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SPECIAL SECTION

Settler colonialism in Donald Trump's America

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Abstract

This commentary contends with the broader settler colonial structures through which the second Donald Trump presidency may proceed. Through a historical and contemporaneous engagement with broader concepts such as settler colonialism and the 'frontier', this piece grapples with how Indigenous nations can ensure their continued vitality through this political moment.

KEYWORDS

frontier, indigenous peoples, settler colonialism

1 | INTRODUCTION

To say we have entered uncertain times since the return of Donald Trump to the White House would be an understatement. Nearly two months after his inauguration, Trump and his allies have already cast aside many norms and systems, creating chaos and disorder within the United States and internationally. Critics have already spilled oceans of ink on the effects that this dangerous turn in American policy has had on government agencies, funding for research (NEA, 2025), support for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (Skene and Whitehurst, 2025), economic relations with neighbours, foreign policy, and far more (Stevis-Gridneff, 2025).

However, another profound effect of Trump's return to the White House has operated below the radar of cultural consciousness and media attention. I speak here of the impact of this new administration on Indigenous peoples in the United States. I argue that the return of Trump to the seat of American policy lays bare the very real danger of the return of a more brutal form of settler colonialism—one that is not only premised on the continued exploitation of Indigenous lands but the renewed commitment to the elimination of Indigenous peoples within the American settler state. In this brief essay, I point to several key elements of Trump's brand of settler colonialism, highlighting areas that require attention both within Indian Country and among those who have a stake in the well-being of Indigenous nations across the United States.

2 | SETTLER COLONIAL MASCULINITY AND THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

A brief treatment of settler colonialism is necessary here. Settler colonialism is defined as the ongoing occupation of land by non-Indigenous peoples, via the displacement of Indigenous or the original peoples of a given space (Wolfe, 2006).

This form of colonisation is distinct from other forms of colonisation because control and occupancy of the land is the central goal of settler colonisation (Wolfe, 2006). The subsequent political entity, known as the settler colony, or settler state, then further entrenches itself on the land culturally, politically, and legally (Smiles, 2018). Settler colonialism is by nature a very anxious phenomenon in that it seeks to erase Indigenous histories from the land to place its own histories and stories there instead (Rifkin, 2014). The end goal of settler colonialism is that the Indigenous person will vanish entirely without a trace, and the settler colonial state's history will be the only one left standing (Wolfe, 2006). This is already in progress: Americans are brought up learning about historical events such as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Great Depression, but many settlers could not tell you the names of the Indigenous peoples whose lands they are on.

Settler colonialism also has developed distinctly masculine traits. Speeches by settler politicians extolling the claims to land and legitimacy of the settler state often invoke masculine figures, such as explorers and pioneers (Smiles, 2020). The prototypical settler's masculine traits are placed in direct conversation with the perceived femininity and fertility of the settler state itself—the land is a vessel to make the settler state, and settlers themselves, strong and numerous (Smiles, 2024; Wolfe, 2006).

The role of femininity in perpetuating the settler population can be seen in immediate moves by the far-right in the United States to curtail rights to abortion by women, while at the same time moving to further restrict the ability of women/childbearing people of colour to have access to health care and social services (NASW, 2025). The parallels to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are not just hyperbolic—we are in danger of moving to a eugenicist future where the ability to work and wield economic/political power is the domain of white settler men, and the ability (if one can call it that) to have children and grow population is the domain of white settler women, whether they want to or not.

3 | MIGHT MAKES RIGHT—HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN POLICY

This focus on ensuring the demographic domination of settler Americans has been at the heart of Federal Indian policy historically, and I fear it will be at the centre of the next phase of Federal Indian policy as we move further into the second Trump administration. Early treaty making in North America focused on friendship and on defining the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Miller, 2018). However, subsequent treaty-making and Federal–tribal relationships from the nineteenth century onwards often focused on two things: gaining land from Indigenous peoples and strictly regulating Federal obligations towards Indigenous peoples, when they bothered to try to meet those obligations (St. Germain, 2001).

Federal treatment of tribal nations often oscillated between brutal subjugation, such as the 'Trails of Tears' in the early-nineteenth century, and bloody massacres such as at Sand Creek in 1864 and Wounded Knee in 1890, or a paternalistic framework in which tribal nations were 'encouraged' to abandon their lifeways and to assimilate into the American cultural and political fabric. This included putting Indigenous children through boarding schools designed to strip them of their cultures and languages (Piccard, 2013).

In the twentieth century, the U.S. Government imposed Western governmental structures on tribal nations and went as far as to entice tribal members to move to urban centres, while also removing 'recognition' of their relationships with and obligations to tribal nations (Wilkinson & Biggs, 1977). All of this, I argue, comes from a mindset of 'might makes right'—the belief that the United States can behave how it pleases with Indigenous nations, as it occupies the higher end of the power dynamic between sovereigns.

Under the second Trump administration, the idea that 'might makes right' will continue to be a central point of Federal Indian policy. If tribes do not bend to the government's whim, the consequences will be dire, as seen by tribes who lost Federal funding during Trump's first term (Smith, 2020). Trump has historically been hostile towards Indigenous nations, who he views as threats to his sources of income and to his power more broadly. Now that he is back in what is arguably the most powerful position in the world, the danger to tribes will only increase.

4 | RETURN OF THE FRONTIER

The myth underpinning the American settler state is the concept of Manifest Destiny, or the belief in the God-given right of the United States and American settlers to create a continent-spanning empire—and to eliminate any Indigenous

peoples who stand in their way (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2013; Rifkin, 2014). This invocation of 'divine right' strengthens settler claims to land, giving them, in their view, supreme authority to control the land, rule it, and exploit it to their satisfaction (more on this in a bit). It also brings about a space-related anxiety: how to protect the settler colony from a villainised 'Other,' whether that be Indigenous peoples, or 'outsiders' accused of entering the settler colony to usurp settler access to resources and capital (Englert, 2020).

Historical and contemporary American border policy is based on this anxiety, particularly on the U.S./Mexican border. On the southern border, U.S. immigration policy into the early-twentieth century was much looser than what we recognise today, but fears about the economic threat that Mexican immigrants presented to white settler jobs, along with pseudo-scientific 'racial hygiene' theories, led to a strengthening of border policy after 1924 (Cedillo, 2021).

While Trump is far from the first president to take a strong position on 'security' related to the United States' border, the empowering of ICE and other law enforcement agencies to remove immigrants/migrants from the country has picked up in tempo and severity in the first months of Trump's presidency, with disastrous effects along multiple axes. This includes the separation of families, the wholesale deportation of individuals for spurious reasons, and even the arrests of Indigenous American citizens on suspicion of being 'illegal immigrants'—a racist action that suggests that anyone who is not white or European has little legitimacy to be in the country (Elassar, 2025).

I want to return to the idea of Manifest Destiny and tie it to my arguments around settler colonialism and American anxiety about the 'other' usurping its place on top of the settler-colonial hierarchy. This is best articulated using the 'frontier' as an analytic lens. The frontier, or the space that has yet to be explored and controlled, is integral to the formation of the American settler state (Grandin, 2019). The frontier exists as something to be conquered and controlled by the settler state and is regarded with both a sense of wonder and a sense of 'otherness', to borrow from Said (1978).

Trump's behaviour draws heavily from this 'othering' of people who are not white settler Americans, whether they are abroad or within the United States. When Trump talks about 'Making America Great' again, he is doing so with a nod and a wink to the time when white settler dominion over land and space (both physical and discursive) was unquestioned in the United States. One such example of this is his renaming of Denali to its colonial name, Mount McKinley, reversing a previous decision to restore the Indigenous place name to the mountain (Stagner, 2025). Anything that runs counter to this colonial logic is viewed as a frontier to be 'conquered' once more.

5 | THE UNHOLY MARRIAGE OF CAPITAL AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

But why does Trump want so badly to control and conquer everything around him, particularly space? This is partly tied to the intrinsic connection between settler colonialism and capitalism. Sai Englert (2020) writes that settler colonialism is a function of capitalism, in that the settler state seeks to control land so that it can enrich and strengthen itself from the capital that is extracted, or more appropriately, looted from the land. The most powerful and influential people in the settler state are those who can exploit the most labour and extract the most capital from the land (Englert, 2020). One glance at the key figures in the new Trump administration, such as Elon Musk, shows the validity of this argument.

This explains Trump's sudden desire to annex Canada, Greenland, and the Panama Canal for example—Canada and Greenland's wealth of natural resources would greatly benefit the United States, and the Panama Canal's strategic importance would facilitate further economic growth in the form of tolls and ease of access for American goods transiting the Canal. It also explains his recent attempts to force Ukraine to sign a resources deal granting the United States access to rare earth metals that are important for American technological efforts (Aikman & Gregory, 2025).

What does this mean for Indigenous environments in the United States, which have received less media coverage? Indigenous environments often are placed at ground zero for extractive industries and their accompanying infrastructure in the settler colonial state. The very history of settler colonial land grabs from Indigenous peoples was one of generating wealth from the land through farms, plantations, and other forms of industry. Almost none of the wealth generated from these ventures flowed to Indigenous peoples (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2013; Wolfe, 2006). More recent examples include the pipelines that have been built across Indigenous lands, such as the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Keystone XL pipeline, and the Line 3 pipeline (Bosworth, 2022; Estes, 2021). Other examples include the frequent placing of mines on Indigenous lands (Chief Dull Knife College, 2008) or the extensive logging of old growth forests on Indigenous lands (Loomis, 2017). In Trump's first administration, he allowed permits for pipelines to proceed, and in his second term, the phrase 'Drill, baby, drill' has entered the political lexicon in the United States. Given the immense resource wealth that many Indigenous reservations/Alaska Native corporations sit upon, it can be assumed that these lands will fall under the gaze of Trump's administration and their drive for further capital accumulation.

How might this proceed? We've seen the blueprint historically and contemporarily: the U.S. Congress possesses the plenary power to remove recognition of tribal nations in the United States, meaning that not only could Federal support for tribal funding end, but tribes could lose their reservations, and cease to exist as sovereigns in the eyes of the Federal government (CITE). It might also proceed through attempts to force through infrastructural projects, backed by the might of militarised police (Estes, 2021). Trump has already shown his disdain for Indigenous nations who represent economic threats to his own business interests. Their very existence poses a direct challenge to the settler colonial state, and we cannot assume his ire will not find its way back to these nations.

6 | FUTURE IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What can we do about this? Are we fated to be eliminated in yet another attempt by the settler-colonial state to erase our existence and occupy more of our space? I gently warn against the fatalism that is prevalent within settler circles. As Kyle Whyte (2017) reminds us, our peoples have faced apocalypses before. We already have gone through the end of our worlds, and yet we are still here. And so, we have the blueprints for our own resurgence with us already (Estes 2021; Simpson, 2017). That blueprint focuses on our relationships to land. We must be willing to re-engage with the land and to do so in a way that restores positive relationships with the land and that protects it from the very destruction that people like Trump may bring. This may look daunting, as we also face anthropogenic climate change, but Indigenous communities across the United States are already doing this work, such as taking culturally based actions to adapt to climate change, returning to land-based practices that reinscribe relationships with important spaces, and ensuring that future generations of Indigenous peoples do not forget about these relationships and what they mean.

In fact, I think that the current political moment calls for us as Indigenous nations to remind ourselves that we are citizens of our nations first. We may be American citizens, but our obligations and responsibilities are to our communities, our relatives, and to the lands that are important for our people. This may play into the 'othering' that settler colonialism is based on; yet this otherness has always been present: we are not of the settler colony, but we are of our own peoples who have had connections with the land from time immemorial. Trump does not speak for me just because I oppose his politics. He does not speak for me because my obligations and my responsibilities are not to him, but to my elders, to my fellow Anishinaabeg, and to the generations of Anishinaabeg who are yet to come. We may be placed in the 'frontier' in Trump's eyes, but we will not be conquered.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this paper as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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