

## Creolizing Collective Memory

Refusing the Settler Memory of the Reconstruction Era

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# Creolizing Collective Memory

## Refusing the Settler Memory of the Reconstruction Era

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In the summer of 2017, in the face of an emergent white nationalist movement energized by the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency, activists demanded the removal of—or directly sought to remove—statues such as that of General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. Lee was a Confederate general, defender of the Secessionist South in the U.S. Civil War, and thus a defender of the formalized system of chattel slavery upon which the South’s economic and political power so depended. This conflict became the premise, although not the deeper cause, of the most notable political and racial moment of that summer, when hundreds of white nationalist, “Alt-Right” men marched in a rally, carrying tiki torches, to defend the monument and, more fundamentally, what they saw to be their identity and status as white Christians in the nation, chanting, “You will not replace us!” and “Jews will not replace us!” A confrontation with anti-fascist activists ensued and a white nationalist drove his car into a group of protestors, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer, and wounding nineteen more people. In the wake of these tragic and brutal events, the most popular argument made by those who oppose the removal of such statues was that doing so served to erase the nation’s history. President Trump made this exact argument in his many remarks about what happened in Charlottesville. The argument has, at least, one fundamental flaw. Removing monuments does not erase history because monuments are not about history. They are about memory. The intense fight over them speaks to the importance of memory in politics. Politically, when we fight about the meaning of the past, we are not fighting over history, we are fighting over memory, specifically the collective memories that purport to bind and define a people’s sense of who they are from past to present and on into the future. These fights, as we have seen, can be deadly.

In many ways, the most fraught politics and fights over collective memory occur when a non-dominant group dares to creolize a community’s relationship to its past as a means to assert critiques about and liberating

alternatives to the conditions and forms of oppression in the present. This sort of politics of creolizing collective memory refuses the inclination or dominant expectation to fall back on ready-made and neat categories, myths, logics, and approaches as one constructs the relationship of the past to the present. I refer to this as a creolizing of collective memory because I see it to be in the spirit of Jane Anna Gordon's claim in *Creolizing Political Theory* that

...framing instances as those of creolization requires a particular approach to the study of the past.... [T]he expectations with which we approach prior historical moments are significantly shaped by how we conceive of symbolic life and its relationship to patterns of human movement. Particularly creolized forms can therefore themselves, if we are willing to grapple with them, belie ways of narrating the past that impose on them a *de facto* purity.<sup>1</sup>

By the phrase "conceive of symbolic life" I think of the manner in which efforts to remove or destroy Confederate Statues are themselves a demand placed on the wider community to open up the possibilities of meaning and ways of narrating the past that cannot be determined in advance. Such demands are *impure* in an open democratic sense of widening the horizon for how we interpret and draw the thread of connections from the past to the present. A creolized politics of memory seeks to disabuse the given of dominant collective memories, pulling down or defacing these memories, so as to denaturalize readings of the past that legitimate hierarchies and oppressions in the present as somehow just the product of the agent-less "work of history." Creolizing in this way involves cracking open the shell that encases memories to see and deal with what spills out. Lisa Lowe's notion of the *past conditional temporality* helps here, a term she devised to refer to "'what could have been'.... a space of reckoning that allows us to revisit times to consider alternatives that may have been *unthought* in those times.... This is not a project of merely telling history differently, but one of returning to the past its gaps, uncertainties, impasses, and elisions...."<sup>2</sup> It is with attention to the *unthought*, in those times and in ours, that I seek to creolize collective memory through deconstructing the work of what I call settler memory. I do so with attention to a particular era of U.S. history, that of the Reconstruction period, as I consider the collective memory of it to be a good example of creolization that could also do with further creolizing by refusing the influence of settler memory.

Settler memory refers to the capacity both to know and disavow the history and contemporary implications of genocidal violence toward Indigenous people and the accompanying land dispossession that serve as the fundamental bases for creating settler colonial nations-states. Settler memory is a critical element of the dominant forms of collective memory for

settler nations such as that of the U.S. nation. Settler memory is not a state of amnesia. It is not a forgetting of this history, for in topographical names, consumer products, sports team names, military nomenclature, and national holidays Indigenous people and the history of colonialism and settlement are ever-present and yet also absent as relevant structures, events, and actors in our time. Settler memory is the capacity to see and not see Indigenous people as contemporary subjects, and as such to see and not see Indigenous people in the writing of key historical moments that continue to haunt the present-day. To diagnose a writer's work as being shaped by settler memory is not to say that this person or text is necessarily supportive of colonization and the genocidal and dispossessive actions against Indigenous people. This is the dilemma and trick of settler memory in fact. For even some of the most radical writers suffer from settler memory as a habitual mnemonic process that leads them to, at once, see and not see Indigenous people and settler colonial practices as they construct and write their histories and analyses of inequality, violence and structural oppression and radical resistance in the U.S. context. As an example, I consider how this works in the collective memory of the Reconstruction Era.

A lore has emerged around the period that goes by the name of Reconstruction, one which still haunts and taunts the nation—haunts with its failures, taunts with its potentiality. The lore of Reconstruction includes the rigorously accumulated and analyzed historical facts and figures of the laws, policies, events, actors, and developments of this period that formally lasted from 1865–1877. It goes well beyond these facts, however, for Reconstruction has taken up a position of symbolic centrality in U.S. political memory. Many writers are drawn by the lure of the lore of what was, what was not, and what might have been of an era that tried to generate a nation built upon substantial and wide-ranging freedom for many more than was the case before the Civil War. Jane Gordon could be describing the collective memory forged in the written work on Reconstruction in her claim that “Creolization is borne out of just this double moment: of loss and melancholy and simultaneously out of possibilities.”<sup>3</sup> No concept may better express this creolized product of loss, melancholy and possibilities that stem from the political memory of Reconstruction than that of the *afterlife of slavery*, coined by Saidiya Hartman. Slavery's afterlife is zombie-like, a deathly haunting; dead but not, as also with the possibilities for freedom, alive but not. Hartman grasps this sensibility via the words of ex-slaves existing in this afterlife: “Only a willful misreading could interpret the disappointments of freedom constantly reiterated in slave testimony as a longing for slavery. To the contrary, what haunts such laments is the longing for an as yet unrealized freedom, the nonevent of emancipation, and the reversals of slavery and freedom.”<sup>4</sup> No work likely better sets out these longings, and the ultimate “nonevent of emancipation,” than W.E.B. Du Bois' canonical text, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*, published in 1935.

To Gordon, Du Bois's numerous scholarly writings are "groundbreaking examples of creolizing work. Seamlessly drawing from history, philosophy, sociology, political economy, and literature to diagnose the centrality of racialization to projects of European modernity."<sup>5</sup> More than a multi-disciplinary bringing together of self-contained disciplines, creolizing theory is about loosening, or better yet losing, the boundaries that define a field so as to allow for "illicit blendings" of expertise, methods, and styles that take the writer and the reader in unexpected directions.<sup>6</sup> I take illicit here in the sense of mixtures that are not just unexpected but in fact defy and transgress custom, expectation, and tradition. In his time, Du Bois produced such illicit blendings as he found himself writing an analysis and history that contravened the predominant scholarly view and assessment of the Reconstruction Era in the prior decades. This dominant view, the lore of the time produced by white scholars alone, was that Reconstruction was a disaster and mistake due to many reasons but most fundamentally because Black people were not capable of governing themselves and others or of being economically self-determining. Du Bois's detailed, thorough and rich tome re-imagines the Reconstruction Era from the perspective of many interests and parties to it, but in particular regarding the role of Black Americans as "ordinary human beings" who were critical to engineering the defeat of the Confederacy and to bringing about achievements at state levels that occurred despite the fact that the effort to reconstruct the South and "make black men American citizens was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure."<sup>7</sup> The "splendid" element in the midst of this nation-wide policy failure came in the manner in which Black freedmen in states across the South, with "all the wealth and all the opportunity, and all the world against" them, took on the rigorous and committed task of a "great and just cause; fighting the battle of the oppressed and despised humanity of every race and color."<sup>8</sup> While there was a failure to make them citizens in the sense of their rights, lives, and livelihoods being secured permanently, or more than temporarily, millions of Black Americans in their day-to-day lives were carrying out the role of citizens through their actions, such as in a general strike walk-off of the plantations during the Civil War on up to engaging in the practices of governance in southern states during Reconstruction's short life. Du Bois's effort here, then, is a creolizing one, as even the framing of success and failure places a too neat and tidy meaning on what he shows was a fraught, creative, and contingent process. The Reconstruction effort was not a success in its basic objective, but this is the nature of politics, for as Gordon states, "political life, after all, operates precisely within the messy and unpredictable options opened up by symbolic life."<sup>9</sup> While *Black Reconstruction* creolized U.S. history in a way that has shaped, in much needed ways, the nation's collective memory of Reconstruction, it is also a work shaped by settler memory, and could do with further creolization.

There is a constitutive presence and absence of Indigeneity and settler colonialism in *Black Reconstruction* that we need to attend to. Given that, as

Gordon asserts, "...the condition of the liminal must be a central focus of work aimed at creolization,"<sup>10</sup> it is telling that in *Black Reconstruction* the land dispossessed from Indigenous people is, at once, so central to the story of this period in actual historical fact, and yet Indigenous people and also settler colonial practices that produced this dispossession remain, at best, barely visible to it. Re-reading Du Bois's masterwork by paying attention to the work of settler memory reveals some of the deeper implications of the book's fundamental and constant references to land. In one respect, the importance of land and property to this text is not surprising. *Black Reconstruction* is an illicit blending created by Du Bois's re-reading of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods through a Marxist lens. In so doing, he creolized the political memory of Reconstruction just as he creolized Marxism by applying its premises to the U.S. context, as Cedric Robinson has argued.<sup>11</sup> Du Bois maintained a clear analytical focus on the importance of the role of land as a central economic requirement to secure the political freedom of Black people over the long term. On the other side of the conflict, capital and property relations were central motivating factors for why major political and economic interests aligned strategically to bring Reconstruction to an end. To mark out these creolizing advances by Du Bois and still to suggest that settler memory is at work in his text is not to claim that he should have written a different book, but rather to push us as readers to not allow settler memory to shield the structural and human underlay of the story he tells about this period, and what we learn from him.

With this in mind, take into consideration just a sampling of the references one can find in *Black Reconstruction*, from cover to cover, through which are woven threads of another tale, from the "continual supply of fertile land, cheaper slaves," "endless land of richest fertility,"<sup>12</sup> "free rich land and cheap labor,"<sup>13</sup> "access to the soil, South and West, to the free laborer,"<sup>14</sup> "land hunger—this absolutely fundamental and essential thing to any real emancipation of the slaves,"<sup>15</sup> "one clear economic ideal and that was his demand for the land,"<sup>16</sup> "demands for land and education,"<sup>17</sup> "the overthrow of Reconstruction was in essence a revolution inspired by property, and not a race war,"<sup>18</sup> and "the rebuilding, whether it comes now or a century later, will and must go back to the basic principles of Reconstruction in the United States during 1867–1876—Land, Light, and Leading for slaves, black, brown, yellow, and white, under a dictatorship of the proletariat."<sup>19</sup> The absence of "red" in this list is a product of the land question around which the book's narrative pivots. The creolizing quest here concerns the vision of a shared world one can imagine when Indigeneity, the land question, and settler colonial economic and political development are also part of the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The dominant, although not singular, collective memory of the Civil War was that it was about slavery in economic, racial, and political terms. It was thereby also about the terms of U.S. expansionism, even if this is not fully acknowledged and incorporated in the memory of the period. Prior to the U.S. Civil War,

Abraham Lincoln did not oppose slavery itself, but rather its expansion westward. In the antebellum era, Western expansion was occurring and thus, by definition, furthering Indigenous dispossession as well; the emergent North/South conflict was about on what terms would the new territories and states be organized—slave or free (for those who were free)? From before the U.S. founding, settler colonial development was driven by the economic and political priorities of enslavement that required more and more land. To bring to the fore the settler colonial underpinnings critical to the creation, maintenance, and eventual abolishment of legalized chattel slavery in the United States is to refuse the work of settler memory around the defining conflict of American collective memory, the Civil War, and then to compel a creolized reading of the place and meaning that Reconstruction takes up in popular memory—its ambitions, its failures, its lessons. No post-Civil War claim by freed slaves is as resonant as that of “forty acres and a mule.” The claim makes sense as a matter of justice and reparations in the wake of slavery, and as Du Bois makes clear the question of bringing it into reality haunts the story of Reconstruction. However, along with the important matter of inquiring as to the historical and fundamental source of these “acres” and at what group’s expense, a creolizing reading of Reconstruction that accounts for Indigeneity and settler coloniality pushes the matter even further to reconceive the *symbolic life* of land that is at work here in the collective memory of the era.

When creolized through a decolonization perspective that refuses the work of settler memory, the collective memory of U.S. Reconstruction that was so necessarily re-shaped by Du Bois reveals a *past condition temporality* through which to re-frame that moment in history as we seek to re-imagine our own. With that in mind, consider a passage from Chapter XIV of *Black Reconstruction*, “Counter-Revolution of Property,” which is a critical chapter not only for diagnosing the core reason for the “splendid failure”—the battle over property between elites and laborers in the Reconstruction Era—but also for the radical political lesson Du Bois takes from it. As he states:

Put all these facts together and one gets a clear idea, not of the failure of Negro suffrage in the South, but of the basic difficulty which it encountered; and the results are quite consistent with a clear judgment that Negro and white labor ought to have had the right to vote; that they ought to have tried to change the basis of property and redistribute income; and that their failure to do this was a disaster to democratic government in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Du Bois’s lessons are clear—the meaning and distribution of property and income were not dealt with and thus Reconstruction was doomed. The lesson for many on the left today echoes this edict; either address property relations and income distribution in order to generate and support an economically grounded dictatorship of the proletariat, or the prospect of a

contemporary reconstruction that would dismantle the intertwined evils of white supremacy and capitalist exploitation is similarly doomed. However, the work of settler memory has left us seeing and not seeing another lost opportunity and lesson of this time.

During the formal period of Reconstruction, the other critical political and economic developments occurred in the form of the treaties that the U.S. Federal Government was making and ratifying with Indigenous Nations. One treaty in particular stands out; the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie between the Great Sioux and Arapaho Nations and the United States. The U.S. government was “essentially suing for peace” in the wake of the Sioux Nation’s 1866 victory over the U.S. army garrisoned along the Bozeman Trail.<sup>21</sup> The 1868 Treaty “pledged peace to both sides,” “reserved the area West of the Missouri River and east of the Rockies for the ‘absolute and undisturbed use’ of the Sioux,” pledged U.S. government support for the tribes in the form of education, “seed and clothing for Indian farmers, and set up agencies for the distribution of aid,” and “recognized the Bozeman Trail area as ‘unceded Indian territory’ where whites would not be allowed to settle and within which there would be no military posts.”<sup>22</sup> Without getting into all the historical details since 1868, it should come as little surprise to even a mildly informed reader that the U.S. federal government did not live up to its treaty promises. In fact, the Sioux Nation won a 1980 case against the U.S. government for its blatant seizure of unceded territory in the Black Hills, and were awarded a settlement of over one hundred-million-dollars. The Sioux Nation refused and continues to refuse the cash settlement (with accrued interest it is now over one billion dollars in value) holding fast to the demand for the return of the land, as promised in the 1868 Treaty.

The *past condition temporality* that haunts radical scholars about Reconstruction is the lost opportunity of the cross-class alliance of “black, brown, yellow, and white” workers forming a dictatorship of the proletariat that might have abolished the economic, propertied undergirding of white supremacy. The *unthought* of that period—and *unthought* in the collective memory of it in our time due to the work of settler memory—is the deeper meaning and potentiality of the political and economic agreements created between Indigenous nations and the U.S. government. Only when we, first, refuse the work that settler memory does to radical left collective memories can we, secondly, begin to creolize the lore of this period to offer models for what it would mean to talk about a cross-class alliance for the transformation of the basis and distribution of property that could exist in a productive, compatible and mutually constitutive relationship with the material and political support of Indigenous people’s claim to their traditional territories. A creolized reading of Reconstruction offers us the mnemonic fuel and imaginative potentiality of a co-habitative abolitionist and decolonization project, combining a dictatorship of the proletariat and



Indigenous self-governance. A start but not the finish to such a radical imaginary begins with “black, brown, yellow, and white” accomplices demanding that the United States live up to its agreements with Indigenous people, not in cash payouts, but in territory and respect for Indigenous self-governance. This demand also opens up the symbolic imaginary around land itself to challenge the model of property as the hegemonic form through which we understand and practice the relationship of human beings to land and to non-humans. This re-imagining is particularly urgent in the midst of our climate crisis. This approach also opens up and requires a decolonial imaginary regarding white supremacist U.S. settler governance itself, because a creolized memory of the Reconstruction Era reveals to us a period of time when radical Black and Indigenous governance co-inhabited and co-practiced in these lands. The radical Black governance of the Reconstruction era that Du Bois lauds as the *splendid* element of the “splendid failure” existed at the same time and alongside the Sioux Nation’s successful effort to force the U.S. government into a peace agreement that legally recognized their claim to territory. As radical historians and political theorists inspired by Du Bois continue to look back to the Reconstruction Era for the regenerative fuel of lost potentiality, a creolizing abolitionist and decolonial approach could turn the meaning of this era into something new and germinal for contemporary theorizing of solidarity, co-inhabitation, governance, and resistance. What is required is an opening up of possibilities that stem from the collective memories undergirding and shaping radical imaginaries, with the potential for revealing *unthought* practices, co-presences, challenges and potentialities. Gordon’s creolizing approach provides a way to do so, and refusing to succumb to settler memory is imperative in these efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 176.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2015), 175.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 197.

<sup>4</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 139.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 191.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 177

- <sup>7</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press: [1935] 1998), xix.
- <sup>8</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 708.
- <sup>9</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 220.
- <sup>10</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 217.
- <sup>11</sup> Cedric Robinson. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Zed Books: 312-313.
- <sup>12</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 29.
- <sup>13</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 38.
- <sup>14</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 322.
- <sup>15</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 601.
- <sup>16</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 611.
- <sup>17</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 617.
- <sup>18</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 622.
- <sup>19</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 635.
- <sup>20</sup> DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, 591.
- <sup>21</sup> Robert N. Clinton, "Treaties with Native Nations: Iconic Historical Realities or Modern Necessity?" in Suzan Shown Harjo, ed. *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (Washington D.C. & New York: Smithsonian Books, 2014), 23.
- <sup>22</sup> Frederick E Hoxie, ed. *Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1996), 647.