

‘Civility’ and the Civilizing Project

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Abstract: Calls for civility have been on the rise recently, as have presumptions that civility is both an academic virtue and a prerequisite for rational engagement and discussion among those who disagree. One imperative of epistemic decolonization is to unmask the ways that familiar conceptual resources are produced within and function to uphold a settler colonial epistemological framework. I argue that rhetorical deployments of ‘civility’ uphold settler colonialism by obscuring the systematic production of state violence against marginalized populations and Indigenous peoples, relying on the colonial conceptual framework of ‘civilized’ vs ‘savage’, and excusing death-promoting rhetoric under the guise of liberal disagreement.

I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, ‘Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.’ But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?

—Audre Lorde, ‘The Uses of Anger’ (1981: 278)

You tell me which is worse: cussing in condemnation of the murder of children or using impeccable manners to justify their murder. I no more want to be ‘respectable’ according to the epistemologies of colonial wisdom than I want to kill innocent people with my own hands.

—Steven Salaita, ‘Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom’ (2015: 44)

Epistemic Decolonization in Settler Colonial Contexts

Western settler epistemology is deeply invested in and dependent on colonial mythology. It relies on this mythology to facilitate Indigenous land dispossession by constructing a

conceptual framework that remakes land into property and positions the settler as always already ontologically entitled to it (Tuck and Yang [2012](#); Ruíz forthcoming). ¹ Because settler colonialism is an ongoing structure and not simply a past historical event, it requires complex and ongoing forms of violence in order to maintain itself, including epistemic violence. In settler colonial contexts, settler epistemic violence is always linked to land—to its theft, dispossession, and ongoing occupation—although settler epistemologies work hard to obscure the connections between them. Settler epistemologies frame land as being detached from knowledge. This is not an accident. Settler epistemologies not only work to ignore and obscure Indigenous knowledges, they aim to make many aspects of Indigenous knowledges both *un-sayable* and *un-thinkable* within them.

The notion of land used here invokes Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy's ([2014](#)) understanding of land as encompassing all of the earth, including the urban, and as much more than just the material. Their notion draws on diverse trajectories of Indigenous practice and theory that understand land to include air, water, subterranean earth, and to encompass diverse webs of relationships developed over long timescales. It also includes an understanding that many different forms of knowledge exist within these relationships to land. By contrast, settler epistemologies traffic in obscurantism and erasure. In addition to working to erase Indigenous epistemologies from the realm of what can be considered knowledge, they work to obscure much of the machinery and gearwork of settler colonialism itself. This includes, as Dolores Calderon ([2014](#): 10) notes, 'the ways in which place is foundational to settler colonialism'. Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) describes how settler colonialism must 'create amnesia around geographies' in order to justify and maintain itself. Settler structures rely on the forced disappearance and forgetting of Indigenous histories and realities on the lands that they occupy.

Many concepts within settler epistemologies have been constructed to fulfill this specific purpose. The concept of *wilderness*, for instance, does this by falsely recalling 'a nostalgic past and places of pristine virgin land' (Goeman [2017](#): 114). Kyle Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) ([2018](#)) identifies this concept as one of the 'fictional imaginaries of cultural and political legitimacy' that the United States has created in order to justify its existence on stolen land. It was integral to establishing the network of US National Parks through the Wilderness Act of 1964. By conjuring an image of nature that is 'untouched' by humans, and whose 'purity' must be preserved, the notion of *wilderness* obscures and erases the history of forced displacement and

genocide of Indigenous peoples and disruption of Indigenous societies and governance structures that were necessary to create and establish US National Parks. This is one instance of the pattern that Goeman identifies below in which settler structures reframe and reimagine the land they exist on while disappearing violence necessary for their creation and continuing existence:

Settler colonial structures must imagine a homogenous stable present space developed for the good of the majority, even while they rely on forgetting the violence it took to produce the nation-state and the violence and fear it takes to sustain the current socio-political order, which necessitates a lack of acknowledging the ongoing structures of the colonial moment. (2017: 114)

It should be unambiguously stated that the imaginings and forgettings that settler worldviews traffic in are *epistemological projects*. Such imaginings and forgettings are exactly the hallmark of the conceptual heavy lifting that settler epistemologies carry out. The erasure of Indigenous genocides that the concept of *wilderness* performs is an *epistemic function*. Specifically, it is a function of a concept within a settler epistemology that works to uphold settler colonialism by covering over Indigenous histories of these lands and remaking stolen land into the ontological property of the settler. The settler concept of *wilderness* embarks on this epistemological remaking project by imagining the stolen lands that became National Parks as ‘space developed for the good of the majority’ and disappearing the physical, material, spiritual, environmental, and epistemic violence that was required to reorient them as settled spaces. The settler concept of *wilderness* is doing the exact epistemological work that settler colonialism needs it to do. When we uncritically invoke and deploy settler concepts that maintain settler colonialism by erasing the devastating relationships to land and peoples that settler structures are built on and maintain, we are furthering the project of settler colonialism.

Here I specifically consider structures of settler colonialism on Coast Salish, Mohawk, Oneida, Wet'suwet'en, and Hawaiian lands to address what decolonization might require in the contexts of settler colonialism in North America and Polynesia. I take as a starting assumption a point that Tuck and Yang (2012) take much care to emphasize—that decolonization is not a metaphor. Decolonization in settler colonial contexts requires the rematriation of Indigenous lands. If a project or practice does not work toward expanding Indigenous sovereignty, including Indigenous access to and relationships with land, it is not decolonial. Decolonization is not a synonym for social justice projects. It does not and cannot refer to measures taken simply to reduce harm or increase fairness in resource distribution in settler societies. Neither is epistemic

decolonization synonymous with efforts to minimize, reduce, or repair epistemic injustice. Calling such practices ‘epistemic decolonization’ serves the same function as using ‘decolonization’ metaphorically. It reduces settler feelings of guilt and complicity and functions as a move to innocence so that settlers can feel that we are taking part in important efforts to promote justice, but without having to give back any of the stolen Indigenous land we continue to occupy and profit from in order to secure our settler futurity on these lands.

If decolonization requires the return of Indigenous lands to their original peoples, what then does epistemic decolonization require? Among other things, epistemic decolonization requires unmasking the justificatory roles that specific concepts fulfill in settler epistemologies and unmaking the world that such epistemologies construct. This is done in order to disrupt their ability to preserve settler colonial occupation of Indigenous land and the continuation of the colonial project. Settler epistemologies carry out their preserving and justifying functions in myriad ways. When settler epistemological frameworks and the conceptual resources they offer facilitate and maintain the dispossession of Indigenous lands, epistemic decolonization involves recognizing and refusing these functions.

This inquiry is an effort toward disrupting the rhetorical functions of calls for ‘civility’ within settler colonial contexts and the overall function of the concept in settler epistemologies. Calls for ‘civility’ in politics and academia have been on the rise over the last few years. So too have presumptions that civility is both an academic virtue as well as a prerequisite, not only for rational engagement and discussion among those who disagree, but for moral progress itself.

Analyzed abstractly and uprooted from its settler colonial context, it is hard to object to the value of civility as a quality and virtue of expression demonstrated by individuals. But when we look at the use and function of the concept within settler epistemology and the way it is wielded in discourse, there are serious objections to be made to the way that demands for civility are used as a weapon against those who would challenge the *status quo* of settler colonial oppressions both within and outside of the academy. Because one imperative of epistemic decolonization is to recognize the ways that our conceptual resources are produced within and function to uphold a colonial epistemological framework, this inquiry will interrogate the uses and functions of the rhetoric and concept of ‘civility’, its role in settler epistemologies, and its connection to maintaining settler colonialism.

‘Civility’ as the Conduct of the ‘Civilized’

I argue that in a context where the *status quo* is constituted by interlocking structures of oppression constructed under settler colonialism, challenges and disruptions to these structures will almost always be seen as ‘uncivil’. These challenges and dissensions form the core set of what gets labeled ‘incivility’. The first thesis of Tompkins and Nyong’o’s (2018) ‘Eleven Theses on Civility’ is that ‘Incivility is anger directed at unjust civil ordering’. Because expressions of dissent spoken with justified anger at an unjust civil order will generally be seen as *uncivil*, civility is a tool that maintains the *status quo* of settler colonial white supremacist capitalist ableist cis-hetero-patriarchy. The *status quo* means violence and death for many people. We have a moral obligation not to maintain this *status quo*, and we thus have a moral obligation to reject demands that marginalized persons and Indigenous peoples challenge the *status quo* only in ways that are deemed ‘civil’ by the very structures of settler colonialism and oppression that they seek to end.² This obligation is especially salient for those of us who, like me, are white settlers currently benefitting from the ongoing violence of the colonial project, whose bright futures are made possible by the exploitation of Black and Brown labor and by the continuing genocide of Indigenous peoples and dispossession of Indigenous lands.

How, precisely, does the concept of civility function within settler epistemology to uphold the *status quo* of ongoing occupation, dispossession, and oppression? We can look first to the meaning of the word itself and to its etymology. The word ‘civility’ comes from the Latin, *civilitas*, which is from *civilis*, meaning ‘relating to citizens’. Civility is thus orderly behavior befitting a citizen. Civility is an expectation of how one should behave in the public square, but it also carries connotations of whose presence and participation is allowed in the public square at all. In the Americas, this public square is always built on stolen land.

The dictionary definition of ‘civility’ also offers a window into its conceptual connotations: civility is defined as ‘formal politeness and courtesy in behavior and speech’.³ In addition to ‘courtesy’ and ‘politeness’ its synonyms include ‘good manners, mannerliness, gentlemanliness, chivalry, gallantry, graciousness, and gentility’. Gentility is behaving in a way that is suited to the noble-born, demonstrating an elegance expected of the gentry class. Merriam-Webster characterizes gentility as ‘attitudes or activity marked by false delicacy, prudery, or affectation’, and also as ‘superior social status or prestige evidenced by manners,

possessions, or mode of life'. The behaviors that civility demands are grounded in classist white cis-heteronormative social scripts and steeped in disingenuousness and pretense. These definitions provide a look into the conceptual origins of why civility places the manner and tone of engagement above its substance and content.

Civility involves a set of normative expectations for behavior that are classed, racialized, and gendered, and that are not only oriented toward maintaining a settler colonial *status quo*, but that as Evyn Lê Espiritu et al. (2015) point out, construct certain groups as inherently unfit for the space of public discourse. They write:

Certain bodies are constructed to simply be, *a priori*, uncivil. That is to say, it is not merely that the accusation of uncivil behavior is more likely thrown at bodies of color, of immigrants, of queers. More trenchantly, these bodies are *always already* suspect—always seen as primed toward uncivil behavior. They demonstrate for us what incivility is by virtue of the *sheer presence* of their non-normativity. Thus the distinction here becomes less one of speech as uncivil than one of how the ideological evaluation of speech is used to reinforce the production of certain bodies as threatening, dangerous, and uncivil. (Lê Espiritu et al. 2015: 65, emphasis in original)

The conceptual role that *incivility* is playing in settler epistemology runs deeper than simply being a charge that is more likely to be wielded against marginalized people. The notion already constructs certain embodied knowers as disruptive, unruly, and unmanageable. *Civility* has a long, ugly, and well-documented history that contemporary calls for civility obscure. Colonialism was characterized as a 'civilizing' mission, in which European peoples forcibly enslaved, raped, and tortured Indigenous peoples whom they characterized as 'primitive' in order to 'civilize' them, instill 'manners' in them, and save them from their 'savage' selves. As Terese Marie Mailhot (Seabird Island Band) emphasizes, 'Civility is an invention that has been weaponized against indigenous people since settlers first started coming to indigenous lands' (2018).

One weaponization of civility in the enforcement of a civilizing process occurred through residential schooling, which was in part an epistemic project. White Christian settlers in the Americas forcibly removed Native children from their homes and placed them in residential and

boarding schools where they were stripped of their names, cultures, and identities, punished for speaking their languages, prevented from seeing their families, and subjected to ongoing physical and sexual abuse. The violence of residential schools was not only corporeal, it was also cultural, spiritual, and epistemic. Preventing children from speaking their native languages is one obvious form of epistemic violence, but the schools carried out many others as well. The schools enforced a colonial gender system, which disrupted varied Indigenous practices of gender, sexuality, sociality, and kinship. Goeman (2017: 110) explains,

Civilizing the Indian was a large part of colonization, and one of the main methods of erasure was to Christianize the Indian and to change bodily and sexual practices of tribal communities, which often had multiple genders based on roles performed rather than biological organs.

The enforcement of a nuclear family structure came along with an imposition of settler patriarchy, as women were expected to move to the man's village when they married (Maracle 2015). In Salish and Mohawk communities, Native women who married white men lost their tribal status, while white women who married Native men gained tribal status (Maracle 2015, Simpson 2014). Sto:lo elder, scholar, and poet Lee Maracle refers to the forced removal of Indigenous children from their parents and communities through the Residential School System as the settler states' forward-looking effort to complete the 'curtailment of space and Indigenous modes of living' (Maracle 2015: 117). This disruption of Indigenous modes of living involves a disruption of Indigenous political, economic, and epistemic practices.

The very existence of the settler colonial nation-states of North America has always required ongoing epistemic violence that is intimately tied to Indigenous land dispossession. Maracle (2015) explains how Indigenous concepts of family, justice, citizenship and governance were disrupted by the legislative acts of the settler nation-states of Canada and the United States that restricted Indigenous people's use of space and access to land.⁴ In the establishment of the settler state of Canada, for instance, the Indigenous confederacies along the 49th parallel were disrupted and divorced from one another. The establishment of the settler border between Canada and the United States precluded the possibility of full nationhood for the Indigenous nations whose existence encompassed lands that were bisected by the border, such as the

Mohawk and Oneida Nations. The settler nation-states then each established an institution in charge of ‘Indian Affairs’ whose purpose was to limit and regulate freedom of movement and access to land and space. Maracle emphasizes that the harms enacted go well beyond material harms to individuals; they efface Indigenous nations’ political autonomy, Indigenous sovereignty, and Indigenous epistemologies:

This curtailment of space took place alongside the arrest of all systems of governance, and exercise of power over health, wellness, the environment, economic development, knowledge transmission, and cultural education. As a result our understanding of ourselves atrophied. Recovering from this condition will take time *and* space.

(Maracle 2015: 117)

Maracle shows how access to land is central to Coast Salish peoples’ ability to maintain authority over their lives and their knowledge. This includes their political, moral, and emotional relationships with one another and with nonhuman beings, as well as their conceptual understandings of what each of these involves.⁵ The civilizing project has always relied on epistemic violence as a central feature and method of colonization.

In the United States, the intertwined genocides of forcibly displacing Indigenous peoples from their lands in a project of elimination and forcing enslaved Africans and their descendants to work those same stolen lands while being legally owned as property come together in the conceptual framework underlying the civilizing project. As Tuck and Yang (2012: 6) note, the definition of ‘civilization’ requires making the land produce in excess of its ‘natural’ state, ‘i.e. in excess of the sustainable production already present in the Indigenous world’. The ability to make the land produce beyond its ‘natural’ capacity then becomes evidence in the settler epistemology of the settler’s ontological claim to and dominion over the land. ⁶ The rhetoric of ‘civilizing’ a ‘savage’ race was a discursive tool used to morally justify the forced labor and cruelty of slavery, and ‘civility’ has long been used to silence and quell resistance to systems of anti-Black racism in the United States while simultaneously facilitating Indigenous land dispossession.⁷

Settler colonial genocide continues in this hemisphere today through myriad complex manifestations that are rooted in an underlying justificatory settler epistemology. Along with the

violent disruption and suppression of the governance structures of sovereign Indigenous Nations, these methods include destruction of Indigenous lands through capitalist and extractivist exploitation, Canada's active neglect of the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and systematic efforts in the United States to destabilize protections under Indian Law that prioritize placing Indigenous children who are up for adoption first with their own people and second with other Indigenous families before resorting to placement in non-Indigenous homes. These make up just a few of the ongoing concerted efforts to eradicate Indigenous peoples and epistemologies and foreclose possibilities of Indigenous sovereignty on the lands on which the settler colonial nation-states of Canada and the United States have been built. All of these methods are justified within a settler political epistemology that is rooted in a colonial conception of property rights that rests on a picture of Indigenous peoples as uncivilized 'heathens' and white Christian settlers as their 'civilized conquerors'.

The same conceptual framework that underlies both the 'civilizing mission' and the settler notion of property continues to play a role in ongoing settler violence against original peoples and their lands. Consider the Doctrine of Discovery, which states that land would only be recognized as possessed and unavailable for colonization if a title to it was held by inhabitants who were under the rule of a European Christian monarch. This doctrine was cited in a legal decision by the Supreme Court of the United States *as recently as 2005* (City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of New York). The Court ruled against Oneida Indian nation, saying that the Tribe could not return land to its reservation by buying back land that had once been part of its reservation but had eventually been sold off. The majority opinion, delivered by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, held that 'the Tribe cannot unilaterally revive its ancient sovereignty, in whole or in part, over the parcels at issue. The Oneidas long ago relinquished the reins of government and cannot regain them through open-market purchases from current titleholders'. The decision also references the 'Oneidas' long delay in seeking judicial relief' as well as 'the longstanding, distinctly non-Indian character of central New York' in its explanation of why 'standards of federal Indian law and federal equity practice' preclude the Tribe from reviving its sovereignty on said lands. That the lands had become the natural ontological property of the settler was overdetermined by the passage of time and the civilized Christian nature of the first white European settlers.

The role that the concept of property rights plays in settler structures continues to facilitate the portrayal of Indigenous peoples as ‘savage’ and ‘violent’ when they attempt to protect their land from the encroachment, violence, and destruction wrought by settler colonialism. This is evidenced by the treatment of Maunakea’s *kia’i* (protectors) who use *kapu aloha* (a code of conduct that includes non-violence as a central tenet) in their blockade of Maunakea access roads as engaging in ‘threats of violence’ (Maile 2015, 2018). In a racist email written in support of the Thirty-Meter Telescope (TMT), Sandra Faber, white Astrophysics professor at UC-Santa Cruz, referred to the TMT as being ‘attacked by a horde of native Hawaiians’, who she alleged were ‘threatening the safety of TMT personnel’ (Solomon 2016). The dynamic of the settler state criminalizing Indigenous people who protect their land from desecration and portraying them as ‘violent’ is evident in Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)’s long history of arresting and forcibly removing Indigenous peoples from their lands. The RCMP most recently engaged in forcible removal of Wet’suwet’en women elders from Unist’ot’en and Gidimt’en—land that even Canada’s settler law recognizes as unceded and Indigenous—in order to make way for the Coastal GasLink Pipeline. Wet’suwet’en land protectors were defending their land from settler invasion and their community from the sexual violence against Indigenous women that inevitably accompanies the influx of transient workers to the Man Camps set up to build pipelines. RCMP wearing tactical gear arrested Freda Huson, Chief Howilthkat of Unist’ot’en, while she was performing a ceremony to honor the Indigenous women and girls who have disappeared in Canada. The message is clear: peacefully resisting settler violence is the *real* crime. This indication is further present in Justin Trudeau’s admonition that allied protestors stop ‘hurting’ settler Canadians with rail blockades they set up in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en people. He admonished, ‘hurting Canadian families from coast to coast does nothing to further the cause of reconciliation’ (Forrest 2020). Trudeau’s scolding of Indigenous land protectors and allied protestors for harming the process of reconciliation by enacting economic consequences on settler Canada further echoes charges of incivility and the civilized/savage dichotomy that underlies them.

Those of us steeped in settler epistemology and nomenclature may find comfort in the ability to hide behind the presumed distinctions in connotation between ‘civility’ and ‘civilization’. This is because settler epistemology usually manufactures the illusion of an unproblematic, non-racist interpretation of a term or concept and then licenses it as an always

available epistemic option relevant to the question at hand. I embrace an alternative suggestion: namely, that anyone who is purportedly concerned with epistemic decolonization should reject the idea that the contents of concepts can be freely and cleanly excised from the contexts that bore them and the contemporary realities that they uphold (Dotson, personal correspondence). This is in line both with insights in Black feminist epistemology and with the work of Indigenous social theorists such as Manulani Aluli-Meyer (2008) (Kanaka Maoli) and Glen Coulthard (2014) (Yellowknives Dene), who recognize that epistemologies serve particular functions and must therefore be evaluated in part on the basis of the values that they license and the kinds of ethical agents they produce. The conceptual tools of ‘civility’ and ‘civilization’ continue to function to protect settler interests and structures while suppressing and delegitimizing Indigenous refusals in the eyes of so-called ‘liberal democratic’ settler nation-states. One conceptual device propagated by settler epistemologies is the delinking of the ongoing violence of the civilizing mission from contemporary calls for civility, and as such, it must be evaluated in part based on the function it serves.

Uncivil Refusals

Calls for civility ensure that those who object to open debates about the humanity of marginalized and oppressed people and the basic rights and sovereignties of Indigenous peoples will be seen not only as uncivil but as illiberal, violent, and even fascist—as inherently opposed to the pursuit of knowledge itself. The colonial representation of Indigenous land protectors as backward, uncivilized, and resistant to the pursuit of knowledge and science serves the settler project. This portrayal has been vividly on display in much of the academic Astronomy community’s response to Kanaka Maoli protection of Maunakea and resistance to the TMT.

Many Kanaka Maoli have been actively and passionately protecting their land by resisting the settler colonial project of building the destructive TMT on top of Maunakea, one of Hawai’i’s most sacred mountains and wahi pana (storied places). TMT supporters have often argued for the telescope to be built atop Maunakea by using language like ‘Move forward, not backward’, which frames Kanaka resistance to the telescope as standing in the way of scientific progress.⁸ The portrayals of Kānaka who oppose the TMT as anti-science and wanting to go ‘backward’ tend to ignore the long history of complex and sophisticated Hawaiian astronomical

knowledge that has allowed the Hawaiian people to navigate using the stars and voyage throughout Polynesia and Oceania for thousands of years. As Kanaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin (2019: 227) notes,

Settler ideologies often dismiss Kanaka Maoli epistemologies as primitive and backward-looking, thereby mapping Indigenous peoples onto the past as relics or exotic repositories of antiquated knowledge tragically unable to participate in the present or future.

These ideologies promote the replacement of Kanaka epistemologies with colonial ones under the guise of scientific and rational progress, which is framed as a central pillar of civilization.

Contemporary Kānaka reject the images produced by ‘settler colonial knowledge production of the ‘Native’ (Arvin 2018: 228) and push back on settler conceptions of land as something to be controlled and possessed. Building on Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson’s (2007) notion of ethnographic refusal, Arvin (2018) formulates a notion of regenerative refusal as a form of rejection that also creates expansive possibility. Regenerative refusals involve more than meeting the Western gaze and refusing settler narrative constructions of time and space; they envision a world and a Polynesia in ‘Indigenous space-time’, a place and a future beyond the settler logic of possession.

Kamaoli Kuwada (Kanaka Maoli) (2015) emphasizes the incommensurability between the scales and measurements of progress invoked by settler and Kanaka epistemologies and value systems. Kanaka epistemology values the connections of contemporary Kānaka to their ancestors, language, culture, and ‘āina (land). Kuwada explains,

When you see the possibility of ‘progress’ in this more connected way, you see that we are actually the ones looking to the future. We are trying to get people back to the right timescale so they can understand how they are connected to what is to come.

(Kuwada 2015)

In contrast with settler scientists eager to build the TMT before the construction contract expires, Maunakea’s *kia’i* are motivated by generational connections to both the past and the future.

Kuwada explains,

We are operating on geological and genealogical time. Protecting the ‘āina, carrying on our traditions, speaking our language, and acting as kahu for our sacred places are not things measured in days, or weeks, or even years. This work spans generations and eras and epochs. (Kuwada 2015)

In Kanaka epistemology, which incorporates genealogy and cosmogony, land or ‘āina (that which feeds) bears a literal kin relation to Kanaka Ōiwi and encompasses mutual relations of care and protection. It is not an accident that the same settler conceptual framework that equates the building of western technologies on Hawaiian lands with advancement of knowledge also obscures and renders nonsensical the sorts of relationships with land that produce and embody knowledge and understanding in Hawaiian epistemology. Rather, it is a tool of epistemic warfare, which is itself a strategy of colonization.

A main function of settler epistemologies is to obscure the myriad forms of violence that the settler colonial project relies on by excluding them from the realm of what can be considered violence. Settler epistemologies employ the method of what Ruíz (forthcoming) calls *cultural gaslighting*, an epistemic strategy intended to cover over the ‘facilitating violences’ of white supremacist settler colonial dispossession so that they will ‘remain unaccounted for’ within colonial epistemic frameworks. Many concepts within settler epistemological and legal frameworks (e.g., property, wilderness, civility) carry out this function.²

On Ruíz’s picture, it is not a coincidence, for instance, that the notion of (illegitimate) violence within a settler colonial society is limited to the extra-legal use of force. Such a notion obscures from view the foundational epistemic violence that facilitated and continues to maintain the colonization, occupation, and theft of Indigenous lands. It is not insignificant, for instance, that Spanish conquistadores and Catholic priests intentionally stole and destroyed all the Mayan codices that they possibly could as part of their strategy of colonizing the Americas. In doing so, they made a concerted effort to extinguish the knowledge of an entire civilization. It was a deliberate effort to wipe out an epistemology that included, among other things, astronomical knowledge, calendrical systems, political roles, governance structures, architectural methods, agricultural practices, and modes of healing. Nor is it coincidental that Christian missionary colonizers of the Hawaiian Archipelago made the Hawaiian language illegal for many years and passed laws that Kanaka children be taught only in English-language schools.

Colonization relies on tools of epistemic violence. And it is neither accident nor happenstance that the overly narrow ‘flesh-impact’ concept of violence serves and facilitates the specific settler colonial ends of Indigenous land dispossession by excluding epistemic and hermeneutic forms of violence from what can be recognized as violence within settler epistemologies.¹⁰ Rather, it was brought to the Americas to do exactly that. Ruíz explains:

Dispossession is a cultural project of epistemic consolidation that requires foresight into counter-revolutionary strategy and cooptation of resistant cultural narratives, such as Native claims to settler possession of stolen lands and political formations of identity that challenge settler colonial authority. The land cannot simply be seen as being owned *by* settlers; it must be seen as the natural and ontological property of whiteness on territory whose history also naturally begins with settlement and a founding story of fathers birthing a nation. The worldbuilding epistemological function of gaslighting is, by default, to produce totalizing and abusive ambients—languages, stories, buildings, practices, rituals, forms and documents—that work to destroy resistance to settler cultural authority as natural claims to Indigenous land. (Forthcoming)

The cultural project of epistemic consolidation that Ruíz theorizes is the aim of what Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy (2014: 13) call ‘settler zero point epistemologies’. Such epistemologies aim to achieve and maintain a monopoly on knowledge by foreclosing on all epistemologies other than Eurocentric universalism, performing epistemic violence against Indigenous knowledges (Bang et al. 2014), and ‘eclipsing Indigenous points of reference’ (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2014: 14). Ruíz (2012) identifies concrete ways that European colonization of the Americas disrupted Indigenous ways of knowing, and she tracks how colonial lineages create public policies, institutions, and political structures that reify and solidify colonial epistemologies as the only legitimate forms of knowledge.

The flesh-impact notion of ‘violence’ is one such colonial framework in a settler zero point epistemology. It forecloses on the possibility of including non-accidental and structural epistemic, psychological, cultural, and administrative practices from the domain of what can be considered violence. As Ruíz (forthcoming) puts it, ‘Psychological violences are not psychological all the way down.’ The contemporary forms of cultural gaslighting that Ruíz refers

to are psychologically abusive, yes, but they are possible only within the background structures of intergenerational traumas inflicted by settler colonial dispossession, ongoing genocide, and the constant degradation and dehumanization of oppression. These processes are all obviously death-promoting. However, settler epistemologies refuse to acknowledge the extraordinary range of rhetorical, discursive, and epistemic practices that also promote death by upholding the structures of violence that systematically produce it for targeted populations. ¹¹We must extend our analyses and conceptions of violence to encompass the ongoing violence of settler colonial occupation and dispossession of Indigenous lands and the non-accidentally produced structures of oppression that are built on them. Once our conception accurately reflects such a shift, there can be no room to place a burden of civility on those who stand against the death-promoting rhetoric and ideology responsible for generations of violence against their peoples and their communities.

Consider how the notion of civility acts as a cover-up for administrative violence produced by settler structures. The discourse on sexual violence at the US–Mexico border is illustrative here. While many white liberals seem to find the scale of violence at the border and the explicit rhetoric used to justify it to be newly distinctive under the administration of President Donald Trump, the general nature of the administratively orchestrated violence against migrant and refugee women is a structural continuation of systems that were operated and expanded under Barack Obama (Ebadolahi [2018](#), Human Rights Watch [2018](#)) and have been in place for over a century. Rather than being aberrant in our history, they are essential for the continued functioning of a settler government on stolen lands. The violence they facilitate, while horrific, is also mundane. Thousands of immigrants have experienced sexual abuse while incarcerated in detention centers over the past decade (Kassie [2018](#))—and it was also not a new phenomenon then. A notable difference between Obama and Trump—although by no means the only significant one—is the level of ‘civility’ with which the two presidents have carried out their administrative attacks on trans immigrants and asylum-seekers. The notion of civility performs a covering function which obscures and deflects attention from the ongoing forms of violence carried out by the settler state.

This epistemic gaslighting function of civility is vividly illustrated by the backlash to the 2015 protest strategy of an activist who was tellingly referred to as ‘Obama’s heckler’ by both right- and left-wing media. Jennicet Gutiérrez is a trans woman immigrant activist born in

Túxpan, Mexico, who moved to the US when she was 15 and is here without documented legal status. In 2015, she attended a White House event featuring a speech by President Obama lauding the progress made on LGBTQ rights. When Obama made a comment about ‘trans women of color being targeted’, Gutiérrez chose not to silently accept his hypocrisy. Instead, she yelled out, ‘President Obama, release all LGBTQ immigrants from detention and stop all deportations.’ She explains:

I couldn’t help but think about the conditions that my LGBTQ Latino/Latina, especially trans women of color, are facing in detention. So, to me, that was the moment I had to speak up. I had to raise awareness to the President and to everyone else watching that I’m not just going to celebrate, when my trans sisters are facing a lot of violence in the detention centers. [Trans women are facing] sexual and physical abuse, and I just had to send a message. (Jennicet Gutiérrez in Villareal and Ennis 2015)

The response was unsurprising. The room of mostly white cisgender gay activists booed Gutiérrez and did not let her finish. She was led away by security. As Villareal and Ennis (2015) report, ‘Obama did engage with Gutiérrez before she was escorted out.’ ‘No, no, no, no. Listen, you’re in my house’, Obama told her, wagging his finger. ‘You’re not going to get a good response from me by interrupting me like this.’

Obama’s response and the responses from white liberals, both cis and trans, exemplified the epistemic function of civility to enforce sanctimonious norms of respectability over the pursuit of actual justice. Dawn Ennis, a white trans woman writing for the mainstream liberal gay publication *The Advocate*, earnestly admonished Gutiérrez in what almost reads as a satire. After prefacing her comments with ‘I’m one who believes we should resist tossing aside our civility to fight injustice’, Ennis goes on to say:

Manners matter in the transgender fight for civil rights, too. No, manners are not more significant than the horror of rape ... But rape, as horrible and soul-wrenching as it is, does not give one a pass to behave like one is above the law or circumstance or propriety. (Ennis 2015) What an impressive conceptual framework civility provides that it can license such an admonition: let’s not allow rape to get in the way of propriety! Ennis’ comments perfectly illustrate the way that the white settler concept of civility as a normative epistemic value

necessary for promoting the free exchange of ideas actually upholds a deeply bankrupt morality that prioritizes politeness over ending sexual violence, transmisogyny, and settler colonial genocide.

Today, under the current presidential administration's regime of mass imprisonment of immigrants and state-sanctioned sexual violence against women seeking asylum, one in every five victims of confirmed sexual abuse in ICE detention is transgender even though trans people make up only 1 in 500 people detained by ICE (Gutiérrez 2015). We remember the names and lives of Nikki Enriquez, Johana Medina Leon, Roxsana Hernandez—all trans immigrant women who were either killed or left to die while imprisoned in detention camps at the border between the settler nation-states of the US and Mexico, itself a constellation of sites of colonial power founded on and constructed through structural violence. The notion of civility acts as an epistemic accessory to the white supremacist cis-hetero-patriarchal structural violence of settler colonialism.

The conceptual work civility performs has been particularly effective among white liberals. The truly unforgivable crime of the Trump administration, as conceived within the white liberal settler framework of civility, is not the structural production of sexual abuse—white liberals failed to show any concern about institutionalized rape against migrants at the settler border under Obama, just as they continue to simultaneously ignore and normalize prison rape by treating it as part of the expected institutionalized punishment practices of carceral environments more broadly (Davis 2003: 80–83; Curzer 2019). Rather, the truly unforgivable crime was failing to justify the practice of institutionalized rape within the accepted methods of contemporary settler epistemology, namely by reference to the euphemistic and obscurantist rhetoric of liberal democracy, fairness, deterrence, retribution, and justice. As Tompkins and Nyong'o (2018) put it:

Civility is not care, but it pretends to be; civility is the affective shape of administrative violence. It is the velvet glove around the iron claw ... Civility discourse enforces a false equation between incivility and violence that works to mask everyday violence as a civic norm.

Both Obama and Trump operated the iron claw, but only Trump removed the velvet glove. The Obama administration might have *treated* migrants in much the same way that our capitalist settler society treats animals, by subjecting them to violent forms of containment, torture, and domination, but Obama never *called* them animals. He disappeared the violence that his administration engaged in by invoking the covering function of civility. Trump's transgression was to remove the cover of civility surrounding the everyday violence that this settler state carries out institutionally and administratively both at and through its borders. *This* is what is treated as beyond the pale within the settler epistemic framework that uses civil discourse as a cover for the colonial project. The false equivalence of the systemic production of sexual violence with 'impropriety' is some of the central obscurantist conceptual work that civility does, and it accomplishes this moral conflation in the service of preserving the legitimacy of settler colonial authority and political structure.

Debate or Disruption? Civility in the University

In addition to acting as the velvet glove on the iron claw of everyday violence, the rhetoric of civility performs a number of other silencing functions. In the university context, demands for civility function as an epistemic sleight of hand by silencing dissent and quieting speech while simultaneously pretending to promote and value the very things they are cautioning against.

This function is illustrated in the University of Missouri's Show Me Respect Project's list of 20 ways to promote civility, which admonishes, 'Do not let your silence condone disrespectful behavior, yet consider carefully when and where to speak up.' In a January 21, 2015 Twitter post, Steven Salaita beautifully unpacks the function of civility as a 'suppressive code-word' deployed within academe to silence and intimidate those who seek to uncover and critique US settler colonial projects in North America and imperial military projects abroad ¹² that promote and maintain settler colonial structures, such as U.S. financial, ideological, and military support for Israel's occupation of Palestine.¹³ He writes (Le Espiritu, Puar, and Salaita 2015):

Civility, huh? Some professors are war criminals:

Madeleine Albright
John Yoo
Henry Kissinger [ret]
David Petraeus
Condoleezza Rice

And

In the new rules of academic freedom, you can't condemn:

militarism
Zionism
colonization

But you can attack:

Islam
Natives
the poor

After tweeting a series of harsh critiques of Israel's war crimes, human rights violations, and attempted ethnic cleansing, Salaita was painted as anti-Semitic by a campaign of pro-Israel students and faculty (Mackey 2014). His offer for the tenured position of Associate Professor in the American Indian Studies Program at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was subsequently revoked by the Administration, whose chancellor specifically cited concerns about Salaita's lack of 'civility'. The delineation between that which one can criticize and even disparage and still be considered 'civil' (e.g., Indigenous people(s), people of color, queer and trans people) and that which criticism of can only be considered 'uncivil' is significant. It reflects the deep investment that the university as institution and the public discourse around academic freedom have in maintaining US colonial and imperial projects at home ¹⁴ and abroad.

The function of context-evasive calls for civility is to paint the verbal abuse and psychological terrorism against marginalized groups as mere 'liberal disagreement'. In this way, civility discourse allows those who engage in death-promoting rhetoric and ideology to gain

cover as mere political opponents whose expressions of divergent views must be tolerated in a democratic society. Transforming harm, abuse, and even violence, into mere ‘disagreement’ is, to use Kristie Dotson’s turn of phrase, the ‘bad magic’ of civility in liberal discourse.

Calls for civility also act as a trap. Those who benefit from settler structures of oppression intentionally or unintentionally provoke marginalized people to (sometimes explosive) anger and then punish them for their expressions of outrage. They can then draw on powerful controlling images licensed by structural oppression to put marginalized people in their place. These controlling images portray Native people as savage, women as hysterical, trans women as mentally ill, irrational and ‘unhinged’, Black women as inherently angry and Black women’s anger as inherently threatening, and Latinxs as inherently volatile and in need of rational self-control. To express anger or any negative emotion thus becomes a trap that proves the point of the oppressor (Berenstein [2016](#)), and this often has the intended effect of silencing those who are targeted by such controlling images.

This was the rhetorical trap that Evergreen State College professor Naima Lowe found herself in after supporting student-led efforts to hold the administration accountable for its willful disregard of racism on campus. When Fox News showed video footage of Lowe protesting campus racism, she subsequently received an avalanche of virulent racist and misogynistic harassment. Fox News viewers predictably began inundating Lowe’s email with racist slurs and abuse rife with misogynoir, lynching images, admonitions that she kill herself, as well as rape and death threats. When Lowe was doxxed and her personal information including office address was made public, she began having constant panic attacks while on campus. After the University repeatedly failed to do anything to protect her or promote her safety, Lowe resigned. She writes:

I’ve spent over a year recovering from the trauma of becoming a lightning-rod for alt-right hatred and then being thrown under the bus by white liberal complacency. I was dismissed, disbelieved, and ultimately treated as though my anger in responding to racism was on par with the racism itself that I was trying to address. The backlash and condemnations that I received achieved their intended goal. I was largely silent about my experience for over a year, for fear of further recrimination. I’m now done being afraid of my anger. (Lowe [2018](#))

That Lowe's anger in response to racism was portrayed as being just as dangerous and threatening as the racism that she was protesting illustrates the false equivalence between incivility and violence that Tompkins and Nyong'o (2018) critique. Lorde (1981) makes clear the false equivalence at play when bigotry and the structural violence it upholds are placed in parity with anger at and resistance to said bigotry and violence. She writes:

We are working in a context of opposition and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, Lesbians and gay men, poor people—against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action. (Lorde 1981: 281)

Calls for civility obscure the context of opposition and threat that Lorde warns of. The conceptual sleight of hand common to civility rhetoric that equates racist hatred and violence with resistant anger in the face of racism depends on actively distorting the oppressive conditions of social reality. It is a disingenuous rhetorical move.

Well-intentioned white liberals sometimes ask how we are supposed to condemn things like the 'incivility' of Trump's rhetoric or other expressions of white supremacy in contemporary politics. The answer is simple: we condemn rhetoric used to uphold structural oppressions that produce violence against marginalized populations. The problem with Trump calling Mexican and Central American immigrants 'rapists' and 'animals' is *not* that such comments are uncivil. It is that they are part of a long-standing ideology of dehumanization that is inherently related to the promotion of genocide and the lowering of the dominant population's threshold for accepting white supremacist violence against the targeted group (Luft & Solomon 2018; Zimmer 2019). The problem with Trump saying, 'When you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy' is not that such comments are uncivil. It is that they literally promote and excuse the perpetration of sexual violence.

Note how easy it is to identify what is wrong with and materially harmful about those comments without resorting to the mealy-mouthed charge that they are 'uncivil'. Not only do we not need to invoke the concept of civility to identify what is morally wrong with such comments,

but doing so actually obscures the feedback loops between the ideologies such comments express and the structural oppressions that they uphold and are made possible by. Calling such comments ‘uncivil’ usually takes the place of identifying them as what they really are—in this case, expressions of white supremacist ideology and pro-rape propaganda. In this way, the concept of civility frequently functions to produce what I have called structural gaslighting (Berenstain forthcoming), which arises when conceptual frameworks obscure the non-accidental connections between structures of oppression and the patterns of harm that they produce and license. The portrayal of civility as a universal epistemic norm necessary to promote the free exchange of ideas and the corresponding context-evasive demands to demonstrate it function to produce structural gaslighting.

Calls for civility are deployed in ways that position civility as a universal value, one that is necessary for ‘rational debate’ within a ‘liberal democracy’. The fact that calls for civility are deployed without regard to social context means that they function to disproportionately silence expressions of justified anger by equating such expressions with bigoted hatred. As Lorde (1981) emphasizes, ‘This hatred and our anger are very different’ (282). Calls for civility, however, cannot recognize this difference. In contrast to the way that expressions of anger from women of color are constantly labeled ‘useless and disruptive’, Lorde envisions the transformative nature of the anger of women of color as a catalyst specifically for white women to acknowledge our complicities and inactions in a way that might allow us to move ‘toward coalition and effective action’ with women of color against white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (1981: 280–81). She writes:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in all those assumptions underlining our lives. (281)

Because calls for civility are often made in response to expressions of anger, particularly those aimed at the structures of oppression that birthed them, they form part of an epistemology of

domination whose function is to structurally gaslight oppressed and marginalized groups aiming to fight back against the pervasive violence they experience. Naima Lowe's (2018) personal reflections on 'academia's cult of civility' in the aftermath of her resignation from Evergreen State College echo the path forward that Lorde (1981) offers based on the radical coalitional possibilities of embracing the transformative power of anger as resistance in the face of oppression. Lowe writes:

I believe that anger is useful and productive, and I'm no longer afraid to express mine with all its potency ... For years I thought that academia's illusion of comfort was worth swallowing my anger and compromising my integrity. I'm grateful to have gotten free of that lie before it rotted me from the inside out ...
Fuck your civility.

As Lowe (2018) emphasizes, 'Civility hasn't stopped the oncoming train of far-right white nationalism in this country, and it doesn't solve racism on college campuses.' Civility is not an effective one-size-fits-all resistance strategy, nor is it clear that it is much of an effective resistance strategy at all. It should come as no surprise that civility is an ineffective resistance strategy once we recognize that calls for civility are in fact frequently designed to foreclose the very possibility of resistance in the first place.

Feigning Innocence

The unquestioned norms of open debate in liberal settler society create structured harms. They lead to the production of epistemic exploitation for marginalized groups, which occurs when marginalized persons are compelled to educate privileged persons about the nature of their oppression (Berenstein 2016). Ruíz explains,

The production of epistemic exploitation via settler moves to innocence constitutes part of the practice of epistemic consolidation through the disappearing of violences, a form cultural gaslighting which is necessary for the survival of the ongoing settler project.

To understand what this means, consider the fact that people of color and Indigenous peoples in the United States are constantly called on to, as Ruíz (forthcoming) puts it, ‘redundantly answer to “tell me the story of how I conquered you”’. These stories have been told and documented over and over in many contexts, including in settler languages and methodologies. Yet these extracted explanations do not seem to make much of a dent in the structural continuity of the systems that are built and maintained through forced Black labor and stolen Indigenous land—and the demands keep coming.

Settler epistemologies and the forced forgettings and false imaginings that they traffic in produce epistemic exploitation as a matter of course. They do this by actively disappearing the histories, knowledges, and realities that hold settlers accountable for their violence and then ask with feigned innocence, ‘What? What did we do?’¹⁵ This structural production of epistemic exploitation in turn leads to burnout, exhaustion, and cumulative trauma, for those who have to constantly recall and re-enact the violence they have been subjected to, which is exactly the point of the endeavor. In this way, demands for civility compound the trauma of the intergenerational harms of colonization and oppression—trauma which is non-accidentally produced and disproportionately distributed—and are complicit with the structural violence they obscure.

The concept of civility produces cultural gaslighting as an epistemic strategy intended to cover over the ‘facilitating violences’ of white supremacist settler colonial dispossession so that they will ‘remain unaccounted for’ within colonial epistemic frameworks (Ruíz forthcoming). The settler project begins with the forced disappearance of Native epistemologies and the disruption of Native relationships to land and other beings, but the forced disappearance and active forgetting are only one prong of the settler strategy of epistemic consolidation. Another prong involves replacing them with culturally specific values passed off as universal and mythology passed off as truth. This is the settler ‘imagining’ part of the equation. *Founding fathers, birthing a nation, pursuit of property, legislative democracy, pristine wilderness, manifest destiny, doctrine of discovery, white man’s burden*. These concepts all play the important role in settler epistemology of constructing a worldview that makes settler colonialism seem natural, normal, and inevitable.¹⁶

These concepts produce ‘totalizing and abusive ambients’ that work to destroy resistance to settler colonial authority. This too is just what the concept of civility does. It disarms resistance to settler colonial authority by placing demands on the oppressed people and

Indigenous peoples who would state their grievances against the settler nation-state and those who work to uphold its authority and carry out its structural violence. It demands that they state their refusals to accept such violence just a little more quietly, a little more politely, with less anger and bitterness, in a less biting tone, in the King's English, with a smile on their face,¹⁷ and an openness to the opposing views of those who think there is nothing wrong with, and maybe even something right about, perpetuating structural violence and genocide.

Revealing and rejecting the colonizing function of settler epistemic tools is one of the many imperatives of decolonization, both epistemic and otherwise. Decolonization requires returning the land. Without the return of Indigenous lands, there can be no decolonization in settler colonial contexts. The dismantling of colonial conceptual frameworks that promote and justify dispossession is one important step in facilitating the return of Indigenous lands.

Notes

1 See John Locke's theory of property for an example of conceptual work constructing settlers as entitled to Indigenous land. As Ruíz (forthcoming) puts it, Locke's theory was 'explicitly oriented toward providing ontological justification for the removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands using culturally arbitrary conceptions of labor and ownership'.

2 This is not a new argument. It is worth noting that when I make this argument as a white woman, I might get some pushback, and I might be challenged, scolded, or perceived as difficult—but I am usually understood just fine. When people of color and Indigenous people make this argument, it is often treated as conceptually incoherent and construed as evidence against their 'rational nature' or their status as knowers.

3 See Oxford Dictionaries' public website *Lexico*, which focuses on current English and modern usages, for this definition.

4 She writes, 'This dissection has crippled the possibility of nationhood for the nations that straddle the international border. Neither Canada nor the United States stopped at separating our confederacies by international boundaries. Instead, both federal governments took it upon

themselves to further separate one village from another by establishing reservation borders, setting up a pass system, and limiting movement through violence both legal and illegal. These conditions severed connections to relatives, and continue to impair our economic, trade, cultural, social, ceremonial and political being. The impairment of trade destroyed the original economies and lowered the standard of wealth accumulation for Indigenous people. Wealth is the measure of leisure time. Time is the measure of artistic and conscious development' (2015: 116).

5 She explains, 'These conditions limit authority over family and preclude the Indigenous assumption of citizenship and power. They have obliterated our ability to define family and determine citizenship in our own terms, and led to the general belief that we are not entitled to any space at all. At the same time that our mobility, emotionality, and morality, and our concepts of justice, family, and being have been altered, concepts of disentanglement upheld by settler society dominate our lives. These conditions continue to threaten and stymie Indigenous survival (Maracle 2015: 118).

6 This justification of settler colonialism by reference to settlers making the land produce beyond its 'natural' capacity is also present in Zionist rhetoric about 'making the desert bloom'.

7 Consider how the notion of civility in the American South was used rhetorically as a weapon against the civil rights movement. Activists who disrupted the normative structure of daily life as dictated by white supremacy using methods such as sit-ins, boycotts, protests, and marches were deemed 'uncivil' and 'un-American'. In response to these criticisms, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. penned his now-famous Letter from Birmingham Jail. In it he writes,

I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically feels he can set the

timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season'.

The white moderate that King describes is paradigmatically concerned with civility as a commitment to order over to justice. As historian William Chafe, author of *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom*, explains, 'Civility was what white progressivism was all about—a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action' (8). Civility continue to maintain this legacy of prioritizing good manners while sacrificing the possibility of substantive action and change across a range of contexts by maintaining a pretense of compassion, concern, and reasonableness while actually silencing dissent.

8 There is, of course, a deep irony present in settler ideology portraying itself as 'forward-looking' in contrast with Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems, given that it is the former not the latter that is responsible for the global climate catastrophe that currently threatens all present and future generations.

9 Ruíz (manuscript) demonstrates how the structure of the legal notion of 'testimony' originates from and upholds the ongoing project of settler colonialism. I contend that the concept of civility also functions as what Ruíz (forthcoming) identifies as a 'settler epistemic tool that structurally quiets critical analyses of settler structural violence in order to mitigate *cultural liability* for settler colonial violence and its continuing project of dispossession'.

10 Ruíz ([2012](#), [2019a](#), [2019b](#), [forthcoming](#)) introduces the notion of *hermeneutic violence* and characterizes it as violence done to structures of meaning and intelligibility. This includes violence done to land, waterways, artifacts, textiles, and other loci of meaningful social relations and webs of knowledge within Indigenous epistemologies.

11 Consider an example of a death-promoting rhetorical practice. Referring to trans women as 'male' promotes their deaths by upholding the ideology that justifies incarcerating trans women in men's prisons, denying them life-affirming and life-saving medical care, discriminating against

them and prohibiting them from accessing life-saving women-only spaces such as homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters, and acquitting cis-het men who murder them and resort to a ‘trans panic’ legal defense to excuse their acts of homicide.

12 The civilization/savage discourse has long been central to justifying colonial projects abroad. As one illustration, consider that Theodore Roosevelt took conquest to be responsible for quelling ‘chaotic barbarian warfare’. He suggested that peace naturally followed conquest and that the fact was ‘due solely to the power of the mighty civilized races which have not lost the fighting instinct, and which by their expansion are gradually bringing peace into the red wastes where barbarian peoples of the world hold sway’ (Roosevelt 1900: 38).

13 See also Salaita’s (2015) *Uncivil Rites: Palestine and the Limits of Academic Freedom*. In it, Salaita analyzes the public and academic responses to the now infamous incident regarding University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign response to his criticism of Israel’s settler colonial occupation of Palestine.

14 This includes the internal colonialism evinced through state subordination of populations of color, such as the militarized brutality exercised against Black Lives Matter protestors by police in Chicago, Baltimore, St. Louis, and New York. All of these cities have police departments who have trained with Israeli Defense Forces under the guise of learning counter-terrorism tactics.

15 Consider the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada as an example.

16 This phrasing comes from Collins (2000), who describes the justifying function of controlling images as making the structures of oppression that produce them seem ‘natural, normal, and inevitable’.

17 The final item on Missouri’s ‘20 Ways to Promote Civility and Respect at Missou’ list reads, ‘The world always looks better from behind a smile!’

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