

## Processes and Relationships

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I have been working in the field of Indigenous American history for a long time but have engaged with the concept of settler colonialism less readily than many of my peers. Initially I shared James H. Merrell's critique that confining settlers to colonists "makes European colonial thinking normative, denigrating and dismissing Native ways of ordering—and settling—the land," and "thereby rendering Indian territories *unsettled*, with all the errors of that default mode (as with *wilderness*)" (Merrell 2012, 473). As Jeremia Pelgrom and Clemens Six point out, moreover, settler colonialism as an approach tends "to overlook Indigenous agency and empowerment" (Pelgrom and Six, 2025).

The essays in *Settler Colonialism as a Structure?* have forced me to engage with the literature in this field, then, in ways that I have not done before. Patrick Wolfe's "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" appeared in 2006, after I had been a professor for twelve years, after I had written three books, and probably after I became a good bit set in my ways (Wolfe 2006). Funny thing is that I now see the parallels between my first book, *Dominion and Civility*, and Wolfe's "Settler Colonialism," which he published seven years after my book appeared.

Like Wolfe, I hoped to understand and explain the nature of the encounter between Indigenous peoples and European newcomers. I argued that English "metropolitans," the promoters of Anglo-American empire, struggled to control the frontier population, which contended with Indigenous peoples for access to and control of finite frontier resources which they used in incompatible ways. Out of that incompatibility came violence over control of the land and harsh, racist assessments of Indigenous peoples and culture. In resolving these crises in New England and the Chesapeake, metropolitans at the imperial center and in provincial headquarters tended to adopt the violent and virulent racism of the frontier as their own. The violence quickly became genocidal. Virginia Company of London officials who, for instance, had claimed in 1609 that "it is not the nature of men, but the education of men which makes them barbarous and uncivill, and therefore change the education of men and you will see that their natures will be greatly rectified and corrected," by 1622, after the Powhatan Chiefdom launched a devastating attack on their colony, had thrown the Powhatans off the Ark and referred to the Indians as "errors of nature/of inhumane birth/ the very dregs, garbage, and spanne of the earth" (quoted in Oberg, 1999). Their "savagery," it seemed, was irredeemable.



Settlers on the frontier wanted land, and they were willing to kill to obtain it. But even those metropolitans, who looked at Indigenous peoples and saw “sonnes of Adam, in whom there remain so many footsteps of God’s image,” believed that at best Indigenous peoples might become something else. They could become “civilized,” and “Christianized,” and serve the ends of an Anglo-American, Christian, New World Empire. In this sense, both the frontier and the metropolis looked forward, albeit in different ways, to “the elimination of the Native.” The “imperialism” that I described was not all that different from Wolfe’s “settler colonialism.”

I see value in drawing comparisons, across time and space, in the efforts of other metropolitans to settle other frontiers. These comparisons, I know, can be instructive. The Romans who interested Jeremia Pelgrom (2025) for instance, spoke in terms that the two Richard Hakluyts, the greatest promoters of Elizabethan empire, would have well understood. Jitse Daniels (2025) pointed out that Roman officials in the Greek East were well aware of their weakness on this frontier, a reality English imperial administrators confronted and with which they would easily have empathized.

Nonetheless, I consider myself a historian of Indigenous America, and looking back on *Dominion and Civility*, I feel that I spent too much time talking about Europeans, and not enough about the Indigenous peoples with whom they interacted. We need to look at these encounters, and as we do so, we must free ourselves from teleological assumptions premised on the ultimate triumph of the newcomers. Perhaps settler colonialism might be viewed less as a process and more as a set of relationships that varied across time and space based on the Europeans involved and the Indigenous peoples brought together in this colonial encounter. Neither Natives nor newcomers were monoliths. Settlers seldom spoke with one voice, as both Jitse Daniels and Mark Thompson point out. And more than the Europeans who composed the accounts on which we rely, an enormous number of Indigenous communities with different interests approached the newcomers. This is the point I have tried to show in my work on the Roanoke Ventures late in the sixteenth century (Oberg 2020). It is vital to understand the multitude of voices, native and newcomer, brought together along a variety of frontiers. We must look more closely at the Indigenous side of the encounter, and the cacophony of voices present there. How, for instance, did Indigenous peoples view the colonial forces against which they found themselves arrayed? What plans did they develop and nurture for incorporating European newcomers into their conceptual universe? Indigenous people, acting on norms and values about interacting with outsiders and transforming them into kin that long predated the arrival of Europeans, brought much indeed to the colonial encounter, something easy to see even in the fumbling attempts of English imperial officials who, in their quest to obtain Iroquois land in what became New York, found themselves passing across the “council fire” strings and belts of “wampum” as they spoke to their Indigenous “brothers” of “drying eyes,” “opening ears,” and “unstopping throats,” so that business could proceed (Oberg 2007a).



It is these relationships that interest me most. Focusing on these relationships allows us to see how Indigenous leaders like the seventeenth-century Mohegan Uncas used his knowledge and the power of the English to develop the Mohegans into a regional power. Uncas played as large a role in the formation of “colonial” New England as any of the Puritan “founding fathers” of the region. English explorers who arrived at Roanoke Island in 1585 came not as conquerors but as invited guests, settling where Algonquian wereoances on the Outer Banks placed them. The English at Roanoke could show great brutality. Their arrival brought significant disruption. But that their colonizing efforts failed owed less to their short-sightedness and bad luck than it did to the basic fact that Algonquian peoples on the Outer Banks no longer saw reason to tolerate their presence any longer (Oberg 2007b). And French Jesuits, who came to the center of the Iroquois League, Onondaga, in the middle of the 1600s may have thought that they were acting on opportunities opened by God’s providence to save savage peoples. In reality, they were hostages, serving Onondaga purposes. When the priests finally figured this out, they made secret plans to escape. They built a boat in the one place they knew the Onondagas would never look: the church that no Onondaga attended (Oberg 2026).

When we talk about settler colonialism, then, we risk talking too much about Europeans, their ideas, and their institutions, and too little about Indigenous peoples who exercised considerable power in the colonial encounter. European dreams smashed continually into American realities in ways that the newcomers seldom anticipated. Europeans intruded into an environment in which Indigenous peoples had found ways to meet their material and cultural needs in emotionally, spiritually, and physically satisfying ways. They had, over centuries, developed means to maintain a critical balance, with their neighbors, among themselves, and with the spiritual forces that ordered their cosmos. They had developed ways of living and systems of belief that allowed them to survive and comprehend their world in all its complexity. They did not live in isolation. They interacted with other communities, fighting with some and living in peace with others. They had devised culturally satisfying means for interacting and dealing with strangers and rendering unfamiliar people familiar. When Europeans arrived they found themselves, at least at the outset, surprised to be operating in a world governed by Indigenous rules. Reading European accounts too uncritically and uncarefully, I believe, makes it nearly impossible to explain Indigenous persistence.



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