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Empire of the People
Introduction

The Settler Colonial Foundations of Modern Democratic Thought

“We seek not the empire of the sword—not the empire of the Inquisition—not the empire of despotism; but the empire of the people—the empire of the rights of man.”

—Daniel Ullmann, The Course of Empire (1856)

Rethinking “Colonial America”

American democracy owes its origins to the colonial settlement of North America by European colonists. Since the birth of the republic, observers have emphasized how American democratic thought and identity arose out of the distinct pattern by which English settlers colonized the new world. Empire of the People shows how dominant interpretive and historical currents of modern democratic theory have neglected the other side of this equation: the constitutive role of colonial dispossession in shaping democratic values and ideals.1 By placing the development of American political thought and culture in the context of nineteenth-century settler colonialism, this book reveals how practices and ideologies of indigenous dispossession have laid the theoretical foundations of American democracy. Discussions of colonial America seldom take place in the context of broader debates about the legacies of European colonialism. As the literary critic Michael Warner states, “Very few sentences about colonial America would be significantly altered if the word ‘colonial’ were simply replaced by the word ‘early.’”2 If colonialism and empire entail the imposition of political rule and dependency status on colonized subjects, then American development is anticolonial to the extent that it was born out of revolt against empire. Yet by placing American democratic thought in the context of settler colonialism—a distinct form of colonialism aimed at the expropriation of native land rather than
the exploitation of native labor—its colonial tendencies come into more direct focus.

Colonial settlement and colonial dispossession are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, colonial settlement refers to the movement of people to a new political space in order to create a new socio-political order. “Settlement” and the related terms “colony” and “plantation” thus refer to the process by which settlers plant a colonial base that marks the origins of that society and establishes further dynamics of social, political, and cultural development. Rooted in the thinking of English theorists Sir Thomas More and Richard Hakluyt, English colonizers understood colonial settlement in agricultural terms as the planting of a seed from which self-perpetuating political communities would flourish. In its familiar etymology, the term “colonus” connotes both inhabitation and cultivation, combining processes of agriculture and settlement of foreign territories into a single process. On the other hand, colonial dispossession entails the displacement of preexisting social and political forms to constitute a new political community. The spatial movement of settlers from metropolitan centers to colonial peripheries most often entails the dispossession of indigenous communities by divorcing them from their territorial and cultural foundations.

Despite the dual character of colonization, dominant narratives of American democracy rely on a bifurcated understanding that emphasizes the formative role of colonial settlement while neglecting colonial dispossession. Nowhere is this more evident than in one of the urtexts of American democratic identity, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). In this seminal text of American political theory, Crèvecoeur emphasizes the role of agricultural settlement in shaping key principles of democratic thought—pluralism, the rule of law, social equality, and popular sovereignty. For Crèvecoeur, the novelty of American identity derives from the natural conditions of new world geography that prevent the formation of feudal institutions. Bound together by the common project of settlement, regardless of ethnic and religious differences, Americans are a “race of cultivators.” In highlighting the centrality of land and nature in shaping this new American identity, Crèvecoeur asks, “What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil?” Although he emphasizes the process of colonial settlement, Crèvecoeur disavows the centrality of colonial dispossession to the construction of democratic thought and culture.

In characterizing the process of colonizing the island of Nantucket, Crèvecoeur wrote, “This happy settlement was not founded on intrusion,
forcible entries, or blood. . . . Neither political nor religious broils, neither disputes with the natives, nor any other contentions, have in the least agitated or disturbed its detached society. Yet the first founders knew nothing either of Lycurgus or Solon, for this settlement has not been the work of eminent men or powerful legislators.” When it comes to explaining “the political state of the natives,” he noted that they “were not extirpated by fraud, violence, or injustice as hath been the case in so many provinces” but were naturally “hastening towards a total annihilation.”

While he briefly acknowledges the colonial violence involved in other settlements, Crèvecœur masks the constitutive effects of colonial conquest on American democratic identity. In taking Nantucket as a microcosm for the settlement of the nation, Crèvecœur asserted that, in contrast to Europe, here “everything is modern, peaceful, and benign. Here we have had no war to desolate our fields.”

Rather than a political process involving war and conquest, Crèvecœur presents settlement as a natural process. By colonizing the land, settlers become the corporeal incarnation of nature, subsuming the democratic characteristics of the landscape into the organic body politic. The basic features of American democratic peoplehood thus emerge from the land.

In treating the American founding as a natural process of colonial settlement rather than an act of “powerful legislators,” Crèvecœur short-circuited what William Connolly calls “the paradox of political founding.” Found most forcefully in Book II of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Social Contract, the paradox of political founding illustrates the problems by which a people become a political people capable of ruling themselves: “For an emerging people to be capable of appreciating the sound maxims of politics and to follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause . . . men would be, prior to the advent of laws, what they ought to become by means of laws.” For Rousseau, the “true constitution” of republics is “not engraved on marble or bronze, but in the hearts of citizens.” Yet citizens cannot develop the proper habits, customs, and opinions of republican self-rule without first having a system of good laws. To dissolve the chicken-or-egg type paradox, Rousseau introduced the figure of the legislator, who uses extra-legal means to establish the foundation of law. For Connolly, this points to a larger problem besetting all democratic governments—the fact that any political order is founded on extra-legal violence that stands outside of democratic legitimacy.

In a manner emblematic of American political thought more generally, Crèvecœur’s account of colonial settlement dissolved the paradox by
disavowing colonial dispossession. This book traces the conceptual and theoretical lineages of this disavowal throughout the course of American democratic theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a material sense, colonial dispossession involves the construction of a new society on top of expropriated land. Conceptually, it entails the construction of a spatial imaginary that empties the territorial ground of democracy of its prior inhabitants by disavowing the presence of indigenous orders. I treat colonial dispossession less as a policy or institution than as a theoretical mechanism that allows settlers to ideologically obscure the foundational violence of colonial conquest. Colonial dispossession is a form of what Walter Benjamin calls “founding violence” or “law-making violence,” a process by which the elimination of native life-forms enables the constitution of new legal, cultural, and political norms. Such foundational violence establishes the basis of democratic sovereignty. As James Tully writes of settler colonial dispossession, “the ground of the [colonial] relation is the appropriation of the land, resources, and jurisdiction of the indigenous peoples, not only for the sake of resettlement and exploitation . . . but for the territorial foundation of the dominant [i.e., democratic] society itself.”

Thus, to uphold the legitimacy of American settler democracy, settler political thought must disavow the origins of democracy in colonial dispossession and in turn erase the political and historical presence of native peoples. It is important to clarify, however, that by focusing on the foundational disavowal of native dispossession, I do not mean a “politics of forgetting” or a form of “national amnesia.” Disavowal in ordinary language is a “refusal to acknowledge” and in psychoanalytic terms is “the refusal to recognize the reality of traumatic perception.” Disavowal is not simply a passive ignorance of native life-forms in the historical archive of colonial violence. It is an active refusal to historically and ethically grapple with the presence and political claims of indigenous peoples as well as the colonial violence that paved the way for the emergence of modern American democracy. While amnesia and forgetting are passive and might be noted merely by registering the silences in a text, disavowal implies the active and interpretive production of indigenous absence. In settler democratic thought, the absence of native conquest is not assumed or forgotten; it is discursively produced. Consequently, the traces of disavowed colonial violence remain in historical and textual memory.

Focusing on the theoretical disavowal of colonial dispossession in democratic thought sheds new light on the familiar problem of the relationship
between race and democracy. To explain the persistence of slavery in colonial Virginia and its centrality to emergent notions of political liberty, Edmund Morgan famously argued that slavery and freedom in the American political imagination, rather than being mutually exclusive, developed in relation to one another. In so doing, Morgan resisted the temptation to flip the script by casting slavery and oppression as dominant trends in colonial thought and advances in liberty and equality as the exception. In Morgan’s account, racial slavery was not antithetical to American liberty, but laid the conceptual and economic foundation of freedom for white settlers. In a conceptual sense, American colonists developed their notions of freedom not despite but because of slavery by contrasting their own status as freemen with that of their slaves. In a material sense, individual freedom rested on the economic independence afforded by the profits from slave labor. At the political and collective level, then, the vast economic growth produced by slave labor enabled the emergence of a free American state and citizenry. The central problem for American colonists prior to the Revolution was the “struggle for a separate and equal station among the nations of the earth.”14 Slavery constituted freedom at both an individual and collective level, allowing colonists to develop their notions of political and individual liberty.

According to Morgan, slavery and liberty existed not in an oppositional or even identical relationship to one another, but in a web of contradictions, giving rise to what he calls “the American paradox of slavery and freedom, intertwined and interdependent, the rights of Englishmen supported on the wrongs of Africans.”15 While Morgan made these claims through analysis of literature in colonial Virginia, his emphasis was on slavery rather than indigenous dispossession. Empire of the People recasts the paradox of race to focus not just on the relationship between slavery and freedom, but also on the relationship between democracy and dispossession. Dispossession was not an unfortunate by-product of modern democracy, nor was settler colonial ideology an entirely separate political tradition from democratic thought. The two surged alongside each other and reinforced each other in their historical development. This pushes historically oriented scholars of race and politics in a different direction to bring questions of land and indigeneity back into the fold in studies of American political thought. Institutions and ideologies of conquest and colonization, as well as those of slavery and racial exclusion, were closely linked to the development of democratic ideals and institutions.

For all Morgan did to advance our understanding of the complex
relationship between race and democracy, he neglected crucial dynamics of colonial America. By adhering to a periodization of “colonial America” as pre-republican and pre-independence, Morgan ignored the colonial dynamics of America that persisted not only into the republican period but also into the present. I thus propose to shift the meaning of “colonial America” to a theoretical register away from an exclusively historical register that casts the qualifier “colonial” in terms of temporal periodization. In its theoretical register, the idea of “colonial America” centers on the constitutive role of settler colonialism in shaping American democratic thought. Understood in this way, “colonial America” names not a phase of American intellectual and political development, but the settler colonial foundations of American democracy that continue to structure the basic features of modern democratic thought and politics.

The critical indigenous theorist Jodi Byrd helpfully highlights why political theorists have not sufficiently appreciated the centrality of settler colonialism to the making of modern democracy. Indigenous politics tend to get framed through a politics of race and racialization. As Byrd writes, “When the remediation of the colonization of American Indians is framed through discourses of racialization that can be redressed by further inclusion into the nation-state, there is significant failure to grapple with the fact that such discourses further reinscribe the original colonial injury.”

By framing processes of colonization in terms of a politics of exclusion (the solution to which inclusion into the constitutional, multicultural state) rather than a politics of dispossession and sovereignty (the solution to which is the reclamation of indigenous governance), discourses of racialization in turn reinforce structures of settler sovereignty through the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the imperial state as the remedy for conquest. In a related way, treating the problem of colonization in terms of “internal colonialism” tends to cast indigenous peoples as “minorities within” settler states rather than as conquered and dispossessed populations. The idea of internal colonialism thus feeds “the construction of the United States as a multicultural nation that is struggling with the legacies of racism rather than as a colonist power engaged in territorial expansion since its beginning.”

If we are to properly understand the settler colonial foundations of American democratic thought, we need alternative frameworks of analysis that capture the history of native communities in the United States as a process of colonization and dispossession. Recovering and contesting these historical elisions is essential because the enduring legacies of
Settler colonial foundations of modern democratic thought

Colonial dispossession and their disavowal counteract native claims to self-governance in the present.18

**Democracy and Empire**

Despite the fact that modern democratic thought is coexistent with and deeply implicated in empire from its inception, the writing of imperial and colonial histories of modern democracy has only just begun. Perhaps one of the most enduring conceptual frameworks in these efforts has been that of “liberal imperialism.”19 Although historians are still debating its complex and contested legacy, the core of liberal imperialism is a defense of European expansion on the basis of the unfitness of non-European subjects for liberal government. Its claim to embrace a “universal constituency” notwithstanding, liberalism employs a variety of exclusion clauses to justify the continued exploitation of colonial subjects and intervention in non-European societies. By privileging anthropological capacities rooted in Enlightenment culture, liberal imperialism exempts colonized societies from the promise of liberal ideals. As a result, colonized societies are relegated to the “waiting room of history” where they are subject to regimes of enlightened despotism before they can rule themselves through liberal principles.20

While scholars of imperial history and modern political thought have analyzed ideologies of liberal imperialism at the heart of the British and French empires, much less attention has been given to how ideologies and practices of settler expansion figured into the formation of American democratic theory. Despite a growing literature exploring how key concepts of European political thought were articulated in response to the politics of imperial expansion, the role of empire in American thought is severely understudied.21 Rooted in new currents of scholarship, this book examines the ideological and cultural development of American democracy in the context of settler colonialism. Specifically, it examines the process by which democratic conceptions of freedom, popular sovereignty, consent, and equality emerged through practices and ideologies of settler colonization. In doing so, I develop the concept of democratic empire as a distinct ideological formation from liberal imperialism.

Despite their historical and theoretical sophistication, discussions of liberal imperialism fail to capture the distinct imperial and colonial dynamics of the nineteenth-century United States for two primary reasons.22 First, they neglect the central role of popular sovereignty and constituent power in fostering settler colonial processes of expansion. Second, they center on
the strategies of exclusion that liberal imperialists employed to justify the exploitation and extraction of indigenous labor and resources rather than the expropriation of indigenous land. Frameworks of liberal imperialism thus misconstrue American ideologies and practices of colonization by mapping onto American development a set of concepts and categories that were developed in different geographic and historical contexts. Because of this, the ideology of democratic empire provides a more appropriate interpretive framework for analyzing the relationship between democracy and empire in settler colonial contexts.

The key differences between the two ideological formations can be further understood by considering the case of John Stuart Mill. Often taken as the representative figure of liberal imperialism, Mill famously wrote, “Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end. Liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved.”23 In his effort to discern the proper scope of individual liberty, Mill provided a powerful justification of British colonial rule. While the imperial metropolis was to be governed through liberal principles of representative government, Mill condemned colonial subjects in India to the arbitrary rule of British administrators. Yet despite his positive views about the democratization of British society, Mill insulated the rule of the British colonies in India from popular control. Indeed, he was irate when Parliament abolished the East India Company after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 and imposed direct rule on the colonies. For Mill, colonial expansion was the domain of intellectual elites who possessed special talents for leading colonial subjects down the path of civilization. Precisely because of, rather than despite, its liberal elements, Mill’s was a decidedly antidemocratic imperialism that excluded the democratic masses from having any role in carrying out British imperial ambitions.24

Such a position might seem irrelevant in the larger scheme of things, but it is precisely in opposition to this aspect of liberal imperialism that the ideology of democratic empire comes into clear focus. Lacking a robust conception of popular sovereignty, an emphasis on liberal imperialism alone cannot explain how American expansionists constructed popular constituencies that demanded territorial expansion and then enlisted those constituencies in the process of empire-building. Although liberal imperialism justifies colonial rule through the positive ethical benefits that it confers to
the colonized, it makes no pretense to democratic rule in the acquisition of new territory. In the ideology of democratic empire, conversely, democratic self-rule is not simply the end of imperial expansion but is also its primary means. Rather than a centralized state or colonial administration, democratic empire casts “the people” in their sovereign capacity for self-government as the primary agent of colonial expansion. My central argument is that settler-colonial discourses constructed the “sovereign people” as an imperial constituency who demanded territorial expansion as a necessary correlate of democratic equality and self-rule. American democracy emerged through a conceptualization of space and time in which the vitality of democratic society rested on the disavowal of colonial dispossession.

Among imperial historians, democratic empire refers to “empires where all classes in the home territories share in the project of rule.” The idea has perhaps been most forcefully advanced by the early twentieth-century sociologist Franklin Giddings, who wrote, “The world has been accustomed to think of democracy and empire as antagonistic phenomena. It has assumed that democracy could be established only on the ruins of empire, and that the establishment of empire necessarily meant the overthrow of liberty by a triumphant reign of absolutism.” Yet, Giddings argued, the modern era is “witnessing the simultaneous development of both democracy and empire,” resulting in the formation of “democratic empire.” Throughout the nineteenth century, Giddings observed how the two most powerful nations on earth—Britain and the United States—became more democratic in their internal organization while expanding their boundaries through the acquisition of new territorial possessions. The basic principle of democratic empire is that as a nation establishes itself as “the nucleus of an empire” it can successively annex new territories and continue to be democratic. By reconciling colonial expansion with egalitarian principles, democratic empires govern acquired territories democratically while maintaining a strong imperial government.

Although this basic understanding captures many key features, it tends to view the impulse for democratic expansion within a theoretical framework of democratic responsiveness, in which democratic empires expand because they are beholden to the demands of “the people” for land, liberty, and equality. That is, colonial expansion occurs because democratic-imperial states are responsive to the desires of popular constituencies for more territory and the political and ethical benefits it affords. This understanding of democratic empire, however, rests on a static notion of “the
people” as a bounded entity. Democratic theorists have recently argued that the idea of the people that underwrites modern theories of popular sovereignty is not an objective referent, an aggregation of individuals, or a culturally bounded entity, but is rather a political process in its own right that involves a dialectical interaction between citizens and institutions.  

In lamenting the “stigma of empire” that democracy bears, Sheldon Wolin has provocatively shown how the shifting dynamics of American empire have both redrawn the boundaries of popular sovereignty and transformed the meaning of democratic citizenship. Wolin writes, “Virtually from the beginnings of the nation the making of the American citizen was influenced, even shaped by, the making of American imperium.” In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Wolin was particularly concerned with how the rise of American superpower has resulted in a passive and demobilized democratic citizenry. But in the context of nineteenth-century territorial expansion, the process of expanding political space engendered a new kind of active and highly mobile democratic citizen.

Frameworks of democratic responsiveness thus fail to capture how the process of settler expansion figured into the creation of democratic citizens and democratic publics. In the process of constructing the sovereign people as an imperial constituency, ideologies of democratic empire embraced the constituent power of the people as the authorizing force of territorial expansion. The idea of democratic empire does not simply point to how the people provided the engine of settler expansion but rather to the dynamics by which settler colonialism itself constituted democratic peoplehood. If claims to represent the people or speak on the people’s behalf in fact construct the people as a popular constituency, as Jason Frank has shown, then efforts to enlist the people in the process of empire building constituted the American people as an imperial constituency. That is, attempts to justify democratic expansion by invoking the demands of popular movements for land and liberty do not reflect a predetermined constituency. They draw the boundaries of popular sovereignty as such. Notions of democratic empire that view settler expansion as the product of popular demands for land and liberty are limited because they treat the people as a bounded entity whose political demands get translated into state policy rather than as the product of settler colonial dispossession.
Race, Space, and Settler Colonialism

In the first and most basic sense, settler colonialism entails the outward migration of settlers from a metropolitan center to establish colonial outposts on the periphery of empire. Settler regimes expand through the replication of metropolitan cultures and institutions in new territory. Settlers seek to make that space familiar by importing their own customs and social relations. Although they are replications of metropolitan societies, settler colonies necessarily exist as distinct and separate communities. Settler colonialism thus proceeds through the removal of a fragment of the metropolitan population who abandon the old order to constitute a new and separate political society, giving rise to “founding cultures” and “new world imaginaries” that both continue and break with metropolitan cultures. In creating new societies in a new political space, settler colonists must deal with preexisting orders and identities that occupy and inhabit that space. To mask the vital role of conquest in establishing the territorial foundation of settler society, settler colonial ideologies systematically obscure land appropriation and native dispossession. In this way, settler ideology embraces racial logics that operate through space rather than culture or biology.

Two factors distinguish settler colonial ideology from other forms of colonial and imperial ideology. First, settlers share a common racial identity with citizens of the mother country. Accordingly, settlers count as civilized subjects who migrate with their rights and liberties intact when they colonize new spaces. Second, in settler colonial thought, settlers have fully developed their capacities for self-rule and thus achieved the status of political maturity prior to settlement. Thus, distinct from colonial subjects who lacked a common racial identity and capacities for self-rule, settlers obtain inherent claims to democratic rule vis-à-vis imperial governments. What is important in settler colonial ideology, then, is that it talks about race less through body politics than through the politics of land and space. This shifts attention away from exclusive emphasis on anthropological conceptions of race as a cultural or physiological attribute of individuals to spatial representations of land as a cultural, historical, and political attribute of indigenous peoplehood. In settler colonial ideology, conceptualizations of land and space imply conceptualizations of race.

Mill himself reflected this spatial (rather than cultural or biological) understanding of race when he distinguished between two different types of colonies in the British Empire. While some colonies “are composed of people of similar civilization to the ruling country; capable of, and ripe for,
representative government” (e.g., settler colonies in Canada and Australia), others “are still at a great distance from that state” (e.g., India). Mill is making here what is now a widely recognized distinction between “settler colonies” and “occupation” or “exploitation colonies.” If exploitation colonies rely on either the extraction of valuable resources or the exploitation of indigenous labor, settler colonies are characterized by the expropriation of indigenous land. Through the “mass transfer” of European populations across space, settler colonization implies the “demographic takeover” of indigenous land. Nevertheless, while Mill took great pains to construct civilizational hierarchies—what Uday Mehta calls “strategies of exclusion”—that barred colonized subjects in India from entrance into the universal constituency of liberalism, he cast land in settler colonies as empty and naturally belonging to white settlers. In settler colonialism, structures of colonial domination follow spatial logics of native disavowal rather than biological-exclusivist or cultural-developmentalist logics.

Distinct from the exploitation colonialism of the late nineteenth-century French and British Empires in India and Africa, in which the relationship between colony and imperial metropolis was signified by the exploitation of indigenous labor, settler colonialism works through the elimination of the native and the expropriation of indigenous land. Also, distinct from mass migrations in which migrants return to the home country, settlers come to stay. As such, settler “invasion is a structure and not an event.” Settler colonialism names more than an event or process concerning the creation of a new society; it characterizes the structure of a society founded on conquest and the elimination of native modes of life. Settlers are, in the words of Lorenzo Veracini, “founders of political orders who carry their sovereignty with them.” In settler regimes, colonial expansion operates through the constituent power of settlers to establish their sovereignty on top of expropriated land. As a form of constituent power, settler colonialism entails the foundational violence of conquest in which the elimination of old orders and identities enables the consolidation of a new political order. Liberal imperialism and democratic empire thus rely on distinct strategies of colonial domination. If liberal-imperial strategies of exclusion/domination focus on justifying the continued exploitation of indigenous labor and the rule of colonial administration, the strategies of exclusion/domination in democratic empire are oriented toward rationalizing indigenous dispossession and land appropriation. In its focus on land appropriation, settler strategies revolve around what Patrick Wolfe calls the
“logic of native elimination” in which a “new colonial society” is erected “upon an expropriated land base.” Although they greatly vary, ideological rationalizations of such processes center on strategies of colonial disavowal where settlers refuse to acknowledge the indigenous presence by casting land as “empty” or uncultivated, what in legal discourse is known as *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one). Other means of colonial disavowal involve narratives of the “vanishing Indian” in which settlers justified territorial expropriation by casting indigenous communities as retrograde and decaying societies, thereby loosening their sovereign claims over the land. Nevertheless, all such strategies rest on the assertion of European superiority over the native political forms, and they all encourage the disappearance of native societies to make way for a newer, more purportedly advanced form of society. Ideologies of democratic empire rely upon strategies of exclusion that define the boundaries of popular sovereignty through the disavowal and elimination of indigenous sovereignty as having any legitimate claim to new world territory.

Although “native elimination” is a harsh term that evokes images of physical genocide, indigenous dispossession need not necessarily proceed through physical extermination. Often, mechanisms of forced removal and assimilation offer more ideologically consistent modes of native elimination. In a certain sense, indigenous assimilation was opposed to racially exclusivist thinking because it acknowledged the mental and physical capacities of Indians to acculturate to white civilization. Nevertheless, policies of assimilation embraced the assumption that native modes of life were inferior to European forms of social and political organization. Assimilation thus appeared to white settlers as a means of offering the “gift” of civilization to Indians rather than as a form of elimination. In any case, the practical effect of assimilationist policies was the extirpation of indigenous land claims. In the case of native peoples, “democracy’s intolerance of difference has operated through inclusion as much as through exclusion. Some differences are absorbed rather than excluded.”

**Ideological History**

By tracing the complex relationship between democratic thought and settler colonialism, this book offers not an intellectual history of democracy and colonialism but rather an ideological history. In the fashion of Cambridge School techniques of discourse analysis developed by Quentin Skinner and others, the intellectual history of political discourse puts
primary focus on the linguistic regularities and shared vocabularies that provide the context for the emergence of political concepts and ideas. The meaning of a text or idea is not uncovered through a close reading aimed at retrieving moral axioms about human nature or universal truths about political order; it requires situating a text in its historical context. Drawing on speech act theory, such interpretive techniques emphasize the public legibility of political argument. Because political discourses are united by broad regularities in the vocabularies political actors use to influence politics, intellectual historians can uncover the intention of an author by examining the linguistic contexts that govern the formation of political arguments. Through contextualization, intellectual historians can illuminate the linguistic conventions that help us understand what an author was doing with a particular political language.41

Although my approach to ideological history adopts many of these interpretive techniques, it also moves beyond these approaches to emphasize the social and material contexts of political ideology. Instead of focusing solely on discursive and linguistic contexts, Ellen Meiksins Wood argues for attention to the “deep structural contexts and long-term social transformations” that shape political thought.42 In its exclusive focus on political languages peculiar to specific historical moments, Skinnerian approaches risk detaching consideration of the social conditions and economic processes from the discursive structures and linguistic contexts that shape political debate. This, in turn, restricts the range of historical contexts that account for the historical specificity of a given political discourse. Attention to how political ideas develop in relation to large-scale historical and social processes widens the range of contextual factors relevant to the formation of political ideologies.

A broader sense of what counts as relevant historical context is necessary if we are to pay attention to how material processes of settler colonization laid the foundation of democratic society in the United States. A more synthetic understanding requires attention to the institutional processes of settler colonization (as a material set of practices and policies of land appropriation) that shaped the conceptual development of democratic ideas, as well as the ideologies and discourses of settler colonialism (as a theoretical and ideological tradition of political thinking) that lend justification to those institutional practices. The two should not be broken down into a dichotomous binary-like base and superstructure but should be seen as two moments of an integrated totality. To have a truly dynamic understanding
of politics and culture, political development must be understood as “a continuous interaction between ideology and the material forces of history.”\textsuperscript{43} Accounting for a broader range of historical contexts that shape ideological traditions requires attention to how both material and ideological aspects mediate each other in a dialectical fashion.

Within this contextual understanding of ideological history, the concept of ideology operates on two levels of analysis. At the simpler and programmatic level, ideological history involves tracing the conceptual lineages and discursive effects of “legitimizing constructs” that rationalize power relations and the construction of colonial hierarchies. In this sense, ideology is not simply dogma or doctrine, but rather “the system of beliefs, values, fears, prejudices, reflexes, and commitments—in sum, the social consciousness—of a social group, be it a class, a party, or a section.”\textsuperscript{44} At a deeper level, ideologies are not simply instrumental constructs used to justify power and domination but actually structure consciousness and group identity.\textsuperscript{45} In focusing on the role of ideology in constituting popular constituencies as imperial constituencies, I attend to what Priscilla Wald calls “official stories,” authorizing narratives that “constitute Americans.”\textsuperscript{46} Rather than isolated currents of political thought, settler colonial narratives shaped the ongoing redefinition of democratic peoplehood and democratic thought.

Although I focus on the ideological development of democratic empire in the US context, I have no intention of presenting the American experience with settler colonialism as exceptional or unique. One can find parallels with this ideological configuration by placing democratic empire in transnational and comparative perspective. Perhaps the most obvious point of comparison is the British Empire of the nineteenth century, not in the exploitation colonies of Africa and Southeast Asia but in the settler colonies of Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand. The experience of the rebellions of Lower and Upper Canada, partially to thwart repetition of the American rebellion, led British colonial architects to integrate democratic principles and imperial frameworks of rule in the Durham report of 1838 (Chapter 1). The outcome significantly mirrored the American framework of combining territorial expansion with democratic self-rule in settler colonies. Beyond Anglo settler states, one sees profound parallels in French Algeria. Alexis de Tocqueville, for instance, looked to American ideologies and practices of colonization in his own efforts to construct a settler colonial state in North Africa. Although he ultimately concluded the differences were too great to fully replicate the American model of colonization, the cross-national
circulation of settler ideology helps illuminate the American case (Chapter 3).

In this way, I also move beyond comparative frameworks toward a transnational perspective. If comparative perspectives emphasize the similarities and differences between US colonial history and other settler states by treating them as discrete and insular units of analysis, transnational history highlights the cross-national circulation of colonial practices and ideologies. From this perspective, the United States is not one among many units of analysis but has played a central role in developing settler colonial technologies of power. “Inserted into the history of colonialism,” Mahmood Mamdani states, “America appears less as exceptional and more as a pioneer in the history and technology of settler colonialism. All the defining institutions of settler colonialism were produced as so many technologies of native control in North America.” For instance, the South African system of native “reserves,” which carved out separate homelands for each indigenous ethnic group and provided the basis for apartheid, was based on the US reservation system used to confine indigenous peoples to spaces outside of the commercial channels of settler expansion. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European colonizers looked to the United States for examples of how to govern native peoples in colonial outposts. Architects of settler rule in Australia drew on the racialist ideas of US theorists to reconcile democracy with colonial domination in the antipodes. Through attention to these networks of “overlapping territories” and “intertwined histories,” I illustrate how transnational flows of settler colonial ideology influenced modern democratic thought.

**Chapter Overview**

What I seek to establish throughout the book is that native dispossession and settler colonialism did not simply shape American institutional and social development, but that they infused into and constituted the basic conceptual logics of democratic theory. My focus on the logics of native elimination and indigenous absence shows how practices and ideologies of colonization have been foundational not just for democratic institutions and constitutional law but more precisely for central theoretical constructions of American democratic theory. In this regard, my account also differs from much of the literature on conquest and frontier violence in focusing less on the liberal, individualist ethos of self-reliance than on conceptions of popular sovereignty, social equality, federalism, and democratic peoplehood.
Emphasizing democratic dispossession in this way sheds significant light on empire and colonialism not simply as a political project but as dynamics that were foundational to the construction of modern democratic thought.

The book proceeds through three phases. The first phase charts the ideological origins of democratic empire by examining the relationship between federalism and empire in colonial and early republican thought. Chapter 1 focuses on debates about the proper balance between colonial authority and imperial sovereignty during the Imperial Crisis. It further establishes that the conflict between colonial settlers and metropolitan authorities was largely a debate over the proper terms and conditions of imperial organization. The fundamental point that settlers made in these arguments was that barriers to settler colonization subjected the colonies to the metropolitan center in a way that cast them as colonial dependencies. In response, settlers articulated an alternative vision of imperial expansion in which the constituent parts of empire were equal rather than dependent entities. The chapter then argues that the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 institutionalized a new world conception of empire that privileged the equality of quasi-sovereign settler communities over notions of empire organized around the governance of colonial dependencies. Despite the central principles of equality at the center of this new notion of empire, the ordinance allowed for the further dispossession of indigenous communities as a necessary feature of republican expansionism.

The second chapter argues that the practice of colonization in settler constitutionalism represented a distinct form of constituent power wherein the self-constitution of settler democracy coheres around regimes of indigenous disavowal and native expropriation. Evident in a range of micro-constitutional practices such as the Vermont Constitution, the Watauga Compact, the Cumberland Compact, and the Constitution of the State of Franklin, democratic notions of popular consent and constituent sovereignty were vitally linked to spatial notions of North American land as vacant and unpeopled. This distinct understanding of settler democracy raised significant difficulties as American constitutionalists attempted to build an expansive though stable republic. To the extent that colonization entailed the right of settlers to dissolve the bonds of imperial order and constitute new political orders, it threatened to contain American expansion within preestablished territorial boundaries. By seeking separation and independence from territorial empire, settler practices of colonization potentially subverted American efforts at continental expansion. The Northwest Ordinance tacitly dealt with this
problem by conceiving of the right of settlers to self-constitute republican order in colonized lands as the driving force of settler colonial expansion. In this regard, the Northwest Ordinance engendered a colonization-constitution dialectic in which the constituent power of settlers to create self-governing polities on the frontier was integrated into the colonial apparatus of the American Constitution.

The second phase examines the ideological development of democratic empire from the Jacksonian period through the end of the Civil War. Chapter 3 traces how new conceptions of democracy expressed in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* acquired their conceptual coherence in relation to the politics of settler expansion and land appropriation. At the center of Tocqueville’s thought was a socio-cultural conception of democracy that located the foundations of the democratic polity in culture and society rather than the formal constitution. In this socio-cultural concept of democracy, settler expansion guarded against the resurgence of feudal land title in the Americas by ensuring the primacy of social equality in the context of an expanding and industrializing political economy. For Tocqueville, American democracy was defined by the double absence of feudalism and indigenous sovereignties. Insofar as American democracy conceptually emerged in reference to ideologies of indigenous disavowal, settler colonialism provided the foundation of democratic society. Regimes of settler colonialism and indigenous dispossession constituted the territorial basis of American democracy by shaping the values, habits, and customs that defined the boundaries and character of democratic peoplehood.

Chapter 4 expands this analysis to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John O’Sullivan against the backdrop of the US conquest of Mexico. While O’Sullivan presented a conventional socio-economic argument in favor of colonial expansion in which the acquisition of new land ensured the landed independence of democratic settlers, Emerson recast this argument in the terms of transcendental and romantic philosophy. In O’Sullivan’s theory of colonization, settler expansion ensured the continued social equality of settlers and in turn laid the social basis for a democratic polity founded on the sovereignty of the people. Emerson amended this familiar argument by casting the cultivation and colonization of land as necessary not just for social development but also for the moral development of citizens. Thus, colonization stabilized the democratic polity not simply by maintaining an economic balance between social classes but by creating the moral ethos of democratic citizenship.
Chapter 5 examines similar themes in the political thought of Abraham Lincoln, Galusha Grow, and Walt Whitman. In the free-soil politics of the 1850s, the expansion of slavery represented a feudal threat to democratic equality. In response, free-soil democrats rearticulated democratic empire as a form of free labor empire that privileged egalitarian expansion over the oligarchic empire of slavery. These theorists emphasized the moral benefits of free labor that suited settlers for democratic citizenship. Similar to Emerson, Whitman revised these moral and economic arguments into a poetic theory of democracy. For Whitman, the true foundation of democracy was in its cultural rather than constitutional form. Central to the creation of democratic culture was the formation of democratic literature that imparted democratic virtues to citizens and cemented the moral bonds that united individuals and states in a grander federal union. As this chapter explains, free-soil expansion and native dispossession provided the linguistic raw material for the creation of democratic culture. To develop a uniquely “native” American vernacular that demarcated democratic literature from its European precedents, Whitman integrated indigenous languages and cultural traditions. Yet when he described the western landscape, his poetic vision of North America emptied the continent of its indigenous presence.

While the previous two sections focus on official narratives and legitimizing constructs of settler ideology, the last section mines resources within American democratic thought that might aid in a larger project of decolonizing democratic theory. Toward this end, Chapter 6 examines the concept of “Indian nullification” in the political writings of the Pequot Indian William Apess by situating his defense of indigenous sovereignty in the context of debates about the legitimacy of nullification in US constitutionalism. It illustrates how Indian nullification operates not as a feature of constitutional design asserting minority rights over the tyranny of the majority, but rather as a rhetorical form of political contestation exposing the foundational violence of American settler democracy. Apess shows how democratic equality and self-rule rest on settler colonialism and indigenous dispossession, highlighting the “paradox of settler sovereignty” that provides the basis for American democracy. Indian nullification is not a simple demand that the boundaries of liberal citizenship be expanded to include Indians. It is a way of narrating the forms of settler conquest that establish the material and conceptual foundation of democratic equality for white settlers. Apess thus illuminates the possibilities within democratic theory for unsettling the colonial foundations of modern democracy.
Although several other Native American political theorists might provide a compelling counterpoint to settler ideologies of democratic empire, Apess exemplifies the foundational critique that this book explores. The inclusion of Apess is therefore not meant to be exhaustive of his thought or as a full representation of Native American political thinking, but as a means of tying the counter-narrative offered in this book to indigenous critiques of settler colonialism. To further contextualize Apess in relation to broader currents of Native American political thought, I briefly contrast his legal and political thought with that of other native thinkers such as Tecumseh, Black Hawk, and Elias Boudinot throughout the book. Nevertheless, while my primary concern in Empire of the People is to trace the contours of indigenous disavowal and epistemological elimination in American democratic theory, it is beyond the scope of this book to entirely fill in those absences. While this is a productive avenue for future scholarship, my account of Apess’s thought is suggestive of one possible route for deeper engagement with Native American political thought in its historical contexts.

If the primary task of this book is to deconstruct exceptionalist narratives of American democracy by highlighting the entwinement of democracy and dispossession, the afterword closes with a reconstructive effort to sketch the outlines of a decolonial theory of democracy. Specifically, it highlights two features of the decolonial theory of democracy: (1) a nonsovereign conception of democracy that relinquishes the aspiration to collective self-mastery and (2) a transmodern conception of democracy that attends to the productive influence of indigenous traditions on the modern democratic tradition. Through a conceptual and historical reconstruction of the relationship between settler expansion and American democracy, I call for a decolonial theory of democracy that de-normalizes settler political thought as the unsurpassable horizon of democratic politics.