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The Role of Linguistic Weaponisation in the Establishment of Settler Colonial States

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Authors

Jessica Louise Hall

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Editors

Stefanie Kunze: Stefanie.Kunze@nau.edu

Ibrahim Berrada: Ibrahim.Berrada@nau.edu

Correspondence

The NORPAK Review
Department of Sociology
Northern Arizona University
5 E McConnell Dr.
Flagstaff, AZ 86011
NORPAK@nau.edu

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The Language of Conquest: The Role of Linguistic Weaponisation in the Establishment of Settler Colonial States

Jessica Louise Hall*

Abstract

This paper explores the foundational role of linguistic weaponisation in the establishment of settler colonial states. Through an interdisciplinary lens that synthesises socio-linguistic and settler colonialism theories, this paper reveals a theoretical development of the existing two-step process of settler state establishment. An extensive literature review of both socio-linguistic and settler-colonial theories explores four forms of linguistic weaponisation: against Indigenous environments, Indigenous People, the parallel attack on environments and people, and the widely accepted two-step process in settler colonial establishment. From this, the paper acknowledges that whilst there is existing scholarly work on the role of language in colonialism broadly and a two-step process of forming settler states, there is an opportunity for mutual theoretical enrichment by establishing linguistic weaponisation as a prior, initial stage in the creation of settler states. Through identifying an addition to the existing theories on settler state formation, the paper concludes by highlighting other potential steps in the process. The developed theory is applicable beyond its current settler colonial context, as linguistic oppression and the creation of hegemonic imaginaries, to reinforce stereotypes and narratives, is seen throughout the world.

The Language of Conquest

When analysing the histories and continued atrocities inflicted on Indigenous People and their environment through the establishment of settler colonial states, the physical violence of these acts is often what commands the focus. This includes historical violence through imperial warfare and the continuation of this in modern day, through the toxic landscapes of extractive industries. Yet, settler colonialism is a process that begins with often quieter forms of violence, including linguistic, perceptual, cultural and social. The systematic violence of settler states did not begin with physical violence; the enactment of material destruction is the result of linguistic degradation, which led to a perceptual alteration of how people viewed Indigenous communities and their environments. Western legal and philosophical tradition enforced a severing of sacred bonds between Peoples and their land, cutting through Indigenous ontologies of 'Place-Thought' (Watts, 2013) and thus creating an immense ontological divide between Indigenous and settler realities.

Settler colonialism is a process of domination and violence where Indigenous Peoples of a colonised region are displaced by settlers who establish and nurture new versions of the European motherland (Spitzer & Selle, 2020, p. 7). This form of colonialism is differentiated by its permanence; it is a process where settler colonizers come to stay (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388),

*The Association of Early Career Polar Scientists (APECS), The Arctic Youth Network (AYN), Northern Research, Policy, & Arctic Knowledge Hub (NORPAK)

and it is the longevity of this displacement that disrupts human relationships with the environment (Whyte, 2018, p. 125). The establishment of settler-colonial states did not occur instantaneously or accidentally; instead, doctrines, concepts, and the deployment of specific language were used as weapons themselves, used to justify, encourage, and continue the expansion of colonialism.

This conceptual paper builds on existing theories that have established a two-step process in the creation of settler states. First, a perceptual change is enforced, which leads to moral justification; second, there is the reification of material destruction. This paper does not develop a new theory; instead, through connecting settler colonial and socio-linguistic schools of thought, it identifies an antecedent stage that precedes the existing two-step process by which settler-colonial states are established. This paper articulates a sequential three-step process that situates the foundational role of linguistic weaponisation as the catalyst for the necessary alteration of social perceptions required to morally justify the physical destruction of environments and the forced displacement of Indigenous communities. Through exploring quieter forms of violence, perceptual, linguistic and social, this paper will demonstrate how the colonial weaponisation of language was a foundational mechanism, a first step, in establishing settler states on Indigenous land. And indeed, in the continuation of global settler colonial states.

Outline of the Paper

To develop the three-step theory, this paper is structured systematically to first situate the author's positionality in accordance with Bagele Chilisa's research paradigms (2019). Establishing the research and the researcher's approach within a research paradigm is done to show the lens of enquiry used. Following this, the methodology and theoretical underpinnings of the paper are demonstrated to justify the research design. Once the foundational groundwork of the paper has been explained, the existing literature on the topic will be analysed, beginning with an introduction of language in a colonial context, and then in accordance with four themes developed by the author. These themes are: linguistic weaponisation against the land, the dual attack on Indigenous Peoples and their environment, language used against Indigenous People specifically and then the widely accepted two-step process of settler state creation will be questioned and critiqued. This has been designed in such a way to demonstrate that, whilst scholars have acknowledged that language has played a vital role within colonialism broadly, its specific role as a step in creating settler colonies has remained largely unidentified. Rather than detecting a gap in the existing literature, this paper has identified an integrative opportunity to bridge settler colonial frameworks and sociolinguistic theory to justify a preceding linguistic step in the establishment of settler states. From this, the potential academic implications will be discussed to identify the impact of this theoretical development. The paper will conclude by addressing the importance of this theory, exploring its cross-contextual potential and briefly discussing further research directions.

Author Positionality and Research Paradigm

I am a female, English researcher residing in Norway. I am a white, non-Indigenous academic who has spent five years researching environmental, political, and social issues stemming from past and present colonial actions that impact Indigenous communities worldwide. I firmly and respectfully recognise that I am an outsider to these issues and do not place myself in the category of those affected by the topics I am exploring. Instead, my passion and reason for doing research in this field stems from conversations I had with Metis Elders many years ago. My research is dedicated to providing clarity and a deeper understanding of how language can play a decisive role in the environmental and cultural destruction of Indigenous land and communities globally. My learning has been delivered by institutions with long colonial histories, in Norway, Canada and the United Kingdom.

To situate myself most accurately, I have evaluated my positionality in accordance with Bagele Chilisa's research paradigms. After extensive assessment, I have situated myself in the interpretive paradigm, the transformative paradigm and in the Indigenous research paradigm (Chilisa, 2019). Situating myself in this tri-paradigmatic stance, a position Chilisa has described as the 'dance' (2019) of research, is intentional and a form of dialectical pluralism (Johnson and Sterfurak, 2013) that acknowledges multiple ontologies. From this positioning, I can purposefully engage with the tensions existing between differing ways of knowing, which I believe is necessary to analyse this complex and social theme.

Theoretical Approach

This paper utilises an interdisciplinary approach, mirroring my own interdisciplinary background in comparative literature, Indigenous governance and public policy. The theories used include environmental theory, critical discourse analysis, and critical geography, which is grounded in Indigenous ontologies and settler colonial critique. These theories are used in parallel to expose how weaponising language has allowed states to both devalue and dispossess Indigenous land and People simultaneously.

Methodology and Scope of Inquiry

This paper is a qualitative theoretical analysis that has a critical conceptual design. Through investigations and an extensive literature review, this paper examines two existing notions: the widely accepted two-step process of creating settler states, and the second is sociolinguistic theories of language as a weapon. The conceptual research design was required as this paper builds upon an existing theory, as opposed to empirical data or testing. This paper questions and explores the foundational logic of how settler colonial structures are socially justified and physically actualised.

Through purposeful sampling of existing literature, the identified core theoretical texts include Wolfe (2006), Voyles (2015) and Hurley (2020, 2022). The work of many other scholars has been utilised and is explored in the literature review. The core theoretical texts of settler colonialism have unintentionally focused on a North American and Pacific context, and although this theoretical paper does not focus on a specific geographical region, this can lead

to a specific geographical orientation of the argument. In terms of sociolinguistic literature, I have explored literature that refers to toponymic violence and linguistic relativity. Although this paper is not comparative in its methodological design, it has drawn from multiple theories to inform the development of a multi-step process in the establishment of settler states. Furthermore, this paper has not adhered to the Western research technique of finding a gap in the literature review, as this approach mirrors the colonial act of spatial expansion, suggesting that an 'emptiness' within the existing literature must be claimed and constructed through a Western approach (Tynan and Bishop, 2023). This has aligned the methodological design to the Indigenous research paradigm that the author has situated themselves in (Chilisa, 2019).

The analytical approach to developing the three-step process of establishing settler states was purposeful. In previous research, I had explored the role of specific concepts, such as 'Wasteland' and 'Sacrifice Zones' in terms of extractive colonisation. Through another research project on settler colonisation, I began to question why language was not included in the stipulated creation process of settler states. I felt that there was a lack of connection in identifying the role of linguistic weaponisation in settler colonial contexts. Thus, this resulted in me integrating linguistic weaponisation into Wolfe's two-step theory of settler states.

Literature Review

This literature review investigates the work of scholars who have addressed the role of language in a colonial context, specifically the colonial weaponisation of linguistics. First, this section shall explore how doctrines, such as *ferae bestiae*, are deployed to devalue Indigenous environments and ecological systems, identifying the scholarly debates around spatial designations. I will then go on to identify how language is used as a dual attack on Peoples and their environments, to purposefully alter the perception of said People and their environments. There will then be a review of literature discussing the impact of colonial language on people, specifically, focused on the 'savage' descriptor. The literature review will end with an investigation into the two-step process of creating settler colonial states. I will end with a conclusion on these investigations that highlights why I am adding a third step to the process of creating settler states.

Language as a Weapon in a Colonial Context

Language has been used as a weapon since the dawn of colonisation; there is a basic importance to the phenomenon of language, the use of which by colonisers matters an incredible amount, and its role in shaping a perception of otherness is implicit (Fanon, 1952/1982, p. 17). This socio-political observation is supported in modern cognitive linguistics, a school of thought arguing that our use of language forms a framework that shapes our ways of thinking as well as our epistemologies and ontologies (Whorf, 1956; Echterhoff, 2012). Through linguistically encoded biases, the coloniser can justify the division of their world into absolute good, the coloniser, and absolute evil, the Indigenous Peoples, an assertion also termed the 'Manichean' divide, where colonial invasions are portrayed as a righteous mission to further society as opposed to a colonial attack (Fanon, 1952/1982). Indeed, linguistic selections are a conscious decision that are used to convey collective cultural ideologies which can consequently reveal deep-rooted in-group biases and racialised

stereotypes (Collins & Christianson, 2024; Collins & Clément, 2012). Settler states are reliant upon linguistically sustained fictions, fictional imaginaries (Whyte, 2018, p. 136), such as the paradigm of the ‘industrious cultivator’ (Locke, 1689/1988), to establish Eurocentric cultural legitimacy that is purposefully contrasted with Indigenous collective continuance - a society’s capacity to self-determine (Whyte, 2018, p. 136). Thus, through the linguistic transformation of an environment, Indigenous places, land enriched with history and deep culture, are consequently transformed into colonial spaces, geographical areas void of any historical, spiritual, and cultural significance to the occupier (Briggs, 2017, p. 52).

Linguistic Weaponisation Against Environments

Ecological linguistic weaponisation is a colonial tool that operates through legal and philosophical vocabularies to structure colonial dispossession of Indigenous lands as a reasonable and just act (Herrera, 2025; Murray, 2022; Nichols, 2020; Otman & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2025; Trasowech, 2024). This linguistic weaponisation is a factor in the inaction of ‘slow violence,’ a form of violence that occurs gradually and often out of sight, where violence is a delayed destruction of an environment, spread across time and space (Nixon, 2011).

This is exemplified through the inter-imperial application of the Roman Law Doctrine, *ferae bestiae* (wild beasts), which was deployed in juxtaposing ways by Spanish and English empires, representative of the difference in legal language used by different colonisers (Benton & Straumann, 2010; Seed, 1995). This distinction highlights the axiological differences within Spanish and English imperial applications of natural law traditions. For English imperial structures heavily shaped by John Locke’s natural law tradition, the Doctrine of *Ferae Bestiae* stipulated that wild beasts and land were considered *res nullius*, nobody’s property (Fitzmaurice, 2007, p. 6) as they had not been tamed or utilised. This reframed land ownership as something wholly dependent upon Eurocentric definitions of cultivation and labour (Locke, 1689/1988). This perspective was reinforced by Lockean theory: as Indigenous communities had not ‘turned trees into chairs,’ English colonisers deemed that they had not sufficiently altered the land to establish ownership (Gentili, 1612/1933; de Tocqueville, 1835/2000) which consequently ‘justified’ the coloniser’s position as the rightful first takers (Fitzmaurice, 2007, p. 8). This linguistic framework is reminiscent of the later secular theology of Manifest Destiny, where geographic expansion is framed as a natural right and as a righteous mission (Stephanson, 1995).

Opposingly, grounded in Thomistic natural law, the theologians of Salamanca, famously de Vitoria, applied the concept of *Ferae Bestiae* to argue that the Spanish conquests were unjust as it was clear that the ‘barbarians possessed true public and private domain’ (de Vitoria, 1539/1991; Fitzmaurice, 2007, p. 6). For the School of Salamanca, a lack of Christianity and differing governing systems did not justify the linguistic or physical dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from their land – a philosophical position that laid early foundations for Indigenous sovereignty in international law (Vitoria, 1539/1991; Tierney, 1997).

Although there are strategic differences between the Spanish and English methods of valuing land through this doctrine, differences in axiological approach are far more evident between the colonial axiology of property and Indigenous axiology of relationality (Watts, 2013). Colonial perspectives try to establish troubling relationships with environments, deeming them as completely indecipherable to the rational mind, whereas Indigenous Peoples seek to establish holistic and respectful relationships with the land and accept that nature will always possess unfathomable mysteries (Kawagley, 1998, p. 4; Whyte, 2018, p. 136). Indeed, 'Place Thought' extends this axiological argument through its refusal to separate human thoughts and land; instead, the land is alive and conscious, and human thoughts and agency are merely extensions of the land (Watts, 2013), thus highlighting the chasm between Indigenous and Western ontologies further.

A Dual Attack on an Environment and Its People

While historical legal doctrines used concepts such as *terra nullius* and *ferae bestiae* to categorise environments, modern-day scholarship addresses the parallel designation of an environment and its Peoples. Socio-ecological labels, such as 'sacrifice zones' and 'wastelands,' are inherently a dual attack: enforced onto an environment and its Peoples to reduce Indigenous cosmologies and human worth down to 'waste' so that their physical removal or toxic poisoning causes no moral outrage within the settler public (Adamson, 2001; Bullard, 2011; Lerner, 2010).

A 'sacrifice zone' is defined not solely by toxic pollution, but also through a colonial syntax which ensures the perception of the residing community is also explicitly expendable (Bullard, 2011; Lerner, 2010). There is a parallel linguistic construction of an environment as a 'wasteland' or a 'sacrifice zone' that necessitates a simultaneous rhetorical reduction of those inhabiting the land. As I have noted in previous work, the coloniser cannot construct an ecosystem as destructible without first assigning this label to its caretakers, as being politically, culturally or racially inferior (Hall, 2024).

There are two opposing scholarly perspectives on the use of the concepts 'sacrifice zones' and 'wastelands' in this context. One, held by many scholars and Indigenous activists, views the terms as linguistic tools of resistance against colonialism that are an integral part of political activism (Skorstad, 2023; Hollifield and Day, 2017). Furthermore, these two concepts purport to emphasise the unjust transformation of land (Berger et al., 1990) and the moral cost of exploitative decisions (Endres, 2009). In addition, using the concepts can lead to a wider understanding of economic and political power (Fox, 1999) and can problematise loss by disrupting imaginaries portraying these environmental and socially destructive acts as frictionless (Reinert, 2018).

On the other hand, a critical caution in contemporary criticism warns against the unreflected use of the 'sacrifice zone' and 'wasteland' concepts, as scholars explain that the use of these labels can lead to the direct reification of these descriptors (Voyles, 2015; Endres, 2009, p. 930; de Souza, 2020). Furthermore, these concepts are used to highlight the transformation of a sacred space into a 'wasteland' (LaDuke, 1999), an uninhabitable area (Di Palma, 2014, p. 18); they are labels that are used by those who are responsible for the

environmental destruction (Lee, 2022). Using the concepts of ‘wasteland’ and ‘sacrifice zones’ to describe an environment renders it impossible to separate this bureaucratic syntax from those living there; this labelling designates the inhabitants as targets for racial degradation (Voyles, 2015); the people are viewed through a lens of depreciation (Pulido, 2000). It is through linguistic weaponisation, the colonially enforced assertion of labels, that a causal relationship is created: through narrating the land as a ‘wasteland’, it becomes a ‘wasteland’ as people accept the narrative as reality and act upon it (Gross, 2019, p. 94).

Linguistic Degradation of People

Whilst the previous section explored the dual attack on Peoples and their environment through the same concepts and labels, this section will discuss the existing literature analysing the linguistic attacks on Indigenous Peoples specifically through the concept of the ‘savage.’ The impact of this labelling is twofold: first is the denigration resulting from this designation, and second is this label's role in highlighting the presupposed fragility of Indigenous cultures (Behlmer, 2018). However, the concept itself has been critiqued by scholars as being vague and ambiguous (Behlmer, 2018; Denning, 1988). It has been viewed as a hydra of a word by scholars, due to its use as a noun gesturing towards early anthropology, signifying a preliterate culture and a condemnatory adjective meaning bestial (Sinclair, 1977). Whilst I can acknowledge its vagueness in certain contexts, I do believe that the settler colonial use of this word was intentional. This concept is a colonial weapon, used to portray Indigenous communities as both preliterate and less-than settler colonisers, as well as being used to reinforce the notion of Indigenous People as ‘other’ and as uncivilised.

The word ‘savage’ is a fluid linguistic tool, bendable, for different imperial expansions (Butler & Palmer, 2018), just as environmental law doctrines were interpreted opposingly (Seed, 1995). The depictions of ‘savages’ in the Pacific varied enormously depending upon the aims of the European intruders, meaning that the descriptions and portrayals of Pacific Islanders themselves were flexible (Butler & Palmer, 2018). Irrespective of differing empires and their specific goals, ‘savage talk’ was used universally to portray Indigenous communities as naturally temporary (2018), a colonially enforced fiction. This fictional imaginary (Whyte, 2018, p. 136) continually reinforced suppositions about Indigenous People, and through linguistically engineered attacks, colonial settlements and the destruction of Indigenous Peoples as inevitable and natural (O’Brien, 2010, xiii; McGregor, 1997). By framing Indigenous Peoples as ‘savages,’ imperial discourse effortlessly created the ‘doomed race’ theory: a fatalistic logic that asserts Indigenous communities were destined to disappear when touched by Western civilisation (Brantlinger, 2003).

The Two-Step Process of Establishing Settler Colonial States

It is widely acknowledged in scholarship that there are two steps in the process of creating settler colonial states (Voyles, 2015; Spitzer, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). A ‘logic of elimination’ has been developed, stipulating that settler colonialism is inherently driven to destroy, to insert itself and replace what was already in existence (Wolfe, 2006). Within this structural imperative, a ‘one-two punch’ has been conceptualised: first is the dissolution of Indigenous

sovereignty and the second is the consequent installation of settler states; this dual mechanism achieves the ultimate colonial goal of supplanting Indigenous jurisdictions with new, permanent versions of the motherland (Wolfe, 2006). This logic includes the elimination of Indigenous voting rights by settlers, done to attack Indigenous polities at their democratic foundations by accusing Indigenous Peoples of pursuing collective self-determination as racially discriminating against the liberalist individual voting rights of settlers (Spitzer, 2019). And whilst contemporary scholarship applies this two-step framework when mapping the geographical realities of settler state establishment, it has been argued that an over-reliance on this theory risks viewing elimination as structurally inevitable (Snelgrove et al., 2014). Through the lens of nuclear imperialism, the role of settler administrative networks is that of active ‘elimination infrastructures’ (Hurley & Insko, 2021) that enforce a state of ‘radical futurelessness’ on Indigenous populations (Hurley, 2020). This is done through the literal nuclear contamination of sovereign ecosystems to secure ocean and land spaces for permanent settler expansion (Hurley, 2022).

From the scholarship analysed in this literature review, a few things are clear. First, the manipulation of language as a colonial tool is an acknowledged and critiqued tactic. It is used to attack both an environment and its Peoples, and the perceptual consequences are vast and incredibly damaging. Second, scholars widely agree that there is a two-step process required to establish settler states in Indigenous environments. The following section of this paper shall go on to explore the hypothesis in detail, articulating the argument that there is, in fact, a minimum of three steps in this process.

The Three-Step Settler Colonial Framework: Introduction to the Framework

As explored in the previous section, many scholars have shown that language has an instrumental role within colonial structures: portraying environments and communities as destructible creates a logic that naturalises the reification of these descriptors. Furthermore, scholars have also shown that the creation of settler states is dependent upon two-steps: a perceptual shift and a consequent material destruction. These theories are very clearly laid out by scholars from across the globe, writing on different empires and geographical contexts.

Whilst the research on this is extensive, certainly far more extensive than this literature review has been able to capture, what I have not come across is an academic work that connects these two theories. I have not located a publication that introduces the role of language into the two-step process of settler state establishment, as an additional step, a prerequisite of the prior two steps. The conducted literature review has exposed an opportunity to connect the two theories of settler colonialism and sociolinguistics to demonstrate the logic of inserting an additional step into the current theories.

Indeed, this section does not suggest the development of an entirely new theory, as there is significant value in the existing ones. This section will show that the physical dissolution of Indigenous sovereignty and insertion of settler states is reliant upon a perceptual change in how Indigenous lands and people are viewed, and that this crucial step is done through the colonial weaponisation of language.

Step One: Linguistic Weaponisation

The colonial use of language as a tool is vast and varied, with different imperial powers using this weapon in a multitude of ways. Under exploitative colonialism, the enforcement of the colonists' language onto the Indigenous population was a deliberate tool of power, supremacy and economic subjugation that reshaped the consciousness of the population to view their utility through the lens of the coloniser's social structure and language (Fandiño-Parra, 2021). Further, in Algeria, France implemented a policy of extreme cultural assimilation as their language was portrayed as the epitome of civilisation and intelligence. This created a psychological paradox whereby the colonised people were conditioned to believe that a mastery of French would render them more human (Fanon, 1952/1986). In the context of Canadian settler colonialism, through the Canadian Indian Residential School (IRS) system, Indigenous languages were systematically suppressed to achieve total cultural erasure (Chief Moon-Riley et al., 2019). Linguistic erasure served as a tool for social control and the severing of intergenerational ties, a form of state-enforced trauma that continues to impact descendants today (Bombay et al., 2014).

Linguistic weaponisation is the process by which words, concepts, discourse and language in any form have been or are being used to inflict harm on others; it is a systematic process used by dominant groups to marginalise minority communities (Herrera & Bryan, 2022). It is the intentional manipulation of language as a 'loaded weapon' that is used by those in power to distort reality, control social behaviour and shape perceptions to their own agenda (Bolinger, 1980). As explored in the literature review, the weaponisation of language was a parallel attack on Indigenous Peoples and their environment. Settlers systematically portrayed Indigenous communities as 'savages', which constructed a racialised civilisational hierarchy of degrees of humanity (Leigh, 2023), thus depicting Indigenous Peoples as other. This 'savage' depiction was built into the 'wilderness' ideology, a fiction of colonial invention that held that for a landscape to be perceived as a 'wilderness'; it had to be separated from its Indigenous inhabitants (Cronon, 1995). The use of the concepts 'wilderness,' 'wild,' and 'untouched' was a discursive tool to remove Indigenous People from their ancestral land, so settlers could claim ownership of the land (Cronon, 1995). Parallel othering of land and bodies enforced the rhetorical frameworks of emptiness and chaos, exposing the colonial reliance on this dual strategy to reduce both to a 'passive background' (Plumwood, 2002).

The systematic linguistic 'othering' and semantic erasure of Indigenous lands and bodies catalysed the creation of a causal system: once people and environments had been labelled as such, the narrated reality transformed into the accepted reality, consequently informing societal perceptions and actions (Gross, 2019, p. 94). The holistic and ethical relationship between Indigenous Peoples and their land was purposefully redefined by the colonisers' possessive logic. Through the reduction of both bodies and land as something to be owned and categorised, the coloniser manipulates and removes the sacred connection (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Colonial construction has placed people and the land into the same destructible category (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The reductionist dichotomy, formed from colonial linguistic weaponisation, serves as the first step in the three-step process of settler colonial establishment. This reality, shaped by discursive weaponisation, created a rhetorical foundation that dictates the way in which the settler-colonial community perceives Indigenous environments and People (Veracini, 2010). The parallel othering of Peoples and environments created the conditions required for the perceptive reality necessitated to establish settler colonial states.

Step Two: Perceptual Degradation

The second stage of settler colonial establishment is the perceptual stage. It is throughout this stage that Indigenous environments and bodies are understood as destructible and replaceable, due to the linguistic framing of them as such in the previous step. This is a crucial part of the process, as prior to physical destruction occurring, there must be an accepted perception of Indigenous bodies and environments as pollutable and destructible. The colonial linguistic framework directly shapes the societal understanding of Indigenous communities and environments and thus 'justifies' the physical destruction of land and the erasure of native sovereignty.

In the second step of settler state establishment, the parallel attack on Indigenous Peoples and their environments is continued, and this form of attack has theological origins. British colonial views on environmental use were shaped by Lockean natural law, which defined land ownership through a Eurocentric lens of cultivation and labour (Locke, 1689/1988). As Indigenous communities were stewards as opposed to cultivators of the land, for British colonisers, they had no claim to ownership (Gentili, 1612/1933; de Tocqueville, 1835/2000), thus justifying the insertion of British colonisers as the rightful first takers (Fitzmaurice, 2007). Furthermore, Winstanley, the leader of a radical farming group in 1649, suggests that the cultivation of the 'wastelands' of England is a chance for spiritual redemption whereby immoral societal structures can be healed when the 'wast Land is fruitful' (Winstanley, 1649; Hall, 2024, p. 25). The exact identity of the 'wasteland' within a biblical context develops drastically, once a place that acts as a moral testing ground for humanity, becomes a place that represents humanities immorality (Hall, 2024, p. 27), a land wasted as a form of punishment for immoral actions (di Palma, 2014, p. 18). Thus, when coloniser place the 'wasteland' label onto Indigenous land they are not just describing an environment but they are asserting a historical system of moral punishment onto the People and and environment.

The theological perceptual portrayal of Indigenous Peoples mirrors the demeaning descriptions of environments. Throughout early settler colonial discourse, Old Testament covenant theology situated settler-colonisers as the rightful inhabitants while Indigenous Peoples were linguistically portrayed through biblical allegories of the 'Canaanite' or the 'heathen in the wilderness', which biblically entrenched them as displaceable (Akenson, 1992). Indigenous People were not depicted as the stewards of the land that they were, and instead, this holistic relationship was used as a perceptual weapon: because they had not cultivated the land, they were moral extensions of the wasteland and thus placed into a singular category of spiritual decay (Merchant, 2003), mirroring the linguistic framing in the previous stage.

The philosophical portrayal of Indigenous Peoples and environments has continued in modern-day discourse, shaped by its biblical history (Brown, 2003; Kapfhammer, 2012), as Christian settlers viewed their insertion on Indigenous land as a moral imperative. Thus, the settler colonial portrayal of Indigenous Peoples and environments as firmly separate from their own society is done to justify their consequent eradication and destruction. This process, within settler colonial contexts, is termed 'wastelanding.' First is the assumption that nonwhite lands and bodies are valueless, or only valued because of their resource potential, and second is the subsequent devastation of those environments and people by polluting industries (Voyles, 2015, p. 10). The causal relationship between linguistic weaponisation and a consequent perceptual shift is evident here. The next section will go on to explore the third subsequent stage of settler state establishment, that is, the physical manifestation of the linguistic and perceptual stages, where material destruction of environments and peoples occurs.

Step Three: Material Destruction

The third step of establishing settler states is the parallel displacement of Indigenous people and the physical, violent transformation of Indigenous places, rich in culture and history, into colonial spaces (Briggs, 2017). It is within this physical stage that the prior linguistic weaponisation and perceptual degradation actualise as forced displacement, legal erasure and destructive environmental transformation. This stage is the result of a systematic and purposeful attack by settlers who have deployed language to shape the societal perception of Indigenous communities and their land, which demonstrates how conceptualised space can be violently translated into a lived spatial reality (Lefebvre, 1991). As with the two previous stages, this phase is also a dual attack on Peoples and their land, attacking the legal and cultural sovereignty of communities alongside a destruction of the environment. The justification required to enact this phase is entirely dependent upon the prior two stages; this is a consequential process, thus proving that imaginative geographies precede and reify physical conquests (Said, 1978).

There are a multitude of ways in which both environmental destruction and the forced displacement of communities are enacted. One of these, separated by its permanence both for people and the environment itself, is nuclear settler colonialism, as this type of environmental violence can long outlive the presence of human settlers and their forms of government (Hurley, 2022, p. 972). This is defined as 'territorialisation of Indigenous space into property by nuclear testing within militarised settler epistemologies of productive use, and the permanent occupation of that space through irradiation' (Hurley, 2022, p. 972). This specific form of environmental destruction exemplifies the transition from asserting a label onto an environment and the reification of this descriptor.

The parallel attack on Indigenous Peoples can also be executed through varying means, and one of these is through political and legal erasure. Historically, foundational legal Doctrines, such as the Doctrine of *Terra Nullius* and the Doctrine of *Ferae Bestiae*, were used to remove and attack collective Indigenous self-determination. Settler states have continued

legal attacks on Indigenous legal and democratic sovereignty. However, enshrined as a core principle of international law is self-determination, which is protected by legal instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007, Articles 3-4). Whilst this is a protected right, self-determination does not necessarily synonymise with secession (Dahl, 2012). Settler states such as Norway and Canada have asserted that Indigenous Peoples have localised forms of autonomy, but these are extremely constrained (Ravna & Bankes, 2017). Contested frontiers, geographical zones of transition where the sovereignty or cultural authority are actively disputed, lie directly between the Indigenous collective notion of self-determination and the individual liberalism of settler colonisation (Spitzer, 2022). The dichotomy of opposing political philosophies is a material barrier that fractures Indigenous forms of collective governance, legal systems and cultural sovereignty.

The existence of a three-step process in the establishment of settler states has been asserted in this section. Linguistic weaponisation is used as a tool to shape the perception of Indigenous Peoples and environments, which consequently leads to the justification of material destruction of these lands and communities. This is a sequential process. Throughout the three steps, there is a coordinated dual attack on community sovereignty and the environment. Having established the three-step process, this paper will go on to investigate the potential academic implications of this.

Discussion and Academic Implications

The theoretical contribution of this paper is seen through bridging the theories of linguistic scholarship, settler colonialism and legal and environmental scholarship. Although existing work does explore the role of language in shaping perceptions of people and environment, academic discourse has treated these two schools as isolated silos. This paper has established an intertwined and causal relationship developed by drawing from these two schools of thought in the context of creating settler states. This identification highlights the pivotal role of language in the establishment of the settler onto Indigenous land.

Although this paper has not been methodologically structured as a comparison, it has highlighted the value of approaching academic silos collectively. By including approaches from multiple colonial powers and through different geographical contexts, the impact of a universal colonial syntax has been established. By breaking down these isolated academic silos, this paper has identified linguistic weaponisation as a catalyst for settler establishment. Whilst the development of the three-step process has been conducted primarily in a North American and Pacific context, certainly through a settler colonial context, I argue that this theory can be applied broadly to other geographies and contexts.

The role of linguistic weaponisation in furthering the destruction of people and environments broadly extends far beyond what has been explored in this paper. For example, the cartographic labels of the 'East' and the 'West' do not exist in nature; they are artificial, cartographic imaginaries that define the world through a Eurocentric lens (Said, 1978). These labels are used to define lands legally and rhetorically for imperial purposes (Harley, 1989). In future research, I would explore the role of counter-mapping strategies in dismantling colonial cartographic violence, mirroring a similar exploration into quieter forms of resilience

that my previous work has explored through a poetical lens (Hall, 2024). I would also like to investigate the processes of ecological reclamation in colonially deemed ‘sacrifice zones’ and ‘wastelands’ and the rebuilding of Indigenous relations to the land.

The argument for including a prior step in the process of settler establishment does not limit the possibility that there are more. Instead, it is quite the opposite. There are undoubtedly more steps, and in future research, I would address this by exploring critical cartography, political ecology, Indigenous legal studies and restorative justice synergistically. I would continue to question the process with a specific focus on what happens after the establishment of settler states, indeed, what happens when these settlers leave?

From this, a theoretical paradox is evident: does the material phase of settler colonialism transform Indigenous diasporic nations into unwilling settlers themselves? The diaspora of Indigenous nations is weaponised, and the ‘arrivants’ are forced to facilitate the continued occupation of Indigenous lands (Byrd, 2011), which can permanently disrupt Indigenous solidarity and enforce land dispossession (Mamdani, 2020). The enforced facilitation of Indigenous diasporic nations to continue the cycle of settler displacement could be theorised as a fourth step, as an extension of the three-step process developed in this paper. It is this paradox and its role in continuing settler state violence that will be explored in further work.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has shown that the establishment of settler states, the physical transformation of Indigenous land into colonies and the forced displacement of Indigenous Peoples are enacted through a three-step process. This sequential process begins with a linguistic attack as language is weaponised by colonial powers. The impact of which is a perceptual designation that ‘others’ Indigenous environments and bodies. Once the ‘othering’ has been accepted as reality by settler communities, there is a consequent reification of these views as Indigenous environments are destroyed and People are displaced to make way for the establishment of settler colonial states. Early colonial architects used language to linguistically empty land as well as enforcing a fictional portrayal of Indigenous communities as intellectually, socially and culturally less than their colonisers. The use of language to forcefully create colonial imaginaries altered the minds of the settler community, leading to an acceptance of these environments and people as destructible. This perceptual shift directly materialised into violence as Indigenous environments were stolen and recreated through destruction for the settlers, and Indigenous communities were forcefully removed from their ancestral land and morphed into diasporic nations.

In adding a prior linguistic step to the existing scholarly theory of a two-step process in establishing settler states, this paper has articulated the need to acknowledge the foundational role that language has had in creating settler states. Linguistic weaponisation is an essential tool for settlers as their power is asserted through the continual degradation and ‘othering’ of peoples and land. By establishing this trajectory, this paper has shown that settler colonialism is a self-perpetuating system. One that is not necessarily limited to these three articulated steps.

To continue this research, there will be a thematic and contextual broadening. The first of which is a focus on the consequential paradox created by settlers, forcing Indigenous communities into an involuntary form of settlers themselves. This will be explored as a potential fourth step of the process; albeit occurring after the establishment of settlements, it is nonetheless a direct consequence of the process. Furthermore, I would like to extend this research outside of a settler colonial context, highlighting the role of linguistic weaponisation in modern-day political speeches and portrayals of minorities, immigrants and other social groups.

In essence, language has a long history, one still in existence, of being used as a weapon to oppress environments, people and cultures. It is a form of control that reduces people and land to the fictional imaginaries of the hegemons. Conversely, language has a wealth of positive value; it is used as a form of resilience, strength and celebration, and these forms of linguistic use champion and consistently battle against their linguistic counterpart. Would it not be more valuable to focus on how language strengthens marginalised and minority resilience rather than on how it continues to denigrate?

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