

# Unsettling the family sciences: Introducing settler colonial theory through a theoretical analysis of the family and racialized injustice

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## Abstract

In this article, I advance settler colonial theory (SCT) as a critical framework for antiracist and anticolonial family scholarship. Rather than a historical event, SCT describes settlement as a persistent and violent structure. SCT uniquely connects racialization to Indigenous erasure, anti-Blackness, anti-immigrant exclusion, and the ascendancy of Whiteness through intersectional analyses of belonging and otherness. In my discussion, I position the family as a key mechanism of settler colonialism, moving between the historical and contemporary phenomena of family formation and family separation in the United States. Weaving together tenets of SCT and the *family*, I provide a critical case analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and its colonial leanings. To conclude, I discuss the unique possibilities that emerge when family scientists utilize SCT to disrupt the structural power of the settler, contributing to the critical transformation of the family sciences.

## KEYWORDS

Black families, immigrant families, Indigenous families, racialization, settler colonial theory, White families

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 laid bare the violent realities of racism and genocide that underpin settler colonialism. The United States, under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was confronted with news of Black men and women killed by police and civilian vigilantism (Okech & Essof, 2021).

Across the expanse of time immemorial, many nations and peoples created sacred legacies on the Land that I and the University of Arkansas occupied. I respectfully acknowledge the Osage, Caddo, and Quapaw Nations, who involuntarily left this ancestral Land. I also acknowledge the Cherokee, Muscogee Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole Nations forced through this Land on the Trail of Tears. *Hara ahau i te tangata mohio ki te korero otira e tika ana kia mihi atu kia mihi mai.*

Simultaneously, racialized families faced an elevated risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19 while bearing the brunt of the pandemic's social implications (Lynch et al., 2021). Protests around the country catalyzed global social movements against systemic racism (Okech & Essof, 2021). Counterbalancing these protests in the United States was a contested presidential election, where almost half of voters supported a candidate who openly supported White protectionism (Iglesias, 2021). Crystalizing the violence of settler occupation, the year 2021 commenced with a deadly insurrection at the US capitol building (Iglesias, 2021). In the summer of 2021, North America's legacy of colonial dehumanization and genocidal impulse was revealed, when more than 1300 unmarked graves of Indigenous children were unearthed at Canada's former residential schools (Blakemore, 2021).

Now possibly more than ever, the family sciences face a renewed urgency to develop and employ theories to untangle the effects of family racialization (Walsdorf et al., 2020). However, addressing this phenomenon means "we must first recognize the dominant structures that create the conditions of its perpetration and excusal" (Jordan & Dykes, in press, p. 1). That is, we must address settler colonialism. The family is a key mechanism of settler colonialism in dictating who has access and rights (Bermúdez et al., 2016). For settler colonial purposes, binaries of gender, race, sexual orientation, and ability were encoded in the meaning of family and weaponized as rights of belonging (Jordan, 2021; Williams, 2020). The social sciences then became a handmaiden of the settler colony to give credence to enactments of violence and distancing, enabling the settlement and sovereignty of White settlers. Family scientists cannot undo the damage that has been done in the name of the family without attending to how this damage continues to be done. Thus, to critique our research, theorizing, and interventions, we must engage with this legacy that shapes the current reality of our settler coloniality.

In this article, I advance settler colonial theory (SCT; Veracini, 2011) as a critical framework for the family sciences. Historically, I explore how the United States is a settler colonial nation structured by English-speaking settlers who are always-already achieving ascendancy by disappearing Indigenous peoples and subjugating Exogenous peoples. Structurally, I illustrate how the family becomes a tool of colonial control through processes of family formation and separation. Weaving together tenets of SCT and the family, I demonstrate a settler colonial analysis in critically analyzing the racialized effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how SCT can aid family scientists who wish to disrupt the structural power of the settler in a critical transformation of the family sciences.

At the risk of neglecting the global reality of settler colonialism, I write from and about the United States to explicitly evaluate this country's creation of interconnected relationships between Indigenous, Exogenous, and settler. Grounding this writing in the United States situates it on this Land in response to (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015), who describe how any anticolonial work must center on Land, the material terrain, and the "familial, intimate, intergenerational, and instructive" (p. 57) Land relationships. Just as Land is capitalized throughout this paper, I use other terminologies of SCT. *Indigenous* is a referential term for place-based sovereign identities subjected to dispossession, genocide, and removal from ancestral Lands. In the United States, Indigenous peoples represent multiple nations comprising the American Indian, Alaska Natives, and Polynesian Hawaiians. The term *Exogenous* denotes persons settled on dispossessed Lands, including descendants of enslaved Africans, migrants, and refugees. Exogenous is regulated through the nonsovereign displacement of global manifestations of capitalism and White supremacy. Finally, *settlers* are persons of European descent who, through Land theft and dehumanization create the racialized social system to become White (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Settlers claim sovereign rights as beneficiaries of Indigenous replacement, while Exogenous are nonsovereign targets of displacement (Veracini, 2015).

## Locating myself

As a scholar working within the imperial onto-epistemological academy, who embodies Whiteness and speaks the colonizer's language, I am wary of utilizing theories made for and by persons marginalized from these embodiments; however, this was not always the case. Socialized in the same academy from which I teach and research, I believed that I could "master" any theory or methodology made known to me. Such ontological expansiveness (Sullivan, 2006) led me to presume my right to occupy any cognitive, geographical, linguistic, or psychological space. I was unaware of epistemological occupation until I moved to New Zealand to conduct my dissertation research (Jordan et al., 2021) and came face-to-face with my epistemological error. Fanon (2008) suggested that "de" in the work of decolonizing, signifies removal. As a politically engaged term, I asked myself how we decolonize processes such as the family or the academy when they are both products and producers of colonialism. I became aware of the contraindications of being a White person working for justice without first seeking to disrupt Whiteness. My goal in focusing on SCT is to call on my subjectivities as a settler to deconstruct and resist the foundational projects of colonialism, White supremacy, and Whiteness in family research. This paper is one-step I have taken in this never-ending journey.

## SETTLER COLONIAL THEORY

SCT is a transdisciplinary framework describing the biopolitical matrixes of domination that occur within a nation and the global neoliberal and capitalist effects produced by that nation (Glenn, 2015). Settler colonialism is distinct from, yet intertwined with, classical colonialism, and the United States is a settler state rather than a colonized nation (Glenn, 2015). Classical colonialism follows a circular path, moving outward to exploit foreign Lands, resources, and peoples, and ultimately returning to the point of origin (Veracini, 2011). In contrast, settler colonialism follows a straight line, where settlers come to stay, claiming sovereignty, transforming Indigenous Lands to mirror the settlers' homelands (Veracini, 2015).

A settler colonial analysis can explicate how settlement required eliminating the Indigenous and dehumanizing the Exogenous to indigenize the settler. Therefore, the analysis should focus on the simultaneously historicized and contemporary relationships of oppression and domination within settler colonies (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Focusing on the dynamism of racialization, SCT attends to the settler's role in constructing otherness through structures such as sexual relations, gender, class, race, and ability (Veracini, 2010; Williams, 2020). As a critical social theory, SCT disrupts the idea that we live in a postcolonial era, as settlement is a perpetual, structural act of "invasion" rather than "an event" (Wolfe, 1999, p. 163), dependent on the ongoing elimination of nonsovereign alterities. SCT also describes that to be fully settled, a colony supersedes itself by eliminating all challenges to settlers' sovereignty, thereby obviating the structures of colonial control. In the United States, the contemporary manifestation of supersession results in "settler moves towards innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9), simultaneously appearing as the denial of inequality and the promise of eventual equality (Veracini, 2015).

## Settler indigenization through violence and disappearance

The success of settler colonialism depends on eliminating any threat to settler sovereignty over invaded Lands (Veracini, 2011). In the face of Indigenous resistance to settlers' claims (Estes, 2019), settler colonial logic required that the Indigenous disappear, entitling settlers to inherit the Land left behind (Veracini, 2015). In the United States, settlers attempted this through displacement, confinement, erasure, assimilation, and appropriation. While settlers

claimed their genocidal rights to the Land, enslavers used violence to subjugate Black persons for profit in “the dirty work of nation-building” (Jordan, 2021, p. 4). Making humans fungible labor (King, 2019) through the brutality of enslavement and the perpetual arrival of globally disenfranchised immigrants and refugees was foundational to the United States and our capitalist economy (Miles, 2019). Settlers ensured their dominance by dehumanizing Exogenous peoples as commodities to excuse the violence, murder, and degradation of human life that they wrought. The commodification of enslaved and migrant bodies interwove with settlers turning Land into property to ensure the success of settlement.

These interlocking components of genocide, enslavement, and labor abstraction are central to the indigenization of the “American” through material, psychological, and ideological reproduction. Settlers used their Europeaness to deem themselves civilized and justify eliminating the Indigenous. Simultaneously, settlers rationalized the violent dehumanization of the Exogenous by proclaiming settlers’ belonging to the Land (Veracini, 2015). Through this inconsistent logic, White settlers inextricably linked themselves to the national identity of the United States. Through a violent and dispossessing conversion “driven by the crucial need to transform a historical tie (‘we came here’) into a natural one (‘the Land made us’)” settlers declared themselves Indigenous to the Land (Veracini, 2010, p. 46), settlers established themselves as indigenized. To further their sovereign claims, they created a racialized social system, establishing Whiteness as different from Indigenous and Exogenous (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Consequently, they produced a system of economic exploitation and social control over Indigenous and Exogenous polities devoid of belonging or sovereignty (Miles, 2019).

As the United States diversifies, the settler class continues to stoke fears of cultural “invasion” as a threat to “native” American culture (Glenn, 2015). These fears are routinely dramatically evidenced, such as in the 2021 insurrection at the US capitol (Jordan & Dykes, in press) or in the everyday police brutalization of Black Americans. While the United States is rife with such examples, the settler class has learned to overlook them because this violence is justified to maintain the security of settlement by promoting settler belonging and denying the belonging of constructed others (Iglesias, 2021; Okech & Essof, 2021).

## Triangular construction of otherness

In the United States, settler colonialism forces divisions between settlers, Exogenous, and Indigenous peoples (Glenn, 2015) through the racialized triangular “construction of inferior ‘otherness’” (Osterhammel, 1997, p. 108). Settlers’ position at the apex is a sovereign ascendance dependent on keeping the Indigenous and Exogenous in lower and oppositional vertices. The oppositional positioning of Indigenous and Exogenous belies their interrelationship. Indigenous genocide was offset by enslavement, creating people as commodities and Land as property, thereby guaranteeing the humanness of the settler through the dehumanization of Black and Indigenous peoples. The erasure of these relationships constitutes settlers’ attempt to ascend through the diffusion of relational connectivity and self-determination (King, 2019), replaced by a bifurcated analysis of dichotomous and essentialized being (Williams, 2020).

In establishing themselves at the triangle’s apex, White settlers also established themselves as the norm by which all others should be measured. Consequently, the right to belonging and equality became premised on a person’s assimilability. The implication is that through Europeanization, one is welcomed into sovereign ascendance. Populations, however, are kept “in their place” or eliminated through racialization’s divergent meanings of blood, biology, and race. As Williams wrote, “race did not produce inequality; inequality produced race” (Williams, 2020, p. 148). Therefore, it is in settlers’ interest to maintain the Exogenous as vital yet expendable labor leading to the identification of Black persons through the conceptual “one-drop rule” (Green, 2006). Similarly, as Indigenous claim to Land threatens settler

sovereignty, “blood quantum” rules were established as a measure of one’s “Indianness.” Such discursive identifiers mean that the number of Black-identified persons is continually increasing while the population of Indigenous persons is always diminishing (Green, 2006).

For our settled society to exist it must always be resettling, distancing itself from the Indigenous and Exogenous others who threaten White sovereignty yet are implicated in its creation. That settlers’ claims rest on the impermanence of others, however, lead to unsteady footings, and resistance to these claims raise “unsettling anxieties” (Veracini, 2011, p. 3). Pushing against these anxieties, settlers deny the rights of others by naturalizing their disenfranchisement while simultaneously proclaiming their equality through empty declarations of recognition and inclusion (Coulthard, 2014). To settle such anxieties, the structures and logics of White supremacy are hidden, promoting historical, political, material, and cultural methods of Whiteness (Veracini, 2011). Mechanisms such as the family are implicated in the production and reproduction of the racialized discourses that maintain and normalize the settler’s ascendancy.

## THE SETTLER COLONIAL FAMILY

In the United States, the ideological family developed from colonialism, scientifically reified, resulting in privileged and vilified family forms (Letiecq, 2019) that advance the political and cultural power of White supremacy (Walsdorf et al., 2020). During the colonial era, the family became a measure of settlement, establishing Land dominance by constructing permanent dwellings and reproducing settlers born on claimed Lands (Jordan, 2021). White masculinity became tied to the idea of family, while the contrary notion of simultaneously submissive and fronting womanhood developed (Glenn, 2015). Through women’s reproduction of children, the settler colony became viable and continued to reproduce itself. Thus, settler colonialism relied on mobilizing White women as key figures in promoting settlement, charged with making the home (Jordan, 2021). White women were complicit both in leaning into their husbands’ heteropatriarchal power and producing enslaved peoples as property—one of the only properties over which settler women could exercise control (Jones-Rogers, 2020).

In the following, I discuss family formation and separation as practices devised to disappear the Indigenous, control the Exogenous, and indigenize the settler. Through this discussion, I provide a settler colonial rendering to argue why the family is a foundational mechanism within the practice and politics of colonialism. Though I discuss these mechanisms separately, the laws, policies, and practices described reciprocally enforce each other.

### Family formation

The family was crucial in the construction of the transhistorical colonial state. Whereas settler women were integral to establishing the colony, Indigenous women were a distinct threat to colonial claims (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). Consequently, Indigenous women were “hunted down and slaughtered” because of their “potential through childbirth to assure the continuance of the people” (Hernandez-Avila, 1993, p. 386). Settlers engaged in the systematic rape of Indigenous women to dilute bloodlines, reproducing “half breeds” dispossessed from the treaty claims of “full-bloods” (Green, 2006). Conversely, enslaved women’s reproductive capabilities became commoditized while they were simultaneously degendered in the process of becoming property (S. Hartman, 2016), and slavers extended their holdings and wealth by reproducing enslaved children through rape. These early formations in the colonies enabled campaigns against women’s bodily sovereignty (Jordan, 2021), resulting in eugenicist-based, classist, racist, and ableist discourses enacted in the emerging family professions (Jordan, 2022).

Eugenics—selective breeding to reduce undesirable traits (negative eugenics) and increase desirable ones (positive eugenics)—developed out of family studies on degenerative and achieving families (Jordan, 2022). Eugenacists concerned with differential birthrates of “desirables” (protestant, White, wealthy) and “undesirables” (catholic, immigrant, racialized) predicted an impending White “race suicide” (Kohlman, 2015, p. 18). Scientists, thus, focused on reproducing “superior” persons, enlisting White families in “Better Babies” and “Fitter Families” contests (Kohlman, 2015). As public acceptance of positive eugenics grew, in the 1920s, scientists’ work became accessible through the proliferation of marital clinics and relationship advice columns in magazines, launching early family studies professions (Jordan, 2022).

The “race betterment” goal provoked further settler anxieties as African Americans from the South migrated to the North and laborers arrived from China and Southern and Eastern Europe (Kohlman, 2015). Negative eugenic laws grounded in ableism prohibited miscegenation and family immigration and justified the systematic sterilization of women deemed undesirable. In 1927, the supreme court legalized sterilization of the “feebleminded,” a diagnosis established through IQ testing focused mostly on Indigenous, Black, and Latina women (Jordan, 2022). However, given the tenuousness of White racial membership, poor White persons were also subjected to racial hygiene sterilization (Kohlman, 2015).

Today, discourses grounded in eugenics operate in the background. The functions of positive eugenics position White women as the settler-determined “mothers of a nation” (Collins, 1999, p. 118). White women have increased access to reproductive technologies, and White child-free women are stigmatized for going against the grain of “natural” womanhood (Jordan, 2021). Conversely, racialized women contend with racist healthcare based on negative eugenic beliefs, where systems tolerate high infant and maternal mortalities and coerce sterilization (Kohlman, 2015). Racialized mothers, especially Black mothers, are routinely demonized as unfit, dependent, demoralized, and scapegoated for societal downward mobility (Davis & Davis, 1986; Williams, 2020). The narratives of positive and negative eugenics persist (Collins, 1999), grounding regulatory family formation policies and resultant family structures as justifications for inequality such as seen in Moynihan’s cultural deficit concerns that linked poverty in Black families to unmarried births (Williams, 2020). Resulting anti and pronatalist laws promote colonial paternalism, heterosexism, and ableism (Jordan, 2021) and risk seeping into the intervention and prevention methods established by family scientists.

## Family separation

Since the establishment of the United States, family separation has procedurally maintained settler ascendancy. As White family units settled Lands during westward expansion, laws regulating marriage and child production positioned the nuclear family as the beneficiary and pillar of settlement (Coontz, 2016). Concurrently, the pathologization of Indigenous kinship separated “civilized” from “savage,” resulting in centuries-long family separation programs (Jordan, 2022). Settlers’ early capitalist framework arose from family separation. Indigenous peoples were separated from Land to cut familial ties, producing it as property, just as the separation of enslaved families created persons-as-property (S. Hartman, 2016; Morgan, 2021).

From the 1800s to the 1970s, assimilation policies across North America forced Indigenous children into residential schools or White family servitude, eventually relocating an estimated one-third of all Indigenous children into White households (Regan, 2010). The resocialization of Indigenous children encouraged dependency on the paternalism of the colonies and broke kinship and Land ties (Jacobs, 2009). In addition, severing Indigenous children’s tribal ties meant denying rights to treaty provisions and family allotments and diminishing the political power of Indigenous nations (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). The thousands of recently unearthed graves at residential schools hint at the violence of relocation (Blakemore, 2021).



In 1978, the US government passed the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to protect children from nation removal (Crofoot & Harris, 2012). However, ICWA is unevenly enforced and perpetually contested by White families and political operatives (Gojevic, 2020). These opponents assert that ICWA is racially biased, further racializing Indigenous persons and diminishing their political nationhood (Gojevic, 2020).

The maternalist politics that reified White mothering, positioned enslaved women as sites of regulated yet ungended reproductive, sexual, and physical commodities. Dependence on slave labor required settlers' dehumanization of the enslaved, who were established as less-than-human, both animal and property, inherently fungible yet crucial in the building of the American economy (S. Hartman, 2016). The degendering of Black women served to "render the black child as by-product of the relations of production" (S. Hartman, 2016, p. 168). Enslaved families were not legally recognized and lived under perpetual threat of separation as slavers sold, gifted, inherited, or borrowed against the enslaved to ensure their own enrichment (Morgan, 2021).

After slavery's abolishment in 1865, the government enforced White supremacy through laws restricting Black freedom (Sharma, 2020). Jim Crow laws (1881–1964) separated Black and White families by creating differing educational, housing, medical, and employment opportunities (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Carceral labor and convict-leasing programs established a new form of indentured servitude as policing and criminalization practices ensured the institutionalization of Black men (Sharma, 2020). The separation of Black men from their families gave rise to Black women's workforce participation, which was primarily restricted to domestic service under White families. The long hours and heavy workloads of these jobs decreased Black women's ability to spend time with their families, continuing the narrative of Black woman as a nonmothering site of reproduction (Collins, 1999; Morgan, 2021). In the 1960s, policies emphasized child removal from "unsuitable" homes determined by White family scholars, social workers, and policymakers, and leading to the overrepresentation of Black children in foster care (Ross & Solinger, 2019). The legacy of "suitability" remains in today's decision-making as Black families are more likely to be investigated when faced with reports of child maltreatment, and Black children in foster care are less likely than all others to be reunited with their families (Ross & Solinger, 2019).

Family separation also controlled the expendable labor of immigrants. For example, from 1854 to 1929, 250,000 Polish and Irish children were rehomed during the Orphan Train Movement that decentralized newly immigrated communities (Karell, 2018). Laws such as the Page Act (1875) banned the arrival of families whose cultural practices would threaten "White values" and were promoted as acts of public decency (Sharma, 2020). During the depression, just under 2 million people were deported to Mexico, 60% of whom were US citizens of Mexican descent, separating families to boost the economy for White workers (Hernández, 2019). The settler colonial positioning of the Exogenous as a danger to settlement continues today, as seen in the Trump administration's immigration actions. A "zero-tolerance" policy led to the separation of an estimated 2800 Central American and Mexican families, with thousands more assumed separations than officially reported (Hernández, 2019). The media described border separations as antithetical to the foundational qualities of the nation (Vick, 2018). However, these immigration actions reenact the weaponization of family to maintain White settlers' place in the triangular construction of otherness. White Americans' difficulty in reconciling these actions with their vision of themselves speaks to the cloaking power of settler colonialism.

## THE FAMILY AND COVID-19: A SETTLER COLONIAL ANALYSIS

SCT is appropriate for critical analyses of structural power relations aimed at dismantling inequality to promote societal change. A common risk in change-oriented work occurs when

researchers focus on oppression's relational and developmental effects without fully considering the role of the oppressor. Looking only at the effects of inequality allows the settler mentality to operate in the background as if oppression occurs without actants (Mills, 2014). An SCT framework can reveal invisibilized White supremacy while centering a settler–Indigenous–Exogenous triadic analysis. As a case in point, I briefly explore the settler colonial determinants of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

In late 2019, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) identified in China spread leading to a global pandemic (Kumar & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020). COVID-19's origins trace stressed viral interactions between humans and animals due to the exploitation of natural resources and resultant habitat degradation. Its spread mimicked the routes of transnational capitalism, determined through colonial imperialism. Worldwide governmental and private-sector responses provoked the centralization of power, forced social controls, and undermined "equitable redistribution of wealth, ensuring the maintenance of global consumer capitalist systems that promise plenty but promote poverty and harm" (Kumar & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020, p. 195).

Worldwide, COVID-19 cases and mortalities disproportionately occurred in racialized communities and nations, surfacing the colonial determinants of people's worth. Mitigation policies aimed to "get back to normal" through the production of upward mobility through the disposability of essential workers, further valorizing the White European standard. Global vaccine hoarding sustained colonialism, relegating racialized nations (e.g., the Third Worlded) as collateral damage. At the same time, the diplomatic distribution of vaccines recreated the White saviorhood of colonial medicine in these "developing" nations (Irfan et al., 2021).

In the United States, the disproportionality and severity of infections and mortality risk intersected with racial–cultural constructions of who deserves protection. National responses to the pandemic, such as relief packages and business reopenings, were geared toward those considered socially desirable and economically viable. For racialized persons in the United States, the dangers of the virus converged with preexisting conditions related to structural violence, such as racism (Abbasi, 2020). The vestiges of settler colonial eugenics maintain a healthcare system wherein racialized persons are dehumanized, used as test subjects, and disbelieved when discussing symptomology. Hence, although Black, Latinx, and Indigenous persons are more likely to die from COVID-19, they are less likely to receive adequate healthcare or trust preventive vaccines (Abbasi, 2020).

## Indigenous elimination and Land occupation

Indigenous scholars comparing how historical, biological warfare emboldened settler prosperity have compared COVID-19 responses in the United States to the settler impulse for Land displacement. Leonard (2020) suggested that "cross-border travel is a key factor in the spread of the disease" and "in this way, settler bodies are disease vectors that reproduce borders and are boundary-setting in the furtherance of biocolonialism" (p. 165). As shutdowns occurred across North America, a predominantly White population traveled to their second homes, many in Indigenous territories, straining limited local resources (Leonard, 2020). From escaping to remote communities to beating "lockdown fatigue" in Indigenous-managed greenspaces, increased nonresident crossings stretched Indigenous communities at the height of the pandemic. Furthermore, each border crossing infringed on state and local mandates, jeopardizing the health of Indigenous communities already at higher risk of contracting and dying of COVID-19 due to historical settler-induced health conditions. With Indigenous peoples dying from COVID-19 at twice the rate of White Americans (Lively, 2021), the tragedy of the pandemic reiterates the settler impulse to disappear the Indigenous and seize "abandoned" Lands.

In some sovereign nations, citizens were unable to follow mitigation efforts, leading reservations to become COVID-19 hotspots. For example, 40% of Navajo homes lack running water,



impeding handwashing, an efficacious disease mitigator (Lively, 2021). In another example, metaphoric of the settler impulse to disappear the Indigenous, the Seattle Indian Health Board received body bags instead of the requested testing kits (Leonard, 2020). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic reproduced the centuries-old settler colonial practice of separating Indigenous children from their families. Lovelace Women's Hospital in Albuquerque implemented a covert policy placing pregnant women residing on tribal reservations under quarantine for suspected COVID-19 (Carroll et al., 2021). The hospital used the slower but more reliable PCR test, and babies were separated at birth until the test results returned, depriving both parent and child of immediate contact and breastfeeding (Carroll et al., 2021).

## Exogenous exploitation and disposability

In the United States, the Trump administration recast COVID-19 in blatantly racist language with terms such as the "China virus" and "kung flu" (Esses & Hamilton, 2021). As anti-Asian xenophobia increased, the administration shifted blame and attention from an inadequate pandemic response to the threat of foreign outsiders (Esses & Hamilton, 2021). Even as cases declined between the second and third surges of the virus, disease-focused xenophobia persisted. For example, the Texas governor blamed immigrants for spreading COVID-19 while concurrently lifting mitigation efforts to cater to predominantly White protesters (Iglesias, 2021). Leaning on settler protestations that immigrants are carriers of incurable and deadly diseases, Trump justified immigration and deportation policies as public health mandates to protect American citizens from "infected" immigrants (Esses & Hamilton, 2021). These adverse immigration policies, such as the public charge rule, intermingled with fears of deportation, possibly contributed to delayed medical attention and community spread (Geary et al., 2020).

Politicians shifted their focus to immigrants and the undocumented while simultaneously exploiting their labor. Almost 69% of immigrants and 74% of undocumented persons living in the United States participate in the "essential" workforce (Esses & Hamilton, 2021). Such labor exploitation is directly connected to the early and ongoing high rates of COVID-19 contracture and mortality, as the essential workforce is predominantly staffed by Black, Latinx, and immigrant communities (Geary et al., 2020). These agricultural, food service and production, trucking and warehousing, and medical and home care jobs provide low-waged, under-benefited, and hazardous conditions, which became increasingly risky during the pandemic.

As governments and organizations across the United States enacted shutdowns to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, businesses either shuttered or moved to telework. However, just under 40% of jobs in the United States can be performed remotely—work predominantly performed by the settler class (Abbasi, 2020). On the contrary, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant communities largely work in fields colloquially termed *essential* and *frontline*. During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in these positions were furloughed or fired as industries that already provided low wages and few benefits decreased hours and staff. The employees who maintained employment faced returning to unsafe conditions, decreased wages, and with schools and daycares closed, no access to childcare (Abbasi, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, exploitation of racialized labor had propelled the United States' economic growth, and racialized communities' overrepresentation in essential jobs stems from enslavement, Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, prison labor, and immigration acts, such as the Bracero program (Banks, 2019). For example, redlining and blockbusting policies centralized Black families into urban areas where generations prior had moved to escape the South. Black workers became stranded in industrial areas, reliant on shriveling factory economies. Segregation led to under-funded schools, as job training directed Black workers to unskilled jobs and White workers to skilled employment. In rural areas, Black farmers are dispossessed of their Land, and today, rural Black communities have the worst health outcomes nationwide. Finally, the over-policing of Black men has ensured Black women's place in the domestic and care-

based workforce (Banks, 2019). These and other similar practices have maintained the Exogenous as an exploitable labor force that works in under-paid, harsh conditions that exist to care for, feed, and produce goods for the American public (Geary et al., 2020).

### **Circling the wagons: Families, neighborhoods, distancing**

The material circumstances of settler colonialism determine factors such as secure and stable housing, neighborhood quality, job security, and access to healthcare, healthy food, and clean air and water (Lynch et al., 2021). Neighborhood–pandemic intersections are symptomatic of settler colonialism and indicative of Indigenous displacement, settler gentrification, and Exogenous redlining. For example, New Rochelle, the traditional Land of the Siwanoy, became the first recorded community hotspot (Lewis-McCoy & D’Andrea Martinez, 2020). The mediation response, symbolic of “circling the wagons,” resulted in New Rochelle declaring a containment zone within a one-mile stretch, which drew a physical boundary around an existing metaphorical one.

As a geographically targeted intervention, the containment zone protected White, wealthy residents and effectively spread COVID-19 risk into the surrounding predominantly Latinx and Black neighborhoods (Lewis-McCoy & D’Andrea Martinez, 2020). Two months after the containment zone’s establishment, the encircling zip codes reported the highest COVID-19 case numbers. These areas house working-class racialized families, who provided essential services for those in the containment zone. As Lewis-McCoy and D’Andrea Martinez (2020) stated, “the containment zone did as intended, it pushed an array of resources into a highly affected community, one that was racially, economically, and ethnically segregated, but porous segregation meant while 10804 was cleansed, 10801 and 10805 were infected” (p. 11). The settler situation in New Rochelle was further evidenced as an U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid and the murder of a Black man by police bookended the containment period (Lewis-McCoy & D’Andrea Martinez, 2020).

Families also circled the wagons in response to remote learning. During the early days of the pandemic, when schools closed, it initially appeared that all children would be similarly affected. However, the settler impulse quickly arose as neighborhood groups began opportunity hoarding, gaining, and maintaining access to educational resources that marginalized opportunities for others (Diamond & Lewis, in press). Pandemic learning pods became a method to pool children into private groups, where hired education professionals or teachers led the instruction. In the short term, pods seemed like a creative decision in a time of crisis. In the long term, the reverberating effect will be the widening of educational and opportunity inequalities. While the pods mainly betray issues of classism, as it was the wealthiest families that could afford homeschooling resources, there is also a clear correlation between race, neighborhood, and income (Diamond & Lewis, in press).

From the exploitation of Exogenous workers, continued disappearance of Indigenous sovereignty, and settler-claimed entitlements, the settler colonial drive to exploit and exclude crystalized during the pandemic. Undeniably, many other effects accounted for the social, material, and emotional taxes of COVID-19 pandemic on the United States. We cannot overlook the challenge ahead of overcoming the domestic issues induced by COVID-19, such as increased intimate partner violence, homelessness, and food insecurity. To respond to this challenge, we can critically analyze how these and the many other effects of COVID-19 converge with settler colonialism and the prioritization of settlers’ sovereign entitlement.

## **DISCUSSION**

SCT offers a lens to analyze the intersectional, interlocking mechanisms of family inequality and privilege, grounded in time and place. The triadic analysis implicated in SCT centers on the

dynamism of racialization to describe the intertwined relationships between Indigenous, Exogenous, and settler. These relationships are productive in that settlers produce their humanity through violence, conquest, and dispossession. These entwined positionalities problematize distinctions made between sovereignties over Land and body (Cordis, 2019). Indigenous kinship to nature, animals, sea, and sky was unmade through settling, where Land was framed as an extractable good. As settlers cut Indigenous familial ties to the Land, they also cut enslaved persons from their Lands of belonging to be made property (S. Hartman, 2016; King, 2019). Dehumanization, death, and disappearance created the White US citizen and grounded the exceptionalism of “dominance-focused interpretations of Judaeo-Christian [sic] scriptures and Cartesian assertions that the ability to reason sets humans apart from and above all other animals” (Aftandilian, 2011, p. 238). This exceptionalism was aided by Western sciences that reproduced Indigenous and Exogenous as savagely animal-like, justifying the violence of settler ascendance through mechanisms such as the family.

## Problematizing settler scholarship

In the family sciences, scholars working from decolonizing and critical race theories illustrate how imperialism (Bermúdez et al., 2016) and White supremacy (Walsdorf et al., 2020) produce the academy and understandings of the family. However, as a White settler scholar, I recognize the risk of adopting these theories as an appropriation that recenters Whiteness, ensuring colonial futurity (Matias & Boucher, 2021). White scholars who use decolonizing and critical race theories have been critiqued for ignoring the role of transnational Whiteness that produces contemporary injustices through ongoing colonialism (Go, 2017). In so doing, White scholars displace and exclude the intended subjects of these theories from academic discussion while usurping, publishing, and becoming known for theorizing (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

White scholars who use decolonization to claim all are colonized by Western academia risk codifying settler innocence and concealing scholarly complicity in the ongoing settler colonial project (Smith, 2012). Designating “all struggles against imperialism as decolonizing” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 17) academically dislocates Indigenous resistance to colonial Land-taking, enslavement, and genocide. The critique surrounding the depoliticization of decolonizing theory has grown to include intersectionality and critical race theories as they encounter domestication by White scholars (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The latter’s use of critical race theory risks partial adaptation where the academy avoids explicit discussions of White supremacy in favor of White privilege and fragility (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Thus, White scholars must resist settling critical theories as a process of Western liberation from itself.

As a critical frame in family studies, SCT challenges White scholars to attend to knowledge creation and delivery governed by colonization and White supremacy. As an intersectional theory, SCT moves beyond racialized binaries (persons of color versus White people) and binaries of colonizer–colonized established by Eurocentric and imperial academies (Fanon, 2008; Go, 2017; Mignolo, 2012; Williams, 2020). SCT purposefully centers Whiteness and settlers’ role in the triangular construction of inferior otherness to produce only themselves as human (Sturm, 2019). Evaluating the violence of settler humanization requires settler scholars to reach into the fear, violence, and ownership White Americans feel about race and sovereignty (Cordis, 2019). It is a provocation for White scholars to engage in embodied subjectivity. Identifying our settlement histories enables us to pick apart the normalization of colonial mentality to call out the deceptiveness of White supremacy.

Discovering a settler scholar identity can produce feelings of shame and guilt. However, Indigenous and Exogenous peoples must not be forced to live with the pain of their colonial realities while settler scholars evade discomfort (Regan, 2010). Becoming comfortable (but not complacent) with discomfort allows solidarity to emerge from “an embodied place of

connectivity that is essential to reconciliation” (Regan, 2010, p. 12). Although grappling with our complicity in colonialism can be overwhelming, entering antiracist research through shame destabilizes the stable footing required for solidarity. We cannot decontextualize ourselves, writing as if from nowhere. Rather, we must recognize our occupation of Indigenous homelands as perpetual and representative of more than physical Land theft; it is an invasion of kinship, cosmology, belonging, and ancestry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Moreover, this occupation sustains colonial institutions, benefiting settler colonizers by perpetuating settler indigenization and ascendance by dehumanizing Indigenous and Exogenous persons.

## **Cultivating nondisappearance and nonexploitation in the academy**

The academy is a microcosm of the settler construction of inferior otherness, wherein settlers remain in the apex, denying the existence of Indigeneity and Exogeneity while profiting from their exploitations. Therefore, to do critical settler colonial research requires that settler scholars recognize their role in reproducing and thus disrupting the triangular construction of otherness, pushing back on colonial institutions and practices.

Applying a settler colonial lens asks settler scholars to attend to how racialized scholars’ erasure and simultaneous exploitation occur daily within universities. For example, predominately white institutions remain the norm within the United States; schools that center Whiteness and marginalize the identities and perspectives of racialized students, faculty, and staff. Largely these universities lack diversity in racial representation; however, racialized faculty are called upon to address and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion on campuses. The cultural taxation of this invisible work can be emotionally draining, politicized, and requires a disproportionate amount of time in service not counted in academic spaces. When racialized scholars are expected to “do” diversity, equity, and inclusion, their labor is frequently unseen and takes time away from the rewarded work of tenure-line positions simultaneously freeing mental and emotional space for settler scholars to progress validated efforts (Reddick et al., 2020). However, at the same time when this work is privileged and prioritized, racialized scholars report that the mentoring, community engagement, and advancement of justice is a source of pride, purpose, and belonging (Reddick et al., 2020). Settler scholars are called upon to confront the invisibility of this work, on one hand committing to purposefully join in doing it and on the other transforming what is counted in the academy. Hooks (1994) offers ideas for pedagogical, administrative, and relational practices that settler scholars can engage to challenge the status quo.

The erasure and exploitation of citational politics (Ahmed, 2013) is another example of how the academy participates in the triangular construction of otherness. For example, the contributions of racialized artists, writers, and scientists risk neglect, politicization, or diminishment as White scholars repackage theory and method as described by the Cite Black Women Collective ([www.citeblackwomencollective.org](http://www.citeblackwomencollective.org)). Cultivating nondisappearance and nonexploitation requires settler scholars to attend to citational practices, of who we cite, teach, and read. Similarly, when we see the Land and family as sites of knowledge transmission, we must reconsider how we honor the learnings gained in these spaces. For example, MacLeod (2021) developed templates for academic citations of oral epistemologies passed down by knowledge keepers to prioritize knowledge transmitted in traditionally nonacademic processes. In the family sciences, not citing the intellectual contributions of racialized scholars, contributes to the dehumanization of the other occurs in multiple pathways, including epistemicide (de Sousa Santos, 2015) and epistemological violence (Teo, 2010), discussed below.

To directly intervene in the triangular construction of otherness, settler scholars must move beyond shallow efforts at representation and inclusion (Coulthard, 2014). Boveda and Bhattacharya (2019), Fields and Cunningham-Williams (2021), Jordan (2022), Walsdorf et al. (2020), and Shelton et al. (2021) provide several implications for how individuals and

institutions can address racism to reimagine nonexploitative clinical, research, academic, and collegial relationships.

## Confronting the settler hold

Epistemicide is the destruction of knowledge and ways of knowing that diverge from the privileged Westernized onto-epistemologies (de Sousa Santos, 2015). Stemming from the colonial matrix of power, where a colony declares itself civilized and, thus, destroys other civilizations through epistemicide, settlers dismantle, and delegitimize “other” ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2002). The family sciences primarily operate from epistemologies that position Eurocentric knowing as isolated from culture (Mignolo, 2012). Projecting Westernized empiricism as universal in teaching and research counter-positions racialized scholars’ work as ethnocultural and niche (Sullivan, 2006). A settler colonial analysis can direct our purposeful attention to how colonial power replicates itself through research and knowledge dissemination.

Similarly, the settler hold on the academy dictates the boundaries of critical scholarship, separating Indigenous and Exogenous scholars (King, 2019; Williams, 2020). In Canada, critical work focuses on settler–Indigenous relationships and in the United States, on Black–White relationships, distancing intertwined realities. Academic “bilateral opposition” (Veracini, 2010, p. 103) and analytic bifurcation (Williams, 2020, p. 144) debates the incommensurateness of Indigenous and Black studies keeping “Black and Indigenous communities in isolation from one another, which is a settler/desire/dream” (King, 2019, p. 2).

Utilizing an intentional settler colonial framework can confront artificial binaries that otherwise stall critical potentiality to imagine a world beyond White domination, through what King et al. (2020) termed “otherwise relationality” (p. 10). Indigenous and Exogenous scholars move beyond the narrowly conscribed boundaries of race and indigeneity to imagine and reformulate modes and methods of knowing through generative, interconnected, and dialogic analyses (Williams, 2020). Such revisionings are seen, for example, in King’s (2019) methodology of “shoaling.” In this work, King used the shoal as a metaphorical and literal terrain to bridge incommensurability and connect shared histories and potential futurities.

## Deinscribing the family

Incorporating SCT into the family sciences invites scholars to stretch our way of knowing “family.” In the family sciences, epistemological violence (Teo, 2010) has codified the “normal” family, derived from settlers’ nuclearization of the family to sustain the theft of bodies and Lands. In making Land a commodity, “place becomes exchangeable, saleable, and steal-able” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 64), and the family becomes the seat of exchange.

Yet in many Indigenous cosmologies, the Land is more than property, more than physical; it is a source of familial connection, a site of connected knowing, ancestral belonging, and rememory (Simpson, 2017). Land is family and teacher of epistemology, cosmology, history, and science. However, we must be clear in understanding the relationships of Land, place, space, and time as family, which Tuck and McKenzie (2015) discussed as overly romanticized in non-Indigenous scholarship. As Salmón (2012) stated, “To us, the land exists in the same manner as do our families, chickens, the river, and the sky. No hierarchy of privilege places one above or below another. Everything is woven into a managed, interconnected tapestry” (p. 27). Land as family disrupts Western sciences’ rationalist tendencies to classify humans as superior to and separate from the natural world.

Simpson (2017) described the fight for decolonizing as not to repossess the dispossessed but to retain and maintain a secure attachment to the Land, relating to it and each other through



“connection-generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear relationship[s]” (p. 43). For Indigenous and racialized peoples, we must consider the current toxic attachments to Land created through governmental policies and practices of brutalized nonbelonging.

The family sciences can also re-envision the sovereignty of bodies on Land. The female body is produced against settler colonial hegemonic inscriptions of gender, maternalism, legitimacy, and worth (Jordan, 2021). Racialized women are denied legitimacy, which is seen through the violence produced on their bodies. These violence’s against Indigenous women are an epidemic of sexual violence, murder, and discriminatory denial of legal equality (J. L. Hartman, 2021). Overwhelmingly Black women experience higher rates of sexual violence than Latinx, White, and Asian Americans, while Black men are erroneously stereotyped as violent sexual predators (Jordan, 2021). The lack of bodily safety that Indigenous and Exogenous women faced is accompanied by diminished reproductive justice (Ross & Solinger, 2019). Deinscribing the family means situating the body as sovereign, and for racialized women, who face heightened risks of sexual violence, decreased access to reproductive technologies, and an increased risk of being separated from their children, the sites of these injustices are on the Land. Reproductive injustice occurs in direct correlation with the racialization of gender, the commodification of bodies, and Land use as a spatial site to police, deport, and separate (Ross & Solinger, 2019).

Admittedly, the lessons that Indigenous and decolonized epistemologies can bring to the recultivation of the meanings of family, Land, and body warrant a richer discussion than presented in the current article. However, to resurrect the family from coloniality, family scholars must attend to and recenter the Land as sites of knowing, teaching, and being, rich with the re-memories of culture, science, relationship (past and future), and ontologies. Salmón (2000) suggested that social scientists evolve to a kincentric ecology grounded in the connection between humans and nature as one “part of an extended ecological family that shares ancestry and origins. It is an awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin,” which includes “all the natural elements of an ecosystem” (p. 1327). In this evolution, the family becomes a site of “spiralic temporality” (De Vos, 2020, p. 2), rooted in relational accountability to the Land, a space of learning and transmitting cosmologies, epistemologies, relationalities between and among ancestors-past and descendants-to-come.

Revising the family, and family research, as sites of embodied belonging, connected to self-other-Land, promotes a relationally accountable research agenda (Wilson, 2008). As Opaskwayak Cree scholar Wilson (2008) wrote, “research is ceremony” wherein “theories and ideas are only knots in the strands of relationality” (p. 87). Tuck and McKenzie (2015) described the intersections between SCT and critical place methodology as sites of productive tensions that can purposefully center Land, body, and epistemology in knowledge production. Critical place methodology provides researchers with a unique lens and method of redressing the consequences of colonial science’s detachment from the Land and all its lessons through scholarship (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Finally, Boveda and Bhattacharya (2019) describe their onto-epistemology, based on love, community, complex connections to Land, cosmos, and spirituality oriented from their mothers’ knowledges. In this work, the authors describe how the relationality of knowledge production becomes an ever-expanding and interconnected process, when we move past linear and delimited knowing and constrained ideas of justice.

## Re-de-envisioning social justice

Settler colonial analyses prompt a critical accounting of the meanings and purposes of social justice, which in the United States has been heavily influenced by Christianity and paternalism. Despite our best intentions, social justice researchers can fall prey to perpetuating the colonizing discourses we hope to counter. As the Western world established itself as developed and

superior (Said, 1995), it secularized linearity in time and space and the accumulation of “discovered Lands” (Mignolo, 2002). The other side of this colonial project is the advancement of Western cultures as inescapably linked to Christian concepts of salvation, describing those who need saving and the savior (Said, 1995). White settler scholars interested in advancing social justice for the “at-risk” implies a similar scientific-savior status. All the while, the knowledge producers remain empowered to determine who needs saving and who is worth saving (e.g., epistemological violence).

Although settler scholars seek to “give” voice to participants, they also speak for them and narrate their realities through settler-situated lenses (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). The liberal discourse on social justice and claims of equality through representation, inclusion, and voice is reliant on proclamations that do not necessitate transformative justice. Coulthard (2014) argued that settlers’ utilization of representation is inherently set up to fail. When settlers seek to include, the name, essentialize, and other the subaltern, blocking transcendence beyond coloniality (Coulthard, 2014). To do social justice, we must address the politics of dispossession—the dispossession of Land and body. Without doing so, we only address the symptoms rather than the cause, allowing settler colonialism to benevolently operate in the background, providing just enough programming, theorizing, and policies to continue recreating itself (Coulthard, 2014).

SCT asks settler scholars committed to justice-oriented research to evaluate how we reproduce knowledge accordant to the majoritized frame, including work positioned as antiracist and anticolonial. The risk for majoritized-settler researchers lies within the re-creation and pathologization of the other even as we attempt to counter-hegemonic norms (Smith, 2012). An SCT lens provides settler scholars with the challenge to evaluate why they investigate injustice, as much as it does how and on whom they direct their focus. It is an accountability that asks settler scholars to be aware of their capability of, and culpability for, remaining ignorant of the living history of colonialism and its structural effects on social, political, and cultural worlds, which leads to complicity in upholding colonial structures (Regan, 2010). Further, the researcher’s ability to choose whether to engage with the discomfiting emotions of anticolonial work demonstrates the privilege of not knowing. Choosing not to participate is a sign of collusion that assumes colonial structures, institutions, and ideologies are natural and, thus, diminishes other cultures, knowledges, and ways of being and living. Research within the “white racial frame” (Feagin, 2013, p. 7) reproduces and justifies the dehumanization, decimation, and exploitation of racialized peoples (Smith, 2012).

To prize the role of colonialism in today’s academic and social worlds, we must examine settler colonizers’ construction of the world. In our analyses, we can integrate the mechanisms of White supremacy and coloniality to discern how today’s problems are undergirded by “the logic, tenets, and identities engendered by settler colonialism... and continue to shape race, gender, class, and sexual divisions, privileges, and oppressions into the present” (Glenn, 2015, p. 57). A settler scholar is accountable for working toward righting the wrongs of colonialism while being careful not to commit more in the process.

## CONCLUSION

As Letiecq (2019) suggested, for too long, family scientists have focused on assisting the marginalized without “equal study of the mechanisms operating within a matrix of domination to maintain and reproduce privilege” (p. 11). Similarly, Walsdorf et al. (2020) described the need for family scientists to seriously consider how White supremacy maintains inequality and is maintained through research. This article responds to these concerns by proposing the use of SCT in family sciences. For family researchers committed to advancing racial justice, SCT

offers a lens to analyze the intersectional, interlocking mechanisms of family inequality and privilege, grounded in time and place.

Promoting antiracism and anticolonialism in the family sciences requires researchers to critically evaluate their relationship to the settler colonial body politic. SCT connects anti-Blackness and anti-immigrant exclusion to Indigenous erasure and the ascendancy of the settler to move beyond rhetorical disconnections created as a tool to construct and maintain the status quo. Centering SCT is not centering on White people but centering on Whiteness and White supremacy as mechanisms of inequality and domination. Through SCT, we can confront the normative gaze of Whiteness, guard against disseminating data that maintains and rationalizes colonial social structures, and asks White scholars to implicate them—ourselves in the maintenance of the colonial status quo (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Such analyses also encourage settler scholars to question their positionality and possible complicity in hegemonic and disenfranchising research, teaching, and relationships. This means adopting an intersectional approach to study how privilege and inequality operate in tandem through multiple connected lines, systems, structures, and identities. When these lines are overlooked in family research, settler binaries, such as civilized–savage, are left to operate in the background, continually reifying and norming the dominance of the settler class (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). Rather than dislocating inequities from their causes, a settler colonial analysis attends to how settler desires lead to inequality. Through surfacing the settler impulse to disappear indigeneity and subjugate exogeneity while simultaneously claiming sovereignty, family scientists can evaluate their place within the settler colonial framework to advance intentional and aware research for social justice.

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