in Indigenous land theft, which continues into the present. Legal scholar Cheryl Harris argues that the creation of notions of whiteness as the defining feature of property in the United States was based on race, and these notions were amalgamated by two historical facts: the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans.¹¹

Permanence. The dispossession of Indigenous people from their land is at the root of anti-Indigenous bigotry. Because the United States remains occupied Indigenous land, until it is returned, there will continue to be anti-Indigenous bigotry. At the very least, the United States could honor and respect the treaties that they made with Indigenous peoples. Without honoring the treaties, the United States makes clear that Indigenous livelihood and futures within the U.S. hardly matter.

Pervasiveness. The pervasiveness of anti-Indigenous bigotry is fundamental to U.S. popular culture. From the Boston Tea Party where colonists dressed up as Mohawks to form their own protest to the ongoing debate around Indigenous mascots today, the denigration of Indigenous peoples is as American as cherry pie. We can look no further than the 2021 World Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Houston Astros. Indigenous activists have been protesting to convince the Atlanta Major League Baseball franchise to change their name for decades. When former president Donald Trump attended a game, he egged on the crowd and performed the tomahawk chop—a racist mockery of how Indigenous peoples are supposed to act.¹² However, the fans do this at every home game to the sounds of drums, and it illustrates how ubiquitous American Indian play remains—something that all races have contributed to. Like blackface and minstrelsy, playing Indian has been a defining characteristic of cultural production in U.S. society. Until Indigenous peoples have positive representations in society, until they can be their full selves without the threat of stereotypes, these meta-narratives of Indigenous peoples being only a part of the past will remain a part of the American fabric.

¹⁰Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not “A Nation of Immigrants:” Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), xiii.

¹¹Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1714.

¹²Nick Selbe, “Donald Trump Participates in Tomahawk Chop During Game 4 of World Series,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 30, 2021, <https://www.si.com/mlb/2021/10/31/donald-trump-does-tomahawk-chop-game-4-world-series>.

A Recommended List of Sources

Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Deloria's concept of playing Indian argues that white Americans constructed their concept of self—as American—through their ideas about Indigenous peoples. From the Boston Tea Party to the anxieties of urban development in the late 19th century to the counter culture of the 1960s, Deloria illustrates the pervasiveness of this type of performance. He ultimately argues that whenever white Americans feel some type of anxiety about their country, they return to the idea of the “Noble Savage” as a foil to construct their own sense of self.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

This bestselling book argues that settler colonialism is a defining feature of American history. From the campaigns of Andrew Jackson to contemporary U.S. militarism, the genocide against Indigenous peoples not only shapes our past but exists well into the present through ongoing militarism around the world. A must read for anyone interested in exploring how Indigenous genocide has shaped the core of American history.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Not “A Nation of Immigrants:” Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).

Within today's society, immigrants from a variety of countries often say, “we are a nation of immigrants” as a gesture to state that the United States welcomes everyone. In doing so, they erase Indigenous peoples and the long, ongoing history of settler colonialism. Award-winning historian Dunbar-Ortiz explores this ideology, from Irish immigrants to African descended peoples to Latinx folks, in order to dispel this persistent myth in American culture.

Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1710–91.

This profound article demonstrates how notions of property were rooted in race, in particular whiteness in early America. In order for whiteness to develop, in addition to their conception of property, white people needed a foil. They developed these notions of property and race through the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans in order to define who could belong and who could not as citizens.

Jessica Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes through Indigenous Science* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2022).

Jessica Hernandez writes a profound book about navigating multiple colonial systems in the U.S., Central America, and Mexico, as an Indigenous scientist. Using personal narratives and basing part of it on her father's experiences as a child soldier, she demonstrates how, as an Indigenous scientist, it is essential to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into western knowledge systems about the environment in order to create a more holistic approach to environmental justice.

Kyle T. Mays, *An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).

Beginning with pre-Revolutionary America and moving into the movement for Black lives and contemporary Indigenous activism, Afro-Indigenous historian Mays argues that the foundations of the U.S. are rooted in antiblackness and settler colonialism, and that these parallel oppressions continue into the present. He explores how Black and Indigenous peoples have always resisted and struggled for freedom, sometimes together, and sometimes apart. Whether to end African enslavement and Indigenous removal or eradicate capitalism and colonialism, Mays show how the fervor of Black and Indigenous peoples' calls for justice have consistently sought to uproot white supremacy.

NDN Collective, "Land Back." <https://landback.org/> (accessed 4 April 2022).

It is a political framework that works toward returning land back to Indigenous peoples. The Land Back campaign is designed to imagine a world where Black, Indigenous, and People of Color can live together on Indigenous land.

Jean O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

Jean O'Brien argues that, in the Northeastern United States, white Americans manufactured the idea of the "vanishing Indian" by writing stories that suggested that they founded various places. In so doing, these narratives served as the mechanism through which notions of citizenship and belonging were created. Moreover, it suggested that Indigenous nations did not have a place in the developing U.S. nation-state.

Alaina E. Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

This important book explores the relationship between African Americans and Indigenous nations in Indian Country during the post-Reconstruction era. She explores the history of Reconstruction through the experiences of African Americans who actually received the "40 Acres and a Mule," white settlers, and Indigenous nations.

Claudio Saunt, *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020).

The dispossession of Indigenous peoples is a fundamental part of how the U.S. was created. However, the financial scale and severe loss of land in the creation of the United States is rarely considered together. Through this careful study, historian Claudio Saunt analyzes how the removal of Indigenous people in the U.S. south was buoyed by government officials, southern planters, and northern land speculators.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Simpson's book is a call for action to radically transform Indigenous people's relationship with the settler state. Though speaking mostly from the settler state of Canada, this remarkable book explores

the possibilities of Indigenous resurgence, and asks us to build on Indigenous traditions in order to create a future free of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy.

Disrupting Anti-Indigenous Bigotry: Steps Forward

Given what I have outlined here, it remains a tall task in disrupting and eliminating anti-Indigenous bigotry. However, listed below are several steps that could be taken to move us in the right direction.

1. Eliminate all anti-Indigenous mascots, names of teams, at sporting events and high schools. The research is clear: the use of mascots is detrimental to the self-esteem of Indigenous youth.¹³ This, of course, won't fully eliminate anti-Indigenous bigotry but it will help educate all people that this isn't right.
2. End the construction of pipelines that go through Indian Country. This isn't just an Indigenous issue but an issue for all Americans.
3. Better serve urban Indigenous communities. In spite of the fact that the majority of Indigenous peoples live in cities across the U.S., there remains a dearth of social science data on their existence. Those communities need more federal dollars, which will require more research on the history, experiences, and everyday lives of urban Indigenous people.
4. Make lessons on Indigenous history and contemporary culture mandatory for K-12 education. Federal funds could be used to teach Americans about the concept of sovereignty and how tribal nations are distinct nations.
5. Create a federally funded campaign that tells the American public about contemporary Indigenous peoples. Include resources for campaigns in popular culture. We could especially benefit from private corporations like Netflix and Hulu, among others, allowing Indigenous creators to produce more Indigenous-centered content.
6. In general discourse, stop referring to Indigenous peoples in the past tense.
7. Federal recognition of state-recognized tribes and those seeking recognition. And this should be led by a variety of Indigenous peoples.
8. The lack of housing for Indigenous peoples in urban contexts is a core issue. Urban homelessness is a concern for Indigenous peoples, and we need more federal dollars that can help fund urban Indian centers to assist them in helping their constituents.
9. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). The concern of violence toward, queer, non-binary, and Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and trans-women is an important topic in Indian Country. We need more resources to provide safety for vulnerable populations.

¹³Stephanie A. Fryberg et al., "Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 30 (2008): 208-18.