

Imagining ‘Our Ancestors’: Liberal Indigeneity and the Repudiation of Colonialism in Postimperial Britain

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Abstract

This article examines imaginative connections to an indigenous ancestry in popular British nonfiction writing on nature, landscape, and environment. It coins the term ‘liberal indigeneity’ to characterize ostensibly plural, inclusive engagements with Britain’s prehistoric past that promise to reconnect with nature and recover lost forms of identity, community, and relationality. Though animating interests that diverge considerably from the far right’s exclusionary racism, I suggest that liberal indigeneity’s understanding of ‘our ancestors’ is inflected by the coloniality it tries to reject. By overidentifying with actually existing indigenous peoples on the (ex-)imperial periphery, liberal indigeneity acknowledges the racial violence of empire but comes to terms with it inadequately by conjuring a scenario in which colonialism has made victims of us all. Drawing on discussions of white self-indigenisation in settler-colonial contexts, I suggest that liberal indigeneity is part of a similar process of racial formation where white privilege is maintained through its disavowal.

Keywords

indigeneity, prehistory, race, whiteness, nativism, popular culture

There is a widespread engagement with prehistory in contemporary British culture. Bestselling coffee-table books like *Weird Walk* encourage their readership to revel in a ‘distant pagan past’ (2023: 79) through participation in ancient folk rituals and visits to neolithic standing stones, while sold-out events programmed by Stone Club (‘recreating prehistory since 2021’) promise to connect members to ‘ancient sites through community and conversation’ (2024). Prehistory is evoked in rewilding initiatives aspiring to recreate landscapes that have not existed on this East Atlantic archipelago for thousands of years: the owners of an island in the Outer Hebrides report that they plan to take it

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‘back to the bronze age’ (Abdul, 2024), while part of a Welsh valley ‘is to be restored to its ancient glory’ with planting to resemble ‘neolithic times when our ancestors were first creating woodland clearings’ (Morris, 2024). Nature writing journeys ‘into the landscapes of our ancestors’, making imaginative connections ‘back through deep time, across 10,000 years, when Mesolithic people lived upon these lands’ (Canton, 2023: 239), while popular environmentalism calls on us to rebuild a culture ‘that came intuitively to our ancestors’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: xi). At the end of our lives we can now commission the funeral company Sacred Stones (2024) to inter our ashes in a recreated Neolithic barrow, promoted as ‘the first of its kind for some 3,500 years’.

What are we to make of these voices that entreat 21st-century Britons to step back in time, and what kind of relation do they assume between those various thens and now? What meanings derive from these transmillennial connections to a common territory that has come to be defined in recent historical time by the political entity of the British nation-state, and what does all this tell us about the expression of identity and belonging in post-imperial, post-Brexit Britain? Drawing on examples from popular nonfiction, this article will suggest that we can make some sense of these excursions into Britain’s distant human past as engagements with the conceptual field of indigeneity.¹

Two Problems with British Indigeneity

To begin this discussion, it is worth acknowledging that there are two problems that might be thought *prima facie* to rule out claims to British indigeneity or its interpretive deployment in discussions like this. The first of these relates to its historicity, which is at significant variance to the most literal reading of indigeneity as describing the ‘original’ inhabitants of any given territory. As a term given shape by modern European imperial and colonial history, ‘indigenous’ was used by European colonizers to give a single name to the multiplicity of peoples they encountered. As an invention of coloniality (Ndlovu, 2019), the definition of who is indigenous ‘implies a colonialist language and a colonialist categorisation of people’ (Haber, 2007: 225). Even now when the valences of the term have shifted so that it has become a tool of Indigenous emancipation, indigeneity remains fundamentally marked by the history of its origination. While it can be rhetorically important and sometimes politically necessary to demonstrate that an Indigenous group has lived in a place for a significant period of time, the claim to indigeneity is relative, not absolute. What really counts is that an Indigenous group was in place prior to colonization.

Such an assessment fits with a relative consensus that now persists in Western anthropology. After some disciplinary hand-wringing at the turn of the current century that the term might tend to essentializing racial distinctions as a synonym for the discredited ‘primitive’ (see Asch et al., 2004; Barnard, 2007; Kuper, 2003), it is now generally agreed that ‘indigenous’ is a way of describing ‘comparable experiences of invasion, dispossession, resistance, and survival’ (Clifford, 2013: 26). Definitions like this do not need to involve themselves in testing the validity of Indigenous groups’ origin claims, and there is no defined temporal limit to determine a people’s Indigenous status. The common experience of displacement means that neither is there a requirement that Indigenous groups prove they were the first to occupy a particular territory, nor that they

should now be living within it. By framing indigeneity as a relational term focused on 'the fundamental issues of power and dispossession that those calling themselves indigenous are concerned to address' (Kenrick and Lewis, 2004: 10), it is not necessary for Indigenous peoples to have anything in common with one another beyond the central historical experience of colonization.

It is this shared exposure to colonial modernity that has informed the internationalist movement of Indigenous peoples and their struggles for rights and recognition through bodies like the United Nations. Indigenous identity, as we understand it today, is therefore best understood not as a 'primordial' survival but the complex outcome of marginalized and oppressed groups defining a sense of themselves within the international political and legal architecture of the second half of the 20th century and beyond (Merlan, 2009; Niezen, 2003). Indigeneity is generative, 'enabling mutual recognition and collaboration by indigenous peoples across disparate histories and geographies' (Tallbear, 2013: 6). In such frameworks of understanding, Indigenous peoples shake off a conception of themselves as the last surviving remnants of permanently diminishing cultures. Instead, they open up possibilities for Indigenous growth and renewal, even as they simultaneously broker strategic compromises with nation-states, always existing in tension with ongoing relations of coloniality at local, national and international levels.

It can be convincingly argued, therefore, that the idea of an indigenous relationship to Britain is straightforwardly a category error, a term misapplied. While many individuals and groups will, to varying degrees of credibility, make ancestral claims to identity and belonging, any assertion of indigeneity in contemporary Britain remains a contradiction in terms. If we hold to the idea that to be Indigenous is, to borrow a phrase from Doreen Massey (1994), to be 'on the receiving end' of colonial modernity, then 'indigenous' cannot be meaningfully applied to describe the culture or identity of groups or individuals hailing from the imperial or postimperial centre. Put simply, the colonizer cannot become the colonized.

If we are to understand the claim to British indigeneity as an inadmissible inversion of the relations of coloniality, we can register a similar objection to a second problem: the appropriation of the language of indigeneity by the far right. Making an appearance on BBC1's *Question Time* in October 2009, Nick Griffin, then Chair of the British National Party, claimed that 'the indigenous people of these islands [. . .] the people who have been here overwhelmingly for the last 17,000 years: we are the aborigines here'. Presented as equivalent to the indigenous claims of 'a Maori' or 'an American red Indian [sic]', Griffin went on to argue that indigenous Britons are suppressed in 'extraordinarily racist' ways and as a result 'feel shut out in our own country' (BBC, 2009). Griffin's co-optation of the burgeoning language of Indigenous rights has much in common with the rhetoric of other ethnonationalist and neofascist movements across contemporary Europe, representing 'a curious shift from a rhetoric of superiority to a rhetoric of victimhood' (Kirwan and Stirrup, 2013: 68). It is in this climate that the European far-right 'identitarian' group Generation Identity claim on their current UK website to defend an 'indigenous population' and preserve 'the ethno-cultural tradition of our ancestors' against 'the pressures of mass immigration and Islamization'. Generation Identity invoke the international language of indigenous rights in their assertion that 'all peoples have the right to preserve and defend the characteristics and features of their ethnocultural

identity' (Generation Identity, 2024). British far-right group Patriotic Alternative have organized hikes to ancient monuments and held events to coincide with International Indigenous People's Day (Farrell-Banks and Richardson, 2024). Making explicit reference to the white supremacist 'great replacement theory', the blurb for the bestselling *Manifesto* by far-right activist and co-founder of the English Defence League Tommy Robinson claims that 'the political class have openly planned to replace the indigenous people of Europe' (Robinson and McLoughlin, 2024).

Were it possible to ascribe invocations of British indigeneity to the cynical machinations of the far right alone, we might be content to end our discussion here. It would serve as an interesting case study of 'ethnic drag' (Attewell, 2016) that would tell us about the dis- and re-articulation of the language of Indigenous rights as they have travelled from the ex-colonized to the ex-colonizer. We would be able to make connections to the wider appropriation of liberation struggles by right-wing populists setting up poor white communities as rivals to minoritized groups and vulnerable migrant communities who are said to be receiving preferential treatment at the hand of cosmopolitan elites (Mondon and Winter, 2020). We might consider too how the right-wing language of British indigeneity harmonizes with an older lexicon of European racial nationalism, akin to the Dutch distinction between *autochtonen* and *allochtonen*, the French distinction between *Français de souche* and *Français de papier*, and expressions of German *Heimat* centred on *Blut und Boden* (Geschiere, 2009). We might go on to consider how this cocktail of white victimhood and primal territorial entitlement informs the actions of both neo-Nazi sects who vow to 'take back' Neolithic sites (Dixon, 2019) and emboldened white racists who have orchestrated attacks on asylum seeker accommodation and marched through English towns chanting 'we want our country back' (Sinmaz and Vinter, 2024).

Yet the language of indigeneity is not so neatly contained. In much the same way that the far right have capitalized on the political mainstream's legitimization of its anti-immigrant racism ('we want our country back' was frequently accompanied on those marches by 'stop the boats', a Tory election slogan that in both opposition and government Labour chose not to contest), the terrain on which far-right claims to British indigeneity have grown has significant political breadth. Hans-Georg Betz gives a clear account of the shift in European politics from 'economic' to 'symbolic' nativism, as immigrant groups have become framed as 'ethnoculturally "incommensurable" with the indigenous population'. According to Betz, symbolic nativism has come to centre on the putative 'defence of the fundamental traditions, values, and historically evolved institutional arrangements that define a particular community, its culture and identity' (Betz, 2019: 112, 123). Brexit was most obviously enabled by symbolic nativism, but its roots in the political mainstream can be traced further back in recent British political history in fumbling attempts to parse the meaning of national identity in a multicultural society striated with racism, such as in efforts to define the cultural content of 'Britishness' under New Labour (Pitcher, 2009).

It is my suggestion, then, that we might think about the appeal of indigeneity in Britain in relation to a wider landscape of identity practices where the logics that underpin symbolic nativism are at work in the conceptualization of identity and belonging. For a culture already very much in the grip of tradition as a 'sense of predisposed continuity'

(Williams, 2009: 62), notions of indigeneity appear to offer up to a variety of social actors a ‘perceived structure of inheritance’ (Smith, 2023: 123) that provides points of anchor and orientation in a period of political uncertainty and change. Symbolic nativism sounded most loudly at the moment of Brexit and it is most clearly audible in the language of the far right, but the rhythm of a nativist mood music resonates throughout British culture as a whole. By coining the term ‘liberal indigeneity’ to describe forms of indigenous identification that are distinct from those of the far right, I try to account for a wider set of identity practices that present themselves as inclusive and internally diverse. If far-right indigeneity is underpinned by a racist imaginary, liberal indigeneity seeks to construct an alternative origin story structured by the rejection of racism and white privilege.

It is my argument that a close examination of the racial politics of liberal indigeneity will complicate its apparent antiracism. As I have already made clear, the centrality of colonialism to the shaping of indigeneity means that it is a term erroneously applied to identities which have been on the ‘giving’ rather than ‘receiving’ end of colonial modernity. The critical task undertaken in this article is therefore not of attempting to establish the legitimacy of liberal indigeneity in the British context, but rather of trying to understand how and why the language of indigeneity has developed a life outside of far-right circles, and the uses to which it is being put. Although far-right iterations appear to be a foil against which liberal indigeneity sets itself, I suggest that liberal indigeneity retains an underlying affinity with white nationalist claims to identity and belonging. In making this argument, I suggest that we can reveal something about racial formation in contemporary Britain and in particular the ways in which white racial guilt produces colonialism as an object of discomfort and shame. Appearing to promise a way out of this bind, identification with the victims of colonialism becomes in effect a refusal to face up to the ongoing privileges of whiteness. If we place a slightly different emphasis on the understanding that indigenous identities are positions ‘embedded in networks knitted by colonial relations’ (Haber, 2007: 216), and draw our attention to questions of identity and belonging not among the colonized but in the ex-colonial centre, then careful consideration of the language of liberal indigeneity can reveal much about life in postcolonial, postimperial Britain and its ongoing entanglements in coloniality.

Two Stories about Indigeneity in Contemporary Britain

It will be useful at this juncture to give some examples of the ways in which relations to the distant past have come to resonate in contemporary British culture, and how they engage the conceptual field of indigeneity. I will start with an image that is shared by the opening chapter of *British Woodland: How to Explore the Secret World of Our Forests* (2023) by self-styled ‘bushcraft and survival expert’ Ray Mears, and the first chapter by right-to-roam campaigner Jon Moses of the multi-authored *Wild Service: Why Nature Needs You* (Hayes and Moses, 2024). Both writers situate themselves in the contemporary British landscape: for Mears it is the Chiltern Hills of Southern England, for Moses the Severn Estuary in South Wales. From these respective locations, Mears and Moses imagine an encounter with prehistoric humans: Mears hears the laughter and imagines the presence of two young women from around 15,000 years ago (Mears, 2023: 6);

Moses watches two children foraging for shellfish ‘about 8,000 years ago, sometime in the Upper Mesolithic’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 1). The timeframes are different, but the narrative function is the same: Mears and Moses evoke a common landscape across time to stress a continuity of place and, within this, explore a contrast between the human cultures of then and now. Across chapters on subjects such as ‘way finding’, ‘fire’, ‘food’, ‘shelter’, and ‘fibre’, Mears’s young women are the first in a series of prehistoric peoples employed to illustrate ways of utilizing the trees and plants of the British landscape to sustain themselves and their cultures. ‘[S]omewhere deep in all of us’, he later argues, ‘there is a vestige of our hunter-gatherer forebears’ (Mears, 2023: 196). Moses’s ‘wee ancestral foragers’ provide an example of a period in time when ‘connection to nature was a given’ and from which we might learn in our current historical moment in which we have, he writes, become ‘unstitched from the tapestry of life’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 3, 1, 2).

There is an interesting slippage at work in both these efforts to connect with and learn from the ways of the distant human past. Both conjure the lives of prehistoric hunter gatherer humans to tell a story about who we are *as a species*: Mears’s young women are ‘our direct ancestors, *Homo sapiens*’ (Mears, 2023: 6); the natural environment in which Moses’s Mesolithic children dwell is ‘where we evolved to be’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 2). Yet because these species-level connections are occurring within a landscape space that is common to both narrators and narrated, a more direct and consequential genealogy is also implied: a species relationship becomes confused with or is collapsed into a common identity as a people. In Mears’s book, national identity makes a retrospective claim on both the prehistoric land and its peoples as he asks us to ‘think of our ancestors’ who followed Birch trees ‘back onto our soil, at a time when Britain was an unfamiliar, pristine wild landscape’ (Mears, 2023: 39). Instructing us to ‘[d]ig where you stand and you’ll find what you need’, Moses traces a long history between his Mesolithic children and the present, asserting an ‘unspoken connection which entwines the alterity of the earth deep into the strata of our selves’ as ‘a kind of ancestral memory’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 3, 14, 20). While we don’t have to read either of these as a literal claim of direct descendence, the relationship that gets set up between ‘our ancestors’ and the people of the present inhabiting a single common landscape gives us pause to consider the relationship between such statements and the idea of a ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ claim to identity and belonging.

Such associations are buttressed in both texts by frequent references to Indigenous others. In *British Woodland*, Mears makes repeated recourse to ethnographic analogy where the practices of Indigenous and First Nations peoples are said to give insights into the lives of ‘our ancestors’. By using the technology of the hand drill to light a fire, Mears makes a skilled connection

to my beloved trees and fungi, to my ancestors, to the ancient past and to my many friends in indigenous communities both past and present who also have twirled sticks for fire. (Mears, 2023: 111)

In a similar vein, Moses quotes the organizers of a ‘Stone Age Club’ set up ‘to teach ancient skills’ who assert that:

There are indigenous groups around the world who have remained gatherer-hunter cultures who have against the odds continued to survive to this day, and our hope is that if they were to meet a child in our group, they would have some skills in common to connect over. (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 18, 19, 23)

There is an established literature in archaeology, anthropology, and related disciplines that highlights the problems with making a direct analogy between ancient and indigenous peoples on the basis of a shared technology or culture, not least because it can echo or repeat the hierarchies of racial difference central to the classificatory logics of European colonialism, and invest in notions of Indigenous culture as the untouched remnants of 'earlier' cultural practices (Etherington, 2024; Lavi et al., 2023; Pitcher, 2022; Shryock and Smail, 2011; Sterling, 2015; Widerquist and McCall, 2017). That both Mears and Moses have a positive assessment of indigenous cultures does not exempt them from such a critique, but it does give their interest in making a personal connection to ancestral cultures a different flavour to the symbolic nativism of the far right. While the far right might be said to appropriate the language of indigeneity as a framework to construct their own 'ethnocultural identity' in a backlash against the confected threat of racialized others, Mears's and Moses's investments in indigeneity are not remotely xenophobic. Indeed, both exhibit a positive embrace of Indigenous difference as a means of reconnecting to the lost cultures of 'our ancestors'. To consider what these liberal engagements with indigeneity might mean, it is worth giving some thought to the books' audiences and the problems to which they give life.

As mass market nonfiction books, *British Woodland* and *Wild Service* can both be said to animate popular interests and concerns. They are explicit about their intentions, addressing a readership broadly concerned with environmental issues. Mears's back cover copy promises that 'with Ray as our guide [. . .] we can learn how to live inclusively in nature, for our own wellbeing and enjoyment, and also for the future of the planet'. The front cover of *Wild Service* presents the book as a 'call to action' by Right to Roam, a group campaigning for access rights to the countryside founded and directed by several of the book's contributors, including Moses himself. Both books are centred on cultivating a relationship to the land as a reconnection to that which has been lost or forgotten. Contemporary culture is in a state of alienation from nature, and it is for this reason, as the prologue to *Wild Service* puts it, that

we must look to other cultures for guidance. Each and every one of the essays that follows has drawn from the knowledge of indigenous philosophies from around the world. Many of these cultures have, despite the many attempts at suppression, kept the threads alive between their present selves and the old ways. If we listen to them, perhaps we, too, can begin to patch up our old tapestry, mend and reweave the broken strands. (Hayes and Moses, 2024: xi)

The contributors to *Wild Service* have differences in their approach to indigeneity: some advocate a position of learning from Indigenous peoples to rediscover 'our place in nature again' but warn that 'we don't need to claim indigeneity ourselves'. Another discerns in the revival of wassailing the germ of a home-grown indigeneity, 'a festival of reciprocity as potent as any we might look to indigenous cultures elsewhere to provide',

adding, in a hopeful tone, ‘perhaps we do still know how to do this’. The folk musician Sam Lee writes less equivocally of his ‘search for what a multicultural indigenous British identity could be’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 84, 88, 112, 201). In all cases, actually existing Indigenous cultures provide ‘guidance’ for developing improved relationships to the land and to one another. Locality, community, sustainability, and natural harmony are the various objects of contemporary ecological desire that are brought to life in the example of Indigenous peoples.

These often tentative invocations of liberal indigeneity need to be understood in their wider cultural context. Although there is a lot of clear water between these books’ expressions of popular environmentalism and the symbolic nativism of the far right, they can both be understood as having been shaped, at least in part, by some of the same economic, political, and cultural conditions: Britain’s long-term postcolonial decline and the nationalist politics of Brexit are factors here, as is the transnational language of indigeneity as a burgeoning resource for the expression of identity and belonging. Though they are part of different political projects, right-wing and liberal expressions of indigeneity in the UK both describe investments in ancient ancestors that give significance and meaning to their respective endeavours. As ecological and environmentalist discourses come to valorize that which is considered natural, local, and sustainable, could it be that liberal indigeneity has become an equivalent form of identification to the symbolic nativism of the far right, a version of identity and belonging that is similarly in-place and ‘home grown’?

The Plurality of Liberal Indigeneity

If liberal indigeneity represents a version of identity and belonging made possible by a nativist zeitgeist, it is therefore inevitably caught up in the cultural politics of race. While the far-right appeal to indigeneity is an unambiguous expression of proprietorial whiteness, liberal indigeneity has an explicitly pluralistic intonation, inverting the right’s hostility to outsiders. The coffee-table book *Weird Walk* illustrates this well. The authors of *Weird Walk* make the same kind of deep time connections to ‘our ancestors’ as *British Woodlands* and *Wild Service*: they write of accessing ‘something wilder, more primal’ than a romanticized ‘Merrie England’, said to ‘speak to a deep thread woven into our psyche’ in essays that celebrate seasonality, tradition, spirituality, nature, and community (Weird Walk, 2023: 19, 79). In contrast to the indigenous claims of the far right, the ancestor talk in *Weird Walk* foregrounds its own diversity: the book’s preamble starts with Britain’s inhabitants ‘[a]t the close of the last ice age, over 12,000 years ago’, but they are soon accompanied by subsequent migrants in prehistory and history, ‘and today a blend of myriad nationalities and ethnicities’. The Thaxted Morris may be a ‘strange, peculiarly British dance’, but its ‘positive energy’ is soaked up by ‘folk from many different backgrounds’. The book’s summative afterword portrays the British countryside as ‘a deep resource of rich, transformative strangeness [. . .] that should be available to us all, regardless of our background or identity’; it insists that the spectacles and customs that are ‘woven into our landscape [. . .] belong to everyone’ (Weird Walk, 2023: 11, 106, 275).

When *Weird Walk* describes ‘[o]ur ancestors’ congregating at the Neolithic megalithic complex of Avebury and the repetition of this behaviour ‘thousands of years later’ (Weird

Walk, 2023: 122), this is not therefore a genealogical or racially exclusive claim, but one that centres on the cultural plurality of the present. The distant past is available to anyone who finds meaning in making a connection with it. *Weird Walk*'s presentation of diverse pasts and presents is content not to police a distinction between citizens and non-citizens, and its depiction of a nation of immigrants thus remains open to future visitors making Britain their home. This kind of relationship to the distant past chimes with that of arts and events organization Stone Club, who aim 'to bring new perspectives to prehistory in a collaborative and inclusive way' and insist in the 'Second rule of Stone Club' that 'Stone Club is for everyone' (Stone Club, 2024). Such statements have a clear affinity with a more established practice in the English folk scene: the Tradfolk website, for example, asserts that 'We're absolutely NOT about appropriating Englishness for right-wing causes. Quite the opposite. It's about inclusivity, not exclusivity' (Tradfolk, 2024). This more categorical statement can be understood as a product of the rejection of the far-right's advances on English folk culture in the early 2000s which involved the creation of Folk Against Fascism in 2009 (Winter and Keegan-Phipps, 2013).² Following this lead, liberal indigeneity positions itself as multicultural and at times explicitly antiracist: *Wild Service* includes contributors like Nadia Shaikh, who draws attention to the whiteness of conservation organizations and advances a critique of nature conservation 'as a modern extension of colonialism' (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 33). The racial awareness of liberal indigeneity is not peripheral to its meanings as it opposes the claims of the far right and works to mitigate its exclusionary potential by foregrounding migration and cultural pluralism as characteristics of both past and present.³

The questions to ask of an anti-racist rebuttal, though, are why it is felt necessary in the first place, and in whose interests is it being made? In my reading, the diversity of liberal indigeneity is necessary because it tells a tale for and about white people, giving them a back-story that is equivalent to the ancestral claims of the far right but which is not troubled by their racial exclusivity. It allows liberal white people to identify with a native British culture while proofing that culture against the stain of racism. In much the same way that racially minoritized groups are encouraged to get back in touch with their ancestral roots to anchor notions of culture and identity (a prevailing logic itself entirely congruent with the ethos of symbolic nativism), liberal indigeneity provides liberal white people with their own unique point of origin from which to derive meaning and significance. Liberal indigeneity is hereby an 'ethnically appropriate' (Pitcher, 2014: chap. 2) form of identification available to white British people that is innocent of any charge of cultural insensitivity or misappropriation. Although the exponents of liberal indigeneity may themselves be black or brown, they are to a significant extent servicing a white fantasy of identity and belonging.

Identification with the Colonized

If the diversity and pluralism of liberal indigeneity can be said to benefit the identity practices of white people, it is instructive to bring the question of whiteness to the fore. In the following discussion I would like to draw attention to the *relationship* between invocations of liberal indigeneity in the United Kingdom and the struggles of actually existing indigenous groups, particularly those in settler colonial contexts connected to

Britain by its imperial and colonial history. This relationship is not only, as I have already shown, important in defining what an indigenous connection to land looks like (where we in Britain are positioned as the students of indigenous peoples who will teach us how to live a richer, happier, and more sustainable life). It is also crucial in shaping the self-image of those subjects who derive meaning through practices of indigenous identification. The far right's articulations of indigeneity are easily dismissed as opportunistic appropriations of identity politics, but the resonances of liberal indigeneity appear to have a profounder hold on the way white liberal subjects imagine their ancestral roots.

One of the most important themes in European race studies concerns the difficulties of understanding and coming to terms with imperial and colonial history, resulting in forms of cultural aphasia, amnesia, forgetting, or disavowal, or in forms of psychic investment in the glories of empire that suggest an inability to move on (e.g. Gilroy, 2004; Stoler, 2011). It is my contention that the contemporary turn to liberal indigeneity in Britain is similarly an expression of this difficult relationship to Britain's imperial past. I want to suggest that the connections liberal indigeneity makes to an indigenous British ancestor are produced through an emphatic identification – ultimately, I argue, an overidentification – with the figure of the Indigenous found most prominently in historical settler-colonial contexts. Liberal indigeneity can be understood as a reframing of the postcolonial self through the device of the colonized other. From this perspective the strangeness and alterity celebrated in *Weird Walk* comes into focus as a refraction of racialized otherness. When the contemporary white British person forges a connection to an indigenous ancestor, they are setting up an understanding of themselves as the correlative of a 'real' (that is, colonized) Indigenous person. This discussion will explore the reasons why such forms of identification are taking place.

Fantasies of liberal indigeneity in Britain are, as sketched above, very much about reconnection and recovery. Their narratives of loss are predicated on the sense of a longstanding alienation from land and nature. By learning from the practices of Indigenous peoples it becomes possible to revive a native British indigeneity and begin to close that gap. In the words of Ray Mears, we become able to 'see beyond the blinding dazzle of our technology and re-establish a more respectful and harmonious relationship with the forest, our planet and with nature herself [sic]' (Mears, 2023: 119). As in the case of settler-colonial contexts, Indigenous peoples offer models of community, spirituality, and authenticity that white people are said to lack (Gaudry, 2018; Tallbear, 2021). But instead of appropriating the identities of colonized peoples themselves, liberal indigeneity uses them as a stepping stone to imagine indigenous British ancestors. If such forms of indigenous identification can be said to reflect 'an increased dissatisfaction with the political and cultural modernity on offer in Europe' (Stirrup, 2013: 2), then the story that is implicit to liberal indigeneity in Britain is of the cultural losses that occurred as a consequence of the advent of European modernity itself. This does not necessarily make the putative antecedent referents of liberal indigeneity the 'oldest' forms of indigenous culture,⁴ but it constructs them as the *first* kinds of indigenous culture to feel the forces of the modern world that only later would find expression in the colonial projects of European empires.

In other words, liberal indigeneity in Britain says not only that 'we were the victims of colonialism too', but moreover that in some sense 'we experienced it first'. This is the

frame of reference deployed by Harry Jenkinson in *Wild Service* when he argues that ‘systems of land grabbing’ deployed in practices of enclosure ‘were perfected in England before being exported abroad to reinforce colonial systems’. Later in the book Nick Hayes argues that ‘European imperialism had to destroy the relationships that communities held with the land’, and that by imposing an ideology that separates culture from nature ‘on other lands, we cemented it deeper into ours’ (Hayes and Moses, 2024: 93, 148). Accepting that such stories may help reveal some meaningful continuities between expressions of colonial modernity at home and abroad (see Kenrick, 2011), the theme of ‘internal colonialism’ (Ferlat, 2019) also encourages a more troubling identification with Indigenous otherness that serves to flatten out the racialized power relations of the present. An identity between ‘our ancestors’ and the Indigenous colonized potentially reduces the moral and historical grounds for reparation, and colonial victimhood becomes framed as a universal characteristic of the modern human condition. It is at this point where liberal indigeneity embraces its own subalternity that it resembles quite closely its right-wing counterparts.⁵

Despite this family resemblance, liberal indigeneity continues to tell a rival story to that of the far right. Consider, for example, James Canton’s *Grounded: A Journey into the Landscapes of Our Ancestors* (2023), which plays out the encounter between indigenous and colonizer in its meditation on the meeting of Mesolithic and Neolithic peoples in British prehistory. To Canton, the hunter-gatherer cultures of the British Mesolithic are described as ‘the native population’ and ‘the indigenous peoples’. They are said to have been ‘a people truly living in harmony with their surroundings’ who saw themselves ‘as part of the natural world’ and who ‘did not possess a sense of ownership over the land’ (Canton, 2023: 151, 182, 184). Canton speculates that because of this, Mesolithic peoples may have accepted and welcomed incoming Neolithic groups into their midst, comparing them to the ‘Native Americans’ who taught the *Mayflower* pilgrims how to avoid scurvy by consuming cranberries during their first American winter. In this image Canton makes clear that his affinity with Mesolithic British ancestors is by association a concurrent identification with pre-colonial Indigenous Americans. The arrival in Britain of Neolithic farmers, and with them alienation from the land, competition for resources, and ‘[e]ven the very notion of domination’ is likewise an association with colonialism. Both colonialism and the Neolithic are framed in Canton’s deep time perspective as comparably destructive wrong turns in human history.⁶ Canton’s desire to become ‘grounded’, and his suggestion that we might ‘become more Mesolithic in our ways’, is at the same time a repudiation of colonial modernity and a form of universal indigenous identification (Canton, 2023: 190, 191). A common human indigeneity provides a way of seeing beyond the problems of our time and forging a better collective future. As expressed in a promotional blurb for Zakia Sewell’s forthcoming *Finding Albion* (2026), liberal indigeneity expresses the ‘yearning for a connection to this ancient land and for a sense of identity beyond the toxic myths and symbols of empire’ (quoted in Bayley, 2023).

But what are the racial politics of this manoeuvre for white British people who might reasonably be thought beneficiaries (however unwillingly) of empire’s ‘toxic myths and symbols’? Might British imperialism’s more recent history and its centuries of violence against Indigenous and colonized peoples not be a more concrete cultural legacy for this cohort to inherit and understand? It might be argued that Canton’s

imaginative connection to a point in time prior to European colonialism provides a neat way of leapfrogging implication in its troubling legacies. Symbolic time travel and identification with a precolonial antecedent provides the contemporary subject with an opportunity to evade responsibility for coming to terms with a history that has, according to the ahistorical logic of indigenous identification, not yet occurred (see Pitcher, 2022). Alternatively, it is a tactic that positions colonialism as an historical wrong turn that white Britons can repudiate and from then move on, picking up again where their precolonial ancestors left off. Liberal indigeneity might be said to provide a counterfactual prehistory of origins that addresses white guilt by deploying a decolonial analysis behind which liberal white subjects are shielded from exposure to their own ongoing racial privilege. Like other forms of racial surrogation (Roach, 1996; Sieg, 2002), liberal indigeneity processes the memory of empire by substituting a prehistory that is more amenable to the needs of liberal whiteness. Liberal indigeneity starts from an entirely different premise to far-right claims to indigeneity, speaking to a demographic concerned with environmentalism and sustainability, not racism and xenophobia. Yet the ways in which liberal indigeneity appears to reject racial advantage in its embrace of universal indigenous personhood suggests that its exponents might usefully reflect on how their investments play out in the contemporary cultural politics of race.

It is instructive to consider such articulations of British indigeneity in parallel to white practices of self-indigenization⁷ in settler-colonial contexts. There, a critical scholarship identifies a wide repertoire of benefits that accrue to white people who ‘discover’ an ancestral indigenous connection. In the analysis of many commentators, white settler self-indigenization has the effect and often the intention of undermining Indigenous communities: Darryl Leroux gives a detailed account of how self-identifying new ‘Métis’ organizations in Canada have their origins in ‘a committed opposition to Indigenous land and territorial negotiations’ consolidating a ‘pro-white rights politics’ (Leroux, 2019: 3, 175); Laura Junka-Aikio tells of how the rise of Sámi Indigenous rights and an increasingly insecure settler culture has led to claims and practices of self-indigenization where ethnic Finns reconstitute themselves as ‘oppressed and silenced minorities’ and weaponize their indigenous identities ‘in the service of inherently anti-Indigenous forces’ (Junka-Aikio, 2016: 223; 2022: 314); Jessica Kolopenuk addresses the ‘pretendian problem’ in North America which involves the settler appropriation of resources earmarked for Indigenous peoples (Kolopenuk, 2023).

Underpinning these explicitly anti-Indigenous manifestations of settler self-indigenization is a more longstanding and culturally significant symbolic dependence of white settlers upon colonized Indigenous peoples. Innumerable crises of identity in white settler cultures have been solved by embracing the productive otherness of Indigenous peoples (Deloria, 1998). In our contemporary moment, indigenous identification can be said to represent ‘a refusal of whiteness’ (Kowal and Paradies, 2017) that offers white settlers ‘a naturalistic spirituality, a morally justifiable family history and a sense of community’ amidst a ‘wider awareness of colonial injustice, an increased emphasis on autochthony, and the rise of environmentalism and holistic spiritualism’ (Watt and Kowal, 2019: 64, 66). It is not that the symbolic embrace of Indigenous cultures by white settlers is necessarily less harmful than an explicitly anti-Indigenous politics, for in the analysis of many

scholars, white self-indigenization is inherently colonial, enabling non-indigenous peoples to 'reconcile or justify their presence on Indigenous lands' (Adese et al., 2017: 2). Settler colonial states are hereby maintained as white possessions 'though a process of perpetual Indigenous dispossession' (Moreton-Robinson, 2015: xi). In so far as self-indigenization relieves the settler 'of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege', it can be understood as a 'move to innocence' where the desire not to be the oppressor gets turned into an identification with the oppressed (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 10, 3).

Making the necessarily contextual adjustments, these insights can be meaningfully applied to indigenous identification in the United Kingdom, too. In my reading, an imaginative (re)connection to an ancient indigeneity solves a number of problems around questions of identity and belonging for liberal subjects in postimperial Britain. Liberal indigeneity tells a story about 'our ancestors' that provides a point of anchor at an historical moment when the cultural logic of symbolic nativism encourages all inhabitants of multicultural Britain to get in touch with their roots. Motivated by guilt about the injustices of imperialism and their ongoing racial inheritance, liberal indigeneity invests in a moment that long precedes colonial modernity. It references a subject position that is not implicated in the subordination of racialized others, and which through analogous association identifies with Indigenous peoples as being 'on the morally right side of history' (Watt and Kowal, 2019: 76). Liberal indigeneity thus offers a narcissistic path of absolution that fits neatly into the logic of a residual Christian morality stressing affinity with the oppressed. This act of postimperial surrogation simultaneously provides alienated white people with a means to reconnect with the land and with the natural world, refuting the evident harms of colonial modernity, as they learn from Indigenous peoples to become more like their own indigenous ancestors. If these qualities go some way to explaining the appeal of liberal indigeneity in contemporary Britain, they also describe the central issue with which it fails to come to terms. As with self-indigenization in settler-colonial contexts, liberal indigeneity's cultural politics of race have been moulded by, but ultimately avoid facing up to, the ongoing privileges of whiteness. They remain fatally overdetermined by that which they seek to overcome. Despite the differences between the ex-colonies and the ex-imperial centre, the white embrace of indigeneity is in both locations an investment in a subject position that sidesteps responsibility for acknowledging its own implication in relations of coloniality and their enduring legacies.

'Our Ancestors' and the Contemporary Cultural Politics of Race

This article has made a critical reading of liberal indigeneity in the United Kingdom as a compromised and conflicted phenomenon. Precipitated by concerns about the environment and a perceived alienation from the natural world, I have suggested that liberal indigeneity is centrally preoccupied with imperialism and colonialism and that its curious investments in elective minoritization are to do with negotiating some of the abiding contradictions of race in Britain today. Despite the appearance of making connections back in deep time, liberal indigeneity's invocations of 'our ancestors' produce versions

of the past ‘used to ratify the present and to indicate directions for the future’ (Williams, 2009: 62). Liberal indigeneity resembles and presents itself as the residue of the distant past, but it is in fact the product of a contemporary set of issues, conditions, and concerns: from the identity practices of symbolic nativism to the disavowal of white privilege, from the transnational circulation of the language of indigeneity to the moral force of antiracism and decolonization in shaping the cultural politics of race. As such, liberal indigeneity might be best understood as an *emergent* structure of feeling produced within sociohistorical processes of racial formation in 21st century postimperial Britain. The contemporary resonances of the distant past remain complex and it would be incorrect to suggest that liberal indigeneity is synonymous with the indigenous claims of the far right. And yet at an historical moment in which forms of racialized nationalism have been afforded such prominence in British political culture, we should be alert to the directions in which this particular weird walk could be heading.

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Notes

1. In this discussion I will maintain a distinction between the inchoate and contestable status of British indigeneity and the identity of recognized Indigenous peoples by reserving capitalization for the latter.
2. The relationship between notions of indigeneity and the broader field of folk culture are complex. Winter and Keegan-Phipps note how a left-wing inclined folk scene continues to celebrate the first period of folk revival when figures like Cecil Sharpe ‘expressed, quite explicitly, a strong belief in the concept of an indigenous Englishness’ (2013: 166).
3. It is worth noting that these multicultural visions where the British landscape belongs to everyone remove other political tensions, including class conflict, from our relation to the past in what Patrick Wright glossed in the mid-1980s as ‘newly inclusive ceremonies of collective identification’ (Wright, 1985: 251). If the symbolic nativism of the far right fuelled the passions of the ‘leave’ campaign, these visions of a nation united in relation to its collective past can be read as ‘remainder’ fantasies of cultural reharmonization after the divisions of Brexit.
4. Indeed, when compared, for example, to the 65,000+ year history of Australia’s First Peoples, post Ice Age European populations are relative latecomers in the human story. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
5. For example, the self-styled exponent of ‘benevolent green nationalism’, Paul Kingsnorth, gives a ‘psychodynamic’ reading of internal colonialism when he insists that ‘the imperialism which the English became so good at later in their history was a subconscious reaction to the violent suppression they themselves had suffered in the 11th century’ (Kingsnorth, 2013, 2017). I do not have space here to deal with the class politics of indigenous identification, but suffice it to say that it can also be read as a form of postcolonial disavowal where the progenitors of contemporary white Britons are configured not as the agents of imperialism but instead count among its casualties.
6. Canton provides a useful example, but his book is a small part of a far larger literature that rehearses the trope about alienated modernity, beginning with the Neolithic transition (see Lavi et al., 2023).
7. I borrow this term from Leroux (2019) to draw attention to its elective character.

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