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# Backfire: the settler-colonial logic and legacy of Smokey Bear

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1940s, the United States Forest Service's (USFS) national fire suppression efforts have been bolstered by a public-facing ad campaign led by the Ad Council, most notably through the iconic rise of Smokey Bear. The consequences of decades of strict fire suppression, promulgated and solidified by this highly successful campaign, have been ecologically disastrous, and especially detrimental for fire-dependent Indigenous communities and ecosystems. Scholars have examined the Smokey campaign's racialized, nationalist discourse, yet none have grappled with the campaign's settler colonial logic, itself replete with gendered exclusion and speciesism. In this article, we combine intersectional theoretical frameworks with settler colonial and Indigenous studies to carry out a systematic content analysis of 201 unique campaign documents. We demonstrate how the campaign's production of the careful citizen – one rooted in mid-to-upper class, settler masculinity – hinges on interlocking narratives of Indigenous erasure, low-class criminality, and the helpless victimhood of women and more-than-human species.

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**KEYWORDS** Smokey Bear; fire suppression; settler colonialism; intersectionality; Indigenous peoples; U.S. Forest Service

## Introduction

Federal forest managers throughout the United States are increasingly acknowledging the importance of controlled burns for mitigating pests, maintaining fire-dependent ecosystems, slowing the spread of disease, and reducing forest fuel loads. This contemporary acknowledgement is a sharp departure from the strict fire suppression that has characterized U.S. Forest Service (USFS) management since the agency's inception in 1905. Beginning in the 1940s, the Forest Service's fire suppression program became bolstered by a national, public-facing ad campaign encouraging citizen vigilance about – and participation in – fire prevention. During WW2, this campaign was driven by fear that acts of war would set fire to western forests. The

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Wartime Ad Council (as it was referred to then) prepared military propaganda linking vigilance about fire with patriotism, and a desire to burn forests with grotesquely caricatured images of Axis figures. After the war ended and fears of enemy fire were no longer justified, the Wartime Ad Council dropped 'Wartime' from its name and similarly adjusted the fire suppression campaign to reflect a new moment in time. It was then that Smokey Bear emerged as the friendly face of fire suppression. Smokey is a widely recognized icon that continues to shape the American public's perception on forest fires to this day.

Our work takes a critical look at the messaging and impact of this campaign but is by no means the first to do so. In his chapter 'Smokey is a white racist pig,' Kosek (2006) unpacks the racialized, nationalist histories embedded in the Forest Service's historic fire suppression ad campaigns. He exposes the Ad Council's infusion of anti-Japanese and anti-communist sentiment, the association of fire with evil, and the formation of an exclusionary national vision of who constitutes a good caretaker of the forest. His analysis takes root in New Mexico, where he describes how the Forest Service's ongoing presence has resulted in the land dispossession of Mexicans whose ancestors cared for local forests long before New Mexico became a U.S. state. In other work, Minor and Boyce (2018) analyze the Smokey Bear campaign through the lens of Clark's (2011) *pyroplitics*, employing Foucauldian concepts such as *governmentality*, *biopolitics* and the state's production of knowledge, to explore the connections between state administration of people, territory, and flammable landscapes. Yet, while both articles mention colonialism and allude to its role in the campaign, neither article engages with settler colonial theory – an important oversight, given that the Forest Service's successful implementation of absolute fire suppression hinged on the criminalization and erasure of long-held Indigenous burning practices. Relatedly, while Kosek's analysis reveals the glorification of white masculinity at the center of the Ad Council's campaign, he does not elaborate on the resulting erasure of women's roles in forest use and management (and perhaps most notably, the roles of Indigenous women). Furthermore, Kosek's chapter omits any discussion of the large-scale ecological and cultural implications of the Forest Service's widespread inculcation of anti-fire sentiment, implications which have profound effects on both forest ecology and Indigenous communities. Meanwhile, Minor and Boyce mention Indigenous peoples only in the past tense, and – while describing the ecological consequences of the campaign in some detail – fail to address how Indigenous communities are uniquely affected and resisting Smokey's legacy.

In this article, we remedy the above gaps by combining intersectional theoretical frameworks (ecofeminism, Indigenous and Black feminisms, critical environmental justice, and multispecies justice) with settler-colonial

and Indigenous studies to examine how logics of domination – including speciesism, settler colonialism, and patriarchy – interweave and permeate campaign materials. This theoretical pairing combines modes of analysis that draw attention to nature as inherently political and that link the oppression of peoples (especially marginalized genders and Indigenous communities) with the exploitation of landscapes and more-than-human species. In the case of Smokey, we demonstrate how fire suppression and the attendant discourses generated significant eco-social impacts upon Indigenous communities and the ecosystems in their care. In particular, we consider how an array of interconnected dualisms underpin Smokey’s message and work to justify the eradication of fire as an important ecosystem process while simultaneously depicting women, people of color, Indigenous people, poor people, and the land itself as somehow deficient.

We also build upon Kosek (2006) and Minor and Boyce’s (2018) work by carrying out what is – to our knowledge – the most extensive analysis of campaign materials to date, involving a total of 201 unique documents. Via a systematic content analysis of campaign visuals and related correspondence from the Ad Council archives at the University of Illinois, we reveal the Ad Council’s shifting advertising tactics aimed at selling an unchanging message to a constantly changing audience. We consider how advertising, as a technology of power and political influence, enabled the USFS to employ highly subjective, unscientific messaging to convince the public of the indispensability of fire suppression, thereby securing broad support for what has ultimately proven to be an ecological disaster with increasing socio-cultural implications. The inculcation of fire phobia upon the American public is most deeply felt by Indigenous communities with long histories of cultural burning, but also poses challenges for federal and other land managers who now realize the need to return fire to forests but must contend with Smokey’s deep-seeded legacy. The Ad Council has done little to problematize this consequential legacy it helped build, even as the need for controlled burns has become apparent and the risk of massive wildfires is at an all-time high.

## Literature review

### *Intersectionality and environmental identity*

In her work on the American conservation movement, Taylor (2016) posits the development of an environmental identity among large segments of the US population. This identity enabled the development of a collective movement which fundamentally transformed U.S. society and environmental practices. Despite its transformative power, certain colonial ideologies persisted – and even defined – the conservation movement. For example, concepts such as cultural nationalism and frontierism remained deeply

embedded, and the rhetorics of moral obligation and civic duty were regularly deployed to promote engagement in environmental action. In so doing, the conservation movement and subsequent iterations of mainstream environmentalism have relied upon and replicated longstanding practices and beliefs regarding identity and the environment. Taylor's (2016) work demonstrates how gender, race, and class ideologies have permeated the development of U.S. environmentalism, largely privileging the environmental values of mid-to-upper class, white masculinity.

From an intersectional perspective, one can see that gender norms, ideas about race, and the material conditions of class have long influenced – and been influenced by – notions of land and ‘nature.’ Scholars in a range of fields demonstrate these linkages (i.e. Warren 1990, Goeman 2013, Plumwood 2015, Salleh 2017, Simpson 2017, Federici 2004, Norgaard 2019). Warren (1990) contends that ‘[a] logic of domination is not just a logical structure. It also involves a substantive value system, since an ethical premise is needed to permit or sanction the “just” subordination of that which is subordinate’ (p. 2). She demonstrates how this logic operates across a range of distinctions, such as gender, race, class, and species. Similarly, Plumwood (2015) notes that ‘assumptions normally made or implicit in the cultural background . . . create equivalences’ between pairs in a hierarchical dualism, for example logic/emotion, and man/woman. Put more simply, “categories of humans labeled Others have been equated to one another, to animals, and to nature” (Hill Collins 2010, p. 543).

Pellow's (2016) work on critical environmental justice (CEJ) elaborates on these claims, incorporating more-than-human species in his intersectional CEJ framework. He emphasizes the need to ‘push our analyses and actions beyond the human, the state, and capital,’ noting that ‘threatened bodies, populations, and spaces are indispensable to building socially and environmentally just and resilient futures for us all’ (p.224). Relatedly, multispecies justice frameworks recognize the linkages between human and more-than-human categorization and oppression (Haraway 2013, Chao *et al.* 2022). Celermajer *et al.* (2021) explain that ‘[r]ethinking the subject of justice moves attention from the fiction of individuals to the actual ecological array of relationships that sustain life. As humans and other beings surround, infuse, and support each other, justice for any cannot be divorced from [multispecies justice] for all’ (p.120). These emerging multispecies frameworks are not new to the many Indigenous Nations, Tribes and communities with knowledges, spiritualities and practices involving kincentric, reciprocal relations with other species (LaDuke 1999, Salmón 2000, Simpson 2017, Whyte 2018). Sundberg (2014) encourages academics in Western institutions to critically examine post-humanist frameworks for their perpetuation of Indigenous erasure and Eurocentrism. In our engagement of justice frameworks that encompass the more-than-human, we recognize the diverse

Indigenous knowledges and practices that have long understood humans and other species as integrated and interdependent. However, given the deeply place- and culture-specific nature of most Indigenous epistemologies, we employ more generalizable, multispecies justice frameworks given the international and intersectional scope of our analysis.

### *Settler colonialism as eco-social structure*

Settler colonialism is theorized as an ongoing eco-social structure upheld by settlers and the settler state for the purposes of systematically dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their lands, waters, and ecological relationships (Tuck and McKenzie 2014, Bacon 2018, Whyte 2018). Unlike more transitory forms of colonialism that exploit resources and Indigenous labor without the implicit motivation to completely erase Indigenous lifeways and governance, settler colonialism seeks to create replicas of the metropole for settlers to permanently inhabit and therefore hinges on a potent logic of Indigenous erasure (Wolfe 2006, Veracini 2011). This erasure is achieved via various forms of violence, including genocide, forced relocation, and forced assimilation (Fenelon and Trafzer 2014). Because settler colonialism is principally about land and ecological relations (Tuck and Yang 2012), Indigenous genocide specifically – and erasure more broadly – are often achieved via what Bacon (2018) terms ‘colonial ecological violence,’ including the forced removal of Native peoples from their homelands, the repurposing and renaming of culturally significant sites, the criminalizing of traditional practices, and the imposition of settler ecologies. The outcome is what Whyte (2018) describes as an environmental injustice ‘by which at least one society seeks to establish its own collective continuance at the expense of the collective continuance of one or more other societies’ (p.136).

Settler colonialism is also understood as a system of intersecting oppressions (Glenn 2015, Simpson 2017, Whyte 2018). In the United States, Glenn (2015) asserts that gender, sexuality, and race are co-constituted by settler colonial projects, explaining that these projects result in a racialized and gendered national identity that normalizes male whiteness and strongly associates this identity with property ownership and political sovereignty. Whyte (2018) explains that settler colonialism’s patriarchal foundations – in which men are positioned as dominant over other genders and in which gendered violence is normalized – deeply affect Indigenous peoples and ecologies by neglecting the social principles of trust and consent, and reducing resilience-building redundancy by inhibiting the socio-ecological roles of women and non-binary peoples. Simpson (2017) describes the simultaneous exploitation of land and bodies under settler colonialism, a fact that ‘has always been extremely clear to Indigenous women and [Two Spirit and queer] people,

and it's why sexual and gender violence has to be theorized and analyzed as vital, not supplemental, to discussions of colonial dispossession' (p.41).

Not surprisingly, settler colonial logics also implicate more-than-human species. For one, the erosion of Indigenous ecologies in favor of settler ecologies can lead to the decline or extinction of species who hold what Whyte (2013) refers to as 'reciprocal responsibilities' with Indigenous communities. Settlers may explicitly target these species for extermination as a means to disempower Indigenous peoples, as was the case with buffalo. In other cases, settler ecologies may inconspicuously affect species of Indigenous cultural significance by reducing or fragmenting habitat, poisoning environments, or criminalizing Indigenous practices (such as cultural burning) that are key to ecosystem renewal. Underlying settler approaches to multispecies relations is the notion that humans (and more specifically, Christian men of European descent) are separate from, and hold dominion over, all other earthly species and processes, stripping other beings of agency, and framing human relationships with the land as that of warden, fruitful manipulator, or savior, but seldom as a collaborator (Watts 2013).

### ***State forestry, pseudo-science, and the "vicious sedimentation" of fire-phobia***

In settler colonial nation-states, Scott (1998) describes state forestry as a means by which to administratively order nature and control human relationships with the environment. Said differently, it is a mechanism by which to exert settler ecologies upon Indigenous peoples and landscapes. The U.S. Forest Service was initially shaped by a German forestry model that sought to maximize timber production and minimize unauthorized disturbances to the forest, including – and especially – fire (Scott 1998). While uses of national forests have morphed over time, one USFS management objective has consistently remained central to the agency's mission: fire suppression. Pyne (2015) explains that '[p]erhaps more than anything else, fire was the reason the agency existed at all, and it became a primary index of the agency's success' (p.4). Prior to settler colonialism, many North American landscapes had been profoundly shaped by the cultural burning practices of Indigenous peoples (Kimmerer and Lake 2001, Stewart 2002, Hessburg *et al.* 2005, Lake and Christianson 2020). Yet, since the U.S. Forest Service's institution in 1905, fires that are vital to many species, ecosystems, and Indigenous communities have been systematically suppressed on so-called public lands.

Vinyeta (2022) demonstrates how starting in the 1920s – in an effort to convince an ambivalent settler public of the superiority of forest fire suppression – the USFS deployed anti-Indigenous discourse to discredit Indigenous peoples and knowledges as well as settlers who advocated for prescribed fire. This tactic served to elevate the agency's pseudo-scientific justifications for

strict fire suppression policy. Then, in 1942, and amid fears of large-scale Japanese retaliation after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Forest Service and (what at the time was referred to as) the Wartime Advertising Council developed the first national forest fire prevention campaign. According to Kosek (2006), the Wartime Advertising Council saw this campaign as serving a dual purpose: as ‘a means of protecting the nation’s forests from a menacing enemy,’ and ‘as a vehicle for the restoration and preservation of the public’s image of the advertising industry’ (p.192). In 1944, Smokey Bear would first appear on campaign materials and would grow to become one of the most influential icons in United States history. As Kosek (2006) reveals, Smokey Bear would come to represent not only forest fire suppression, but the nation itself.

In his description of the ecological dimensions of settler colonialism, Whyte (2018) explains that “[t]he US actually tries to establish troubling ‘persisting’ relationships with the environment by creating fictional imaginaries of its political and cultural legitimacy in North America, from the doctrine of discovery to ideologies of ‘wilderness’ (p.136). Smokey Bear is among the symbols that breathe life into settler imaginaries, contributing to what Whyte might refer to as the ‘vicious sedimentation’ of settler fire phobia. Whyte describes ‘vicious sedimentation’ as the process by which ‘constant ascriptions of settler ecologies onto Indigenous ecologies fortify settler ignorance against Indigenous peoples over time’ (p.138). In continuation, we demonstrate how by inculcating generations of settlers with a reductive understanding of forest fire and repeatedly entrenching the notion that settler masculinity is the exclusive intersection responsible for protecting the woods, the Ad Council and Forest Service created an ecological catastrophe that dispossesses Indigenous communities and disempowers women and non-binary peoples as well as fire-adapted species.

## Methods

The Ad Council archives housed at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana provided the data for this analysis. With the support of archive staff, we were able to locate and examine  $N = 88$  boxes of print material containing files related to forest fire prevention. These files included campaign ads in the form of visual materials and radio spot scripts, Ad Council correspondence encouraging publishers and radio stations to run campaign materials, and to a lesser extent, private correspondence between Ad Council staff and external parties regarding the campaign. Much of the material involved the Smokey Bear campaign but also included substantial materials from the southern fire prevention campaign as well as materials from the 1940’s which pre-date the development of Smokey’s character. Our data analysis involved a preliminary read through of all fire prevention material while gathering notes on initial impressions.



**Table 1.** Number of Smokey documents (including advertisements and correspondence) analyzed in this study.

Distribution of analyzed Smokey documents by decade	
Decade	N Smokey Documents
Undated	3
1940's	14
1950's	9
1960's	37
1970's	81
1980's	33
1990's	24
2000's	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>202</b>

We then digitized all relevant campaign materials for later analysis. While the majority of the material we analyze are Smokey advertisements, we also look at memos and letters that were found in the archive. When campaigns involved multiple files of highly similar materials we selected one document of that type to add to our data set. In total, this process yielded  $N = 202$  unique documents. Release dates range from 1944 to 2001, with the majority of advertisements produced in the 1970's (see Table 1). We then coded each document for themes derived from our theoretical orientation combining intersectional, settler-colonial and Indigenous studies, and annotated each entry with specifics regarding how it aligns with – or deviates from – patterns derived from our theoretical framework. Some of our codes include *nationalism*, *colonialism*, *race*, *gender*, *religion*, *crime*, *commercialism*, and *ecology*.

The Smokey Bear campaign imagery presented in the findings is copyrighted material and is being used with the permission of the U.S. Forest Service. The reader should note that this publication does not reflect the opinions or views of the U.S. Forest Service or the Ad Council.

## Findings and discussion

### *The campaign through the years: same message, different wrapper*

Our detailed review of the Smokey Bear campaign reveals that while the campaign's fire suppression message is unshifting, the imagery and rhetoric employed continuously morph to align with the dominant politics and changing populations of the time. Through the campaign's decades, we note the rise and fall of 1) wartime narratives, 2) the emphasis on natural resources, 3) Christian symbolism and iconography, 4) ecology-minded messaging, 5) mentions of the wildland-urban interface and 6) the emergence of ads in 'immigrant' languages and featuring more diverse populations. Through these evolving advertising tactics, one constant remains – Smokey represents

a moral authority and guide regarding what constitutes appropriate wilderness citizenship. Whether it is by providing a positive example of proper fire etiquette, highlighting the negative impacts of fire, or – as was prevalent in the regional campaign aimed at the US South – equating negative fire behavior with criminality, Smokey’s messaging shapes the formation of the capable and trustworthy forest citizen – a citizen at the intersection of various dominant social identities.

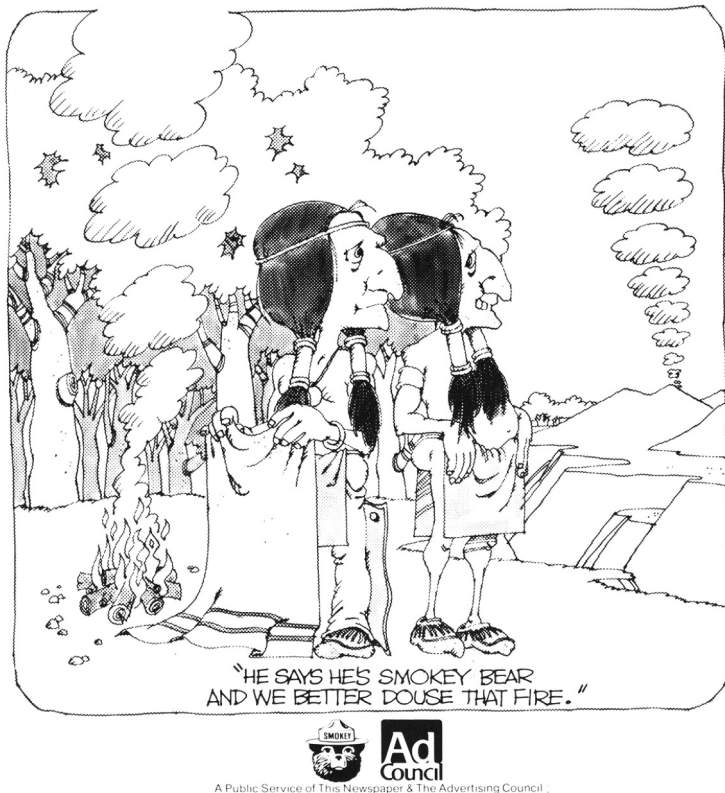
### *Settler belonging, indigenous erasure*

Scholars of settler colonial theory describe Indigenous erasure as a central mechanism by which settler land tenure is justified and cemented (Wolfe 2006, Veracini 2011). In effect, the USFS fire prevention campaign’s most noticeable engagement with Indigenous peoples is its lack thereof. Indigenous subjects are seldom explicitly incorporated in campaign materials despite the fact that in the 1920s, the U.S. Forest Service embarked on a national effort to discredit Indigenous peoples and burning practices (Vinyeta 2022). Instead, we repeatedly find narratives of settler belonging, ownership, and land entitlement, as well as the occasional symbolic allusion to backward, disappearing Indigenous peoples. Take for example, an undated campaign visual captioned ‘Make Wildfire a Thing of the Past.’ A train representing the expansion of European progress crosses the foreground through golden crop fields, while in the background, buffalo – a species with powerful Indigenous associations – scatter as a fire burns in the distant horizon. Without the explicit inclusion of Indigenous peoples, this image alludes to Indigenous peoples’ use of fire and the need to eradicate these practices to facilitate settler colonial expansion.

Indigenous erasure can also be found in a 1974 campaign radio spot that states: ‘Long before man set foot on North America, fires caused by lightning raged unchecked through the primeval forest. And yet the forests survived and grew into dense stands of noble trees.’ Here, the sole mention of lightning as a source of fire and the use of the word ‘primeval’ to describe North American forests suggest a continent devoid of Indigenous stewardship. Similarly, a 1976 ad uses a tree ring motif to point to key moments in American history in relation to the tree’s lifetime. Conveniently, the tree is born in 1776, the same year the Declaration of Independence was drafted by Thomas Jefferson. Other key historical events highlighted in connection with the tree rings are the discovery of gold in California (1848), the completion of the first cross-country railroad (1869), the eruption of WWI (1914), and Neil Armstrong’s landing on the moon (1969). Indigenous peoples are omitted entirely from the history of the United States, and the broadscale theft of Indigenous homelands is obscured. Interestingly, scientists are now proposing the use of dendrochronology – the study of tree ring patterns to

understand socio-environmental change – to gauge the ecological impacts of oppressive social systems such as slavery and settler colonialism (Minor 2017, Bruno 2023).

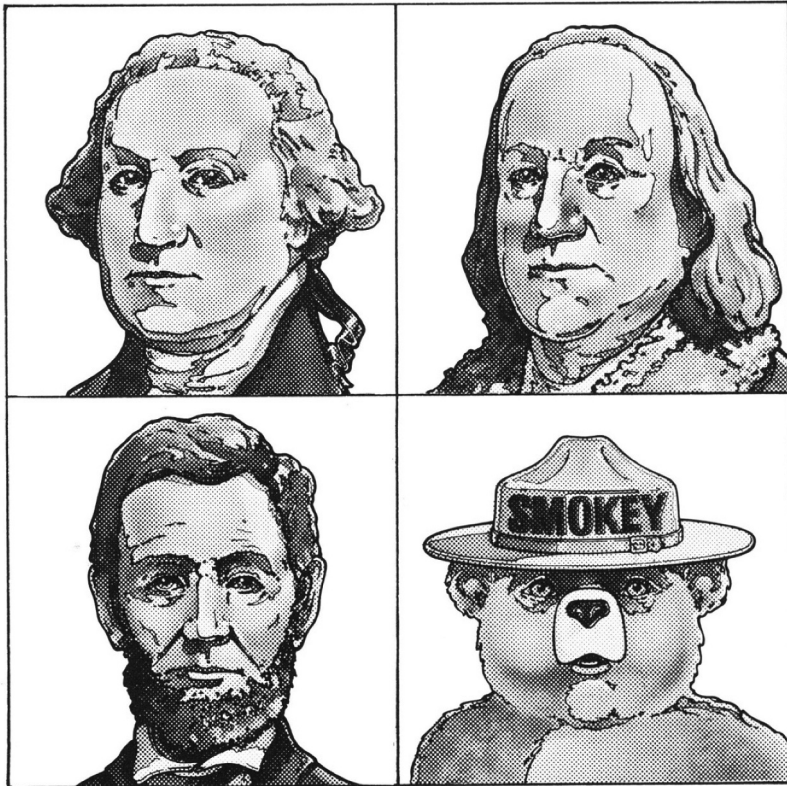
Rarely, Indigenous peoples are included in campaign materials. In a 1976 campaign ad (Figure 1), Indigenous peoples are depicted as racialized caricatures that are uninformed about fire safety and must be educated by Smokey Bear. This graphic in many ways reflects the racialized narratives employed by the U.S. Forest Service in the 1920's delegitimation of Indigenous peoples' knowledges and burning practices. Just a few years before, in 1971, the Ad Council had released the famous Crying Indian ad as part of the *Keep America Beautiful* campaign to dissuade national audiences from polluting (Melillo 2013). Via the alternate employment of backwards and noble savage discourses, the Ad Council uses racialized stereotypes to mobilize the settler public.



P-2 (3 col. X 70 li.)

**Figure 1.** In one of the few instances where we found Indigenous representation within the campaign, Indigenous peoples are portrayed as ignorant, racialized caricatures.

In 1976, the Ad Council also releases a series of campaign visuals linking Smokey Bear and national forests to the settler origin story of the United States. In one of the ads, an upward view into a tall, sun-dappled tree canopy gives way to bold letters stating ‘In the time it took to grow this tree, we grew a country.’ Another 1976 campaign graphic (Figure 2) includes a portrait of Smokey Bear alongside portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson,



# Thanks for making America great.



A Public Service of This Newspaper & The Advertising Council

P-12 (2 col. X 70 li)

**Figure 2.** Smokey is represented among – and equated with – iconic figures of the settler colonial state in several campaign ads.

and Abraham Lincoln, with the slogan: 'Thanks for Making American Great.' The graphic equates Smokey Bear with men who powerfully represent the rise of the settler nation-state.

Among our most interesting findings concerning settler belonging and Indigenous erasure is the contrast between the lack of Indigenous representation in outward facing campaign materials and declarations of concern for the prevalence of Indigenous burning in private Ad Council correspondence. In a 1966 letter from Henry Wehde (Ad Council) to Allan Wilson, Wehde informs Wilson of a recent campaign ad that was run in *American Indian Horizon*, a publication geared towards Indigenous audiences that existed at the time but is no longer in circulation. Wehde celebrates the fact that this fire prevention ad has been run in *American Indian Horizon*, stating: 'In fact, I think if a thorough study were made, it's those damn Indians sending smoke signals to each other that start a hell of a lot of our fires.' This correspondence suggests that while Indigenous subjects remained largely absent from the Ad Council's campaign, it was not because of lack of concern regarding Indigenous burning. One could infer that the need to reinforce undisturbed narratives of settler belonging and ownership superseded the need to outwardly recognize Indigenous communities as among those setting fires in the forest.

### *Anti-fire sentiment as American citizenship*

While the presence and perspectives of Indigenous peoples is effectively erased or misrepresented in the Ad Council's campaign, Smokey's messages provide continual lessons on what makes a good settler citizen of the forest (Kosek 2006, Minor and Boyce 2018). These lessons contain many of the standard concepts embedded in settler-state law and politics – heteropatriarchy, Christianity, compliance with the state, and pro-industrial and pro-capitalist ideologies. Kosek (2006) clearly articulates the depiction of Smokey Bear as a father figure and 'family man' wandering the woods with his cubs, as an animal symbol of frontier masculinity, and as a figure who legitimizes the state as authoritative owner of the forest. Christian iconography also weaves in and out of the campaign, building upon colonial narratives of manifest destiny in which middle and upper-class settlers are understood as harbingers of morality to a heathen land. In various ads, Smokey is seen praying or employing language from the ten commandments to convey his fire suppression message. In addition, Smokey introduces a set of conventions for how the model citizen should engage with the natural world, relations that should above all protect the state's wealth and ongoing commodification of natural resources.

In these patriotic messages, the good citizen is portrayed as careful, as the responsible tender of the nation's natural resources – resources that he is told

belong to him. The careful citizen understands that forests are to be used but not wasted, that nature is above all an economic asset on which he, his neighbors, and his nation depends. In line with neoliberal principles and Foucault's theory of *governmentality*— in which 'state goals are accomplished through the self-regulation of its citizenry' – the responsibility of the state to monitor and protect national forests is delegated to the individual citizen (Minor and Boyce 2018, p.89). Capitalist production and the myriad commodities it generates depend on the careful citizens' eradication of fire in the forests, a catastrophe 'ONLY HE' can prevent. This narrative is exemplified in various campaign materials, including a 1981 ad (Figure 3) in which the branches of a tree morph into a series of wood-derived commodities, including musical instruments, sports equipment, and furniture. Above the image, the ad states: 'Look what you lose when a tree burns.'

The economic centrality of forests – and their financial connection to government – emerges strongly during the Reagan presidency (1981–1989). The Reagan administration's emphasis on tax cuts, reductions in government size, and narratives of fiscal conservatism thematically seep into the Smokey campaign. In a 1985 ad, Smokey is once again placed alongside George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. This time, the bold print states: 'These guys want you to stop wasting your tax dollars.' In fine print it continues: 'Wildfires in our country are a terrible waste. A waste of natural resources. A waste of natural beauty. A waste of money.' Similarly, a 1985 ad features a deciduous tree whose leaves literally become dollar bills (Figure 4). The ecological and inherent value of species for their own sake is eclipsed by their utilitarian value (and supposed cost!) to the U.S. taxpayer.

Alongside the campaign's formation of the good, 'careful' citizen are portrayals of the failed citizen that is 'careless' and often likened to a criminal. The language around criminality and intentional burning is especially abundant in the campaigns aimed at the U.S. South, where rural settlers of Scottish and Irish descent adopted widespread burning practices akin to Celtic range management traditions in Europe that concerned federal forest managers in the United States (Johnson and Hale 2000). The first set of documents we encountered from the 'Special Southern Forests Fire Prevention Campaign' date back to 1963. While a small image of Smokey's face appears in the lower right corner of the document, a more prominent image features a cartoon rendering of a shadowy figure setting fire to a forest, the words 'The malicious woods burner robs our state' emblazoned beside him. Here, the firesetter is portrayed as an outright, malicious aberration for his supposed love of fire and the wanton destruction it causes. The casting of fire prevention as crime prevention is pervasive in this campaign. For example, the 1968 letter to radio programs opens 'Dear Southern Radio Broadcaster, in these times of increasing lawlessness and violence you can strike a blow for law and order by broadcasting these new forest fire prevention messages for your listeners.' Similarly, a southern

# Look what you lose when a tree burns.



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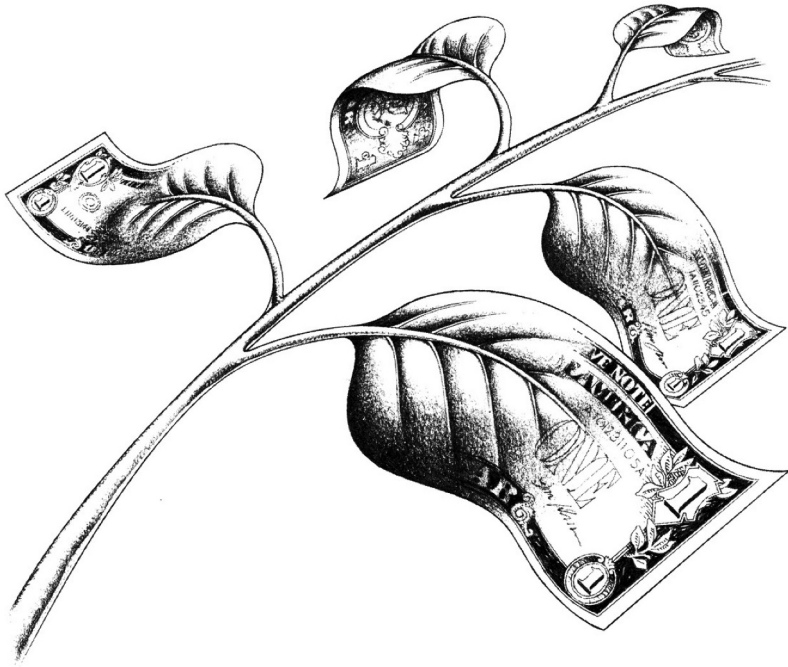
FOREST FIRE PREVENTION CAMPAIGN  
MAGAZINE AD NO. FFP-1025-80 - 7' x 10' [110 Screen]  
Volunteer Agency: Foote, Cone & Belding/Honig, Inc., Volunteer Coordinator: Lewis R. Angelos, Atlantic Richfield Co.

CP-2-80/CM-3-80

**Figure 3.** Within the campaign, forests are often depicted or described strictly in relation to capitalist interests and commodity production.

campaign magazine ad contains bold white print on a stark black background stating: 'Put the woods arsonist in his place. Prison.' A land management act carried out for diverse ecological benefits becomes a criminal act when it compromises timber capital on federal land, necessitating – as Scott (1998) theorizes – the surveillance and control of people and forests alike.

## One billion in tax dollars does grow on trees.



That's how much it costs taxpayers every single year to protect our nation's resources and fight wildfires caused by people.

So keep our country green. Remember, only you can prevent forest fires.



*A Public Service of This Magazine & The Advertising Council*

FOREST FIRE PREVENTION CAMPAIGN  
MAGAZINE AD NO. FFP-1847-85—7" x 10" [110 Screen]  
Volunteer Agency: Foote, Cone & Belding/Honig, Inc., Volunteer Coordinator: Lewis R. Angelos, Atlantic Richfield Co.

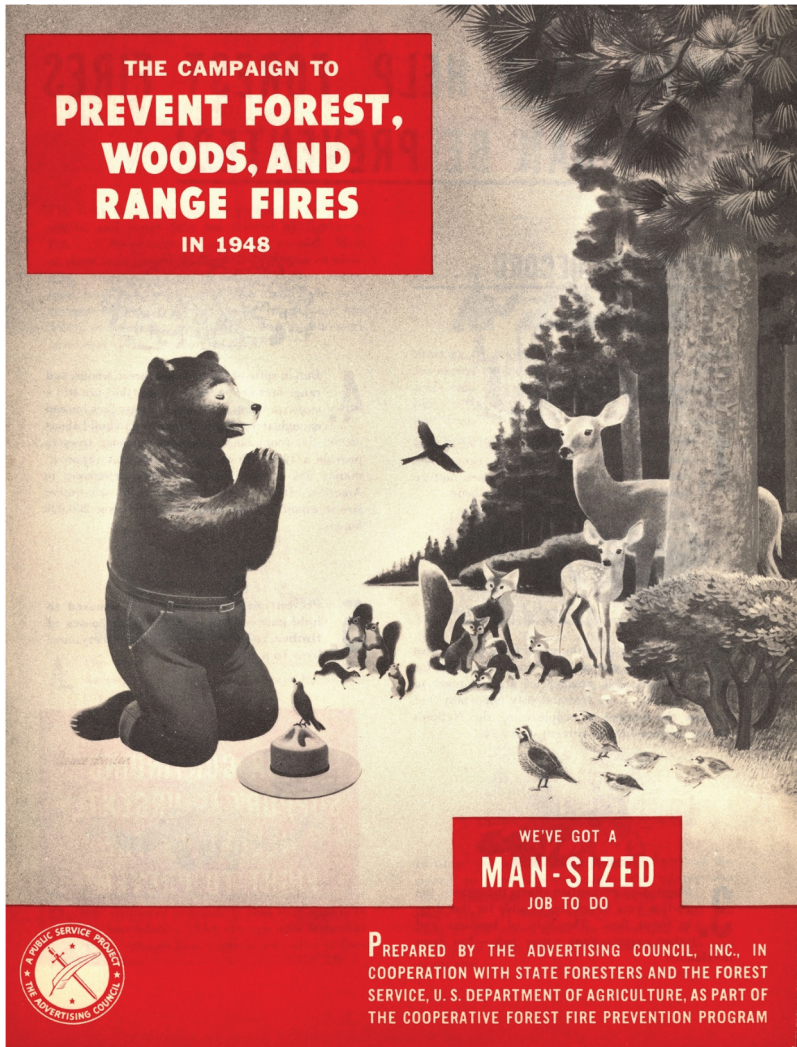
CM-SPEC  
1/85

**Figure 4.** Trees are seldom ascribed their own inherent worth but are instead discussed in relation to their monetary value or their cost to taxpayers.

### *The helpless other*

While over the decades, the campaign's imagery adapts to the changing times, there is a clear thematic correlation between effective forest fire prevention and white, settler masculinity, a phenomenon well documented by Kosek (2006). For example, a 1948 ad (Figure 5) includes Smokey kneeling and praying, surrounded by forest animals. Beneath the image – and in





**Figure 5.** The campaign repeatedly alludes to settler masculinity as the epicenter of fire suppression and forest management.

reference to forest fire suppression – is the statement ‘We’ve got a MAN-SIZED job to do,’ emphasizing the masculine target of the campaign. Yet these narratives elevating settler masculinity don’t exist in isolation – they are bolstered by parallel narratives portraying women, Indigenous peoples, poor people, and other species as helpless victims or unreliable stewards. Humans and more-than-humans categorically othered are not only equated to one another, as Hill Collins (2010) describes, but are conceptualized as devoid of agency – either as possessions or in need of protection. These tropes are presented in numerous ways throughout the Smokey campaign.

Women play a limited role over the campaign's history. When women do appear, they are often depicted as sidekicks to their husbands, their lack of direct knowledge or involvement in forest activities a central narrative. For example, a 1966 campaign ad contains bold print across much of the page that states: 'Bring out the bear in the old man.' In smaller font below, the ad continues: 'Next time your man goes off hunting or fishing, do Smokey a little favor. When you cuddle close to say goodbye, whisper softly in your favorite ear: "Remember dear, only you can prevent forest fires"'. The ad targets female audiences as seductive vessels to convey fire suppression messaging to their outdoorsy husbands. The woman herself is not the landing place for fire suppression messaging, as her concerns remain away from the woods and in the home. In a later 1975 ad ([Figure 6](#)), a picture of a blonde, seemingly stupefied woman with glasses fills much of the page, with text that states 'Wildfire? What's that got to do with me?' Below it, the ad answers with 'Plenty,' filling in some of the reasons why this woman should care about wildfire. Equating femininity with a lack of knowledge of, and interest in, forest and fire management erases the active role of women – especially Indigenous women – in managing ecosystems and species relations across time. For example, Indigenous basketweavers – often women – play vital roles in maintaining complex ecosystems in which basketry-related plant species and a whole host of other plants and animals thrive. Part of this role involves the employment and management of cultural burning.

Nature as hapless victim is yet another prevalent theme in the Ad Council's campaign. One such example is the 1973 campaign visual with an image of Smokey surrounded by infantilized wildlife, with a statement that reads: 'There are babes in the woods. And they need your help.' It is important to note that forest fire can, in fact, have an impact on wildlife, and it is not our intent to diminish the loss of life. Yet, equally worth mentioning is the fact that many ecosystems and species are highly fire adapted, and in some cases, fire-dependent – a reality completely omitted in the Ad Council's campaign. Instead, we notice the repeated victimization of plants, animals, and ecosystems, even those for whom fire is vital. Take for example deer, a repeatedly used species in Smokey iconography, piggybacking upon the popular success of Bambi. In a 1961 ad, a fawn stands helpless, saddened, and seemingly orphaned in a recently burned forest. The campaign would have the audience believe that deer are dependent primarily on forested landscapes, and solely harmed by forest fire. Yet, as long-time Indigenous knowledge and recent Western scientific research reveals, deer and other ungulates depend on fire's maintenance of open meadows and improved browse quality (Carlson *et al.* 1993, Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources [Karuk DNR] 2010, Stewart 2002).

H. 560 lines 4 col.x 140 lines newspaper



**"WILDFIRE? WHAT'S THAT GOT TO DO WITH ME?"**

Plenty. Last year, wildfire damaged over 900,000 acres of our Southern forests. The forests that give us necessities like building materials and pleasures like camping. Watch for and report woods arsonists. You'll be doing yourself a favor.

**WILDFIRE.**

**It's a crime.**

And it spreads to everyone.



**Figure 6.** Women are often portrayed as spousal sidekicks, lacking the knowledge or wherewithal to engage in ecosystem stewardship.

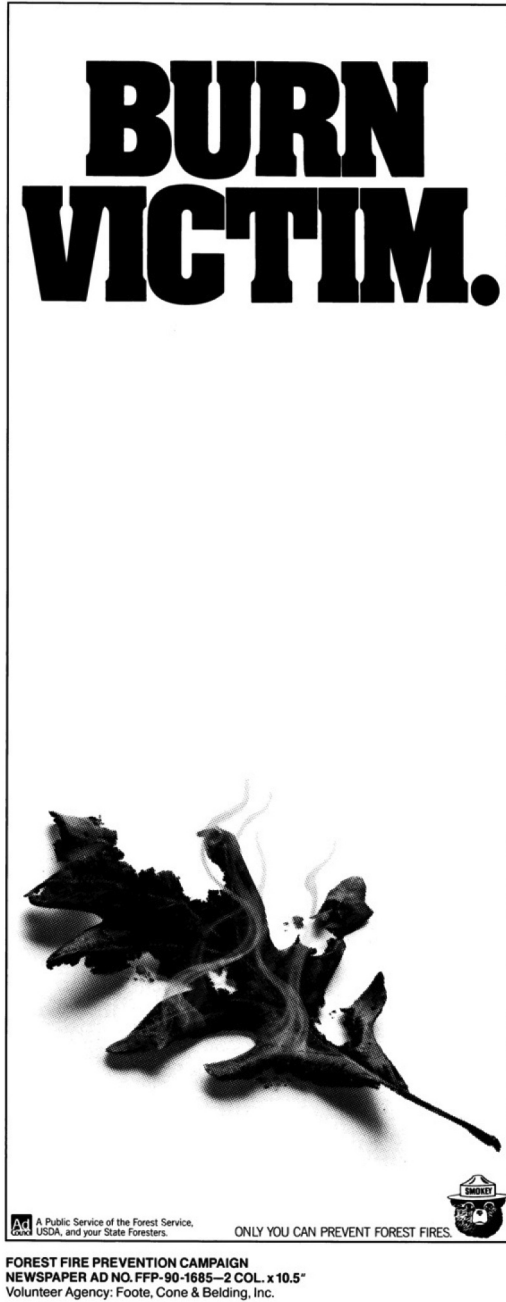
Similarly, most oak forests and oak savannas across the United States benefit from fire and may even depend on repeat fire intervals for consistent oak regeneration (Brose *et al.* 2013, Dey *et al.* 2015, Varner *et al.* 2016). Yet, a campaign ad from as recently as 1990 includes an image of a scorched oak leaf accompanied by the words 'Burn Victim' in bold lettering (Figure 7). Ironically, in the last 100 years, many tree and

plant species have experienced declines more so as a result of fire suppression than fire exposure. In California, the Karuk Tribe of Northern California is leading efforts to return cultural burning regimes to the Klamath River Basin in part to restore the health of culturally significant tanoak stands (Karuk DNR 2010). While tanoaks are not true oaks, they are yet another tree species that depends on fire to thrive. Worth noting here are intertwined, settler assumptions of helplessness among otherwise fire-adapted Indigenous communities and more-than-human species.

Finally, as we described above, the southern fire suppression campaign relies on the othering of poor people in the rural South, weaving class into the campaign's matrix of domination. As campaign materials indicate, the southern campaign was the only distinct regional campaign, emerging out of concern for the prevalence of human-caused fires in the region (Johnson and Hale 2000). In particular, the southern campaign focuses on debris burning and arson, often depicting southern residents as poor, uneducated folks with illogical, criminal practices. Private correspondence from 1968 between the Ad Council's Henry Wehde and Alan Wilson discusses an Ad Council meeting regarding the southern campaign's ad materials. In it, Wehde writes: "Jim admits that the ads are poor from standards that Foote, Cone and Belding and all other volunteer agencies of the Council maintain, but that the southern ads speak the language of the area, and the campaign should not have a more sophisticated approach." It is important to place this regional campaign within the broader context of the U.S. Forest Service's conundrum with poor southerners who routinely set fire to their lands. Deeply frustrated with their practices, and with their suppression-only campaign in full swing, the Forest Service hired psychologist John P. Shea to assess southern fire-setters' motivations, which led to the development of a report titled 'Our Pappies Burned the Woods.' In the report, Shea (1940) pathologizes southern fire-setters as devout to tradition without proper ecological justification. Decades later, the Southern U.S. Forest Service Region would be the first to recognize the indispensability of fire in regional ecosystems. Fire in the South, it appears, was ecologically necessary, yet poor southerners who started fires – likely for reasons ecological and otherwise – were targeted by both the U.S. Forest Service and the Ad Campaign as uninformed, unreliable land stewards in need of federal shepherding.

### *The "vicious sedimentation" of fire-phobia*

Minor and Boyce (2018) describe government advertising as 'a useful lens for examining the production and dissemination of official "truths," intended for consumption by a broad public who would thereby internalize particular



**Figure 7.** Ecological accuracy is not a central goal of the campaign, as is revealed by the portrayal of an oak as a burn victim, despite the central role of fire in maintaining oak habitat.

attitudes and express certain behaviors desired by state actors and agencies' (p.80). The 'official truths' Smokey aims to instill contribute to the vicious sedimentation of fire-phobia. As was defined earlier, Whyte (2018) describes 'vicious sedimentation' as the process by which 'constant ascriptions of settler ecologies onto Indigenous ecologies fortify settler ignorance against Indigenous peoples over time' (p.138). By layering iteration after iteration of mutually reinforcing messages, the decades-long Smokey campaign has ingrained a deep-seated fear of fire in the settler psyche. Various campaign materials refer to burnt landscapes as 'ugly' and imply that they are useless and 'wasted.' Furthermore, campaign materials include misinformation regarding the inability of forests to regenerate after fire. For example, a 1966 ad dramatically displays the words 'Ashes. Soot. Scars. Butts. Ugly. Stump. Hell.' Smaller text on the page states: 'When the soot settles after a forest fire, the Ugly Years begin. The growing back. But once forests are reduced to ashes, they never grow back as green.' While fire can be a substantial disturbance that should be handled with care, burned landscapes are also sites of nutrient recycling, species regeneration, and ecosystem renewal, a fact omitted by the campaign.

The campaign has been remarkably slow to reflect Western scientific understandings, let alone long-held Indigenous knowledges regarding the value of fire. Internal knowledge regarding emerging data suggesting the benefits of fire could be found in campaign correspondence as early as 1968. In a letter once again written by Henry Wehde to Alan Wilson regarding the southern campaign, Wehde describes how the 'campaign will continue to tell people that intentionally started wildfires are criminal acts, but that burning is good under certain conditions' later clarifying that 'if good burning is not contained and wildfire results, a crime has been committed.' In 1973, the Ad Council's campaign correspondence also mentions "'Friendly Fires" Confusion,' explaining that during 1972, a number of articles appeared in widely read periodicals that discussed the use of fire by professionals in certain areas of the country, under special conditions, for forest management purposes. The correspondence states that '[t]hese articles have raised doubts in the minds of some readers about the need for them to be careful with fire when out-of-doors.'

In 1975, Ad Council correspondence to southern radio station managers implores them with the following statement: 'Smokey still needs your help. Yes, we've seen some news stories suggesting he's done his job too well because fire can be used as a valuable tool in forest and wildlife management. But Smokey's message is about wildfire – wildfire: a forest fire that's started for the wrong reason, in the wrong place, at the wrong time and by the wrong people.' The wrong people, as we have illustrated above, are likely people outside the intersections of mid-to-upper class, settler masculinity. Importantly, here we see the emergence of a narrative that would endure into the present – that

Smokey has in fact done his job too well, and there is now a need to return some fire to the forest. Omitted from this statement is the Ad Council's and Forest Service's vicious sedimentation of an unwavering fervor for strict fire suppression, one that erases nuance from the discussion, let alone educates the public on the many ecological benefits of fire.

Of the 201 documents we analyzed, it isn't until 1996—over 50 years into the Fire Prevention campaign – that Ad Council materials describe fire as 'natural' and ecologically necessary. In marketing materials for 'On the Fire Line,' a documentary produced by the Forest Service and the Ad Council detailing the worsening wildfire crisis, the campaign finally acknowledges the role of fire suppression in creating high forest fuel conditions contemporarily threatening the western United States. Indigenous peoples, knowledges and burning practices go unmentioned. This ongoing Indigenous erasure continues the work of vicious sedimentation into the present day. Despite the occasional, lucid recognition of the grave consequences of Smokey's messaging, the overall campaign remains mostly one-dimensional in favor of fire suppression. Most settlers continue to be largely unaware of Indigenous burning practices and center the role of the settler state as tender of the nation's forests. Ironically, even in instances when the Forest Service wants to return fire to deprived forests, the agency must now contend with fire phobic settler imaginaries built by decades of their own strategic advertising.

## Conclusion

While no one disputes the practical wisdom of advising caution with fire, it is impossible to ignore the power relations that created and proliferated the Smokey Bear icon. At the turn of the 20th century, the cultural burning practices of Indigenous peoples and the pro-fire behaviors of some settlers stood in opposition to the needs of the settler state and the elite interests it aimed to serve. As an agency of the settler state, the U.S. Forest Service emerged as the entity in charge of policing national forests and ensuring their proper use, namely by discouraging disturbances such as fire. Lacking the ability to monitor every citizen's use of the forest, the agency employed a powerful advertising campaign to inculcate generations of settlers with a forest culture that individualized state responsibility and protected state interests. The Smokey campaign's relentless messaging helped cement fire phobia within the American settler psyche, protecting timber interests as well as the Forest Service's indispensability in the eyes of policymakers and the general public. Various elements of the campaign, both public-facing and in-house, have replicated interlocking, oppressive dualisms and contribute to a settler-colonial ethos of land management that operates on behalf of industrial capitalist interests. Regardless of the specific rhetorical tropes

deployed, the messaging of the Smokey Bear campaign is continually aligned with the core ideologies of ‘American identity’ – a blend of colonialism, heteropatriarchy, Christianity, and capitalism.

Many national forests have been under a fire suppression regime for so long that fuel accumulations have created truly volatile conditions. In the last decade, the Forest Service’s scientifically unsupported adherence to suppression-only management has fueled the largest wildfires in written U.S. history. Often, Indigenous communities stand on the fire’s front lines, though settlers too have borne the brunt of forest mismanagement. In addition, the fire-adapted species Indigenous communities tended since time immemorial with mixed-intensity, strategically timed cultural burns (such as burning for deer and oaks!) now must contend with extensive, high-intensity, widespread fires that compromise survival and ecosystem renewal. The consequences of the Smokey Bear campaign, therefore, are a matter of multispecies injustice.

Many Tribes are embarking on efforts to restore healthy fire and undo Smokey’s colonial legacy (Adlam *et al.* 2022, Connor *et al.* 2022, Tom *et al.* 2023). Importantly, Indigenous women and non-binary peoples – demographics deeply erased by the Smokey Bear campaign – are reclaiming their role in fire management via inspiring organizational efforts such as the Karuk Tribe’s Indigenous Women-in-Fire Training Exchange. In some cases, Tribes are generously collaborating with the Forest Service to return fire to national forests. While the Forest Service has changed its stance on the critical ecological importance of fire, it doesn’t openly acknowledge its culpability in producing the West’s contemporary tinder box (U.S. Forest Service 2022). Furthermore, the Smokey campaign continues to promulgate one-dimensional, anti-fire propaganda. This raises the question as to whether the USFS and the Ad Council don’t trust the American public’s ability to digest nuanced public messaging. Relatedly, the campaign – which might seem aimed at settlers most committed to ecological welfare – relies on the widespread detachment of the settler populace from the natural world. Failure to see the inaccuracy of picturing the oak as a fire victim, for example, relies upon an audience that is more familiar with, and committed to, brands and corporate logos than with fellow species and natural processes of the lands they inhabit. In the end, settlers were, in fact, consuming a brand all along, one that – like so many others – engaged in false advertising.

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