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Cultural memory, white innocence, and United States territory: the 2022 *Urban Geography* plenary lecture

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore how hegemonic forms of cultural memory in the United States, specifically, National Historic Landmarks, represent white supremacy and colonization. National Historic Landmarks are a particular form of commemoration that, according to the National Park Service, “represent an outstanding aspect of American history and culture and embod[y] national significance.” We examined how such sites represent white supremacy and colonization, based on the nomination materials as well as fieldwork, especially in terms of territorial development. Through our analysis, we identified four primary forms of representation: erasure, valorization, multiculturalism, and acknowledgement. Erasure, valorization, and acknowledgement all constitute denial, albeit in distinct ways. Altogether, over 90% of all National Historic Landmarks denied white supremacy and colonization. I argue that such monumental denial is essential to reproducing white innocence; acknowledging the racial violence embedded in the territorial development of the United States would constitute a crisis for the white nation.

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Introduction

I would like to begin my talk with a land acknowledgement. I realize these are popular these days (Goeman, 2020), but much of my talk is about Native dispossession and how we deny it. Consequently, I want to call attention to the historicity of the land acknowledgement at this moment. The following is a combination of the University of Oregon’s land acknowledgement, which was written by Indigenous faculty, and my own words:

I come to you from Kalapuya Illihi – also known as Eugene Oregon. Kalapuya Illihi was home to the Kalapuya people before their land was taken by Euro-American settlers and they were forcibly relocated to the Pacific coast by white settlers using a range of strategies. This included the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act, in which Indigenous land was given to white settlers prior to treaties. Today, the Kalapuya are part of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians. They are active members of the community and remain caretakers of this land.

The fact that I begin with a land acknowledgement reflects the moment we are living in. As we all know, the United States' racial formation is undergoing profound changes. On the one hand, awareness of white supremacy and antiracism is widespread. On the other hand, we are living through the latest chapter of white backlash, which routinely ensues after meaningful movement towards racial justice. The current backlash can be seen in physical attacks against antiracist activists; anti LGBTQ legislation; efforts to restrict voting rights; the mainstreaming of white nationalism; and declaring war on Critical Race Theory (CRT), to name but a few. I want to touch briefly on CRT, as it is directly linked to white supremacy, cultural memory, and denial of current socio-political realities.

As of 17 March 2022, 39 states had introduced over 60 pieces of legislation that seek to curtail what teachers can say about racism (Schwartz, 2021).¹ At that time there were only eleven states, including Puerto Rico, where no such bills had been introduced. These bills vary in their scope, ambiguity, and provisions. For example, some require that teachers tell “both sides” of racial issues. Others require that no one is made to feel discomfort when discussing the racial past, and still others, such as in North Dakota, prohibit teachers from presenting racism as anything other than individual biases and preferences. Some are highly specific, including banning teachers from using the *New York Times*' “1619 Project” because it insists that slavery was fundamental to the United States. Collectively, such legislation seeks to deny the existence of structural racism (PEN America, 2022). Attacks on CRT reflect the Republican Party's default strategy of fomenting “cultural wars” to bolster support, its longstanding politics of grievance and resentment, and fears that whites will soon become a minority, known as “replacement theory.” Less understood, however, is that these attacks are about cultural memory. Hostility towards CRT is anchored in how we choose to remember the racial past and its implications for white innocence. As one report explained, “Shielding American history and society from negative moral judgements has been a major priority for lawmakers in 2022” (PEN America, 2022).

I confess, I never imagined that such ideas would be banned in the United States, but that was naivete on my part. Because even a cursory look at our history shows a deep investment in white innocence and a desire to preserve it at all costs. But this is exactly what CRT threatens to undermine: white innocence. I recall when Texas tried replacing “slaves” with “involuntary relocation” in its textbooks (Lopez, 2020). I thought this was a one-off. How wrong I was. Instead of seeing it as an opening salvo or a test strategy, I saw it was an isolated, extreme position. It has taken me awhile to awaken to the breadth, depth, power, and organization of efforts to deny histories of white supremacy and colonization. Eventually I did and I began my study of pervasive racism in the United States.

I would like to share some of that research with you today. In my talk I explore how United States cultural memory embeds and represents white supremacy and colonization through a powerful institutionalized instrument: National Historic Landmarks. First, I provide an overview of the contemporary public discourse around cultural memory, paying close attention to why these issues are so contentious. Second, I discuss white supremacy, denial, and white innocence, and why they are fundamental to the nation's cultural memory. Next, I will briefly discuss my research questions and methodology, and finally, I present some findings. I argue that the current mainstream cultural

memory in the United States is characterized by a monumental denial of everyday racism in order to produce white innocence, especially in terms of territorial development.

Public discourse around cultural memory

My understanding of cultural memory draws from Sturken (1997) who defines it as popular understandings of the past. Cultural memory is distinct from history, which presumably has some connection to facts and evidence, and it is different from individual memory, as it is collective. It is the shared nature of cultural memory which gives it power and significance. Though cultural memory has always been important, it has increasingly become a site of public contestation. Arguably, the current wave of struggle began with Bree Newsome, who climbed the South Carolina statehouse in 2015 and took down the Confederate flag, an act for which she was promptly arrested (Phillip, 2015).

While Newsome attracted significant public attention, which was the point, others have been quietly working on this topic for years. For example, the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Birmingham Alabama, seeks to document and memorialize all lynchings in the Southeast (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). This is an attempt to make visible the invisible. Likewise, Sandra de la Loza, a Los Angeles based artist, created “Operation Invisible Monument,” in which she installed monuments to Chicana/o/x history around the city, including counter narratives to the Mexican American War (De la Loza, 2011). These activists and artists know that how we remember the racial past matters. They force us to question who and what we choose to commemorate and why. What purposes does hegemonic commemoration serve? Who benefits? And how can we disrupt such forms of commemoration?

Historic commemoration is a powerful form of ideology. As Stuart Hall reminds us, “Ideology is a practice ... it is generated, produced and reproduced in specific settings” (1981/2021, p. 102).² Hall encourages us to think of the daily and mundane ways through which ideology operates. Not only does he insist on its historical and geographic specificity, but by framing ideology as a practice, he enables us to see and touch it, which in turn, facilitates efforts to challenge it.

Current public engagement around cultural memory is unprecedented because never before have the colonized and racially dominated pushed back so openly and with such power. A central issue animating popular resistance and debate is who is commemorated (Bright et al., 2020; Bronin, 2020; Monument Lab, 2021), and to a lesser extent, counter hegemonic forms of commemoration. Activists have challenged the commemoration of colonizers and enslavers by literally taking them down, what are called, “topplings” or by defacement (Inwood & Alderman, 2016; McFarland et al., 2019; Sheehan & Speights-Binet, 2019).³ While most attention focused on Confederate monuments, across the country statues to Christopher Columbus and other colonizers were painted red, decapitated and toppled (Diaz, 2020; Shalby, 2020). In Figure 1 activists celebrate the toppling of “Father Pioneer,” an icon of settler colonization, at the University of Oregon.

There are many reasons people oppose hegemonic commemoration. Some say that it is inappropriate to honor such individuals, that such statues make some feel unwelcome, they no longer reflect who we are as a country, or, that they are painful reminders of the past. All are legitimate reasons to oppose honoring colonizers and enslavers, but it is important to note the extent to which popular discourse centers emotions and can be



Figure 1. For years the Native Studies faculty and students requested that "Father Pioneer", a celebration of settler colonization, be removed. The University declined to do so. The first image (Photographer: Torsten Kjellstrand) depicts the Native Studies faculty posing in opposition to the "Father Pioneer" statue at the University of Oregon. The second image (Photographer: Katharine Carvelli) shows "Father Pioneer" toppled following the June 2020 protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

symbolic, rather than "challenging the foundational histories and geographies of racism" (Inwood & Alderman, 2016, p. 3).

Building on these sentiments, the Mellon Foundation has invested in public memory. "The Monuments Project" has adopted a two-pronged approach (Mellon Foundation, n.d.). First, it is spending millions in developing alternative commemorations focused on the local level. The Foundation invites artists and activists from around the country to submit their visions for alternative forms of cultural memory (Mellon Foundation, 2022). In addition, the Foundation funded a detailed study of United States commemorative practices through the Monument Lab. The Lab released an audit that analyzes monuments in terms of who and what we commemorate (Monument Lab, 2021).

The audit confirmed the extreme bias of United States monuments. The authors analyzed 50,000 monuments and found that the vast majority were dedicated to elite, white men. Specifically, it found that 75% were land owners and 50% owned enslaved persons. Among the top 50 people commemorated, there are two Black men: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Frederick Douglass, two Indigenous people: Sacagewea and Tecumseh, and three women: Joan of Arc, Harriet Tubman and Sacagewea. There are no Latinx or Asian people. The audit corroborates previous research that has documented the "whiteness" of United States commemorative landscapes, but at a national level (Alderman, 2012;

Bright et al., 2020; Bronin, 2020). The question of who we should commemorate is called, “just representation” (Bright et al., 2020). Just Representation argues that historic commemoration should reflect the histories, accomplishments, and contributions of all, not just a few.

Besides unjust representation, the Audit found that monuments distort history. For example, only one percent of Civil War monuments mentioned slavery (Monument Lab, 2021, p. 27). This finding validates previous research on the South regarding how slavery is represented (Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Eichstedt & Small, 2002; Hanna et al., 2022; Hanna & Hodder, 2015; Stone et al., 2016).

This last finding is of great interest to me. I am less concerned about who is commemorated than with the collective stories that landmarks tell, particularly in terms of territory. Collectively, these stories create a narrative or series of narratives depicting the historical geography and territorial development of the United States. If we think of territorial development as a relational process (Painter, 2010), it is clear that white supremacy and colonization are embedded in all historic sites. I argue that by distorting history, hegemonic commemorative practices routinely erase or deny such processes to preserve white innocence.

White supremacy, denial and innocence

I define white supremacy as a set of attitudes, values, and practices emanating from the idea and practice that white people and Europe are of greater value than people and places deemed nonwhite and nonEuropean and are entitled to a great share of society’s power and resources. Note, I do not suggest that whites are posited as superior to Native and people of color. While many certainly do embrace that idea, far more pervasive is the unspoken but acted upon belief that whites are of greater value (Cacho, 2011). I choose to focus on value because not only is it the minimum threshold required to create and maintain a racially unjust landscape, but it reminds us that racism is an ideology rooted in power with material consequences. It is an enabling logic that facilitates material processes such as colonization, settler colonization, slavery, empire, state-formation, and nation-building. Consequently, it is because whiteness is considered to be of greater value that the needs and desires of those associated with whiteness routinely take precedence over those identified as Native, Black, Latina/o/x, Asian or other racial categories.

White supremacy is a spatial process that was fundamental to the creation of the United States. There is simply no way to understand the territorial development of the country outside of white supremacy. While this obviously applies to Indigenous dispossession, it is also manifest in the development and expansion of slavery, the conquest of Mexico, settlement of the Oregon Territory, the take-over of Hawai’i, and so on. Though white supremacy is routinely erased in historic commemoration, it is simply not possible to believe that countless peoples and nations willingly gave up their land, liberty, and life so that the United States could achieve its current geographical configuration.

I do not wish to collapse settler colonization with other processes of racial domination (Byrd, 2011) but I do wish to highlight the role of white supremacy in early colonization and dispossession (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). White supremacy is a common denominator among various processes of dehumanization fundamental to the creation of the

United States territory, nation, and state. I am interested in how we narrate these processes. In his historical geography of the United States, Meinig (1986/1993/1998) conceptualized territorial development as a series of regional projects. I agree with his approach, but instead I frame territorial development as a series of regional racial and colonial projects, which, in turn, we create elaborate stories to justify. We are master storytellers.

Scholars of settler memory have argued that settlers must not only explain away Indigenous people and dispossession, but they must rationalize and affirm their presence in the new land (Barker, 2018; Bruyneel, 2021; O'Brien, 2010). Consequently, "fantasy is central to settler colonization ... 'American Exceptionalism' and 'Manifest Destiny' are both fantasies that drove US settlement. In attempting to carry out their fantasies and realize their dreams, settler colonials perceived their action as the performance of good works" (Hixson, 2013, p. 21). But the United States is not only a settler state, it has been forged through multiple forms of white supremacy. Thus, there is ample evidence of fantasy, as seen in the fact that one percent of Civil War monuments mention slavery. But the question remains, why? The answer is white innocence.

Inwood defines white innocence as the practice of "deny[ing] the fundamental role racism has played and continues to play in the U.S. settler state" (2018, p. 4). He insists that interrogating white innocence goes beyond documenting denial, and requires examining the very categories of white and whiteness as historical processes themselves. Of course, whiteness is not about skin color, but rather, a series of power relations, structures, and ideologies that we have created. Arguably, the concept of white innocence has been most developed in the context of settler colonization. Tuck and Yang suggest that settlers desire innocence as "relief in the face of the relentlessness of settler guilt and haunting" (2012, p. 3). In the case of United States cultural memory, we must distinguish between guilt and haunting, as they denote slightly differing levels of awareness and consciousness. Guilt entails some level of discomfort due to a moral transgression. The discomfort prompts an awareness, although this awareness can range considerably. In the United States there has been occasional guilt associated with past racial violence, as with slavery. Our data found that the nation, however begrudgingly and belatedly, increasingly acknowledges that slavery existed and was wrong. This is not always a cut and dry process. For example, Sheehan and Speights-Binet (2019) found that white fragility, that is, whites' resistance to engaging in uncomfortable racial issues, presented a major obstacle to the timely removal of Confederate statues.

Haunting, in contrast, encompasses a spectrum of awareness levels, including the unconsciousness. Gordon defines haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (Gordon, 2011, p. 2). Haunting allows for a presence, even if the wrong is not acknowledged. This, in fact, characterizes settler memory in the United States. According to our data, the nation is far less apt to even recognize settler colonization, hence, there is nothing to feel guilty about. O'Brien's (2010) study of cultural memory in the Northeast, for example, identified numerous ways in which white settlers narrate Indigenous extinction. Specifically, she identified firsting, lasting, and replacement, as narrative strategies to explain how this land became the United States. The level of denial is so deep and pervasive that guilt does not even surface.

White innocence is fundamental to routine thought and practice the United States (Inwood, 2018), specifically, the white nation. Drawing on both Anderson (1983) and

Thobani (2007), I define the white nation as an imagined, sovereign political community in which white people and whiteness are centered for entitlement. Because whiteness is a hierarchical, genocidal and exclusionary category, the white nation requires the erasure and management of past racial violence in order to maintain the nation's moral legitimacy. This requires the cultivation and maintenance of white innocence on a grand scale. This is the work of hegemonic cultural memory. To understand how the nation and state have curated the racial past, I explore how white supremacy and colonization are represented through National Historic Landmarks. I argue that one of their functions to preserve white innocence.

Research questions and methodology

In the United States, the National Park Service (NPS) manages all federal historic sites. This includes the National Register of Historic Places, National Monuments, Historic Parks, and National Historic Landmarks. Thus, landmarks are a particular kind of historic site that “represent an outstanding aspect of American history and culture” (National Park Service [NPS], 2022a). To achieve landmark status, an individual or organization must nominate a site and demonstrate the site's significance in terms of designated criteria. This is not an easy process and can take years of hard work, resources, and money. Sometimes, costly historic or archaeological surveys are required. But landmark designation opens the door to other forms of preservation support and opportunities, including state and Federal funding. Currently, there are approximately 2600 National Historic Landmarks, most of which are listed on the NPS's website.⁴ The location of approximately 300 landmarks is not disclosed because of their sensitive nature. They are mostly Native archaeological sites, which have been the sites of plunder, and military sites. These have been excluded from the analysis.

In this project I ask the following questions: (1) What forms of white supremacy are inherent in the places/events commemorated by National Landmarks? (2) How are various forms of white supremacy represented? (3) Collectively, how do they narrate the founding, development and expansion of the United States? What is the role of white innocence in this process?

To answer these questions we mapped (see [Figure 2](#)) and created a database of all 2300 publicly available landmarks.⁵ We coded all landmarks based on the nomination materials available on the NPS website. We coded for two separate processes: First, what forms of white supremacy were embedded in the place, event, or person commemorated? Was it slavery, state-formation, nation-building, racial capitalism, colonization, or settler colonization? Second, we coded the sites in terms of how such processes were represented. Was there simple erasure? Valorization? A multicultural framing, or genuine acknowledgement? In addition to analyzing the archive, we conducted selective fieldwork across the country. We chose sites based on diversity: geographic, temporal, forms of white supremacy and modes of representation. Fieldwork included studying the landscape, exhibits, tours, docents, and literature to document how the racial past is narrated.

As mentioned, we identified four ways in which white supremacy could be represented: Erasure, valorization, multiculturalism or acknowledgement. I elaborate on each below, but I want to emphasize that, except for acknowledgement, the other

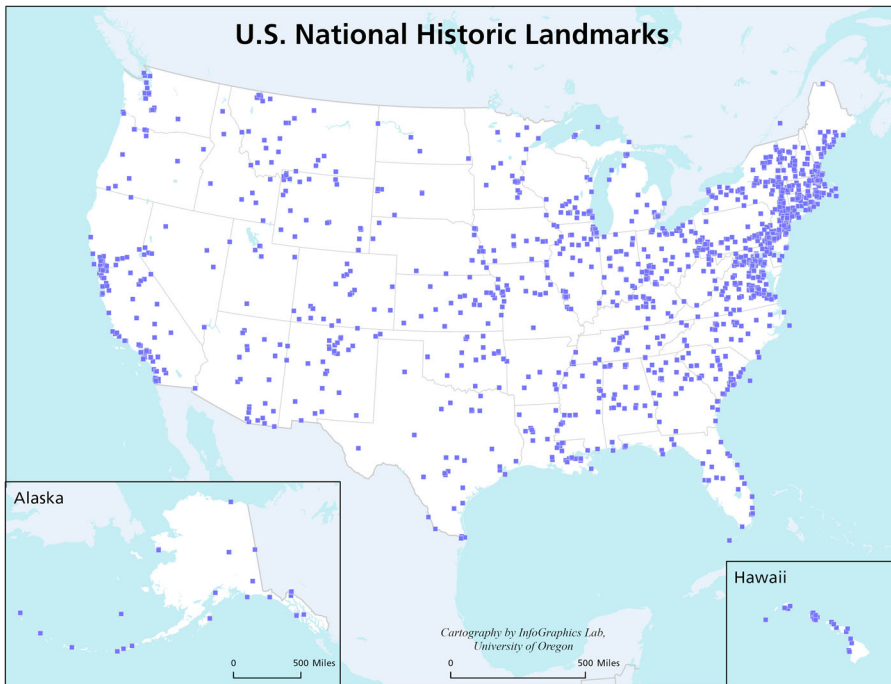


Figure 2. Distribution of U.S. National Historic Landmarks. Source: InfoGraphics Lab, University of Oregon.

three are all forms of denial. They constitute denial because they do not acknowledge the truth. To qualify as acknowledgement, the archival record needed one sentence that admitted white supremacy. The sentence could be very site-specific, such as confirming that Japanese American Internment Camps were motivated by racism, or it could be more general, perhaps noting that African Americans experienced racial inequality and discrimination. Despite this low threshold, only 7.6% of all landmarks acknowledged white supremacy and colonization (Figure 3).

Let us look more closely at the different forms of denial. As seen in Figure 3, just over 80% fall into the “erasure” category. Erasure is defined as complete silence on anything related to race, colonization, or even Indigenous people and people of color. They are simply never mentioned, not even in one sentence. There is no acknowledgement of whose land this once was, of the struggles to make it part of the United States, or of the exclusionary, exploitive or extractive practices associated with the place’s history and its larger geography. It is as if the site was part of a “nonracial” historical geography.

What do they talk about instead? In addition to our own coding of the data, we analyzed landmarks according to how the NPS categorized them in the nomination materials. Based on this analysis, half of all sites are designated as landmarks because of their architecture (47%). Fifteen percent are related to military history. It is difficult to overstate the nation’s obsession with architecture (Carlson, 1980). Though I fully support historic preservation, I conclude that a fixation on architecture helps to avoid the racial past. Architecture provides a “safe” way to preserve the past without rupturing white innocence. Indeed, the stated objectives of Daughters of the American Revolution,

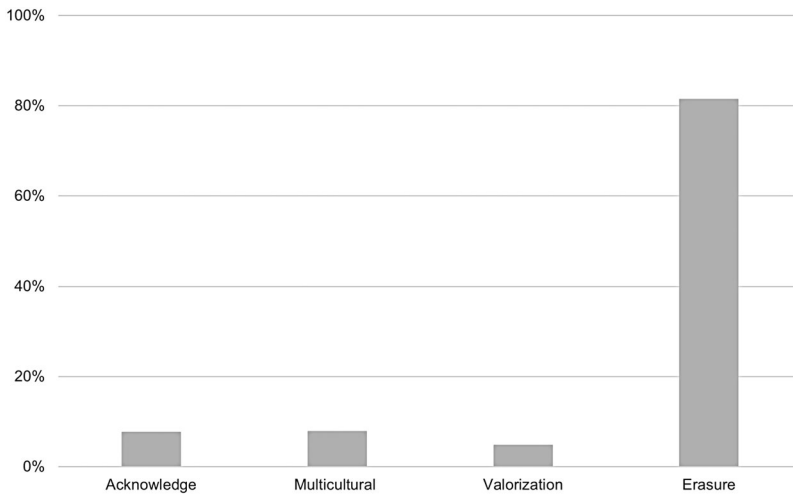


Figure 3. Distribution of forms of representation among National Historic Landmarks. Eighty percent of all National Historic Landmarks are sites of erasure. Erasure, valorization and multiculturalism are all forms of denial. Source: Sophia Ford.

a leading force in preservation, is, “historic preservation, education, patriotism” (Daughters of American Revolution, 2023). In contrast, based on the nomination forms, only eight percent of sites pertain to Black, Indigenous, or people of color. There is no designation related to “racism,” although in the past “settlement and colonization” was a category.⁶

Given that 92% of all landmarks are sites of erasure, what are we to make of such silences? Sturken (1997) has argued that such practices reflect a systematic forgetting. But this erasure is on such a grand scale that “forgetting” does not capture reality. I believe the more appropriate term is denial – on a staggering scale. Cohen defines denial as “assertions that something did not happen, did not exist, is not true, or is not known” (2001, p. 3). People typically engage in denial when the truth is too disturbing or threatening to be accepted. Norgaard (2019) writing about climate change, argues that denial should be understood as existing along a spectrum. In this case, erasure, valorization, and multiculturalism are all distinct forms of denial.

Erasure, as noted, is simply complete avoidance. In contrast, valorization glorifies or embraces white supremacy, colonization, or even the denial itself. Multiculturalism is also a form of denial. Such landmarks mention various nonwhite and Indigenous people, but deny systematic forms of racism and colonization. This is where my work is distinct from those that advocate for just representation.

Consider Sacagawea. Most commemorations of Sacagawea celebrate her contributions to building the nation and territory. She was a key figure in Lewis and Clark’s expedition of westward expansion, dubbed the Corps of Discovery by President Jefferson. Sacagawea, translated, was a guide, identified food sources, and literally saved their lives on multiple occasions. She is commemorated because she “contributed” to the United States’ territorial expansion. Never is the dispossession of her people, the Shoshone, mentioned. This, despite the fact that Shoshone Land (what is now Idaho) became part of the Oregon

Territory in 1848. Are we really to believe that Sacagawea wanted her people dispossessed of their land?

Or consider the image in [Figure 4](#). This is a common scene throughout the West: Indians as “friend to the pioneer.” This image was taken in Port Townsend, Washington. There is no denying that many Native people were friends to the pioneers and helped them on countless occasions. Indeed, one could argue that the pioneers’ success was partly dependent on the goodwill of Native peoples. But this is a partial truth masquerading as the whole story. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz reminds us, “People do not hand over their land, resources, children, and futures without a fight, and that fight is met with violence” (2014, p. 9).

The final category of representation is Acknowledgement. These are sites that affirm the racial past in some way, however modest, even if they seek to sanitize violent and deadly processes. Such landmarks challenge the white nation and its innocence by naming massacres, slavery, dispossession, incarceration, racial discrimination, and other forms of racial injustice.



Figure 4. ‘Chief Chetzemoka, Friend of the Pioneer’ Port Townsend, Washington, 2021. Indigenous people are often framed as “friends” throughout the West. Such a framing is a form of settler memory. Source: Photo by Audrey Mandelbaum.

This is a vast landscape of denial and cannot be construed as accidental. It represents a systemic effort to sustain white innocence in order to avoid a racial reckoning – which would produce a crisis for the white nation. But systemic does not mean deliberate or fully conscious. It is systemic because it emerges from the hegemonic nature of white supremacy and settler colonization. But because it reflects “common sense” understandings of the racial past, it encompasses multiple levels of awareness.

White supremacy is less hegemonic than in the past, as there is far more awareness and vibrant movements for racial justice. Indeed, it is because of real and imagined racial progress that we are experiencing a white backlash once again. This current wave goes back to at least the Tea Party, which arose in response to the election of President Obama and has been intensified by the Trump era (Inwood, 2019; 2015). Such events, coupled with direct challenges to white innocence like the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones et al., 2019) and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, have led to “white rage” (Anderson, 2016). Crucial to white rage is a denial of the denial. In other words, the white nation denies that it is denying a history of racial violence. But the landscape is a powerful form of evidence which suggests otherwise. In the words of Pierce Lewis, “landscape is our unwitting autobiography” (1979, p. 1).

Representing white supremacy and colonization in national landmarks

Erasure

I would now like to present some examples of how white supremacy and colonization are represented by National Landmarks. I start with erasure because it is the most common form of representation. Figure 5 is the Assay Office in Boise Idaho (#66000305). There were numerous gold and silver rushes in the West throughout the nineteenth century. Rushes were powerful and multifaceted processes. Mining created wealth for some, spawned new industries, and brought settlers into contested territories. It also created ecological devastation on Indigenous lands, and in places like northern California, triggered genocide (Madley, 2016). This building is where miners brought the rocks, metals and minerals they had extracted from the earth and converted them into cash. It now houses Idaho’s historic preservation program. The plaque on the building reads: “This is the Old U.S. Assay Office. Built in 1870–1871 and said to have received more than 75,000,000 Dollars in Gold and Silver Through its Doors.”

Consider the implications of Idaho mining for the development of racial capitalism, including the transformation of nature into capital and the taking of Indigenous lands for mining and settlement. The nomination states, “the building is a symbol of the importance of mining in the political, social, economic and legal development of Idaho and the Far West, and also bears testimony to Federal encouragement of mining in that territory” (Higgins Schoer & Snell, 1976). Despite recognizing the role of the Federal government, settler colonization is never mentioned.

Instead, there is an exhibit on sandstone, an abundant building material in Idaho. While certainly an important example of settler material culture, the sandstone exhibit suggests the lengths the nation will go to avoid acknowledging colonization. This is denial as erasure.



Figure 5. Assay Building, Boise Idaho. The Assay Building is a form of erasure. Neither the nomination materials nor the site contain a single sentence regarding settler colonization. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Valorization

The next category I consider is valorization, which is epitomized by The Alamo Mission (#66000808). The Alamo, as it is known, commemorates a battle in which Texans fought Mexico to achieve independence. Though seen as the cornerstone of Texas history, The Alamo's significance extends far beyond the Lone Star state. Indeed, The Alamo should be seen as an opening volley in the Mexican American War (1846–1848), in which the United States acquired half of Mexico's territory.

The battle illustrates one way in which settler colonization operates. In this instance, settlers moved to Mexico and became Mexican citizens. In exchange for land, they were required to learn Spanish, convert to Catholicism, and obey Mexican laws. However, they soon chafed at Mexican laws and restrictions, especially Mexico's ban on slavery, and decided they wanted independence (Burrough et al., 2021). No sooner did they get it (1836) that they sought to rejoin the white nation. Thus, the war for Texas Independence is not a case of the state or military taking Mexican land – that happens in the Mexican American War. The Alamo illustrates settlers leading the process of territorial expansion (Wilm, 2018).

Of course, Texans lost the battle of The Alamo. So how does a site of loss become valorized? First, by erasing the true reasons for the battle. Even today, Texas legislators seek to downplay the role of slavery in The Alamo and anti-Mexican violence (Romero, 2021). The Alamo is framed as a shrine devoted to “freedom” and “Liberty.” One of the plaques reads: “Between February 23 and March 6, 1836, gallant Texans, greatly outnumbered by General Santa Anna's Army defended the sprawling compound



Figure 6. Visitors at The Alamo. The Alamo is an example of a site of valorization. The couple in the photo are Latina/o/x, demonstrating the wide appeal of The Alamo. Source: Tianna Bruno.

to the death. The Battle of the Alamo stands as a symbol of freedom throughout the world.” But given the desire for slavery, we must ask, freedom for whom?

Second, the site has a split personality. Inside, it is a sacred shrine. The defeat is treated as a sacred and hallowed event. Similar to how southerners framed defeat as honorable through the Lost Cause (Blight, 2001), the suffering and loss of The Alamo are vehicles for the purification of the cause and the “defenders” (see Rose, 2006). In contrast, on the outside, there is a celebratory atmosphere as seen in Figure 6. By creating two distinct environments, The Alamo is a fun place to celebrate Texas history while also being a revered site.

Multicultural

The next category of denial is multiculturalism. To qualify as multicultural, sites simply had to mention an Indigenous person or a person of color. Less than eight percent fell into this category. Mount Independence (#71000079) in Vermont commemorates a battle in the Revolutionary War (Figure 7). Located on Lake Champlain, British forces were entering from Canada into Vermont territory. Few know that Vermont, like Texas, was its own republic before joining the colonies. A key battle was fought here in 1776 which bought colonists critical time to mount a powerful counter-attack. The



Figure 7. Mount Independence, Vermont. Mount Independence is an example of a multicultural site. The site commemorates a battle along Lake Champlain, thus, the visitor center is intended to replicate a boat. Source: Author's photograph.

site now includes a museum, picnic areas and several trails with exhibits along a walking path. Indigenous peoples were mentioned in several exhibits. One reads:

Even before the American army straggled onto Mount Independence in July 1776, people had left their mark on the land here. For thousands of years Native Americans made tools out of chert, a black fine-grained stone in numerous outcroppings on the Mount and traces of their industry may still be seen on the ground. Revolutionary War soldiers appear to have discovered and been fascinated by this ancient past; archaeologists have found projectile points in some of the soldiers' hut sites.

Here, Native peoples are cast as firmly in the “ancient” past. Such an historical framing precludes any need to explain displacement and how this land became part of the United States.

Nevertheless, I asked a worker about the Indigenous peoples of the area, the Abenaki. They responded, “Well there weren't any as far as we know. The Indians passed by this area but there were no permanent villages here.” This was a common response I heard throughout the country: “There were no Indians in this area.” This is denial by spatial containment (Pulido, 2017; Inwood, 2018, p. 5). It concedes that Indians may have existed in some places, but not in this exact location. The worker's statement is a form of settler memory predicated on two ideas: First, it overlooks the fact that Native peoples used large areas of land in different ways depending on the season. While no single person or tribe may have “owned” the land, Native nations had developed complex social relations around land use. The worker's understanding of land ownership and use is rooted in the colonial idea that only privately owned land is legitimate (Bhandar, 2018). Second, and relatedly, this legal violence is compounded by the belief

that only Native settlements recognized by archaeologists or that exist in the English language archive are legitimate. As Logan (2014) observes, states refuse to see histories of settler colonization that exist in oral traditions and the bodies and lands of indigenous peoples. Engaging in spatial containment is a convenient way of denying processes of displacement.

Contestation

The next form of representation I discuss is contestation, which is not one of the four primary forms of racism embedded in commemoration. Contestation occurs when people challenge hegemonic narratives and can be associated with any site of denial, whether erasure, valorization, or multiculturalism. Contestation does not exist in the archive, but typically develops after landmark designation. Iolani Palace (#66000293) in Honolulu is a multicultural landmark that Native Hawaiians, people of color, and others have actively resisted. Iolani Palace is where the United States staged a coup and illegally conquered Hawai'i in 1893 (Figure 8). The United States wanted the islands for several reasons, including for military operations in the Pacific. Queen Liliuokalani, who enjoyed widespread support, was forced to abdicate. The United States took over in 1898 and in 1900 passed the Organic Act, which made Hawai'i its territory. Interestingly, soon after the invasion, President Cleveland acknowledged that it was an illegal act. And one hundred years later, President Clinton apologized for the overthrow, but of course, this did nothing to change island's status.

Despite this formal recognition, the Palace museum focuses overwhelmingly on furniture, fashion, and architecture. While it is acknowledged that the Queen was



Figure 8. Iolani Palace, Honolulu. Iolani Palace is a contested site. Tourists visiting the Palace watch Mai Poina's Performance of the "The Annexation Debate". Source: Author's photograph.

overthrown, we never learn why and the larger significance of the event. In response, on the 50th anniversary of Hawai’ian statehood, a group called, Mai Poina, decided to challenge such representations. Activists created a performance depicting four days in Hawai’ian history called, “The Annexation Debate” (Figure 9). The play, which takes place on the exterior grounds of the Palace, tells the story of the coup from Hawai’ian perspectives in six scenes. Each scene is performed by one or two actors, including some professionals. Scenes include a Japanese cane worker who was exploited by American plantation growers, a Greek merchant, and Chinese voters, among others. Mai Poina makes explicit how the United States changed the electorate by requiring English literacy to vote, thereby disenfranchising Chinese and others residents. The performers also offer a detailed discussion of the Bayonet Constitution, so named because it was forced on the Hawai’ians upon the threat of violence.

This is a wonderful example of “speaking back” to the white innocence embedded in imperialist expansion. While uncommon among National Landmarks, such forms of commemoration are growing throughout the country.

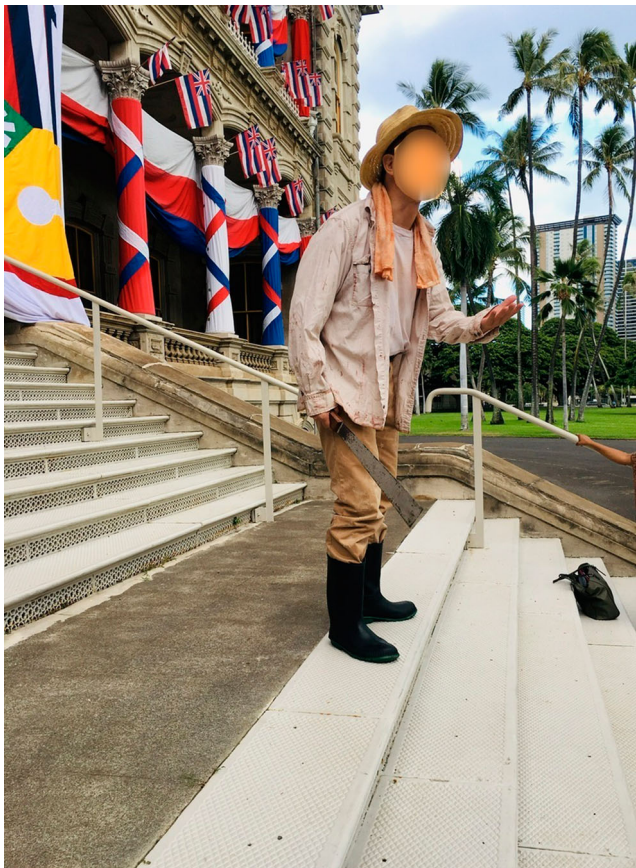


Figure 9. Mai Poina Performance at Iolani Palace, Honolulu. Actor depicting Japanese cane worker. Source: Author’s photograph.

Acknowledgement

The final form of representation is acknowledgement. Recall that less than eight percent of sites qualified as such. As with all categories, there is tremendous variation within each, so I will discuss several. The first one is from Sitka, Alaska. Based on the archive, Castle Hill (Figure 10) does not qualify as a site of acknowledgement, but the narration at the site does and illustrates an important commemorative dynamic, which I elaborate on below. Alaska is distinct from the nation's prevailing cultural memory as multiculturalism is widespread and there are several sites of acknowledgement. This may be due to the recent nature of colonization, as well as a strong Native Alaskan presence and their palpable political power.

Castle Hill, also known as the American Flag Raising Site or Baranov Castle, is an outcropping in the Sitka Harbor and was previously the site of four principal houses of the Kiksadi clan of the Tlingits (Hanable, 1975). Castle Hill is where the Russians transferred ownership of Alaska to the United States. According to the nomination, "... the American Flag Raising Site is perhaps the most nationally important historical property in Alaska. The events of October 18, 1867, marked the Nation's first expansion into non-contiguous territory" (Hanable, 1975).

Russians arrived in Alaska in the 1730s, eager to expand the fur trade and expand their empire. However, by the 1850s they decided it was both too much to manage and an administrative liability. Russia offered to it the United States, who bought it in 1867 for \$7.2 million, in what is known as Seward's Folly. It was so named because few could see the value in acquiring over half a million square miles of frozen land. It is important to contextualize the purchase of Alaska in light of other instances of



Figure 10. Castle Hill, overlooking Sitka Harbor. Castle Hill is a site of acknowledgement because it questions the right of empires to usurp Indigenous sovereignty. This is where Russia transferred Alaska to the United States. Source: Author's photograph.

expansion, namely, the Mexican American War (1846–1848). Clearly, the United States was intent on adding millions of acres in the West and beyond. While much of the public debate regarding Seward’s Folly centers on if it was an economically wise decision, little is said about Native Alaskans. At Castle Hill, there are a series of plaques detailing the history of the site. Several plaques discuss the Tlingit, including one that states: “In 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the United States – but was Alaska their’s to sell? The original inhabitants of the land were plunged into a new era with the stroke of a pen.”

This is an example of the low threshold required to qualify for acknowledgement – one sentence. It may not seem like much, but the mere fact that Castle Hill questions the presumed rights of empires to usurp Native sovereignty and territory differs significantly from the prevailing erasure of the larger United States. A strong Native presence plus the history of Russian colonization may facilitate such acknowledgement, since the United States was not the first to colonize the region. As such, Russian colonization may provide a buffer of sorts, which functions to protect United States white innocence.

Cultural memory in transition

What about the temporal shifts in cultural memory? Historic commemoration has changed significantly over the decades (National Park Service, 2022b). Because most sites are older, they reflect earlier ideas about public memory as well as white supremacy and colonization (see also Bronin, 2020). Recent landmarks, such as Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, tell a different story. But because the adoption of new landmarks is a slow process, our data is heavily weighted to the past.

One place where these shifts have been most pronounced is plantation museums. Though several National Landmark plantations foreground slavery and the lives of the enslaved, such as the Whitney in Louisiana, all plantations struggle with the racial past (Modlin et al., 2018). Consequently, there are multiple efforts underway to grapple with white supremacy and racial violence. One landmark that does so is Middleton Place Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina (#71000770). For many years Charleston was a leading site of the slave trade. Approximately forty percent of all enslaved persons who entered the United States came through its harbor. Prior to the cotton boom in the Deep South, hundreds of thousands of people toiled in the rice fields of the Piedmont region. Both rice and the slave trade made Charleston one of the wealthiest cities in North America. Moreover, it was pivotal in upholding slavery, as South Carolina was the first state to secede (1860).

There are several ways to view slavery as a territorial process. First, Native land was taken to pave the way for settlers and plantation crops. It was typically slave labor who converted “raw land” into fields. But the desire to expand slavery was also essential in driving westward expansion. Slavery, like all forms of capitalism, required continual growth and expansion. The South knew that without westward expansion, their economic system was in peril.

The Middletons were a tremendously wealthy family. They had 19 plantations and owned over 3600 human beings. Middleton Place became a National Landmark in 1972 because of its landscaped gardens, which are said to be the oldest in the country. Middleton opened as a plantation museum in the 1960s, but only recently began discussing slavery. In 2000 at one of its “Descendants Gatherings,” Black people showed up for

the first time, including an African American history professor. Black descendants pushed the Foundation and family to consider the role of slavery at Middleton and staff have invested tremendous time and energy researching it.

Figure 11 is “Eliza’s House” and is the heart of the slavery exhibit. Although not an actual slave cabin, it was built in 1870 and replicates one. The slave exhibit at Eliza’s House is an attempt to acknowledge slavery, but it does so in a limited way. Middleton frames the past thru a strong labor narrative, but in its sanitized version of slavery, there is no violence, terror, rape, or family separation.

Middleton develops a labor narrative in several ways. First, it acknowledges the humanity of enslaved persons by consistently giving their names and positions, culled from the ledgers. All exhibits related to labor feature text such as, “Toby worked at the Blacksmith Shop.” Middleton has recreated work areas, so tourists can see, for example, how textiles, pottery, and baked goods, were made. To further emphasize the humanity of the enslaved, a large plaque in Eliza’s House lists all known persons owned by the Middleton family.

The second way in which a labor narrative is forged is by reminding us that the enslaved produced the wealth of South Carolina’s planter class. We hear repeatedly that enslaved workers built the structures, grew the crops, were hired-out, and tended children. Emphasizing who creates the wealth is invaluable. Making visible such power dynamics should be a key goal of all historic commemoration.

The third component of the labor narrative is a continual emphasis on the skills and knowledge of enslaved workers, especially in terms of rice cultivation. Carney (2001) pointed out long ago that planters sought enslaved persons from West Africa, Senegambia, and the Gold Coast precisely because of their knowledge of rice culture. We hear this



Figure 11. Middleton Place Plantation, Charleston South Carolina. Eliza’s House’ is the heart of the slave exhibit. Source: Author’s photograph.

repeatedly – it wasn't just backbreaking labor, but the skills and knowledge of enslaved persons that created this landscape. At one point, a docent at Eliza's House was discussing slave labor and used the words, "economic contributions." Upon hearing this, one visitor replied, "Well, doesn't 'contribution' imply some kind of willingness?"

And that is exactly what we never hear about. There is no mention of the constellation of power and violence associated with unfree labor, or of the ongoing racial violence in the post-bellum era. We never hear about lynchings, the KKK, or Jim Crow. Instead, we hear about the many skills and contributions of enslaved persons.

Middleton attests to genuine progress in acknowledging slavery. Its exhibits and tours would be unimaginable even 40 years ago. Yet, it still strives to preserve white innocence. Slavery is represented as an exploitive labor system, but not a violent one. Physical violence is entirely absent. One exhibit states that over the lifetime of the plantation, which included seven generations, only four slaves were known to have escaped. While this finding was based on ads for runaways, it also implies that Middleton was a benevolent plantation. Likewise, there is no mention of enslaved families being broken up. Clint Smith, in *How the Word is Passed*, observes that white visitors at plantations consistently ask, "weren't there any good slave owners?" (2021, p. 20; see also Hanna et al., 2022). This desire to redeem the moral integrity of slave owners is apparent at Middleton Place by erasing the most egregious elements of slavery.

I would like to conclude with one final landmark. Stono Rebellion (#74001840) is similar to Middleton in that it is a site of acknowledgement and also located in the Charleston area, yet it is radically different. While Middleton is one of the most developed National Landmarks, Stono Rebellion is one of the most minimal (Figure 12). There are likely several reasons for this, including money, sponsorship, and professional staff, but the Stono Rebellion also recalls events which directly challenge white innocence.

Stono Rebellion commemorates the largest slave revolt in British North America (1739). A group of enslaved persons sought to escape Carolina for freedom in Spanish Florida. Along the way they killed twenty white people. In response, whites pursued them and killed almost forty Black people. What is significant about this story is that enslaved people sought to escape conditions that they considered unbearable, even at the risk of death. In addition, the escapees actually killed white people. Whites were killed because they were obstacles to their escape and because of the rage that was felt towards their white oppressors and the institution of slavery. In response, whites went on a rampage seeking revenge and hoping to quell future rebellions. The end result was even harsher slave codes in the Carolinas. The Stono Rebellion makes abundantly clear that slavery was a brutal, violent system. This alternative narrative is in direct contrast to Middleton's version of slavery.

Is it coincidental that the Stono Rebellion consists merely of a marker along the highway, while Middleton Place is an elaborate plantation museum, complete with a foundation, docents, performers, and restaurant? Stono Rebellion became a National Landmark in 1974 and was nominated by the South Carolina Sea Island Farmer Co-operative, a Black owned enterprise that was created in 1969. The actual nomination form was prepared by the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation (Greenlee, n.d.). In discussing the significance of the site, the nomination states: "A false picture of life in colonial America would show masters and slaves living in perfect harmony. Yet, that is the impression many Americans have. Blacks were not so supine as to submit to enslavement without



Figure 12. The Stono Rebellion, South Carolina. Stono Rebellion is a site of acknowledgement. It offers an honest account of slavery and has not been developed like other sites. The landmark is situated along Savanna Highway in Rantowles. Source: Author’s photograph.

resistance. Colonists lived in fear of slave revolts and often had to suppress plots and uprisings.” The archive indicates that the landmark was a clear effort to foreground Black history and to radically shift hegemonic narratives of slavery. The contrast between the two landmarks speaks volumes about United States cultural memory and white innocence.

Conclusion

In closing, I have tried to show the breadth and depth of denial in the United States’s hegemonic cultural memory through an analysis of National Historic Landmarks. Specifically, I have identified four ways in which white supremacy and colonization are represented, including erasure, multiculturalism, valorization, and acknowledgement. While there is diversity and heterogeneity in each category, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that National Landmarks’ designation and narrative constitute monumental denial. Despite recent progress, we struggle enormously to tell the full racial and colonial history of the United States, especially in terms of its territorial formation. My hope is that by illuminating the denial, we can refute the “denial of the denial” which animates the right. This is no easy task as the white nation’s investment in a racialized innocence is pervasive and fierce. Though the nation’s attachment to white innocence is an obstacle to a genuine and meaningful racial reckoning, the very fact that we are experiencing such a pronounced a push-back, indicates that progress is being made.

Notes

1. For updates and analysis of CRT bans, see UCLA’s Law School, “CRT Forward Tracking Project” <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/> (accessed 10 July 2022). For a legal analysis of

trends, see PEN America (2022); on challenging CRT bans, see the Association of American University Professors' "Educational Gag Orders" https://www.aaup.org/issues/educational-gag-orders-legislative-interference-teaching-about-race?link_id=1&can_id=b35649a5f259820bfba2f7069f7abb7a&source=email-update-on-educational-gag-orders&email_referrer=email_1526878&email_subject=update-on-educational-gag-orders (accessed 12 January 2022).

2. I am grateful to Magie Ramirez for this citation.
3. See Wikimedia lists, "Monuments Removed During the George Floyd Protests" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_monuments_and_memorials_removed_during_the_George_Floyd_protests and "Removals of Confederate Monuments and Memorials" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Removal_of_Confederate_monuments_and_memorials.
4. At the time of this writing the NPS only lists the landmarks by state, but does not easily make available the nomination materials and addresses. This requires that you search by individual landmark.
5. The research team included: Sophia Ford, Tianna Bruno, Carla Macal-Montenegro, Cristina Faiver-Serna, Cheyenne Holliday, and Aakash Upraity.
6. In the 2010s the NPS began curating and encouraging sites pertaining to non-Black people of color, women, and LGBTQ history. NPS began focusing on African American history earlier (NPS, 2022b; for a full historic overview, see NPS, 2022c).

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