Querying the Ecological Sublime: Colonial Aesthetics, Anticolonial Thought, and the "Double Fracture"

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Abstract

This article examines the ecological sublime in its relationship to the history of colonial aesthetics, anticolonial thought, and contemporary colonialism. It argues that, while Edmund Burke utilized the sublime in support of colonialism (including settler colonialism) in North America and colonial slavery, Samson Occom and Ottobah Cugoano developed versions of the sublime to contest British colonialism in the Americas. The history of this aesthetic contestation has not been represented in scholarship on the ecological sublime, which, this article shows, has a vexed relationship with historical and contemporary colonialism. The article argues that the ecological sublime exhibits the "double fracture" of modernity in its inadequate handling of the history of colonialism and environmentalism. It concludes by evaluating the potential of the ecological sublime for anticolonial uses by Indigenous and Black thinkers.

Keywords: Anticolonial thought, Black, ecological thought, Indigenous, sublime.

Resumen

Este artículo examina lo sublime ecológico en su relación con la historia de la estética colonial, el pensamiento anticolonial y el colonialismo contemporáneo. Sostiene que, mientras que Edmund Burke utilizó lo sublime en apoyo del colonialismo (incluido el de los primeros colonos) en América del Norte y la esclavitud colonial, Samson Occom y Ottobah Cugoano utilizaron versiones de lo sublime para impugnar el colonialismo británico en América. La historia de esta contestación estética no ha sido representada en los estudios sobre lo sublime ecológico, los que, como muestra este artículo, tienen una relación conflictiva con el colonialismo histórico y contemporáneo. El artículo sostiene que lo sublime ecológico exhibe la "doble fractura" de la modernidad en su manejo inadecuado de la historia del colonialismo y el ambientalismo. Concluye evaluando el potencial de lo sublime ecológico para usos anticoloniales por parte de pensadores indígenas y afrodescendientes.

Palabras clave: Pensamiento anticolonial, Afrodescendiente, pensamiento ecológico, indígena, sublime.

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 1

As a concept, the sublime has shown the ability to endure (Brady; Costelloe). This article traces contestation over the sublime in the eighteenth century to evaluate the potential of the ecological sublime today. The ecological sublime, as this article understands it, is an experience of the natural world that interrupts the normal sense of self and rationality and fosters a reappraisal of a person's relationship to the environment. Scholarship on the ecological sublime has flourished, but without

adequately addressing historical and contemporary forms of colonialism.[1] This status quo, I argue, represents an example of "modernity's colonial double fracture" which "separates the colonial history of the world from its environmental history" (Ferdinand 3). The following analysis examines the ecological sublime from the positionality of Indigenous and Black anticolonial thought and queries its potential for Indigenous and Black nations who have always faced colonial domination alongside ecological devastation.

This article brings Indigenous and Black anticolonial thought into relation in order to provide a hemispheric view of eighteenth-century anticolonial thought in the Americas. As such it aims to elucidate the pervasiveness of the critique of colonialism from a site (i.e., the Americas) that has been historically dismissed by Eurocentric notions of philosophy and politics.[2] Scholars of colonialism have excavated how Indigenous and Black writers were shaped by intimate contact with each other through religious, economic, social, political, and literary practices.[3] Similarly, scholarship on relationality has shown the usefulness of relational models and ethics in challenging colonial knowledge production.[4] This article builds on the scholarship on intimacy and relationality through an emphasis on decentering European thought and privileging texts that emerge from the "underside of modernity" (Maldonado-Torres, "Against"). Although it examines Indigenous and Black anticolonial thought primarily as parallel traditions, it acknowledges that they often interact and overlap.

The following analysis focuses on colonialism in the Americas, which includes settler colonialism in British North America. Settler colonialism defines itself through its attempt to "eliminate and replace Indigenous peoples by force and assimilation rather than extracting resources and revenue on behalf of a distant colonial metropole" (Goldstein 61).[5] Similarly, slavery as a mode of governance was pervasive in the Americas, and in many locales (especially the Caribbean, North America, and Brazil), it was one of the primary engines of capital accumulation. The abolition of slavery did not lead to the dismantling of racial subjugation, but instead its continuation in reconstituted forms.[6] Likewise, settler colonialism continues throughout the Americas as settlers attempt to "transform Indigenous homelands into settler homelands" (Whyte, "Settler" 135). Unsurprisingly, then, Indigenous and Black resistance to colonialism continues.[7]

The article begins with an analysis of Edmund Burke's use of the sublime in support of colonialism in the Americas. Burke has remained central for discussions of

[1] See Armstrong, Lloyd, Roelofs, and Hoffman for interrogations of the racial underpinnings of Kant's and Burke's aesthetics; see Eze, "Color" for a critical appraisal of the effects of Kant's anthropology on his philosophical thought.
[2] For Indigenous philosophy and political thought, see Waters and Alfred. For Black philosophical and political thought, see Eze, "African," and Rogers.
[3] For the intimacy of Indigenous and African peoples in the Americas, see Lowe, Miles, and Restall.
[4] See Figueroa-Vasquez, Koshy et al., and King et al.
[5] See also Barker "Territory," Byrd, L. Simpson, and A. Simpson.
[6] See Hartman "Venus," Du Bois, and Césaire.
[7] For contemporary Indigenous anticolonial thought see Coulthard and Estes. For contemporary Black anticolonial thought see Alexander and Smith.

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the sublime for his own unique contributions as well as his influence on later thinkers including Immanuel Kant. It examines the relationship between his aesthetic treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and his lifelong advocacy for settler colonialism and colonial slavery. It argues that Burke's aesthetics was intimately tied to his support for colonial dominance through portraying Indigenous and Black people as savage, irrational, and threatening. The article then turns to Samson Occom's sermons and petitions, including his "Sermon for Moses Paul," to trace how he utilized the sublime in his contestations of the devastating logics and effects of settler colonialism. It argues that Occom drew upon the sublime to contest the figures of Indigenous sublimity, inferiority, and lack of sovereignty that were explicit in Burke's work. Afterwards, the article explores Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* and his uses of the sublime in highlighting the illegitimate violence of colonial slavery and colonialism.[8] It contends that Cugoano employed the structure of the jeremiad to provide a thoroughgoing critique of colonialism while also attacking one of the presuppositions of Edmund Burke's aesthetics: that darkness was sublime, not beautiful. The article draws upon work often not considered part of the history of aesthetics in order to provide a more expansive picture of aesthetic concepts and their centrality in eighteenth-century political contestations over empire. These historical intellectual and political arguments inform the second half of the article. The subsequent section examines how prominent advocates of the ecological sublime (including Christopher Hitt, Lee Rozelle, and Paul Outka) address the history of contestation surrounding the colonial sublime as well as present-day colonialism. On the strength of my discussions of Occom and Cugoano, it argues that these advocates do not adequately address colonialism and instead often fall into the trap of "modernity's colonial double fracture" (Ferdinand 3), which makes colonial history and anticolonial politics subordinate to environmental history and environmentalism. The article concludes by reflecting on the potential usefulness of the ecological sublime for anticolonial thought in the Americas. It argues that a turn to the ecological sublime would likely reinscribe existing colonial relations.

Edmund Burke and Colonial Aesthetics

Edmund Burke is often considered the father of British conservativism. Born in Ireland in 1729, Burke graduated from Trinity College in Dublin and eventually rose to international prominence, spending almost three decades as an MP in the House of Commons. His aesthetics has been recognized as an essential part of his political thought. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime*

[8] I have previously examined Ottobah Cugoano's anticolonialism (Peters, "Anti-Imperialism") and also the relationship between Edmund Burke's aesthetics of slavery and Cugoano's abolitionist aesthetics (Peters, "On the Sublime"). Exploring Cugoano's aesthetics from an anticolonial lens, as I do in this article, provides a different point of departure in thinking about anticolonialism, the sublime, and ecology.

and Beautiful (1757) intervened into debates about sentiment, rationality, and art through an examination of the concepts of the sublime and the beautiful. Similarly, his *Account of European Settlements in America* (1757), written with William Burke, attempted to educate the public about the nature of European colonialism during Britain's Seven Years' War with France. Burke sought to convince readers that to compete with France's growing wealth and power, "Britain should do more to foster the development and prosperity of its colonies" (Lock, *Edmund* 131). The cross-fertilization of ideas between these texts has been extensively studied due to Burke's aesthetically inflected response to the French Revolution.[9] However, the connections between his aesthetics and political commitments in British colonial America have only recently received the attention that they deserve.[10] Eighteenth-century British aesthetics was necessarily connected to its colonies in the Americas, conquests in Asia, "exploration" of the Pacific, and slave trade with Africa. Embedded in the ideas of the sublime and beautiful were philosophical notions of human difference that also fostered British colonialism. These aesthetic categories racialized difference and "barred from access to civility and humanity" whole continents (Lloyd 68).

For Burke, the sublime and the beautiful were the primary tools for tracing human passions to their natural sources. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, he argued that the sublime was a property of things; he also contended that the experience of the sublime occurred when a person encountered something terrifying that did not threaten their safety. This produced a response that was neither pleasurable nor painful but "a delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (136). For Burke, all sublime phenomena could be traced back to some form of terror (57). He drew upon established associations of the sublime with divinity, power, and majesty (Schechter). In addition, Burke represented existence as the result of Biblical creation that produced a well-ordered rational world (1, 50). As P.F. Lock notes: "The world of the *Enquiry* is upon the whole an agreeable place, created by a beneficent Providence for our benefit" ("Politics" 137). For Burke, where there was evil, this would be addressed by human beings rather than an interventionist God.

Burke's sublime was rooted in the belief that non-whiteness, and especially darkness, was naturally terrifying. In *A Philosophical Enquiry,* he wrote that a child "saw a black object, it gave him some great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror" (144). His example conformed to the racial logics of eighteenth-century British society due to Black women being historically represented as monstrous, grotesque, and unfeminine in European travel literature.[11] Burke associated the sublime's counterpart, the beautiful, with whiteness: "Beautiful bodies must not be dusky or muddy, but clean and fair" (144). Such statements, positing certain bodies as inherently beautiful or sublime, were likely intended as a rejoinder to those (like

[9] See O'Neill and Zerilli.

[10] See Kohn and Pitts.

[11] For the racial logics of British society see Armstrong; for the history of Black women in travel literature see Morgan.

William Hogarth and Joseph Spence) who maintained that reactions to phenotype were not natural but rather learned (Dabydeen 41). Burke's aesthetics positioned all of humanity somewhere between sublime and beautiful. This reflected the way Europeans utilized historical schemas of savagery, barbarism, and civilization to explain human diversity (Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Volume 4* 157-202). Just as Indigenous people and those on the Indian subcontinent were accorded different civilizational statuses, they also had distinct locations on Burke's human mapping of the beautiful and sublime (Kohn and O'Neill 197).

Edmund Burke was a lifelong supporter of the slave trade and of plantation slavery. In 1757, he supported the slave trade because it provided laborers to the British Caribbean and North American colonies (Burke and Burke, *Account* 2:126). Although he decried the horror of slavery, he advocated for the slow and gradual abolition of both the slave trade and slavery rather than immediate abolition ("Sketch"). Crucially, his opposition to immediate abolition often involved deploying the sublime. He represented Black people as naturally sublime and used fictional narratives of slave rebellions to portray emancipation as antithetical to civilization. For example, he claimed that Dunmore's Proclamation during the American Revolution incited enslaved people to "murders, rapes, and enormities of all kinds" ("Address to the King" 359). Later, he evoked marronage in the middle of his discussion of French revolutionary historical consciousness (*Reflections* 32). Burke, then, consistently upheld the enslavement of Africans as a means for ensuring the continuation of British colonialism in North America and the Caribbean.

Similarly, he supported the erasure of Indigenous people and the transformation of Indigenous land into settler lands. His support for settler colonialism often involved representing North America as a wild empty land and Indigenous people as the "picture of the most distant antiquity" (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 1 208). For example, he argued that the British should not restrict settlers from lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. He labelled this land "a lair of wild beast," and argued for British settlement because colonists were fulfilling Biblical commandments to cultivate the earth and "increase and multiply" ("Conciliation with America" 132). The Royal Proclamation that prevented settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains was issued because of Pontiac's War, which brought together a multitude of Indigenous nations in opposition to British claims to Indigenous lands and loyalty (Dowd). Burke's support for colonization, then, directly opposed Indigenous nations' desire to stop colonists and colonial authorities from occupying their lands. His advocacy for the occupation of Indigenous lands and the subjugation of Indigenous nations displays his deep commitment to settler colonialism (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 2:278).

Because of explicit references to Indigenous people in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* scholars have traced the figure of sublime French revolutionaries to Burke's earlier writings on Indigenous people.[12] His descriptions of Indigenous

[12] See Gibbons and O'Neill.

fighters "exercising the most shocking barbarities" has remained essential for interpreting Burke's take on democracy, gender, and colonialism (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 1: 212). However, it is rarely remarked how the vengeful, violent, and "implacable" sublime Indigenous fighter had a peaceful corollary in both *An Account* and *A Philosophical Enquiry* in the guise of the Indigenous orator. Overshadowed by the more sensational figure of the Indigenous fighter, the Indigenous orator is equally "savage" and inferior in relation to his European counterparts. Burke wrote in *An Account* that

> The chief skill of these orators consists in giving an artful turn to affairs, and in expressing their thoughts in a bold figurative manner, much stronger than we could bear in this part of the world, and with gestures equally violent, but often extremely natural and expressive. (1: 172)

The equation of "natural" and "expressive" with "violent" gestures places Indigenous orators outside of the European norms of civility and oration. The eloquence of Indigenous speakers was a longstanding trope in British travel writing (Gustafon); both the Indigenous fighter and orator were understood to be positioned at the beginning of human history and lacking civilization.

In the 1759 second edition of *A Philosophical Enquiry,* Burke again invoked natural oratory, this time in response to critics of his theory of language and passions. He argued that European languages were more civilized than Asian ones by reworking the description of Indigenous oratory in *An Account*. Words had a special place in Burke's thought because they could "excite the passions directly" while being detached from clear ideas (Lock, *Edmund* 104). Burke wrote that

> the oriental tongues, and in general the languages of most unpolished people, have a great force and energy of expression; and this is but natural. Uncultivated people are but ordinary observers of things, and not critical in distinguishing them; but, for that reason, they admire more, and are more affected with what they see, and therefore express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner. If the affection be well conveyed, it will work its effect without any clear idea; often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it. (175)

Language embodied reason—or the lack of it. Therefore, differences in languages were differences in rationality. The distinction between naked and polished languages conformed to the civilizational hierarchy in which Indigenous people were unpolished and natural, while Europeans were polished and civil. Burke's Indigenous orator in *An Account* can be glossed as passionate, uncritical, without clear ideas, and inferior in reason. When Indigenous orators speak, they are exciting passions, but do not know what they are talking about.

This figure of the Indigenous orator reflects the approach of European settlers who sought to elide and disbelieve the content, veracity, and ontological weight of diplomats protecting Indigenous lands. In *An Account*, Burke spent pages portraying the savage passions of Indigenous fighters, and then explicates Indigenous and British diplomacy with no more than a single sentence: "Here it is [Albany] that the treaties and other transactions between us and the Iroquois Indians are negotiated" (2: 192). Neither here nor in other discussions (including those of William Penn) does Burke

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 1*

provide a robust picture of Indigenous sovereignty or the importance of treaties in constituting settler sovereignty.

Throughout his career Edmund Burke denied Indigenous nations sovereignty. His views on civilization shaped his views on sovereignty. As Lenape theorist Joanne Barker argues, lacking proof of civilization including "reason, social contract, agriculture, property, technology, Christianity, monogamy, and/or the structures and operations of statehood" justified the denial of sovereignty (Barker, "For Whom" 4). The denial of sovereign status to Indigenous nations meant that British diplomacy with Indigenous nations was seen as less important in comparison to European nation states (Pocock, *The Enlightenments* 7). It also meant that the British often attempted to dictate the obedience of Indigenous nations and ownership of their lands with European diplomats without the presence of Indigenous diplomats (Sleeper-Smith 130). The denial of sovereignty was essential to perpetuating larger narratives of Indigenous people as savage and inferior.

Burke's representation of Indigenous oratory was damaging because it provided a settler colonial gloss to the political relationships of European and Indigenous nations. The supposed irrationality of Indigenous diplomats (as orators) meant that they did not have clear ideas about reality, which fostered the dismissal of Indigenous political claims. For Burke, absence of literacy was a marker of savagery, thus the Indigenous oratory was both savage and inferior to its civilized literate British counterpart. Given that the legal framework that undergirds Anglo settler colonialism is premised on forced incorporation into the British nation, the paternalism inherent in Burke's distinction between "uncultivated" and "polished" mirrors distinctions between savage and civilized and, equally importantly, between those lacking and those enjoying sovereignty (Stark). The analyses of languages and oratory in *An Account* and *A Philosophical Enquiry* supported settler colonial logics of Indigenous political subjugation and elimination.

Various scholars have claimed that Burke was an anti-imperial thinker.[13] However, Burke's anti-imperial thought was premised on a civilizational hierarchy that prioritized those he considered civilized, while it remained unconcerned with those considered savage. Although he never proposed the end of British rule in India, the Americas, or Ireland, he did advocate for various reforms. But overall, he supported colonialism and utilized his political power to make it more manageable and less visibly horrific, especially when it concerned the destruction of nobility or aristocracy whom he perceived as worthy of sympathy.[14] Edmund Burke's consistent portrayal of Indigenous and Black people as sublime and the antithesis of European civilization shows clearly that whatever his anti-imperial credentials, they did not extend to the Americas.

[13] See Agnani, Mehta, and Pitts.

[14] O'Neill's argument of the logic of Burke's conservative support for empire, especially as it relates to Indigenous dispossession, chattel slavery, and the East India Company, is the most compelling interpretation of the complexity of Burke's anti-imperialism.

Examining Edmund Burke's aesthetics through the responses of his white British and European contemporaries, as most scholarship does, avoids accounting for the reception of his ideas by those most affected by British aesthetic thought. Therefore, the next section examines Samson Occom's (Mohegan) and Ottobah Cugoano's uses of the sublime in their criticisms of U.S. and British colonialism. Whereas Burke's concept of the sublime combines a view of a "beneficent Providence" with strands of existing European thought that viewed non-Europeans (especially Africans, but also Indigenous populations in the Americas) as monstrous, ugly, and terrifying, both Occom and Cugoano drew upon explicitly Christian notions of the sublime that highlighted God's divinity, power, and willingness to punish injustice (Lock, "Politics," 137). I contend that these versions of the sublime were anticolonial in their orientation and contested arguments implicit in Burke's use of the sublime to support colonialism.

Occom and Cugoano have more in common than just publishing works critical of British colonialism. They were contributors to bodies of literature produced through the Atlantic crossings and forced cultural contacts of colonial violence.[15] They were both active members of larger transnational political communities that were committed to self-determination for those most affected by colonialism—Occom through his petition writing and preaching amongst New England Indigenous communities and Cugoano through his activism and his co-authored letters with other Afro-British abolitionists in London. Of great import, they were deeply familiar with the colonial world of London, including British art and aesthetics. Both were represented in paintings while in London, Occom in 1768 and Cugoano in 1784.[16]

Samson Occom, Settler Colonialism, and the Sublime

Samson Occom (Mohegan) was arguably the most famous Indigenous writer (of English) during the eighteenth century. Born in 1723, he was raised within the Mohegan kinship networks of western Connecticut and was educated in English, Greek, and Latin by Eleazar Wheelock. Occom became an ordained minister and preacher who sought to constitute Indigenous survival through Indigenous Christian institutions and political self-determination. Upon his death, he left behind a hefty literary legacy, the separatist Indigenous Christian community of Brotherton, and a lasting influence on Indigenous politics in New England. Moreover, he has been hailed as a key contributor to the American Indian Intellectual tradition and a contributor to early Indigenous literature.[17]

Occom was educated during a period when Indigenous literacies in Massachusett and English had made significant strides.[18] Despite his education, he

[15] See Gilroy and Weaver on the Black and Red Atlantics.
[16] For the portrait of Occom see Zuck; for the painting in which Cugoano was represented as a servant see Hartman, *Lose*.
[17] See Martinez and Warrior.
[18] See Brooks and Bross.

and other Indigenous writers were caught between two unflattering representations "of being simultaneously noble and 'republican' in their traditional oratory, but essentially 'unlettered' and anti-intellectual in their grasp of alphabetic literacy" (Round 48). Whereas the Indigenous oratory tradition was seen as inferior to European literacy due to its orality, Indigenous writing was seen as inferior in its execution. Indeed, neither oratory nor literature escaped the colonial apparatus that sought to subordinate and forcibly incorporate Indigenous people within British and later U.S. sovereignty. In December of 1765, he boarded a ship to London to raise money for Eleazar Wheelock's "Moor's Indian Charity School," which Occom thought would be a great benefit to Indigenous youth throughout New England. Unfortunately, although successful in raising funds, the ideas of colonial aesthetics and Indigenous inferiority preceded him.

When Occom arrived in the United Kingdom in 1766, he entered a space in which Indigenous people were seen as savage and lacking humanity. He noted that most Britons saw him through the lens of sublimity, whether that was fear, darkness, ugliness, or novelty. In his sermon "Saying What Think Ye of Christ," he wrote: "I think I am ready to stand before you all, if it is only as a spectical and gazing stock" (175). Given that the beautiful in Burke was associated with whiteness and delicacy, the spectacle of Occom was not pursued through a desire for the beautiful. Likewise, Occom was aware that his British audience would assume that he was inferior in reason. Thus, he began the same sermon by stating that "it looks to me some like a dareing presumption, that I shou'd stand before you this day as a teacher" (174). His presence in the pulpit was an inversion of dominant narratives and colonial desires that sought Indigenous subordination to the British. The novelty of an Indian preacher was seized upon by those who had for over a century represented and hosted Indigenous diplomats while inscribing colonial difference into theatrical experiences; hence, as Rochelle Raineri Zuck notes, Occom was mocked in the English theater within six months of his arrival (555). The sublimity of Occom as spectacle fits the colonial aesthetics and commitments of Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry* and *An Account*, as Burke's aesthetics, as I showed, represented Indigenous people as lacking clear and precise ideas and that ascribed sublimity to those who were "dusky or muddy" (*A Philosophical Enquiry* 144).

A few years after his sojourn to the United Kingdom, Occom utilized the jeremiad tradition to preach a sermon with an explicitly anticolonial argument. The jeremiad (named after the Biblical prophet Jeremiah) harnessed the threat of divine retribution to support social reform (Bosco 164). The sermon was preached for Moses Paul (Wampanoag), who had been condemned to hang for the murder of a white tavern patron. The spectacle of an Indian preacher heightened anticipation of the execution due to white colonists' long fascination with "the meaning of Indian death" (Schorb 149). Both Paul and Occom understood that Occom's prominence as an Indigenous preacher would lead to a large white and Indigenous audience to hear of the circumstances that led to the execution (Chamberlain 444). He addressed how European colonialism was responsible for great ills, including alcoholism, the

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 1

mistreatment of Indigenous people, and a prejudiced legal system. He highlighted his kinship with Paul: "You are the bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. You are an Indian, a despised creature" ("A Sermon" 188). The sermon explicitly condemned the animosity of white settlers towards Indigenous peoples and nations. Occom met the audience's expectations of the execution narrative—a public which had become "increasingly concerned with the sociology of crime"—and made clear that societal injustice was a contributing factor to the events leading up to the execution (Schrob 155).

Samson Occom melded anticolonial thought to the sublime by drawing on the long association of terror with divinity and the all-powerful deity of the Old Testament. Throughout the sermon he consistently rendered death, torture, and vengeance as sublime. He also linked justice to terror when he said that "the day of death is now come; the king of terrors is at hands … the holy law of Jehovah, call aloud for the destruction of your mortal life" (188). Occom described the punishment that awaits Moses Paul in hell, "where everlasting wo and horror reigns; the place is filled with doleful shrieks, howls and groans" (188). These images conform to the definition of the sublime Burke provides when he argued its relation to terror, danger, and pain (*A Philosophical Enquiry* 39). However, whereas Occom employed the sublime to provoke the necessary transformation of the listeners' spiritual and social lives, Burke's concern for Christianity in his aesthetic writings and his writings on colonial America were meant to show how religions always have an element of the sublime (as power, pain, and terror) (70). He argued that Christianity could improve colonialism by making enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples more respectful and docile (Burke and Burke, *An Account* 1:241, 2:128). This demonstrates the contrast between Edmund Burke's use of the Biblical sublime in the Americas for the benefit of settler colonialism and slavery and Samson Occom's use of the sublime as a tool of critique of colonialism.

Occom wrote numerous petitions to colonial legislatures that emphasized the sublime's association with divinity. These petitions used narratives of Indigenous sovereignty, colonial history, and Biblical interpretation to affirm the rights and political power of Indigenous nations. In the petitions, "Occom expresses Native determination to survive as nations" within Indigenous communities constructed amid colonial violence (Wigginton 25). He argued that God-as-creator had confirmed the sovereignty of Indigenous nations; North America, he contended, was a central site in Biblical creation while its unique place in creation helped explain differences between European and Indigenous peoples: "The most Great, the Good and the Supream [sic] Spirit above Saw fit to Creat This World, and all Creatures and all things therein" ("Brotherton" 149). The Christian cosmology of the petitions represented North America as a "religiously chosen land" (Wigginton 47). The central images of fences and planting—as in "he fenced this great Continent by the Mighty Waters, all around, and it pleased him, to Plant our fore Fathers here first, and he gave them this Boundless Continent" (149)—are significant because both were essential to how British law conceptualized ownership: to fence and to plant were meant as acts of

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 1

sovereignty and property (Seed 19). For Occom, God as the great governor provides a political and an ontological frame for Indigenous claims of sovereignty and property on the continent. Contrasted with Edmund Burke's advocacy for the intensification of colonization based on the supposed Biblical commandment "to cultivate the earth and 'Encrease [sic] and Multiply" ("Conciliation with America" 132), Occom's supreme sovereign was cut from a different cloth.

Occom claimed in numerous 1780s petitions that the British took advantage of, defrauded, and stole Indigenous lands using a variety of tactics. In the Montaukett petition, for instance, he claimed the English made deals in bad faith and often resorted to outright theft: "some they bought almost for nothing, and we suppose they took a great deal without purchase" (151). He also highlighted how the British used alcohol as a weapon against Indigenous diplomats and leaders, "[d]rowned with Hott Waters before they made these Shameful agreements" (151). This history of acquisition of Indigenous land through fraud, theft, and guile contradicts Edmund Burke's figure of the unreliable Indigenous orator (as diplomat). By illuminating the nefarious actions of colonial officials, it narrates British duplicity and injustice as decisive in treaty negotiations. Occom and the signatories of the petition make explicit that these practices persisted after American independence. He named the citizens of Connecticut "our English Neighbors," which equated American citizens with the oppressors they had just recently thrown off ("Montaukett" 151). Overall, Occom's anticolonial use of the sublime centered on arguing for the Biblical legitimacy of Indigenous sovereignty and lands and utilizing the jeremiad as a critique of settler colonial violence against Indigenous nations. Moreover, his awareness of how Indigenous speakers were perceived as lacking rationality and understood as sublime in the American and British public imaginations attests to how Burke's colonial sublime was both context for and target in Occom's political, literary, and religious works. He wielded English literacy against colonialism in a political context in which such literacy was most often used to exploit Indigenous diplomats in their interactions with colonial agents. Explicitly criticizing the status quo in the same colonial language that was used to disadvantage nations (e.g., all treaties were written in English; Murray 21) was a powerful attempt at self-determination.

Ottobah Cugoano, the Sublime, and Global Colonial Critique

Ottobah Cugoano was a free Afro-British abolitionists who was born in 1757 and enslaved as a young boy in Ghana. He spent almost a year laboring on a plantation in Grenada before he was brought to London and became a servant to the painters Richard and Maria Cosway. His *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* published in 1787 was one of the most radical statements against chattel slavery during the eighteenth century; it argued for the immediate abolition of the slave trade and the rapid emancipation of enslaved people in the British colonies. Written in the form of a jeremiad, *Thoughts and Sentiments* presented readers with a sublime

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 1

connected to an omnipotent Christian deity.[19] It was a part of a larger body of abolitionist jeremiads published after the Seven Years' War (C. Brown 297). Although he is recognized as a contributor to the London abolitionist movement and leading voice on numerous subjects (including rights, liberty, poverty, crime, and reparations), few scholars have analyzed Cugoano's contributions to anticolonial aesthetic thought.

Ottobah Cugoano's anticolonial thought connected European colonization of Indigenous nations in the Caribbean, South America, and North America to the slave trade and plantation slavery. In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, European colonialism precedes and provides the framework for understanding the development and continuation of slavery. Interpreting the violence unleashed on Indigenous nations in the late fifteenth century, he argued that only the "most brutish" of people "could have […] treated the various Indian nations, in the manner that the barbarous inhuman Europeans have done" (61). Likewise, his global analysis of colonialism contended that all European colonies were created and were maintained through "murders and devastations" and that the essence of European colonialism was legible in the Spanish policies of "rapine, injustice, treachery, and murder" in the Caribbean, North America, and South America (62, 72). An example of this injustice and murder was British rule in India, which he portrayed as a parallel criminal enterprise to plantation slavery in the Caribbean (70). For Cugoano, the treatment of Indigenous people throughout the Americas was paradigmatic for understanding colonialism globally as well as slavery.

In *Thoughts and Sentiments,* Cugoano linked the sublime to the Christian god's capacity for divine retribution. He argued that slavery so contravened divine law that it would result in retribution against its perpetrators. He stated:

> For if the blood of one man unjustly shed cries with so loud a voice for Divine vengeance, how shall the cries and groans of a hundred of thousand men annually murdered ascend the celestial mansion, and bring down that punishment such enormities deserve? (76)

Given the magnitude of the crimes of enslavement, Cugoano contends that the punishment would be catastrophic. This would not be exceptional for a God who had historically authored "severe retaliations, revolutions and dreadful overthrows" (60) in delivering the oppressed. Cugoano prophesized divine vengeance unless there was a reformation of British morality and politics that ended the slave trade and plantation slavery. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed that devastating events reflected God's judgment of human affairs (Rublack 7). *Thoughts and Sentiments* advocated for a radical change in British behavior and the nation's relationship with God, whose clearest manifestation would be abolition. His terrifying vision of great punishments and revolutions drew upon the long association of the sublime with power and divinity.

Cugoano contested Burke's connection of the sublime with blackness and the idea that such blackness must be contained (i.e., *enslaved*) by representing the

[19] See Carretta, Sandiford, and Bogues.

violence of slavery as illegitimate. Although Cugoano did not use the exact vocabulary of the sublime (i.e., terror, awe, astonishment), he deployed closely related terminology. On his enslavement in Africa, he narrated the "dread" of capture and articulated the process of enslavement as being "conveyed to a state of horror" (15). In describing the kidnapping of Africans, he wrote that "no description can give adequate idea of horror of their feelings, and the dreadful calamities they undergo" (74). The horror and dread were not incidental, but primary aspects of slavery and its attempt to control enslaved people (V. Brown). The pervasive violence that accompanied and structured chattel slavery was intended to terrorize, provoke reverence, and command obedience. Cugoano wrote of the quotidian violence of slavery as "dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty, and seeing my miserable companions often cruelly lashed, and as it were cut to pieces, for the most trifling faults" (72). In contrast to Burke's example of the torture and public execution of the regicide Damien (*A Philosophical Enquiry* 39), Cugoano's witnessing of the pain and violence of his companions did not result in "a delightful horror" (136). Instead, it revealed the illegitimacy of the institution and its pervasive violence.

A key anticolonial dimension of Cugoano's engagement with British aesthetics was his deployment of blackness as beautiful. In *Thoughts and Sentiments*, he used an example of Biblical blackness to counter prevalent ideas of Black sin, sublimity, and ugliness: "Noah was an olive black in colour" (123). This has been recognized as a profound challenge to the discursive underpinnings of the slave trade and slavery but has not been interpreted more broadly to include a critique of territorial expansion (Wheeler 34). Cugoano obviously sought to challenge how Black figures were positioned in British visual culture as slaves, servants, and oddities and how this visual representation sought to strengthen white dominance of African descendants (Dabydeen). However, scholarly privileging of abolitionist arguments in the text has led to a lack of attention to how Cugoano's work also challenges colonial aesthetics. In *Thoughts and Sentiments* slavery and colonialism are conceptualized and historicized as co-constitutive not only in the Americas, but also in sacred history (47). In this way, Cugoano's gloss of Noah's skin color as "olive black" should be seen as reverberating throughout the late-eighteenth-century global British empire. Overall, his use of the sublime contributed to his thoroughgoing critique of slavery and colonialism within the jeremiad tradition; he deployed the sublime to argue that slavery was a crime that would be punished through divine retribution and to highlight the illegitimacy of the quotidian violence of slavery. Furthermore, Cugoano's awareness of the racial aesthetics that attached negative connotations to darkness resulted in his attack on the connections between darkness, sublimity, and European colonial violence. Thus, his deployment of a non-fair, "black," "olive" Noah and its anticolonial significance.

ECOZON@ | *Vol 16, No 1*

The Ecological Sublime and Colonialism

Examining Edmund Burke's sublime and its colonial entanglements alongside the anticolonial thought of Cugoano and Occom provides a robust eighteenth-century perspective on the contestations over aesthetics, settler colonialism, slavery, and global empire. Both Occom and Cugoano displayed an awareness of the colonial consequences of prevailing notions of human difference and of Edmund Burke's sublime. They employed explicitly Christian associations of the sublime with the power of God and divinity to challenge colonialism. Absent from this analysis is the Kantian sublime, its colonial contexts, and differences from Burke's sublime. Nonetheless, I would argue that Cugoano's and Occom's interventions are not irrelevant for an assessment of the legacy of the Kantian sublime: both Burke and Kant use philosophical anthropologies that positioned Europeans as civilized and rational in contrast to the rest of the world; these hierarchies were intertwined and embedded in their constructions of aesthetic theory. From the perspective of eighteenth-century Black and Indigenous people, it would not matter whether the sublime was explicated by Burke or Kant, as neither conferred them full humanity. While this history of colonial aesthetics may seem distant from the contemporary ecological concerns that are central to this special issue, the coeval construction of aesthetics and colonialism remains critical as the scholarship on the ecological sublime continues to develop. The ecological sublime as expounded by contemporary scholars has a vexed relationship to the connected histories of colonialism, aesthetics, and anticolonialism as well as the contemporary politics and philosophies that emerged from these intertwined histories. The colonial history of the sublime is often dismissed or avoided, while contemporary Indigenous and Black anticolonial ecological politics and philosophies are ignored or denigrated. This "colonial and environmental double fracture" (Malcolm 3), which makes colonial history and anticolonial politics subordinate to environmental history and environmentalism, is prevalent in the literature on the ecological sublime.

The ecological sublime can be understood as an experience of the "nonhuman world," the "natural world," or "natural spaces" that results in a break with the normal sense of self and rationality (Hitt 609; Dunaway 97; Rozelle 1). This in turn facilitates a reappraisal of a persons' relationship to the environment. Encounters that cause the ecological sublime are connected to the ability of natural phenomena to produce disorientation and overwhelming thoughts and emotions (Hitt 605); they involve "awe and terror," "wonder," "'admiration' and 'respect'" (Rozelle 1; Dunaway 81; and Hitt 607). As a transformative moment in an individual's relationship to nature, the ecological sublime carries the possibility of profound change. It may help prompt "responsible engagements with natural spaces" or foster "stewardship" (Rozelle 1; Dunaway 97). This is accomplished by the disruption of the ordinary functioning of language, culture, and human context (Hitt 614; Rozelle 2; Outka 203). The experience becomes the basis of a new relationship with the natural environment as well as a model for new thoughts and practices. The ecological sublime in its political

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 1

aspects challenges status quo policies and ideas that are damaging to the environment and natural spaces due to cultural, linguistic, and social orders that cause environmental destruction. However, this political orientation has left the politics of colonialism largely untouched.

Advocates for the ecological sublime have often ignored, trivialized, or mishandled the historical and contemporary relationships between the sublime and colonialism. Christopher Hitt, for instance, argues that the "ideological" connections between the sublime and racial hierarchies, gender subordination, and colonialism should not prevent the recovery of the sublime (603). The supposed universal experience of the sublime is privileged over the less universal experience of colonialism. In a similar vein, Lee Rozelle addresses colonialism and slavery, but in exploitative ways; in particular, Black and Indigenous histories and bodies become handmaidens in the analyses of ecosublimity. Utilized for the purpose of representing moral clarity and to provide intellectual equivalence to ecological devastation, Black and Indigenous people are rendered indistinct through representations of extreme violence (26-28, 78). A telling detail of the analysis is that the concluding image of a just environmental future is devoid of any mention of the dismantling of racial domination and colonialism, but instead features decentralization, decreased population, and small towns (113). Paul Outka's engagement with the ecological sublime, in contrast, does address "modernity's colonial double fracture" (Ferdinand 3), especially as it relates to slavery. This is primarily because he places into relation chattel slavery as a project of racial subjugation and the construction of white racial identity through experiences of nature (4). However, Outka's optimism that the U.S. may have reached a point of safety whereby the ecological sublime can work simultaneously on uncritical ideas of the natural world and on the racial trauma of slavery has not come to pass (202).

The "double fracture" also appears to haunt the Anthropocene sublime. Marco Caracciolo's analyses of the limits of the Anthropocene sublime focuses on the necessity of conceptualizing movement as materialist, kinetic, and emotional, which would allow for a deepening communication and relation with the physical world. His account does not deal with the complexities of embodied racialized material emotions, such as Edmund Burke's terrifying Black woman, or the larger politics of colonialism and the "afterlives of slavery" that have been a part of "values and cultural views that become entangled with our emotional meaning-making" (304). In this way, his account appears to leave the colonial status quo intact in the same way that Hitt's did decades ago. In a more contentious vein, Claire Colebrook's view of politics reduces Indigenous and Black contestations against colonialism to a politics of difference (91). Her politics of difference functions as an interpretation of electoral and grassroots politics that she believes are no longer concerned with "socio-economic" relations but rather with affect and identity (115). This Nietzschean and Foucauldian view helps underwrite her desire for a "geological sublime" that would read the human imprint on the planet as an archive of material practices without "readability" or "spirit" (124).

ECOZON@ | Vol 16, No 1

The philosophical stakes of the ecological sublime are hidden in plain sight; a common assumption is its universality. Without attending to the fact that this experience may only be confined to specific cultures and traditions, scholars of the ecological sublime write in the idiom of a "we" which includes all humans regardless or despite cultural differences (Caracciolo 299; Rozelle 2; Outka 202). It is because the sublime experience is universal that it is so attractive as a mode of relating. As Hitt states: "I consider the sublime to be a particular cultural and/or literary expression of something that is indeed universal: human being's encounters with a nonhuman world whose power ultimately exceeds theirs" (609). If the promise of the sublime is that it can be universalized, then at the bottom of this promise is a particular view of the human: a European one. The critiques of humanism that emerged from outside of Europe have long questioned the universality of European philosophy, including how it establishes itself by remaining pure through non-engagement with other philosophical traditions (Grosfoguel). Moreover, the privileging of European philosophy to solve problems that were created through European thought poses a classic post-Second World War problem recognized by European philosophers. What does one do with a tradition that seems capable of creating the most explosive violence (Arendt)? From the Americas, the question was asked differently: how does one assess a philosophical tradition and civilization that refuses to admit what ails it? If European modernity is in fact a decadent, stricken, and dying civilization that has created problems that it is incapable of solving, including colonialism, capitalism, and environmental destruction, turning to it for answers would be folly (Césaire 31). This is the challenge of the decolonial turn in Black thought; Indigenous thought also has its decolonial streams.[20] The universality of the ecological sublime is what gives it philosophical, ethical, and political weight, but it is exactly this universality that goes unexamined in the scholarship, not only philosophically but also historically, when scholarship denies the colonial underpinnings and anticolonial contestations surrounding the sublime.

Conclusion

Erasing the political history, especially the colonial and anticolonial history, of Burke's sublime has resulted in the sanitized emergence of the ecological sublime; this historical erasure has facilitated the elision of the contemporary workings of colonialism, including settler colonialism, and contemporary Indigenous and Black anticolonial politics. Similarly, the ecological sublime and Anthropocene sublime have avoided engaging Indigenous and Black philosophical traditions that would have challenged its standing, presuppositions, and orientations. These include the scholarship on Black and Indigenous ecologies which have been instrumental in providing a counterweight to Eurocentric environmentalism.[21]

[20] See Maldonado-Torres and Sium et al.

[21] For Black ecologies see Hosbey et al. and Moulton. For Indigenous ecologies see Whyte, "Indigenous" and Maracle.

This inevitably brings up the questions of whom the ecological sublime and Anthropocene sublime are attractive to as means of dealing with current political, economic, and ecological devastations? And why? The ecological sublime may be attractive to some because of its elision or non-inclusion of the histories and materialities of colonialism and the ongoing processes of colonial modernity. In fact, it might be the absence of sublime bodies (and histories) that renders the discourse itself beautiful, an old but effective slight-of-hand of Eurocentrism. As has been examined above, the Burkean (and Kantian) discourses of the sublime have not been neutral, but rather overwhelmingly harmful to colonized populations in the Americas. This is due to the sublime's ability to frame Black and Indigenous peoples and nations as uncivilized, irrational, violent, inferior, disposable, exploitable, and in need of European domination. From this perspective, a theoretical, philosophical, and political turn to the ecological sublime by Indigenous and Black thinkers and activists in the Americas would arguably be a turn towards whiteness and an abandonment of the anticolonial ecological aesthetics that have sustained nations and communities for centuries. This too is a trick of colonialism.[22] Querying the ecological sublime from the Americas means doing so with attentiveness to the historic and continual presence of colonialism, including settler colonialism, and the "afterlives of slavery."

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[22] For Fanon, colonized peoples' aspirations to whiteness negates their own existence; while for Coulthard, recognition by the settler colonial state constitutes the colonial relation.

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