

# Bound by Whiteness: Common Ground in Land-Reclamation Movement Case Studies

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## Overview of the Project

In this project I investigated the relationship between white racial identity and attitudes towards land within two public figures' arguments for reclaiming agricultural lands. Reclaiming agricultural lands is defined broadly as projects encouraging conversion of land into agricultural use, and labor back to agricultural work. My first case study examines the discourse of Ammon Bundy, the leader of the 2016 occupation at Malheur National Wildlife Refuge that aimed to reclaim public land for cattle ranching. The second engages the works of farmer, poet Wendell Berry — one of the most prolific thought leaders of contemporary movements for sustainable agriculture and rural community — through analysis of his 1970 book, "The Hidden Wound," in which he discusses racism and its impact on agricultural land and people. Using content analysis I found that both public figures employ white racial projects that promote white belonging to land and romanticize the racialized social order related to land. In this way, despite other differences, the two approaches to land reclamation are bound by whiteness and an overlapping racial politics.



Wendell Berry



Ammon Bundy

## Investigation of the Literature

While not exhaustive of my literature review the following is an introduction to the existing literature on critical whiteness studies and land attitudes.

### Critical Whiteness & Racial Formation

- *Racial Formation*: Making meaning of race through social economic, and political forces (Omi & Winant 1986).
- *Racial project*: An interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines (Omi & Winant 1986).
- *White Bound*: shared meaning of white identity across divergent political lines. (Hughey 2015).

### Land, the Agrarian Model, and Settler-colonialism

- *The Agrarian Ideal*: Sees agricultural communities and agrarian lifestyles as the best model for relating human relationships to land.
- *Critiques*: idealist, nostalgic, privileged.
- *Zimbabwe decolonizing settler-ag*: Environmental attitudes in agrarian settler-colonialism were found to be significant to white's legitimizing belonging and possession of their land (Hughes 2006).

## BUNDY & BERRY: Bound by Whiteness

### Ammon Bundy and the Occupation at Oregon's Malheur Wildlife Refuge

- *Race*: Bundy enacts a color-blind racial project meant to represent the occupation's demand for federal land transfer to local private management as race-neutral. However, "The People" Bundy describes were really white land-owners. At times this public political correctness was disrupted by less covert racism with statements like, "Before white man came, so to speak, there was nothing to keep cattle from tromping on those things" (Boone, 2015) which characterize whiteness as virtuous and benevolent, albeit based on falsities.
- *Land*: Bundy truly believe himself and the occupants to be good land stewards. They emphasize the connection to the land through "good-use" to be the best social and ecological relationship to the land. "Good-use" has been a political tactic to assert private ownership of land for extraction industry.
- *The Possessive Logics of Manifest Destiny*: Bundy and the occupants characterized their cause, their whiteness, and their relationships towards land as virtuous and benevolent. Couple this with the suspicion the Burns Paiute Tribe faced as they asserted their indigenous rights to the occupied land, Bundy and the rest of the occupants clearly were inspired by a Manifest Destiny ideology that assumed their possession and belonging to the land as righteous.

### Wendell Berry and the American Back-to-the-Land Movement

- *Race*: Berry enacts a racial project of color-conscious that is critical of whiteness. His characterization of whiteness identifies self-violence, avoidance, and a preoccupation with abstraction as the defining dynamics within the "white mindset."
- *Land*: Berry is critical of the alienation from land he sees as common today and based in the "white mindset" that is preoccupies with abstract success and professional class work. He embraces an ethic of "universal care" which is meant to care for both people and land.
- *The Limits of Romanticizing "Nativity"*: While he is critical of whiteness and conscious of many racial dynamics related to land and agriculture he, reminiscent of the back-to-the-land movement Berry often uses the language of nativity to describe his belonging to his land. Simultaneously he characterizes indigenous people as our "excellent predecessors" (Berry 1970) which continues the violence of erasing indigenous people who are living. This is significant because it perpetuates white control of resources and decision-making by not even robustly acknowledging that there may be communities with claims to land Berry is claiming as his. If there is no image or character to claim rights over land, then white-settlers can easily go about their work of ecological restoration and good farming.

#### Referenced Literature:

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- Omi, Michael & Winant, Howard (1986). *Racial Formation in the United States, 3rd ed.* New York: Routledge. [www.jstor.org.proxy.seattleu.edu/stable/3805415](http://www.jstor.org.proxy.seattleu.edu/stable/3805415)

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