Redefining Gender Violence: Radical Feminist Visions in Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction and Women of Color Activism 1990-2010

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REDEFINING GENDER VIOLENCE: RADICAL FEMINIST VISIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION AND WOMEN OF COLOR ACTIVISM 1990-2010

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

To Ada and all children who make our world a better place.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Ron Welburn, for his wisdom, encouragement, and unending support. Professor Welburn has always been very generous with his time and wisdom, and also been a great role model, showing me ways of being a teacher and a colleague at the same time. Professor Welburn’s mentorship and direction over the past seven years made this project possible, guided me from the beginning of my studies, and I am beyond grateful to have had such a wonderful, wise mentor chairing my dissertation. I would also like to thank my likewise brilliant committee members, Asha Nadkarni, who have supported me in all ways possible in graduate school in addition to generously providing her expertise and feedback on multiple chapters; Fumi Okiji, who wholeheartedly supported my project. My gratitude goes to those scholars who have helped me along the way, including Rebecca Dingo whose mentorship along with pedagogic and research expertise have been invaluable. I also need to thank faculty members at and beyond the English Department who have been part of my research and professional development as a scholar, including Mazen Naous, Daniel Sack, Tracy Parker, Kiran Asher, and Laura Briggs.

I wish to thank all my friends and colleagues who read my dissertation at various stages, provided emotional support, and showed their camaraderie in myriad of ways. My wonderful friend and cohort Jodie Childers have been the biggest supporter of my ideas and accompanied me during the highs and lows of my journey. I am also grateful to those who provided friendship and support throughout these years, including Korka Sall, Neelofer Qadir, Yunah Kae, Maggie Foley, Adeline Broussan, Jae Ahn, and Maria Ishikawa.
My parents, Fatma and Hasan, my sister Rüveyda, and my brothers, Kürşat and Serhat, have been the greatest inspirations for my curiosity and urge to know from a very young age. Despite the monumental physical distance between us, I know you have always loved me, supported me in all my academic endeavors, and been proud of my achievements. Your love and confidence in me calmed my mind and gave me optimism during the difficult parts of this project.

Finally, I cannot thank my life partner and best friend, Deniz, enough for his unending commitment to our shared goals and visions for our present and future. Your love and belief in me kept me going and inspired me to do better. You and our baby girl Ada, who came to life in the middle of this project, allowed me to enjoy life amid the constant busyness of writing and teaching. Thank you both for all the joy and love.
ABSTRACT

REDEFINING GENDER VIOLENCE: RADICAL FEMINIST VISIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC AMERICAN WOMEN’S FICTION AND WOMEN OF COLOR ACTIVISM 1990-2010

May 2022

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Redefining Gender Violence: Radical Feminist Visions in Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction and Women of Color Activism 1990-2010 reconceptualizes state-sanctioned family disintegration as gender violence, most recently evidenced in the forced separation of the central Latin American asylum-seekers at the US-Mexico border. It frames family separation as part of ongoing settler colonial history and delineates the gendered aspects of this form of state violence. More specifically, Redefining Gender Violence articulates a theory of gendered logic of dispossession through analyzing the novelistic representations of family (dis)integration by Native and Black authors and resistance strategies offered by women of color (WOC) activist writings. It examines how selected novels by Leslie Marmon Silko, Toni Morrison, and LeAnne Howe and the writings of the feminists-of-color-led activist network INCITE! interrogate bodily, familial, and communal attacks, highlighting the conjunctions of gender, identity, family, and community in violences directed at women of color. Redefining Gender Violence argues that the novelists’ and activists’ visions of family integrity are central to their anti-violence feminist resistance and communities of color’s political struggles. Building on
women of color feminist theories, *Redefining Gender Violence* makes three critical interventions: first, based on its archive’s shared emphasis on women’s role in the political and social organization of family and communal life, it interconnects assaults on bodies, families, and collectives of color as with those of to their geographic origins, lands, and homes. Second, it foregrounds feminist visions of contemporary novelists and activists to establish solidarity through the political, intellectual, and artistic productions by WOC. Finally, through a careful juxtaposition of contemporary feminist visions with the critical incident of family separation at the border, it makes evident that current immigration control mechanisms are closely related to the histories of dispossession and settler violence.
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INTRODUCTION

LOSING MOTHERS, MOTHERLANDS, AND BROKEN CONNECTIONS

In her landmark book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya Hartman intimates the history of the Atlantic slave trade, kneading the narrative of her journey in Ghana with her genealogy and captives’ experiences of loss and violence. Through her masterful prose and diligent scholarship Hartman narrates the violence of slavery as embodied in captives’ experiences and symbolized through the phrase “lose your mother.” Based on the West African public discourses and stories about slaves, the phrase *losing mother* sums up slaves’ experiences of loss and dispossession, forced separation from their kin, and disconnection from their past. “Mother” operates as a handle for signifying connection to not only family and kin but home and natal country; “mother” singlehandedly represents genealogy and kinship, ancestral and cultural roots, and the intimacy of family and community which one yearns. Thus, the slave who lost her mother is primarily a “stranger,” who is “[t]orn from kin and community, exiled from one’s country, dishonored and violated.”¹ Hartman continues, “[c]ontrary to popular belief, Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery. They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners and barbarians at the outskirts of the country, and lawbreakers expelled from society.”² Among its layered meanings, losing mother is a reference to the gendered histories of the Atlantic slave trade and genders the violence of slavery on a symbolic level. While a slave’s forceful disconnection from family and kin renders her body vulnerable to

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¹ 5.
² 5.
violence and exploitation, it also implies the violation of mother’s bond with an enslaved child. Hartman’s poetic insights about the figure of mother emphasizes her role in anchoring a child’s identity in a place and lineage and underlines the violence of separation. She represents forced separation from beloved families, communities, and lands as a gendered and racialized violation of one’s claim to the self, culture, and way of life.

In Lose Your Mother, Hartman focuses on historical violations of Black bodies, subjects, and families along the Atlantic slave route. Despite its specificity, Hartman’s conceptualization is pertinent for multiple political collectives in North America when we consider losing mother as a theoretical trope for expressing the violence of dispossession, not exclusive to African American experience but as loss at the conjunctions of identity, family, and origins. Across the Atlantic Ocean and simultaneous to the violence along the slave coast of West Africa where Hartman’s narrative is anchored, settler colonial violence was claiming Indigenous lives at a genocidal scale with a determination to eradicate Native tribes and their roots from North America. By the time colonial violence was inaugurated with the landing of Columbus in the Americas on October 12, 1492, the shores of West Africa had already been under assault by the Portuguese. For centuries, slavery and colonialism, spatially converging in North America (both figuratively and literally), separated Black and Native collectives from their mothers and motherlands. Following long periods of racial and genocidal violence, Native and Black familial integrity continued to be targeted through assaults on bodies, minds, and lands. It is this legacy of violence with which Redefining Gender Violence: Radical Feminist Visions in Contemporary Ethnic American Women’s Fiction and Women of Color Activism 1990-
2010 is concerned. Thematically, through a close engagement with contemporary ethnic American women’s literature and women of color activism *Redefining Gender Violence* attends to the long history of family separations and violences enacted to disintegrate Native and Black families. On a theoretical level, *Redefining Gender Violence* reconsiders dispossession as a form of violence that separates women and men from systems of intimacy, analyzes its gendered and racial underpinnings, and situates this specific form of dispossession in the larger context of settler colonial history in North America.

Contrary to current political discourse which considers family separation as only exclusive to US immigration regulation, my dissertation frames state-sanctioned family disintegration, including child taking, as part of ongoing settler colonial history and considers the gendered aspects of this form of state violence. More specifically, *Redefining Gender Violence* articulates a theory of gendered logic of dispossession through analyzing the novelistic representations of family (dis)integration by Native and Black authors and resistance strategies offered by women of color (WOC) activist writings. It examines how Leslie Marmon Silko’s, Toni Morrison’s, and LeAnne Howe’s fiction and the writings of the activist network INCITE! interrogate bodily, familial, and communal attacks, highlighting the conjunctions of gender, identity, family, and community in violences directed at women of color. *Redefining Gender Violence* argues that the novelists’ and activists’ visions of family integrity are central to their anti-violence feminist resistance and communities of color’s political struggles. Building on women of color feminist theories, *Redefining Gender Violence* makes three critical interventions: first, based on its archive’s shared emphasis on women’s role in the
political and social organization of family and communal life, it conceptualizes family separation as gender violence by interconnecting assaults on bodies, families, and collectives of color as with those of their geographic origins, lands, and homes. Second, it foregrounds feminist visions of contemporary novelists and activists to establish solidarity through the political, intellectual, and artistic productions of WOC. Finally, through a careful juxtaposition of contemporary feminist visions with the critical incident of family separation at the border, it makes evident that current immigration control mechanisms are closely related to the histories of dispossession and settler violence in North America.

While Native studies has long framed Indigenous family disintegration and Native child removals as part of settler colonial violence, there is no current critical ethnic studies research that considers family separation as both a historical and contemporary form of dispossession that affects multiple political and cultural groups across the spectrum. Thus, on a broader scale, my dissertation considers family separation as part of longue durée of dispossessive colonial violence and aims to understand its links to current violations of marginalized and displaced communities.

**Gendering Family Separation**

Taking children of asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border stands out as a critical incident in recent US history; deeply disturbing (yet unfortunately not shocking) images of children in “cages” are still fresh in American national memory. It was mostly the images of children forcefully taken from their families that drew public attention to this brutal practice in 2018. While these scenes quickly became marked representations
of family separation, the separation of children from their families and kin has a long history in the United States. According to historian Laura Briggs, removal of children from their families has long been employed to control and discipline Black, Native, Latinx, and poor families and communities. Briggs includes slavery, Indian boarding schools and child removals, foster care system and its targeting of welfare and “crack” mothers, mass incarceration, and anticommunist civil wars in Latin America supported by the United States in the long history of taking children in the Americas. Taking Children: A History of American Terror (2020), a concise survey of these intertwining histories, lays bare the pervasiveness and cruelty of taking children. Briggs writes:

Taking children has been a strategy for terrorizing people for centuries. There is a reason why “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” is part of international law’s definition of genocide. It participates in the same sadistic political grammar as the torture and murder that separated French Jewish children from their parents under the Nazis and sought to keep enslaved people from rebelling or to keep Native people from retaliating against the Anglos who violated treaties to encroach on their land. Stripping people of their children attempts to deny them the opportunity to participate in the progression of generations into the future—to interrupt the passing down of languages, ways of being, forms of knowledge, foods, cultures. Like enslavement and the Indian Wars, the current efforts by the Trump administration to terrorize asylum seekers is white nationalist in ideology. It is an attempt to secure a white or Anglo future for a nation, a community, a place.³

³ 7-8.
As Briggs indicates, we can easily recognize the violence of family separation when we consider other genocidal contexts where children have been removed from their families. This type of dispossessive act cannot be reduced to immigration regulation nor can it be treated as a new practice; rather it should be contextualized, as Briggs does and argues, in the larger history of systemic family disintegration and child removals which the United States government has enacted for centuries. Briggs’s book is unique in its contextualization of child taking as a “counterinsurgency tactic” employed against multiple communities of color. As a historian, Briggs highlights the connections among child taking practices across communities of color and demonstrates how family separation has been intentional and systematic rather than the collateral damage of racist structures and violences. However, we need further interdisciplinary research focused on comparative ethnic and feminist studies to thoroughly understand racial and gender dimensions of family separation. My doctoral project is an attempt to fill this important gap; in addressing family separation on a cross-racial terrain, it simultaneously attends to how gender is a critical marker in the North American history of child taking and forced family separations.

Obvious from Briggs’ discussion, it is often women or mothers who are disproportionately targeted by the state and state agencies for their children. Some recent examples of this targeting include the state’s separating children from their addicted and allegedly abusive parents during the infamous “war on drugs” era, from 1970s to 2000s, and Indian child removals that continue to affect Native tribes today. The law enforcement agencies collaborated with the child welfare system to punish Black and

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4 12.
poor women for their drug use even when there was no apparent harm to their children. For Indian child removals, state authorities often cited Native men and women’s alcoholism. Similarly, working class women’s substance addiction in addition to poverty was allegedly the reason for taking their children and giving them to foster care agencies. In fact, collectively these practices worked to undermine affected families and their communities’ well-being in the long run. Native, Black, and poor parents’ stigmatization did not only enable state authorities to take their children, but made parents’, particularly mothers’, claim to their own children precarious; their marginalization and demonization through such narratives made them seem ineligible for parenting in the public eye. More recent examples that both feed on existing stigmatizations of parents of color and further stigmatize them include Black incarceration, police violence, and the prison industrial complex; these racist systems simultaneously normalize violence against Black men while they undermine their families and communities’ social well-being. African American men locked up in prisons mean that their relationships with families, partners, children, and kin are disrupted, irreparably harming systems of intimacy and care in the Black community. In these instances, too, gender plays an important role in the demonization of Black men; we are bombarded with representations of violent Black men while representations of Black men’s nurturing roles as fathers, partners, and family members are scarce in popular culture, news, social media, and other media outlets.

Of course, these recent manifestations of systemic family separation and disintegration are rooted in the long history of racist and colonial oppressions in North America. This history is long, and my project is not exclusively concerned with history although understanding and connecting past violences is vital for my arguments.
Nevertheless, I observe that due to this (disturbingly long) history of separated families, family disintegration is deeply embedded in US multiethnic literatures, conveyed through diverse rhetorical tropes and narratives. Particularly, boarding school experience and child removals in Native American literature, racism and Black incarceration in African American Literature, migration and displacement in Chicana and Latinx literatures frequently animate contemporary authors’ imagination. Torn apart families, lost children and mothers recur in narrative representations of these histories; it is often women who are portrayed most vulnerable to this form of violation and loss of intimate connections. Women’s experiences of being displaced, dispossessed, marginalized, and (un)belonging take center stage in the novelistic representations of these violent histories. Accordingly, my conceptualization of family separation as a gendered process is mostly based on 1) contemporary women of color authors’ vision of family and intimacy, and their representation of personal stories as entangled with collective histories and communal experiences; and 2) feminist of color analytical paradigms for understanding intersections of racial, colonial, and gendered violations of women’s bodies and psyches. In the next section, I elaborate on contemporary women of color novelists, scholars, and activists’ collective resistance against violence and their radical feminist visions for social justice.

**Novelists, Intellectuals, and Activists’ Radical Feminist Visions of Violence and Resistance**

*Redefining Gender Violence* argues that an emerging feminist anti-violence vision animates contemporary ethnic American women’s literature and women of color activism. While I observe this vision to become more salient at the turn of the twentieth
century into the twenty-first, women of color theorizing, literature, and activist writing of the previous eras have nurtured today’s feminist visionaries. In the era following the civil rights, feminist, and ethnic empowerment movements of the 1960s and 1970s, there was a proliferation of feminist writings that addressed violence at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Particularly, ethnic American women writers engaged in the issues of gender and racialized violence in their fiction. Authors from several literary traditions penned their works at the backdrop of personal and communal violations that were rooted in historical oppressive systems. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Octavia Butler, and Linga Hogan produced some of the most significant examples of such fiction during this period. In the twenty-first century, women of color novelists continue to meditate on violence and loss. There are also significant number of memoirs and other genres that address similar issues. A recent example, Asha Bandele & Patrisse Cullors’s When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir (2018) intimates how personal experiences of loss and broken families are connected to the contemporary violences against the Black community. We observe similar themes in earlier works such as Ana Castillo’s My Father Was a Toltec (1995) and Jesmyn Ward’s Men We Reaped (2013) as well. From Native American literature, we can add to this list Louise Erdrich’s extraordinary novel Future Home of The Living God (2017), Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir (2012) by Deborah Miranda, LeAnne Howe’s Shell Shaker (2001) and Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story (2007). Not coincidentally, broken familial and communal connections and assaults on maternal ties often take center stage in the writings of these novelists and authors.
In parallel to the literary field, women of color activism increasingly dealt with violence and centered antiviolence organizing following the feminist and ethnic movements of the 1960s and 70s. At the turn of the twentieth century, women of color scholarship and activism mostly focused on state-sponsored violence against women and their communities, acting on a collective antiviolence effort. Women of color were heavily involved in feminist, prison abolition, and anticolonial activist movements, initiating and giving direction to major national and global protests such as immigrant rights after 9/11, reproductive justice and women’s rights, and antiwar organizing against the Iraq War.\(^5\)

(We see a continuation of these global feminist mobilizations, most recently evidenced with Women’s March in 2017.\(^6\)) These movements were part of a proliferation of social movements which ranged from labor to Indigenous rights, from gender violence to environmental colonialism. Jodi Melamed points out that this rise in public protest around diverse issues was simultaneous to the rise of neoliberal multiculturalism in middle 1990s and the turn of the twenty-first century. While contemporary scholars associate the movements of 1990s and 2000s with the rise of neoliberalism, collective urge for protest was ignited by women of color antiviolence scholarship, activism, and organizing to a large extent.\(^7\)

In short, women of color have been resisting violence, documenting it, and imagining a world without violence for a long time in the United States. Feminist scholars have long recognized and offered groundbreaking theorizations of racialized,


\(^6\) For more, visit https://womensmarch.com/.

\(^7\) Although diverse in agendas, Melamed recognizes these activist strands in the United States as “a resurgence of antiracist materialisms” collectively protesting neoliberal and multiculturalist trends of the 90s and 2000s (40).
colonial, and gendered violence, paying particular attention to the role of the state in the execution of violence against women and communities of color. From “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1977) to and *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) to *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* (2006), women of color have written about all forms of violence and emphasized its gender aspect in theory, fiction, and activist writing. Thus, we cannot only give credit to activists and organizers and ignore intellectuals, scholars, novelists, writers, and poets who resist and protest violence in writing. That is why I juxtapose artistic and activist texts in my dissertation; I demonstrate that the novelists, scholars, and activists collected in my work perform solidarity against gender violence in narrative form and that their antiviolence vision provides a strong base for intercommunal alliances and collective social justice struggle. Analyses of the political, intellectual, and artistic production of WOC in my project both establish solidarity among contemporary women visionaries and communities of color, and interconnect distinct forms of feminist knowledge production.

When collectively examined, as I do in this dissertation, Native and Black novelists, feminist scholars, and women of color activists’ shared visions of social justice and liberation indicate that violences directed at their familial integrity and larger communities are also gendered violations of women of color. Accordingly, as opposed to narrow or conventional definitions, I propose that any state act, law, practice, and institution that risks and harms women’s bodily and family integrity constitutes state-sponsored gender violence. Native feminist theorizing informs my approach to gender violence in this study; various Native studies scholars have established that it is crucial to understand assaults on familial and communal integrity of Indigenous women and
communities as part of systemic gender and racial violence of settler colonialism.⁸ Beyond the attacks on women’s bodies, Native feminism considers the imposition of colonial ideologies as assaults on Native women’s social, thus political, power in their communities. A pioneer in Native feminist theorizing with her seminal collection of essays, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), Paula Gunn Allen explains that colonialism harmed Native tribes and families through disrupting their gynocentric social organization and attempted to destroy future generations’ connection to their ancestral and cultural roots. She notes that “the invaders have exerted every effort to remove Indian women from every position of authority, to obliterate all records pertaining to gynocratic social systems, and to ensure that no American or few American Indians would remember that gynocracy was the primary social order of Indian America prior to 1800.”⁹ Emphasizing women’s central role in maintaining tribal systems and gynocentrism as a key structure for the political and social organization of life in Native tribes, Allen maintains that attacks on Native women’s positions in their communities were attacks on the social well-being of their communities. Eventually, settler colonists’ efforts to eliminate tribes’ gynocentric social organizing and assimilate them into white-dominant gender normativity undermined Native familial and tribal integrity, dispossessing women of their authority over the organization of tribal life.

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⁹ 3.
My proposition of a wider definition of gender violence is also informed of critical ethnic studies scholarship which maintains that it is crucial to understand violence in the US context as a fundamental state apparatus to enact its ideologies.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, gendered and racial forms of violence which the novels in this archive intimate include state practices that are not conventionally associated with gender such as biomedical technologies, eugenic practices, forced family separation (family in the sense of units of connected individuals who may/may not share a household), and institutional policies. INCITE!’s writings also broaden the scope of gender violence to include women’s violations “beyond interpersonal forms of sexual and domestic violence” and to contextualize gender and sexual violence as a tool of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism within and beyond the United States.\textsuperscript{11}

While deeply concerned with definitions and representations of gender violence, and women’s struggle for justice and liberation, \textit{Redefining Gender Violence} foregrounds Native and Black American women novelists’ and women of color antiviolence activists’ diverse visions of family, systems of intimacy, relations of care, and community. \textit{A Mercy}’s enslaved female characters, Lina and Florens; \textit{Almanac}’s twin sisters, Zeta and Leche, and their lost-and-found Yoeme; \textit{Miko Kings}’ Lena and her time travelling, genius spirit relative Ezol show us creative ways to think about family, intimacy, and care. For, these women form attachments and rewrite their relational herstories based on personal

\textsuperscript{10} My position is particularly informed of Chandan Reddy’s critical work on the intersection of race, sexuality, violence, and state. He notes that “collectively epistemologies generated by critical ethnic studies suggest that our contemporary moment is one in which the conditions of freedom and violence—or liberty and slavery, freedom and empire—constitutive of nineteenth-century racial modernity, and upon which modern citizenship is founded, cannot be resolved by epistemologies that see violence as a means or an instrumentality that can be dissociated from the ideals that organize political life” (222). Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State, Duke UP, 2011.

\textsuperscript{11} Color of violence: The INCITE! Anthology, p. 4.
experiences and visions, defying patriarchal, colonial, and racist impositions on their identities, womanhood, and ways of life.

Critical Conversations: Dispossession and Violence

Dispossession has become a pervasive and pertinent concept for theorizing and analyzing multiple modes of subjectivity, forced movements and displacements of diverse populations, the exploitation of disposable bodies and their labor, and most notably the capitalist and colonial acquisition of wealth and land. The increased attention to dispossession as a critical concept is partly propelled by critical ethnic studies’ recent orientation toward an intersectional analysis of indigeneity, race, and gender, which is mainly undertaken by Native and Indigenous studies scholars. Most notably, Native studies scholars such as Jodi Byrd, Glen Coulthard, Mishuana Goeman, and Stephanie Fitzgerald utilize the term in their theorizations of settler colonization, land theft, and forced relocations. They also use the term to indicate precarious political, economic, and social conditions under which American Indian collectives have been forced to live. In each formulation undertaken within Indigenous and Native American studies, dispossession implies a violent communal experience because of disconnection, displacement, or separation. In parallel, scholars of Black radical tradition employ the term to characterize ancestral as well as contemporary experiences of Black political collectives on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. While Black dispossession is implicit or mostly implied in earlier works by contemporary intellectuals such as Hortense Spillers, there is more explicit engagement with the term in later work in this tradition. Hartman’s

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theorization of slave subjectivity as dispossession is one the most prominent examples of this scholarship, which is why I begin this introduction with a reflection on Lose Your Mother. Hartman considers slaves’ forced separation from familial and natal origins as slavery’s violence and argues that this is the legacy of slavery which African Americans have inherited from their ancestors. She names this legacy dispossession multiple times throughout the book: “the isolation of being severed from your kin and denied ancestors,” “no attachment or affiliation,” and the “sense of not belonging and of being an extraneous element” are inflections of dispossession and meant to articulate African American’s collective (and Hartman’s personal) sentiments about Black identity in the twenty-first century.13

Outside Black and Native studies, many renowned scholars increasingly recognize dispossession’s validity and versatility as a theoretical concept. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, for example, approach the term from multiple perspectives, discussing a variety of subject positions that can be termed as dispossession including but not limited to the realms of sexual, economic, and cultural in Dispossession: The Performative in the Political (2013). Similarly, the special issue of the journal Darkmatter titled “Cultures of Dispossession: Rights, Status and Identities” covers multiple contemporary forms of dispossession from First Nation women in Canada to Palestinian refugees in Syria. Editors Brenna and Davina Bhandar note that “[t]o be dispossessed of one’s home, land, territory, means of subsistence, history, language, and sense of self has been a defining experience of much of the world’s population in the 13 87-88.
modern era,” thus linking a wide range of political groups’ experiences across the
globe.14

Dispossession is also becoming a key word in comparative critical ethnic studies,
bringing together distinct literary and cultural traditions in innovative ways. In a co-
edited a special issue of Social Text titled “Economies of Dispossession: Indigeneity,
Race, and Capitalism,” critics Jodi Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan
Reddy address Native and Black dispossession as organically connected processes; they
propose “a relationality grounded both in place and in movement, which simultaneously
addresses Black geographies, dispossessions, and other racialized proprietary violences
as incommensurate to yet not apart from Indigenous land and sovereignty.”15 Similarly,
political science scholar Robert Nichols’ Theft Is Property! Dispossession &
Critical Theory (2020) offers an elaborate discourse that puts Native, Black radical,
feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial theories of dispossession in conversation. In an effort
to connect these diverse and divergent discourses, Nichols writes:

At the most general and abstract level… dispossession is typically used to denote
the fact that in large sections of the globe, Indigenous peoples have not only been
subjugated and oppressed by imperial elites; they have also been divested of their
lands, that is, the territorial foundations of their societies, which have in turn
become the territorial foundations for the creation of new, European-style, settler
colonial societies. So dispossession is thought of as a broad macrohistorical
process related to the specific territorial acquisition logic of settler colonization.16

14 http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2016/05/16/cultures-of-dispossession/.
15 “Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities,” 5.
16 5.
While my dissertation builds on these critical genealogies that theorize and contextualize dispossession in divergent and convergent ways, I center Native and Black studies intellectual discourses on dispossession as I work through a relational approach between the two. Following tradition by Native American as well as Indigenous studies scholars and Black radical thinkers, I insist to inject violence in critical discourses on dispossession, particularly in relation to experiences of loss and displacement. Particularly, I follow Native feminist scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen, Haunani-Kay Trask, Andrea Smith, Joanne Barker, Luana Ross, and Maile Arvin.

In its emphasis on violence, my work is aligned with Tiffany Lethabo King’s insightful inquiry of Black and Native literary traditions, politics, and theory in *The Black Shoals Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (2019). King draws attention to the overemphasis on land and labor and the disavowal of violence in critical discourses of settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Tracing the origin of white settler colonial studies, King observes that “[t]he uncritical adoption of settler colonial discourses from an oceanic context enacts a discursive shift that privileges a theoretical and ethical engagement with settlers, settlement, and settler colonial relations. Together, this works to displace conversations about genocide, slavery, and the violent project of making the human (humanism).”¹⁷ Instead, King returns to “conquest” as an analytical point for settler colonial history and theorizes the violence of racial abstraction. She argues that “conquest as a grammar and a frame from which to think makes it possible to register the always already intersectional violence of anti-Blackness, slavery and its afterlife, and genocide at the same time.”¹⁸

¹⁷ 65.
¹⁸ 68.
While King’s critique is directed at white settler colonial studies, abstract and generalized discussions of dispossession can undermine the legacy of violence that accompany colonial and racial histories of dispossession. That is why throughout my dissertation, I emphasize the violence of colonialism that may be pushed to the margins and decentralized in the recently popularized discourses of (white) settler colonialism and already established discourses of biopower and transnational feminisms, particularly those of which that focus on North America. While I do not claim to provide a comprehensive critique of all these often valid and pertinent paradigms, I draw attention to instances when colonialism’s ongoing violence is downplayed, usually in order to shed light on the ways in which forms of global oppression and vectors of power operate through and condition our lives. Previously, many scholars of Native studies have drawn attention to this recurrent issue. While I utilize settler colonialism as a larger contextual paradigm in my work, unlike the body of scholarship King criticizes, I do center Native feminist theories and writing.

At the intersections of Indigenous, Black, and critical ethnic studies, my project utilizes a relational approach to colonialism and racism as a mode of analysis to both examine contemporary Native and Black women’s fiction and highlight Native and Black experiences of dispossession. In its engagement with dispossession and larger discourses that surround it, my dissertation is informed of the US ethnic studies conceptual paradigm anchored by indigeneity, race, and gender and aligns with those of Glen Coulthard, Mishuana Goeman, Jodi Byrd, Iyko Day, Jodi Melamed, Chandan Reddy, Grace Hong, Roderick Ferguson, and Tiffany Lethabo King.
As it relates the conjoined histories of Native and Black dispossession through a focus on family separation, *Redefining Gender Violence* considers the concept of dispossession both within and outside its conventional meaning, including but not limited to cultural, familial, communal, and land disposessions. It argues that family separation is a dispossessive violence; Black, Native and migrant collectives’ experiences of familial loss are embedded in intertwining histories of forced displacement and accompanied by racial and gendered violations. In this regard, family separation shows how “the geopolitical realities of territorial dispossession and displacement are intertwined with cultural, psychic and affective forms of dispossession.”\(^{19}\) In the next part, I elaborate on cultural, literary, and feminist studies methods and approaches that frame this project.

**Methodology**

*Redefining Gender Violence* is transhistorical with a focus on contemporary cultural and activist writings by women of color. The novelistic representations of family disintegration, and antiviolence feminist-activist writings by INCITE! span from 1990 to 2010. The novels, however, engage in different historical periods in North America. Silko, Morrison, and Howe’s novels are fine examples of contemporary ethnic American women’s fiction which collectively form a field of historical redemptive work and a rhetorical space for imagining radical feminist futures. Of course, it is not only women of color novelists who produce history-specific revisionist creative works. Yet, their radical feminist visions are vital for not just imagining the future but understanding the past from a contextually appropriate perspective.

By curating an archive of contemporary historical fiction by women of color authors, my project utilizes a feminist aesthetic imagination that reclaims and redresses androcentric settler colonial historiography. LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007), for example, relates actual and fictive histories of Indian baseball, the Hampton Normal School, land allotments, and nineteenth-century assimilation politics that tore Native children from their families and communities. As I examine Choctaw-centric history and epistemology in the novel, I also interrogate the historical mission of Hampton Institution and Indian boarding schools in general to reflect on Black-Native-White interracial relations, cohabitation, and education. Similarly, in my reading of Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008), I explore intimate connections between racialization and colonization as they are linked through the gendered logic of dispossession and (dis)possessive manifestations of violence, property, and subjectivity in seventeenth-century American context.

After I unpack bodily, cultural, and land dispossessions and trace their long and merging histories as represented in the select narratives, I focus on the writings of the feminists-of-color-led activist network INCITE! to contextualize family separation within the current context of violence against women of color. The organization’s critical approach to gender violence closely aligns with my project’s overall attention and wider critical ethnic studies’ recent attunement to indigeneity, race, and gender; INCITE! posits gender violence “as a tool of patriarchy and as a tool of racism and colonialism,” positioning the white settler state as “the primary perpetrator” of gender violence, particularly against women of color.\(^{20}\) INCITE!’s writings provide the narratives of actual

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\(^{20}\) *The INCITE! Anthology*, p. 4.
cases where women of color and their collectives have been subjected to state abuse and made vulnerable in incommensurable but related ways. More importantly, though, their feminist activist vision makes it evident that no matter how conflicting and contradictory their grievances may appear, feminists of color must build alternative collectives and alliances against violence.

While concerning itself with the legacy of colonial, racial, and gendered violence, my dissertation is firmly anchored in abolitionist and decolonial ideals of Black and Native feminist epistemologies. These ideals are often imagined and operate across cultural and political boundaries rather than in ethnic and racial vacuums. And I have arrived at my doctoral project after working at multiple intersections of critical ethnic studies and contemporary multiethnic literatures. I have constructed my project in a way to transcend boundaries of Native and Black studies and to diverge significantly from merely comparative or completely unrelated representations of the two fields. This epistemic as well as ethical approach is informed of and formed by my long dedication to women of color feminist critique whose ethos has always been collaborative knowledge production and activism. Thus, women of color feminist epistemologies constitute a major theoretical framework in my dissertation.21

I should acknowledge my own positionality on the periphery of the two (imagined and rhetorical) political communities, namely Native and Black. While my introduction to histories that concern Native and Black collectives started only during my graduate

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studies, I recognized my identification with women of color from the beginning. A few of radical feminist writings became staples for my scholarship and new ones were added each year: *Sister Outsider*, *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *Lose Your Mother*, *The Sacred Hoop*, *Beloved*, *Almanac of the Dead*, *Living a Feminist Life*, *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, and *Color of Violence! The Incite Anthology*. These intersectional, anti-racist, and decolonial feminist sources of knowledge and their creators have been my guide and inspiration for forming my identifications and vision for social justice in academia and beyond. Their diverse and sometimes disparate radical visions and aspirations for just futures have resonated with mine on a personal level, possibly due to my own politically marginalized position based on my religious background in this country. I have constructed this project to center women of color and marginalized communities’ political visions for present and future. For me, this is an ethical as well as personal, thus political, choice; I recognize my personal investment to research (and teach) women of color radical feminist visions and make a conscious effort to show how learning communities of which I am a part can benefit from this knowledge production. Intersectional, anti-racist, and decolonial feminist works guide my vision of social justice and I have enacted my vision in this project through a close engagement with radical feminist writings and women of color cultural productions. Feminist visionaries and their uncompromising vision for justice and liberation inspire and fuel my investment in women of color radical feminist politics.
Chapter Outline

Redefining Gender Violence is a research project about gendered violence, broken families, and histories of bodily and communal violations. First, it engages in the novelistic representations of family disintegration and considers Leslie Marmon Silko’s, Toni Morrison’s, and LeAnne Howe’s fiction within the current context of forced family separation. It examines representations and actual stories of family separation. After I unpack bodily, cultural, and land dispossessions and trace their long and merging histories as represented in the select narratives, I turn to contemporary women of color (WOC) activist writings in order to consider family disintegration as a current manifestation of dispossessive, gendered state violence. I focus on the writings of the feminists-of-color-led activist network INCITE! to contextualize family separation within the current context of violence against women of color. My project also analyzes radical feminist visions of contemporary novelists, activists, and intellectuals.

Chapter 1, “Bio-Extractive Zones and Bloody Histories: Tracing Bodily Violences in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead”, examines Almanac as a theory of colonialism’s gendered violence(s) and bodily violations in the Americas. In this chapter, I problematize the current conceptualization of biopolitics and show the centrality of Native American cultural productions for generating nuanced theories of biopolitics informed by settler colonialism. More specifically, I utilize the terms biopolitics (as mostly discussed by Foucault) and necropolitics (Mbembe) in my reading of Almanac as analytics in order to conceptualize contemporary biomedical practices as a cluster of systems and technologies that are presented as the primary tool of neoliberal governmentality and violence in the novel while relating these contemporary
technologies to the settler-colonial past and present. For a discussion of biopolitics at the intersection of settler-colonialism, I turn to Jaspir Puar’s most recent book *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017). With neoliberal governmentality and the medical-industrial complex as its targets, *The Right to Maim* characterizes the United States as a biopolitical control society which “work[s] insidiously by using disciplinary power to keep or deflect our attention around the subjection of the subject, thus allowing control to manifest unhindered.”22 I propose that Puar’s elusion to conceptualize the United States as a settler colonial state, despite her acknowledgement, and this focus on the present US as a primarily neoliberal state, miss the opportunity to consider the biopolitics of settler colonialism in its “settled” stage, as opposed to its destructive (or deadly/debilitating) phase as in the case of Israel.

I suggest that the frameworks of settler colonialism/Indigenous death and debility and neoliberalism/biopolitics are potentially at odds with each other. Biopolitics is not a commensurable term for delineating the settler colonial logics of the United States as it signifies the existence and acceptance of an assumed population, a multiplicity of bodies that represent “the body” to be managed and controlled. The fact that US settler colonialism has been built on the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas implies the extermination of a native “body” in order to create space for a settler population in the first place, rather than its management. I show that what is missing in recent theorizations of biopolitics and (along non-Indigenous and -Native narratives of US settler colonialism) is violence.

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Chapter 2, “The Condition for Coexisting: Settler Colonialism and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*”, crafts a Native feminist reading of Toni Morrison’s 2008 novel *A Mercy*, reflecting on the gendered logic of settler colonial dispossession and its connection to violence, property, and subjectivity in the seventeenth-century North American context. It argues that Black and Native women’s forcible separation from family and community emerges as one of settler colonial possessiveness’ foundational features in the novel. Signifying the compulsory individualism of the colonial condition, *A Mercy* reveals a world order in which Native and diasporic women are cut from their roots and communal intimacies; function as servants for an emerging capitalist formation in and outside the house; and inhabit a colonial domestic space while struggling to bond because of clashing subjectivities. This chapter shows that in Morrison’s imagination 1690s’ colonial America is first and foremost a violent social cosmos formed by settler colonial possessiveness and its defining race and gender relations.

Chapter 3, “Severed Hands, Stolen Lands: Looking for Lost Connections in LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings*”, continues and extends the second chapter’s reflection on dispossession, relating histories of land theft with familial and cultural loss. Choctaw author LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007) narrates a love story between the team’s pitcher and his lover, weaving multiple plotlines of Indian baseball, the Hampton Normal School, and assimilation politics that tear Native children from their families and communities. Commenting on the multiple stories the novel brings together, Howe says: “I started with the love affair to ground me here, at Hampton, because Hampton begins, or it is a good model for the beginning of, replacings… And
you can go to the gravesite and look at all of the children of that experiment, here at Hampton, who lie dead, in the cemetery as monuments to that replacement narrative. They’ve lost their family connections” (84). Drawing on previous chapters, this chapter continues the thematic discussion on losing familial and communal connection. It focuses on the role of Hampton Institute as a controversial educational institution and discusses how the school enacts violences by disconnecting Native students from their cultures and communities and placing them in a historically Black institution.

While telling stories of loss and separation, Miko Kings critically centers Choctaw history and epistemology in Indian territory to emphasize returns and reconnections to Native lands and cultural roots. The narrator/main character Lena’s return to her ancestral lands signifies cultural politics of reclaiming Indian country and reminding historical truths about cultural geographies that have come to be US territory but always have belonged to Native nations.

Featuring Hampton School and baseball, Howe’s novel offers additional insights into relations and intimacies among tribes and other communities inhabiting Native lands and how their relations were subject to racist surveillance by white supremacist groups such as KKK in the early twentieth century. Miko Kings also features the Four Mothers Society, an important political organization which protects political rights and land claims of Muscogee Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw people. Howe’s narrative represents the gynocentric and matrilineal nature of tribal nations, echoing

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Paula Gunn Allen’s argument that Native women are central to the social wellbeing and organization of American Indian tribal lifeways. Accordingly, this chapter elaborates on the author’s vision of women’s role and place in organizing and sustaining political and social life in Native communities that are incorporated in the novel.


I focus on *The INCITE! Anthology* as it provides a synopsis of women of color’s collective anti-violence vision and grounds this vision in their scholarly and activist work. I draw on multiple accounts of antiviolence strategies; forms of gender, racial, and colonial violence; and movement building offered by contributors to the collection. After providing a brief history of the antiviolence movement and INCITE!, I offer a close analysis of the organization’s self-identified radical feminist approach to (ending) gender violence; clear from the organization’s self-professed goal, they advocate for comprehensive, grass-roots, political-activist antiviolence strategies and analyses that center women of color. Their “radical vision of structural oppression” incorporates analyses of gender violence with economic and racial justice issues, recognizing the role
of states in the enactment of violence against communities of color. 25 By connecting social justice struggles conventionally treated as separate, they offer a thorough antiviolence vision, called abolition feminism, which centralizes women of color analyses, experiences, and voices. In concluding Chapter 4, I investigate how the political vision of the select fiction converges with the antiviolence activism of this specific network of contemporary feminists of color.

Finally in the Epilogue, “Of Separations and Returns,” I reflect on the forced family separation of the central Latin American asylum-seekers and its aftermath. Children’s removal from asylum-seeking parents epitomizes state-sponsored violence in form of child abuse and evokes genocidal assaults on migrant communities. 2018 Summer has shown, unfortunately, that the novels in this archive do not relate a distant past when it comes to family separation; violences directed at communities of color should be a central concern of antiviolence activism, as for INCITE!. Historically, Native, Black, and families of color have never had their family unity protected and most recently their familial integrity has been systematically destroyed through incarceration, forced child removals, and racist reproductive medical practices. These collectives and other communities of color continue to resist their disintegration in the United States. Thus, examining family separation as a ubiquitous tool of state-sponsored violence is crucial to understand the ongoingness of US settler-colonialism and its links to current violations of these communities.

25 The Incite Anthology, 3.
CHAPTER 1
BIO-EXTRACTION ZONES AND BLOODY HISTORIES: TRACING BODILY VIOLENCES IN LESLIE MAR MON SILKO’S ALMANAC OF THE DEAD

In her most recent book The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability (2017), Jasbir Puar asks: “Alongside examining how and why Foucault elided a theory of colonial occupation in his formulation of biopolitics, we might also ask, what is biopolitics in the twenty-first century, especially as informed by the ongoing structure of settler colonialism?” Her book overall is a successful attempt at answering this question in the Palestine-Israel axis: Puar argues, Israel settler colonial rule instrumentalizes “maiming” to create injury and maintain a debilitated Palestinian population in the region. This ostensibly benevolent act of “sparing death by shooting to maim” reflects the biopolitical logic of Israeli control state, namely, “the logic of “will not let die”” rather than the power of biopolitical governmentality to make live and let die.

While Puar ingeniously uses the concept “debility” to explain biopolitical technologies specific to Israel, her discussion of debility, disability, and capacity as an assemblage of control societies resonates transnationally. She juxtaposes, for example, the violence going on in Gaza with that of Ferguson in the summer of 2014: “Militarized containment of civilians in Ferguson echoed those of the settler colonial occupation of Palestine.” The Right to Maim’s proper juxtaposition of Israel with the Unites States, another ongoing structure of settler colonialism and, not surprisingly, the greatest ally of

\[26\] 137.
\[27\] x.
\[28\] ix.
Israel, however, does not extend beyond a comparison mainly based on the simultaneity of the violences in these two different geopolitical contexts. With the neoliberal governmentality and the medical-industrial complex as its targets and at the intersection of disability and critical race studies, The Right to Maim characterizes the United States as a biopolitical control society which “work[s] insidiously by using disciplinary power to keep or deflect our attention around the subjection of the subject, thus allowing control to manifest unhindered.”

I propose that Puar’s elusion to contextualize the United States as a settler colonial state, despite her acknowledgement, and her focus on the present United States as a primarily neoliberal state miss the opportunity to consider the biopolitics of settler colonialism and the biopolitics of colonial violence in its ostensibly “settled” stage in the United States in comparison to its destructive (or deadly/debilitating) phase as in the case of Israel.

To be fair, though, biopolitics may not be the most commensurable term for delineating the settler colonial logics of the United States. In Foucault’s formulation, biopolitics “deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem.” Biopolitics signifies the existence and acceptance of an assumed population, a multiplicity of bodies that represent “the body” to be managed and controlled. The fact that US settler colonialism has been built on the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas implies the extermination of Native bodies in order to create space for a settler population in the first place, rather than its management. Native genocide, or erasing a Native existence on the land, operated on the assumption of Native bodies as non-human

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29 51.
30 “Society Must Be Defended,” 245.
and found its justification in the cultural domain through dehumanizing discourses which reduced them into “savages” incompatible for control and discipline by a political state. Thus, the historical existence of the United States is premised on the assumed absence of a governable and manageable body in North America; an empty land waiting not only to be cultivated and extracted but first to be occupied and embodied by a civilized population.

The simultaneity of killing bodies for making other bodies live, or the simultaneity of the management of bodies along with others’ extermination, complicates the applicability of biopolitics in the context of US settler colonialism. In a sense, US settler logic has been “make die” to “let live,” which Achille Mbembe terms as “necropolitics.”31 And yet, as Mbembe argues, we cannot separate these two different technologies or politics, namely biopolitics and what has come to be called the politics of death,32 in US legal and political history, and possibly its present, because the extermination of Native peoples can never be outside the legal-political realm in the United States’ claims to sovereignty: “To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.”33

I observe that by considering the United States primarily as a neoliberal state, Puar marks the territory of her (transnational feminist) scholarship outside Indigenous studies and Native feminist scholarship. While I do not claim that Puar purposefully eschews engaging in Native feminist scholarship, which formulates the United States as a

31 In his well-known article titled “Necropolitics,” Mbembe defines necropolitics as “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (39). His argument that “the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power” aligns with my argument in this essay that biopolitics is a too sterile concept to account for contemporary political structures’ exertion of power over human populations and bodies (39).
32 See Hannah Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) for a discussion on racism and death.
33 Mbembe 12.
source of constant colonial violence at home and beyond, I question whether transnational feminist scholarship, particularly its critique of neoliberalism, is too steadfastly focused on contemporary forms and formations of global oppression to the detriment of its shared genealogy with Native feminist scholarship. While the critical discourses of Indigenous and Native feminist studies (two overlapping yet distinct fields) may require engagement with US colonial past-present\(^\text{34}\) and a consideration of Indigenous inhabitants of North America, again these two fields offer consistent and intersectional analyses of settler colonial violence and racializing, gendering, heteronormative technologies of the neoliberal era. Particularly, Native feminist\(^\text{35}\) scholars remind us that biopolitical practices of population management have always been complimentary to US colonial rule, which is itself a gendered process and possibly a form of gendered violence. In *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture* (2010),\(^\text{36}\) editors Cheryl Suzack and Shari Huhndorf rightly note that “[f]or Indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women’s bodies, and sexual violence.”\(^\text{37}\) Other Indigenous feminists’ analyses of settler

\(^{34}\) I use the term past-present to indicate the continuity of colonialism while also drawing attention to the settler colonial history. This meaning aligns with Macarena Gommez-Barris’s use of the term in a related article: “The term past-present indexes for me the continuum of colonization within a web of extractive capitalism that began in the 1500s and has persisted through the past forty years of neoliberalism until the present, an extractive capitalist complex that, despite shifts in its mode of production and representation, continues to unequally structure both relations between humans and relations between humans and other species” (90-91). “Mapuche Mnemonics: Reversing the Colonial Gaze through New Visualities of Extractive Capitalism,” *Radical History Review*, no: 124, 2016, pp. 90-101.

\(^{35}\) I use Native feminist and Indigenous feminist interchangeably throughout the paper, not because they do not have nuances but because these scholars’ works belong to the same genealogies within feminist studies.

\(^{36}\) The volume uses the term “Indigenous feminist studies” in order to highlight common issues and concerns among Indigenous women across borders.

\(^{37}\) 1.
colonialism also indicate that colonialism has been the primary force that has created patriarchal, heteronormative, and racist formations of citizenship and nationalisms in the United States. In light of their arguments, it is particularly curious why Puar’s discussion of US biopolitics does not incorporate Native feminists’ insightful formulations of settler colonialism and, more remarkably, colonial violence. Keeping Native feminist politics and arguments in mind, I ask: 1) what are the ways the contemporary biopolitics of the United States is grounded in its colonial existence if “settler colonialism performs biopower in deeply historical and fully contemporary ways,” as Scott Morgensen suggests? 2) What do we enact when we fail to conceptualize US biopolitics in relation to settler colonialism other than “naturalizing” settler colonial existence and its power, biopolitical or other? 3) Has biopolitics of the United States become a euphemism of the neoliberal era for the racialized, gendered, and sexual violences of colonialism? 4) What do we make apprehensible and obscure when we theorize state policies and practices as biopolitics even when they kill, maim, permanently damage the assemblages of bodies and psyches? (Or, does violence have to signify physical death?) 5) Keeping Native feminist ethics and its mandates in mind, what do we call the liberal gendering and racializing technologies of US settler colonialism such as boarding schools and child removals, especially as we know that these

39 “The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now”, 52.
40 Morgensen argues that “if settler colonialism is not theorised in accounts of these formations [European colonisation, global capitalism, liberal modernity and international governance], then its power remains naturalised in the world that we engage and in the theoretical apparatuses with which we attempt to explain it” (53).
technologies have been employed to diminish Native existence in North America? Is it a biopolitical exercise to manage remaining Indigenous peoples with the intention of eliminating land claims?

Since these questions are concerned with US settler colonialism’s biopolitics and necropolitics, current violences and violations, and the matter is of life and death, I turn to Leslie Marmon Silko’s phenomenal novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) for my inquiry: her book offers a calculated sketching of the sociopolitical landscape and the imperial outreach of the US nation-state as well as its domestic violence and violations of land and bodies in the late twentieth century. Silko relates her story interweaving colonial, intergenerational, and European-sourced violences with colonizing technologies and practices of the neoliberal era. From the literal bloodshed of genocide to the more “refined” violences of biomedical technologies, for which bloodshed is also essential, *Almanac* traces the old and more recent tools of settler colonialism in the Americas and beyond. Thus, *Almanac* comes to mind as an expansive creative-critical discourse for exploring settler colonial violences on a transnational terrain due to its broad geographical outreach. Throughout this lengthy book, which is 763-pages long, Silko sketches a world contaminated, on the one hand, with toxic materials and radioactivity; on the other hand, with organ trafficking, porn, drugs, sexuality as commodity, torture, and corruption. In other words, she depicts a civilization which has been built upon the destruction and invasion of Indigenous lands and at the expense of the Indigenous along with other disposable bodies around the globe.
So far, *Almanac*’s broad historical and spatial scope has led to innovative readings and interpretations. Previously, critics celebrated its revolutionary vision, transnationalist eco-criticism; drew attention to its non-transnational Indigenous politics, its Pueblo-centric and place-based epistemologies and storytelling. *Almanac* has been juxtaposed with Indigenous activism; read as `both theory and history. It has also been critiqued for not advocating tribal/national sovereignty for Indigenous people. The inclusion of a multi-ethnic and -national army of poor people has been the ground for its speculated gesture toward transnationalist solidarity: Shanri Huhndorf, for example, proposes that the politics of the novel offers “transnational alliances… as the most powerful (but nevertheless contradictory) form of anticolonial resistance.” She considers the novel’s transnationalist perspective as a way to incorporate the overlapping histories of “imperialism, slavery, and class struggle in a single, ongoing story of land conflicts.” Joni Adamson also argues that the novel gestures towards a civil-rights based and other “innovative forms of coalition politics” among peoples who come from different Indigenous and ethnic groups in the United States, Africa, New Zealand, Central and

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48 *Mapping the Americas*, 141.
South America. Sarah Ray, on the other hand, points out that Silko reflects on the transnationality of Indigenous politics to problematize easy and quick acceptance of “totalizing theories” such as transnationalism. Instead, she suggests that Silko approaches every idea, theory, ideology with caution. The previous body of scholarship which characterizes Silko’s vision as belonging to civil rights discourses and transnationalist solidarities based on shared oppressions might have paid enough attention to the novel’s critique of the interlocking systems of oppression that operate transnationally, systems in which Silko's characters are entrapped and revolting against simultaneously. My reading borrows from the valuable groundwork that these critics have already laid. However, I believe that they have mostly drawn attention to the embodied identities and solidarities between those constellations while they have not paid enough attention to Silko’s radical feminist vision which traces the violent past and present of (settler) colonialism on the bodies of neoliberal subjects and of their ancestors.

Examining Almanac as a theory of colonialism’s gendered violence(s) and bodily violations in the Americas and beyond, I show the centrality of Native American cultural productions for producing nuanced theories of biopolitics informed by Native feminist critique of settler colonialism. In a sense, this chapter is an inquiry of the intersections of possibly disparate and definitely distinct activist trajectories of transnational feminist

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51 Andrea Smith critiques this type of political organizing among women of color whose premise is “that women from communities victimized by white supremacy should unite together around their shared oppression” (66). She draws attention to the limits and complications of such an organizing in terms of equivocating distinct experiences and concerns of different political communities. “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing,” The Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology, edited by Incite! 2006, Duke UP, 2016, pp. 66-73.
theories and Indigenous feminist studies, rather than an intervention.⁵² In my reading of *Almanac*, these intersections happen to be more bodily than temporal or spatial; the novel lays bare the most extreme dimensions of the medical industrial complex that prey and thrive on disposable bodies; namely bodies of color, women’s bodies, bodies of babies, and disabled and debilitated bodies. While I utilize the terms biopolitics and necropolitics to conceptualize contemporary biomedical practices as a cluster of systems and technologies essential for neoliberal governmentality and violence in my reading of the novel, I also demonstrate that Silko threads biomedical violations of neoliberal era to colonial practices that simultaneously harm humans and the earth.

My choice of Native American cultural production in order to do some serious thinking on the issues that presently concern me, i.e. feminism, transnationalism, and contemporary Indigenous politics, is informed of Indigenous scholars’ cogent arguments regarding settler colonialism and Indigenous epistemologies. Jodi Byrd maintains that for accomplishing a decolonial method and working with charged issues of settler colonialism, sovereignty, and Indigenousness, we must center American Indian authors.⁵³ Similarly, Linda Tuhwai Smith’s seminal book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) emphasizes the importance of Indigenous epistemologies for producing ethically and contextually sound research. Beyond the weight of these arguments, I zero in on Silko’s book not because *Almanac* engages in issues of colonial

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⁵² For more on the issue, see *American Quarterly*’s special forum titled “Native Feminisms without Apology.” Articles in the forum posit that “postcolonial and transnational feminist theory often develops without sufficient attention to indigeneity, wherein Native bodies are unwittingly positioned as what Kate Shanley terms a “present absence.” At the same time, Indigenous studies has often dismissed postcolonial and transnational feminist theory by simply arguing that Native peoples are not “postcolonial” without more carefully engaging theoretical contributions from this field that might be helpful to Native studies” (244). *American Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2008, pp. 241–315.

violence but because Silko offers an overwhelmingly comprehensive analysis of colonial violence and traces it on a vast spatiotemporal terrain. Thus, I turn to Silko not to apply already-existing theories of violence, colonialism, and biopolitics; rather I examine her vision as a ground for theories of and resistance against colonialism’s bodily and earthly oppressions. In the rest of this chapter, I focus on three issues intersecting in the novel: 1) extractive capitalism and its relation to bodily violences, 2) colonialist violations of bodies and reproductive rights, and trauma, and 3) family separation as a form of gendered colonial violence.

**Extractive Capitalism and Bio-Extractive Zones**

Silko’s depiction of the Americas anticipates Macarena Gómez-Barris’s term “the extractive zone.” Noting its presence in the Americas since the arrival of colonists, Gómez-Barris defines extractive capitalism as “an economic system that engages in thefts, borrowings, and forced removals, violently reorganizing social life as well as the land by thieving resources from Indigenous and Afro-descendent territories.” Resource extraction has been foundational to colonialism, economic imperialism, and capitalism since the European conquest of the Americas, expanded dramatically in modernity, and reached to alarming scales in the neoliberal era. As a driving force behind

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54 T.V. Reed posits a similar argument regarding the book’s “global decolonial environmental justice criticism”: “I argue not that an environmental justice cultural criticism can be applied to *Almanac of the Dead*, but rather that *Almanac of the Dead* was already doing global decolonial environmental justice cultural criticism many years before the field was named, and that critics still need to catch up with Silko” (25). “Toxic Colonialism, Environmental Justice, and Native Resistance in Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*,” *MELUS*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 25-42.

55 *The Extractive Zone*, xvii.

neocolonization, military interventions, and political conflicts on a transnational terrain, global extractivism is a central issue in environmental, economic, and social justice debates today. As Gómez-Barris emphasizes along with an increasing number of scholars of environmental justice and ecocriticism, the sites of resource extraction are often Indigenous lands and territories in South America and the Global South in general. As a result, Indigenous communities are forced to suffer the deadliest consequences of extractivism, despite their sustained rejection and protest of these practices.57

Considering its focus on environmental degradation, colonialism, and death, it is no surprise that Silko interweaves capitalist resource extraction into her epic narrative, engaging in multiple geographies that have been extractive zones. Most notably, the author characterizes her tribal homeland, Laguna Reservation, as an extractive zone in the chapter titled “The Stone Idols.” Silko wittily narrates how a uranium mine imposed by the federal government splits the tribe: “old-timers… dead set against ripping open Mother Earth so near to the holy place of the emergence” [of stone idols] versus “a whole generation of World War II veterans then who had come home looking for jobs, for a means to have some of the comforts they had enjoyed during the years away from the reservation” (34). She shows, however, that this generational divide between the tribe members is not simply a matter of age and experience. Instead, economic and social consequences of World War II work for the benefit of the federal government in its disputes with tribal entities, forcing the Laguna tribe members to agree with the federal decision:

It had been 1949 and the United States needed uranium for the new weaponry, especially in the face of the Cold War. That was the reason given by the federal government as it overruled the concerns and objections the Laguna Pueblo people had expressed… those old ones had been dying off and already were in the minority. So, the Tribal Council had gone along with the mine because the government gave them no choice, and the mine gave them jobs. They became the first of the Pueblos to realize wealth from something terrible done to the earth.

(34)

The chapter tacitly references to Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine, which was in operation in Laguna Pueblo from the early 1950s to 1982. In telling the story of the uranium mine, Silko shows how the federal government and its extractive practices can, and did, bring Pueblo Indians close to death, not just by constructing the mine site within their land but recruiting the tribe members as workers. As Russell West-Pavlov notes, resource extraction exploitation “extends from the neglect of reinvestment in the environment and the workers, to a fully fledged necropolitics” and this episode from the novel sums up all these violences in a tongue-and-cheek way. It is particularly telling how the federal government can, and actually did, screw up World War II veterans from Pueblo Laguna twice, during and after a traumatic war, and somehow can make them believe that they would be the beneficiaries of a man-made disaster called uranium mine. Despite the old-time people’s warnings that “all the people would pay, and pay terribly, for this desecration, this crime against all living things,” the mine ends up being constructed (35).

While the novel does not reveal all the catastrophic consequences of the mine, in

actuality this extractive site was connected to multiple health issues in the surrounding communities. It was, for example, the culprit of frequent cases of lung cancer among uranium miners in the Southwestern United States in the 1950s. And it continues to pose a risk to people and the environment. Silko does not delve much into actual catastrophes which the uranium mine caused. Instead Silko tells this story early in the novel to signal that old-timers and ancestors’ words contain ancient wisdom that is critical for the earth and its inhabitants’ salvation.

In this episode, we also get a glimpse of the previous generation’s extractive practices, namely the Cold War period. Rather than corporations and industry stakeholders being greedy with the earth’s limited resources, which has been the case in our neoliberal moment, it is the federal government that seeks resources for its war machine. Currently, extractive capitalism is more propelled by corporations, and governments all around the world support rising extractive, or rather destructive, corporate-capitalist greed through their neoliberal economic policies. This does not mean, however, that the US military stopped depending on extractive capitalism during the neoliberal era. The symbiotic relationship between the US military and extractivism continue unabated. The United States’ invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and 2003

59 The facility continues to be a health risk to the surrounding communities to this day. For more information, see “Public Health Assessment Jackpile-Paguate Uranium Mine Laguna Pueblo Laguna, Cibola County, New Mexico” available at https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HAC/pha/JackpilePaguate/JackpilePHAPublicComment_508.pdf

60 The United States started catching up with neoliberal currents in 1980s when the Reagan administration implemented a series of economic policies to revert the effects of the recession experienced in 1970s. The Clinton administration followed suit by introducing and promoting more aggressive neoliberal policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

61 See Stuart Kirsch, Mining Capitalism: The Relationship Between Corporations and Their Critics (2014) for a discussion on how corporations manage their relationships with governments and environmental organizations by manipulating scientific research and deploying discourses of sustainability in pursuit of more profit and zones for exploitation.
invasion of Iraq during the George Bush administration show, for example, that US military-industrial complex’s agenda perfectly aligned with the extractive corporations’ search – in this case Anglo American oil companies such as British Petrol (BP) and Shell – for new geopolitical zones unstabilized by political and armed conflicts. While the economic paradigms have shifted from more state regulation to free-market capitalism and deregulation since the Cold War period, not surprisingly, the United States continues to boost the military industry, or rather the military-industrial complex, through waging wars in zones of rich mineral and natural resources. Ongoing US invasion in Afghanistan and continuing US involvement in post-invasion Iraq are the most recent examples of this relationship.

As Gómez-Barris notes, extractive logics do not only zone and seize lands but divide communities and the residents of lands into racial, gender, sexual hierarchies; it “violently reorganizes territories as well as continually perpetuates dramatic social and economic inequalities.”62 Currently, US-sourced racial and sexual hierarchies of global scale are imposed in the Americas through extractive capitalism and in the (old and current) war zones of Asia and the Middle East through military intervention, only to boost a “national” economy which never serves Indigenous communities, racially and economically oppressed groups, or sexual others. Almanac shows that such hierarchies abound within and beyond the US settler colonial territory and documents political and economic hierarchies fueled by settler colonial extractive logics. The hierarchies created by the extractive zones of the Americas are not limited to the organization of social life in Almanac, though; from infant organ harvesting to the blood plasma business, the

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62 xviii.
“extractive zone” permeates to bodies, turning them into materials and supplies. In the novel, these “recyclable,” or rather “repurposable,” bodies belong to veterans, the homeless, and babies; bodies out of which capitalism cannot extract labor, thus must be pieced and dismantled in order to be commodified.

Silko represents Tucson, Arizona, as such an extractive zone where racial organization of social life intersects with corporeal commodification. Located in Tucson, Trigg’s biomaterials company is a lucrative business; his supply-chain for plasma donors are Vietnam veterans who have found themselves on the streets after the war, “army of the homeless” in Silko’s words (396). His “illegal sales to certain West German biomedical consortiums” come from bodies of hitchhiking homeless people whom he himself picks up and executes (443). With the money he makes from his blood and organ donor business, Trigg buys real estate in Tucson for “rehabilitating” neighborhoods, meaning removing Mexicans and Blacks who “could drift up from the bottom of the cesspool – and it only took a few of those brown floaters to stink up and ruin an entire neighborhood” (387). Disabled after a car crash, Trigg fantasizes about walking again with the help of advancing biomedical technologies and that is why he supplies “fresh biometarials” for human organ transplant research (389).

Silko’s portrayal of the biomaterial business in Almanac closely resonates with Jennifer Terry’s Attachments to War: Biomedical Logics and Violence in Twenty-First-Century America (2017), a real-life account of how biomedical advancement relies on the literal bodily traumas of veterans. Focusing on the Afghanistan and Iraq wars between 2002 and 2014 and discussing the symbiotic relationship between biomedicine and war,

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63 Here I use the word piecing in its literal meaning. Jasbir Puar, however, offers a more specific definition informed by disability studies critical discourse. For more on the term, see Puar’s The Right to Maim.
Terry shows how the constant wounding and multiple traumas of the soldiers create the necessary conditions for promoting, funding, and conducting biomedical research, and also how the biomedical logics of justifying war are codependent on the racialization of Afghan and Iraqi soldiers, veterans of color, and on heteronormativity. While Terry’s discussion of the war-biomedicine nexus does not extend to previous periods of US wars, when juxtaposed with Silko’s imagination, it helps us understand biomedicine as the ubiquitous technology of the imperial war machine called the United States, which cripples bodies domestically and internationally and intend to remedy only the worthy bodies of qualifying citizen subjects: By biomedical logics, a body is worthy if it is heterosexual and fertile and it qualifies as a citizen if born inside the United States’ borders to correct parents. Trigg’s obsession with the ability to experience erection fits very well with Terry’s account of veterans’ genital injuries and “the value invested in restoring heterosexual masculine sexual embodiment” although his injuries are from a car crash (85). Trigg tries to compensate for his disability through heterosexual sex; even though he cannot ejaculate, he claims to have mental orgasms during intimate encounters with women. Until biomedical technologies fulfill its promise of working legs, his erection functions as his self-validation and validation of his body as masculine and abled.

Biomedicine, Terry argues, can be used to justify violence; it possibly obscures bodily violations, presenting itself as an assemblage of scientific practices ostensibly meant to better human conditions.\textsuperscript{64} Silko represents these very same practices, however, as actual tools of gendered, sexual, and racialized violence, not its justification.

\textsuperscript{64} By biomedicine, Terry means “the multiplying branches of modern biological sciences in their convergence with medical research, treatment, and profiteering” (3).
In the novel, the spread of HIV in Africa, for example, is presented as a medical experimentation of the first biological bomb plotted by international collaboration. The novel speculates that the contaminated blood and blood plasma supplies were given to postpartum women patients, thus infecting husbands and future newborns. “Deadly and silent” army of the virus, biological warfare in other words, is “superior to bullets and bombs” (547-48).

In *Almanac*, biomedical technologies are deployed to impair and wipe out yellow, brown, and black bodies; to produce artificial uteruses (because women are not reliable); to create a super race; and to reestablish monarchy in Europe. As *Almanac* implies, biomedical violence and the complimentary logic of biopolitics and necropolitics underlie the overlapping histories of colonialism/genocide, slavery/capitalism, orientalism/war, i.e. of “three pillars of white supremacy” in Andrea Smith’s words. Although they overlap, the politics of life and death are not rendered in a uniform fashion in these different histories and their operative logics. Presently, biopolitics and necropolitics may be enacted in similar or distinct ways resonant with these three pillars; however, historically they have relied on the differentiation of bodies and each hierarchal structure targeted, exploited, and managed human body in specific ways. Deeming it a necessity to address slavery in the critical discourses of biopolitics and necropolitics and the historical theorizations of politics of life and death, violence and terror, Mbembe explains, “[s]lave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life” and the “slave is… kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity” for the value of her/his labor, thus body.65 The Native body, however, did not constitute a

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65 21.
property with a value added to it, therefore it had to be eliminated for the possibility for transforming native land into property. *Almanac* shows that in the twentieth century, capitalist biomedical technologies ensure that bodies, from which labor cannot be extracted, are harvested for what they are in essence: flesh and blood. It is only possible to create value out of some bodies through its piecing, such as bodies of babies or mentally and physically disabled bodies. In a sense, surplus bodies which cannot make themselves available or fit for neoliberal market logics must be turned into value, which can only be rendered possible by biocapital.

Here I use the term “biocapital” in a loose fashion to indicate an essentially economic system which can turn the materiality of bodies, not its labor, representation or assumed meanings, into value. Kaushik Sunder Rajan offers a more sophisticated definition for the term in *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life* (2006). He argues that “life sciences represent a new face, and a new phase, of capitalism and, consequently, that biotechnology is a form of enterprise inextricable from contemporary capitalism.”66 In his work, biocapital signifies “a study of the systems of exchange and circulation involved in the contemporary workings of the life sciences but is also a study of those life sciences as they become increasingly foundational epistemologies of our time.”67 Rajan notes that biocapital is not necessarily specific to the neoliberal capitalist era. Defined as “a continuation of, an evolution of, a subset of, and a form distinct from” capitalism itself, biocapital emerges in multiple and myriad of ways across borders although its global emergence can make it seem uniform.68

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66 3.
67 12.
68 10. In terms of his methodology, Rajan brings together Marxian theories of value and Foucauldian notions of biopolitics to trace the emergence of life sciences and biotechnologies both as material
Tracing the constant references to blood, flesh, and other bio-matters in the novel, I speculate, will show that Silko suggests biocapital as the latest, and simultaneously ubiquitous, form of biopolitical logics at the intersection with settler colonialism in the Americas. Distinct from Foucauldian biopolitical logics to “make live; let die,” the biocapital logics *Almanac* depicts can be formulated as “recycle/reuse” to “let live.” Thus, in accordance with the twenty-first-century capitalist ethos of sustainability, settler colonialism’s previous bio/necropolitics to “make die” to “let live” are reinvented to accommodate the increasing supply needs of advancing biomedical technologies and enlarging biocapitalist markets. We can still consider this updated bio/necropolitics at the intersection with settler colonialism; Silko never offers the emergences of this “new” capitalist form or the executions and eruptions of related violences in temporal, spatial, or ideological isolation. In other words, while paying attention to structural differences in several geopolitical contexts, she also recounts her stories as related histories, not created in continental or national vacuums.

In *Almanac*, Silko traces colonialist hierarchies on bodies of the neoliberal era. Or rather, she shows how bodies are utilized by a new form of capitalist enterprise whereby disposable bodies and body parts are turned into commodity and bought/sold for profit. In a sense, she suggests that not only exploited geographies have become bioextractive zones; neoliberal bodies of racially, sexually, and economically marginalized are bioextractive zones. Tracking the complex transnational networks of neoliberal exploitation from resource extraction to biomedical industry, Silko connects land to bodies, characterizing both vulnerable to extraction, degradation, and exploitation.

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* economies and epistemologies in the comparative framework of the Unites States and India, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.
Below, I focus on several episodes in *Almanac* where biocapitalist practices are intertwined with the destructive histories of colonialism and European-originated racist and sexist ideologies. These episodes show ways in which colonial violence seeps into women’s reproductive lives and causes harm to bodies and familial bonds as well communities and generations.

**Colonial Violence and its Remainings on Bodies**

Silko narrates a plethora of transnational and transhistorical, economic and bodily, connections among characters who embody the colonial and capitalist processes of violence and moral decay throughout the Americas. In the subplot about Seese and her kidnapped baby, Silko relates oppressive interpersonal relationships as the manifestations of gendered and racial hierarchies of colonialism. Signifyingly, these episodes feature one or various forms of shady medical practices, biomedicine, eugenics, and other technologies related to human biology. The key character in the subplot, Beaufrey epitomizes the master of manipulations. Beaufrey keeps cocaine to attract young boys and manage Seese while he uses Seese as a decoy to manage David (59). Coming from wealth and growing indifferent to his environment and affects of others, including love, care, and physical pain, Beaufrey learns to manipulate people very early, particularly young men, whose pain and emotional destruction he is more interested in than their bodies. His fascination with images of dead faces and blood goes back to his childhood

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69 Huhndorf also suggests these characters serve as a critique of ongoing colonialism throughout the Americas: “the novel’s characters show that conquest is ongoing by repeating the removals, dispossession, and slaughter of the conquest, events that occur over and over in the story, often involving figures with the same names. This repetition of names and incidents depicts colonialism as a cyclical history of bloodshed common to all places throughout the Americas” (148).
years. In college “he had realized there always had been a connection between human
cannibals and the aristocracy,” so Beaufrey finds the commodification, circulation, and
easy disposal of human flesh very ordinary, possibly necessary (535). In his mind, his
cannibalistic relationship with human flesh, alive or dead, is nothing out of this world.
His real fascination, however, lies with the “unavailable and forbidden” (535), i.e.
pornographic: This fetish extends beyond personal manipulations of bodies around him;
he is in pornography business and specializes in “the surgical fantasy movies” (103).

Beaufrey is able to manipulate Seese into aborting her first pregnancy. When his
several attempts to talk Seese into aborting her second baby fail, he becomes obsessed
with her child. For Beaufrey, a fetus and a full-grown baby do not have equal value
because “films of fetal dissection” sell for much higher prices: “The biggest customers
for footage of fetuses was the antiabortionist lobby, which paid top dollar for the footage
of the tortured tiny babies. Beaufrey watched the creatures grimace and twist away from
the long needle probes and curette’s sharp spoon. Million-dollar footage” (102). Looking
back, Seese remembers how upset all men were with her second pregnancy, except for
David, who was interested in the baby only because he hoped that the baby would be a
literal projection of himself. Beaufrey has always been the actual danger, but Seese
realizes that a little too late. When the pain of her missing son is combined with excessive
amounts of cocaine and alcohol, Seese’s dreams become mixed with reality: She dreams
herself on a hospital bed, with “a sanitary napkin between her legs.” She knows it was
Beaufrey who “paid doctors to reach up inside her belly while she was knocked out, and
they had cut the little tendril.” The rosebuds she sees “have wilted, and the edges of the petals have dried up” (52).

From her incapacitated body to her body’s capacity to bear children, Seese’s body is governed by men’s whims and desires in the novel. Seese’s manipulation through drugs and alcohol and her “harvested” baby show that her body has become a bio-extractive zone. Seese is unaware that Monte ends up being one of the babies harvested for their organs, one of the many infant bodies Beaufrey provided for his business. In another dream, “she finds Monte’s corpse in a fountain at a shopping mall. He is tiny, reduced to the size of a fetus. But all his features are those of the six-month-old child he was when he disappeared” (47). It is actually Serlo, Beaufrey’s partner in crime, who wanted Seese’s child for his eugenics research. Serlo, who is “pure blood” Columbian, meaning non-Mestizo/non-Indian, is concerned with the conservation of nobility and European lineage. Trained in eugenics, he thinks that “the human race would die without a proper genetic balance” (542) and that mixing of bloodlines among Caucasians was the cause of weak genetic material and many issues Freud identified would not exist if both parents were male (542). In Serlo’s finca (meaning ranch in Spanish), Beaufrey and Serlo, who are “potent and virile” horsemen, lay the groundwork for the creation of a noble, pure-blooded race in Europe (554). They believe that they can create pure-blood, sangre pura, nobility through artificial insemination; Serlo freezes and stores his semen,

Shannon Toll explains that “In Laguna-Pueblo cosmology yellow is the color associated with femininity and fecundity; in Seese’s dream the yellow roses are dried and lifeless, signifying death rather than fertility. Seese also recalls the “chrome-yellow hue of light” in the room where the procedure took place, the same color Alegria observed after she seduced Menardo. Both women see this specific yellow light when they have compromised themselves to appease or please powerful, destructive men; men who desire to exert control over the women’s bodies, whether in a sexual or reproductive capacity” (77). “Weaving a Transnational Narrative: Yellow Woman and Orature in Almanac of the Dead,” American Indian Culture and Research Journal, vol. 39, no. 1, 2015, pp. 65-82.
like his grandfather did. Blood and semen, Silko shows, have become the biological imprints of race and lineage in heteropatriarchal\footnote{I use the term “heteropatriarchal” not its conventional meaning which signifies heterosexuality as the norm of sexual orientation. I use it in the sense that women are seen simply as bodies to bear a masculine, white race, and men are given the role to pass on that privileged blood lineage to future generations.} economies Serlo intends to maintain: “There was a strict biological order to the natural world; in this order, only sangre pura sufficed to command instinctive obedience from the masses” (italics in original, 549).

Silko represents the masculinity-coded nobility which Beaufrey and Serlo inherited from their ancestors as a curse, though; it is an outcome of intergenerational violence rather than a privilege. Through an anecdote of sexual abuse by Serlo’s grandfather, who shared the very same notions of nobility and blood lineage with Serlo, we learn that the notions of racial superiority persist simultaneously with the histories of bodily abuses. In this subplot, the commodification of gender and sexuality manifests as toxic and abusive relationships, and result in the underground trade of organs, dead fetuses, and artistic images of the corpse of a “white Texas fag boy naked in white chenille” (107). Haunting readers with spider-webbed lives of wasted bodies, Silko shows that these have become ordinary scenes in the extractive zones of the Americas; the palimpsest of histories merge on bodies, marking them as living victims, witnesses, and executers of colonial violence. They have become bio-extractive zones.

Silko’s negative, to say the least, characterization of homosexual white men in these episodes has led to the criticism of the novel.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion on the subject, see Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, “‘Now We Know that Gay Men Are Just Men After All’ Abject Sexualities in Silko’s Almanac,” Howling for Justice: New Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead, edited by Rebecca Tillett, University of Arizona Press, 2014.} While it is often considered an important (popular) cultural intervention to portray queer characters and other marginalized groups in positive light and positions of power, obvious from Almanac and
her other writing, Leslie Silko’s political aesthetics is beyond positive representation (a liberal fallacy in my opinion) and appropriate queer-sexual or ethnic-racial portrayal. Her representations are meant as metaphors to critique colonial mandates of masculine sexuality and their racializing logics and to evoke “convivial relations” between race and sexuality. Silko’s critical imaginary here aligns with the critical discourse Jaspir Puar engages in relation to white/European normative and nationalist conceptualizations of queer subjectivities in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007). These episodes can be considered as a peek into a European, white homonormativity, which Puar describes “as a formation complicit with and invited into the biopolitical valorization of life in its inhabitation and reproduction of heteronormative norms.” I believe there is an important distinction between these two authors’ political imaginaries, though. Puar contextualizes contemporary homonormativity in relation to US nationalism and imperialism, and invokes its transnational resonations in Europe. She relates the emergence of liberal homonormativities to demonstrate how they simultaneously produce the racial others of queer subjectivities both within and beyond US nation-state. Silko, on the other hand, directs the gaze on the sexual subjectivities of masculine-coded racial exceptionalism, rather than focusing on the production of racial-sexual others. Also, the

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73 See Philip Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*. NYU Press, 2015. Here my discussion is informed by Harper’s argument in relation to realist and abstractionist aesthetics of African American cultural productions. Harper is critical of the notion that social-critical “function [of cultural productions] is best served by a type of realist aesthetics that casts racial blackness in overridingly “positive” terms” and “argues for the displacement of realism as a primary stake in African American cultural engagement, and asserts the critical utility of an alternative aesthetic mode that it characterizes as abstractionism” (2).

74 Puar states, “I seek to exhume the convivial relations between queerness and militarism, securitization, war, terrorism, surveillance technologies, empire, torture, nationalism, globalization, fundamentalism, secularism, incarceration, detention, deportation, and neoliberalism: the tactics, strategies, and logistics of our contemporary war machines” (*Terrorist Assemblages*, xiv).

75 3.
homonormativity which *Almanac* depicts belongs to European colonial ideologies, thus extends the historical and geopolitical span of liberal sexual pathologizing. Further, however disturbing we find Silko’s characterizations, they function to narrate the intimacies of violent histories and capitalist ideologies in the Americas and beyond. *Almanac* constantly, not only in its depictions of white gay men, reminds that bodily violence persists, as a consequence and a tool of European colonial ideological institutions, whether it is biopolitics, medical practices, or war.

In her portrayals of characters who are seduced by capitalist greed rather than violence, Silko brings up blood and sex, too. Silko inserts a subplot about a mestizo arms dealer and insurer, Menardo, to scrutinize past and present “bloody” manifestations of colonialism in Mexico and beyond. Based in New Mexico, Menardo is involved in several gory businesses and has his own personal battle with his blood. Ashamed of his Indian heritage (mostly visible because of his flat nose, he believes), Menardo is eager to pass for a “sangre limpia” and to climb up the social ladder (259). He works very hard and spends much money to be worthy of his beloved wife Iliana, a descendent from the conquistador De Onate, although he cheats on her multiple times. (And even better, his lover Alegria, a Spanish architect, turns out to be even more driven by money than himself and outlives him.) He collaborates with CIA agents and serves the Mexican elite as well as drug and arms dealers in the United States. He has an ambitious vision for his business; his transnational insurance company provides coverage even for political unrest and casualties. In a conversation with his security services manager, Menardo, who is

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nauseated even by the talk of blood, learns interesting theories about blood: General J. “speculated that the sight and smell of blood naturally excited human sex organs. Because bloodshed dominated the natural world, those inhibited by blood would in time have been greatly outnumbered by those who were excited by the blood” (337). The histories of bloodshed and sex the General recounts dates back to “the cave people of France,” which confounds Menardo; he is under the impression that “the general was referring to savage tribes – Indians and Africans – and not to civilized Europeans” (337). General J.’s theory of bodies as recollective adds to Menardo’s bewilderment and nausea:

General J.’s main theory was that only the body remembered. The mind would blank out, Tortured nerves and veins had a memory; what the torturers did to prisoners was to make human time bombs… the best examples of the Nazi torture work were Jews who proclaimed themselves survivors. Because their bodies had carried cruel memories for years and years, and when the Jews thought they were home free, and safe, then the time bomb went off and they committed suicide.

(338)

Unlike the capitalist medical notions of human blood and flesh as disposable or reusable biomaterials, which she narrates in Trigg’s story, in this episode Silko represents bodily parts as capable of remembering. The “cruel memories” retained by the survivors’ bodies are not only the sensibility of images, screams, or the smell of exposed flesh; violence leaves its irrevocable prints in physical tissues and blood. In a way, Silko suggests that bodily violences become coded in DNA and are passed on from one generation to another, which is in fact argued by scientific studies on the transmission of cultural
trauma and epigenetics. As she reminds us of the refined and methodical savagery the Nazis exhibited, Silko also suggests that there are organic connections between a cultural group’s past trauma and their likelihood of inflicting violence, connections that are imprinted in human blood: “Palestinians kept in prison camps were tortured and killed by descendants of Jewish holocaust survivors. The Jews might have escaped the Third Reich, but now they had been possessed by the urge to inflict suffering and death. Hitler had triumphed” (546). The holocaust has been one of the most violent embodiments of racist ideologies in modern European and world history; however, it was not the first and is not likely to be last, either, Almanac prophesizes.

Silko’s portrayal of bodies as recollective beings, rather than mechanical assemblages of animated biomaterials, aligns the novel with the theories of intergenerational trauma. It is a well-established fact that intergenerational (cultural) trauma and “historical unresolved grief” ail Native communities and are passed from one generation to the next. Trauma and grief caused by conquest, genocide, land and cultural dispossession, forced removals, boarding schools, and various settler assimilation policies are referred as the foundation of contemporary social issues such as alcoholism, violence, and abuse that plague Native tribes and collectives. Many contemporary Native American authors pen their works in cognizance of historical and intergenerational trauma that saturates Native experiences. Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms (1994), for example, relates Angela’s, a young Native American woman, troubles and her life in

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77 Injecting a controversial subject here, Silko references to epigenetic research mostly done with the Holocaust survivors regarding their collective and individual trauma. For more on cultural trauma and epigenetics, see Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda, “Cultural Trauma and Epigenetic Inheritance,” Development and Psychopathology, vol. 30, 2018, pp. 1763-1777.
Adam’s Rib, a fictional town between Minnesota and Canada. In Adam’s Rib, Angela combats mental effects of violence inflicted on herself and her mother while her community faces environmental effects of extractive activities in the town. In *Shell Shaker* (2001), LeAnne Howe interweaves the Billy family’s distant generations’ violent experiences and their intergenerational effects with land struggles and forced removals. The novel represents embodied intergenerational trauma that results in violence.

Published only within a decade after *Almanac*, these works indicate an awareness of the connection between history, intergenerational trauma, and violences inflicted on bodies, particularly women’s, in Native American women’s fiction.

Certainly, narratives about violence and trauma are not limited to contemporary Native American women’s fiction. In addressing intergenerational trauma, contemporary Native American women’s fiction is also aligned with contemporary African American women’s fiction that includes countless cultural representations of historical trauma. Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison are only a few notable novelists from this tradition; their works often explore the cultural trauma of the African Americans and the legacy of slavery as inherited by contemporary characters. Not only in African American literary tradition but in general, Toni Morrison must be the most acclaimed of contemporary novelists whose fiction centers – and pushes the readers to reflect – on violence and intergenerational trauma caused by (racialized and gendered) violations of bodies and psyches. Particularly, *Beloved* (1987) stands out among her several prominent works that consider the destructive effects of past violence on families, communities, and generations of color. *Beloved* narrates and elaborates on various ways Black family unity is broken and targeted through slavery, racism, and anti-black white supremacy. Morrison
depicts how Black family and communal life are constantly threatened, showing intricate ways slavery and racism effect violence by injuring intimate bonds. However, *Beloved* can also be read as a text about resisting subjectivities who struggle to establish and maintain a familial connection despite intergenerational trauma and the trauma of history. The symbolic and literal resistance female characters embody through love and care for each other animate their battle with the violence of a traumatic past. In this sense, *Beloved* offers insights into how family and community can be reimagined and constructed anew. Morrison demonstrates that forming new relationships out of shared pasts, common experiences, or based off our visions of a desired future is a necessity. She communicates to the Black community that we cannot stay content with what is deemed suitable for us; redefining the conditions of our coexistence is a must as much as it is a choice. Thus, *Beloved* calls the Black community to move, change, and better understand their shared histories and presents through connecting with each other.

While Silko is equally skillful (and brutally honest) at depicting historical trauma of multiple cultural groups and trauma’s roots in violence, Silko’s political vision in *Almanac* and in general is also grounded in collective action and healing. Her vision of healing is more marked in her previous novel, *Ceremony* (1977), which meditates on how trauma leaves its marks on bodies. The novel tells the story of a World War II veteran, Tayo, who returns to his tribal land, Laguna Pueblo, after the war. *Ceremony*’s plot offers an optimistic outlook on trauma; with the help of his community and with a healing ceremony eventually Tayo recovers from physical and psychological symptoms of his distress. *Almanac*, on the other hand, follows a different, more intricate, trajectory towards resistance, unity, and healing. And yet, *Almanac* does not detail violences
enacted on bodies and the earth just to depict collective traumas; instead, the book shows them to be the reason why Indigenous resistance is vital for the survival of current and future generations and the survival of the earth. In recollecting the violences of the past and present, *Almanac* expresses a rightfully “harsh” anger at colonial legacies that spoil bodies, souls, and the earth.79

Reflecting on the issue of violence and intergenerational trauma, in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014) Glen Coulthard similarly suggests that Indigenous people’s contemporary resentment, which is “understood as an incapacitating inability or unwillingness to get over the past” by the Canadian state, constitutes “a politicized expression of Indigenous anger and outrage directed at a structural and symbolic violence that still structures our lives, our relations with others and our relationships with land” (109). Coulthard maintains that the harm caused by the colonial condition is highly visible on Indigenous bodies, psyches, and overall existence today. He is critical of colonial discourses that dispute and dismiss Indigenous people’s rightful anger in order to obscure the ongoing colonial condition on Indigenous lands. In regard to the colonial politics of recognition in Canadian context, he notes that colonialism acknowledges “the collective rights and identities of Indigenous peoples” as long as their recognition will not question the actual condition of this relationship (41). As he argues, the current position of Indigenous peoples – their political, economic, and social conditions as well as claims to their own lands and

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79 The novel has been called out for its blunt depiction of violence and its pathological characters from multiple political/cultural groups. For a more detailed discussion on the issue, see Joni Adamson, “A Place to See: Self-Representation and Resistance in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead,*” *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, And Ecocriticism: The Middle Place,* University of Arizona Press, 2001.
sovereignty, in Canada, the United States and other settler colonial societies which continue to be structured by this relationship. Similarly, *Almanac* demonstrates that Indigenous peoples continue to share their ancestors’ pain as well as the colonial condition and will continue to resist until “the return of all tribal lands” and “the disappearance of all things European” (Five Hundred Year Map).

Land loss, genocide, and cultural dispossession are at the core of historical trauma in Native nations. And yet, settler practices that cause harm to generations of Native families and communities are not limited to these genocidal and disposessive violences. The removal of children from their families has been a violent US strategy to dispossess tribal generations from their ancestral, familial, and cultural roots. The separation of Native children from their families through boarding schools and child removals by fostering agencies are the leading causes of intergenerational trauma in tribal communities today. In *Almanac*, Silko shows removing children to be complementary to extractive and bio-extractive technologies that violate the earth and bodies. In the final part, I discuss how *Almanac* takes issue with family separation and child removals, exploring modes of resistance to this colonial violence.

**Separated Mothers and Missing Children: Dispossession through Family Separation**

The trauma of child removals and separated families still haunt many North American tribes. Its psychological effects on Native families and communities are closely linked to intergenerational trauma and collective grief in today’s tribal communities. Boarding schools, which started in the 1870s, were the first federal step in separating Native children from their families and placing them in assimilative institutions that were
hostile to their Indigenous culture and identity. After boarding schools were closed in the 1930s due to activist campaigns against them, child separation strategies that tore Native families apart continued in other forms in the following decades. Through the late 1970s, the state foster care system targeted Native families in disproportionate numbers, placing their children with white families to assimilate them into mainstream American citizens without claims to Indigenous lands. Indian Children’s Welfare Act (ICWA) was enacted in 1978 to deter high numbers of children’s separation from their families in Native American tribes and communities. Although the legislation provided essential correction to the unfair and racist child separation practices by state child welfare and private adoption agencies, Indian child removal continued to affect families and tribes beyond the ICWA.\(^{80}\) In addition to family separation, Native women, along with Black women, were sterilized in disproportionate numbers from the mid-1960s up until the late 1970s.\(^ {81}\) They were often forced or tricked into accepting irreversible medical procedures that stole their reproductive rights and freedom to bear children. In short, following genocide, land dispossessions, and violations of tribal sovereignty, Native families’ unity, thus tribal communities’ collective future, has continued to be undermined by multiple settler attacks on families and children, and women’s reproductive rights.

Considering the long and ongoing practice of Native child removals and family separation in North America, it is no surprise that Silko engages with this theme. *Almanac* is not her first work to touch on the issue, either. One of Silko’s most renowned works “Lullaby,” featured in *Storyteller* (1981), her collected work of short stories,"
poems, and photographs, is a short story that fictionalizes the practice of child removals. The story intimates an old Navajo woman’s reflection on her past and how she lost all three of her children: Her oldest son Jimmie dies in the war and she ends up losing her two young kids Danny and Ella to the authorities, most likely child protective services. When doctors arrive at her shack one day showing her papers and asking her to sign, Ayah signs the papers to send them away from her children’s vicinity; she is unable to understand what they say or want because she does not speak English. When they try to take the children, she grabs them and runs to the nearby hill. She has to give in when they show up again the next day, this time with a BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) policeman, though. Ayah stays mad at her husband, Chato, for a long time for teaching her to sign her name in English. She thinks:

It was worse than if they had died: to lose the children and to know that somewhere, in a place called Colorado, in a place full of sick and dying strangers, her children were without her. There had been babies that died soon after they were born, and one that died before he could walk… But she could not bear this pain.\(^2\)

While it is Ayah doing the thinking, this passage aptly communicates the collective pain of Native families and tribes whose children were taken from them. As it is obvious from Ayah’s reflection, children’s forcible separation from their parents, particularly mothers, is an open wound that Native communities are still mourning and healing from.

Silko revisits family separation, or rather separated mothers and children, in Almanac. As opposed to the sentimental plotline in “Lullaby” in which Silko

\(^2\) 47
characterizes Ayah as a deeply caring mother who would do anything to be with her children, *Almanac* portrays quite a few scenarios of family separation that are rather cynical and deromanticized. *Almanac*’s mothers are equally affected by corrupt lifeways of the capitalist era and the contaminated culture surrounding them. As Tillett suggests, *Almanac*’s mothers are at least what the authorities would call “bad mothers.”

Crack mothers, negligent mothers, and mothers who *raise* bad kids and monsters (such as Beaufrey’s mother) abound in the novel. Seese’s story, for example, is the most obvious illustration of bad motherhood: Addicted to cocaine and usually intoxicated, Seese perfectly fits the stereotypical representations of a woman unsuitable for mothering. Her battle seems to be with her own troubles that prevent her from being a good and *present* mother. Despite her questionable maternity, Seese is also desperate to reunite with her kidnapped child. She is pushed into further desperation and parental incompetence by her circumstances. By Beaufrey and his men who are supposed to help her, Seese is gaslighted, incapacitated through cocaine, and tricked into believing that her child has been kidnapped by his father, David. When she finally figures out that David is not responsible for the infant’s disappearance, she cannot convince the detectives, who think that “she had got what she deserved,” that her motherhood is worthy of restoring (111). With no photographs to prove his birth and her obvious problem, Seese understands that her words have no weight and “the details of her story did not seem convincing even to her anymore” (112). Seese cannot help but agree with the voice in her head: “Seese drifted as if she were a sea-green ribbon of kelp caught in a current with a voice that accused her over and over. A less distinct voice said she had done the best she knew how.

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Her baby had not drowned in his bathwater. He had not been born addicted. But she could find no consolation for this loss” (111).

Silko’s critique is never pointed at personal troubles in *Almanac*. Rather, through her cynical characterizations, the author engages in the contemporaneous social issues that cripple marginalized communities. Through Seese, Silko compels the reader to contemplate on a scenario that is a little too familiar to the US readership: a crack mother, a term that emerged in the US media during the 1970s and 80s’ “war on drugs.” The state’s forceful efforts to deal with drugs focused on separating children from their addicted and allegedly abusive parents instead of restoring families and rehabilitating individuals afflicted with drug use. Often Black and poor families were victimized by the “war on drugs” that worked collaboratively with the broken child welfare system. Although it may strike the reader as an example of bad mothering at first, Silko incorporates Seese’s story as part of the larger theme of family separation and relates it to the drug policies of the 1970s and 80s. With Seese’s story, Silko criticizes the pathologizing effects of the government’s “war on drugs” which unfairly and disproportionately targeted poor and Black communities. Thus, while we may be urged to second guess Seese’s motherhood, through Seese’s story Silko emphasizes the social stigmatization of women with drug use and connects them to bio-extractive practices that violate women’s reproductive rights and separate them from their children.

In addition to reproductive medical technologies and violations of women’s bodies, *Almanac* shows us other ways in which mothers are unwilfully separated from

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84 Drew Humphries write that crack mothers is “a term coined by the media, referred primarily to women who used cocaine or crack during pregnancy” (19). For more on the history of the term and state policies on drug use, see Drew Humphries, *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs, and the Media*, Ohio State UP, 1999.
their children. In Yoeme’s story, a central character who is an elderly Yaqui woman, Silko relates family separation to exploitative extractivism in the valley of Rio Yaqui, Mexico. Old Yoeme explains to her grandchildren Zeta and Leche, whom she passes the responsibility to decode the old almanacs, that she left her husband and seven children to protect herself from violence and death by “white men streaming into the country” (117). Yoeme recounts that she “was married” to Guzman, a white man, “to make sure that he kept the agreement” between Yoeme’s clan and him (116). According to their agreement, Guzman had promised to prevent other white men from “coming to find more silver, to steal more Indian land” (116). When Guzman reneged on his promise and turned a deaf ear to Indians being killed in the valley, Yoeme understood that she had no choice but run away.

Upon young Zeta and Leche’s inquiry about how she could leave her children, Yoeme implies that it was necessary for protecting herself, her cultural identity, and her people:

“Oh, I could already see. Look at your mother right now. Weak thing. It was not a good match – Guzman and me. You understand how it is with horses and dogs – sometimes children take after the father. I saw that.” And so Yoeme told the twins. It had been a simple decision. She could not remain with children from such a man. Guzman’s people had always hated her anyway. Because she was an Indian. (117)

Yoeme is portrayed as a strong character who has no pretense of remorse for her actions, particularly abandoning her half-white children along with her husband. Just as with many other mothers in the book, Silko does not glamorize Yoeme’s motherhood or the
bond between her and her children. Rather, the author suggests that disconnections and disruptions in family life are related to environmental degradation and earthly violations in a given geography. She represents this relationship through cottonwood trees in Yoeme’s story. When Zeta and Leche insist to know what cottonwood trees had to do with the rift between their grandfather and Yoeme, Yoeme explains that she had men cut all the cottonwood trees around the house before leaving. On a textual level, Yoeme’s act appears to be a signal for cutting her tie to her husband she despises; cutting the trees is more than a symbolic gesture and an act of retaliation, though. Chopping the cottonwood trees becomes inevitable for Yoeme after she witnesses “objects hanging in the beautiful green leaves and branches along the river” (117). Yoeme clarifies for Zeta and Leche that the bodies belonged to her clanspeople and they used cottonwood trees because bullets were expensive.

According to Yoeme’s account, cottonwood trees carry the evidence of violence done to Indigenous people and to the mother earth as well. The cottonwood trees “planted at the mines” and around the house were “got as saplings from the banks of the Rio Yaqui” and carried by slaves for “hundreds of miles” (116). Cottonwood tree’s natural habitat is mud banks near rivers. Thus, trees planted far from the Yaqui River show white men’s disregard for the ecological features and balance of the valley and represent their exploitation of disposable bodies for labor. Yoeme notes that the trees needed enormous amounts of water carried by first “slaves” and “Indians who worked like slaves but got even less then slaves had in the old days” (116). Yoeme also mentions that “white men came and they began digging up the cottonwoods and moving them here and there

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85 For more visit: https://srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/misc/ag_654/volume_2/populus/deltoides.htm
for a terrible purpose” (117). First extracting “the saplings from the banks of the Rio Yaqui” and then removing grown cottonwoods for mining, white men have destroyed Yaqui homelands, Yoeme mournfully recollects. Of course, in telling this story, Silko alludes to the Yaqui’s struggles under the Mexican rule and constant battle for keeping their homelands and cultural integrity since the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century. (Guzman is an obvious reference to Captain Diego de Guzmán, who first encountered the Yaqui in 1533). By invoking the conquistador assaults on the Yaqui land and marking it with the vivid imagery of cottonwood trees in Yoeme’s story, Silko narrates Indigenous loss and environmental destruction on the borderlands of Mexico. Nevertheless, Yoeme’s story of separation from her children ties to her reunion with her descendants, Zeta and Leche, who take over Yoeme’s leadership and rebellion for the Yaqui’s cultural and political survival on their violated homelands. Yoeme passes on this both personal and communal history to her grandchildren to reconnect with them and reclaim her familial bond that was disrupted through settler assaults on herself and her people.

Child removals have been one of the most brutal settler practices and it continues to harm many tribes and families in North America. Silko compels the reader to reckon with the settler violence of family separation, not only through Native mothers’ stories but through multiple mothers’ intertwining narratives from all walks of life in *Almanac*. Currently, taking children of asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border is the most recent state-sanctioned family separation. The images and stories are fresh in our minds. And unfortunately, there are still parents and children waiting to be reunited. With this incident fresh in our memory, we may tend to picture a scenario in which state employees forcefully take children from their families, or parents are obliged to “surrender” their
kids (when we consider family separation or child removals). *Almanac* demonstrates, however, that family disintegration happens more subtly due to colonial relationships marked by race, gender, and indigeneity in the Americas and due to violences enacted on Indigenous lands and communities as well as on bodies and psyches. I would be only speculating, indeed, if I claimed that Silko anticipated the state-sanctioned family separation at the southwest border that happened twenty-seven years after the novel’s publication. And yet, it is not such a wild idea that Silko would have guessed a violent event like family separation happening in the US-Mexico border. For, as much as she recounts the complex intersections of colonial histories in the Americas, she tells a cautionary tale for the future.

We should also note that Silko has an impressive grasp of physical and cultural frontiers that characterize the Southwest. She shows and tells what kind of violations are enacted on bodies and the earth, and how violence dictates life and death in the borderlands of Americas and beyond; Silko’s representation of the Southwestern America powerfully resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa’s characterization of borderlands. But beyond that, Silko shows off an intimacy with the land that informs her narrative style as well as her political vision in *Almanac*. The depth of her engagement with the complex geographies seems unparalleled. Her knowledge and intimacy with a vast spatiotemporal terrain in the Americas defy dispossessive economies of colonialism and possessive relationships of the neoliberal world order. *Almanac* is a testament that colonial concepts

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of extractivism and capitalism cannot compete with tribal-sourced earthly knowledges and ancestral connections to Indigenous homelands.

**Conclusion**

Making the disembodied violences visible and marking them with blood, *Almanac* represents contemporary biopolitical technologies as an extension of settler colonial violence in the Americas, rather than a consequence of neoliberal governmentality. Silko’s feminist vision helps us understand that biopolitics is a too sterile concept to account for settler colonial nations’ exertion of power over human populations and bodies in the Americas. The term obscures the evident and indiscernible forms of violence in the management of bodies even when it is deployed to discuss those forms. Silko reiterates throughout the novel: violence is a requirement for the advancement of biomedical technologies, whereby bodily destruction is justified for the maintenance of settler colonial population.

In the layered histories *Almanac* uncovers, forced abortions become symbolic of colonial sexual oppression and management of women’s bodies. Children’s murder signifies more than the loss of one mother; it implies the denial of motherhood and women’s right to raise their children on colonialized lands. Portraying various characters and political groups corrupted by capitalist greed and seduced by violence, *Almanac* argues that colonialism has betrayed his own children, not only Native people, and it failed fulfilling his civilizational promise time and time again on the same lands.

To end on a positive note: in *Almanac*, every character is weak and strong, innocent and complicit, victim and guilty simultaneously. Silko compels readers to
empathize with the ones who work to contribute to the impending revolution and the salvaging of the earth from capitalist destruction. In this way, Silko defies the liberal imperative of subjectivization by focusing on revolutionary acts rather than the bodily-representable identities of characters. If identities must be coherent within liberal economy of subjectivities which creates and regulates gender normativity, racial hierarchy, and indigeneity, the acts of rebellion can still disrupt them.
CHAPTER 2
THE CONDITION FOR COEXISTING: SETTLER COLONIALISM AND TONI MORRISON’S A MERCY

Toni Morrison’s 2008 novel A Mercy has been mostly noted in scholarly circles for creating a multicultural American origins narrative and imagining slavery sans racism. Nonetheless, current readings of the novel fail to pay attention to the author’s concern with the settler colonial condition and its gendered logic of dispossession in this atypical Morrisonian narrative: While Morrison travels to late seventeenth-century America to entertain what it means to be a female slave without being raced, she zeroes in on the condition of being dispossessed and the violence of being disconnected from one’s origins. The author narrativizes the violence of dispossessio...
a young Native woman who lost all her family and tribe during her childhood and Florens is a Black slave child ripped from her mother at the age of eight and lives in the same settler’s farm with Lina. Like the eggs cracked by the sound of the traveler, they are wounded, doomed to a life of solitude, and must face a hostile world alone as enslaved young girls. The novel suggests, being dispossessed itself is a violent condition that isolates Native and Black women from familial and communal intimacies and makes them vulnerable to settler colonial exploitation.\textsuperscript{89} Morrison does not elaborate on the eagle story, yet we know that the eggs are family to the eagle while they become property to be bought and sold when they are ripped from their nest. Lina’s loss of her family/home and the transaction that rips Florens from her mother signify that they have become a property of male-dominated white-settler possessiveness. Morrison’s brilliant storytelling hints at the layered meanings of dispossession and its gendered nature which she explores throughout the novel.

Featuring the Vaark farm as a representative colonial place, \textit{A Mercy} documents multiple accounts of dispossession and orphaned characters’ struggle to form a community in late-seventeenth-century America. Morrison offers serious meditations on colonization and its gendered and racial violences through pivotal characters’ dispossessed lives, which are in service for a white settler/owner and in detriment to their persons, families and communities. Accordingly, this article crafts a Native feminist reading of \textit{A Mercy} by unpacking the gendered logic of settler colonial dispossession and

\textsuperscript{89} I prefer the term Native to be consistent with Native feminist theories and epistemologies I utilize in this paper. Throughout this article, I also use the terms “Indian,” “American Indian,” “Native American,” and “Indigenous” interchangeably to refer to the Indigenous peoples of what is now the United States. For more on specific meanings and histories, see “Indian” by Robert Warrior and “Indigenous” by J. Kēhaulani Kauanui in \textit{Keywords for American Cultural Studies}, edited by Bruce Burgett & Glenn Hendler, NYU Press, 2014.
its connection to violence, property, and subjectivity in a seventeenth-century American context. Native feminist critique has long maintained that “settler colonialism has been and continues to be a gendered process”\textsuperscript{90} and Indigenous dispossession in North America has constituted a fundamental form of settler colonial violence. Native feminist scholars have theorized the violence directed at Indigenous female bodies as a tool of settler colonialism to draw attention to the intended eradication of Native existence.\textsuperscript{91} Building on their important work, I offer an account of settler colonial dispossession that separates Indigenous families and communities and propose that assaults on familial and communal integrity of Indigenous peoples are part of systemic gender and racial violence of settler colonialism in the North American context. Mishuana Goeman considers it as Native feminism’s critical imperative to examine embodied experiences of Native women and ways their bodies represent historical and geographical connections to disrupt the colonial notions of body as individual, fixed, and impermeable.\textsuperscript{92} I take her call here to account for how Native as well as “arrivant”\textsuperscript{93} women’s bodies are rendered disconnected and thus disposable for settler colonial possessiveness through colonial violences inflicted to break communal integrities of Native and Black collectives. However, it is also critical to understand that colonial violence is not always marked visible on bodies;

\textsuperscript{90} “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,”
\textsuperscript{92} “Ongoing Storms and Struggles: Gendered Violence and Resource Exploitation,” \textit{Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies}, edited by Joanne Barker, Duke UP, 2017. Goeman draws attention to ways Native female bodies are rendered individual, private, and fixed; she argues Native feminism should break from colonial understanding of bodies as impermeable and instead examine how bodies exist as “geographies” connected to their larger physical environments.
\textsuperscript{93} In \textit{Transit of Empire} Jodi Byrd distinguishes racialized groups of non-Native populations from settlers by using the term “arrivant.”
vicious colonial practices like dispossession “discipline and regulate otherized bodies and… traumatize interior psychic space” in order to “map social colonialist rubrics of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies.” In other words, as *A Mercy* suggests, the loss of intimate ties to a self-defined family and community, and destruction of communal integrity can be an oppressive gendering and racializing process without inflicting physical harm. For this, I deploy dispossession as a proper critical lens to examine Morrison’s imaginary of colonial America and how its orphaned peoples are joined and diverge from each other in shared position of being deprived of family and community.

The concept of dispossession, being cut off from family and community, is a powerful literary trope in Toni Morrison’s novels: Her fiction often meditates on familial and communal deprivation, and how larger systemic oppressions and violences that cause emotional harm to generations are constitutive of individual dispossessions. By representing dispossession as a form of violence that separates, both figuratively and literally, women and men from larger systems of intimacy that sustain and connect

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94 In his introduction to edited volume *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender, and the State*, Arturo Aldama asks “Is the goal of racial, sexual, and colonial violence to discipline and regulate otherized bodies and to traumatize interior psychic space - to mirror and map social colonialist rubrics of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies?” (6).

95 In its proper usage or conventionally, dispossession refers to practices of land encroachment, eviction of rightful residents from land or property. More broadly, though, dispossession may imply various forms and conditions of deprivation; in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler explain that the term signifies “how human bodies become materialized and dematerialized through histories of slavery, colonization, apartheid, capitalist alienation, immigration and asylum politics, postcolonial liberal multiculturalism, gender and sexual normativity, securitarian governmentality, and humanitarian reason.” Here, I focus on the process of “becoming dispossessed,” i.e. “derivative condition of enforced deprivation of land, rights, livelihood, desire, or modes of belonging.” More specifically, I mean dispossession through forcible removal from family and community, a violent process that is predicated on forced individualism and destructive to political/human potential to become dependent on one another. Considering the long history of settler colonial dispossession that culminated in the destruction of Native bodies, communities, and spaces in North America and the seventeenth-century American context of the novel, this meaning forcefully evokes dispossession’s connection to settler colonial violence.
individuals, Morrison renders it a common colonial condition of displaced peoples in *A Mercy*. In order to understand dispossession as colonial violence, it is necessary to recognize what Patrick Wolfe calls the settler-colonial logic of elimination, which “seeks to replace Indigenous society with that imported by the colonisers” (93). The logic of elimination poses native residents of a place as a transient population, which is abstract and substantial only in large numbers, distorts Indigenous communities’ rightful claim to land, and partakes in biopolitical regimes of settler colonialism and neoliberal governmentality. Dispossession in the form of deprivation from family and community functions within this logic of elimination; it abstracts a community into individuals, isolates bodies to use them for settler accumulation, and contains them as isolated. In the colonial American context of *A Mercy*, dispossessed *individuals*, of land and/or family are forced into an economic relationality, which is essential for the perpetuation of the settler colonial condition, rather than organically configuring new conditions for cohabitation. Signifying compulsory individualism of the colonial condition, *A Mercy* reveals a world order in which Native and diasporic women are cut from their roots and communal intimacies; function as servants for an emerging capitalist formation in and outside the house; inhabit a transnational domestic space while struggling to bond because of clashing subjectivities. In Morrison’s imagination, women’s transit to a settler colonial world order is violent, their relationships are less hierarchical and quite messy; 1690s’ Americas is not a safe haven but a violent social cosmos.

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While *A Mercy* aligns with Morrison’s other fiction in its thematic content, it diverges from them in relation to its temporal contours and the diverse group of characters representative of racial and cultural multiplicity of the era. The novel’s unexpected narrative formulation, unlike Morrison’s previous fiction centering on African American experience, racism, and enslavement, has led critics to consider the novel as representative of current US racial politics; many scholars have picked up on this unexpected plotline and interpreted it as the ethos of contemporary multicultural society. Stephen Best, for example, considers the novel as an invitation to separate current African American experience from history of slavery, thus interprets it as “postracial.” Celebrating the novel’s digression from her signature genre of historical-redemptive fiction and its undoing of Morrisonian re-memory, he asks: “Is it possible to imagine, then, that Morrison’s effort to articulate the formative moments of blackness, slavery, and racial identity is simply the flip side of their death (the falling away of their conjunction) in our historical present?” Valerie Babb reads the novel as an American origins narrative which recuperates the erased categories of race, gender, and class in canonical narratives of the nation’s history, suggesting that Morrison presents “an expansive version of the prenational world, one that reveals the heterogeneity that characterized settlements then and the nation today.” Libby Simon also examines slavery unmarked by race and racialism in the novel and reads it as a cautionary tale for the nation, arguing that the novel “gestures toward a multiracial America.”

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97 Best notes that he uses “‘postracial’- not as neoliberals tend to celebrate this condition (as a mark of the end of racism) but in the more analytically purposeful sense that the logic of racial slavery does not fully describe or capture racial injustice in the present” (473-74).
98 474.
99 148-149.
100 248.
Strehle concludes that the “glimpses of human recognition and communication across barriers of cultural difference suggest the possibility that early settlers could form an exceptional community in a truly redemptive New World.” I observe that what these critics essentially propose comes to the idea that the novel allows us to consider the past from present tense perspective; according to this logic, what Morrison sketches in *A Mercy* is not settler colonialism but a multicultural nation-to-be whose violences occur because it has failed to deliver its promise of inclusivity despite the ubiquitous diversity of its inhabitants. Works that read the novel solely as another of Morrison’s meditations on slavery (albeit with a different time frame and a larger variety of characters) or as a redoing of multiracial origins of the nation lack insight into Morrison’s portrayal of the settler colonial condition, exemplifying a scholarly tendency to center racialization as a primary violent force in both fictional and factual narratives of US empire. Informed of Native epistemologies’ caution against the eminence of racialization over colonization in critical ethnic studies discourses and diverging from the scholarly consensus, instead I suggest that Morrison’s imaginary forces us to recognize racialization and colonialism as “concomitant global systems that secure white dominance through time, property, and notions of self,” as Byrd suggests in her seminal work *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (2011).

Jodi Byrd is critical of this frequent paradigmatic flaw of conflating racialization with colonization and the imperial-inflected multicultural liberalism in postcolonial,

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101 122.
102 Gabriella Friedman’s article “Cultivating America: Colonial History in the Morrisonian Wilderness” is the only one that engages in colonial condition and how it underwrites the novel, focusing on the concept of wilderness, literacy, European idea of cultivation.
103 Byrd xxiii.
critical race, queer, and American studies discourses. Her observations on contemporary manifestations of the ongoing settler condition problematizes critical scholarship that advocates inclusion into “multicultural cosmopole” which the United States has come to represent. More specifically, she critiques liberal multicultural settler colonialism which “creates a cacophony of moral claims that help to deflect progressive and transformative activism from dismantling the ongoing conditions of colonialism that continue to make the United States a desired state formation within which to be included.”

Here Byrd’s critical insight indicates a double dispossession currently at work for Native communities: Native Americans' violent removal from their lands and systematic land encroachment through coercion, wars, and the deployment of settler law, she suggests, resonate deeply with the contemporary white-settler attempt to pose as Indigenous residents of the US land and to replace Native communities, aiming both to nullify their claims to land and resources and to gatekeep the US empire. She demonstrates how Indianness functions, historically and presently, as a central ontological ground through which US imperial and colonial projects are enacted to acquire Indigenous lands, territories, and resources.

By representing dispossession as a multilayered concept of settler-colonial ideology, Morrison invokes its racializing and gendering effects on Native and Black women, and how dispossession functions to disconnect them from communal ties and to avail their bodies for colonial possessiveness. In the following section, I characterize dispossession as an oppressive gendering process through personal stories of pivotal

104 Byrd adds, “That cacophony of competing struggles for hegemony within and outside institutions of power, no matter how those struggles might challenge the state through loci of race, class, gender, and sexuality, serves to misdirect and cloud attention from the underlying structures of settler colonialism that made the United States possible as oppressor in the first place” (xvii).
characters in the novel. Next, to build on my first point, I focus on settler colonial possessiveness and investigate the ways it works through racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Finally, I offer my reflections on the acts of repossession and self-possession that female characters perform through their chosen subjectivities and practices.

**Disconnected and Displaced: Dispossession as Colonial Violence**

Through personal stories of pivotal characters, *A Mercy* sheds lights on different ways they become orphaned and must learn to *be individuals*. Morrison signals the respective dispossessions of female characters’ as defining moments of their personal histories intertwined in the Vaark’s farm. Through vivid imagery of silent babies, sweating mothers, smelling dead bodies, and finally wolves arriving for carcasses, it is implied that a plague wiped out the whole village. “Scrambled as high into a beech tree” Lina and two boys spend a whole night “listening to gnawing, baying, growling, fighting and worst of all the quiet of animals sated at last” (54). A subsequent conflagration started by soldiers sweeps away bodies as well as houses, crops, and all signs of living and community on her land: “Memories of her village peopled by the dead turned slowly to ash and in their place a single image arose. Fire. How quick. How purposefully it ate what had been built, what had been life” (57). Morrison marks Lina’s parting from her tribe at the age of six as a violent departure, invoking settler colonial “genocidal outcomes”\(^\text{105}\) that often transpired as plagues, fires, and deliberate destruction of habitable Indigenous spaces in North America. The novel features this moment from Lina’s girlhood as her most traumatic experience and a precursor of subsequent violences.

\(^{105}\) Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.”
and violations which she is subjected to as a dispossessed female Native left to the mercy of soldiers, white settlers, and religious fanatics who arrived to prosper on her ancestral lands.

While spotlighting her separation as a key and violent moment, Morrison crafts Lina’s story around her continued isolation from roots: Lina becomes dispossessed, first from family, community, and land, and later is forced to abandon her identity associated with her communal territory and tribe. Lina’s alienation from her identity/subjectivity relational to her communal territory is crucial for what Patrick Wolfe calls the settler colonial logic of elimination; Wolfe posits that as the actual goal for settlers is always the land, Indigenous communities need to be eliminated because they hinder settlers’ access to it. In other words, within the settler logic of elimination, the systematic dispersal of Indigenous communities and nations is a facilitating factor in the dispossession of land. According to this logic which is the case with US settler colonialism, first and foremost Lina’s dispossession means she has lost her claim to ancestral territories. As Lina’s story progresses, the same logic works in a way that requires Lina’s subsequent assimilation into settler society and losing her tribal way of living. This is evident in the phase of dispossession following the complete annihilation of her community; Lina is given to live with Presbyterians who expect her to shed off her sinful acts and idleness; “bathing naked in the river”, “staring off into a space to weep for a mother or a playmate”; “covering oneself in the skin of beasts” (55-56). Her forced assimilation means christianization not just in the sense of worshipping another God but recognizing her Native way of life as a deviation from what Presbyterians consider a universal moral compass.
The novel shows that the logic of elimination is not outside of but functions within the gendered ideology and structure of settler society. Accordingly, named Messalina by the Presbyterians, an obvious reference to the sexually insatiable historic female figure, Lina is not welcomed as a vulnerable, orphaned child, but cautioned against as a potentially promiscuous Indian girl who must discard her tribal ways and work as hard as they do. However much it disturbs her, she feels compelled to accept “her status as a heathen and let herself be purified” by the Presbyterians because the idea of “once more losing shelter” and “being alone in the world without family” terrifies Lina (53). Morrison elucidates how gender works for Lina’s both advantage and detriment within the settler logic, critically depicting colonial misconceptions and settlers’ lack of knowledge on Native tribes’ structure of living: The Presbyterians harshly criticize Native men as idle “entitled paupers” fishing and hunting all day like landed gentry who do not even own the land they live on (55). Their notion of Native women as hardworking keeps Lina sheltered at least for a while, though. When she sins, unable to suppress her suspect sexual behavior, Lina is once more given away; sold for the valuable labor expected from a fourteen-year-old “hardy female” she is (61).

While dispossession has a double meaning of being deprived of both land and community for Lina, for Florens, being born a slave means being doomed to a dispossessed life from the beginning. In her landmark article “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers notes that “we could not say

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106 Messalina refers to the historic figure Valeria Messalina of the Roman Empire. The figure is represented as a promiscuous female character in various artistic works such as paintings, sculptures, movies, and novels.

the enslaved offspring was “orphaned,” but the child become the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status, by the very nature of the case, had yet to be defined.”\textsuperscript{108} We can consider the precarious position of slaves’ offspring as a constant state of dispossession and Florens’ narrative is helpful for unpacking the layers of dispossession that complicate slave child’s (dis)connection to family. In her case we know that the condition of being born a slave foretells Florens’ separation from her mother; her person along with labor belongs to D’Ortega. However, much like Lina, Florens is abruptly cut off from her family at an early age, around age six, when she is given away to settle D’Ortega’s debt to Jacob Vaark. Florens’ black body, unavailable to her own person and family, and disposed of humanity, functions as a currency between property-owning European males and is marked as their “prime commodity of exchange.”\textsuperscript{109}

To further dramatize her parting, though, Florens’ purchase is posed as her mother’s disowning Florens and choosing the baby boy over her daughter: “Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me” (8). Florens’ mother insists to give Florens to Mr. Vaark, thinking she will be safer with him; by her judgment Jacob does not pose as big of a danger as D’Ortega when it comes to sexual violence.\textsuperscript{110} This scene in the novel provides a crucial moment to ponder on the (un)gendering of female slave which Spillers theorizes in her article. Spillers insists that we recognize the gendering/ungendering of slave Black women that deviates

\textsuperscript{108} 74. Spillers further explains: “In effect, under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not “belong” to the Mother, nor is s/he “related” to the “owner,” though the latter “possesses” it, and in the African-American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without whatever benefit of patrimony” (74).

\textsuperscript{109} Spillers 75.

significantly from commonly accepted “equation between female gender and mothering” in discourses of domesticity or the feminine sphere.\textsuperscript{111} Slave woman as a (potential) mother, robbed of her “parental right” and home, is denied femininity and motherhood, and experiences “loss of gender” which Spillers regards as a form of dispossession.\textsuperscript{112} Spillers’ notion of female slave’s (un)gendering resonates powerfully with minha mãe’s (my mother in Portuguese; that is how Florens calls her mother in the novel) ambiguous subject position in the novel; a slave mother who renounces her daughter while pleading for her nursing baby boy. Or rather, she represents a precarious motherhood where she is forced to enact her offspring’s dispossession and other child’s infantile dependence turns out to be useful to protect the female child. Spillers’ theory of slave’s gender formation (or lack of) also becomes relevant when we remember Florens’ fondness for shoes at an early age and her mother’s protest: “Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora’s house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top” (4). Lina echoes minha mãe’s sentiments: “Florens, she says, it’s 1690. Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady?” (4). While being female is imposed on Florens as it makes her labor more desirable inside a colonial domestic space, she is deprived of the (socially constructed) characteristics of femininity that are associated with female gender. This denial of femininity is sustained and reinforced in several encounters Florens has with various characters throughout the novel, particularly during her time as a slave working in the Vaark farm.

\textsuperscript{111} 78. \textsuperscript{112} 77.
In the episode of Florens’ separation from her mother, Morrison critically captures how the violent (un)gendered logic of slavery works seamlessly with the gendered logic of settler colonial dispossession. Florens’ narrative intimates the complicated gender status of female slave and how being female makes already dispossessed lives of enslaved women more vulnerable to traffic in settler-colonial possessiveness. Just as Spillers contends that “[t]he destructive loss of the natural mother, whose biological/genetic relationship to the child remains unique and unambiguous, opens the enslaved young to social ambiguity and chaos,” Florens is forever wounded by her abandonment (as it is unknown to her that the imminent danger of sexual violence calls for an earlier departure when she is still a child). That is how Morrison invites us to consider the condition of being separated from family and community, or becoming an orphan in Morrison’s words, as damaging as physical and sexual violences enacted on enslaved women’s bodies.

Both Lina’s and Florens’ narratives remind the constant danger of gender violence which enslaved Native and Black women have to live with as dispossessed individuals. The author inserts these frequent episodes of violence in a subtle way, which could be why previous scholarship on the novel has failed to posit the gender violence Morrison shows to be inherent to settler colonial dispossession. For example, Lina’s abandonment by the Presbyterians follows a violent attack she survives with a “swollen eye” and “lash cuts on her face, arms, and legs” (61). Morrison implies that Lina has been a victim of sexual violence and the victim-blaming Presbyterians have chosen to let her go, thinking their prophecy about her sexual behavior is fulfilled: “The Presbyterians,
recalling perhaps their own foresight in the name they had given her, never asked what had happened to her and there was no point in telling them. She had no standing in law, no surname and no one would take her word against a Europe” (61). By characterizing the perpetrator as a Europe and underlining the Presbyterians’ indifference to Lina’s plight, Morrison invokes the colonial inflection of gender violence and always-already sexualized positions of Native women in the eyes of settlers.

Another episode of gender violence which Morrison does not dwell on is the sexual abuse Florens’ mother has been subjected to by D’Ortega. Instead, minha mãe’s untold experiences and sacrifice to protect her beloved daughter from a potential violation become the prologue to the entire novel: without telling it upfront Morrison builds and bookends the entire narrative on the imminence of gender violence. Also, minha mãe’s story signals the early notions of racialization being formed in the new world, highlighting the intersections of race and gender on enslaved women’s bodies. Reflecting on her arrival in Barbados before she is shipped to D’Ortega’s plantation in Maryland, Florens’ mother remembers how she is made a “negrita” along her enslavement (192). She recognizes how all aspects of her identity become associated with skin color, reducing her to a black body representative of her character, culture, and the community of origin: “It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families, I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song -- all of it cooked together in the color of my skin” (194). Morrison underscores the displacing and dispossessing capacity of racialization, how physical displacement of black bodies and their dispossession from communities and families serve chattel slavery. As *A Mercy* suggests, slave dispossession, very much like Natives,
is a constant process that does not end with removal from lands of origin. In US imperial history, Black people’s racialization provided the premise of their further dispossession from families and communities they constructed, which was integral to their experiences as slaves. This was through “an inclusive taxonomy that automatically enslaved the offspring of a slave and any other parent” making them available for owners’ disposal. As Iyko Day notes, the inclusive logic of racial slavery, however, worked seamlessly with settler colonial eliminatory logic, which instrumentalized genocidal and assimilation practices against Natives, “to serve a unitary end in increasing white settler property in the form of land and an enslaved labor force.” Although they were racialized in disparate ways, Blacks and Natives were subjected to constant dispossessions that operated through their bodies, negating self-claims to bodily, familial, communal integrities as well as claims to land of origin and territory.

**Settler Colonial Possessiveness**

Settler claims to private property and ownership are organically linked to the history of Indigenous dispossession in the North American colonial context. Not surprisingly, the earliest claims to private property emerged along European arguments about colonialism’s legitimacy, which in combination functioned to dispossess Indigenous lands in the Americas. The ideology of settler-colonial possessiveness, which

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114 “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” Wolfe further notes that “In the wake of slavery, this taxonomy became fully racialized in the “one-drop rule,” whereby any amount of African ancestry, no matter how remote, and regardless of phenotypical appearance, makes a person Black. For Indians, in stark contrast, non-Indian ancestry compromised their indigeneity, producing “half-breeds,” a regime that persists in the form of blood quantum regulations. As opposed to enslaved people, whose reproduction augmented their owners’ wealth, Indigenous people obstructed settlers’ access to land, so their increase was counterproductive. In this way, the restrictive racial classification of Indians straightforwardly furthered the logic of elimination” (387-88).

115 “Being or Nothingness,” 113.
grants settlers the access to Indian land and the right to accumulate wealth, can be traced back to John Locke’s political philosophy and his early formulations of liberalism in late seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{116} Locke’s \textit{Two Treatises of Government} constitutes a controversial philosophical undertaking which argues for the colonization of America while simultaneously defending liberty and equality of all, thus pairing liberal ideology with Indian dispossession.\textsuperscript{117} This philosophical pairing of private property with justification of colonization is now recognized to have granted authority to (white) European men who could rely on racial and gender hierarchies of the society to appropriate the so-called “waste” land of North America, exploit labor of its dispossessed residents, and accumulate as much property as one desired.\textsuperscript{118} The possessive nature of seventeenth-century liberal political thought that marks Locke’s philosophy is often termed possessive individualism to indicate “the conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities.”\textsuperscript{119} I prefer to call this possesive quality settler-colonial possessiveness (my term) to indicate the colonial condition that accompanied the original possessive individualism of the seventeenth-century liberal thought in the North

\textsuperscript{116} John Locke is often argued to have laid the foundation of liberalism in the second part of seventeenth century. See, for example, Martin Seliger’s \textit{The Liberal Politics of John Locke} (1968); John Dunn’s \textit{The Political Thought of John Locke} (1969).

\textsuperscript{117} Nagamitsu Miura, \textit{John Locke and the Native Americans: Early English Liberalism and its Colonial Reality}, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. As Miura indicates, Locke sees preservation of life, liberty, and property as the natural right of all men; all men have equal claim to the use of lands and its resources, and the one who labors the land deserves its ownership. Locke’s liberal logic, however, is based on the dichotomy between settlers as rational and working civil men and Natives as idle and superstitious men of nature, which functioned to exclude Native populations from or required their assimilation to what Locke calls civil society. Miura further explains: “The underestimation of Indians’ lack in the industriousness and rationality in the sense of commercial and money economy is characteristic of Locke’s argument on the right of land acquisition in the name of natural law” (30).

\textsuperscript{118} Locke’s position on slavery, labor, and property of one’s labor is a highly disputed subject and beyond the scope of this paper. For more on the issue, see \textit{John Locke and the Native Americans: Early English Liberalism and its Colonial Reality} by Nagamitsu Miura.

\textsuperscript{119} Macpherson 3. Macpherson explains that “the basic assumptions of possessive individualism – that man is free and human by virtue of his sole proprietorship of his own person, and that human society is essentially a series of market relations – were deeply embedded in the seventeenth-century foundations” (270).
American context. Thus, as opposed to more “neutral” tone of possessive individualism, the term settler-colonial possessiveness signifies a simultaneous violent foundation that was fundamental to settlers’ possessive individualism and links the seventeenth-century liberal philosophy to the (ongoing) history of Indian dispossession.

As A Mercy intimates, the ideology of settler-colonial possessiveness is a constitutive element of Jacob Vaark’s white male subjectivity and his dominance in the Vaark household as the rightful owner of both himself and land he was given: “Land and property ownership has surely been at the heart of the onto-epistemologies of subject formation in the histories of the western, white, male, colonizing, capitalist, property-owning, sovereign human subject.” In other words, Jacob Vaark occupies a subject position that offers him the privileges of aspiring Englishmen despite his humble beginnings as an orphan: Previously a “small-scale trader for the Company” Jacob seeks to join landed gentry and goes about becoming a “landowning, independent farmer” by following all the steps he deems necessary, i.e. his having “secured a wife, someone to help her, planted, built, fathered” (39). As Jacob’s own reflections show and considering the settler-colonial matrix the novel is placed in, his claims to self as a white man cannot be disentangled from claims to paternity and property. Jacob recognizes that his assertion to self- and man-hood relies on his ownership when he dismisses Rebekka’s inquiries into his need for acquiring more with a brief statement of his simple logic: “What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (104). Brenna Bhandar elucidates that whiteness and maleness were required to be eligible to own private property, which both rested on and

120 Dispossession, 12.
assured “a proper political subject” position in European colonies. This colonial logic, which Bhandar calls a tautology, becomes more evident in the novel when we consider Jacob’s constant ventures into more profitable trades and obsession with building a new house in the farm. Jacob’s acquisition of more land and property reinforces his subject position as white and male, and strengthens his dominance in the household as the *rightful* owner and protector of his territory and its residents. His dominant subject position grants him not only the privilege to own himself and property but a proprietary claim to people who depend on him whether they are family, children, or servants.

Morrison reveals this dynamic in Rebekka’s reflection on her increasing dependence on Jacob to provide and protect: “Tales of his journeys excited her [Rebekka], but also intensified her view of a disorderly, threatening world out there, protection from which he alone could provide” (103).

Nevertheless, Morrison shows that Jacob’s settler accumulation and possessiveness remain contingent upon female characters’ continued dispossession in his household. Although Jacob believes that he is, in a way, their custodial guardian and their acquisition is “rescue”, he relies on and prefers female laborers thinking that “[i]n the right environment, women were naturally reliable” and “men cannot be trusted during his long absences in the farm” (39). Jacob is oblivious to the fact that what he thinks to be natural, i.e. biological, about women’s reliability is assured by colonial property laws that prevent women from ownership and possessing their persons. Morrison shows, to be

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121 Bhandar explains that “Raciality and property ownership were co-constituted through a tautology repeated throughout European colonies: in order to be a proper political subject one had to own property, and in order to own property, one had to be in possession of certain qualities in the requisite degrees, such as whiteness and maleness, which determined whether one could own property. Properties circulated amongst and were unevenly attached to subjectivities of both coloniser and colonised” (229). “Plasticity and Post-Colonial Recognition: ‘Owning, Knowing and Being’,” *Law Critique*, no. 22, 2011, pp. 227–249.
independent, thus unreliable, is a position that “unmastered” women cannot afford in a world hostile against any female without an owner (68). Florens’, Lina’s, or even Rebekka’s safety and survival at any point are not protected by the same liberal ideology but depends on the condition of belonging to/being a property of a master, a white male settler whose claim to property and paternity come over everything, definitely over human life.

Highly cognizant of the settler inflections of liberal ideology and liberal groundings of male-dominated property laws in colonial times, the novelist problematizes white male subjectivity through her reflections on Jacob Vaark’s convoluted morality. Thus, we cannot consider Jacob’s intention of creating a family/community in his farm independently of colonial ideological structures such as dispossession that secure the continuation and accumulation of (white male) settler wealth. Nor can we consider Jacob’s integral relationship with his servants outside the violence of slavery and its legal foundations that articulated “the captive’s bifurcated existence as both an object of property and a person,” as stated by Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). Hartman reminds that what has been termed paternalistic relations between masters and slaves were another way of facilitating dominion over the captive’s subjectivity, particularly Black identity; “the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved.” While their original dispossession may not have been Jacob’s doing and he may not represent a master as conventionally understood, female laborers, who are
cherry-picked by him to create a community, are compelled to be rational, self-disciplined individuals in his house, and live in a harmony of interests that only benefits Jacob even though servants’ dispossessed status stands in contradiction to the fundamental condition of human coexistence.

Further, Morrison depicts Jacob Vaark’s settler-colonial possessiveness as a pathological materialism: for the colonizing white male subject Joseph Vaark represents, acquisition of land functions as the remedy for dispossession, materially compensating for his “misborn” and “disowned” status as the orphan child of an English mother and an inconsequential Dutch father: “Inheriting land softened the chagrin of being both misborn and disowned. Yet he continued to feel a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays, remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways, and ports of every region he traveled” (38). Jacob’s dependence on property for his subject position is once more pathologized by his association of paternity with ownership. As the narrative progresses, Joseph Vaark, who is apprehensive of owning slaves and trading in flesh in the beginning, keeps accumulating more wealth and property, and becomes infatuated with building a new house, partly (it is implied) to fill the void he feels due to his unfulfilled fatherhood. Jacob’s strong feelings for the third house are not lost on Lina; she critically observes him getting unusually excited:

she had never seen him in better spirits. Not with the birth of his doomed sons, nor with his pleasure in his daughter, not even with an especially successful business arrangement he bragged about. It was not a sudden change, yet it was deep one. The last few years he seemed moody, less
gentle, but when he decided to kill the trees and replace them with a
profane monument to himself, he was cheerful every making moment.\textsuperscript{124}

Lina’s observations attest to the problematic nature of Jacob’s attachment to private
property, particularly to the third house he is building, for Sir (that is how they address
him) is inspired to build not simply a bigger but an impressive construction in the farm
after he sees Senhor Ortega’s “grandiose” house in his plantation Jublio, located in
Maryland (17). Despite his arrogant contempt for D’Ortega, Jacob, jealous of Ortega’s
wealth and his surviving heirs, cannot help fantasizing “to build a house that size on his
own property” (31). And he believes that it would be “pure, noble even, because it would
not be compromised as Jublio was” (32). Nevertheless, Morrison frequently mocks
Jacob’s “good opinion of himself,” his self-justified superiority and scorn towards
“wealth dependent on a captured workforce” (31-32) by exposing his settler possessive
mindset: “They [Jacob and Mr. Ortega] both spoke of the gravity, the unique
responsibility, this untamed world offered them; its unbreakable connection to God’s
work and the difficulties they endured on His behalf” (20). By inserting recurring
reminders about Jacob’s complicity in constant land contestations and dispossessions that
enable plantation capitalism and chattel slavery in the colonies, Morrison’s narrative
allows us to recognize racialization and colonialism as “concomitant global systems that
secure white dominance through time, property, and notions of self,”\textsuperscript{125} as Byrd
suggests.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{124} 51.
\textsuperscript{125} Byrd xxiii.
\textsuperscript{126} In \textit{Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism} (2016), Iyko Day
uses the term “settler colonial capitalism” to indicate the triangulation of Native, settler, and alien
populations and to highlight the role Asian labor played in the simultaneous formation of settler
colonialism and capitalism in the North American context (7). Similarly, we cannot consider slave labor
Jacob’s unsuspecting trust in his benevolence and soft spot for orphans convince him that he has constructed a family of orphans through gathering the displaced on a displaced land. At first look, the shared condition of being displaced and dispossessed creates an illusion of unity in the Vaark household. When Jacob dies, though, the true nature of their collective becomes obvious: “they were not a family – not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all” (69). With Rebekka fallen ill with pox after her husband dies, Lina recognizes the actual threat of being alone and once more disowned in a lawless and chaotic new world where people from around the world are coming to grab its land, resources, and people. Without belonging with anyone, Lina knows that her isolation as a woman leaves her vulnerable to all sorts of dangers in a land that is ruled by chaos and theft: “three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone… Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (68). Florens’ mother echos Lina’s sentiments about being female when Morrison gives first person voice to her thoughts at the conclusion of the novel: “There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (191). She is aware of the dangers waiting her daughter as she grows up on the plantation; Florens is already showing physical signs of transitioning to adolescence and her mother is alarmed by the way Senhor D’Ortega looks at her. She recognizes D’Ortega’s colonial gaze that reduces herself and her kin to flesh to be constantly exploited and abused. While she knows that giving her daughter to Mr. Vaark will not forever protect her from harm, she considers Mr. Vaark as a less

outside the seventeenth century settler colonial matrix that structured the relationships between diverse political and cultural groups.
dangerous, if not better, master because he sees Florens “as a human child, not pieces of eight” (195). She is forced to make the difficult decision of forgoing Florens, believing “[t]here is no protection but there is difference” in the way Jacob treats her (195).

Through Florens’ and her mother’s first-hand experiences, Morrison posits that women’s sexual and labor exploitation in the Americas is not an exception but a transnational condition of seventeenth century US empire and their exploitation is integral to patriarchal systems such as colonialism and slavery: “men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops” (192). The mother’s story along with Florens and Lina’s reinforces the notion of white men’s prosperity as enabled by Native and arrivant women’s bodies and as destructive to their bodily integrity.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison unravels the deep material outcomes of dispossession which safeguards Native and arrivant women’s subjectivization as servants for white male settler accumulation. We observe, while their initial dispossession is operative in rendering both Lina’s and Florens’ bodies disconnected, thus disposable for settler colonial possessiveness, their servitude requires further estrangement and isolation from intimacies they may seek. *A Mercy* features the Vaark farm as a representative colonial space that ensures slaves’ and servants’ continued alienation and disconnection from communal relations; the farm’s isolation from the rest of the town is not coincidental but provides the boast for Jacob’s confidence in his self-reliance and provides the forced individualism his servants are condemned to.

Inside the house, rather than being a community, the Vaark household are primarily in an economic relationality and cohabit essentially for the benefit of white male settler accumulation. The economic colonial logic that governs the Vaark household
can be called a form of domestic colonialism, to echo Amy Kaplan’s groundbreaking 1998 article “Manifest Domesticity.” According to Kaplan, when we consider the domestic as opposed to the foreign, or outside its conventional meaning, the ideological work of domesticity expands to incorporate the process of domestication; resonating with the colonial project of domesticating and assimilating the foreign (Rebekka), the wild (Florens), and the savage (Lina). Morrison’s narrative brilliantly defies such distinctions between “colonial” wilderness and domestic space, (if not between private and public spheres of the nineteenth century), demonstrating the central role the colonial home plays in producing servants for settler accumulation and an emerging capitalist formation (or nascent capitalism) in North America. Particularly for Lina and Florens, who are cut from familial and communal roots at a young age, the Vaark place embodies the compulsory individualism of the colonial condition by reinforcing their alienation from communities of origin. In the next section, I discuss how Lina and Florens resist compulsory settler individualism and the psychic violences of dispossession through the recognition of their need for intimacy and human relation whereas, this section shows, Jacob lacks this knowledge; his need for a community is misplaced by a compulsive desire for more wealth and ownership.

127 Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” American Literature, vol. 70, no. 3, 1998, pp. 581-606. Kaplan’s article reconceptualizes domesticity by placing the term the domestic in opposition to the foreign. Kaplan’s uncommon interpretation questions the validity of separate spheres as a dominant literary paradigm to understand nineteenth-century domestic fiction. She suggests that when we consider the domestic as opposed to the foreign, men and women are united within their mutual domain of nation, and women are entrusted a major role in the construction of an imperial nation. Focusing on Catherine Beecher’s A Treatise on Domestic Economy and several works by Sara Josepha Hale, Kaplan examines the authors’ engagement in imperial project of domestication, thus shedding light on the conflicting and shifting boundaries of so-called separate spheres. “Manifest Domesticity” is a compelling invitation to reimagine nineteenth-century domestic fiction with new lenses oriented toward understanding woman’s literature as narratives of nation and empire rather than didactic fiction of private sphere.
Subversive Acts of Self-Possession and Female Solidarity

So far, I have reflected on violent forms of dispossession in *A Mercy*; however, Morrison’s brilliant narrative formulation offers multiple meanings of dispossession. Butler and Athanasiou posit that the term dispossession can have a positive meaning which indicates limited autonomy of a liberal subject, thus potential for human interrelation. In the positive sense the authors frame it, dispossession “marks the limits of self-sufficiency and that establishes us as relational and interdependent beings.”128 In regard to the complicated nature of dispossession in forming relational subjects, Athanasou asks:

how we can be moved to the other and by the other (as well as the other’s life-world) beyond the logic of “proprietariness” – with all its undertones of property, priority, and propriety – when the other is constituted as ultimately disposable and transposable by forms and norms of governance. Further, does the ability to recognize or acknowledge self-dispossession necessarily lead to halting the violences of dispossession?129

As I discuss in previous sections, when the other is marked disposable for colonial possessive accumulation, she cannot form attachments to the “privileged” subject outside the logic of “proprietariness.” In order to entertain Athanasou’s second question, though, we can consider Lina’s and Florens’ acts of survival and resistance against forced familial and communal deprivation.

Morrison dramatizes Lina’s resistance against becoming dispossessed with her reconnection to ancestral and natural way of life. When she is sold to Mr. Vaark at the

128 *Dispossession*, 3.
129 *Dispossession*, 94.
age of fourteen “for exchange of goods or specie” by the Presbyterians, Lina decides to toughen up “by piecing together scraps of what her mother taught her before dying in agony” (56). In order to cope with the weight of her dispossession and solitude at the Vaark farm, Lina invents “a way to be in the world” by combining “neglected rites,” “European medicine with native, scripture with lore” (56-57). She finds strength, if not comfort, in reclaiming the parts of her identity and community which she is supposed to forget and suppress to be a servant of settler-colonial white possessiveness. Lina redeems her heritage with the limited memory of her ancestors, not letting territorial dispossession to completely displant her from cultural roots. She returns to nature, both animate and inanimate, to redesign a life that belongs to her, a life lived in harmony with “the natural world: She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to the rain” (57). Lina’s inventing a self-possessed way of being in the world implies independence and resilience which being dispossessed, i.e. not being in a sustaining environment, requires rather than a lack of interest in forming a community.

In Florens’ case, we can consider her character development as an evidence of her resistance against dispossessing violences. In the beginning, possibly due to her young age, Florens is portrayed to be tender and in constant need for love and attention, “deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval” (72). As the narrative progresses, Florens is called wild by others multiple times. Most critics consider Florens’ characterization as wild as a defying, self-possessive act and her refusal to be owned and dominated.\textsuperscript{130} Friedman, on the other hand, draws attention to the

\textsuperscript{130} See, for example, Jesse Goldberg, “Slavery’s Ghosts and the Haunted Housing Crisis: On Narrative Economy and Circum-Atlantic Memory in Toni Morrison’s \textit{A Mercy},” \textit{MELUS}, vol. 41. no. 4, 2016, pp. 116–39, and
colonial connotations of Florens’ wild character and argues that “the concept of wilderness cannot empower Florens in a so-called New World context where all of the land is stolen, colonized, and worked by enslaved people” (312). Along those lines, I contend that while it alludes to her autonomy, Florens’ becoming wild also must be considered within dispossessing economies of settler colonialism and slavery. For, wilderness does imply a lack of human connection and of access to intimate circles of family and community, which the novel demonstrates to be the result of dispossessing violences of settler colonial condition. Nevertheless, we can consider Florens’ writing her own story as defiance against her dispossession, an act to negate the forced abstraction of her humanity, even though it is a symbolic act that cannot end material violences. Similar to Lina’s self-possessive act, Florens creates the narrative of her life, writing her story on the floors of the late Mr. Vaarks’ empty house. Called a wilderness and wild multiple times by others, she asserts her own perspective of her life and character in writing: “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven, Unforgiving. No truth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (189). Writing becomes Florens’ single act of repossession, her owning and telling the story she wants the blacksmith to know. Florens reclaims her voice to self-author her life which has been deemed dispossessed and disposable. The significance of Florens’ act, however, lies not only with her literacy, but the act of writing on the house floor. She carves the story into Jacob’s empty house, his final construction on the farm emblematic of his white male subjectivity, even while she is his property long after his death. What defines Jacob Vaark, his “profane monument to himself,” however, becomes the blank slate on which Florens recreates her narrative in an

act to reject the subjectivity imposed on her (51). With Florens’ carved letters on its floor, the third house, which Jacob believed that would be “pure, noble even, because it would not be compromised as Jublio was,” becomes the evidence of slaves and servants’ constant dispossession for settler colonial accumulation in the Vaark farm and seventeenth-century America (32). Obviously disagreeing with Jacob on its purity, Florens intends to burn the house with Lina’s help and make its ashes fall “over acres of primrose and mallow. Over turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow and flavor the soil of the earth” (188). Florens’ words imply that Jacob Vaark is the traveler who separates the eggs from their mother and what he thinks he owns does not and will never belong to him.

I am aware that these acts of self- and re-possession cannot be considered outside the liberal subjectivization and individualism which were ideological forces that formed and maintained colonial dispossession in early America. However, Lina’s and Florens’ narratives also offer alternative ways to liberal forced individualism; Lina and Florens provide support and family warmth for each other which alleviates the crippling effects of isolation and alienation in the Vaark farm. Through their narratives, Morrison offers female solidarity as a remedy for dispossessing violences of settler and domestic colonialism that rule intimacy among a household. As we entertain the notion of female solidarity in a colonial domestic place, we should, indeed, factor the constant violence of settler colonial dispossession. If in negative sense dispossession signifies “a condition painfully imposed by the normative and normalizing violence that determines the terms of subjectivity, survival, and livability,” as Butler and Athanasiou suggest, what is the
possibility for human connection for the violently displaced and disowned individuals such as Lina and Florens?\textsuperscript{131}

Despite individual acts to repossess their lives, we observe that Florens and Lina recognize their need for human connection. Lina’s self-invented toughness, for example, is helpless against the need for company and a home to sustain herself. She forms a quick friendship with Rebekka soon after her arrival in the farm as the new wife even though “the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina” in the beginning (62). Morrison characterizes their friendship as “a united front in dismay;” Rebekka and Lina discover their co-dependence in the shared burden of working Mr. Vaark’s land, maintaining the farm, and inhabiting a domestic space that belongs to neither. Thus, their shared condition of being women “implies… structural dependence on social norms that we neither choose nor control,” rather than biological disposition.\textsuperscript{132} Accordingly, Rebekka reflects that what unites women is:

the promise and threat of men… Some, like Lina, who had experienced both deliverance and destruction at their hands, withdrew. Some, like Sorrow, who apparently was never coached by other females, became their play. Some like her shipmates fought them. Others, the pious, obeyed them. And a few, like herself, after a mutually loving relationship, became like children when the man is gone. Without the status or shoulder of a man, without the support of family or well-wishers, a widow was in practice illegal.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131} Dispossession, 2.
\textsuperscript{132} Dispossession, 92.
\textsuperscript{133} A Mercy, 115.
Despite this statement by Rebekka and the novel’s overall emphasis on women’s subordinate position to men, we cannot interpret Rebekka’s and Lina’s codependence as friendship or sisterhood, or in the positive sense of dispossession Butler and Athanasou discuss. The oppressive economic relationality in the Vaark’s farm cannot substitute familial or communal relations that are based on shared life and mutual growth. This becomes evident when Rebekka eventually sheds off her friendly manners and assumes the role of authority figure in the house vacated by her husband. With Rebekka’s changing attitude through the end of the novel, Morrison problematizes romanticized and essentialist notions of female solidarity which are often based on the universal condition of being oppressed.¹³⁴ To the contrary, Morrison shows that women’s relations with each other are equally harmed by and vulnerable to structural hierarchies that govern their interactions.¹³⁵ Butler states, “we are interdependent beings whose pleasure and suffering depend from the start on a sustained social world, a sustaining environment.”¹³⁶ A Mercy reveals, gender and racial hierarchies that enable and preserve settler colonial dispossession turn Native and Black female bodies’ suffering into settlers’ pleasure. A community constructed within settler colonial matrix cannot sustain its members when the care and need are not reciprocal. Settlers’ dependence on Native and Black bodies for their survival and privilege cannot lead to a mutually enriching social space. Functioning


¹³⁵ This has been a prominent argument of women of color feminisms, particularly Black feminist thought, transnational feminisms, and Native feminist critique cited and referred in this article.

¹³⁶ Dispossession, 4.
within oppressive gender dynamics of settler possessiveness, dispossession cannot empower disowned women like Lina and Florens.

However, the novel manifests that Lina and Florens can resist their deprivation when they fulfill each other’s need for human interconnection. Accordingly, their relationship functions to provide intimacies that are necessary to create a sustaining human environment, mimicking the mother-daughter relationship: “Mother hunger – to be one or to have one – both of them were reeling from that longing which, Lina knew, remained alive, traveling the bone” (73). Their need for each other does not depend on or derive from a colonial-possessive relationship but functions to mutually heal violences of dispossession: While Lina recognizes Florens’ vulnerability and need for protection, she is cognizant that Florens’ presence lessens her longing for “the home Lina once knew” (70). Rather than an essentialist notion of family as biological kinship, Morrison evidences that familial intimacies can be formed outside biological boundaries and around shared experiences when people provide a system of support for each other.

Dispossession has been an effective colonial tool for the deliberate destruction of Native tribes, nations, and communities in the Americas. Similarly, Black children, women, and men have been forcibly removed from their kin to destroy families and debilitate their communities on the same lands. When paired together, as in this poetical Morrisonian narrative, these shared experiences indicate the conjoined histories of colonialism and slavery, and violences inflicted on Native and Black families. Once more, Morrison urges us to reckon with history in order to understand emotional harm that has been done to communities and generations that are ripped from their beloved origins, cultures, and lands.
Indeed, we can argue for *A Mercy*’s relevance to today’s US politics since “there is no “post” to settler colonialism” as Day notes.\(^{137}\) With this reminder, I intend to once more signal my critique of critical ethnic studies scholarship for its prioritization of racism and other systemic oppressions in the US context over settler colonialism. This critique is not to suggest that racialization can be reduced to colonialism, nor does it mean that racial slavery does not resonate with contemporary Black racialism in the US. And I am not alone; among many, Day reminds the insufficiency of “the dominant conceptual paradigms of U.S. ethnic studies anchored by race, citizenship, war and labor migration, and transnationalism and diaspora” to examine Indigenous cultural politics and its settler colonial paradigm.\(^{138}\) As I conclude, I should reiterate: the representations of colonialism and slavery’s violences in the novel may resonate forcefully with the current violations of Native, Black, and other communities of color. Nevertheless, they cannot be interpreted as merely a reflection on the so-called multicultural present outside the settler colonial matrix. And, it is both ethically and critically flawed to disregard Morrison’s tackling of settler colonial violence in *A Mercy* or regard it as a distant past, thus deeming it irrelevant to current US cultural politics.

\(^{137}\) “Being or Nothingness,” 104.

\(^{138}\) “Being or Nothingness,” 118.
CHAPTER 3
SEVERED HANDS, STOLEN LANDS: LOOKING FOR LOST CONNECTIONS
IN LEANNE HOWE’S MIKO KINGS

What has sustained and cohered Native families and communities for centuries during physical and cultural genocide, dispossession, and various settler attacks on Native life? Currently we recognize Native survivance as “an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners” as Vizenor has described.139 Yet in order to conceive how Native nations, tribes, communities, and families in urban places as well as on reservations have sustained this active sense of presence, which signifies both resilience and resistance, we need to closely look at how these small and large collectives of intimacy have organized life at every level of their communities. In this chapter, I would like to consider Native political and social organization of life that has cohered communities and families for hundreds of years and how Native lifeways have endured to this day. As I attempt to answer my main question in this chapter, I turn to a prominent name in contemporary Native American literature, LeAnne Howe: her 2007 novel Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story offers a compelling narrative about the structures, traditions, and visions that have ensured the continuation of Native life and lifeways by representing a Choctaw-specific history and tradition of Native survivance.

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139 Gerald Vizenor, Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance, University of Nebraska Press, 2009, p. 1. Vizenor contends that survivance “is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response;” it implies “an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (15). Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence, University of Nebraska Press, 1998.
Howe opens *Miko Kings* with an established trope of contemporary Native American literature, returning home. The novel’s protagonist Lena Coulter, who has been a nomad for years, returns to her home in Ada, Oklahoma, after working as a journalist in New York and Amman, Jordan, respectively. Determined to mend her “Native connections,” she starts with renovating the house which she inherited from her Choctaw grandmother MorningTree Bolin. As the renovation continues, Lena starts looking for lost connections in this very house where she spent her childhood. When she finds a leather pouch “stuffed with papers,” a journal, and a photograph captioned “1907 Miko Kings Champions” in the closet, Lena decides to find out what happened to the Indian-owned ball club Miko Kings (15). The rest of the novel is an intricate story of intertwined lives and a deep reflection on a multitude of issues regarding historical and contemporary Indian experience.

Juxtaposing land allotments and Indian boarding schools, *Miko Kings* strikes us as a long narrative on the violation of Native familial and communal connections and how these violences were enacted through different institutions. Howe’s vision of Native life, however, is one of resistance and activism. That is why the novel incorporates baseball as a parallel narrative. Howe shows baseball to be a southeastern practice which undoes the effects of separation and rebuilds the community that has been harmed. She explains that in *Miko Kings*, a novel marked by characters’ separations from family, community, cultural roots, and homeland, “the analog to the separation is playing [the] game of baseball… so the cosmos is involved in this idea of return.”

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140 LeAnne Howe, Personal Interview, 21 June 2019.
inserts baseball as a Choctaw practice and tradition that reverses the effects of settler colonial violence.

The game of baseball thus is more than just a game for Choctaws and southern Native nations. Considering its representative power of returning and reclaiming community and land, Indian baseball is an act of resistance. It is not coincidental that resistance against land allotments, the Four Mothers Society’s organizing of the game, and Indian boarding schools are intertwined in the novel; characters such as Hope Little Leader, Ezol Day, and Lena are all actors involved in the resistance against the dispossessio of Indian lands, families, cultures, and histories. Their actions at remote points in history serve as activism against settler colonial practices that tear Native communities and families apart and displace them. In this regard, *Miko Kings* requires serious engagement with a multitude of issues regarding historical and contemporary Indian experience. In the rest of this chapter, I will focus on five main issues on which the novel urges attention: 1) the Hampton Institute and Indian youth and children’s separation from their families and their boarding school experience, 2) the Allotment Era and Indian Territory, 3) Lena’s return to her homeland and reconnection with her cultural roots, 4) Choctaw women’s role in the organization of political and social life, and 5) baseball as a southern tribal tradition for survivance and sustaining tribal life and lifeways.

**The Hampton Institute, Separation, and Indian Boarding Schools**

The fundamental issue with the Indian Program at the Hampton Institute as generally with all Indian boarding schools lies in the fact that it was meant to perform the
work of cultural dispossession; land dispossession through the establishment of reservations, land allotments, and forcible removals did not suffice to create a socially and culturally uprooted Indian population. Dividing Indian communities proved to be more challenging than white settlers had anticipated. Boarding school programs were implemented to create a culturally assimilated population within Indian communities who were believed to eventually carry out the work of replacing Native cultures and lifeways with those of white settlers:

School was another means – together with religious conversion, dispossession, disease, trade and war – of making Indians change. Ideology and expectations shaped all behaviors towards Indians, and education operated in a larger venue of cultural, political, and social ideas and actions. Americans’ and America’s attitudes toward Indian peoples, shaped and formed over years of contact, conflict, and uneasy coexistence, created “school” and all it was and came to be for Indians. But Indians’ attitudes – about Europeans, about white Americans, about their own past, loses and survival – also shaped and formed what “school” was and would come to be.  

Founded in 1868, Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was originally intended for the education of newly freed African Americans. In 1878, however, the Institute initiated its Indian program, recruiting over 1300 students from sixty-five tribes until the program’s termination in 1923. Similar to the one for African American students, the Indian education program at Hampton incorporated academic training, manual work, and Christian education to “produce” Indians fit to serve their communities.

141 To Lead and To Serve, 11.
Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the founder and principal of Hampton Institute between 1868-93, was no stranger to Indian boarding schools and education programs. During the time his father, Richard Armstrong, served as the minister of public instruction in Hawai‘i, the young Samuel visited schools with his father and had the opportunity to observe their programs. Lahainaluna, a normal school founded in 1831 and “the first school in Hawaii to incorporate manual labor into academic curriculum” was the inspiration for Hampton, Armstrong later stated.\textsuperscript{142} Raised by missionaries with strong puritanical roots in Massachusetts, he aspired for a locally operated school in Hampton upon his arrival: “Since both the displacement of the Indian and the enslavement of the black by the English on this continent had begun in the Hampton area, it seemed only fitting that the whites’ “civilizing” efforts begin there as well.”\textsuperscript{143} He envisioned the school to integrate academic education with agricultural and mechanical skills and to be run by northern white Americans. In alignment with the nineteenth-century federal Indian policy, the “civilizing” job of Indians rested with educational institutions when the reservation system failed to serve its mission to “force Indians into a settler lifestyle that would allow their eventual “civilization”” although it fulfilled its mission to “separate whites and Indians” and “clear the path for westward expansion.”\textsuperscript{144} The hoped-for replacement of Indian identity and lifeways with that of American was further pursued through education and the allotment of Indian lands, which “would end the reservation system and assure the civilization of the Indians.”\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{142} Lindsey 2.  
\textsuperscript{143} Lindsey 18.  
\textsuperscript{144} Lindsey 11.  
\textsuperscript{145} Paul Stuart quoted in Lindsey 12.
Although Jeanne Zeidler argues that the program at Hampton was based on the idea of cultural pride and heritage, scholarly evidence established that Hampton Institute was no exception; it operated on the same premise as other Indian boarding schools whose mission was to assimilate the Indian.\textsuperscript{146} In case of the Hampton Institute, the work of cultural dispossession was actualized through a combination of institutional policies, practices and dynamics. Like many institutions for Indians such as in-reservation day schools, in-reservation or off-reservation boarding schools, the Indian program at Hampton included academic training, manual work/industrial training, and Christian education. These aspects of the program such as military style trainings for male students and domestic training for female students collectively ensured Indian students’ assimilation to white-proper gender roles. Based on day school curriculum models and driven by a desire for full Indian assimilation, Hampton became predecessor to more, this time Indian-exclusive, boarding schools such as Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which was founded in 1879 as the first off-reservation Indian boarding school.\textsuperscript{147}

The Hampton Institute taught, or rather imposed through its strict discipline, white-proper, nineteenth-century gender roles to Indian students and these teachings were crucial for the schools’ assimilative practices. Gender-specific education of female and male students, or rather the indoctrination of separate gender roles, was implemented through a variety of trainings in manual skills although academic courses were mixed.

\textsuperscript{146} To Lead and Serve, 6. In the same book, Hultgren and Molin state in another article that “the Hampton program for Indian students became the forerunner of a system of off-reservation boarding schools designed to assimilate Indians into the dominant society” (18).

\textsuperscript{147} Today, Hampton and Carlisle are considered the archetypes of Indian boarding schools. They mostly followed the curricula of in-reservation day and boarding schools, which consisted of language instruction, industrial training (with separate foci for boys and girls), and lessons in Christianity. For a comprehensive examination of boarding school institutions for Indians and their curricula, see David Wallace Adams, Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928, University Press of Kansas, 1995.
gender-wise. During their time at school, male students formed battalions, did drills and guard duty on campus, and were trained in military tactics. Female students were trained to lead the domestic life of a nineteenth-century white woman; their residences and daily schedules provided a “home-like atmosphere” where they performed domestic chores as well as white femininity through activities such as making their “own pretty frocks.”

They learned housekeeping in the dominant white American fashion, practicing “sewing, cooking, laundry, and care of the sick.”

The Hampton Institute employed the teachings of white gender ideology to effect fundamental changes in Indians’ gendering systems and family structure. While male students’ education ensured their becoming self-sufficient, self-disciplined, farming, land-owning individuals, female students’ education prepared them for the management of the domestic sphere that was indispensable for the maintenance of a traditional, white American home life. Agriculture, cooking, sewing, and rug weaving were reserved for female students while male students were taught bricklaying, painting, plastering, and other construction work. The hope was that Indian students who were trained in white-appropriate ways would go back and create a similar home life on their reservations. The Institution also had a “family program” for married couples whose participants “were to return to their reservations and become assimilated role models.” With white, gendered trainings and encouragement for nuclear family models, Native lifeways regarding family, intimacy, and gender roles were meant to be replaced with mainstream American family and gender ideals at reservations, as communicated by Armstrong’s remarks: “the

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148 To Lead and To Serve, 33.
149 To Lead and To Serve, 34.
150 To Lead and To Serve, 37.
family is the unit of civilization, and the conditions of a pure family living are the first things to be created in educated men and women.”\textsuperscript{151}

The Institute implemented additional programs to expand Indian students’ assimilation and ensure its continuity such as summer outing programs at nearby farms. Summer outing programs placed Indian students with white New England families; they earned money doing farm and housework for the families. The goal was to train students to cultivate individually owned land, which would accelerate their assimilation into mainstream American society. New England, particularly Massachusetts, farms played a significant role in students’ assimilation through the outing program: “From the school’s perspective, the greatest benefit was the students’ daily association with white Christian families.”\textsuperscript{152} The outing program was a supplementary component of the Indian program through which students were immersed in white American culture, Christianity, and English language.

The existence of the Black student population and their already established program created complex racial and institutional dynamics that were at the core of the Indian program’s success. Donald Lindsey emphasizes that the Indian program cannot be considered in isolation from Black students’ experiences at the Hampton. He further argues that the vice versa is also true:

In fact, no complete picture can emerge from a split image view of either red or black at Hampton. Its principles and staff dealt on a daily basis with the issues raised by bringing black and Indian students together. Their thinking about one

\textsuperscript{151} General Armstrong, quoted in \textit{To Lead and To Serve}, 37.
\textsuperscript{152} \textit{To Lead and To Serve}, 31.
minority unavoidably and demonstrably textured their thinking about the other, not only on campus but also in the national arena.\footnote{xii.}

Hampton’s racial dynamics played a key role not only in the Black and Indian interracial relations but shaped perspectives and policies on the issue of Black, Indian, and white cultural mingling. With Lindsey’s argument in mind, we should consider Hampton as a place of racial and cultural crossroads whose history cannot be accounted for without an analysis of its internal and external race relations. However, it is insufficient to consider the history of the Institute solely from racialization perspective. As many scholars have noted such as Jodi Byrd does in *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (2011), we must keep in mind the colonial relationship between Indians and whites that can never be reduced to racialization although it is necessary to account for Indians’ racialization involved in the colonization process. Rather, the Hampton’s history provides an opportunity to consider racism and colonialism as interlocking systems of oppression that made the foundation of Hampton possible and its mission legitimate.

The interconnection of racism and colonialism becomes stronger when we consider the critical role its Black student population played in Native students’ assimilation at Hampton. By the administration, the school’s Black student population was considered to be a tool for creating conformity and willingness, and for breaking Native students’ resistance to white cultural assimilation. The Institute’s own publication from 1914, for example, documents various scenes in which Black and Native students were being taught the same manual skills and crafts. A photograph captures female students ironing in the designated ironing room. It is noted that “instruction is given in
the best ways of sorting clothes, removing stains, washing, blueing, starching, ironing, folding and distributing clothes.” Considering Hampton’s unique status as a traditionally Black institution and (stereo)typical housework which African American women did for white families before and after the Emancipation, the image is striking: the image evokes a continuity of Black servitude for white society. It is particularly interesting that students are wearing all white and ironing white garments. In one particular black-and-white photograph, the image looks highly white-washed in terms of its color scale as well. Other images in the publication, too, show that the Institute taught Native students, who never labored as servants before, the same chores that Blacks had been doing for white families for years. The images are visual testaments to the interconnection between racism and colonialism embedded in the Hampton Institute’s mission to not only “whiten” Native students also assimilate them into laboring for a white society along with their Black fellows. Labor, as practiced by western societies, was an alien concept to Indian students and constituted another ideological imposition of colonialism. In North America it was Black (slave) labor which carried the burden of emerging capitalism. In the late nineteenth century, however, with the establishment of Indian boarding schools and through their industrial trainings, labor was introduced to Indian students who mostly lived in reservations in their entire lifetimes. With shrinking Native lands and Native-exclusive communities, and Indian youth’s increasing confinement from their homelands and cultures at boarding schools, laboring became a

154 Hampton Institute, 18.
155 Margaret Jacobs notes that “boarding school system had trained Indian girls in domesticity and then “outed” many of them to work among white families in vicinity of the schools” (179). “Diverted Mothering among American Indian Domestic Servants, 1920-1940,” Indigenous Women and Work: From Labor to Activism, edited by Carol Williams, University of Illinois Press, 2012.
shortcut to the extinction of Indianness. At Hampton, Native students were encouraged to labor and learn gendered and racialized laboring practices of the white-dominant society along with Black students. In this sense, Hampton’s unique history challenges critical paradigms that treat racism and colonialism as exclusive historical processes and manifests how these two systems of oppression have been interrelated.

From images and short blurbs accompanying them in the book, it is obvious that Hampton students were being trained to serve, not to lead, a white society and to do the manual work for a dominant class. Indian students’ integrative training with Black students was meant as a reinforcement of their assimilation and future servitude. The institution’s already-established authority on African American student population was a tool to train and manage Indian students and there was no intention for racial mingling but anxiety around it:

By manipulating the races’ interaction, Armstrong’s biracial program aimed to create both a reconstructed, politically contented Negro work force in the South and an Indian people who believed the ways of whites superior to their own. Encouraging blacks and Indians to teach each other the lessons of white civilization became a central tool of Hampton’s strategy of accommodation, and the views of students who rejected this approach rarely got heard, translated, or printed.\(^\text{156}\)

Boarding schools became an integral part of the centuries-long “[a]ssault on Indian land, body, and mind.”\(^\text{157}\) Of course, whether these institutions fulfilled their ultimate mission is debatable. While it is argued that Indian families sometimes desired and demanded

\[^{156}\text{Lindsey 100.}\]
\[^{157}\text{Rayna Green, To Lead and To Serve, 9.}\]
education organized by white settlers, many students were forcibly removed from their families to attend these schools. Children, their families, and communities often resisted this form of forced education before, during, and after their placements.

Family separation and harm to communities through boarding schools is one of the major issues which Howe tackles in the novel. The novel reminds us that boarding schools were one of the settlers’ forced assimilative practices that were meant to tear apart Indian communities. A contemporary narrative of Indian experience and a significant example of historical fiction, *Miko Kings* seamlessly blends past and present, fact and fiction. Despite the story as fiction, Howe’s interpretation of the Hampton Institute’s history imagines what Native students’ experiences at the institution might have been like. Her well-researched and historically-sound imaginative work makes a critical intervention in neoliberal characterizations of the Institute’s history as the origins of a multicultural society and celebratory accounts of Indian boarding schools in general. Instead, she offers a narrative that sheds light on the educational and disciplinary practices that made the Hampton Institute a tool of cultural dispossession:

The Indians call Hampton “The Reservation,” because there are so many different tribes represented. Every waking moment is organized for them. The teachers discourage personal beliefs, rituals, and traditions… The Indian students are trapped here. Like chameleons in a basket, the trick is to become invisible, blend in, and stay out of trouble. (62)

These thoughts belong to one of the central characters in the novel, Hope Little Leader. Presently handless but previously a fierce baseball pitcher, Hope’s story is a tragic one in many ways. When their mother dies of consumption, Hope and his two younger sisters
become vulnerable to settlers’ mission to recruit them for their schools. With his mother
gone and being young, Hope cannot keep his family together and his grandfather is too
old to be his guardian. A preacher, Clyde Spencer, who has been on a mission to recruit
Choctaws “for their fine dispositions,” takes Hope and two sisters Lucinda and Helema to
deliver them to Hampton Normal School for Blacks and Indians (63). When they arrive,
however, the school’s principal, the Reverend Clark, decides to keep Hope but his sisters
are taken to Good Land, an orphanage near Doaksville Oklahoma. Hope’s separation
from his sisters subsequent to their mother’s death is highly dramatic:

“Falamat ia. Katimma ish-ia? Come back! Where are you going?”
Helema, his baby sister, stretched her arms toward him and tried to jump
from the wagon, but Mrs. Spencer held her back. His eight-year-old sister
Lucinda yelled “Hopai-a-a-a,” releasing the a as she ran out of breath.
He ran as fast as he could across the schoolyard. The school’s janitor,
George Lincoln, a full-grown black man, tackled him before he could
reach the wagon. He held Hope on the ground until his screaming sisters
were out of sight. (65, emphasis in original)

Separated from his family and displaced from home, Hope feels lost at the Hampton
Institute. He is subjected to various insults on his character, culture, and way of life on
top of being ripped from his sisters. He is put in solitary confinement, condemned to
loneliness and isolation at the school. He is punished because he runs away from school
in defiance of the school’s principal, the Reverend Clark.

Through Hope’s character and experiences at Hampton, Howe imagines the ways
Indian students might have resisted their assimilation. Despite repeated attempts by the
school administration to tame him and teach him “self-discipline,” Hope continues to practice his culture, offering “corn to Hashitali, the eye of the sun, the one watches over all Choctaws” (62). Hope recognizes that his identity, beliefs, and way of life do not matter at Hampton; he is brought to Hampton to mix in and lose his identity. Yet, Hope is determined to go back home and never return to Hampton.

Hope remains at Hampton because of his love for baseball and because he is in love with a teacher’s aide. To make things more complicated, the aide happens to be a mixed-race Black character, Justina, whom he calls Dusky Long-Gone Girl, “a mixture of Louisiana Indian, African, and French” (71). While Hope sees no impediment to their relationship, Justina is more mature and aware of obstacles for their relationship than Hope is, as she grew up multiracial in New Orleans. Justina had family members who were under constant threat by white Southerners. The relationship between Hope and Justina gives a realistic portrayal of potential intimacy between two different student groups at Hampton despite the society’s, tribes’, and the Institution’s anxiety about such relationships at the time. Indian and Black mingling created unease and was prevented as much as possible at Hampton after the Indian program was introduced. As LeAnne Howe notes, though, theirs is “a relationship that happened because of this colonialist manifesto of the Hampton experiment.” With this love affair, Howe imagines how the assimilative practice of placing Indian students in a traditionally Black institution could have backfired in a romantically positive way. Thus, their love affair represents a transgressive act in an institution where Black and Indian students were not supposed to mix and
become involved in intimate relationships with each other despite the integrated classes and co-residence.\textsuperscript{158}

Justina’s character adds another layer to the theme of resistance in the book.\textsuperscript{159} Her intellectualism as a teacher aide at Hampton is juxtaposed with her activism at her young age in New Orleans. We learn the New Orleans part of Justina’s story through her encounter with Algernon Pinchot, a history professor researching Justina’s activism and her character known as Black Juice (69). During the time she teaches children of the prostitutes at the Courtesan, “one of the more famous brothels in the Storyville District” in New Orleans (72), Justina reports cases of child abuse to the local newspaper \textit{The Mascot}, “focusing attention on the child sex market – for the most part Black and Indian children – in the district” (77). That is not only what makes her a research-worthy activist figure and inspiration for Black Nationalists; Black Juice is alleged to have dynamited the Courtesan on Wednesday, July 25, 1900, during New Orleans race riots. Initially unwilling to discuss her activist past, at Professor Pinchot’s insistence Justina confirms her involvement in the incident. While elderly Justina Maurepas regrets the destruction which she caused and believes that she “failed in [her] struggles against violence and inequality” (73), the twenty-two year old Justina’s vision of justice seems to have outweighed the consequences. She eventually intimates her reasons to Professor Pinchot who cannot seem to comprehend her motives for blowing up the brothel, or “the only home these children had” (76): “Monsieur, have you ever held a small boy in your arms

\textsuperscript{158} Kirstin Squint interprets Hope and Justina’s relationship as an example of “cross-cultural alliances against hegemonic powers both in the traditional Choctaw homelands and in the space that has been known as Indian Territory” (128). “Choctaw Homescapes: LeAnne Howe’s Gulf Coast,” \textit{The Mississippi Quarterly}, vol. 66, no. 1, 2013, pp. 115-137.

\textsuperscript{159} Davis 84.
after he has been so thoroughly sodomized that he dies of exhaustion – and loss of blood?” (77). Black Juice’s act seems to have arisen out of both hope and hopelessness for justice and ending violence.

Pinchot’s book, which chronicles Justina’s life as a Black activist, is titled Black Juice, The Martyr of Hope but Justina chooses to characterize herself “the lover of Hope” (81). Disinterested in the dominant public narrative about her past as a New Orleanian activist, Justina Maurepas considers her time in Ada, Oklahoma, as a more pivotal moment in her life despite the brief period she spent with Hope. To the reader’s dismay, Hope and Justina’s courtship continues only as long as they can remain defiant of racial divides of the time. In a time when “Indians look down on colored folks the same as they look down on whites” and “the Klan” pay threatening visits to interracial couples’ houses, Justina decides that it is best to leave Hope and the Indian Territory (194-95). While there is no happy ending for them, years later Justina regrets her decision and Hope never stops loving her, the mother of his only child about whom he never knows.

When Hope is absorbed in his love for baseball and Justina at Hampton and incognizant of tribal matters, the stakes are high for Indians. The preservation of tribal identity is ever more critical during the Allotment Era. Boarding schools were not the only way which settlers imposed their culture and attack Native life and lifeways to ensure their destruction at the turn of the century. Howe juxtaposes the Allotment Era and boarding schools to reinforce the interconnection between land allotments and boarding schools in the novel:

The year is 1896. Hope knows this because the school’s principal, the Reverend Clark, repeatedly tells time for the students. He says that in the coming twentieth
century, four years hence, there will be no more wild Indians. Education will see
to that. (61)

The juxtaposition of multiple settler practices in the novel shows how educational
institutions can also be mobilized for cultural and land dispossession. The principal’s
[Reverend Clark] remark reiterates how educating young Native Americans in boarding
schools serves a bigger purpose of seizing Native lands: “by cultivating you wild
Indians… we tame the land” (63). The principal’s remarks make it obvious that by
removing Indians from their land, they obtain (the opportunity and right to own) the land.
Howe’s metaphor of cultivation is very suiting and provides a vivid image for imagining
Indian dispossession and land allotment: If you would like to cultivate a piece of land,
you first need to clear it of all wild vegetation that grows “naturally” on that piece of
ground. Then, you introduce the crop which you would like to grow to this newly
acquired land; in order to make sure that your crop grows without obstruction, you
periodically remove any “wild” or organically growing vegetation that may keep
springing. They need to be completely uprooted and the land needs to be cleared of any
remaining roots and seeds for the newly introduced crop to grow and thrive. Thus, the
process of cultivation is a useful metaphor to understand both cultural and land
dispossession. Education provided at boarding schools was intended to strip Indian
children of their cultural knowledge and way of life. Their minds were, instead, filled
with settler notions of the world; their understandings of the sacred were replaced with
Christianity; and their bodies were trained for laboring and serving. Boarding schools
cultivated the young generations of tribes, their young minds and bodies, for a life to be
lived in accordance with settler norms and ideologies. In the meantime, land
dispossession continued through allotments which transformed collectively held tribal lands into parcels of private property. Settlers invented land allotments in order to cultivate more Indigenous lands into settler use, and eventually outnumber its original inhabitants with incoming residents. In this way, the “wild” inhabitants were cleared for newcomers to take roots and grow on Native homelands.

Indian Boarding Schools were settlers’ cultural dispossession tools that meant to “kill the Indian, save the man.” The hope was that Natives would eventually start living like white men and leave their ancestral claims to land. In this sense, land allotments were another form of dispossession and the Allotment Era was another period of violence against Indians that followed the histories of genocide and forced removals.

Land Allotment

“In 1904,” says Ezol, “75000 white people in Indian Territory applied to the U.S. Dawes Commission for a place on the rolls of the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations. Everyone knew if they were accepted on the Dawes Rolls they’d receive a section, or two, of the tribes’ allotment lands. Free for the taking. The Dawes Commission admitted them all, but the Cherokees and Choctaws contested the inflated numbers and appealed to the government for a review. It’s still pending.”

“What is?”

“Identity,” she says. “No one will ever know who they really are if they rely on paper identities issues by the federal government. Documents cannot be trusted.”

Miko Kings recounts the early 1900s, a critical period in the Allotment Era when the Five Tribes continued to resist allotments, assaults on Indian identity through the privatization of tribal lands, and the transition of Indian Territory to the state of Oklahoma in 1907. Ezol Day, a time-travelling spirit and Choctaw theorist of relativity,

\footnote{Miko Kings, 29.}
returns to 2006 to meet Lena and gives her an account of what was happening in Ada and Indian Territory at the turn of the century and what it meant for Indian experience. As reflected in the epigraph of this section, Ezol draws attention to the ideological work of land allotments and forced assimilation of the tribes. Without communal land cohering a cultural group and as a base for sovereignty, tribal identity and citizenship specific to each Native nation become contested constructions. The Dawes Act, enacted on February 8, 1887, operated on this notion; by granting Native Americans land allotments as individuals, the Dawes Act undermined their tribal membership. While previously the Section 8 of the act kept the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles, and many other specified groups exempt from the law, in 1893 the Dawes Commission, appointed by President Grover Cleveland, started negotiations with the Five Civilized Tribes. The negotiations culminated in the abolishment of tribal governments and recognition of state and federal laws by the Five Civilized Tribes. In order to be considered eligible for allotment, tribal members were supposed to enroll with the Office of Indian Affairs. In short, in order to acquire a small parcel of tribal lands that originally had belonged to other Native nations and at the time collectively held by the Five Civilized Tribes, the tribal members needed their eligibility, or rather Indianness, to be approved by a federal office. Ezol emphasizes this tragic contradiction with the phrase “paper identities issued by the federal government” (29).

Tribal identity becomes, because of the Allotment Act and a plethora of other federal legislations and practices that followed it, something that can be arranged and overruled through law. According to Ezol, the novel’s genius spirit, tribal identity “is still

pending” to be approved as tribal citizens had turned to the federal government to establish their right to their own lands during the Allotment Era (29). In other words, tribal identity “is still pending” because the Allotment Era’s repercussions and federal government’s effort to dispossess Indian tribes of their land and identity continue to this day, Ezol implies.

Land as in “homeland” has been the fundamental source of maintaining life practices, social and political organization of Indigenous collectives and nations in North America. Land theft has been the foundation of US settler state from the beginning, producing an ongoing history of Indigenous dispossession. Contemporary Native American literature offers powerful representations of how this abusive relationship, which white settlers have imposed, has played out for Indians. Howe contributes to this critical artistic work of contemporary Native American fiction; she crafts Miko Kings against the backdrop of land allotments to alert the reader to land’s central role in Native experience and to remind us of the constant contestations over Indigenous lands by US government. Specifically, she sheds light on the Allotment Era, 1887-1934, and the transformation of Indian Territory to the state of Oklahoma in 1907 as a larger context of the conditions that have shaped Choctaw experiences of land and cultural dispossession.

To amplify what I mean here, I consider land allotment as a specific form of Indigenous dispossession and the Allotment era as the continuation of both forcible removal and another period of settler colonial violence. While there is a consensus about the obvious violence created by the Indian Removal Act and the following Native displacement that led to tragic experiences such as the Trail of Tears, the Allotment Era may seem less grave compared to visibly violent settler policies and practices of land
Theft and genocide. Land allotments and the establishment of the state of Oklahoma, however, provide a unique case to consider continued Indian dispossession; the imposition of Anglo-Western notions of land as “inheritable patrilineal estate with intergenerational wealth and caste-making properties” aimed not only to repossess Native lands but to irrevocably change Native nations’ relation to their land.\(^{162}\)

The period of forcible removal started with the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and resulted in tragic displacement of multiple Indian collectives. The Five Tribes were forced to relocate to Indian territory, an event known as the Trail of Tears, which robbed them of their ancestral homelands that sustained distinct political entities and communities, and disrupted their cultural lives. By the 1880s, white settlers started to look for other ways to get hold of more Indian lands, arguing that Natives were not utilizing the land to its full capacity. Indian Territory, collectively held by the Five Civilized Tribes of Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokees, Creeks, and Seminoles, was one of those lands that were considered too valuable to be left to Indians. Following the Civil War, more white settlers started to intrude Indian Territory, defying tribal authority and continuing the settler assault on Indian lands. In 1887, the Dawes Act was enacted to transform Indian territories into privately-owned parcels of land, allotted among members of Native American tribes.\(^{163}\) Ostensibly intended to secure Native people’s “individual claim” to their land, immediately and in the long run, the Allotment Act allowed for the transition of collectively owned Native American homelands to individual white settlers. By the time the Allotment period ended in 1934 with the Indian Reorganization Act,

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\(^{162}\) Barker 21.  
\(^{163}\) Chang 79.
Native landholdings had been reduced to 52 million acres from 138 million.\footnote{Goldstein 91.} With the establishment of state of Oklahoma and constant influx of white settlers to Indian Territory, the citizens of Five Tribes became a minority on Native land.

The privatization of the tribal lands of Indian territory, initiated by the Dawes Act, operated to transform communal land into individual plots allotted to families and persons in accordance with the settler notions of land ownership. Through the allotment, the settler notion of land as private property was imposed on the Five Tribes of Indian Territory. The Five Tribes resisted this imposition rather than unquestionably accepting it because land allotments conflicted with and complicated the tribes’ relationship to land. Native notion of land differed dramatically from the white settler mindset of private possession and forceful acquisition.\footnote{Angie Debo writes that “[a]ccording to ancient Indian custom the land was held in all the tribes under communal tenure. Any citizen might cultivate as much land as he wanted and the tribal laws protected him in his right of occupancy and in the possession of his improvements, but as soon as he ceased to use it the title reverted to the Nation. With a natural gift for collective enterprise the Indians were contented and prosperous under a system that seemed actually sacrilegious to the individualistic and acquisitive white man” (14). And Still the Waters Run, Princeton UP, 1940.} The communal tenure ensured that individuals and families were able to inhabit and cultivate land while it still belonged to the tribe. With the allotment, land that previously cohered Native collectives, political entities, and confederacies and sustained their communities were passed into heads of households/individuals who were encouraged to work their private land in accordance with settler practices of land cultivation.

Another equally devastating consequence of the allotments is that a great portion of the Indian Territory went to settlers and non-Indians, irrevocably altering Indian Territory to parcels of private property. Despite the Five Tribes’ efforts to maintain Indian Territory as a sovereign piece of Native land, on 16 November 1907, Indian
Territory and Oklahoma Territory were admitted as a single state to the union as part of the larger scheme of settler land theft. The transition took less than two months. The establishment of Oklahoma as a state was abrupt and had devastating consequences for its Indian residents who had been violently displaced from their ancestral lands before. Chang notes that while it took over a century to transition Indian land for agribusiness, in Oklahoma this period was much shorter, taking only about forty years.166

The transformation of Indian Territory into the state of Oklahoma is historically unique also because of the racial and identity aspects of land dispossession that were mobilized in the enactment of the allotments: “This rapid, violent transformation of Oklahoma throws into stark relief patterns of Native American land loss, black landlessness, and white class divisions that are emblematic of the history of landownership across the United States.”167 Cognizant of the multiple intersections of the colonial and racial dynamics of the era, many scholars of Native American Studies and American Studies at large increasingly recognize the close connection between Indigenous land dispossession and economic and racial marginalization of Native communities and several other political groups today. In “Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities,” for example, Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy state that “Indigenous dispossession continues unabated to provide the logics that order power, violence, accumulation, and belonging for all those who find themselves on lands stripped from Indigenous peoples.”168 They suggest a “relationality… which simultaneously addresses Black

166 Chang 6.
167 Chang 6.
168 2.
geographies, dispossessions, and other racialized proprietary violences as incommensurate to yet not apart from Indigenous land and sovereignty” to signify that Indigenous land dispossessions are at the center of racial and economic violences of the twenty-first century North American context, specifically the United States.169

*Miko Kings* critically engages in the Allotment Era’s violent impacts on the lives of affected tribes and next generations. Howe relates how this abrupt change of hands of Indian Territory caused irrecoverable harm to the Five Tribes and their contemporary descendants. Unfortunately, allotments’ lingering effects still structure Native life and land ownership, enabling the federal government to mark and control Indian land.170 *Miko Kings* is attentive to this ongoingness of Native dispossession grounded in the history of land allotments. To point to continued cultural and land dispossession, Howe formulates a narrative of multiple time frames spanning from 1904 to 2006 with retrospective projections into Native experiences during the Allotment era. The novel suggests a relationship between today’s disposposessive economies/acts with the previous eras’ practices and policies of land theft and settler invasion, particularly because of the Allotment. Howe’s account of the Allotment era and its contemporary repercussions resonate with Cree scholar Stephanie Fitzgerald’s conceptualization of ongoing dispossession as a result of allotment in severalty. Fitzgerald uses the term “post-allotment reservation” to mean that “the dispossession and alienation of Native land resulting from allotment in severalty are part of an ongoing process, one that did not abruptly come to an end in 1934 with the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act.”171

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169 Fitzgerald 5.
170 Fitzgerald 12.
171 Fitzgerald explains that allotment “continues on in the form of fractionated heirships, mismanaged trust lands, and Individual Indian Money (IIM) accounts... Further, dispossession on the post allotment...
Living in 2006, Lena retrospectively contemplates the replacement of Indian Territory with Oklahoma and its detriments to Indian existence. Ezol alerts her, however, to the current repercussions of land allotments and how Lena is affected by them:

“I have been thinking,” she says, “this must have been Uncle Henri and Cousin Cora’s house. They lived in a house just like this one on West Ninth Street.”

“No,” I answer. “The land belonged to MourningTree Bolin, my grandmother, and she built the house. This was her allotment, I have the papers to prove it. They are in the safety deposit box in my bank.”

… “Documents lie,” she says casually. (28)

Considering Ezol’s suspicion of documents and judgment of Lena, we can call Lena “post-allotment” since she has a trust on legal papers issued after allotments for her cultural and actual heritage. With the house she inherits, Lena also inherits a reliance on documents released by the federal government for a rightful claim to her homeland. Ezol challenges Lena’s ways of knowing her identity and Choctaw heritage by questioning her taken-for-granted attitude towards documents and papers issued by non-Indian, definitely not Choctaw, authorities. Instead, Ezol introduces Choctaw notion of timespace to Lena to reinforce the idea of continued cultural dispossession and to contest her dominant knowledge of the universe from a western perspective. More specifically, through her theory of space and time Ezol challenges western notions of linear time, the difference between science and sacred, and monolingual representations of lived experiences, which Lena seems to be fully convinced of:

reservation is not only a land tenure issue, but it is intimately linked with environmental issues as well. The generic legal language of allotment reveals the Anglo-American legislative histories of reservation lands, yet at the same time, that language masks realities—of the loss of land, and of what the land represents culturally, environmentally, economically, and politically to Native people” (47).
Choctaw words are tools. They form equations, much the same as geometry…
Geometry may be guided by facts, but those facts are ultimately the choice, or consent, of a specific group. Language, rules of grammar, and meaning are the agreement of a particular group based on their practiced experience. I theorized that Choctaws didn’t have the same experiences with time as those of Europeans because we speak differently. This is revealed in our vast differences of verb usage. What Choctaws spoke of, they saw. Experienced. (37)

Ezol’s theory of Choctaw timespace argues for differential cultural dimensions of space and time. Choctaw language, Ezol contends, has verbs that contain past and present, and that is how two different points in time can intersect (45). In a way, Howe confirms the Choctaw theory of time and space by writing in multiple timelines and intersecting Lena’s and Ezol’s lives. As a time-traveling spirit related to Lena, Ezol embodies the link between past and present. A journalist, a seeker of truth and fact-checker, Lena locates documents, newspaper clips, photographs, and a silent movie about an Indian baseball team, which are artifacts that support everything Ezol recounts. Despite her reliance on tangible documents, a spirit from Lena’s past becomes the (truth-)teller of the story she writes.

*Miko Kings* highlights many further repercussions of land allotments beyond its primary consequence of Indigenous land loss. Relating several detriments to Native life and lifeways caused by allotments, the novel demonstrates how the settler mindset tries to enforce a shift in Native identity through allotment. Through offering a multi-temporal narrative and Choctaw-specific theory of time and space with the genius spirit Ezol, *Miko*
Kings reinforces the idea of continued Native dispossession, cultural and otherwise. I elaborate on Lena’s return to her home in the next section.

Lena’s Return, Reconnection, And Rebuilding: A Prelude to Recovery of What Has Been Lost

In the beginning of the novel, Howe gives a glimpse of what Lena’s life has been like in the Middle East, “the next travel frontier for Americans”: A freelance travel journalist based in Amman, Lena seems to enjoy her life filled with travels, international friends, and a cross-cultural romantic relationship with a Palestinian journalist, Sayyed (18). It is not a coincidence that Howe matchmakes Lena, a Choctaw nomad in the Middle East, with Sayyed. Choctaw and Palestinian homelands were invaded at different points on the western linear timeline but remain occupied to this day. Through Lena and Sayyed’s romance, Howe suggests that these points, Choctaw and Palestinian homelands, intersect in Choctaw timespace.

Having spent years and anchored by love in the Middle East, Lena thinks that she is settled in Amman for life. Her connections to Oklahoma, Choctaw heritage, and family become muted in her rebranded identity. She never knows, however, where on earth she is grounded culturally and spiritually. Following September 11 attacks, she struggles to find freelance work on Middle East travel writing. After the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, Lena hides her nationality and pretends to be an “American-educated daughter of a wealthy Jordanian” for protection from Iraqi single men (19). Lina does not easily give up her life in the Middle East. Only when she loses her boyfriend in a bombing in Amman, on November 9, 2005, is she called back home:
Then, in early April, I heard a strange voice at dusk during the Salaat… instead of “Allahu Akbar” I heard “The time has come to return home.” The next morning at sunrise it was the same. The time has come to return home. Without warning, I began to sob. So I hadn’t purged all my Native connections after all. Even though I’d put ten thousand miles between me and Oklahoma, the land of my ancestors had tracked me down and was speaking. At age forty-seven, I clung to it like a lamp against the darkness. I sold everything I had. Within a month I extricated myself from where I had thought I might be for the rest of my life. (emphasis in original, 20)

Salaat is a call and reminder for Salah, one of the Five Pillars in Islam. Salaat is an invitation for the worship of Allah; in a sense it is a call to remember and return to the creator five times a day. In the religion of Islam, it is believed that every human being comes from the creator and will return to him one day. Having heard daily prayers “broadcast over loudspeakers” in the Gaza Strip, Palestine, during her 1992 visit, LeAnne Howe reflects on the Islamic practice of praying in Evidence of Red: Poems and Prose (2005). She notes how timing of the prayers correspond to the sun’s position in relation to the earth, interpreting it as a parallel between Islamic and Choctaw prayers: “the first prayer of the day begins at the moment the rays of the sun begin to appear on the horizon. The last prayer in the evening ends at sunset… When I hear a man singing the prayers on a mosque’s loud speaker system I am sure he is praying to the Sun, just like the Choctaws once prayed to Hashtali.”172 It seems that her encounters with Islamic practices and the

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172 Evidence of Red, 55. When “a vendor outside Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem” corrects Howe’s creative interpretation, noting “prayers are to Allah, not the Sun,” Howe explains that “[i]t looks like you are praying to the Sun, especially with your palms turned up toward the sky. The Egyptians once worshipped the sun God, RA. Since the Hebrews and the Egyptians once lived together, maybe your religions rubbed
period she spent in the Middle East inspired Howe to incorporate some of that knowledge and experiences in the novel. Choosing the Salaat as an invitation for Lena, Howe hints that Lena’s return will be a spiritual journey toward her “Native connections” that she feels a sudden urge to remember and restore.¹⁷³ When she arrives in Ada, Lena starts renovating the house which she inherited from her Choctaw grandmother MorningTree Bolin. During the renovations, Lena stumbles upon a leather pouch “stuffed with papers,” a journal with Ezol’s name embossed on the cover, and a photograph captioned “‘1907 Miko Kings Champions’” in the closet, and she embarks on a time travel to her past and Choctaw history in Oklahoma (15).

Prominent names of the Native American literary tradition such as Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Linda Hogan, and Louise Erdrich have used the trope of returning home in their fiction, foregrounding homecoming as a quintessential political theme of their literary works and the distinctive rhetorical motif of Native American literature. They have highlighted the critical role which land assumes in the continuation of Native nations and their cultures through the trope of returning home in novels Almanac of the Dead, Ceremony, Solar Storms, Love Medicine, and many others. This trope has come to signify the collective vision of contemporary Native American authors who characterize Indian homelands as essence for Native identities and cultures. Further, the same trope has appeared in contemporary Native American art. During my

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¹⁷³ I should emphasize that Howe’s writerly imagination is deeply rooted in Choctaw knowledge, cultural practices, and spirituality. I suggest here that Howe can evoke a spiritual journey with ease by inserting an Islamic practice in the narrative because she has previously reflected on Islamic practices and Choctaw spirituality comparatively in her writing. Moreover, Howe’s prose and poetry tend to suggest cross-cultural and -religious relationships among many groups, not only between Islamic and Choctaw cultures and practices. For more examples of this, see Evidence of Red: Poems and Prose and Choctalking on Other Realities by LeAnne Howe.
brief stay in Denver, Colorado, for the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association, I observed that *Wheel*, an artwork created by Cheyenne/Arapaho artist HOCH E AYE VI Edgar Heap of Birds for the Denver Art Museum in 1997, resonated with Native American literary productions through engaging in the trope of returning home. *Wheel* forms a circle and stands in the foreground of Cheyenne words “Nah-kev-ho-eye-a-zim.” Curved on the museum building’s wall, “Nah-kev-ho-eye-a-zim” translates in English as “We are always returning home again.” Both through its form and message, *Wheel* symbolizes a communal place of gathering and remembering the history of American Indian peoples in the region; thus, it stands as an homage to tribal lands.  

Evidently, the trope of returning home can be identified as a significant metaphor in contemporary Native American literary and cultural tradition. Beyond being a cliché and simply a shorthand reclamation of Indigenous lands and cultures, the trope of returning home bears complex ideas and notions integral to the politics of contemporary Native American cultural production. Glen Coulthard argues that as “a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world,” place (or land) guides Indigenous activism and resistance today. Coulthard presents place/land as an epistemological framework (as well as a source of material sustenance) that informs Native American political, social, and cultural practices and relations. In *Miko Kings*, LeAnne Howe partakes in the collective political vision of Native American artists and scholars by opening the novel

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175 Coulthard states that “Place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world – and these ways of knowing often guide forms of resistance to power relations that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place. This, I would argue, is precisely the understanding of land and/or place that not only anchors many Indigenous peoples’ critique of colonial relations of force and command, but also our visions of what a truly post-colonial relationship of peaceful co-existence might look like” (79-80). “Place Against Empire: Understanding Indigenous Anti-Colonialism,” *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*, Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2010, pp. 79-83.
with this prototypical rhetorical device; with her literal home coming, Lena takes the opportunity to reconnect with her origin and cultural roots. Zeroing in on Lena’s homecoming in this section, I unpack the trope’s layered meanings and its significance for the larger story in the novel.

Although the novel mostly focuses on Lena’s return to homelands and reassociation with her cultural history, Lena’s story is previously marked by familial loss and rejection of tribal identity. As in Hope’s story (where Howe pairs separation from culture with separation from family), Howe suggests that Lena’s estrangement from her culture and origins is rooted in her disconnection from her mother and severed ties to her emotionally and otherwise absent father. Despite her grandmother who tries to fill the void by creating an image of her mother and being the bearer of cultural knowledge for Lena, Lena’s sense of abandonment leads to a search for an identity disconnected from Choctaw culture and dislocated from Oklahoma. Grandma’s lessons in Choctaw language and lifeways during summers and the “box of memories” about her mother cannot prevent Lena from feeling “abandoned” and floating in life: “somehow my umbilical cord to the center of her had been severed, completely detached before I was born, setting me adrift to fend for myself, with only an absent father” (17).

Lena’s separation from her cultural and familial roots also has symbolic significance for the larger story of land and cultural dispossession in the novel. Lena’s alienation from her homeland and culture evokes the history of forced removals followed by the Allotment era. Although Lena’s departure is voluntary and individual, her story bears the marks of the Allotment Era when her ancestors were robbed of their communal land and divided by the dispossessive privatization of tribal lands. Lena must be
grounded in Ada, Oklahoma, to restore a relationship with her homeland and feel a sense of belonging for her Choctaw heritage. Her quest to unearth the story of the Indian baseball team Miko Kings brings her closer to her cultural roots and tribal history. She can, however, collect only scattered information about the team during early 1900s. Her research and the documents including photographs and newspaper clips do not reveal how the players of Miko Kings were affected by the allotments and the transition of Indian Territory to the state of Oklahoma. Ezol shows up to help Lena uncover the mystery and recover what has been lost in archives and documents. She acts as a catalyst for Lena’s return to home culturally and spiritually by helping Lena regain insight into the Choctaw way of life passed on from her ancestors. Through Ezol’s reflections about the allotments, Lena begins to own up the story she is writing and understands that she is involved in the history which she remembers; “no longer just the writer” Lena reconnects with her communal past (186).

Lena can only sense what the Five Tribes must have experienced in the shadow of allotments. With Ezol’s help, though, she finds out that the Five Tribes’ efforts and activism against allotments have been erased from official histories. By making Lena’s homecoming a prelude to a recovery of what has been lost, Howe suggests that tribal homelands must be reclaimed collectively by remembering a time when they belonged to Native American communities. Lena’s home coming as an estranged Choctaw woman constitutes the initial step of resistance against ongoing settler assault to eradicate Indigenous peoples and their histories. Howe knows how to elevate Lena’s individual struggle to a collective level, making her the voice of the history rewritten in the novel. In this sense, the trope of returning home represents an active form of resistance for
upholding communal integrity of Native nations. The way to maintain tribal identities and communities is organically linked to the preservation of Indigenous homelands in the novel.

**Choctaw Women’s Role in The Organization of Family And Tribal Life**

Let us for a moment imagine that all the great deeds and noble philosophies, all the earth-centeredness, egalitarianism, medicine systems of sacred power, all the values of life ways and values of Native Americans from the northern barrens to Tierra del Fuego, are woman-inspired and woman-maintained.¹⁷⁶

The central inquiry of this chapter revolves around understanding systems, values, and traditions that have made the continuation and endurance of Native life and lifeways possible. I am interested in the organization of political, social, and family life in addition to the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices from one generation to the next, which have allowed tribal systems to operate despite multiple disruptions and destructions. For an answer to my inquiry, in this section I examine Choctaw women’s active role in the organization and management of tribal life, considering the tribe primarily as a political entity. Since Laguna scholar Paula Gunn Allen, a prominent name in American Indian studies, published *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* in 1986, tribes’ gynocentric organizations have been widely recognized. Various Native feminist scholars including Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, Angie Morrill, Joanne Barker, Cheryl Suzack, and Kehaulani Kauanui have produced female-centric scholarship and theorized the field from female perspective. In this sense, the questions I pursue here are neither revolutionary nor unprecedented. Still, LeAnne

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¹⁷⁶ Allen 263.
Howe’s vision of the Choctaw women’s central role in tribal life and history is significant not only for my project. As a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and an accomplished scholar and creative writer, Howe is well-versed in the matrilineal organization of tribes, particularly Choctaws. Her insight into women’s central position in the organization of the political and social life regarding both familial and tribal matters, is well represented in her fiction such as her 2001 novel *Shell Shaker*. *Shell Shaker* is a compelling narrative about generations of powerful Native women and their active roles in family and tribe. (Howe notes that *Miko Kings* is more about her male family members, uncles and grandfather, and a counterbalance to *Shell Shaker* which is very women-centric).177

Howe’s insights into Choctaw women’s influence in their communities become even more significant when we consider the lack of documentation and historical evidence about the matrilineal and matrilocal organization of the tribe. Writing on the women’s roles in Choctaw society in the eighteenth century, Michelene Pesantubbee observes that there is scarce information about Choctaw women before and during French colonization. Thus, relying on archival sources, which are mostly European, about Choctaw women’s historical experiences is problematic and insufficient: “to depend solely on documentation specific to Choctaw women’s lives written during the eighteenth century effectively relegates Choctaw women to the realm of the unknown or perpetuates the continued misinformation about them.”178 Absences and misrepresentations which Pesantubbee points to make creative representations such as *Miko Kings* more critical for producing historically truthful knowledge about Choctaw women. While we are unable to

177 Howe, Personal Interview.
178 3.
talk about specific tribal ways of political and social organization without proper historical context and evidence, we can examine how a Choctaw author and woman herself envisions women’s role in Choctaw society today and in the past. And this is exactly what I undertake here.

In *Miko Kings*, Howe portrays multiple Choctaw women in influential positions in their families and tribes, including grandmothers, mothers, elder sisters, and aunts. Howe’s vision of women’s, primarily mother’s, pivotal role in cohering a family is embedded in the Choctaw tradition of matrilineality. Howe notes that the matrilineal organization of Choctaw and possibly many other southern tribes implies that the mother’s home offers a stable center for family and community to come together. She describes mother’s land as a location where the whole family is grounded and connected. Mother’s home, or oldest daughter’s when mother dies, “acts as a center of the family unit” where families gather for ceremonies and holidays. In this sense mother’s home/land is a “multigenerational” place that coheres families through time.

In the novel, Lena’s personal history narrativizes the significance of mothers and women in Choctaw matrilineal culture. After Lena inherits her grandmother’s house in Ada, Oklahoma, she cannot recognize it as her true home in the beginning. Just like her physical journey to ancestral homeland, Lena’s return to her cultural roots is quite convoluted. Growing up, Lena lacks an intimate bond with anyone and feels “abandoned” because she does not have anyone “on [her] mother’s side to take care” of her. In a matrilineal society, children become the responsibility of mother’s family in the event of

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179 For an extended discussion on the matrilinieal, matrilocal organization of Choctaw society, see Micheline E Pesantubbee, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast*, University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

180 Howe, Personal Interview.
death. Her grandmother tries to fill in the maternal role and be the transmitter of cultural knowledge for Lena, leaving a collection of childhood memories filled with Choctaw culture. Cora, or Mourning Tree Bolin, cannot fill the void, though, because she herself is filled with “grief” over her own loss, Ezol intimates. Moving in “Choctaw space,” Ezol reaches out to Lena to tell her their shared past and lineage; she implies that she has arrived to take care of Lena. She does so by revealing a history that will help Lena understand herself and family better (221). The story which Lena uncovers with Ezol’s help strengthens and deepens Lena’s reconnection with her cultural roots. Following Ezol’s lead, Lena assumes a critical role in her journey to recover the story of Miko Kings and rewrite the history of baseball. The history which Lena is writing finally becomes her own history, or herstory as it is called in feminist history writing: “Are you ever coming back to help me finish our story?” I say softly, looking up into the heavens. I shiver, suddenly realizing what I’ve admitted. I am no longer just the writer” (186).

Lena’s story manifests that female ancestors cultivate tribal identity and intimate connections with one’s roots in Choctaw culture. And this important role cannot be explained merely as childcare or domestic labor. It is the social and political organization of tribal life; it means reinforcing a sense of community through care.

Another way through which Howe narrates Native women’s involvement in the social and political organization of tribal life is the Four Mothers Society. The Four Mothers Society was an intertribal organization of Muscogee Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. It was formed to restore former treaties to secure tribal lands forever. They organized and raised money to resist the allotment of Indian Territory and to
advocate for the tribes’ claim to their communal land. There is not much information about this important society, as Howe notes. While it is not certain how or in what capacity tribal women were involved in the organization, considering the southern tribes’ matrilineal nature it is unlikely that its name is merely an homage to the tribes’ ancestral mothers.

In *Miko Kings* Howe imagines that the Four Mothers Society organized intertribal games to collect money for the organization’s activism against allotments. The author seems to be inspired by tribal women’s active involvement in political issues which we may not be able to verify through archival documents because that they acted in secrecy, Howe implies: “you have all these mothers societies that sprang up in the Southeast especially if you wanted to have political meetings you get the women to do that because they are not under the suspicion of the oppressor because all women they can't do anything; so let them meet. All these things were all kind of underground for a long time and that’s how we have survived I think all these years, this millennium, because of the women.”

I believe that Howe’s and many other Native authors’ vision of women has important implications for contemporary feminist scholarship as well, beyond the immediate arguments of this chapter. While we should bear in mind the specificity of tribal cultures and their organizations, we should also recognize that matrilineal structure of tribes allows us to put women’s familial roles and positions in perspective. Motherhood and what has come to be called reproductive labor in feminist theory are

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182 Howe, Personal interview.
often characterized as a form of domestic chore even when said theories try to prove its importance. Howe’s vision reminds us that the symbolic power of mother’s home/land as the center of generation of families predates and challenges western notions of home as a domestic place and land as exclusively male property. Ideals of domesticity, separation of private and public spheres, and a clear demarcation between women’s and men’s place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries operated to reduce women to simply domestic actors. These prevalent western, particularly American, ideologies reflected women’s role as subservient or secondary to men’s. In matrilineal organization of tribes, however, cohering a family around a place grounded in ancestral/multigenerational land represents a significant communal role bestowed upon women. Also, considering the settlers’ constant attack on tribal unity and survival, the work of cohering a family or keeping a community together becomes a key political act and struggle. Staying together and returning to a community and land that belong to their families and ancestors become political actions in the face of genocide, dispossession, land allotments, and boarding schools, which are the tools of settler colonial violence. These violences always operated on the mission of terminating Native communities or breaking up Native collectivities. In this sense, Choctaw and other Native women’s critical role in sustaining their families and keeping their communities together epitomizes their political vision and demonstrate their inexhaustible commitment to the structures of intimacy that maintain their lives and lifeways.
Baseball

Separation and loss are abundant in *Miko Kings*. I decided to include this novel in my dissertation because it sympathetically conveys how Native people were dispossessed of their land, family, and communities due to settler violence. For me, the narrative about baseball as an Indian game was intriguing but more of a technical detail to move the story forward. My interview with the author, however, showed me that the game was intimately connected to the themes and histories about which I was interested in the novel. That is why I would like to acknowledge that many things I write in this section reflect the author’s own vision of baseball as central to Native experience as the quotations show. I should also note that *Miko Kings* is not Howe’s only work that tells how the Native life and lifeways are embedded in the game. She co-produced the film *Playing Pastime, American Indians, Softball and Survival* (2007) to reflect on baseball’s continuing popularity in the South. Again, in the chapter “Embodied Tribalography” in *Choctalking on Other Realities* (2013) she explains how baseball and Native ballgames, “emplotted in the land” and “embodied by the players”, exemplify tribalography, a term Howe uses to refer to America’s creation through Native stories.\(^{183}\) Clearly, Howe’s insights into Indian baseball go beyond a creative writer’s and are great resource for anyone interested in the history of this popular Native American pastime.

LeAnne Howe contends that baseball has been a significant part of family and social activities in Southern tribes and kept them anchored in their tribal lifeways despite changing relationships with their homelands during removal, allotment, and post-allotment period. Land dispossession often brings communal disintegration and the

\(^{183}\) 190.
disruption of cultural lifeways for Indigenous nations; like many tribes, Choctaw tribal members’ traditional relationship to their land changed, at least legally, upon the forced allotment and privatization. Baseball, however, has been a Southern tribal practice to maintain land’s centrality in Native life and culture. Just as “the land was everywhere an integral part of the stories of Native nations, woven into history, cosmology, and moral discourse – hence ‘emplotted’: constructed cognitively as an active participant in the drama of human life,” land was a significant component of ballgames along with players.¹⁸⁴

Howe emphasizes baseball’s power to bring families and tribal communities together and suggests that Choctaw society has actively resisted colonial impositions on their cultural lifeways by continuing the tradition of baseball:

what is so interesting is the way that the families continue to play collectively and against one another so… you have evidence of how important this land and this game [for] cohering a family. It doesn't… always make everything right but they're turning back time, turning back time, turning back time into a time when we were not separated. So, the game is acting as a conduit on many levels and that impacts the family and… also keeps families together even through the boarding school experience. So… the story of Southeastern people cannot be told without this game.¹⁸⁵

Howe’s remarks make it evident that for the context of the novel it is crucial to consider baseball as a Native tradition that unites families and tribes. Miko Kings relates, with factual accuracy, various historical events such as boarding schools and allotments that

¹⁸⁴ Galloway 175.
¹⁸⁵ Howe, Personal Interview.
were intended to disintegrate Indian families and communities. These historical events, however, do not entirely reflect tribes’ collective experiences. *Miko Kings* demonstrates that there is more to the story that needs to be told than removal and loss. Both colonial records and contemporary narratives dominant in Native American histories tend to erase stories of tribal survivance and favor the ones about cultural extinction, which Howe is very conscious of as a scholar who spent years researching French colonial archives. Because we cannot solely rely on settler documents and narratives, Native American literature plays an important role to correct colonial myths and offer more truthful representations. And this is what Howe accomplishes in *Miko Kings*: Characterizing baseball as a Southern tribal practice for sustaining connections and cultivating communities, Howe does not only reclaim baseball as a time immemorial Indian game but provides a holistic account of Native life from Choctaw perspective.

Traditionally, ballgames inspired and informed Choctaw nation’s political culture, organization, and diplomatic relationships. *Miko Kings* reveals baseball’s various functions in tribal matters and life beyond being a fun sport and favorite pastime. Most notably, baseball is shown to facilitate intertribal coalition and diplomacy that southern tribes have had for centuries: “our game was created so that we could include everyone. We played the game to collaborate with other tribes, the stars, and with the great mystery” (43-44). Miko Kings, the team itself, with players from all the Five Civilized Tribes, embodies intertribal coalition and is intended to bring tribes together not just for profit and fun but for self-investment and activism. The team’s founder Henri Day, who is Ezol’s uncle, believes that starting an Indian baseball team, and then a league, of which all interested Indians can be shareholders, will help with collective tribal resistance
against land allotments. He thinks that the league “will demonstrate that the people from
different tribes can own something together… first inter-tribal business, an alliance that
will spread across the whole U.S. Maybe even the whole goddamn continent.” It is also a
great business opportunity in a town like Ada, “alive and bustling” (112). He hopes that
“[o]ut of all the turmoil of allotment there might still be opportunities for Indians – if
only they’ll act on them” (116). So, the team and the league are means for collaborating
to keep Indian Territory in tribal hands. Henri’s family, particularly his mother, also
works with the Four Mothers Society to organize against the allotment, holding meetings
at ballgames. Baseball is a means for uniting and stirring a fight against allotments and
Henry aims to mobilize it with the help of the Four Mothers Society. Baseball is the most
fitting sport as playing it “is in the blood” for Indians (104). And it is obvious to Henri
Day that “if Indians don’t stick together, they’re doomed to be overwhelmed by the
Naholla” [white man in Choctaw] when their homelands are being stolen (117).

In the present-day parallel narrative, or rather parallel point in Choctaw
spacetime, Lena keeps finding more information about Miko Kings and begins to
understand why Henri Day considered baseball as so urgent to everyday life in Ada and
for the Five Tribes: “He wanted Indians from the Five Civilized Tribes to begin investing
in themselves. To hold something in common, even if it was just baseball” especially in a
time when their communal land was being divided into parcels and given away (186).
She learns, to her dismay, that Henri Day’s strategic mobilization of baseball and Four
Mothers Society’s organizing could not prevent catastrophe when its most skilled player
was oblivious to tribal matters and absorbed in his own problems and ambitions.
Miko Kings lose 1907 Twin Territory Championship to Fort Sill’s Seventh Cavalrymen. Miko Kings’ defeat is symbolic of the history of settler attacks on Native life and land. The Seventh Cavalry Regiment, formed in 1866, participated in some of the most infamous battles of the Indian Wars such as the Battle of Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee massacre. Miko Kings’ symbolic “lost” battle has many consequences: With this defeat, Miko Kings also lose the chance to play in other leagues and shatter Henri Day’s dream for an Indian baseball league. Just before the game, Bo Hash, Justina’s cousin, offers five thousand dollars to Hope on condition that he throws the game. Hope is helpless after Justina has left him and decides to throw the game and take the money. Hope cannot foresee the consequences of his actions; this defeat is one of things that will eventually cost the Five Tribes Indian Territory. Hope, too, ends up losing both hands when his team members find out about his betrayal. Hope is doomed to a life without baseball, the worst punishment for a pitcher with great athletic prowess whose “ambition was to become the greatest baseball player-ever” (199).

*His Last Game*

For Hope’s character and tragic story, LeAnne Howe was inspired by *His Last Game* (1909), today a cinematic artifact. This short movie, produced by Carl Laemmle, a German born filmmaker and founder of Universal Pictures, tells the story of Bill Going, “star player for the Choctaw team,” and white gamblers efforts’ to convince Bill to “throw the big game” in a championship game against Jimtown.¹⁸⁶ Gamblers offer gold, money, and alcohol, it seems, to convince Bill without success. Finally, when they try to

¹⁸⁶ *His Last Game.*
spike his drink, they start a physical fight. One of the gamblers draw his gun and Bill shoots and kills him with the gambler’s own pistol. Just like Hope, Bill resists to gamblers’ efforts but they trick him anyway. For an early twentieth-century production, the film is quite compelling in terms of portraying the relationship between whites and Natives. The film provides short but sharp commentary on the relationship between Indians and whites; “Swift Western Justice” is served, Bill is convicted to death without trial, and is made to dig his own grave.\footnote{His Last Game.} Other game players, who are white men with Choctaw pinned in their fronts, however, convince the town guys and the sheriff to let him pitch in the game before he is punished. Bill is granted reprieve if he wins the game, but they end up killing him despite his winning pitch.

*His Last Game* stands out as a rare early twentieth-century representation of Indian baseball and the rivalry between whites and Choctaw teams. Howe’s inclusion of this artifact adds truth value to her narrative. Considering Southern tribes’ current and historical fascination with the game, I believe that baseball as an originally Indian game is self-evident. And Howe’s brilliant storytelling leaves no room for suspecting otherwise. Nevertheless, she incorporates various other artifacts in the novel from photographs to actual newspaper clips acquired from *Ada Evening News* archives in addition to citing scholarly sources such as Angie Debo’s *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (1940).

During our interview with LeAnne Howe, we talked about baseball, ballgames, mounds, ballparks, Oklahoma, the South, and *His Last Game*. Professor Ron Welburn also participated in our conversation at Hotel UMass, located on the University of
Massachusetts Amherst’s campus. In addition to providing valuable insights for this chapter and my dissertation, Howe helped me see baseball from a fresh perspective. Particularly, when I asked the author about familial separation and cultural alienation in the novel, she directed my attention to baseball’s critical role to undo and repair those losses by embodying the circle of separation and return:

So… the analog to the separation is playing game of base and ball and return so the cosmos is involved in this idea of return and it is certainly embodied in the practice of Hope the pitcher. He is also representative of the pole man above us who pulls down the power of the stars. So all it is, I would say, a collage of themes that are all based in land and that land can't be separated from the sky.¹⁸⁸

As Howe indicates, baseball constitutes a significant spiritual and cultural practice for southern tribes because the game contains rituals and movements that make it more than a sport. Ezol implies that modern fans and non-fans of the game may not be able to appreciate its sacred and metaphysical elements just as Lena has a hard time wrapping her head around Ezol’s theoretical explanations about the game. In the beginning Lena does not “think baseball is a sacred game” (43). Ezol, however, corrects her, reiterating the game’s assimilation by the settlers: “Don’t confuse our ancient game with the one that’s been assimilated into America’s consciousness” (43). Ezol emphasizes how this ancient game of base-and-ball is played in a way to signify players’ connection and communication with the cosmos:

“Base-and-ball,” says Ezol, “was a game that was played on every ancient square ground in the southeast. It had two intersecting lines that crossed at the mound

¹⁸⁸ Howe, Personal Interview.
where the pitcher stood… From the mound, a pitcher was the embodiment of the center pole that could access the Middle, Upper, and Lower Worlds.” (39)

Howe’s references to the pitcher’s mound as elevated and his connection to the Upper, Lower, and Middle worlds have important implications for Native American history: From the elevated position in the baseball field that connects the three realms of the cosmos, the pitcher creates a counterclockwise motion to undo the history of Native loss and dispossession and restarts history.

Although Hope was/is unaware of his power, Ezol understands his ability to harmonize with “the earth’s mathematical systems”: “With his hands Hope could collaborate with nature. Hope was special, and Blip and the others knew it. They loved him for it, but it’s because of his recklessness that we all ended up… forgotten” (44). It is only at the end of the novel that the circle is completed when Hope throws the ball against Fort Sill’s Seventh Cavalrymen one more time:

Hope winds up, looking straight up into the Sun as if in prayer to Hashtali, the Choctaw’s source of power. He disappears inside it. When he pulls out of the light he throws everything he’s got at the Cavalry. Hugh Scott swings again but just tips the ball, and it flies straight to Hope’s glove. (218)

Miko Kings win 1907 Twin Territory Championship, and the history is rewritten.

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In Miko Kings, Howe offers an Indian baseball story which defies separations, disposessions, and loss. Hers is a story that reconnects to tribal homeland, family, and culture. Her message is crystal clear: Base-and-ball, ancient Indian game, represents a tradition that has cohered families and tribes in these lands. Native lives and lifeways will

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prevail despite ongoing settler assaults on tribal organization of political and social life. Baseball will continue to be the re-route to familial and tribal unity. Those who play the game, those who write about it, and those who share the vision of unity do recreate and redefine Indian experience.
CHAPTER 4

“WE EXIST IN A VIOLENT AND VIOLATED WORLD:” COLOR OF VIOLENCE! THE INCITE! ANTHOLOGY AND WOMEN OF COLOR AGAINST VIOLENCE

The color of violence... is the color of white over Black, white over brown, white over red, white over yellow. It is the violence of north over south, of continents over archipelagoes, of settlers over natives and slaves. Shaping this color scheme are the labyrinths of class and gender, of geography and industry, of metropolises and peripheries, of sexual definitions and confinements.

We exist in a violent and violated world, a world characterized by "peaceful violence," as Frantz Fanon so astutely observed. This is the peaceful violence of historical dispossession, of racial, cultural, and economic subjugation and stigmatization. Our psychological suffering and our physical impairments are a direct result of this peaceful violence, of the ordered realities of confinement, degradation, ill health, and early death.189

– Haunani-Kay Trask, “The Color of Violence”

The quote that inspired this chapter and deeply influenced my vision for the dissertation belongs to Haunani-Kay Trask, a Native Hawaiian scholar and activist. In her essay “The Color of Violence”, featured in Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology, Trask takes issue with multiple forms and histories of assaults juxtaposed in the Americas, providing a snapshot of racial, economic, and social oppressions in Hawai‘i. I had no idea when I outlined this chapter that I would be residing in Hawai‘i while writing it. As I have become more familiar with Hawaiian history, now I see how Hawai‘i may fit into the frame of this study and want to start here and now. Hawaiian archipelago is spectacular and unique; living or visiting here is a privilege. Unfortunately, it is a

189 INCITE! Anthology, 82.
privilege afforded to many of us at the expense of its nature’s destruction and Native Hawaiian population’s suffering. From the first moment of European footstep on the islands in 1778 to ongoing land dispossession and militarism in 2021, post-contact Hawaiian history encapsulates the violence of genocide and colonialism. Trask’s statement in the epigraph is a razor-sharp reminder of how this brutal history, inaugurated with conquest, continues uninterrupted today. The phrase “a violent and violated world” implies a world in which violence and violations against bodies, psyches, families, and communities of color become “ordered realities” of everyday life, irrevocable realities of people of color experiences in the United States. The USA stands out as arguably the most powerful and objectively one of the most violent countries, Trask observes. Tracing the history of violence in “a country created out of genocide and colonialism,” she connects today’s white supremacist assaults to conquest: “Colonialism began with conquest and is today maintained by a settler administration created out of the doctrine of cultural hierarchy, a hierarchy in which European Americans and whiteness dominate non-European Americans and darkness.”

Trask mentions Franz Fanon’s term “peaceful violence” to draw attention to the ordinary and quiet nature of violence which people of color suffer in colonized geographies every day; as opposed to our expectation of violence to be loud, sudden, and extraordinary, “peaceful violence” represents recurring and degrading conditions of racial, cultural, and economic oppressions. With the concept of “peaceful violence” Fanon articulates how violence continues to characterize countries in the aftermath of colonization. Fanon, who was among the first anticolonial thinkers to describe destructive

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190 82.
effects of colonialism on psyches particularly in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, reminds that “[t]he atmosphere of violence, after having colored all the colonial phase, continues to dominate national life.”[^191] Peaceful violence which Fanon calls out, violence in all its iterations, racial, gender, sexual, are too familiar and too close to home for Trask and many other Native (Hawaiian) feminist scholars. Thus, Trask emphasizes the ongoing violence of conquest which afflicts the “wretched” of the world, structuring contemporary social hierarchy in the United States and beyond. Her message is clear: violence initiated with conquest and turned into genocidal amplitudes have morphed into white supremacist state violence that we have become accustomed to seeing and experiencing on a regular basis.

Without digressing too much, it is worth considering the pertinence of Fanon’s conceptualization of colonial violence and its effects on psyches to some of the characters from the novels in this dissertation. Fanon narrates how everyday violences deeply disturb the colonized personalities and lead to sometimes (self)destructive mental disorders. Homicidal impulses, depressive disorders, paranoia, and aggression abound in both Algerians and the French, he observes; victims of violence become the perpetrators of violence, develop aggressive tendencies toward loved ones, they become incapacitated by their traumatic memories, and they live with constant anxiety. Silko’s characters demonstrate similar tendencies, paranoid, suicidal, homicidal, and genocidal violence cripple both their bodies and souls. To cope with their troubles, they often turn to drugs, alcohol, and other forms of self-inflicting injuries. Silko relates these bodily and mental symptoms to violences rooted in colonialism and capitalism in the Americas, which

[^191]: 76.
strongly resonate with Fanon’s psychiatric observations about the colonial subjects in Algeria. Morrison, too, hints at violent tendencies arising from enslavement and loss of bodily sovereignty. Most notably, Florens accepts others’ projection of her identity and identify her mental state as wilderness, finally acknowledging her abandonment by her mother and lover: “You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No truth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last.”

In parallel to Silko and Morrison, Trask contextualizes today’s oppressions and assaults on people of color in the history of genocide and slavery. She also draws attention to the interlinked oppressions of racism, colonialism, and prison/military industrial complex in Hawai’i, explaining how militarism is a perfect example of indirect state violence enacted on the Native Hawaiian population:

On O’ahu… the military controls 25 % of the land area. Statewide, the combined American armed forces have 21 installations, 26 housing complexes, 8 training areas, and 19 miscellaneous bases and operating sites. Beyond O’ahu, Hawai’i is the linchpin of the American military strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. It is home to the largest portage of nuclear-fueled ships and submarines in the world. These ships are received, cleaned, and refashioned at Pearl Harbor, where workers are called “sponges” because they absorb so much radiation during cleaning.

While turning Native Hawaiians’ home into a passive battleground, at the same time US military dispossesses the islanders of their homes and land in a state where the housing crisis has left many families homeless. Trask characterizes her home base as a microcosm

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192 A Mercy, 189.
193 84.
of conquest, genocide, and “peaceful violence” that the settler state has imposed on Native peoples, lands, and cultures. Particularly, her account about ill health and poverty among Hawaiian Native residents, a fact about Hawai‘i, is possibly shocking for settlers and tourists alike. It should not be unexpected, though, as ill health and poverty are not exclusive to Hawai‘i but common to violated geographies of the Americas and beyond.

I start this chapter with a long reflection on Trask’s article because her analysis of colonialism sets the conceptual paradigm for this chapter and my dissertation; it exemplifies the analytical framework of women of color feminism that redefines gender violence at the intersection of colonial, racial, and state violations against people, particularly women, of color. First and foremost, her piece is critical for my work here as it captures the immediacy of Native genocide and European conquest for our current moment; for Trask, the racialized and gendered violences today are direct results of colonialism that was launched with the conquest: “Colonialism began with conquest and is today maintained by a settler administration created out of the doctrine of cultural hierarchy, a hierarchy in which European Americans and whiteness dominate non-European Americans and darkness.” Trask repeatedly invokes the past to better grasp the present; the novelists and scholars whom I engage with and frequently cite in this dissertation share this intention to understand how history (in)forms the present and inspire an engagement with the past. Leslie Marmon Silko brings the past into the present by turning the post-contact history of the Americas into an epic story of the continents

194 Trask writes: “This kind of “peaceful violence” results in land confiscations, contamination of our plants and animals and our peoples, and the transformation of our archipelago into a poisonous war zone. Additionally, many of the lands taken by the military are legally reserved lands for Hawaiians” (84).
195 83.
and beyond. Similarly, Toni Morrison travels back to 1690s to imagine how colonial beginnings might have determined today’s Black and Native experiences. And LeAnne Howe intimates how land and cultural dispossessions of the past are ever present today. Each author reimagines the past from an empowered vision of Native and Black life, a vision that reclaims strength and persistence despite violence. By allowing us to see how genocidal and colonial violences remain relevant and resonant today, Trask corroborates Silko, Morrison, and Howe’s attention to history of oppression and their visions of strength and resistance.

In the first three chapters of my dissertation, I unpack bodily, cultural, and land dispossessions and trace their long and merging histories as represented in Silko’s, Morrison’s, and Howe’s novels, respectively. In this chapter, I turn to INCITE! as an example of contemporary women of color (WOC) activist writings to delineate a feminist vision that allows me to contextualize family disintegration as a current manifestation of disposessive, gendered state violence rooted in genocide and colonialism. Specifically, I focus on the writings of the feminists-of-color-led activist network INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence to analyze family separation within the current and historical context of violence against women of color. While the novels in previous chapters provide fictional, yet historically accurate, narratives and representations of gendered violence of family separation, INCITE!’s writings offer a comprehensive analytical framework that forces us to consider violences intended to break families and communities of color as a form of gendered violence. This chapter is divided into three main sections: The Movement narrates the history of INCITE! within the mainstream antiviolence movement. The Vision offers a discussion on women of color feminist
theory’s approach to gender violence and how INCITE! reconceptualizes violence against women from an intersectional perspective. My contribution to this reconceptualization is to consider forced family separation and its many iterations within violence against women. In this section, I also provide a brief account of abolition feminism as an emerging political vision of INCITE! and a collective vision for radical feminist futures.

In the final section **The Text**, I focus on *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, juxtaposing the three novels with the collection. *INCITE! Anthology* also guide my thinking and argument throughout the chapter, grounding me simultaneously in scholarly and activist feminist work.

**The Movement**

In this part, I provide a brief history of the antiviolence movement and INCITE!’s divergence from the mainstream organizations. It is critical to keep the movement’s trajectory in mind when we reflect on today’s established practices within the broader antiviolence work. A quick look at the movement reveals that INCITE!’s knowledge and guidelines on antiviolence are rooted in grassroots organizing and reparative community work, rather than reliance on law enforcement, professionalization and NGO-ization of services. This part is also essential for the dissertation as it shows the ways in which radical antiviolence visions of women of color feminism are mobilized in social movements and activism, again carried out by women of color themselves.
INCITE! History

INCITE! emerged at the turn of the millennia when a group of feminists of color organized the conference “Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color” in 2000. Convened at the University of California Santa Cruz campus on April 28-29, the founders had three goals: 1) to center women of color in the antiviolence analyses and strategies, 2) to collect multiple forms of interpersonal and state violence under the umbrella of violence against women of color, and 3) to restore political organizing in the antiviolence movement. Organizers initially planned the conference as a small meeting for women of color activists who thought that the antiviolence movement needed a radical rebranding by feminists of color. It turned out, however, that the organizers “had touched, and needed to tend to, a collective raw nerve”; women of color from all corners of the country passionately responded to the event and wanted to be included. The conference ended up hosting two thousand women of color while more had to be turned away.

“Color of Violence: Violence Against Women of Color” conference turned out to be a milestone event in the antiviolence activism and women of color organizing. Following the conference, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence was formed to address all forms of violence against women of color at individual, community, and national levels. Among founding members were Andrea Smith, Beth Richie, Mimi Kim, and many others who had been active in the antiviolence movement for a long time. The overall response to the conference in 2000 indicated to the organizers that there was an urgent need for radical women of color organizing in the antiviolence movement. At the

196 incite-national.org/history/.
197 incite-national.org/history/.
time women of color survivors were underserved by the mainstream antiviolence organizations. The conference and INCITE!’s formation re-sparked radical activist spirit of the antiviolence movement, leading to a series of responses and collaborations. Soon after the first conference, grassroots chapters and affiliated organizations were formed in major cities including San Francisco, Washington DC, New Orleans, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. In the following years more conferences were held to address a variety of issues that concerned women of color and their communities. Chronologically, INCITE! members and women of color activists gathered on the following exemplary occasions: “Building A Movement” (Chicago, 2002), “Stopping the War on Women of Color,” (New Orleans, 2005), “Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit-Industrial Complex” (2007), and “Beyond the State: Inciting Transformative Possibilities” (2015).

From war and militarism to reproductive justice, law enforcement violence against migrant women to transpeople’s rights, INCITE! conferences and activities initiated critical conversations in the antiviolence movement and activist-scholarly circles. Only one year after its foundation in 2000, INCITE! and The Critical Resistance, a national prison abolition organization, released “The Critical Resistance - Incite! Statement on Gender Violence and The Prison-Industrial Complex.” The statement, which explained how antiviolence and prison abolition movement were working in contradiction to each other, was widely circulated and signed by many antiviolence organizations, activist groups, and individuals. In another effort to raise awareness about violence against women of color, in 2004 INCITE! started SisterFire, a national multimedia tour of art and culture. INCITE! also collaborated with other local, national,
and transnational organizations to address past and present violations against communities of color. It assisted, for example, the launch of the Boarding School Healing Project, a Minneapolis-based Native American organization dedicated to understanding and addressing the trauma of Indian Boarding schools. These wide-ranging projects and activities with distinct missions and foci to end violence illustrate INCITE!’s deep commitment to ending violence through working from an intersectional, transnational vantage point.

INCITE! stayed active between 2000 and 2015 by organizing, building alliances, and creating knowledge on violence against women of color and strategies to end it. Currently, the organization continues as a network of radical feminists of color and maintains its platform mostly through its website and social media. INCITE!’s success to appeal to a large crowd of women of color activists and scholars indicates the founders’ and members’ critical role in forming a platform of solidarity against violence. With their radical insights into violence against women of color and the antiviolence movement, the founders invited feminist visionaries, activists, and scholars to come together under the banner of INCITE!, accomplishing so much more than reclaiming the movement and returning it to its radical feminist roots. Activists and women of color supporting the organization along with its members and founders shifted analytical paradigms of gender violence and started a new era in social justice organizing.

Feminist movements to end violence against women date back to the 1960s and ’70s in the United States and have radical activist roots. By 1990s, the mainstream antiviolence movement had become more professionalized and government funded. As a

Footnote: For more on the organization, visit boardingschoolhealing.org.
parallel, their approaches to ending violence increasingly relied on law enforcement and criminalization. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence founders came together to address this issue and, as Beth Richie says, to “unapologetically take power back” from the mainstream antiviolence organizations. This urgent need to reclaim antiviolence movement from the mainstream and recenter it in radical feminist ideals created the exigence for INCITE!’s foundation at the turn of the century. In the next part, I give a brief history of the antiviolence movement and where INCITE! stands in the movement with its radical antiviolence vision.

A Brief History of Antiviolence Activism in The United States

Contemporary feminist antiviolence movement includes hundreds of activist organizations, social justice networks, projects, and programs that collectively fight against various forms of gender-based violence and violence against women. As expressed by scholars and activists alike, today feminist antiviolence movement is experiencing a shift toward broader visions of social justice and liberation, brought by women of color leadership and advocacy. While coalitions, collaboration, and shared visions abound in the antiviolence movement, the movement has long been marked by criticism, both internal and external tensions, and conflicting approaches to ending violence.

199 [www.facebook.com/BCRW.Feminism/videos.](www.facebook.com/BCRW.Feminism/videos.)

Feminist movements to end violence against women have their origins in the civil rights, feminist, and racial justice movements. The civil rights and feminist activist movements of the era brought recognition and prominence to issues such as rape, beatings, sexual harassment in work and public spaces. Initially, domestic violence and sexual assault were at the core of antiviolence political activism and coalitions. Through grass roots organizing, public protests, and consciousness-raising groups, women increasingly spoke out about physical abuse they experienced in domestic space and so-called private spheres of their lives. In 1970s and 80s, support groups in forms of rape crisis centers and women shelters proliferated throughout the country, bringing long-needed community aid to women survivors of violence, if not remedy to violence against women at large. The initial organized efforts showed that the state lacked necessary response mechanisms and concern for this prevalent social issue. Current law enforcement institutions as well as legislation failed to take preventive measures against domestic violence and sexual assault although legislation with a limited scope existed for the penalization of perpetrators at the time. Thus, antiviolence movements of the 1970s and ’80s focused on bringing institutional and legal reform, increasing the state and its law enforcement apparatus’s involvement in women’s protection from violence. Today, antiviolence movements can be credited with the passage of various legislations nationally and the global recognition of gender-based violence as a human rights issue. Following the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 December 1993, the United States passed

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201 I should acknowledge that for Black women, anti-violence has been part of their activism for much longer since historically violence against Black women have been gender- and race-based. Feminist movements that exclusively focused on violence against women and organized around gender/sexual/domestic violence, however, emerged in the 1960s and 70s.
the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) on September 13, 1994. The Act was the culmination of grassroots feminist activism in the 1980s and ’90s.

With the institutional and legal reform, community-sourced and grassroots organizations left their place to official organizations that mostly relied on government funding and characterized their work as social service and professional support. This transition toward professionalization, hierarchy, and government money in antiviolence work brought more reliance on criminal justice systems.\textsuperscript{202} Moreover, mainstream feminist antiviolence movements of the 970s mostly focused on rape, sexual, and domestic violence; the gender aspect of violence against women was largely attributed to personal and private encounters between men and women. These initial analyses of violence against women as a private or individual matter laid the ground for advocating criminal justice solutions and lobbying for the state as the protector of women. In this way, women of color and marginalized women survivors, who were endangered through their contact with the state, were either left out or disserved by the mainstream antiviolence movement. Other factors that may be involved in gender violence such as race, class, sexuality, nationality, or immigration status were kept outside the scope of organizations, programs, and activism. By limiting the matter to gender aspect and men against women situations, adopting criminal justice solutions, and employing a color-blind and universalist approach to gender violence, the mainstream antiviolence movement alienated women of color and otherwise marginalized survivors.\textsuperscript{203}

\textsuperscript{202} Gretchen Arnold, “U.S. Women’s Movements to End Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse, and Rape.”
From the beginning, women of color have been involved in the antiviolence movements in leadership, legal advocacy, community service, and grass-roots activist positions. Their visions and experiences have shaped public policy, social services, and academic research on violence against women. Women-of-color-led organizations also have stayed true to the radical origins of the movement, keeping their focus on community-based solutions and grassroots activism. Their organizational and analytical frameworks have aimed creating structurally sustainable social change that will deter all forms of violence against women. A manifestation of WOC commitment to radical feminist ideals in antiviolence work is their intersectional approach to eliminating violence against women. Intersectional analysis of gender violence recognizes the multiplicity of factors that form women’s identities and shape their life experiences such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, immigration status, religion, age, and disability. While it was Kimberlé Crenshaw who developed intersectionality into a theoretical framework in 1991, women of color, particularly African American women, involved in the antiviolence movements have long recognized how a combination of social and political identities have shaped their lived experiences and created the conditions of their lives.

Collins and Bilge explain that “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, Intersectionality, Polity Press, 2016.

In her 1991 landmark article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” Crenshaw explores “the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color” (1241). She argues that women of color have “intersectional identities” which means their experiences are outcomes of “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (1243). Indicating the lack of engagement of the feminist and antiracist discourse in intersectionality, she observes the ways “in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against...”
One major conflict within the antiviolence movement since 1990s has been the intersectional analysis of gender violence (or any kind of oppression) by feminists of color versus the universalist, color-blind, white feminist analysis of gender violence. By 2020, intersectionality has been largely adopted by feminist scholars and activists; there has been a number of antiviolence organizations that operate within this analytical framework, and intersectionality has been brought to public attention by movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. Also, repeated instances of police violence against Black communities, violence against trans women, and state violence against asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border through incarceration and family separation have laid bare the intersections of factors that are at the core of these violences. When intersectionality was a newly introduced idea in the early 1990s toward 2010s, feminists of color in the antiviolence movement and feminist activist-scholars collectively made a conscious effort to render intersectional analysis a prevalent approach to understanding gender violence and any form of oppression.

Beth Richie, a prominent scholar of gender violence and anti-violence activist, notes that the antiviolence movement was successful in raising public awareness mostly due to activists’ shared notion of violence against women as a common experience and rhetoric that “it can happen to anyone.” Richie explains that this rhetoric was a “strategic attempt by early activists to avoid individualizing the problem of domestic and sexual violence, focus on the social dimensions of the problem of gender violence, resist the
stigmatization of race and class commonly associated with mainstream responses to social problems.  

While Richie acknowledges the success of this approach and necessity for a universalist construction in the beginning of the movement, she also draws attention to serious repercussions of white feminist analysis of gender violence created out of race- and class-neutral assumptions based on the notion of every woman as a potential victim of gender violence:

In the end, the assumed race and class neutrality of gender led to the erasure of low-income women and women of color from the dominant view… So what began as an attempt to avoid stereotyping and stigma has resulted in exactly that which was seen early in the antiviolence movement as a threat to the essential values of inclusion, equality, and antioppression work. The consequence of this paradigmatic problem is that victimization of women of color in low-income communities is invisible to the mainstream public, at best. Worse yet, when poor African-American, Latina, Native American women and other women of color are victimized, the problem is cast as something other than a case of gender violence.

Richie argues that this erasure has been one of the ways in which the radical feminist approach to ending gender violence has been undermined in the mainstream antiviolence movement. Today, intersectional analyses and theories of gender violence are widespread and constitute a dominant feminist paradigm. Criminal justice solutions, law enforcement approaches, professionalized and hierarchical organizations, which have been founded on race- and class-neutral analytical frameworks, however, persist in social service and legal

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realm of antiviolence work. The collaboration between antiviolence organizations and the state (actors) continues to cripple the transformative potential of the antiviolence movement that is rooted in the radical feminist ideals of the 1960s and ’70s.

WOC feminist practice and scholarship have long grappled with violence against women and communities of color, providing analytical frameworks for examining the dominant role of state actors in the creation and execution of racialized, gendered, and sexual violence. Historically, WOC activist networks have demonstrated a deep commitment to anti-violence both in local, domestic, and transnational contexts, forming solidarities with sister and international networks and offering new possibilities for collective resistance. INCITE! and its writings belong to this long tradition of feminists of color antiviolence activism and struggles for gender equality in the United States.

2000, the year when radical antifeminist activists gathered for the first INCITE! conference at the University of California-Santa Cruz on April 28-29, stands as the hallmark of women of color antiviolence movement. At the turn of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, antiviolence started to receive increased attention in women of color scholarly and activist circles, bringing together multiple national and transnational organizations. INCITE’s establishment as a women of color antiviolence group was both a response to emerging social movements and a culmination of various antiviolence activists’ collective and individual work up until the moment. Since 2000, INCITE! has

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been a predecessor and ally to numerous women of color activist organizations committed to fighting against gender and racial violence simultaneously.

Today, scholars point to an ongoing tendency to include mostly mainstream organizations in the movement which are often staffed by white, middle-class women, do community assistance, and use government funding. Many organizations and programs led by younger activists, women of color, immigrant, and marginalized women are ignored and left out. Nevertheless, this erasure from dominant narratives cannot undermine or negate the widespread influence of women of color organizing and social justice activism in the United States. Inheritors of a legacy of community activism and resistance, women of color continue to lead and uphold the fight for justice, equality, and liberation.

The Vision

This part addresses two main issues: what is gender violence and how does INCITE! aim to end gender violence? I use gender violence instead of violence against women 1) as the former is a broader term than the latter and 2) because I include assaults to LGBTQ+ peoples and communities since such assaults are either gender-based or related to gender categories/issues although my focus is not specifically on LGBTQ+ community in this dissertation. After a brief overview of what gender violence means, I proceed with the reproductive justice framework which is an analytical paradigm for relating population control mechanisms to gender violence. Finally, I offer a close analysis of the organization’s self-identified radical feminist approach to (ending) gender violence; clear

\[^{211}\text{Arnold.}\]
from the organization’s self-professed goal, they advocate for comprehensive, grassroots, political-activist antiviolence strategies and analyses that center women of color. Their “radical vision of structural oppression” incorporates analyses of gender violence with economic and racial justice issues, recognizing the role of states in the enactment of violence against communities of color.\textsuperscript{212} By connecting social justice struggles conventionally treated as separate, they offer a thorough antiviolence vision called abolition feminism, which centralizes women of color analyses, experiences, and voices.

**What Is Gender Violence?**

United Nations General Assembly’s *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, adopted on 20 December 1993, defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”\textsuperscript{213} The definition is broad enough to encompass various forms of gender-based violence perpetrated by individuals, families, communities, and the state.\textsuperscript{214} These type of official policies globally advocate for women’s rights and coordinate member states for the prevention of violence against women. UN also supports gender equality and the

\textsuperscript{212} *The Incite Anthology*, 3.
\textsuperscript{213} 3.
\textsuperscript{214} *The Declaration* notes that “Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following: (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation; (b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs” (3).
empowerment of women with a dedicated entity called UN Women. These efforts represent a global apparatus crucial for urging countries to take protective and preventive measures against gender violence. Existing policies, organizations, and global efforts, however, often cannot protect women from violence enacted by the state itself even in so-called developed countries. A recent example of this shortcoming has been the forced hysterectomies performed on immigrant women at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers in the United States. A complaint filed on September 14, 2020 by Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide brought to light medical neglect and potential abuse against detained immigrant women at the Irwin County Detention Center (ICDC), operated by LaSalle Corrections. Dawn Wooten, a licensed nurse working at ICDC, was the whistle blower along with immigrant detainees who provided first-hand accounts about the high rates of hysterectomies. It is reported in the complaint that the women were not provided with a clear explanation about why they might have needed the surgical procedure. It is obvious from the accounts of the immigrant women that the procedure was not always done with their best interest in mind. One particular account by Wooten lays bare the extent of neglect which not only puts immigrant women’s lives at risk but denies them the possibility of bearing their own children in the future:

Everybody he sees has a hysterectomy—just about everybody. He’s even taken out the wrong ovary on a young lady [detained immigrant woman]. She was

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215 For more, visit www.unwomen.org/en.
supposed to get her left ovary removed because it had a cyst on the left ovary; he took out the right one. She was upset. She had to go back to take out the left and she wound up with a total hysterectomy. She still wanted children—so she has to go back home now and tell her husband that she can’t bear kids… she said she was not all the way out under anesthesia and heard him [doctor] tell the nurse that he took the wrong ovary.218

Immigrant and incarcerated women often are subjected to medical violations of their bodies, particularly regarding reproduction, while they are in the custody of the state. These violations can take many forms including inaction, denial of medical treatment, or unlawful/unnecessitated medical practices. Just like incarcerated women, there are real dangers to immigrant women’s reproductive health at detention centers due to racist notions which devalue their reproduction, and maternity, and characterize their reproduction as immigration threat.219 Immigrant women’s reproductive health at detention centers is even more precarious for a variety of reasons. Isolation from family members and friends who cannot advocate for or support them renders women defenseless against unlawful medical practices. There can be language barriers for clear understanding of medical procedures without the help of a translator, family member, or friend; it is easy to get confused and be intimidated to ask questions to medical professionals who act with a certain level of authority when serious health risks are involved. Advocating for the right medical treatment and care is difficult and requires high level of familiarity with medical terms and regulations for both immigrant and non-

immigrant residents in a country. Particularly, in a place such as the United States where the health care system is frustratingly complicated and inaccessible for a variety of reasons, immigrant women are made extremely vulnerable to medical malpractices.220

As Wooten’s testimony shows, it is a personal tragedy for a woman (irrespective of whether she wants to have children or not) to lose her reproductive organs and be taken her liberty to get pregnant, which is enough reason to fight against such malicious medical acts. However, the consequences of forced hysterectomies go beyond affecting one individual or their immediate family. These types of practices (are intended to) cause harm to immigrant women’s families and their communities. Uprooted from their home countries, immigrants often do not have their close and extended family members in their proximity. For many immigrant couples, having their own children and raising them in their adopted country is one of the ways to socially integrate, settle, and grow roots in a new place. Depriving one immigrant woman of the ability to bear her own children is a direct attack against her family’s success to start a new life. Collectively, violent acts like forced hysterectomies represent a deliberate, systemic attack at immigrant communities, enacted through reproductive medical practices and directly or indirectly sponsored by the state. Thus, medical violations of immigrant women’s bodies can easily become state tools to punish, terrorize, and prevent immigrant communities from growing and

prospering. And we should consider them first and foremost as gender violence that targets affected women’s families and communities at large as well as their persons.

Unfortunately, documents like UN’s *Declaration* do not eliminate the heightened risk of gender violence for incarcerated and immigrant women, and women in general who are detained in state(-connected) facilities although they acknowledge the risks for marginalized and socially vulnerable women. Prisons and immigrant/refugee detention centers may not be considered as purveyors of gendered violence in official accounts, legislation, and government documents. Again, official policy does not provide context about how medical technologies and practices are deployed to police and control women of color and marginalized women’s reproductive freedom in countries marked by the legacy of genocide and slavery such as the United States.

Forced hysterectomies and similar reproductive oppressions are part of gendered violations of women’s bodies that have long served the state’s population control apparatus against communities of color and marginalized communities. Therefore, they need to be analyzed within an intersectional framework of reproduction, including its control and promotion. We need rigorous critical frameworks to help us understand the depths and prevalence of gender violence in our sociopolitical context and analytical models that will enable us to identify the intersections of colonial, racial, and gender oppressions in the current manifestations of state-sponsored bodily assaults against women of color and migrant women. For this, as I do in the rest of my dissertation, I turn to women of color scholarship and feminist analysis to contextualize these ostensibly

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221 *The Declaration* states that “some groups of women, such as women belonging to minority groups, Indigenous women, refugee women, migrant women, women living in rural or remote communities, destitute women, women in institutions or in detention, female children, women with disabilities, elderly women and women in situations of armed conflict, are especially vulnerable to violence” (2).
random acts as part of ongoing genocidal and racialized violences that target women of color and their communities.

Women of color feminist scholarship and activism consider reproductive oppressions, including forced hysterectomies, as part of the state’s population control mechanisms and within the reproductive justice framework. According to The SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, an Atlanta-based activist organization, reproductive justice is “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”

Loretta Ross, a pioneer of reproductive justice activism and a Black feminist scholar, explains that reproductive justice means “reproductive rights embedded in a human rights and social justice framework used to counter all forms of population control that deny women’s human rights.” This feminist activist framework considers reproduction more broadly than reproductive freedom or reproductive rights framework and pays attention to a myriad of ways in which women’s/reproducing bodies are regulated; reproductive freedom/rights framework singularly focuses on, mostly white and middle class, women’s choice to have babies, access to abortion, and right to reproductive health care.

While reproductive justice is a movement and its

222 www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice.
223 INCITE Anthology, 53.
224 Ross and Solinger write that “Reproductive Rights is a legal and advocacy-based model that is concerned with protecting individual women’s legal right to reproductive health care services, particularly abortion (often called the pro-choice movement). It addresses the lack of legal protection and weak enforcement of laws to protect individual women’s reproductive choices regarding health care services. The goals are to have legal protection for all individuals and to claim these protections as rights under the U.S. Constitution. Reproductive Justice is a movement-building and organizing framework that identifies how reproductive oppression is the result of the intersection of multiple oppressions and is inherently connected to the struggle for social justice and human rights. Reproductive justice argues that social institutions, the environment, economics, and culture affect each woman’s reproductive life. Reproductive justice activists invoke the global human rights system as the relevant legal framework using treaties, [and] standards, [while] moving beyond the U.S. Constitution” (69).
organizations mostly operate on a community-needs basis, its human rights analysis is as crucial; the state is often the perpetrator of reproductive oppressions that exercises power over marginalized persons through laws and regulations. The mechanisms for population control, globally and nationally, may not be official policies written into law. Nevertheless, ideologies such as white supremacy that police people of color and their reproductive autonomy are still ingrained in the current societal systems and structures. Thus, framing reproductive rights as human rights allow organizations and activists to hold governments accountable and “draw attention to—and resist—laws and public and corporate policies based on racial, gender, and class prejudices.”

A crucial dimension of reproductive justice framework is that it understands reproductive experiences as community-related and reproductive oppressions as attacks on both individuals and their communities. This framework emphasizes the connection between the reproductive health of an individual and the “the economic and cultural health of the community structures.” Thus, reproductive justice ideals call for working for collective (reproductive and social) justice for individuals, families, and communities that are disproportionately targeted by the state’s birth control apparatus. Building on this important work by women of color activists, scholars, and reproductive justice framework, I maintain that attacks, by the state or any other actors, on an individual woman’s, a political group of women’s, or a community’s reproductive rights, thus acts that obstruct reproductive justice in any way, should be termed gender violence.

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225 Ross and Solinger 10. Ross and Solinger maintain that “The human rights analysis rests on the claim that interference with the safety and dignity of fertile and reproducing persons is a blow against their humanity—that is, against their rights as human beings. Protecting people against this interference is crucial to ensuring the human rights of all because all of us have the human right to be fertile, the human right to engage in sexual relations, and the human right to reproduce or not, and the human right to be able to care for our children with dignity and safety” (10).

226 Ross and Solinger 12.
My proposition to call attacks on reproductive justice as gender violence is informed of radical feminist scholarship and activism that considers assaults on women’s reproduction within the context of deeply ingrained misogyny and racism in society. Particularly, my proposition aligns with INCITE!’s antiviolence vision which I consider to be representative of radical feminist of color scholarship and activism in the twenty first century; INCITE!’s analytical framework of violence against women of color and gender violence forces us to pay simultaneous attention to sexism and racism and consider gender violence’s effects on individual women, their families, communities, and society. Therefore, INCITE! promotes a women of color feminist analysis that defines gender violence in broad terms: “Reconceptualizing gender violence beyond interpersonal forms of sexual and domestic violence,” the organization posits gender violence “as a tool of patriarchy and … of racism and colonialism.” Within the context of colonialism and racial capitalism, the white settler state is “the primary perpetrator” of gender violence, particularly against women of color.

Rather than trying to offer a universal definition that can apply to any woman, INCITE! considers women of color’s diverse experiences of violence and assault within their communities and beyond. It emphasizes, for example, Native women’s historical struggle with the white settler state and how they have been made victims of further violence both in their communities and by the state itself through federal policy. Similarly, within this framework Black women’s frequent subjection to police brutality

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227 I use violence against women of color and gender violence interchangeably because I would like to emphasize that we cannot ignore racial, colonial, anti-immigration, and other intersections in gendered violence against women of color. This is not, however, an exception, but should be the norm for all analyses of gender violence. Thus, by using violence against women of color and gender violence interchangeably, I center intersectional, radical feminist of color analysis of gender violence.

228 INCITE! Anthology, 4.
and disproportionate incarceration are considered beyond the trauma of and harm to an individual but addressed on a community and generational level. Rape cases at the US-Mexico border, violence against trans and gender nonconforming people, domestic violence in South Asian communities, medical violence against people of color, and many more distinct patterns and forms of gender violence require contextually appropriate and intersectional analysis of gender violence. INCITE!’s reconceptualization assesses how diverse conditions of women’s lives produce diverse outcomes and advocates for radical solutions to ending violence against women of color.

I would like to conclude this section with a reminder about forced hysterectomies done to immigrant women in ICE detention centers. Unfortunately, we have seen multiple manifestations of state aggression and violence against migrant and refugee communities in the last four years. Family separation at the US-Mexico border has been one of the most brutal examples of anti-immigration state aggression. On October 21, 2020, news broke those 545 children separated at the US-Mexico border could not be reunited with their parents despite a San Diego-based federal judge’s order for the government to reunite families on June 26, 2018.229 Searches have been conducted and names have been tracked down. As of April 2021, parents of 445 children still cannot be found.230 Children are still waiting for authorities to find their parents… Forced hysterectomies and family separation are violations of reproductive justice for migrant and immigrant communities. And they are not isolated cases; they emerge in the current anti-immigration national context built on genocide, slavery, and a constant state of violence against people of color. As Loretta Ross, Andrea Smith, bell hooks, and many

other prominent scholars of Native and Black feminisms have pointed out, reproductive medical violations such as forced hysterectomies are rooted in genocidal and racial attacks against Native and Black women’s bodies throughout US history. From the foundation of first European settlement in North America, Native reproduction was seen a threat to the settlers’ “land claims, their accumulation of wealth, and their political control of the settled territories.” In contrast, enslaved Black population growth, which provided free labor force, was key to settlers’ success to grow and thrive in a new land. These differing perspectives against two distinct political groups produced violations of Native and Black women’s bodies and reproductive capacities, either to foster or prevent frequent pregnancies and childbirths. From colonial laws to missionary activities, and to federal laws and state enforced medical practices today, population control mechanisms have enacted gender violence against Native, Black, minority, immigrant, and socially vulnerable women; this legacy of gender violence has been the foundation of the settler colonial state from the beginning.

Abolition Feminism: An Emerging Feminist Political Vision

At its essence, abolition feminism signifies an intersectional approach – in terms of both analysis and organizing – to ending violence. Angela Davis, often credited with the term, calls abolition feminism “a revolutionary approach to change” that understands abolition beyond the confounds of prison industrial complex and brings together prison abolition ideals with women of color’s radical antiviolence vision. From the beginning, INCITE! founders shared a vision for simultaneously working toward ending

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231 Ross and Solinger 18.
interpersonal and state violence committed against communities of color and their members. Accordingly, INCITE!’s analytical and organizational framework has always been at the junction of two political movements, feminist antiviolence and prison abolition movements. While feminist antiviolence movement dates back to the 1970s and ‘80s, prison abolition is a more recent, growing movement, rapidly morphing into a critical focus of social justice organizing. Over the last two decades numerous scholars and activists have posited that incarceration has become a profitable industry that serves discriminatory ideologies and perpetuates already-existing economic, social, and racial oppressions, which in turn reinforces the surveillance and policing of people of color in the United States. Due to scholars and activists’ sustained attention to prison industrial complex and the increased awareness among communities of color about their vulnerability to incarceration, abolishing prison industrial complex as a system has become a core movement in racial and social justice organizing.233 Similar to INCITE!’s vision of ending gender violence, prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition advocates a holistic approach to ending racial oppressions enacted through incarceration and law enforcement: PIC abolition is a “political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment.”234

233 Scholars and activists use the term prison industrial complex to indicate “the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” (http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/). Anti-prison and abolitionist activists emphasize that “the proliferation of prisons and prisoners is more clearly linked to larger economic and political structures and ideologies than to individual criminal conduct and efforts to curb “crime”” (2). Angela Davis and Cassandra Shaylor, “Race, Gender, and the Prison Industrial Complex California and Beyond,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1-25.

234 http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/. Critical Resistance (CR) is a prominent PIC abolition organization, led and advised by scholars and activists. CR’s vision closely aligns with INCITE!’s vision of abolition feminism: “From where we are now, sometimes we can’t really imagine what abolition is going to look like. Abolition isn’t just about getting rid of buildings full of cages. It’s also
INCITE! has been critical of anti-prison/prison abolition movement – in addition to the mainstream antiviolence movement – because such racial justice organizations and PIC abolition advocacy groups have tended to ignore the intersections of carceral and racial oppression with gender violence and violence against women of color. In 2001, one year after INCITE!’s first convening in 2000, Critical Resistance (CR) and INCITE! released “The Statement on Gender Violence & The Prison Industrial Complex” to urge social justice organizations to “develop analyses and strategies to end violence that do not isolate acts of state or individual violence from their larger contexts.” While INCITE! has recognized the important work accomplished by anti-prison and racial justice movement in terms of raising awareness about harm caused by criminalization and prison industrial complex, the organization has also repeatedly pointed to the failure to address the needs of survivors of domestic/sexual violence and lack of focus on gender and sexuality in prison abolition analysis and organizing.

Antiviolence activists and radical feminists such as Angela Davis, Beth Richie, Andrea Ritchie, and many other INCITE! members emphasize collaborative work between abolition and antiviolence organizations, which means not merging these two movements but working toward shared interests. For, ensuring collective safety for about undoing the society we live in because the PIC both feeds on and maintains oppression and inequalities through punishment, violence, and controls millions of people. Because the PIC is not an isolated system, abolition is a broad strategy. An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives. Abolition is both a practical organizing tool and a long-term goal” (http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/).

235 “INCITE! - Critical Resistance Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex”
236 “INCITE! - Critical Resistance Statement on Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex” notes: “Prison and police accountability activists have generally organized around and conceptualized men of color as the primary victims of state violence. Female prisoners and victims of police brutality have been made invisible by a focus on the war on our brothers and sons.”
women of color and their communities requires divestment and digression from all systems that are involved in and collaborate with prison industry complex.\textsuperscript{237} Accordingly, in the last couple of years and with more emphasis in 2020, INCITE! has rebranded its vision as abolition feminism.

INCITE!’s antiviolence vision and abolition feminism are critical for our moment, for the context of our lives in this country, to address all sorts of violence happening right now and understand how they are rooted in past violences. Recent and recurring instances of police violence against Black people throughout the United States have shown that abolishing current law enforcement agencies is not such a radical idea anymore. Police forces have proved to be way too invested in a carceral industry that thrives on violence against Black people and people of color, and perpetuates racist ideologies and oppressions. Forced hysterectomies performed on immigrant women at ICE detention centers – more acts of violence at government-funded institutions – are, unfortunately, another example of why immigration enforcement abolition should be part of the work toward ending gender violence. Eradicating violence against migrants and refugees need to be considered within an abolitionist feminist framework because national security and gatekeeping agencies, organizations, and structures, as extensions of the carceral state, are deeply invested in prison industrial complex. Immigrant and refugee communities are often unjustly targeted by immigration enforcement agencies and suffer from immigration enforcement’s collaboration with law enforcement. Family separation, 

\textsuperscript{237} The activist organization Critical Resistance observes that “the prison industrial complex has not only expanded, it has widened its web through greater collaboration and complicity with the military, immigration enforcement authorities, law enforcement agencies, child welfare agencies, mental health systems, and social assistance agencies.” \textit{Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex}, 17.
detention, and abuse by immigration and border security agencies make it evident that current immigration enforcement institutions, which are organically related to prisons and prison industrial complex, function to lock up and criminalize migrants. Abolishing institutions such as ICE has long become an urgent obligation in order to end state violence against immigrant communities, families, and children.

I observe that as an emerging political framework embraced by feminists of color and antiviolence activists, abolition feminism is fast gaining traction in the larger feminist scholarship and activism. We can explain its rapid evolvement into a practical analytical framework with the fact that abolition feminism puts intersectionality into practice. Rather than being a conceptual social justice ideal, abolition feminism inspires collaborative work in activist circles such as the one between Critical Resistance and INCITE!. Abolition feminism demonstrates how analytical/theoretical visions can be mobilized in actual movements. In this sense, we should consider abolition feminism also a tool for organizing that builds bridges between disconnected social justice struggles and movements.

There are multiple forms of feminisms. Some feminist movements and ideals emerge, become a trend, and then disappear. Some remain relevant and keep their rigor. I envision that abolition feminism is here to stay because abolitionist feminist vision has emerged out of an actual movement and community work led by radical feminists of color. More than half a century of feminist and women’s movements have shown that women of color feminist visions are for the past, present, and future. Taking inspiration from their lived experiences and community work, women of color know what is needed for real structural change in our society and beyond. In a time when we need bold visions
against the intersections of police, state, racial, and gender violence, and against violence that breaks communities of color and migrant families, we can turn to INCITE!’s antivi

The Text

Putting a spotlight on *The INCITE! Anthology*, this part examines moments of convergence between creative texts in this dissertation and INCITE!’s writings. These moments of convergences show us that the novelists Silko, Morrison, and Howe share antiracist and decolonial visions of INCITE! writers although their chosen medium of expression is imaginative. As intersections of the artistic and activist strands of contemporary feminist writing, these pairings offer us a new way to think about fiction along with feminist knowledge production and vice versa. They also demonstrate how narratives with different aesthetic effects can simultaneously intimate and resist violence.

*Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*

The *INCITE! Anthology* encapsulates the organization’s analytical and organizational framework; radical feminist vision for the past, present, and future; and its members’ dedication to justice and liberation. It features research, activist statements, personal narratives, shared herstories, and so much more. With its powerful content and radical feminist orientation, it is reminiscent of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). *Bridge* became the symbol of the cry by feminists of color against the white and mainstream feminist movements of the 70s and 80s because
these movements excluded WOC and failed to address their issues. Essentially a work of solidarity and coalition building, *Bridge* authors also express their feelings of alienation among other feminists of color, voice their rage against homophobic practices/feelings in their ethnic communities, and protest elitist feminist practice reduced to academic practice and theory. Centering women of color voices, *Bridge* was groundbreaking because it provided a critical framework for making connections and building coalitions across racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. It articulated the women of color politics of 1980s with precision and passion. Their fierce arguments and broad visions have made the collection a landmark reader in WOC feminist theories. *Bridge* remains an anchor text in women of color studies as it laid the groundwork for subsequent coalitional feminist activism and writing. *The INCITE! Anthology* follows tradition by expanding feminist-activist coalition to incorporate abolition and racial justice in its agenda, which is in alignment with the 2000s women of color politics. *The INCITE! Anthology* can be considered a key text for contemporary women of color studies due to its (and the organization’s) critical role in inspiring an antiviolence spirit in coalitional social justice organizing and feminist writing, too. In a sense, it is the *Bridge* of the early 2000s.

In this chapter and the dissertation, I approach *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* as a foundational text of twenty-first century radical feminist knowledge production and intellectual tradition beyond being a core document of the organization. I

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238 Tiffany Lethabo King observes: “The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century marked a moment in which women of color scholarship and activism were growing in popularity. Within the academy and social justice organizing, the rubric of violence unified a number of constituents nationally and globally. Organizing against interpersonal and state-sanctioned violence became the suture that connected an international movement of gender, prison abolition, anti-imperial, and anticolonial activists. The World Trade Organization protests, post-9/11 immigrant rights organizing, reproductive justice work, and the 2000 protests of the stolen U.S. presidential election were animated to some extent by the antiviolence movement led by women of color” (63).
examine *The Incite! Anthology* to show how multiple ethnic histories are connected in Black, Native, and women of color feminist epistemologies discussed in the collection. By juxtaposing Silko, Morrison, and Howe novels – Black and Native cultural representations – with *INCITE! Anthology* – women of color activist writing – my dissertation shows how multiple women of color antiviolence organizing; by connecting fiction with activism, my work builds a bridge between contemporary ethnic American women’s creative and women of color political writing. In the final section of this chapter, I explore these juxtapositions more closely.

Violence is central to the novelists’ and activists’ political imagination and resistance; it emerges as a significant theme within Black and Native women’s literature and feminist writings starting in early 1990s. *Almanac*, published only a year before the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s so-called discovery of the Americas, rewrites the narrative of life and death in the New World; Silko depicts a world where violence has become the common language of white supremacy and white-dominant narratives of life are written against Indigenous life formations and communities of color. Morrison’s *A Mercy* also imagines the violent beginning of a new racist world order which denies the humanity of Black people. In both *Almanac of the Dead* and *A Mercy* racial and genocidal violence starts with “the mandate for conquest,” to evoke Morrison’s phrase which so brilliantly captures white settler mindset in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.239 Morrison fleshes out what “the mandate for conquest” looked like in *A Mercy*. In other words, *A Mercy* is an intimate version of the well-known

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239 3.
narrative of North America; the settler thrives at the expense of Native and Black lives. The novel lays bare the destructive force of white man’s greed for more land and property, or the promotion of only his personal and family survival. *A Mercy*’s publication in 2008 coincided with one of the biggest financial crises of global scale – another man-made disaster originating in the Americas – which created further economic oppressions and political consequences. LeAnne Howe’s *Miko Kings* shows that the “mandate for conquest” has continued to this day with more subtle, yet equally violent assaults on Native lands and identities; in the novel land allotments, boarding schools, and broken families are contemporary reflections of colonialism and racism.

The novelists’ understanding of colonial, racial, and gender oppressions powerfully resonate with the INCITE! writers and activists’ analytical vision. An example of this resonation is between Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo’s conceptualization of medical industrial complex in *INCITE! Anthology* and Silko’s depiction of western medicine and medical technologies in *Almanac of the Dead*. The term “medical industrial complex” emerged in 1970s and has been in use since then to describe the network of private medical corporations. The term implies that the current health care system prioritizes profit making to the detriment of providing accessible healthcare services for the public.\(^{240}\) It is now known that the morphing of health care into a billion-dollar, transnational industry through aggressive neoliberal policies has caused more harm than benefit for people who need quality and consistent care.\(^{241}\) While the concept of medical industrial complex critically captures the structural violence of health care’s

neoliberalization, Durazo’s piece and *Almanac* remind that western-based medical practices have always been detrimental to marginalized communities and particularly women: “(western) medicine is a violent institution that has, in fact, been dangerous to the health and well-being of women of color and women in the Third World since its imposition.”242 Silko’s depiction of medical industry in *Almanac* can be considered an elaborate narrative of Durazo’s observations in her essay. Particularly, Durazo’s following statement perfectly sums up Silko’s representation of western medical practices: “In fact, the institution of (western) medicine has served the interests of colonial, slavery, capitalist and racist systems by excluding us [women of color] from needed care, and has administered death, disease, and injury.”243

Engaging in the contemporary manifestations of medical violence, both Durazo and Silko trace the roots of western-based medicine in colonial violations of Indigenous bodies and knowledges. Durazo writes that medicine was “an integral arm of European colonial invasion… And medical institutions served as sites where Indigenous communities were actively subordinated, regulated, tracked, and counted.”244 Similarly, in *Almanac* Silko exposes colonial and genocidal roots of contemporary biomedical technologies, whom these technologies serve, and on whom they prey. Strikingly, a testament of her literary prowess, Silko uses blood as a metaphor to connect the trading of human organs, eugenics research, and reproductive medical violations to the practices of whom she calls “the Destroyers, humans who were attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering.”245 Through her intricate storytelling Silko suggests

242 *The INCITE! Anthology*, 183.
243 *The INCITE! Anthology*, 181.
244 *The INCITE! Anthology*, 183.
245 *Almanac*, 475.
that contemporary characters engaged in medical pornography, biomaterial businesses, 
and organ harvesting share the same ideologies of blood worshippers of the Americas and 
“sorcerer-cannibals from Europe.” Through graphic scenes of blood and flesh, the 
novel depicts destructive bio-medical practices embedded in a colonial desire to dominate 
bodies and land. Silko emphasizes that the institution of western medicine and its latest 
technologies, namely neoliberal medical industrial complex, have nothing to do with 
healing and well-being. Instead, it is a capitalist system that thrives on the market of 
disposable bodies and achieves its goals not only through the violation of bodies but 
through the epistemological annihilation of “Indigenous knowledges of the body, health, 
and healing” as Durazo notes.

Another conceptual pairing is possible between Andrea Smith’s essay 
“Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy” in the INCITE! collection 
and Morrison’s *A Mercy*. In her essay Smith proposes a framework for understanding 
distinct forms of violence and oppression experienced by people of color and explains 
that this framework can help build solidarity among communities of color. Connected yet 
operating through distinct logics, three pillars, which Smith calls Slavery/Capitalism, 
Genocide/Colonialism, and Orientalism/War, determine the differential ways in which 
people of color experience oppression and violence of white supremacy. In *A Mercy*, 
Morrison develops a plot that shows how the pillars of white supremacy are being 
formed, evoking Smith’s analytical model. The pillars of white supremacy are 
represented by different characters and through their unique circumstances before and 
during their servitude in the Vaark’s place. Particularly, Florens, who is given to Jacob

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246 *Almanac*, 475.
247 *The INCITE! Anthology*, 183.
Vaark as a payment for her master’s debt, and Lina, who is claimed by settlers when her village is wiped out by the plague, reflect Smith’s framework. On the one hand, Morrison intimates how a little Black girl is commodified in 1690s, an era of a nascent racial slavery and capitalism. While Florens’s humanity is replaced with the status of commodity through the transaction between her master and Jacob Vaark, a racial hierarchy is being established in North America that would deem all Black bodies slaveable and belonging to white masters. On the other hand, Morrison explores genocide and the colonial structure that genocide serves through Lina’s character. Indigenous to the land being occupied by colonists, Lina experiences genocide firsthand with the destruction of her village and entire community. Genocide simultaneously signifies the destruction of Indigenous people and civilization, and the creation of an absence, of people and civilization, that accommodates colonizers. As Smith explains, “[t]he pillar of genocide serves as the anchor for colonialism – it is what allows non-Native peoples to feel they can rightfully own Indigenous people’s land.” Morrison reaffirms this close relationship between genocide and colonialism through Jacob’s characterization. Jacob feels entitled to the land he has been given; he sees Indigenous lands as wilderness to be conquered and tamed. He follows the instinct for conquest of land, launched by Columbus and sustained through genocidal violences. Morrison weaves Jacob’s and Lina’s stories in the novel to show how every time a settler claims Indigenous lands, “the mandate for conquest” is reenacted.

Another dimension of the resonation between the two texts is the authors’ shared vision for alternative ways of living and relating within and across communities of color,

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248 Incite! Anthology, 68.
ideally outside the oppressive racial, heteropatriarchal hierarchy of white dominance. In her conclusion, Smith points to the concept of family and suggests that “we can reconstitute alternative ways of living together… not ordered on the basis of a nuclear family structure” in order to challenge capitalist, heteronormative systems of oppression. In *A Mercy*, Morrison urges the reader toward a similar conclusion in many ways. Morrison deconstructs the idealized image of heteropatriarchal nuclear family by laying bare its racist, genocidal foundation as represented in Vaark’s place. Jacob’s false belief that he provides a family for orphans in his place simply by virtue of being the patriarch is contested through Florens’ prominent voice that tells a different story about family and intimacy in the novel. Florens is condemned to Vaark’s house first when she is separated from her mother and second when her lover rejects her; she understands that love and care are not the foundation of Vaark’s place where she is kept for her labor. And finally, her intention to burn the late Vaark’s new house shows her disavowal of his patriarchy; Florens rejects her subjection to oppressive systems of intimacy.

Writing this chapter and the dissertation has mostly been about intersections of women of color experiences. Their common or similar experiences, unfortunately, tend to be related to oppressive structures and violence, as my dissertation’s focus on gender violence dictates. What has been hard – because it is our human tendency to focus on negative over positive – yet refreshing is to think about their shared visions of sustaining life for themselves, families, and communities despite hardship and heartbreak. Women of color experiences include actively shaping present and future by being the backbone of their familial and social collectives. Yet, juxtaposing women of diverse political backgrounds and distinct lifeways without equating their experiences and circumstances
remains a challenge. This is especially true for thinking about LeAnne Howe’s Choctaw-specific vision of ancestral land, matrilineality, and women’s role in sustaining a community in junction with other ethnic, cultural, racial groups of women. Howe anchors her perspective tightly in Choctaw lands, language, and culture in everything she writes. Her tribal sense of knowing reverberates from her fiction to theory, drama to travel stories. Nevertheless, Howe has a culturally holistic thinking process about people’s experiences; she often connects multiple geographical and cultural points to talk about Native American, particularly Choctaw, culture and history. In *Choctalking on Other Realities* (2013), for example, she wanders around the world to talk about diverse peoples, cultures, historical and geographical contexts as she interprets them from her point of view, connecting her stories back to her home. So, I am partly inspired by Howe and partly driven my feminist scholar urge to entertain the idea that home can carry similar meanings for Choctaw and Palestinian women.²⁴⁹

Before I begin talking about *INCITE! Anthology* in conjunction with Howe’s writing, I should note that the comparison between Native American and Palestinian people’s experiences of genocide, settler colonialism, willful destruction of their lifeways is not a new scholarly conversation. Transnational studies within critical ethnic, feminist, and American studies have provided analytical paradigms for comparing, contrasting, and considering these political groups together. Beyond the discourses of settler colonialism and genocide, scholarship on decolonialization and transnational activist solidarity has

²⁴⁹ LeAnne Howe recounts her time in Israel/Palestine in “Choctalking on Other Realities” in her book with the same title. The idea that home can carry similar meanings for Choctaw and Palestinian women, though, is completely my own.
put Indigenous America and Palestine in perspective. INCITE!’s vision of justice and liberation encompass, among others, Native American and Palestinian women’s activism for decolonization, too; *INCITE! Anthology* provides an analytical and organizational framework for considering Palestinian people’s and women’s decolonial struggles along with women of color resistance against violence in the United States. In the collection, Nadine Naber, Eman Desouky, and Lina Baroiudi, for example, eloquently explain Zionism, “a settler colonial political movement that seeks to ethnically cleanse historical Palestine of the Indigenous population and populate it as a Jewish-only state”, anti-Arab/Muslim sentiment flaring up in the United States after 9/11, and the need for transnational solidarity between activist groups advocating Indigenous people’s rights. These coalitional visions are expected in women of color organizing and theory; instead, I would like to focus on Palestinian and Choctaw women’s and mothers’ role in nurturing decolonial visions through sustaining their families and communities with their care and hard work.

Imagine, for a moment, that you are a Palestinian momma living in a refugee camp. You were born thirty years ago to parents grieving over a land kidnapped twenty-eight years prior. As a child, you had no sense of stability, since a camp can never replace a home uprooted in 1948. But you yearned for a place to nurture and claim as your own. You are married and dream of a space of love, ties, and strength that would embrace your eight children, future grandchildren, and in-laws. You begin building a dream, saving every drop with your palms, your

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251 *INCITE! Anthology*, 99.
partner exhausting every waking hour to achieve your goal. Except a couple of years into the work, he falls ill, unable to move or speak, a living death. You are left with defeated aspirations, but you refuse misery. You continue raising your children, educating them, feeding them, attending to your husband. You are the anchor of the home. You stand in the space between barriers of occupation and occupation-inspired fundamentalism. Working in farming and cleaning, in pursuit of a dream you demur to put on the shelf, it takes you twenty painstaking years to stack three stories of family into a built home. The physical structure is now tied into your sense of self, every drop of sweat you have collected rests in between the layers of cement. The family has now grown to thirty. You live in pursuit of stability, and your home is your source of strength. You are proud.\footnote{INCITE! Anthology, 88-89.}

The paragraph above is from Dana Erekat’s essay “Four Generations in Resistance” in \textit{INCITE! Anthology}. Erekat, a Palestinian American architect, starts with asking the reader to imagine being a Palestinian mother living in Khan Younis and Raffah Refugee camps in Gaza; in doing so she urges us to contemplate what home, or having a home, means for a mother who has spent her childhood in a refugee camp. For a Palestinian mother, a home is a dream materialized into concrete with her blood and sweat. A home contains layers of struggle for survival for herself and family. Although despair and exhaustion seep through “the layers of cement” muddying a Palestinian mother’s strength and pride, home embodies her determination to hold the family together: “it takes you twenty painstaking years to stack three stories of family into a built home. The physical structure is now tied into your sense of self, every drop of sweat you have collected rests
in between the layers of cement.” Its literal construction symbolizes her refusal to give in to the “barriers of occupation” and give up hope. In a land like Palestine, loaned to its original residents, the “dream of a space of love, ties, and strength” revolves around a house, evoking home as the base of resistance and familial survival rather than a place of domestic bliss. Unlike westernized notions of home as a space of private life or private property, home is the center of political struggle against occupation, settler colonialism, and dispossession for Palestinians. Erekat hints at the idea that decolonizing “a land kidnapped” or undoing dispossession starts at home. Women, particularly mothers, lead the struggle, “resisting with their bodies, with their pens, and with their lives.” A mother’s resistance means not only mothering her own children but the entire family including her “twenty-five-year-old daughter in-law with her three fatherless children” who lost their father “to the land.”

The center of the family and literal builder of a home, the Palestinian mother who Erekat characterizes exists for herself and her family whose survival is tied into her country’s political struggle for freedom and decolonization: “Motherhood is an act of defiance in the midst of colonization.”

For Howe, as she shows in Miko Kings with Lena’s story, a sense of identity rooted in tribal knowledge and land is key to pursuing a Native way of life outside colonial boundaries and impositions. Lena’s grandmother’s house, which she built on land in Ada, Oklahoma allotted to her family in 1906 “when she was only seventeen”, is a focal point for Lena’s pursuit to discover her tribal past and self. During our interview, LeAnne Howe explained the significance of mother’s home in Choctaw

253 INCITE! Anthology, 89.
254 INCITE! Anthology, 91.
255 Miko Kings, 16.
culture and how it functioned to tie families together; Choctaw culture is matrilineal, meaning that kinship is continued through the female line in family. More specifically, in addition to maintaining traditional cultural practices such as ballgames and ceremonies, mothers and senior female members of the family ensure the continuity of the tribe and Native lifeways in Choctaw culture. Howe notes that in *Miko Kings* her “home which is really mirrored in this book acts as the center of the family unit” that brings the family together for celebrations and ceremonies. In light of historical facts and Choctaw people’s experiences with first removal and then allotment, matrilineal organization of familial matters and mother’s home as the center of family, too, constitute decolonial cultural practices. The Choctaw Trail of Tears, or the United States government’s attempt to remove the nation from their ancestral lands in the South, brought many Choctaws to Oklahoma between 1831 and 1833. Already displaced from their origins, Choctaws’ struggle for a stable life continued; land allotments enacted in the late nineteenth-century put Choctaws along with the other members of the Five Tribes in a precarious position in terms of their relationship to land. The Indian Territory was privatized, and individual plots were allotted to Native families, transforming communal lands to private property. In this scenario, mother’s home assumes the critical role of anchoring the family in a land constantly assaulted and occupied by settlers. Evidently, beyond conveying the unifying aspect of family home, a Choctaw mother’s house acts as a base for political and cultural survivance in the context of continued dispossession.

Erekat and Howe’s emphasis on mother’s home and mother’s central role in sustaining the family despite colonization and dispossession demonstrates their

[256] Howe, personal interview.
decolonial vision that are embodied through women in their writing. They, along with other authors, scholars, and activists in this dissertation, gesture towards the centrality of women’s resistance against colonization, violence, and racism, whether women are engaged in care work, activism, or knowledge production.

257 I should note that Howe never names her vision decolonial or use the term decolonial in her writing as far as I have read her work. I characterize her Choctaw-specific epistemology, which she outlines in Evidence of Red and Choctalking on Other Realities and utilizes in Miko Kings, as decolonial, though, since she describes a sovereign, tribal way of knowing and interpreting the world that is not constrained by colonial ideologies and knowledge.
EPILOGUE
OF SEPARATIONS AND RETURNS

I shall return to my native land. Those disbelieving in the promise and refusing to make the pledge have no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one’s existence. It is to be bound to other promises. It is to lose your mother, always.

– Saidiya Hartman, Lose Your Mother

In Miko Kings no matter what happened, the characters in the story returned home, just like ancient ball players returning to play on ball fields at earthworks sites.

– LeAnne Howe, Choctalking on Other Realities

One evening at sundown, we were stopped in traffic at a railroad crossing in downtown Tucson while a freight train passed us, slowly gaining speed as it headed north to Phoenix. In the twilight I saw the most amazing sight: Dozens of human beings, mostly young men were riding the train; everywhere, on flat cars, inside open boxcars, perched on top of boxcars, hanging off ladders on tank cars and between boxcars. I couldn’t count fast enough, but I saw fifty or sixty people headed north. They were dark young men, Indian and mestizo; they were smiling and a few of them waved at us in our cars. I was reminded of the ancient story of Aztlan, told by the Aztecs but known in other Uto-Aztecan communities as well. Aztlan is the beautiful land to the north, the origin place of the Aztec people. I don’t remember how or why the people left Aztlan to journey farther south, but the old story says that one day, they will return.

– Leslie Marmon Silko, “America’s Iron Curtain: The Border Patrol State”

One of the biggest headlines of 2018 Summer in the United States was the forced family separation of the central Latin American asylum-seekers at the US-Mexico border. On May 7, 2018, the Trump administration announced its “zero tolerance” policy: All migrant parents who were unlawfully crossing the border were to be separated from their children and the children to be placed in separate facilities as they waited for their cases to be processed. To make things worse, the Trump administration had been separating families as part of a pilot program for months even before it was officially announced.258

At the time, I was in Norway to spend the summer with my husband, who was doing post-doctoral research at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in

Trondheim. As I was writing my dissertation prospectus, there was another big “project” in my mind. After years of delay (due to graduate school), I was finally ready to be a mother, or so I thought. My body was not cooperating, however. I had closed my ears to doomsday narratives of infertility and ticking clocks, focusing my entire attention on my graduate studies for years. And there I was; neither will or determination could help me with this “project.” Filled with resentment towards my body and worry for my future, I was already experiencing a separation anxiety from a future child I might or might not have. And miles away from where I was, parents were being ripped from their children.

Years ago, I chose to relocate to another country with my husband and be away from my close and extended family in Turkey to attend graduate school in the United States. Despite being an adult who made an informed decision about my future, I struggled a lot with homesickness, loneliness, and a longing for my parents and three siblings. Most of these personal emotions came from being apart from my cultural and familial roots, the comfort of my home, and the never-ending feeling of being an alien in a country no matter how long I lived in it. Having infertility issues, thus potential lack of new family members, in addition to the stress of a long-distance marriage exasperated my feelings of despair. In all this emotion, I could not wrap my head around how those kids could have felt after being so traumatizingly taken from their parents and left on their own. How helpless their parents must have felt! Even worse, images showed that separated children were being kept in cage-like facilities and sleeping on the floors with only aluminum blankets to keep warm. And then an audio recorded inside an unnamed Customs and Border Protection facility was released; children were wailing and pleading
Their voices were full of anxiety and fear. How could such a vile practice be a country’s so-called immigration policy in the twenty-first century?

The last question was in everyone’s mind. News broadcasts, social media accounts, activist groups, NGOs, and many other social and political organizations did not refrain from expressing their outrage. The fact that children were being victimized to scare their parents was unacceptable, at least for liberal-leaning US citizens. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the supporters of the Trump administration mostly blamed asylum-seeking parents for putting their children in harm’s way. Depending on one’s political position, the blame was on either the administration, broken immigration system, the asylum-seeking parents, violence and political instability in the South, or all of the above. No matter where their political views sat, it was probably too hard to swallow that the United States, a country always boastful of its freedom and being a nation of immigrants, was reenacting its long-used child taking policy to deter asylum seekers from crossing the southwest border in the twenty-first century.

Denials, protests, outrage, or justifications cannot change the facts or rewrite this ugly truth. Family separations at the US-Mexico border should be pinned in our memory as a reminder of the nation’s violent past that still haunts our present. Rather than as an exception, the Trump administration’s tearing children and parents follows the history of disposessive violences committed against Natives, Blacks, and communities of color in the United States. In other words, while I zero in on the forced family separation of the central Latin American asylum-seekers as a critical example of state-sponsored violence, systematic family disintegration and loss of communal ties do not concern only migrants,

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refugees, and the displaced; as Redefining Gender Violence shows, current and past experiences of multiple political and cultural groups, particularly Black and Native, are marked by dispossessive oppressions, too. The repercussions of Indian child takings and boarding schools, the privatization of Indigenous lands, poor Black mothers’ demonization as welfare queens and crack mothers, and Black men’s criminalization and mass incarceration continue to jeopardize the familial and communal integrity of these groups.

Communal experiences that harm familial connections are more amplified when they are sudden, coerced, and painful, thus apparently violent. I believe that that is partly why there was a collective outrage against family separations at the US-Mexico border; we instantly related to separated children’s anxiety and parents’ utter devastation. Family separations sneakily enforced by the Trump administration was an obvious example of state violence justified by immigration policy and rhetoric about broken systems and societies. A federal judge in San Diego ordered immigration officials to stop family separations at the border and parents and children’s immediate reunification on June 26, 2018. The judge’s decision followed the public’s forceful reaction to the policy of separating children. Child takings at the border, like all previous practices of family separations, stopped mostly due to protests and outrages of communities of color.

Separations stopped but there is more work to be done. Currently there are ongoing public protest, social justice organizing, and grassroots activism to stop police killings, mass shootings, mass incarceration, and reproductive injustices that harm communities of color and their relations of family, care, and intimacy. There are less obvious ways the familial and communal integrity of people of color are violated, though.
Environmental destruction of Indigenous lands and territories, urban poverty and housing
crisis in people of color neighborhoods, wage theft and the exploitation of migrant
workers all lead to marginalized and minoritized communities’ dispossession. That is
why we need more comprehensive, organized, and sustained tools including social
organizing, grassroots activism as well as legal reform and administrative initiatives to
deal with violences and injustices that break families of color.

I did not choose to focus on family separation to explain who was to blame or
because I naively thought that writing about it could prevent it in the future. While the
intense period of family separations sharpened my doctoral research focus, I had long
been ruminating about separations and returns, origins and destinations, identity and
identifications, family and community. Possibly, my constant state of being a nomad and
unlikelihood of settling down in near future made me more attentive to these issues in
literary works and scholarly debates I read and researched. As a literary scholar I
observed that Summer 2018 was a manifestation of dispossessive violences intimated by
the novels in this archive. Yet, there is more to it.

From the beginning of my graduate studies, I have always been inspired by
transnationalist scholarship in American studies. (As I pursued a graduate certificate in
women, gender, sexuality studies) I observed that the most rigorous examples of this
scholarship were being produced by feminist scholars. Studying diverse methods,
epistemologies, and questions of these two fields offered me a broader look on
transnationalism than I previously conceptualized; transitions, exchanges, homelands,
borderlands, departures, and destinations were built into human experience. Movements
and dispossessions as well as origins, family, and community are at the center of identity,
belonging, intimacy, and care for all of us. As opposed to ethnic, social, and cultural homogeneity – on which racist and nationalist ideas of identity, community, and belonging are based, we become connected to each other through flows, trends, and transitions. Thus, losing familial and cultural connections are defining moments that cross boundaries of kinship and community. More importantly, as the quotes in the epigraph suggest, loss and separation are always to be completed by returns, reunions, and reconnections. Native cosmologies that inform Silko’s and Howe’s fiction foretell returns to home, ancestral or native lands through migration, resistance, and sustaining tribal lifeways. Another way of return is to trace origin through learning and writing our personal and collective past, as Hartman does in *Lose Your Mother*. Thus, writing is a powerful tool to reconnect with our familial and cultural roots, even if we lose mother, like Florens, Lena, and the twin sisters Zeta and Leche.
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