TURNING AWAY: RACE, POWER, AND SETTLER COLONIALISM IN THE
PEACE RIVER TAR SANDS OF ALBERTA, CANADA

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Turning Away: Race, Power, and Settler Colonialism in the Peace River Tar Sands of Alberta, Canada

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Short Form

Within the Peace River Oil Sands patch of Alberta, Canada, white settlers actively avoid awareness of the pollution and social violence their Indigenous neighbors experience daily. To do so, they erect racial boundaries that separate them from their Indigenous Other with violent consequences. Their avoidance both produces and is enabled through a settler coloniality – a racial hierarchy that allocates political, economic, and cultural power inequitably to privilege settlers and marginalize Indigenous nations, better securing state and industry access to natural resource regions. This allocation of power drives the formation of the Canadian nation-state and provides significant material benefit to its white citizens, but often to the detriment of First Nations communities. Application of theory from environmental anthropology, critical Native and race studies, and decolonial and phenomenological methods reveals that processes of historical narration, spatial practice, and Anglo-Canadian perception of Indigenous bodies and space work concurrently to reproduce the settler coloniality that allows tar sands development to expand in the absence of local political opposition. I conclude that settlers’ refusal to cross the boundaries they
create denies them the ability to see Indigenous neighbors in their full humanity, reinforces stereotypes, and thus prolongs environmental injustice in settler societies. This argument is driven by an engaged praxis, meant to assist in dismantling harmful racial boundaries across settler nations; that wherever Indigenous nations, peoples of color, and settlers live together we achieve the cessation of the social and environmental violence that justice, reconciliation, and human rights all demand.

**Long Form**

Settler Canadians often extol the virtues of Canadian civic identity – its democratic values, humanitarianism, and multiculturalism – and the economic benefits and “modern life” that oil and gas development in Alberta bring their communities. Yet their Indigenous neighbors lack the same political and economic power, denied the fundamentals of the same modern life from which present-day white settlers benefit: adequate housing and healthcare, clean water, dependable infrastructures, access to education and employment, and freedom from violence and environmental contamination. Theirs is a condition that both the United Nations and Amnesty International have described as a human rights disaster. In the oil town of Peace River, settlers perpetuate these social inequalities and environmental injustice through techniques of avoidance that rely upon racial boundary-making; these techniques, which I analytically term “turning away,” include historical narratives of white pioneering, spatial practices and treaties that demarcate white from Indigenous areas, and racist habits in the perception of First Nations bodies and spaces. I conclude that one effect of “turning away” is the ready access to natural resources like the oil sands and, in turn, the denial of environmental contamination and assignment of social
suffering to a pathology of Indigenous culture – a perception rooted in colonial ideologies originating in the 15th century.

White and Indigenous Canadians in Peace River, Alberta, have lived as neighbors since the mid-nineteenth century. However, they are largely strangers to one another, such that interlocutors regularly described the need for Indigenous persons to defend themselves against racial stereotyping (and occasional harassment and violence) in their daily encounters with settlers. Their words and perspectives are recounted in this dissertation, which grows out of nineteen months of ethnographic research with First Nations and Métis (i.e. Indigenous) activists and community leaders, social workers, and ordinary citizens living and working in oil sands regions of western Canada, and examines the complex interworking of race, environment, and settler colonialism that allows the Canadian nation-state and its subjects to comfortably endure through access to natural resources on traditionally Indigenous lands. In doing so, this work makes substantive contributions to burgeoning literature on settler colonialism, social movements, and the anthropology of race. My work draws on theory from environmental anthropology, human geography, and phenomenology to make its argument. It likewise introduces significant nuance into the study of the extractive industries, showing that Indigenous actors in Alberta not only resist the encroachment of settler colonialism and industry on their sovereign territories, but also strategically engage with that encroachment to ensure their own endurance on the land alongside and within a settler society – in some cases, to ensure only their communities’ mere survival. Together, “turning away” techniques provide the cultural conditions under which the settler’s presence on and use of traditionally Indigenous lands may proceed as unquestionable to all but a few Canadians.
Preface

The times in which we live are frightening to many, but certainly no more so than for the socially and politically marginalized. In the United States, race relations have once again come roaring into mainstream political consciousness in ways that have not been witnessed for decades – and rightly so; it was due time that we begin again, earnestly and robustly challenging the systems, values, and beliefs that maintain social and economic hierarchies in my own country.

Yet during the twenty months I visited and lived in the province of Alberta, Canada, I frequently noted the absence of a vigorous public debate over the state of race relations in that country. This was shocking to me. After all, the signs and symptoms were there, observable from the very first week I spent in the country. At a new park in Sault-Ste. Marie, on my first cross-continental drive out to Alberta, on a large monument celebrating the space as a First Nations territory a vandal had scrawled the n-word, in plural, over the printed text. In this dissertation, I recount many more such encounters, some directly with settler Canadians themselves, and some glanced at askew, or overheard in passing, or seen circulated on social media.

In this dissertation, I do not wish to offend those persons who so generously and lovingly supported me throughout my research. I’m greatly indebted to those persons. But so often I witnessed a reluctance to discuss or consider the state of race relations in Canada where it concerned Indigenous peoples. And, as someone visibly coded as white – a settler – I met many on both the left and right who were only too willing to confide in me their private, and racist, perspectives on Native Canada. In these conversations, there was nearly always a deflection: an assertion that racism was only a problem in the United States (a
sentiment that many other Americans I know who have moved abroad also encounter, from Switzerland to Norway to Mexico to China), or was deserved – the personal and collective fault of Indigenous “culture” or peoples themselves.

In my writing I do not wish to shame or alienate those friends who supported my work. It is my intention to describe what I observe and experience in Alberta with rigor and honesty. This sometimes means shining a light on what many Canadians consider shameful, or offensive, to multicultural sensibility. I don’t believe the way I describe my time in Alberta is the way that many Albertans see their home. That’s why I want to kindly ask the reader not to read this work defensively, but with curiosity and introspection on the state of race relations in Canada.

To examine settler-Indigenous relations in Canada, as well, is not to absolve or deflect rightful criticism of our current political situation in the United States. Living in Canada taught me a lesson on my own country: that although America has many problems, we bring those problems directly into the open for public debate, for the world to see. For this, we receive criticism and condemnation from abroad – rightly so. To my thinking, that’s just part of the work of materializing racial justice and equality in settler societies: to accept and internalize others’ criticism, however awful or defensive it may make us feel. After all, hearing discomforting criticism is a far kinder fate than the violences many marginalized communities face in their day-to-day lives. Criticism will not kill us – but an inability to discuss and address the source of that criticism absolutely kills. This is all to say that if, as an American, Canadian, settler or anyone feels provoked by the content of my critique, this is not to generate within you a sense of guilt, or shame. It’s only to suggest
ways that help fix what’s broken in our societies, whether we want to acknowledge what’s broken – here, racism and settler coloniality – or not.

Indeed, what I suggest, though do not make central to my argument for this work, is that the United States and Canada are very much two sides of the same coin, or two stars in a constellation that comprises the colonized Anglophone world – meaning also Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, South Africa, and elsewhere. As critical pan-Indigenous scholars themselves note, the racial and colonial histories of each of these countries were often informed by one another, especially in the British commonwealth, where governments freely exchanged policy on the management of reserves, land use, Residential Schools, and other governance concerning the relationship of their settler societies to Indigenous peoples. As many tourists note, Canada and the U.S. are very much alike, although with significant and important distinctions. In my next work, I intend to leave Canada and look at instead my own country: the places where our own histories of colonization and violence against Native peoples has been obscured, ignored, or deflected. After all, the United States is a settler society par excellence not only for establishing structural arrangements that keep Indigenous peoples disenfranchised, but that openly celebrates genocide and mocks its survivors through monuments, Western films, childhood games, military weaponry, sports teams, and place names. I want both settler societies, and the subjects that inhabit them, including myself, to look honestly and squarely at what is going on, and has been going on for a long time. This is difficult, and I know that for many settlers, painful – it upends the stories we tell about our own countries, and thus about ourselves. But it’s impossible to properly reconcile ourselves to the brutal truth without first openly examining how we got here.
As such, this dissertation is written in the spirit of bridging divides and calling to task those of us who have, and are currently, benefitting from the racial, economic, and political arrangement of things. I hope many will read this, but it is written to speak back to my fellow whites, wherever our settler societies are found. The work of reconciliation and justice is our work, not the work of Indigenous peoples.

To reach this audience in a way that may produce tangible, material political effects, I’ve tried to write in a way that is direct, clear, and evocative. I try to avoid obscuring my argument or meaning beneath layers of academic jargon and complex theory (though the reader may have to forgive me some on that, particularly within the space chapter). For academics, this may suggest I am avoiding the difficulty of complex theory – after all, the ability to densely theorize is highly valorized within academia, providing cachet that brings jobs, funding, and acclaim. But I never really entered anthropology for any of those things. I did so because I felt that in order to address the injustices around me, I needed dedicated time in my life to better and more thoroughly understand them – to become more effective in knowing how to fix these problems. Seven years later, I’m not sure that I’ve done this; that instead, I’ve actually become more confused. The problems set out in this dissertation are complex, and that complexity is compounded by my own successes and failures in “the field” and outside of it. But this is why I have written the way I have: so that these words may have some purchase beyond the completion of a PhD, beyond my ability to find gainful employment in academia, and beyond solely personal aspirations. I want everyone to be able to read this, and understand the things I have seen and heard, so that you might too come to the conclusions I have. It may be a fool’s errand, but certainly better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, David Luís Jones, 1947-2013, whose endless curiosity, thoughtfulness, and love for knowledge set the foundation for my own path.

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Images</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pivots: Observing the Silence of the Politics of Race in Alberta</em></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Argument: Turning Away</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conceptual Foundations</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Indigeneity, Race and Whiteness in Canada</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Settler Colonialism vs. Settler Coloniality</em></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space and Place</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space versus Place</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connecting Space and Embodiment</strong></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race, Space and Settler Coloniality</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formations of Race and Space</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructing Whiteness Non-Relationally</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>“The Gap,” and Settler (Mis-)Apprehension of Reserve Life</em></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phenomenological Approaches and the Enabling Conditions of Settler Coloniality</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding the Place</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview: Space as an Enabling Condition</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Theoretical Review of Space, Place, and the Body</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>But Why Space?</em></td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Racialization of Space and its Phenomenological Reproduction via Perception</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Redneck”: Marking the Unmarked-ness of White Space in the Peace Country</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settler Innocence: Working to Make the Great White North Pure through Attachment to Landscape</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Race and Canadian Nature</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Relationality, Settler Distancing (Turning Away) and the Reserve</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries, the Frontier, and the Survey: Making “The Peace Country”</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Disrupting Settler Space through Pow Wow, Art, and Marching</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: Historical Spectacle, Narrative, and the Exaltation of the Settler</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Calgary Stampede</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tails”: A Spectacle of Settler Historical Narrative, Land, and Political Order</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On History</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treaty 8, the Lubicon Cree, and the Settler of the Peace River Country</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Their Own Spaces and Words: Visual and Discursive Setter Representations of Alberta and the Peace Country</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Am Albertan”</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Peace River Settlement Chronology</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Analysis of “I Am Albertan.”</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1.1: November 2014 in the Peace River Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1.2: A diagram of “Turning Away”</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1.3: A map of the area of study</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1.4: An aerial photo of the Town of Peace River</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2.1: Anti-pipeline activists at night in British Columbia</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2.2: At the 2013 Healing Walk</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2.3: The 2015 Sisters in Spirit Memorial Walk in Peace River</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2.4: A round dance in NYC in solidarity with the Idle No More Movement</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.1: An industry sign erected on the edge of the oil patch</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.2: A 1914 cadastral survey of the study area</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.3: Signage indicating Treaty 8 territory along the highway</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.4: The Grand Entry of the 2015 AIC Pow Wow</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3.5: Ceremony held in town park following Sisters in Spirit Walk</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.1: The Alberta Oil Sands Plaza at the Calgary Stampede Grounds</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.2: The <em>Tails</em> Finale</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.3: Canada Day celebrations outside of the town museum in 2015</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.4: A defaced historical placard along the highway south of Peace River</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.5: Treaty 8 House</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.6: The Pioneer Club in a Francophone community south of Peace River</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.7: Pioneer graveyard overlooking downtown and Misery Mountain</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4.8: A mural adjacent to the main town park</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 5.1: Signage outside of Shell production facilities 248
Fig. 5.2: Chief Isaac 257
Fig. 5.3: Carmen Langer 263
Fig. 5.4: A CHOPS production site from a distance 267
Fig. 5.5: Closeup of a CHOPS production pad 273
Introduction

“The understanding of the racial question does not ultimately involve understanding by either blacks or Indians. It involves the white man himself. He must examine his past. He must face the problems he has created within himself and within others. The white man must no longer project his fears and insecurities onto other groups, races, and countries. Before the white man can relate to others he must forego the pleasure of defining them. The white man must learn to stop viewing history as a plot against himself.” Vine Deloria, Jr. 1988. Custer Died for your Sins: An Indian Manifesto, pp. 174-5.

Fig. 1.1. November 2014 in the Peace River Valley looking northward and downstream, from the main highway running up the West Hill. A thousand feet below, the northern half of the Town of Peace River sits on the floodplain alongside the Peace River. Photo by author.

We gasped the first time we came to the crest of the valley, where the road begins its descent from flat prairieland down to the river and the town built alongside it. It was November and crystals of powdery snow flowed in swirls and lines across the surface of the road, like the northern lights had turned white and fallen from the sky to dance and play along the flat plane of the ground. For five hours we drove northward from Edmonton, the nearest large city. Concrete sidewalks had given way to snowy white expanses of prairie farmland, sleeping through the dark of the winter; farmland gave way to boreal forest, where stands of gray poplar trunks crusted with hoarfrost stood still alongside lush groves
of spruce. Three hours into the trip, we crossed the threshold where the edge of the boreal
broke piecemeal into farmland again, dotted with both older wooden and newer concrete
grain silos, and oil pumpjacks, and the steepled churches rising from scattered
settlements with names in both French and English; Valleyview, Guy, Falher and
Girouxville, Donelly and Nampa. We were there – in the Peace Country, and would soon
be in the lower Country’s regional capital: the Town of Peace River.

We gasped because the valley seemed to appear so suddenly. After hours of driving
through broad swathes of prairie and forest in northern Alberta, our senses and our bodies
anticipated more of the same. The first time you see it, the valley disrupts your thinking
and your body, of habits of perception and expectation born from only a few hours passing
among the alternating flatness and gentle roll of broad hills in the north.

But the valley! It surprises newcomers in its breadth and beauty, and the bodily
sensation of that surprise is potent. Mounds of white hill rise over a thousand feet from the
river its, grey patches of forests growing from coulees as the valley rolls downward. At its
bottom, the Peace River was wide and flat, its borders concealed with river ice as the annual
freeze up crept downward from the arctic, with only a glossy bluish channel in the center
flowing northward, carrying pancakes of ice. A blue steel truss bridge crossed the river,
connecting the hills on either side of the river to one another, bisecting the small Town of
Peace River that sat along the river proudly, smoke and steam rising from the roofs of its
buildings, arranged in a set of orderly grids.

Several weeks earlier I had reached an impasse in my original fieldwork project on
tar sands extraction in the provincial capital of Edmonton. A month in, preliminary research
networks had dissolved and tantalizing promises of mentorship and introductions from area
social scientists had never materialized; the project seemed to bore researchers I spoke to in Edmonton, and non-scholars eyed me with suspicion when I explained my project. Everyone had already read both the local and international media coverage of the oil sands, and nearly everyone had family working in Fort McMurray, or had worked there themselves, but no one wanted to talk about oil with an outsider very much apart from a few simple platitudes about how important oil was to the Albertan economy, or how Ottawa needed to stop interfering with the province so much. There were few critical voices, and those that there were only stated placidly that it was a shame “what was happening,” or that the industry needed better environmental monitoring and regulation, but that Alberta needed the jobs. When I first arrived in Alberta in 2012, I had assumed the oil industry was a source of local shame, something hidden away from public view. By 2014, I had realized that oil and gas extraction were such a deeply embedded part of daily life in the province that it was nearly unremarkable, as normal and mundane to Albertans as its was spectacular and shocking to persons abroad who had seen the photographs of the strip mines in the north of the province. Naively, I had never made note that Edmonton’s hockey team were the Oilers, or Calgary’s football team the Flames. I hadn’t yet seen the antique drilling rig stationed at the visitor’s center at the southern entrance to Edmonton, or the bronze cast statue of pipefitters sitting squarely in the center of the massive city mall’s main promenade.

So I turned my attention out to the peripheries of the province, to potential work in the oil patches themselves. The tar sands region of Fort McMurray, in northeastern Alberta, is infamous now for the extent of its visible environmental destruction – but it is not the only zone of extractive development of bitumen deposits in Alberta. Smaller deposits, deeper underground, are located in the southeast, near the town of Cold Lake, and in the
northwest, in the Peace Country. The stories of these regions have gone largely unexamined by either the press or scholars, yet in many ways are at the forefront of the technological, political, and transnational market forces driving oil sands extraction. More complex still, they are sited among lands that have been agriculturally settled, but only since the early 20th century and where celebratory pioneer histories and stories of settlement – of wild, “empty” places tamed by intrepid white homesteaders – still circulate as critical parts of local identity and imaginaries. Most significantly, they are places where tar sands extraction occurs nearly unimpeded on both traditional and federally-recognized Indigenous lands, whether First Nations or Métis, and nearly always on lands covered by a system of numbered treaties intended to regulate not only settler-Indigenous relations, but settler and Indigenous land use practices. In a word, these less-recognized sites are places where the processes of industry, nature, settler colonialism, and nation-state formation all converge explicitly and spectacularly, where the timescale of their emergence is recent and un-relegated to a distant past as colonial processes are perceived in my southeastern home, in the Virginian piedmont.

From my desk in shared office space at the University of Alberta, I sent out cold emails to every local institution in both Peace River and Cold Lake that I could find through their municipal websites. Within a few days, the director of the Peace River Museum and Mackenzie Archives invited me to come visit and talk about my research; within a few hours I had called my friend, a journalist who was visiting family down in Calgary, and we set a date for a road trip north. And thus began this project’s primary body of fieldwork and the long drive through farmland, patches of oil and gas extraction that assailed our sense of smell, and forested land that appeared wild and pristine, but which hid extensive
networks of pipelines, drilling rigs, upgraded roadways, production pads, storage tanks, work camps, and seismic cut lines.

Some urban-based colleagues in the south of the province had warned me against performing ethnographic research in Peace River – that it would lead to work that was too parochial, its remoteness too evocative of the classical anthropological tropes of arrival and “contained” village cultures that mark our predecessors’ work. Yet what I encountered in the Peace Country was something else altogether: at the center of the Peace Oil Sands was a nexus of international capital and the extractive industries; a place where the processes and operations of power, race, and settler colonialism were at once both obscured and all-too-visible. Although Peace River is far removed from Canada’s largest cities, it is still an important place, critical to the development of the Canadian settler-nation and -subject as much as it is critical to the foundational stories of local First Nations. Each of these themes I explore throughout this dissertation. While its ethnographic focus appears at first glance to be local, the town and region are metonymic for processes of racial formation and power productive of the emergence of settler states and their subjects across the colonized world. Its lessons and historical connections linger across and are woven into the life of settler states wherever Europeans have come to colonize, and successfully managed to stay.

**Pivots: Observing the Silence of the Politics of Race in Alberta**

There was one conversation I had across Canada, repeated often enough in the words of so many white interlocutors across time and location that it emerged as a pattern – the animating force and ethnographic keystone of this study. In 2015, an uprising in Ferguson, Missouri erupted in response to the murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, as he was fleeing police officers attempting his arrest. Canadian media are far more attuned
to events in the U.S. than the American press is to Canada, and Albertans often wanted to discuss current events below the 35th parallel with me.

“What’s going on down there,” the conversation usually began, “is a real shame.”

And I would respond: “I know. I agree. It’s hard to be abroad and see these things happening in my home country.”

“Yeah,” they would continue. “America seems to have some real race problems. Here in Canada, we’re multicultural, tolerant; we don’t really have these issues [of antagonistic or violent race relations].”

At this point, I would pause. While the racial landscape of Canada is certainly distinct from that of the United States, Canada itself has a host of issues relating to race, and anti-racism activists and academics are busy throughout the country working against both structural and cultural violence that disproportionately impacts Indigenous peoples there. Both journalism and scholarship note the inadequate representation of Indigenous scholars in the academy (Dua et al. 2016); that reserve communities experience endemic rates of poverty, including lack of water and sanitation services (McMahon 2014); that rates of First Nations incarceration are disproportionately higher than those of white Canadians (Roberts and Reid 2017); that suicide rates are two times as high for Indigenous peoples in Canada than for white Canadians (McQuaid 2017), and far more (see King 2013). Although Native scholars themselves point out that enumerating the violence that First Nations experience obscures the daily joy and pride that being Native and part of an Indigenous community bring – life is not all gloom and doom, and this obscuration effectively re-essentializes and pathologizes Native life (Wildcat 2017) – empirical evidence demonstrates that First Nations experience extraordinary and disproportionate
suffering, despite Canada’s tolerant multiculturalism. Despite their prior presence to the Canadian polity, Indigenous peoples in Canada are largely excluded from the full benefits and legal protections its multicultural constitution intends to provide.

And so, I would often respond to this moment in the conversation by saying, “Well, yes; we do have serious issues that we need to figure out in the U.S. I appreciate that we can discuss them openly in the states. But it seems like there are some issues here, too, regarding First Nations…”

I was never asked for clarification on what “issues” I was referring to. Typically, this became a moment for deflection – a pivot away from the question. White interlocutors resisted this line of inquiry altogether by changing the topic, or would offer glib evaluations intended to conclude the conversations. *There are some problems there,* they’d say in one way or another, but that “we’ve all had bad experiences with them,” in the exact words of one acquaintance. The discomfort of the statement often registered in the body of the interviewee: they would fidget, glance at the ground, shift their balance away from me or simply gesticulate towards the area of town where predominantly-Indigenous homeless persons were known to congregate. It left me with the impression that to discuss white-Indigenous race relations and politics was distasteful; their expressions were reminiscent of the thousands of other conversations I had had in my conservative rural hometown when a uncomfortable subject – politics, religion – came up, and it appeared always that a linguistic and embodied repertoire was deployed in order to change the conversation as soon as possible.

In that sense, it appeared that racism in Alberta was a “public secret,” around which a silence has developed. Silence on a particular topic reveals as much ethnographically as
what is said, and it is settler silence on the subject of racism that concerns me here. As Carol Kidron notes, silences are ethnographically demonstrative, moments of the memory’s “nexus” between macro processes of post/colonial or hegemonic violence to the subjects’ phenomenological embodiment of the past. At the “micro” level in turn, silences become expressions of violent histories, such as that of colonialism, “in which everyday, taken-for-granted mnemonic practices are constituted, sustained, and intergenerationally transmitted to create the silent yet no less living presence of the past” (2009, 8). Thus silence can reveal how interlocutors live not only with historical violence, but with violence in the present as well. This nexus elevates silence to the level of what P.W. Geissler, drawing upon Taussig (1999) refers to as a “public secret.” He writes that,

…that what is known but must not be articulated in a given society arrangement – what he called ‘public secrets,’ notably pertaining to hierarchy and domination – is constitutive of social order through a double bond with power: making domination unspoken, silencing critique and resistance, and exacerbating power differentials, since the force of making violence unknowable exceeds that of the violent act itself. Power rests thus not just in knowledge; ‘unknown knowns’ are the apotheosis of power. (2013, 15)

As such, the majority of white interlocutors’ reluctance to engage with me, generally or specifically on the topic of race, reveals in one instance how the power inherent to inequitable race relations reproduces that inequity, and its inherent violence. Silence is here not a failure, or absence of ethnographic method and acuity. It is an object for analysis that reveals more about settler colonial power than it obscures, posing far less of a challenge to the work of ethnography than to the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada who are forcibly marginalized from the settler polity. Put another way, silence on race and violence is not a negation – the negative absence of knowledge and information that could better inform an ethnography. Silence exists here in the positive, productive of race relations and power.
Still, by looking at a range of different data points – ethnographic encounter, racializing spectacles, media representations in local magazines and newspapers, social media – we can triangulate what silence is working here to obscure, even as it reveals power relations in the positive.

Small details reveal as much as large, spectacular events – of the sort around which many ethnographies are organized (consider, for example, Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi’s *Pogrom in Gujarat* (2012)). When working with public secrets, these small details may appear more panoramic than “thick” in ethnographic scope. Their prevalence in an ethnographic text may suggest a thinness in the rigor of the study. But as Michael Herzfeld notes, “the more power in centralized, the easier it is for its representatives to ignore what they do not wish to see” (2015, 20). Thus acute attention to detail in how people behave or change behavior become critical for an interrogation of power. Settler power, I suggest, seeks to obscure and make itself invisible (see chapter 4). Herzfeld likewise notes that under conditions of public secrecy and invisibility, we must “seek the external signs of anything we can claim has been made invisible. One of the most obvious pointers is the presence of sudden shifts in speech of gesture” (20), which offers an important inroad to the phenomenological methods and analytical tack taken throughout this study in trying to understand race amid the tar sands. These approaches are not without precedent in anthropology, clearly (see also Jackson 2013, 13, 153-4). A panoramic, “thin” approach to the ethnography of power – especially invisible power – is then a justifiable ethnographic approach. Again, an apparent “thinness” that comes from difficult access and rapport conditions in the field, as I discuss later, demonstrates significant insight into the operations and reproduction of violence and (settler-colonial) power.
Yet much of the data on racism and white-settler power here is also visible, glimpsed during chance encounters and in moments when white interlocutors’ offered their preliminary take on race before shifting subjects again. On at least six occasions interlocutors would respond to my line of inquiry with the statement that, “Oh, well, I’m not racist, but...” and proceed to list a litany of reasons why First Nations people should be avoided. Avoidance (e.g., turning away) here is critical: it was a telos, an effort to explain why white interlocutors did not engage with First Nations people, or go near reserve; indeed, 38% of Canadians have never been to a reserve, 32% have only driven through, and only 4% claim they have spent “lots of time” on reserve (Angus Reid Institute 2018). The justifications here explicitly reflect the same racialized discourse that circulate in the culture of poverty argument structuring discourse on U.S. Black-white relations. White-settler interlocutors in Alberta stated about their Indigenous neighbors that “they’re all on drugs;” “they’re violent;” “they don’t make anything of themselves;” they “choose to live ‘that way;’” “they’re in gangs;” or most outrageously that “I don’t want to get raped.” White interlocutors were direct when making these assertions. One stated that “I don’t trust them. I may let one [sic] into my yard, but never, ever into my house.” This last interlocutor hosted me while in Edmonton, and she told me that it was a house rule that if any of her First Nations neighbors came to the fence or door, I was not to let them in. Occasionally these statements would be qualified with, “it’s a shame that Canada did this to them [First Nations], but they choose to keep living this way.” To some, racial inequality in the U.S. was the inevitable consequence of a racist American culture and law; but that in Canada, racial inequality was of result of Indigenous persons’ individual or community choices – a “culture of poverty” (see Flanagan et al 2010). Yet, on my very first preliminary trip to
Alberta by road, at a park in Ontario that had been legally reclaimed by a local First Nation and developed into a public park by their council, the n-word was spray painted in enormous letters across an informational placard explaining the cultural and historical significance of the site. While the slur is more infrequently deployed against Indigenous Canadians, its presence on that placard designating Indigenous space clearly signaled the subjects of its attack, and fits into a pattern of other racial slurs used to assault First Nations persons. Incidents include a junior hockey team in Quebec harassed by white Quebeckers, calling those children “savages” (CBC 2018); or an Alberta Health Services manager referring to one of her employees as a “squaw” (CBC 2017); or a man and his companion in a McDonald’s in Red Deer, Alberta being referred to with those same two latter words (Red Deer News 2016). “I hate you, Canada” said the First Nations man in the lattermost attack, “for teaching people to treat me this way.”

While it is clear that both interpersonal and structural racism are operative throughout Canada, it was also apparent that most of the white interlocutors I met did not wish to discuss race with me except to uphold a uniquely Canadian multiculturalism that included all races and ethnicities excluding Indigenous peoples. Their efforts to avoid this conversation then becomes the moment under consideration throughout this dissertation. Their effort was a pivot away from the topic; and that pivot becomes the moment of analysis. Why did they wish to pivot away from the conversation, and what sociopolitical conditions allowed white settlers to live lives in which they did not need to consider or discuss ostensibly “distasteful” issues – even when their First Nations neighbors up the road were suffering from social, economic, and political marginalization, some of which was the consequence of tar sands development itself?
The Argument: Turning Away

This dissertation explores race, environment, and power in a settler colonial context. In particular, following but reinterpreting the anthropological tradition of “studying up” (Nader 1972) towards the socially dominant, I interrogate the cultural and political practices tied to, and productive of, the formation of power amid tar sands development regions that disproportionately benefit white-settlers, but which frequently disenfranchise
local Indigenous communities. Settler power, however, is not contained to particular institutions or discourse but is informed by and realized through settlers’ daily practices and racialized habits of perception and space-making.

My argument begins with and rests upon Canadian scholarship that asserts that race, and settler whiteness in particular, are discursively and legally constructed and bound foundationally to the formation of the Canadian polity (Razack 2002; Baldwin et al 2011; Thobani 2007). However, this dissertation qualifies this scholarship by arguing that race (or settler-whiteness) and racism are constructed not solely through discourse but also through political and research practice, historical spectacle alongside embodied, habituated practices of perception and spatial production that permit white settlers to “turn away” from forms of violence and domination inherent to settler-whiteness as it is currently practiced. Racialized habits of perception, and those perceptions’ a colonially-spacialized landscape, are required to insure the continuing entrenchment of settler presence, and thus both extractive industries and the settler nation-state, on traditionally Indigenous lands in Alberta’s north. Yet these settler habits of perception, as I show, are possible only where law, spectacle, and space-making converge to inform the settler-subject’s idea of the self (i.e., subjectification) and thus their understanding of the world around them, and their rightful place within it.

The ethnographic evidence selected to support this argument emerges from nineteen months of preliminary and primary fieldwork from 2012 to 2016. In the case of the primary field site for this work – the Peace River Country – I focus on what interlocutors described as a sociopolitical and cultural “gap” between settler and Indigenous persons in the province over the course of 43 consented interviews and
uncountable hours of “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998), and which corresponded to what I personally experienced and witnessed as a trained participant observer and in my own life autoethnographically as a settler-subject (Malinowski 1923; Bernard 2011; see chapter 1). What accounts for and is the nature of the “gap,” and how do settlers reproduce that gap in daily life? Through ethnographic analysis, I explore the settler-colonial ideologies and habits of perception that maintain the boundaries between settler and Indigenous subjects, and which characteristically benefit the former over the latter as settler-whiteness entrenches and reproduces itself on Indigenous lands through discursive, spatial, legal, and perceptual techniques.

To unite these disparate processes analytically, I refer to their constellation as “turning away.” Turning away is a phenomenological orientation towards the world that is both cultural and structural, permitted by, and productive of, a complex of spectacle and inequitable social processes that seek to absolve white settlers of responsibility and guilt for settler colonialism while simultaneously perpetuating its various social inequities. For the settler subject, turning away obscures and denies the systemic and patterned disenfranchisement Indigenous peoples in Canada experience at local, provincial, and national levels, permitting them to refuse acknowledgement of historic or ongoing violence against Indigenous peoples, and thus effecting a sense of unmarked “goodness” of the figure of the settler and settler colonial nation-state. At both interpersonal and in collective practice, turning away appears in various ethnographically-observable forms: As settlers’ deliberate physical avoidance – distancing – of Indigenous peoples and communities; as discursive and representational practices that provide ablation for settler-colonial violence both historically and contemporaneously; through the perception of an Indigenous “Other”
and space through racial logics; and through embodied, visceral fear of sharing space. Together, these processes work to achieve the same effect: they permit the white-settler to ignore, avoid, or deny Indigenous social suffering in Canada, and thus reproduce and entrench a racialized settler coloniality that benefits white-settlers disproportionately. In that sense, “turning away” is a phenomenological production, an orientation towards the world around the settler-subject permitted through an array of enabling conditions that include historical discourse, political practices, spatialization, and the political economy – each respectively the subject of this dissertation’s chapters. At its core, and consistent with contemporary settler colonial theory, these techniques permit continued settler access to, and ownership of, the land and all of its resources whether agricultural, mineral, or forest.

Astute readers will note that what I denote as “turning away” potentially reflects new scholarship in anthropology and Native Studies that theorizes on Indigenous refusal.

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1 To put a finer point on the “enabling conditions,” I draw explicitly from (and reduce significantly) the work of Jewish-Czech philosopher Edmund Gustav Husserl’s phenomenology. His main philosophical concern was to understand experience from within experience itself, suspending all methodological judgement and bracketing concerns of “the real” in order to foreground an experience on its own terms. For Husserl, this means considering what it means for a phenomenon to exist at all – how it emerges and appears as and through experience. To do so, he proposed the ideas of noema and noesis. This work is on the nature of consciousness, and in particular how consciousness is directed towards a particular object, such that this intentional direction of consciousness is an object unto itself. Drastically simplified, noema is the idea of a thing, provided to the perceiving subject through – the ideational content of an act. Noesis is the intentional and temporal act of consciousness. That is, “Any type of act, i.e. any living experience is per se a temporal event which makes up the process of personal awareness. Such an experience is a complex event which is comprised of various living components. What Husserl calls an actual content of an act is a variety of components of a living which are added together so to make up a complex intentional experience. The actual content means some temporary parts which create an intentional living” (Rassi and Shahabi 2015, 30). Put another way, “The intentional process of consciousness is called noesis, while its ideal content is called noema. The noema of an act of consciousness Husserl characterized both as an ideal meaning and as ‘the object as intended.’ Thus the phenomenon, or object-as-it-appears, becomes the noema, or object-as-it-is-intended” (Smith 2018). In communicating Husserl’s (and other phenomenologists’) concept of noema, they frequently use the language of “enabling condition,” or “conditions of the possibility – of intentionality, including embodiment, bodily skills, cultural context, language and other social practices, social background, and contextual aspects of intentional activities” (ibid.). As such, in this dissertation I deploy Husserl’s noema vis-à-vis the term enabling conditions to see how settler-colonial history and spectacle, political practice and ideology, and space and racializing practice produce the experience and perception of the tar sands. That is, I try to comprehend the tar sands as a phenomenon in the phenomenological sense of the world, loaded as it is with structural power inequities (settler coloniality) that require race, class, and ideologies of landscape to converge for the tar sands and settler turning away from its violence to emerge at all.
and the politics of state recognition. To consider the position of the oppressed, writes Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson, Indigenous refusal of the social and political conditions (and legitimacy) of the settler society emerges as the moment and space within which authority and power may shift from the dominant to the subaltern. In reference to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, she writes that “recognition” of the oppressed self’s objectification under a racial political economy

…is the basis for self-consciousness, and here taken to be a political self-consciousness that will translate into a revolutionary argument, a movement to unshackle oneself from this formula for self-perception. Glen Coulthard takes from Fanon’s reading of Hegel the impetus to ‘turn away’ from the oppressor, to avert one’s gaze and refuse the recognition itself. This moment of turning away can turn us toward Haudenosaunee assertions, which in different ways tell a story about a territory of willingness, a willingness to ‘stay enslaved.’ We could see this as a political strategy that is cognizant of an unequal relationship, understands the terms of bondage, and choose to stay within them in order to assert a greater principle: nationhood, sovereignty, jurisdiction by those who are deemed to lack that power, a power that is rooted in historical precedent but is conveniently forgotten or legislated away. Perhaps here we see a willingness to assert a greater principle and, in the assertion of this principle, to assert and to be free whether this is apprehended as such or not. So in the Haudenosaunee political context it can mean recognition by another authoritative nexus (one’s own?) and thereby call the other’s into question. This negates the authority of the other’s gaze. (2014, 25)

Here, refusal appears as a technique through which the subordinate may reimagine the terms and conditions of their political standing in relation to settler-state authority. It is a moment in which the legitimacy of colonial power has the rug pulled out from underneath its, opening up new space for the (re-)assertion of self and sovereignty. For this reason, anthropologist Carole McGranahan states that “refusal marks the point of a limit having been reached: we refuse to continue on this way” (2016, 320). And while these two scholars think through the possibilities of refusal to open up new political worlds, settler refusal, or “turning away” does something altogether entirely different. The constellation of processes I note above and explore throughout this dissertation do not concern the abrogation of
colonial power and authority; indeed, they work to uphold that power and authority, distilled into the very being and world of the settler-subject himself. This is perhaps why Indigenous refusal to recognize the legitimacy of a settler state like the U.S. or Canada can provoke such anxiety in the white-settler: without recognition of their or their polity’s authoritative right to be there upon a New World landscape, the very enabling conditions that permit their conception and perception of their world and self is denied. Thus, in order for the settler subject to prevent this refusal from occurring before it even happens, the turning away of settlers forecloses Indigenous political challenge to their power.

Settler turning away is thus a preventative measure, a way in which the settler may say to himself, “I not only have the right to be upon this land, but history and the pathologies of Indigenous culture bear out the legitimacy of this right, and thus I have no need to mark or acknowledge myself as settler or racially marked.” In this sense, turning-away is a self-fulfilling prophecy, an act of settler refusal to acknowledge either their own power or the power and sovereignty of their Indigenous neighbors – tucked away out of sight and out of mind such that the sociopolitical supremacy of settler-whiteness may reproduce itself without having to acknowledge its own processes and existence. In a word, turning away works to make settler power and colonialism invisible to itself (though nearly never to Indigenous peoples). Thus, it would be a mistake to say that the settler turning away I explore here mirrors, is twinned to, or is analogous to the kind of refusal Fanon, Simpson, Coulthard, or McGranahan describe. Settler turning away is in effect a negation of Indigenous refusal, a way of conveniently enabling the outright ignorance of Indigenous (and human) rights to healthful life and political sovereignty within a settler nation-state. As such, whether settler intent towards First Nations and Métis is “racist” or not is
irrelevant: turning away’s effect is to elevate white subjects economically, politically, and socioculturally and thus marginalize Indigenous peoples in order to retain land. Put another way, even if the white-settler subject does not intend racism, turning away upholds structural racism and is thus a racist practice. This is consistent with critical race scholarship which notes that even benevolent (or humorous) intent on the part of whites does not negate the racism of the subject, action or effect itself (Hill 1998; Ikuenobe 2010; Omi and Winant 2014), and which is likewise consistent with recent scholarship on the concept of microaggressions (Huber and Solorzano 2015).

On this last point it’s important to note that Indigenous interlocutors themselves expressed optimism that acts of overt racialized assaults had declined in the town since what they described as its heyday in the 1980s, when the neighboring Lubicon Cree were engaged in political struggle against the province and oil and gas industry. Indigenous interlocutors could still recount over racism, and in the words of one Elder:

I remember back in the day, say 20 years ago, this was a very strong racist community. Many roadside grave markings [of murdered Indigenous people] between here and Cadotte Lake. And one time for an example, there was no golf course behind the mall – there was a park, and that’s where the street people hung out … I went back there one time, my wife and I, and my sister-in-law and her man came with us, [because] I was gonna do a one-on-one [traditional counseling session] with a person … And the police car come by … stopped in front of us. The police got out, and the younger officer said “okay, okay boys – where’s the alcohol?”… So I experienced that racism right there on the spot, that stereotyping.

Incidents like had declined in frequency over the years, he and other Interlocutors said. Yet that stereotyping still occurs – whispered to me in private before the white-settler pivot. It appears that where once racial tension appeared in more overt acts of discrimination, in public they have now taken the form of subtler forms of racism, expressed in micro-level discursive exchanges and bodily orientations towards Native persons which may be
performed without racist intent, but which establish white from Native space and are nevertheless harmful to marginalized peoples (Fleras 2017; Ikuenobe 2010). Race still operates as a hidden discourse between white-settlers (Furniss 2000), the public secret, hinted at to me (the fellow settler) in private before interlocutors nervously shifted linguistic register and topic – a private discourse which emerges through the body publicly. In turn, that private discourse informs settler unwillingness to more fully engage with their Indigenous neighbors. Consequently, turning away is the manifestation of a generalized settler unwillingness to see Indigenous people in their full humanity, and that same Native Elder noted the problem of turning away and its political consequences himself:

… sitting yesterday, listening to the talkers, at the Sisters in Spirit walk [to address the phenomenon of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women], I was looking, and I could see the hill and the traffic on it and I thought, here’s this very small group of [Indigenous] people, very passionate for what they’re doing, very passionate for the knowledge and understanding of the reason for that walk. Yet that highway is just freewheeling vehicles up and down, up and down, and those people [settlers] have no idea what is going on. And maybe with better education, which may hinder people [they can finally come to care and understand the Indigenous peoples, the treaties, and change government law and policy.]

Worryingly, as he notes and I discuss in the conclusion, the political stakes here are high: turning away may foreclose opportunities for the reconciliation paths proposed in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commissions 2015 report, as well as bringing adequate closure to the environmental injustice and structural marginalization experienced by area farming and Indigenous communities proximate to the Peace River tar sands. Thus, turning away is an issue of both racial and environmental justice. It is critical to note, however, that Indigenous and settler activists constantly seek to rupture and transform this arrangement of power, as active and engaged in their own political futures as much as the status quo seeks to consolidate and reproduce itself. White-settler Canadians, I argue, are in a state of
perennial deferral of attention to or responsibility for the racialized violence of their own country; activist actions disrupt this deferral, often only by calling attention to its existence. Yet although these disruptions do occasionally shift arrangements of power in Canada, those shifts are very rarely of the kind, quality, or at the pace at which many activists and First Nations demand – even where those demands are quite measured or are voiced merely to alleviate human suffering. I consider the role of activism in settler societies in further depth in chapter 1 – on Methods and Activism; on community organizing against oil odors and emissions in chapter 4; and again finally in the conclusion.

**Conceptual Foundations**

*Indigeneity, Race and Whiteness in Canada*

It can be problematic to conflate indigeneity with race. As a social category, Indigeneity recognizes that Native nations existed prior to, and outside of, the introduction of Western sovereignty and ontology – within which the classificatory system of “race” is included. However, speech acts such as the examples above operate through the logics and optics of race; they are *racializing* as much as they are *racialized*. As Bonita Lawrence notes, racialization regulates identities, ordering humans and landscapes in the colonial process in ways that permits their control. Both gender and race, she argues, “enable settler governments to define who is ‘Indian,’ and control access to Native land” (2009), and along with gender forms a basis for the emergence of capitalist political economy on colonized Indigenous territories gaining access to all the land’s resources, including agricultural (Coulthard 2014, 3-16). This is to say that the tar sands are not only the consequence of a material political economy, but of a racial ordering as well – a settler coloniality. Because this dissertation examines settler-white power, its quotidian operations and effects, I deploy
the analytics of critical race theory to make sense of how and why settlers do what they do, and believe what they believe. If we want to know how settlers reproduce “turning away” and its rationalization, then we have to look at the racializing logics that enable these phenomena in the first place.

For the purposes of my argument then, and drawing upon both my own ethnographic experience and the body of scholarship termed “whiteness studies” which I review in later chapters, I heuristically define *settler-whiteness* through two key characteristics:

1. The desire to obtain, maintain, and reproduce arrangements of power that benefit whites disproportionately to non-white subjects for the purpose of attaining and retaining land/territory and its resources to perpetuate/justify settler presence;

2. *But* with the enduring desire to deny responsibility either for the historical developments that ensured white dominance, or their perpetuation in the contemporary moment, thus always working to claim what Sherene Razack calls white-settler innocence (2002, 5).

*Settler colonialism vs. Settler coloniality*

To better examine turning away, I deploy two analytical frames to describe the socio-political and physical ordering of Canada: settler colonialism, and settler coloniality. I use both terms somewhat interchangeably, although each develop out of distinct geographical regions and literatures that ostensibly signify different forms of colonialism. Theoretically, however, the terms overlap in ways that allow us to think through settler Canada with greater nuance.

In a word, settler colonialism is a form of colonial practice in which a colonizing population arrives in an already-inhabited territory and does not leave. Distinct from post-colonialism, this arrangement sets out to perpetuate itself, and in so doing requires the “elimination” (Wolfe 2006) or erasure (Simpson 2011) of the Indigenous population.
Places typically described as settler-colonial include the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia – all of which have significant Indigenous populations – and South Africa, and Israel and the Palestinian territories. In other contexts, settler colonialism has been attempted, but ultimately aborted as in Zimbabwe (Hughes 2010). Settler colonialism is “relatively impervious to regime change” (Veracini 2007), and as Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe has argued in his seminal article, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” (2006), settler colonialism is a structure, not an event – although when considering the processes of “turning away,” settler colonialism at times appears as both. Still, this definition resists the historical periodization of “the colonial,” its dominant usage in the United States referring to a romanticized era of American history during the 17th and 18th centuries and its architecture and art. Instead, writes Wolfe, “the logic of elimination [that seeks to ensure settler emplacement on the land] marks a return whereby the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society. It is both as complex social formation and as continuity through time that I term settler colonization as structure rather than an event” (390, emphasis mine). Critically, he notes, that “whatever settlers may say – and they generally have a lot to say – the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (388). Of course, with that territory comes all the material resources that provide the trappings of Western modernity: agricultural production, forestry, and fossil/mineral resources such as the tar sands.

The concept of coloniality, in distinction, originates in Latin American and Latin Americanist scholarship that examines the arrangements of power, control, and social order that developed and continue from the era of formal Spanish colonial governance. In a word,
coloniality is the condition of being colonial, defined through the racialized organization and distribution of power. Pre-eminent coloniality theorist Alberto Quijano identifies axes along which this distribution of power is achieved: “through the control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education); and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity)” (Mignolo 2007, 156). As a form of cultural hegemony, coloniality seeks to naturalize the ways power is operationalized through these categories. That is, the coloniality of power (Quijano 1993) obscures the colonial construction of social hierarchy and control, rooting power inequities that predominantly benefit European ruling classes in biology or natural law. “In the beginning,” Quijano writes,

‘…colonialism was a product of a systematic repression, not only of the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination… [but falling] above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification’ that were non-European, and critical to the foundation of Western modernity. (1993, 169)²

As “modern” settler nations, both Canada and the U.S. were made possible by and are definitive of modernity. Critical to this process, and to this dissertation’s argument, is that:

Two historical processes associated in the production of modernity converged and established the two fundamental axes of the new model of power. One was the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race,’ a supposedly biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others… the other process was the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and products. (Quijano 2000, 534)

Racial logic and classification are thus inextricably entwined to the foundation of modern states in the New World, bound as well to the (Indigenous and enslaved Black) labor that

² It is extremely interesting to note, then, that one of the go-to defenses of the oil industry in Alberta is that petroleum production supports the “modern way of life” – of modernity itself.
extracts, transforms into commodities, and exports on a global market the land’s natural resources (Coulthard 2014; Trouillot 2003). There is no modernity, then, without coloniality (Escobar 2004). With an eye towards settler colonialism in Canada, specifically, anthropologist Brian Noble, drawing upon Said, asserts that coloniality requires a binary opposition between the self and the other; coloniality

…can be thought of as the tendency of a ‘self’ in an encounter to impose boundary coordinates – such as those of territory, knowledges, categories, normative practices – on the domains of land, knowledge, ways of life of an other who had prior, principal relations with those lands… [rationalizing] the dominant presence of this self within those coordinates and to make the presence of the other subordinate to it – often as a tactic for dispossession. (2015, 429)

Thus, when we consider the enduring structures and subjectifying effects on the white-settler, coloniality becomes an essential tool to examine the “settler-colonial relationship” in Canada, or what Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard describes as a relationship “characterized by a particular form of domination; that is, a relationship where power – in this case, interrelated discursive and nondiscursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power – has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (Coulthard 2016, 6-7).

Recently I’ve noticed a shortcoming in the body of settler colonial scholarship that has emerged over the last decade. Two broad traditions emerge in the literature: Critical Native Studies, which draws upon the foundations laid by Vine Deloria, Jr. and developed largely by Native scholars themselves (Audra Simpson; Leeanne Simpson; Glen Coulthard, and others); and a smaller body of polemical scholarship that is often written by exclusively white-settler scholars, or in collaboration with Native scholars. While the latter suggests potential pathways towards a decolonized research program and collaborative settler
society, often this literature (alongside ally activist literature) rests on the assumption that Indigenous peoples in Canada are uniformly opposed to the material and discursive effects of settler colonialism – such as the extractive industries – and should serve this struggle exclusively (Morgensen 2011, 2-3). From this perspective, to be Indigenous is to be always-already engaged in acts of militant resistance to settler colonialism and the resource economy (see Alfred 2005). Yet as several anonymous Indigenous colleagues have suggested to me, this can have the effect of re-essentializing Indigenous identity on the terms of the settler, denying the proliferation of multiple ways of “being Indigenous.” This desire to cleanly delineate the boundaries of Indigeneity and non-Indigeneity (or “internalized colonialism”) on the terms of praxis can itself reinscribe the coloniality of power. At an activist workshop in British Columbia, for example, one white participant learned I was visiting from Alberta and said: “I don’t understand why Native people in the tar sands don’t just fucking rise up and burn that shit down.” At a peaceful Healing Walk, an Indigenous-led spiritual ceremony meant to pray for the healing of the lands disturbed by bitumen extraction, a frustrated white activist said to me, “I don’t get why we’re just walking and praying. Why don’t we go lock down on the upgrader? I didn’t come here to just walk. I thought we’d fuck shit up.” Yet, a middle-aged Métis man in the Peace Country told me this: Elders in province had decided that disruptive or violent conflict with oil and gas would be counter-productive to their peoples’ values and needs; that instead, First Nations in Alberta should manifest the ideals of listening and collaboration that settlers themselves professed in treaty but have never honored. In protest spaces, I have overheard particularly militant activists, both Indigenous and white, refer to these same Alberta elders
as “sellouts” – surely a negation of those First Nations’ own right to self-determination and sovereignty practice.

Three potential traps in the settler colonial literature written by settlers such as myself, then: 1. Settler colonialism theory produced by non-Native scholars often presupposes that Indigenous peoples everywhere in Canada are uniform in both their opposition, and in their practices, to the oil and gas industry; this suggests that to not engage with industry and the state militantly is therefore to be “less Indigenous.” 2. That presupposition essentializes Indigenous peoples and reifies the racializing logic that marks the processes of settler colonialism in Canada, and thus settler coloniality. 3. The presupposition more often than not provides a moment for settler scholars and activists to announce their militancy, decoloniality, or renounce their own whiteness without necessarily taking responsibility for it (Snelgrove et al 2014). Together, this minor strand of the settler colonial literature risks obscuring the diverse subjectivities, cultural practices, and forms of governance that constitute the reality of life for Indigenous peoples in North America today; it forecloses opportunities to see and engage with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Canadians on their own terms, outside of explicitly political spaces in which correct political consciousness and praxis is demanded. Ultimately, this work can risk more deeply entrenching the structures of settler colonialism – that is, the coloniality of the U.S. and Canada – and thus reproduce white dominance. In a word, settler colonial theory written by non-Native scholars often avoids or ignores examining the coloniality of white-settler subjectivity itself. Instead, it offers statements of political position that may serve the interests of the settler-subject, rather than to understand how settler power subordinates Indigenous peoples in order to materially dismantle their sovereignty. This critique is
reflected in the political and racial discourse of an ally activist workshop recounted in chapter one, and risks another instantiation of turning away, or a “settler move to innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012).

As such, I depart from some colleagues and, in trying to move settler colonial studies beyond a more limited examination of domination/subordination in settler colonial societies, want to think more about a settler coloniality. I think of settler colonialism as process; it is an ideology that structures race, space, nature, and time (see Veracini 2015), and thus subjectivities within a settler polity. The structures that emerge from settler colonialism – a “secure and sedimented hierarchy” – is the condition of living under a settler colonial regime, which I name here as settler coloniality. The coloniality of power in a settler society is thus a racial hierarchy structured through settler power, meant to uphold settler-whiteness as the dominant form of power in the settler polity.

An additional limitation of settler colonialism as an analytical frame may be its appearance to readers as essentializing, total, or absolute. How useful is it to think of the political conditions of the U.S. and Canada, for example, as described in totality as “(white-) settler colonial”? Does this not foreclose a more nuanced critique that considers mining as a distinct mode of colonialism – an “extractive colonialism,” and liberal multiculturalism as its own unique analytic, or that asserts settler colonialism is useful only where it specifically denotes agricultural settlement (Cronon 2003)? Yet when we consider the fundamental histories of Western polities in North America, we clearly see their origin is tied not to agricultural settlement alone, but to making land writ large amendable to settlement; and moreover that there is no modern industrialized agriculture without the extractive industries that facilitate its infrastructures: roadways, agricultural inputs,
railways and the fossil fuels that have powered agricultural production are not possible without the extractive industries. In turn, both agriculture and the extractive industries are enabled through and manifested as the political economy, an ordering of production, trade, and wealth distribution through legal, discursive, and customary arrangements particular to sociocultural setting (see Edelman and Haugerud 2005, 18-21). That is, Western presence upon the New World, itself racialized, is from a non-settler perspective one based in “the status quo [of] settler colonialism: a project of white supremacy, capital accumulation, resource extraction, and Indigenous dispossession.” Thus, per Wolfe, settler colonialism “is a structure (with legal, cultural, and social ramifications) and not an event (a moment in the past, now over)” (Shaw 2019). To focus upon particular features of this power arrangement may yield interesting, provocative, and generative analytical insights, but Indigenous and other settler colonial theorists are unanimous in describing both the U.S. and Canada – whose colonial policies and histories reinforce one another, and whose border is fundamentally colonial arbitrary (Simpson 2011) – as settler colonial nations whose modus operandi is to obtain and retain Native lands. And, whatever is upon them (hydrological, forestry and agricultural production); below them (mineral and carbon resources); or above them (geopolitical airspace). None of this is possible, however, without compliant state subjects who are willing to “turn away” from the violence against Indigenous nations inherent to these processes. When we think of settler presence in this way it can open up deep insights into contemporary environmental justice issues, including climate change, environmental racism, and tar sands development.

Thus, what interests me here are the ways in which settlers are tied to their coloniality: how settler persons find themselves in and of it; how settler persons find
themselves justifying it; how settler persons\(^3\) perpetuate it, or, put another way, how settler society perpetuates itself. If Fanon is correct that “the settler, from the moment the colonial context disappears, has no longer an interest in remaining or in co-existing” (1967, 25), then the question must be asked: how has the coloniality of settler power in the Peace Country been emplaced, and how does that power perpetuate itself? Social phenomena like settler colonialism do not proceed in a solely discursive realm; they involve human actors, and material and spatial processes. And, as I suggest throughout the course of this dissertation, it is at the level of subtle, unconscious perception (self- and otherwise) and mundane daily practice that the processes of settler colonialism find their emplacement and reproduction, seeking to permanently ossify the coloniality of power, more so than the ideological orientation or political praxis of the settler subject himself – or the settler subjects’ intention towards Indigenous North Americans, “tolerant,” or otherwise.

*Space and Place*

Throughout this dissertation I likewise engage the concept of space, and consider what it means when white-settlers do or do not engage with Indigenous *spaces* in the Peace Country or the Indigenous persons within them. Space is a social product, reproduced through its perception, usages, and avoidances. Knowing that social processes are contingent – and that the processes described above are knowable as *settler* processes of turning away, we can thus consider what constitutes white-settler space and its spatial

\(^3\) Indeed, non-settler persons perpetuate settler society as well. Yet as a white-settler scholar myself, it can’t be my place to claim deep understanding of the psyche of “colonized” non-white persons; the work within this dissertation grows dialogically from my own experience as a white American – a phenomenological approach to understanding settler supremacy through experience. Any attempt to claim more than I can justifiably know experientially, rather than intellectually – including the lived experiences of people of color within settler society – is an exercise doomed to offensive inaccuracy, and conceptual failure. It’s better to recognize my limits than cause harm trying to extend beyond them. Significant literature, from W.E.B. DuBois to Franz Fanon and Huey Newton can speak to this far better than I’m willing to attempt. Thus, this study limits itself to an examination of white-settler power and the settler-subject’s reproduction of it.
Other – the reserve. A fundamental concept within the discipline of Geography, “space” emerged in the wake of the 1960s as not simply a given universal in Human Geography, but a problem. By the late 1970s, geographers began picking apart the concept beyond its simple distinction from “place.” Uncritically, space is assumed as universal in the West since Kant and Newton. That “absolute” space is ontologically immutable – a mathematical and physical backdrop upon which all human meaning-making and activity is placed. In this sense, geographer Martin Jones defines absolute space as “a condition in which space exists independently of any object(s) or relations: space is a discrete and autonomous container” (2009, 489). David Harvey puts a finer point on it: that absolute space is

a preexisting, immovable, continuous, and unchanging framework (most easily visualized as a grid) within which distinctive objects can be clearly identified, and events and processes accurately described. It is initially understood as empty of matter. This is the space to which Euclidian geometry could most easily be adapted. It is amenable to standardized measurement and open to calculation. It is the space of cadastral mapping, Newtonian mechanics, and its derivative engineering practices. It is a primary space of individuation… [where] individual persons and things, for example, can clearly be identified in terms of the unique location they occupy in absolute space and time. (2014, 12)

In a word, this initial understanding of space represents what Mishuana Goeman refers to as, in the context of North America, an “imposed colonial spatial ideology” (2009, 170).

Yet as human actors move through and form associations to their physical environment, absolute space is more infrequently the criterion through which identities and attachments are formed. Yi-Fu Tuan, in an early critical formulation of the distinction between space and place, argued that universal or “undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (1977, 6). In this sense, place becomes a site for the understanding of the subjectivity in space, a point to which we return throughout this dissertation. For understanding space, though, Tuan suggests something
significant: that space is transformable through human value- and meaning-making, the stuff at the very heart of the anthropological endeavor. Thus critical geographers consider not just place, but space itself – social space – as constructed socially. Through the actions of human persons living and moving within space, contests emerge over exactly what kinds of meaning and values, and thus proper uses, a space could be assigned. Reflecting this, geographer Doreen Massey writes that “so-called spatial relations and spatial processes were actually social relations taking a particular geographical form… space is constituted through social relations and material social practices” (1993, 70). Space then is not simply an empty background upon which human action and meaning takes form, but a realm produced through sociality, and in turn, co-constitutionally productive of particular forms of sociality. In this sense, space is not absolute, but fundamentally relational (Jones 2009; Goeman 2009; Soja 1989). Thus, critical geographers were able to advance their argument on the construction of space through the 1980s to assert that “space is more than [simply] a social construct… not simply a setting, but rather [that space] plays an active role in the construction and organization of social life.” The main takeaway, write Neely and Samura, is that “social and spatial processes are deeply connected and continually interact with and influence one another” (2011, 1936).

While the canon of spatial theory references seminal geographers and theorists including David Harvey (1983), Michel Foucault (1977), Edward Soja (1989) and Doreen Massey (1993), French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre remains an essential theorist on the relationship between what geographers term “social” and “spatial processes.” While his work focuses primarily on urban space, I argue his work is portable to understanding the power dynamics structuring settler and Native space in the Peace Country – a place
that, while appearing “wild,” open, natural, or picturesquely agricultural, is a thoroughly industrialized landscape the space of which has emerged through political economy, juridical acts (e.g., the Indian Act and Treaty 8, which established delineated reserve spaces – discussed in chapter 3), national surveys, reproduced through habituated perceptions of bodies and space. His work is widely recognized as the first to explicitly theorize the idea of the social production of space a 1991 translation of his seminal text, *The Production of Space*. In it, Lefebvre argues that abstract, universal space is unique to modernity and “utilized” predominantly under capitalism production via “grids, plans, schedules,” etc. – the material and symbolic ordering of space and time. In this regard, and consistent with theoretical models of spatial production, the [modus operandi] of space-making is the ordering of persons and bodies into place, and the designation of the appropriate uses of those spaces (Foucault 1975; de Certeau 1984; Razack 2002, 6-13). This spatialization, and its ‘correct’ usage, is itself gendered, classed, and – most importantly for my purposes in examining acts of turning away – racialized.

Reproduced via quotidian practices of time management and movement, Lefebvre proposes a model of social space that is well-suited for the interpretation of my research’s ethnographic data and experience. A tripartite model, Lefebvre proposed three distinct arenas of spatial production that all inform and sustain each other. This process is a dialectic production of space, and includes:

1. Spatial practice: the cohesive patterns and places of social activity.
2. Representations of Space: Space as conceived and abstracted by engineers, surveyors, architects, through plans and designs and schematics. These are the “systems of codes and designs that are used to organize and direct spatial relations,” including technologies of cartography and surveying, formalized into cadastral registries.
3. Representational spaces: spaces of rupture in the hegemonic production of social
space, or “those spaces that the imagination seeks to change and appropriate… clandestine and underground spaces lived by artists and others who seek to describe alternative spaces.” (1991, 39)

Thus, Lefebvre provides a set of theoretical concepts to make sense of the ethnographic data detailed throughout this dissertation: examining how and why interlocutors perceive and utilize, or avoid space, and police or assert “correct” behaviors within a space (i.e., spatial practice). Or how those spaces are “made” through cadastres, setting aside reserve land from settler land through Treaty (i.e., spatial representation). Or how those who envision alternative futures are able to rupture hegemony through the insertion of themselves into public space, through protest or blockade or ceremony, like the pow wow or Healing Walk discussed in chapters one and two (i.e., representational space).

_Space versus Place_

Although a theoretical consensus emerged in the 1970s and 80s that _space_ was both constructed and constructing of human meaning, the question of space’s relationship to _place_ remains outstanding and contentious. The fault lines of this debate typically fall along the question of whether space precedes place, or vice versa. In general, this fault line reflects a more in the former position an empirical stance; the latter, a phenomenological one. While Marxist Geographers often contend that the production of space precedes place – that is, that the production of space facilitates place through the transformation of nature and landscape and the emplacement of meaning (Tuan 1977) – others, including as anthropologist Edward Casey (1996), offer compelling arguments that place produces space. Places, Casey argues, are bigger than spacetime, and not only physical. Places “gather things together,” both inanimate and animate objects, along with “histories,
languages, and thoughts,” all of which *emplace* human people and objects onto a landscape (24).

But even the term “place” is ambiguous – poorly defined, with no clear systemic or theoretical consensus on its meaning and analytical usage. John Agnew summarizes its various usages:

The first is place as location or a site in space where an activity or object is located and which relates to other sites or locations because of interaction and movement between them. A city or other settlement is thought of in this way. Somewhere in between, and second, is the view of place as locale or setting where everyday-life activities take place. Here the location is no mere address but the where of social life and environmental transformation. Examples would be such settings from everyday life as workplaces, homes, shopping malls, churches, etc. The third is place as sense of place or identification with place as a unique community, landscape, and moral order. In this construction, every place is particular, and thus, singular. (Agnew 2004, 2 as quoted in Low 2009, 23)

Critical geography may contend that place emerges from the transformation of spatialized landscapes; but to return to Casey and put a finer point on it, he argues that place is more so phenomenological, wherein the body produces place through its perceptions. Theoretically then, we can look at place, abstract space, and the bodies within them for a phenomenological understanding of racialized space as I not only observed it, but lived it myself as a white-coded settler subject observing and working through the conditions of settler coloniality’s reproduction.

*Connecting Space and Embodiment*

Within our own discipline, Setha Low utilizes spatial theory in both theoretical and ethnographic applications more so than any other anthropologist. She notes that while spatial theory is well-suited for ethnographic analysis, as well as an engaged anthropology, few anthropologists directly study “[social] exclusion through the uneven development of space” (2011, 391-92). One reason for this, she argues, is an historical tendency within
anthropology to conceptualize “place/space [as] taken-for-granted settings to situate their descriptions or reduce the ethnographic to a locale that imprisons natives,” rather than as socially- or phenomenologically-constructed by the people who live there (2009, 21). In order to resolve this problem, and drawing upon French philosopher Michel de Certeau’s work on urban space (1984), she argues that foregrounding the role of the (racialized) body – the locus from which phenomenological perceptions and acts of being-in-the-world are produced – helps the ethnographer to more readily apprehend the ways in which interlocutors both use and produce the meanings of space both materially and symbolically through the enactment of their agency. She writes that,

…the social production of space includes all those factors – social, economic, ideological, and technological – that result, or seek to result, in the physical creation of the material setting. The materialist emphasis of the term social production is useful in defining the historical emergence and political/economic formation of… space. The term social construction can be reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. Thus, the social construction of space is the actual transformation of space – through peoples’ social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting – into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning [such as race]. Both processes are social in the sense that both the production and the construction of space is contested and fought over for economic and ideological reasons, and understanding them can help us see how local conflicts over space can be used to uncover and illuminate larger issues… I conclude… there is a relationship between what is experienced and socially constructed by the users [of space], and the circumstances that social produced the space and its current physical form and design. (2009, 24-5)

From this phenomenological vantage point, Low is thus able to assert that space is not a fixed category of ontological attributes, but the emergent property of a social relationship (Jimenez 2003:104). Thus, Low distinguishes between the social production of space (an empirical emphasis) and the social construction of space (the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated through processes of exchange, conflict, and control). Both of these, however, propose a two-dimensional model of space; but
spatialization likewise involves the body – the person herself as a “mobile spatial field,” producing both place and landscape – along with social formations, language, and discourse. Through the person’s “feelings, thoughts, preferences, and intentions as well as out-of-awareness cultural beliefs and practices – [the subject] creates space as a potentiality for social relations, giving it meaning and form; ultimately, through the patterning of everyday movements, the person produces place and landscape” (2011, 392). However, in much of her ethnographic examples, Low fails to consider the production of space outside of obvious conflict over the use of space. Anthropology may be too obsessed with conflict, particularly since the systems that (re)produce power relations are often mundane, and actively seek to obscure their production through both spatial and discursive practices, as I consider them below.

Additionally, and useful for our purposes here, Low elides theoretical debates regarding the primacy of space over place or vice versa. The idea of “precedence” makes for compelling theoretical debate, but both approaches always inform one another, and in so doing inform both Low’s and my own work. Like Low, I am “less concerned with resolving the space/place dichotomy than with understanding how space/place is produced and reproduced by human agency” (2009, 23).

*Race, Space, and Settler Coloniality*

As geographer Allan Pred notes, power relations are always embedded in the processes of spaces becoming place and vice versa. He writes: “Place always represents a human product; it always involves an appropriation and transformation of space and nature that is inseparable from the reproduction and transformation of society in time and space… [subjects] are formed through the becoming of places, and places become through the
formation of biographies [subjects]” (Pred 1985, 128). It therefore behooves us to consider, ethnographically, power relations as observed. For an examination of settler power in the Peace River Country, this means examining how those who are structurally privileged – that is, of course, white-settler subjects specifically – use and think of space in ways that demarcate Indigenous space away, thus both producing and being reproduced by the arrangements of power in a settler society. Like subject formation, states are also in a process of perpetual becoming. States, and the settler nation-state, are not monolithic entities that exist above and outside human action and perception; indeed, states are only made through the practices of both state officials (Gupta and Sharma 2006) and its subjects themselves (Nugent et al 1994). As such, while the foundation of Treaty 8 discussed in chapter 2 and 3 establishes clear demarcated boundaries between reserve and non-reserve space, it requires the participation of both the Canadian state and its subjects in everyday practice in order to reproduce those boundaries. Establishing a Treaty 8 space makes a space settle-able; it thus permits pioneers and their descendants to perceive of themselves, or to be ideologically interpellated (Althusser 1971) as pioneers or settlers – along with other self-identifications that code these words: Albertans, residents, farmers, or Canadians. Yet it is in daily practice that these identities and the spaces that enable them take form.

Frequently did I hear from settler participants that reserve is a dangerous place. Onto its space were mapped racializing discourses: that all reserve residents – meaning Native people – were addicts, or slothful, or ignorant. These discourses were not unheard by Indigenous persons themselves, who were keenly aware, and offended by, such harmful stereotypes. To their words I return later. In the next section, I offer the central theoretical outline of this chapter and dissertation: that racialization, and the racialization of space,
under the condition of settler coloniality are achieved fundamentally through settlers’ habituated perceptions of race. Although Indigeneity fits complicatedly into race or ethnicity as a system of social ordering, settlers still deploy “racial thinking” (Razack 2000) in their apprehensions of Indigenous bodies and space. In turn, they reproduce settler coloniality, while eliding responsibility for its reproduction.

*Formations of Race and Space*

As geographers and theorists of space argue, space is in large part about controlling the movements of peoples – that is, of keeping bodies organized in spatial arrangements that reflect gendered, classed, and racialized hierarchies of power. These boundaries of these spaces were frequently violently policed. From a non-Indigenous example, white vigilantes in the 19th century patrolled the borders of Chinatowns in North America with clubs and bats, threatening any Chinese residents who drifted too close to white space (Shah 2001). In Canada, Peace River Indigenous interlocutors explained to me that the Indian Act Agents long held non-codified provisions requiring written and signed passes from a reserve’s Indian Agent in order to set foot off reserve (Barron 1988). It was only in the 1950s (CBC 2014) that these juridical controls were lifted from reserves, yet their memory certainly remains; it is the core underlying mechanism of control that appears in the 2014 Native film *Rhymes with Young Ghouls*, a revenge film wherein a teenaged Mik’maq woman takes violent revenge on the director of the Residential School on her reserve – the place where her “world ends at the borders of the reserve, where dirt road opens up to dreams of things you can never be here” (2014, 12:16).

Yet in order for bodies to be organized in a particular space on the basis of racial hierarchy, those bodies had first to be racialized as Other, or alterior to the white settler
nation. The process through which bodies and space come to be regarded as race-specific requires a process of racialization. Wolfe notes that while the processes of racialization and race formation are intimately and muddily linked, racialization is more specifically the “activation of [the] concept [of race] in the production of racial subjects” (2002, 58). The production of race, racial categories, and thus racialization is, like the production of space, a social process that has been well-documented by scholars across a broad range of disciplines – from anthropology to critical race studies, from geography to sociology (see Baker 1998; Brodkin 1998; Omi and Winant 2014; Smedley 2011; Hartigan 1999).

Models of race and space overlap in significant ways, allowing us to examine how race and space are co-constituted in place. Both race and space are arenas of contestation, subject to continual transformation and redefinition as human difference is either encountered or the effects of race’s ordering of human difference made material. In a word, the race concept works as a system of classifying, ordering, and managing human difference, whenever and however it is so perceived. Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that as a conceptual category for thinking through human difference, race emerged at the moment of colonial encounter. He locates its origins in the idea of savagery following the conquest of Muslim territories in Granada; it was the consolidation of European sovereignties over spatial domains that generated the very ability of Europeans to producing ordering effects that distinguished an utopic European Christendom against the “savagery” of the non-Christian, or the Other (2003, 20; see also Said 1979). It is in this sense that the West, and its colonial project to expand Christendom “out into nowhere,” was made the West, and race’s ability to “know and manage” human difference ascribed to Indigenous and other non-Western peoples (2003, 19-23). As Timothy Mitchell succinctly states it, “Colonizing
refers not simply to the establishing of a European presence but also to the spread of a political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real” (1991, ix).

Although race is a “durable concept” in the West, write Neely and Samura, “it must [still] be understood not as a fixed thing, but as a fluid and contested ‘complex of social meanings’ that have tangible material effects” (2011, 1941). While socially constructed, race is very real – indeed, its production as an ontological category – as something that exists in “the real,” race emerges from and produces the material in the course of human social interaction, and in both these arenas engage with the production of space in complex and intricate ways. “Race emerges,” writes Patrick Wolfe, “when social space becomes, or threatens to become, shared. Where Indigenous people were concerned, this occurred in the wake of the frontier, when they became contained within settler-colonial societies” (2002, 51). From spatial theory, we know that space is produced through interaction and contestation, yet also productive of particular forms of social relations, all of which change through time. So thoroughly normalized has the colonization of North America – Turtle Island – been that to think of either the U.S., or Canada, as colonially contested space today elicits confusion or dismissal from the uninitiated, even where the racialization of bodies has always been linked to the theft of land, and the production of new, controllable spaces (Winant 2002). Yet knowing that these lands were wholly Indigenous as we so define it today, how was the spatialization of these modern nation states achieved if not, in part,

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4 This is not to suggest that Indigenous peoples themselves are homogenous; there are over 500 federally-recognized groups within the United States, and more un-recognized, and more the 634 in Canada, all with tremendous cultural, linguistic, and political diversity. Elizabeth Furniss notes that the homogenization of Indigeneity in North America is itself a colonial technic operating as part of what she calls the “Frontier Complex,” where “the diversity within Aboriginal groups is typically overlooked as Indians are reduced to a homogenous group against which the settler’s identity is realized” (1999, 18).
through their racialization? Consider the frontier, the site of action not only for the material transformation of nature (Cronon 2003, 54-81) but for the production of both American and Canadian identities, evinced through Western genres and public events such as the Stampede discussed in chapter 3. “Themes of conflict and violence,” writes anthropologist Elizabeth Furniss,

…are central to [settler-Indigenous] encounters as the protagonists struggle against the harsh environment and climate and the unknown and potentially hostile Indians. These struggles, taking place upon the moral terrain of good and evil, also involve a degree of ambiguity as the protagonists move between these opposing worlds, temporarily mediating these dichotomies. These tensions are ultimately resolved through the settlers’ separation from the conditions of the frontier, typically by their establishment of homesteads and settlements and, by implication, their ‘conquest’ of the wilderness and Aboriginal peoples. (1999, 18)

The frontier is thus rendered always-already as a space of violent contestation by definition – after all, once the space of the frontier has been ordered, domesticated, and sedimented, it no longer remains the frontier. Violence is not only inherent to the production and perception of a frontier, but intrinsic to it – just as is its spatial conceptualization as a place where law is suspended, and violence is not only normalized but justifiable for the purposes of colonial expansion. Where in the U.S., the moral justification for such violence is the doctrine of manifest destiny, in Canada it was often the staunching of American hegemonic expansion northward. As Nicholas Blomley notes, “Inside [the frontier] lies stability and order, outside disorder, violence, and ‘bare life’… Western notions of property [and the lawful order that undergirds it] are deeply invested in a colonial geography, a white mythology, in which the racialized figure of the savage plays a central role” (2003, 124).

The town museum in Peace River then, clad in wooden paneling to give it the appearance of a frontier post or fort, is then a racialized building that in turn racializes the space within which it is set and the bodies which encounter it, seated as it is at the very center of town,
and where many community festivities are held – a site, in fact, for the production of settler community and race (Wrightson 2017). Not merely an appeal to history and narratives of pioneering, the building is itself an appeal to, and producer of racial regimes/settler coloniality, and its centrality to both the space of the town, its ceremonies, and its representation of itself elevates the building to a metonymic status within the Town. By thinking about the ways in which white-settlers use and perceive space – that is, in their embodied or phenomenological apprehension – we can thus begin to think of how race becomes operationalized, even when this occurs outside the cognition of white-settler interlocutors themselves.

*Constructing Whiteness Non-Relationally*

Given that race is constructed, reproduced, and ordering, it follows that whiteness itself is constructed. However, in its construction scholars of critical whiteness studies note that whiteness operates as a “master signifier,” voiding itself of its own meaning and visibility while it simultaneously marks the difference of the other – much as settler colonialism does through turning away, noted above. That is, whiteness works to obscure itself and its operations; where Indigenous people and people of color are treated by the white-settler as *marked*, marked-ness is only achievable through the un-markedness of whiteness (for further discussion, see chapter 2.) This is partially why – especially in context of anthropology’s own colonial history – ethnographic treatments of whiteness, in particular by white anthropologists, are strikingly rare. Still, within sociology W.E.B. Dubois treats white persons and whiteness as an object of study in *The Souls of White Folk* (1920). Within anthropology, several treatments of white interlocutors appear but primarily through the lens of class, rather than racial, formation (Dunk 1991; Hartigan 1998). Only two major
full-length ethnographic treatments of whiteness in a settler-colonial context emerge from the anthropological literature: David Hughes’ *Whiteness in Zimbabwe* (2010) and Vincent Crapanzano’s *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (1986). Remarkably, these works on whiteness identify the very same processes of turning away that I note above, suggesting a transnational durability to whiteness, the examination of which is outside the scope of this dissertation – but which scholars elsewhere do address (Veracini 2013). In his ethnography of white Rhodesia, Hughes notes that whites “did not see blacks, even if the latter outnumbered most games species [with whom whites were obsessed]. This subtle form of exclusion aroused little attention – especially in comparison with the violent exclusion practiced all around it. Even among scholars, outrage at an atrocity obscures the analysis of secondary problems” (12). Here, I elevate that refusal to see to my central, primary problem. Where Hughes argues that white Rhodesians practiced an “Other disregarding” of Indigenous Africans by tying themselves to a love of the landscape – a phenomenon also present in the Peace Country, as recounted in contemporary residents’ description of the land in chapter 3 – I argue that this process is accomplished at the level of quotidian phenomenological practices achieved through the enabling conditions of political life, history, and space-making in Alberta.

Janet McIntosh examines a similar process of settler refusal, Other disregarding, or turning away in her own work on white Kenyan’s “uncertain sense of belonging” to the East African landscape. She terms this “structural oblivion”: “the blind spots, dismissals and beliefs that help prop up privileged social groups… [a] state of ignorance, denial and ideology that emerges from an elite social structural position, and [which] is constituted by the refusal of certain implications of social structure, particularly the experience of and/or
reasons for the resentment of the subaltern” (2017, 663-4). McIntosh’s focus here, however, is on a white minority elite whose sense of belonging is uneasy. Likewise, Hughes focuses on an anxious sense of belonging to Zimbabwe through attachment to its landscape and its Lockean, agricultural transformation. Canada (and the U.S.) present another set of colonial conditions altogether, however. Although the Canadian government uses “visible minority status” and European ethnic grouping (English, Scottish, French, etc.) to categorize its residents demographically, its roughly 33 million residents are 79.1% white, per the 2011 census. So, white Canadians may constitute an elite, but not a minority elite. Moreover, there is little overt anxiety over settler belonging in either the U.S. or Canada; the rightful belonging of whites to North American landscapes is so culturally entrenched that to suggest otherwise strikes settlers as laughable or irrelevant. In the words of a family member of my own: “we had a war [against Natives], and we won. So we get to be here.”

Turning away, though theoretical cousin to Other disregarding and structural oblivion possesses its own unique characteristics – as well as being a phenomenology-specific referant – that pertain to settler belonging on a North American landscape. And while turning away takes unique forms in different locales (surely the enactment of turning away looks ethnographically different in the Peace Country than it does in, say, Cape Breton, Virginia, or New Mexico) produced through varying enabling conditions, there does appear to be a common thread through white perception in all these places in which refusal to consider the Indigenous Other requires work.

Thus, the obscuration of Indigenous suffering is not an unintended consequence of discourse and perception in Canada, but an active feature of settler-whiteness. Examining what they refer to as “white socio-spatial epistemology,” geographers Owen J. Dwyer and
John Jones suggest that whiteness operates as an epistemology, a “particular way of knowing and valuing social life,” both productive of and produced by social space. Their work identifies two primary and dialectical aspects of this particular epistemology:

the first of these, the social construction of whiteness, relies upon an essentialist and non-relational understanding of identity. Whiteness offers subjects who can claim it an opportunity to ignore the constitutive processes by which all identities are constructed. In effacing their construction, ‘white’ people can paradoxically hover over social diversity just as they become the yardstick for its measurement. This first moment is then linked to a second framing, a segmented spatialization that parallels the non-relational epistemology of white identities. This spatial epistemology relies upon discrete categorizations of space – nation, public/private and neighbourhood – which provide significant discursive resources for the cohesion and maintainence of white identities. It also relies upon the ability to survey and navigate social space from a position of authority. (2000, 210)

Effectively, they argue, is that whiteness “taps” extensive and adaptive epistemological fields from in order to generate an authoritative and distanced subjectivity. Much like the local deferrals discussed above, space provides not only phenomenological encounters with and orderings of space that secure whiteness in a particular place, but also discursive locations to which rare acknowledgements of race and power inequities can be located. That is, where racism may be a problem “nationally,” or in any place elsewhere, “here” is a rendered a multicultural space absent of the racial antagonisms encountered in other spaces. These tactics not only displace an understanding of white spatialization as a localized process involved in the creation of place, but also deny the relationality of white identity construction. Whiteness here, “as an asserted positivity (i.e., I am White)… presents itself as a self-actualized achievement, realized in the absence of an Other” – in the Peace River Country and in settler polities generally, absent of the alterity of Indigeneity against which settler subjectivity emerges (212). Thus, the possibility of settler-whiteness to define itself through nationalized consanguineal kinship, Western or
European ‘cultural heritage,’ and through pioneering and other narratives that define settler subjects as those hardy few who domesticated wild, empty lands and the Indigenous (non-)persons who dwelled in and transformed those spaces themselves, prior to colonial encounter, and in the present day.

“The Gap,” and Settler (Mis-)Apprehension of Reserve Life

Many of the interlocutors of this study who were engaged with Native communities in the region observed what they called a “gap” or sociopolitical and cultural space between white-settler and Indigenous persons. James Baldwin, Black and gay American writer, described a similar power effect among whites in the U.S., referring to this as “distance.” Spatial distance, he wrote, and a psychic distance constitute one another to entrench white power, and discursively void its of its history and meaning. “One can measure very neatly,” he writes, “the white American’s distance from his conscience – from himself – by observing the distance between white America and Black America. One has only to ask oneself who established this distance, who is this distance designed to protect, and from what is this distance designed to offer protection?” (1965, 725). Interpreted in such a way, we may ask: what purpose does the demarcation of reserve or other Native space from white space mean, and to what end?

I wish I had made it out to reserve so much sooner, but I was delayed. “Don’t go out there,” I was told, “the roads are too muddy and rutted to access without a big truck.” Promises of guided visits kept me waiting, too – such an introduction to reserve life would have been in better keeping with a decolonial methodology that eschewed the kinds of entitlement to space that mark historical ethnographic practice (and male/whiteness), where I only entered Native spaces by invitation (see chapter 1). Those who did offer guided trips,
usually the Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers who knew the people of the Cadotte communities well, were themselves too busy, doing their fund-raising, bridge-building, event planning, and service providing. But eventually, when the spring snow thaw had dried up and the gravel roads became passable in my small two-wheel drive truck again, I was invited to the Métis settlement bordering the Woodland Cree First Nation reserve. I sat with the director of the community hall, in an impressive cinderblock and steel-roofed building, the funding for which was provided in part through a county municipality. The overhead fluorescent lighting was off, spring sunlight filtering through the window into the room. Immediately, my own settler positionality came to the fore. I asked her what she could tell me about the community, and gesturing out of the window, she asserted: “You know, the people who live here, we’re not all lazy here. We’re not all drunks. It’s not dangerous.” I replied, “Oh! I didn’t think those things. I know it’s not all like that here.” She looked relieved. “Yeah,” she said, “but you know, I know that’s how they [i.e. white-settlers in Peace River] talk about us. I hear sometimes it when I go into town. I seen it [on social media].” In my whiteness, she had assumed I perceived her and her community the same way; my body indexed her past experience and encounters with white-settlers – whose stereotypes emerged from their own habituated misperceptions of her body, and Indigenous bodies both in the space of the reserve and in town.

Together, both spatial practices and representations work to naturalize race, to empty it of its relational constitution and inoculate white-settler subjectification from

5 As a distinct Indigenous nation outside the juridical purview of the Indian Act, Métis community leaders have more flexibility to negotiate for facilities and services directly with local governments; First Nations communities, instead, negotiate primarily with federal, and to lesser extents provincial, governments – itself a structural arrangement placing added burden onto First Nations reserves, and a source of conflict between First Nation and Métis communities.
responsibility for the structural violence and social suffering it produces. This *spatial fetish* obscures social relations themselves, “[hiding] the production of social inequalities” (Erickson 2000, 33). By mapping bodies into space and place, the racial inequalities that produce via colonialism historically and in the present, ‘white space’ comes to be perceived as productive, wholesome, safe, etc. But, following Dwyer and Jones (2014), for white space to be orderly and safe (Bonam et al 2014, 7), its Other-counterpart must be interpreted always-already as disorderly and violent, where violence only appears in town as an aberration, a break with the status quo, and the responsibility for which is routinely placed upon outsiders, racial and otherwise. Yet in reserve space, these very same moments of violence are rendered normative for reserve life and anyone perceived as connected to it, whether through legitimately known familial relationships, or more insidiously through a perceived relationship based upon skin color. Reserve space, or the Native spaces within white space, such as Peace River’s town mall, then become racialized as alterior to the normative master signifier of (white) race. And because space under capitalist modernity carries the aura of universality, empty of history, the signifiers of racial difference from white normativity and its ‘mastery’ over the landscape via industry and agriculture – ‘undeveloped’ spaces and the bodies within them uphold and justify settler emplacement. By “maintaining the distinctions between white and Indians [sic],” the white racialization of space “[naturalizes] the legitimacy of white conceptions of space, naturalized as categories of being.” As Erickson likewise contends, “attempts to locate empirical evidence of race outside the visual realm [i.e. phenotype]… have failed simply because it is through the act of looking that race is identified” (36-37).
For these reasons, the few white-settler persons I did meet in Peace River who had (quite literally) only a passing familiarity with the Indigenous spaces in Cadotte, were perceived through racial ideologies, and contrasted that against what they perceived of their own settler towns. Consequently, pothole-filled gravel roads or dilapidated housing, the results of legal and policy regimes that systematically disenfranchise Indigenous persons in Canada, were naturalized and assigned to moral or cultural deficiencies inherent to Indigeneity – a pathologized “culture of poverty” discourse that proliferates throughout both the U.S., Canada, and other settler spaces.

It was this set of discourses that the community center director knew keenly well and felt the need to defend herself and her community against, to the white-settler anthropologist in her own space. One of the main oil roads, discussed in chapter 1 with regard to the Lubicon, passed through the Woodland Cree First Nation, the Métis Settlement, and Little Buffalo. Several white interlocutors indicated to me their only engagement with those communities was to observe them as they passed through, often noting its visible poverty and lack of infrastructure. Rather than attribute that poverty to legal structures (e.g., the Indian Act), they attributed it instead to a lack of Indigenous persons’ productivity, of the kind described by the director of the Métis hall. Yet even this only passing familiarity with the communities of Cadotte do not prevent white settlers from circulating stories of Indigenous “cultural pathology” in town. At a local pub where I went frequently for a beer or lunch with friends, I once overheard three young white oil workers wearing their safety overalls discuss the Cadotte communities. “It’s like they don’t care,” said one. “I worked up by the reserve for a few months and it sucked. Like living in another country. They [sic] only care about what they’re doing [and not the future] … there’s no
excuse for them not having any water … they’d rather just stay on drugs and alcohol instead of doing anything for themselves. And then the cycle [of poverty] just perpetuates itself.”

In our conversation, the director added that “some people [from town] are afraid to come up here.” It was a statement I also heard reflected in an unrecorded interview with a non-Native museum director working and living on reserve a few dozen kilometers south of Cadotte. The museum, a beautifully-renovated cultural space in the bottom floor of the old Residential School, sat on a gently rising hill overlooking rolling fields of round bales that gave way to a wetland, its main stream flowing through the center into Lesser Slave Lake, near where Treaty 8 was first signed. She recounted a story that I’ve heard repeated elsewhere in other forms. This reserve was particularly, and outrageously, pathologized as dangerous space. One day, an assault with a knife occurred on reserve land, and the bleeding victim lay on the main road winding through the reserve, surrounded by friends who called the paramedics. Yet when the ambulance arrived, the white paramedics refused to cross the invisible line demarcating the reserve from the dozen or so buildings right on the edge of it, where the museum and Catholic church, general store and a handful of Native-owned homes were built. Just beyond the boundary, on the reserve land itself, was a community college frequented by commuting students and faculty who regularly entered the space without problem. “They [the paramedics] wouldn’t come onto reserve,” the director said. “They thought that if they came onto reserve, they’d be killed or attacked themselves,” despite already standing on informal Indigenous space, the bit of the settlement that extended outside the reserve’s formal boundaries and was produced as Indigenous through its use, or spatial practice. Meanwhile, the attack victim lay wounded and dying on the ground, his friends pleading with the medics to come stop his bleeding.
They refused to do so until the RCMP arrived – echoing that historical moment in the 19th century when RCMP first embarked to the Northwest Territories to quell conflict between settler and Indigenous subjects, preparing the space for its settlement, making the space “safe” for whites.

Thus, the ideational production of space has its very real material consequences, bound up in life and death. The boundaries of space, and their reproduction through the movements (or refusal of movement) of different subject types reproduces not only space and place, but the discourses and perceptions assigned to them. Already in a Native community, but just outside its designated reserve, those paramedics thinking the situation through were unable to cross a fictive boundary line to meet their patient only a few dozen meters away. And a Native person meanwhile lay dying, within sight and earshot.

The act of not-looking, of turning away and refusing to enter Indigenous, signals a fictive racial “familiarity” – however stereotyped or fantastical it may be – with the optical perception of Indigeneity. A refusal to look deeper, even while promoting multicultural discourse, ensures that spatial and thus political gaps remain “in place”; ensures that racial hierarchies are maintained and reproduced. How can we achieve reconciliation when settlers render a people and their space as pathological in media and community discourse, as well as in spatial practices and phenomenological perceptions, where white-settlers are more willing to turn towards their racializing conceptions of Indigeneity than the human persons, neighbors, and families directly in front of them? As Seshadri-Crooks puts it, “To desire whiteness is to desire overcoming difference… [but] overcoming difference first requires that difference be produced and maintained” (Baldwin et al 2000, 265), whether through the production of race, regimes of visuality, or space. Clearly, multiculturalism
cannot do the work; it obscures real difference for state benefit, and thus effects turning away more than it engenders good relations between settler and Indigenous nations.

Thus, these various strategies that produce white innocence are concurrently productive of space in both proactive and reactive senses; while proactively reproducing whiteness and its spatialization as an unmarked category of the *good* (productive, ordered, maintained, tolerant), it likewise denies Indigenous persons the recognition of their own phenomenological encounter with that space and the settler-subjects that produce it, negating lived experience in ways that uphold and entrench systems of power and patterns of behavior that benefits white-settlers at the expense of their Others – that is, settler coloniality. Thus, the very discursive and perceptive processes that produce the spatialization of whiteness materialize inequality at the very moment that that inequality is produced, all the while denying responsibility for any of it. It is the very act of turning away.

*Phenomenological Approaches and the Enabling Conditions of Settler Coloniality*

The philosophical field of phenomenology explicitly undergirds my argument and interpretation of ethnographic data. Most scientific research in the West is built upon empiricism, an epistemological method that uses sense-experience (sight, touch, feel, etc.) to ascertain knowledge of a thing, or reality. In this mode of inquiry, knowledge of reality or the object of study is not taken as a given; the empirical approach requires experimentation and testing (i.e., experience) to justify that which the researcher knows or seeks to know.

Phenomenology, as a philosophy of the practice of knowing, likewise relies upon sense-experience to makes claims about what is known or not known. Where epistemology
is the philosophy of how we come to know, phenomenology is the philosophy of how we experience. However, this approach does not question whether or not that which is experienced is justifiable; it is instead concerned with how anything perceived is able to appear to the perceiver. In this mode, things only appear because of their enabling conditions – through ideas, symbolic orders, embodiment, language, everyday activity, cultural contexts, and awareness-of-oneself (Husserl 2001). Thus, a phenomenological approach to the experience of reality (and of ethnographic experience) does not seek to answer whether or not knowledge of that reality is true; it takes the experience as knowledge unto itself. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as a philosophy of perception, wherein the relationship between human actors and the world becomes the starting place for a philosophical inquiry. Perception of the world, Merleau-Ponty writes,

is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them ... the phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears [- relationally]. (2007, 136)

Thus, phenomenology effaces the boundaries between the subjective, objective, and intersubjective.

An example that illustrates the distinction: when I saw the oil sands operations near Fort McMurray for the first time, the odors of the upgraders and mines were overwhelming. On a tour bus of the oil company Suncor’s facilities, a smell like the mingling of asphalt, motor oil, and rotten eggs caused my eyes to water and for me to raise my hand instinctively to my face. Yet workers in the oil patch, including police officers and tour guides to whom I spoke during street interception interviews, denied that any such smells existed, or were
so mild as to escape notice. In 2014 in Peace River, a government inquiry into odors and emissions of oil sands operations and their potential deleterious impacts on residents’ health noted that odors were the central concern of sick neighbors who lived near the patch (and whose stories I recount in chapter 3). On the town’s Facebook group, however, truck drivers and other workers denied that such smells existed; that “I’m there every day and I don’t smell anything,” and “those [people] are only saying this because they’re anti-industry,” despite several of those who reported odors working in the patch at one point or another.

The purpose of this research is not to sort out whether or not, in the empirical mode, those smells existed or not. I smelled them, and they overwhelmed me; others do not, or do and do not feel overwhelmed by them. The more important question is: why do these actors perceive the oil patches differently? What does the disparity between their experiences tell us about the “enabling conditions” of their experience – of the fields of power, politics, and culture through which they move (Kjosavik et al 2018, n.p.)? This phenomenological approach is also critical for the interrogation of race and power. If the last several years of political life in the U.S. have demonstrated, what one actor perceives in a video (i.e., of police brutality) may be perceived in a drastically different way by another. Personal politics and ethics aside, the question of “does this video depict racial violence or not,” in the empirical mode, is moot; the police violence is there, but one viewer does not see it. Why not?

6 One Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer I spoke with did acknowledge the presence of smells, but fatalistically stated that “well, something’s going to kill me eventually anyway,” referencing the idea that the smells were themselves toxic, poisonous, or otherwise injurious to his health.
“Turning away” begins to answer questions of this sort by digging deeper into the roots of racial perception. Why, when I was invited onto reserve, did I perceive happy children laughing and playing, residents playing fetch with their dogs, couples holding hands by the waterfront – while many white interlocutors perceived a space of danger and violence, a boundary along the road and at the edge of reserve that indicated harm should they cross it? As appalling and empirically-ungrounded as the white-settler perception is, it is born out of a habit of seeing and apprehending Indigenous bodies and space through the enabling conditions of racial logic that marks the coloniality of power under settler colonialism. Very few scholars treat or think of race in this way. However, Latinx philosopher Linda Alcoff-Martín, upon whom much of my argument here lies, suggests that it is through the habituation of perception that racism acquires its staying power. In her article, “The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” (2006), she argues that “racial classification does operate on the basis of perceptual difference… [where, following Merleau-Ponty], perception represents sedimented contextual knowledges” about race (184-85). That is, the racialization of bodies, and by extension, of space, is inherently perceptual, found in the locus of embodied perception; “the source of racialization,” says Alcoff, “is [found partially] in the microprocesses of subjective existence” (ibid). And if knowledge-of-the-self or -world, per Husserl, is a field through which perceptions are made, it follows that racially-ordered settler subjects, who perceive themselves through the coloniality of power, in turn have their own perceptions structured through their own racialized and historically-constituted subjectivity, likewise structured through coloniality (Fanon 2008).
This dissertation, then, grounds phenomenology in both *history* and *place*. If the settler-colonial relation always seeks to claim the land and its resources, and racializing settler-subjectivity is realized through that relation, then we can understand both the settler and his [sic] race as grounded in the land itself.\(^7\)

Yet, as Alcoff notes, even habituated perceptions are dynamic and changing, allowing for the possibility of their transformation. The reader may see traces here of Bourdieu’s theories of doxa and habitus (1977); yet the conditions for the transformation of habitus seem always beyond reach, the extensiveness of doxa so complete as to render social transformation nearly impossible. As I argue throughout this dissertation, though, socially-transformative processes such as *reconciliation* and *decolonization* will require a radical reorientation of settlers towards the non-human world and Indigenous peoples both; beginning with the habits of perception, dynamic as Alcoff argues they are, may provide a clearer and more concrete pathway forward than overt political action or move us beyond the realm of discursive representation into the material – the very way settlers use our bodies and spaces. Appeals to Truth have little political purchase today; but a call to retool our habits of perception may offer another way forward. Thus, phenomenological approaches are not only critical to the intellectual project of this dissertation – of understanding how white-settler practices reproduce deep structures of settler coloniality – but to this dissertations’ decolonial project as well, which I hope acts upon the reader in both their subjectivity and habits of perception. In chapter 2, I return to further discussion

\(^7\) But only as a negation. If Indigenous ontologies are grounded in the land through a relational reciprocity, then we have to qualify settler relationship to the land through the exploitations of its ordering effects: its desire to surveil, order, control, police, and extract bodies, labor, resources, and knowledge from it.
of the racialization of space in the Peace Country, and ethnographic examples of how that process is achieved through embodied, habituated practice. Below, we return to the field.

Understanding the Place

The Region

The Peace River Country (or Peace Country), is an expansive region of aspen parkland stretching from the Rocky Mountains in British Columbia through Alberta’s northwest, extending from the 55th parallel at its southernmost extreme to the 58th at its northernmost – an area of roughly 150,000 square miles. Sub-regionally, the Peace Country is divided according to the downstream flow of the Peace River into the upper peace (the southerly zone) and the lower peace (the northerly). Its dominant geographical feature is the Peace
River, a 1,195-mile long Canadian Heritage River whose headwaters begin from glacial- and snow melt in the Rockies, flowing from south to north where it terminates in the Peace-Athabasca Delta on the western fringe of Lake Athabasca. An UNESCO World Heritage site, the Peace-Athabasca Delta is home to several Indigenous communities as well as Canada’s largest national park, Wood Buffalo National Park. The waters continue northward through the Mackenzie basin until they reach the arctic ocean in the Northwest Territories. Major communities along the river and within the Peace Country include Fort St. John, BC; Dawson Creek, BC; Grande Prairie, AB; Peace River, AB; High Level, AB; and Fort Chipewyan, AB.

The wide, deep valley through which the Peace flows formed during the late Wisconsinan Glaciation, where the retreating Laurentide Ice Sheet blocked regional drainage and formed Glacial Lake Peace (Hickin 2015). When the ice dam did eventually break, the lake basin left behind a valley dominated by silica sediments, slippery particles that cause the hills within the valley to slide constantly, often threatening infrastructures and homes both within the valley and along its edge. It is the valley itself, however, that made the Peace Country both amenable to settlement and desirable to both British colonial officials and agricultural pioneers in the 19th century: the valley funnels warmer area from the Pacific as it blows eastward from the Rockies, generating a microclimate several degrees warmer than the surrounding area, and supporting both its native parkland flora and European agriculture. Today, the Peace Country hosts extensive oil and gas development, large-scale industrialized agriculture, the W.A.C. Bennett hydroelectric dam in B.C., and several pulp mills, all of which power the region’s and province’s economy. Indeed, most non-Indigenous residents I spoke with came to the region either because of
the opportunity for employment in these industries, or for its scenic beauty and gentle pace of rural “life in the North” [of Alberta]. The Peace Country is a place many of its residents – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – love deeply, delighted by its charm and natural beauty. It is a special place, and on uncountable occasions residents shared with me the common local expression – derived from a First Nations aphorism – that “once you’ve drunk from the waters of the Peace, you always return,” a testament to the landscape’s affective power to draw people from across Canada and the world.

*On the Politics of Local Terminology*

In Canada, the terms “Native,” “Indigenous,” and “First Nations” each carry political and historical weight, and each usage is contestable. Canada’s multicultural constitution formally categorizes Indigenous peoples as either First Nations, Metis, or Inuit. In law and policy, these distinct peoples are summarily described as “aboriginal,” yet the word “aboriginal” typically curries little favor among activists or academics. In particular, interlocutors regularly decried the mainstream press’s usage of the term “the aboriginals” to describe Indigenous persons and communities.

However, many of the First Nations and Metis social workers and community members with whom I worked explicitly referred to themselves as “aboriginal,” and to their communities with the acronym FNMI – First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. Colloquially, “aboriginal” and “FNMI” was the dominant terminology used when discussing issues relating to area Indigenous peoples in the Peace Country. For example, the working committee bringing together all government agencies and community members engaged with Indigenous persons in the region (to which I was invited and which served as the
primary hub for nearly all my ethnographic research) was the Aboriginal Interagency Committee.

As a matter of politics and ethnographic ethics, I prefer to deploy the terminology actually utilized by the Indigenous interlocutors whose generosity and welcome-ness provided the data for this study. As concerns the politics of ethnographic representation and decolonial practice, it is vital that what is described in this dissertation accurately reflects the experiences of, and is recognizable to, the interlocutors who informed it.

Yet in preparing a chapter of this dissertation for publication in an edited volume, Canadian colleagues immediately flagged and requested that I retool the piece for terminology. “Aboriginal” and “FNMI” reflected a policy or state perspective, they argued, and that “Indigenous” was the preferred Canadian academic and political standard to which my writing should adhere, local usage notwithstanding. Although I am sympathetic to this position – after all, in my research and activism I heard many interlocutors south of the Peace Country explicitly reject that terminology – I remain uncomfortable in choosing to impose an external academic standard over the terms with which interlocutors self-identified. As an issue of the politics of the production of knowledge, this seems like yet another colonial imposition.

Regardless, as a work of scholarship intended for wider circulation, in this dissertation I tenuously choose to abide by the standards of Canadian anthropology and ethnographic representation. If any persons in the Peace Country take offense to this, I want to apologize in advance. I exclude that language from this dissertation unless in reference to specific legal or policy documents. “First Nations,” “Native,” and “Indigenous” are used relatively interchangeably depending on context. In U.S. contexts, “Native American” or
“American Indian” are often used, but except where directly applicable, I revert to above terminology; I use the word “Indian,” which in Canada is egregiously offensive and usually only deployed satirically, or in the mode of reclamation of a racial slur, only in citation.

A politics surrounds the terminology referencing the extraction of bitumen in Alberta, as well. “Tar sands” and “oil sands” both refer to what geologically are called “bituminous sands.” In Canadian academic and governmental convention, “oil sands” is preferred, and is the normative term used locally in the Peace Country and Alberta. “Tar sands,” although used dominantly abroad, indexes an assumed ideological orientation towards the oil sands industry in Alberta. As one Albertan interlocutor told me, “one time I was making small talk to some random guy at Tim’s [Tim Horton’s] that my friend worked up in the tar sands. And he just exploded. He kept yelling at me that they were called the oil sands and that I must work for Greenpeace or something, that ‘tar sands’ was just environmentalist propaganda and that I needed to wake up.” Although historically the bituminous sands near Fort McMurray were always referred to as tar sands – their original application was for Indigenous peoples’ tarring of canoes, a usage which continued through their early industrial development in the 1940s – in the late 20th-century the oil industry embarked upon a public relations campaign to rename them the “oil sands” to avoid the “dirty” connotation the word “tar” carries (Finch 2005). Using the word within the province of Alberta marks the speaker politically. Throughout this dissertation I use “tar sands” and “oil sands” interchangeably. But because this dissertation is written for an American committee, and because I do want this work to circulate among an international audience more familiar with the term “tar sands,” this dissertation is titled using that term and does not avoid its usage in its prose. Moreover, although my own political position regarding oil
sands extraction varies in subtle ways from an environmentalist position, I still wish that this research encourages redress for the harmful effects of the tar sands industry as it operates today.

_The Oil Patch_

Underneath the boreal forests of northern Alberta is a reserve of recoverable oil second only to Saudi Arabia’s – a reserve estimated to contain over 2.5 trillion barrels of oil, of which 170 billion are commercially recoverable and estimated to potentially contribute over 1.7 trillion dollars to the Canadian economy for 2017 - 2027 (Westman 2006, 31; CAPP 2018, 24). This resource is contained within three major deposits: the Athabasca oil sands, near Fort McMurray; the Cold Lake deposit, near Cold Lake, AB; and the Peace Oil Sands – the area of focus in this study.

While most of the earth’s recoverable oil is contained in pressurized, underground reservoirs that release oil as soon as they are drilled, Alberta’s tar sands are an unconventional source of extremely heavy oil trapped in a mixture of sand, water and clay called bitumen. Where these deposits are nearer to the surface, bitumen is recovered through open pit mining (Westman 2006) once the boreal forest, muskeg (a wetland ecosystem), and soil – collectively referred to as “overburden” by industry – have been removed. Once mined, Athabasca bitumen undergoes an extensive process of separation, cleaning, processing, and refining, known as upgrading. Byproducts of this process are deposited in tailings ponds, large reservoirs of toxic slurry. According to a 2010 research paper, tailings ponds leak approximately 5.5 million liters of contaminated water every day and have been doing so for decades (Timoney and Lee 2009, 72). The Athabasca River deposits into Lake Athabasca, where residents of Fort Chipewyan First Nation have noticed
drastic changes in the quantity, flavor, and frequency of deformities in fish and other fauna (ibid 77). Media, activist, and scholarship accounts of the tar sands industry typically concern this form of bitumen extraction. The Athabasca deposit is the one locale in which this mining occurs, and its open pits and tailings are visible from space. Aesthetically shocking, the sands around Fort McMurray have been referred to as “the largest industrial project on earth” (Black et al 2014), and more pejoratively as “Canada’s Mordor” (Nikiforuk 2008).

However, most oil sands in Alberta are found deeper underground and are commercially inaccessible through strip mining. The Peace River Oil Sands, the smallest deposit in the province, are accessed almost exclusively through two methods: through in situ Steam Assisted Gravity Drainage (SAGD), or through Cold Heavy Oil Production with Sand (CHOPS). In the former, hot steam and chemicals are piped underground to liquefy suspended bitumen, making it viscous enough to pump to the surface. At the time of this dissertation’s research, Shell Canada operated the largest SAGD operation in the Peace Country, an experimental facility that promised tremendous employment and wealth opportunities to local governments and communities, but which had been shuttered and in large part sold when oil prices dropped sharply in 2015. The latter method, CHOPS, is the dominant method for production near Peace River. At these well pads, underground bitumen can flow without the assistance of heat and steam. Sand is “deliberately [introduced] into the well along with the heavy oil to increase oil recovery,” which are then “brought to the surface and separated in storage tanks.” These tanks are heated to a temperature between 70 and 90 degrees Celsius using both casing and natural gas, siphoned into trucks after three to five days, and then processed and blended with naptha and
transported to upgraders via pipeline to produce synthetic crude (Dusseault 2002). Within the forests surrounding the agricultural landscape of the Peace Country, batteries of black tanks containing heated oil awaiting transport appear every few hundred meters along gravel roads, large tanker trucks and white pickups rumbling between each pad. As described in chapter four, residents complaining of negative environmental and health impacts associated with the oil industry in the Peace Country are nearly always located proximate to CHOPS production sites.

For decades, exploratory extraction of oil from bitumen reserves was only that: exploratory, experimental, and too cost-intensive to yield substantial profits. But the rising cost of oil in the early 2000s and the development of more efficient extraction technologies permitted a new energy economy for Alberta, one which has brought a massive influx of wealth, labor, and international state and corporate interest to the province, and challenged now by a lack of expanded pipeline capacity. Tar sands extraction is a particularly intensive form of oil extraction, but one that has been touted as the only practical energy solution to declining world reserves – a solution that “promises long-term wealth for all” (Westman 2006, 31). That promise of long-term wealth holds sway over politicians and industry representatives alike. Because these deposits are located in North America, they are promised as an alternative oil resource that eschews the political instability of other global reserves, and owing to Canada’s reputation for appreciation of its natural spaces and a robust environmental regulatory apparatus, industry promote the tar sands as “ethical oil.”
This dissertation concerns a smaller section of the Peace River Country, centered around the Town of Peace River. Despite its relatively small population of roughly 7,000 residents, the town is a regional capital, an economic hub and center for provincial and municipal government services. Once a Hudson Bay trading post, and then the hamlet of Peace River Crossing, the town was formally established in 1911. It straddles the banks of the Peace River and is divided into neighborhoods by the river, as well as by the blue steel highway bridge connecting the two sides of the valley. On the eastern side of the river is the northside, the downtown – many of its shops now vacant, like urban centers throughout North America – and the southside, separated from downtown by the smaller Heart River. The town is surrounded by tall dikes, crowned with pedestrian paths and bikeways,
designed to protect the town from seasonal flooding should jagged chunks of river ice jam and form a dam during the spring thaw. (When I received my new resident welcome packet from the town’s community services office, it contained a pamphlet with instructions on how and when to evacuate should the river threaten to breach the dike. We were all holding our breath in April as the ice front moved northward.) The path along the dike became the center of my personal life during fieldwork. I walked it every day to view the river, to see what people around town and in the parks along the river’s edge were up to, and to get from place to place; the south side, where I lived in a dilapidated old apartment building, and the downtown were small enough that you didn’t need either a bike or a car to get from place to place. It was a beautiful walk, too, although Albertans still seemed to prefer driving – several people told me they found it weird that I walked to get around, and several times during the winter residents pulled over to ask if I needed a ride. I always declined, enjoying the cold (down to -40 degrees Celsius) and comfortably bundled in insulated boots strapped with ice cleats and a long blue Swedish parka. Nearly everyone in town drove oversized pickup trucks, and many homes had quads and boats and RVs parked in the driveway outside of stucco-covered single-story homes with carefully manicured summer lawns.

On the other side of the river, there was the looming Misery Mountain (knowledge of the name’s origin has been lost to time) which boasted a small skiing hill. At its foot, between the hill and the river, was the residential neighborhood of West Peace, a once-independent competing settlement that had grown up around a small shipyard. Adjacent to this historic neighborhood were a railyard, a trailer park populated largely by Indigenous families, and newer middle-class subdivisions replete with cul-de-sacs and well-manicured lawns. The main road on the west side followed the old Shaftesbury Trail southward along
the river, where the first permanent settlement in the area – a Christian mission – had been located, the site of which is today a regional prison largely populated by First Nations men. Narrow tracts of farmland abuts the river in the old French and Métis allotment style, until the paved roadway ends at a river crossing where a ferry runs in the summer, and a groomed ice road forms in the winter. In the winter of 2014-15, ice conditions were never stable enough to support vehicular crossing, although you occasionally heard stories of people who crossed by foot – a feat most residents in town considered dangerous and documented and decried on social media.

At the top of the valley on the west side is the West Hill. Its relative flatness promoted the kind of development associated with late economic modernity (Smith 2008): industrial parks arranged along linear grids; large box stores like Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire; chain restaurants including McDonalds and Tim Horton’s; several large supermarkets that competed with the co-operative supermarket downtown. These large stores were faulted with decimating the downtown’s main street businesses, although they were boasted as an indicator of the town’s economic competitiveness in a region where most towns were too diminutive to attract national and multinational businesses. On the road out to Grimshaw, the next town over and where many workers in Peace River lived, was the hospital, a few hotels, and the municipal recycling center and put-n-take, where I salvaged most of the furniture for my one-bedroom apartment.

Beyond its businesses and residential neighborhoods, the town contained the trappings of most towns in rural North America: several schools (public, French, and Catholic), ball parks and public greens, a dozen churches, convenience stores, gas stations, warehouses and auto shops, local and chain restaurants, municipal and provincial
government offices, bars and liquor stores, a movie theatre, a coffee shop, a small mall, and several community services centers. Very striking, but characteristic of any town in an oil or gas patch, were the several hotels where oil workers lived seasonally. In 2014, they were packed with large pickup trucks, flexible metal poles with blaze orange and neon green flags at their ends, curving in an arc from the cab to the catch at the end of the bed. The next year, when the price per barrel of oil had fallen from around $100 to around $40, those same lots sat empty.

**On the Town’s Multiculturalism**

One glaring omission in this work is a consideration of how peoples of color and im/migrant peoples fit into the racial configuration on the Peace River Country and the tar sands. This omission is only somewhat intentional: this study began on the basis of a very nascent settler colonial theoretical framework in 2011, that at the time posited a dichotomous opposition between Indigenous and settler populations and polities. Works within the body of settler colonial studies that attempted to account for this discrepancy – the absence of consideration of migrant communities and communities of color – largely failed to do so adequately, and when attempted verged on the offensive. For example, Tuck and Yang (2012) group all people of color, which presumably include members of the African diaspora in North America, as “settlers” themselves – the forcible removal of these peoples’ ancestors from their homelands for chattel slavery not withstanding (7).

As such, I plotted out this dissertation to look more specifically at the ongoing colonial dynamics as they exist between Indigenous and white-settler populations. Yet of course, in the oil patch and across rural Canada, controversial legislation such as Temporary Foreign Worker permits have created an entire class of service workers who
are non-Indigenous and non-settler. In Peace River, many of these workers were from the Philippines or South Asia. On the town’s dwindling main street is a small Filipino market selling foods and other items from the Philippines. Many of the workers in the patch itself, from truck drivers to riggers, were immigrants from places afar as West Africa, South America, and East Asia. The pulp mill in town was owned by a Japanese company; several workers from Japan lived in company housing on the west side of Peace River.

Although it is a town painted by both residents of Peace River and myself as “remote” – in the sense that it is physically far from the larger urban metropoles of Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver and Ottawa – the limited diversity of the town demonstrates that far from the “pristine wilderness” space that constitutes a Canadian comprehension of the northern landscape, this place is very much embroiled in transnational networks and flows of labor and capital. These flows are both enabled by and limited through law and legislation. Yet one ethnographic moment suggests an important tension between these flows and their legislative enablement, and how the Town itself is experienced as racialized space. At a dinner with friends one night, sitting around a dining room table one interlocutor recounted a story that had surprised him. A truck driver, who had immigrated to Canada from West Africa, had been living in town for a while and shopped at one of the local supermarkets. When my friend saw that he had dropped something on the ground, he picked it up and handed it to the worker. The two began a conversation about arrival to and life within the town. The migrant worker didn’t like living there: “He said that it was really unusual for a white person from the town to be so friendly with him. Usually, what he said was that he felt he got dirty looks from the people around him, although no one ever said anything straight to him.” What he experienced was
something like what several Indigenous interlocutors had reported: that typically no one in
the town directly confronted them to indicate they were not welcome in its space (although
there were certainly instances of this), but made the sentiment known through furtive
glances, looks, shifts, moving away – in a word, through bodily comportment. Even myself,
as either a queer- or urban-coded person felt these glances dependent upon the particular
spaces I entered into, no more acutely so than when I was with my partner.

Typically settlers held up the presence of these migrant/workers to me as an
example of Canada’s multiculturalism, something to celebrate. Many of the white settlers
I met wished me to appreciate that such a rural town had as much diversity as it did, and
would point to community events and organizations that indicated and celebrated that
diversity: community dinners, “ethnic” restaurants, folk dance groups, and more. Yet these
moves seemed nearly always to at once uphold the goodness of settler Canada – what
scholars of settler colonialism refer to as “settler moves to innocence” (2005), and which I
interrogate more thoroughly in the minute encounters I observed and describe throughout
this dissertation. But more insidiously, that standpoint reflects what anthropologist
Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) calls “the cunning of recognition,” the work of settler societies
to produce a celebratory visibility for non-Settler populations, both Indigenous and non-
Indigenous, for the purposes of entrenching both the liberal state and a settler society.

Settler colonial theory has advanced considerably on the issues of non-white, non-
settler presence however. Even as early as 2011, Jodi Byrd noted the erasure of slavery in
literature on American westward expansion, and offered a settler-“arrivant”-Native model
for understanding racialization in North America (12-13). Arrivant here includes those who
chose to emigrate to the U.S. and Canada, as well as those who arrived due to geopolitical
conflict (refugees and asylum-seekers), historic economic displacement (Chinese coolie labor), and those whose ancestors were forcibly emplaced for the purpose of the extraction of their labor power (Black communities). All movements here, she argues, are effects of Western imperial conquest over the New World. More recently, Black scholars have dug more specifically into the Black presence in settler colonial societies. For example, Iyko Day (2015) notes the obvious shortcomings of framing racial relations in settler colonial theory as exclusively settler/Native and suggests pathways to deeper theoretical insights into the operations of race in settler contexts beyond even North America to Israel and South Africa (102-4). Justin Leroy argues, alongside others, that while slavery and settlement are twin violence upon which nations like the U.S. are founded, theorists who attempt to account for the violence of modernity solely on the basis of settlement or slavery alone produce “claims [that] are internally coherent and broadly useful, but are incompatible. Each field reduces the other to a variation on the theme of liberal multiculturalism in order to maintain the integrity of its own exceptionalist claims” (2).

The claim here is that the U.S. was founded on twin violences: the dispossession of Indigenous lands, and the forced importation of human labor through chattel slavery in order to work those lands agriculturally. In the Canadian context, this claim is more nuanced. Canada never received chattel slave shipments directly to its shores – but slaves were forcibly into the country to New France, Acadia, and British North America during the 17th century from the future United States. While the British abolition of the slave trade under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, Black Canadian historian Afua Cooper notes that “Slavery was the dominant condition of life for black people in this country [Canada] for well over 200 years, so we have been enslaved for longer than we have been free” (Ostroff
In this regard, Canada and the U.S. are not only twin settler colonial projects, but are both intertwined in the violence of chattel slavery in order to transform dispossessed Native land and landscapes.

It is a major shortcoming of this dissertation that these theorists and their ideas are not more robustly incorporated into its argument and theorization of settler turning away, and will be corrected in future development of this work. Still, Leroy points to multiculturalism as a technique of settler-whiteness deferral for its violence; and in weaving some critique of liberal multiculturalism into my ethnographic analysis I hope to allay readers’ fears that these perspectives are wholly unaccounted for in considering race and settler colonialism in the Peace oil sands.

**On Multiculturalism**

Although multiculturalism is not a central focus of this dissertation’s argument, it appears throughout this dissertation, the mainstream political field through which much of the ethnographic material emerges and an ideology within which Canada as a nation-state situates itself. To critique multiculturalism here is to also anticipate objections to my study. As noted above, Canadians often asserted that racism was an American problem – not a Canadian one owing to its multicultural constitution. Yet the words of the interlocutors within this dissertation suggest otherwise. Multiculturalism itself is not free of racism and, when misapplied, can obscure the inequality Indigenous Canadians experience daily and thus further entrench settler coloniality.

While many states have adopted a policy of multiculturalism or acknowledged more informally that their society is culturally plural, Canada is particular in having encoded a policy of multiculturalism into its federal constitution through the 1982
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which later become codified as a formal law in the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act. The Canadian state relates to aboriginal peoples through a number of distinct legal frameworks, codes, and acts which are intended to provide protections and rights to aboriginal peoples. It is not difficult to argue, however, that the state’s concern here is less the provision of legal protection, and rather an act of ordering and folding a population rendered as different into the logic of the state, an act of governmentality “to an end which is ‘convenient’ for each of the things that are to be governed” (Foucault 1977, 95, 100; Bracken 1997). I intend to return to this below. For the moment, I wish to address space of Indigeneity present in Canadian constitutional law. The issue of aboriginal peoples in the framework of Canadian settler law is, of course, complex and contested, and indeed entire volumes attempt to address the topic (Monahan 2006; Macklem 2001; Tennant 1990; Tierney 2007).

From early on, the Canadian state considered its approach to cultural diversity as exceptional. In 1877, Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie defended a recently-negotiated – and particularly expensive – Indian treaty which he characterized as “the cheapest, ultimately, if we compare the results with other countries ... a humane, just, and Christian policy” which was benevolent for the “generosity” with which it considered the indigenous peoples it concerned, especially in contrast to American indigenous policy (St. Germain 2001, xvii). But, as Jill St. Germain notes, this discourse – this ideology of language, of speaking about treatment of the Other – “marked the beginning of one of the most deep-seated myths of the Canadian self-image”: Canada’s benevolent treatment of aboriginal peoples, and later, other minority groups, especially when compared to other settler nations (2001, xvii; Miller 2001, 162).
This benevolence was to be given modern, legal form later in the 20th century beginning under the government of Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, who established the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* (1963) to address and reconcile the “Quiet Revolution,” a growing divide in the 1950s between French and English Canadians, the “two founding nations.” The commission’s purpose was explicit: it was an attempt to placate and find a space for Québécois sovereignty within the framework of a unitary, Canadian federal nation-state (Légaré 1995, 349). As such, early bicultural policy was specifically intended to establish an ideology about the place of difference in Canadian society, and was specifically concerned the bi-lingual, bi-culturalism of French and English settlers, under which all other cultural, ethnic, or linguistic groups would be subsumed (Wilson 1993, 648). Indeed, central to the 1963 *Royal Commission on Biculturalism and Bilingualism* were provisions ensuring English and French minority-group access to native language education in provinces where their native language was not shared by the majority. Subsequent to the Commission, bilingualism was adopted as official state policy in the 1969 *Official Languages Act*, ushered in by incoming Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

Bilingualism and biculturalism proved to be unsatisfactory to social groups and language communities who did not, and would not, identify as either English or French, and consequently began a political drive towards a *multicultural* policy, which would appropriately reflect the “polyethnic” demographics of Canada. Indeed, the bicultural/bilingual policy of the Pearson and Trudeau governments would be directly assailed by aboriginal organizations themselves, in a rejection of the “two founding nations” paradigm that excluded non-French, non-English peoples. Aboriginal peoples thus disrupted a state narrative on the primacy of French and English Canadians in the founding
of Canada, in an attempt to find a space in the narrative history of the nation. Pierre Trudeau responded to this and was the first prime minister to give the idea of *multiculturalism* consideration, addressing parliament on the matter in a 1971 speech. Throughout the 1970s, public and intellectual discourse raged over the nature and implications of multiculturalism; a general consensus, however, trended towards a recognition of a “tapestry” or “mosaic” vision of Canadian plurality, especially as contrasted to the American “melting pot” (Légaré 1995, 351).

This debate culminated in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) that established a constitutional bill of rights including the right to cultural protections. Article 27 states that “This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians” (Monahan 2006, 541). And likewise, the Canadian Act set down both French and English as the constitutionally-recognized official languages of the state. Consequently, the state officially recognized the “*multicultural nature* of Canadian society within a *bilingual* framework” that gave official recognition only to French and English (Small 2007, 196). In accordance with constitutional mandate, in the government ratified the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* in 1988 which had very specific provisions providing protections for the right of a group to “enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language” and to “recognize the existence of communities share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society, and enhance their development” (Canada 1985).

The *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* goes beyond this to provide a clear set of guidelines as to how, where, and in what manner multicultural policy is to be established
both throughout federal and provincial governments, and in society itself – the explicit aim of which is not only to establish federal institutions to ensure implementation of multicultural policy, but to likewise incorporate civil society (labor organizations, the private sector, and all other private and voluntary organizations) into “full participation” into multicultural policy. Especially unique to this “folding” or incorporation of civil society into a state ideological project, however, is the exclusion of aboriginal political institutions from an implementation requirement. Where federal and provincial institutions, specifically defined, are obliged under federal law to implement multicultural policy, aboriginal governments are not – though are covered, as a “community of different origin,” by the policy. While this is not the principle concern of this paper, it would be remiss to ignore the dual quality of inclusion/exclusion here: aboriginal Canadians, under multicultural policy, are both within and outside the settler state; they are both protected by though not obliged to implement multicultural policy; aboriginal Canadians here occupy what Kevin Bruyneel calls the “Third Space of Sovereignty” (2007). Issues of indigenous sovereignty, belonging, and citizenship are here the subtext.

What Canada’s constitutional multiculturalism does, then, is to ossify a particular idea of itself as tolerant, benevolent, and respectful towards cultural plurality into its body politic, or its narrativizing guideline for conduct towards its white-settler citizens. Pierre Nora might argue that this ossification of multiculturalism constitutes a lieux de memoire: the transformation of a “current of continuous thought” into something stable and bounded. But more than this, argues Nora, is that because social life has become increasingly fragmented and individuals divorced from the group and atomized, there is no longer a sense of the past (or the future) as a continuity extending through time through a collective
memory; thus society remains anxious. This anxiety necessitates the idea that the past must be preserved, since it will no longer be remembered through a collective memory, and thus the proliferation of _lieux de memoire_, sites of memory, imbued with a will to remember for both the present and the future (Nora 1996, 1-23). To a great degree, this explains some of the _Canadian Multiculturalism Act_’s rather anxious rhetoric: seeking to “recognize,” to “preserve,” to “enhance,” to “promote,” and to “ensure.” What is evident throughout the policy is an urgent sense that cultural heritage _per se_ is being lost, and deserves to be preserved through legal protections. If the museum is the premier _lieux de memoire_, then it is indeed telling that the policy provides a mandate for the financial support for the implementation of multicultural policy, including for research, scholarship, and public institutions including museums.

In the Canadian instance, the multiculturalism seeks to establish a discourse in which the state comes to define itself through its multiculturalism (Tierney 2007, 22). This, in itself, is the founding of a state narrative, and the narrative of Canadian multiculturalism is explicitly intended to constitute a break from a violent past. “All societies have founding myths,” writes Mark Osiel, “explaining where we come from and what we stand for ... Some societies also have myths of refoounding, marking a period of decisive break from their own pasts, celebrating the courage and imagination of those who effected this rupture. Myths of founding and refoounding often center on legal proceedings or the drafting of legal documents” (Osiel 1995, 464). So too with the _Canadian Multiculturalism Act_. Robert Nault, a member of parliament, made this evident in 2000 when he stated that a legitimized land claims process, constitutional recognition of multiculturalism, and the _Statement of Reconciliation_ now indicated that Canada
respects and embraces people of all heritages, whether aboriginal or non-aboriginal; [it indicates] a Canada that is grateful for the contribution aboriginal people have made and will continue to make; a Canada that is committed to reconciliation and renewal; and a Canada that knows its strength lies in the ability to forge partnerships with those living within its borders ... This treaty is about reconciliation and renewal. It demonstrates the maturity of our nation as we move forward with respect for, and in harmony with, the aboriginal people who proceeded us in the great land. (Blackburn 2007, 628)

Nault is explicit that Canada is now poised to engage in a new type of relationship with aboriginal Canadians following a reconciliation. This aligns with John Borneman’s argument that the departure from trauma through legal retribution rests on the possibility for the establishment of “networks of trust,” and an ongoing process of witnessing and everyday truth-telling in which antagonistic subjects are able to recognize the legitimate concerns of the aggrieved party. What is less clear in the Canadian instance is whether or not these networks of trust have been successfully established; considering contemporary indigenous political struggles, resistance, land claims, agitation, and severe economic marginalization I remain obstinately skeptical as to the success of Nault’s multicultural vision, or the multiculturalism Peace River residents promoted to me. Their promotions, I suggest, unintentionally work to obscure the coloniality of race relations in Peace River, rather than demonstrate how they’ve been overcome. In a word, it’s another instantiation of settlers’ turning away from those who suffer tar sands’ deleterious effects.

**Overview of the Chapters and Structure**

To arrive at a theory of settler turning away, and ultimately to an examination of the tar sands as a racialized phenomenon, three research questions build upon each other consecutively. First: What explains settlers’ silence on First Nations in the Peace Country, as ethnographically observed? Second: What is “the gap,” and how is it maintained or reproduced? Third: In what ways do the underlying social conditions in the Peace Country produce and allow dispossession and environmental contamination to proceed in
multicultural Canada? (Put another way, how do social processes engender formation of the settler state?) To answer these question, this dissertation is structured deliberately to examine particular “enabling conditions” (political and research practice, historical narrative and spectacle, spatial practice and production) so that we can arrive at an understanding of the tar sands, and settlers’ ability to turn away from the social and embodied suffering of those marginalized from tar sands developments’ economic benefits. Thus, each chapter is an examination of one facet of the enabling conditions that allow settler turning away, which ultimately permit the tar sands to expand and reproduce as they have over the last several decades, despite Indigenous and other political opposition to their unregulated development.

Chapter one of this dissertation is titled “methods and activism.” Within it, I explain the methodology of my research – which attempts to employ a decolonial practice – as well as the exact methods utilized to obtain my ethnographic data. In other words, I explain what I did during fieldwork, where I did it, and why I did it the way I did. This project began in the mode of engaged anthropology, through which I intended to continue the activism I participated in prior to joining a doctoral program. Field conditions necessitated a significant reworking of the project. Chapter one explains these changes, but also considers some of the incommensurabilities between activists and academics, and how those differences can make activist anthropology fraught and tenuous. Moreover, I argue that white-settler anti-pipeline activism may itself reify whiteness and white innocence, risking the entrenchment of the very coloniallyting white radicals seek to dismantle. I suggest that anthropologists consider this possibility before rushing into activist anthropology in order to address our fraught colonial history.
Chapter two follows on the theoretical discussion in the introduction and lays out further theoretical foundations for this dissertation. It applies spatial theory from human geography to make sense of “the gap” interlocutors describe. Space, I argue, is both racialized and racializing; it is through the processes of habituated racialization that some parts of the town of Peace River and the Peace Country are “made Indigenous,” and problematically rendered as dangerous or violent by white-settler interlocutors, to violent consequences. This analysis works as the theoretical crux of my argument, thinking not only about how settlers in the Peace Country perceive otherized Indigenous peoples and communities but the physical environment in which they live as well. Here, the body, environment, race, and industry all converge, relegating Indigenous persons to demarcated (and thus ordered and controlled) space that permits the expansion of extractive industry, the formation of settler subjectivity, and the imagined community that is the Canadian nation-state.

Chapter three examines the role historical narrative in Alberta serves to both inform settler subjectivity and entrench settler coloniality in Canada. Drawing upon the work of Benedict Anderson, Sherene Razack, Elizabeth Furniss, and Sunera Thobani, I argue that Canadian history in both its celebrations of multiculturalism and of the “pioneer,” valorizes whiteness and operates as a “settler move to innocence” (Eve and Tuck 2005). An historical show at the world’s largest rodeo, the Calgary Stampede provides an entry point to explore this dynamic. I detail the striking of Treaty 8, which covers the Peace Country and in principle governs settler-Indigenous relations and land sharing, but the responsibilities of which are largely ignored by Canadian governments and industry when access to oil resources are at stake. Less critically, I recount the normative history of the Peace Country,
noting its appeal to early settlers as “the last agricultural frontier” (Leonard 2005), the narrative of which is manifested in daily life in the Peace Country.

Having set out an examination of each of the enabling conditions – which readers will note are thoroughly racialized to the benefit of white-settlers, intentionally or not – we can arrive at a better understand of the tar sands as a social phenomenon. In chapter four, I describe the suffering and environmental injustice that local First Nations and farmers both face when living adjacent to the Peace oil patch. Both communities have reported disturbing changes in their bodily health and the health of the natural world since tar sands extraction in the area accelerated: cattle herd die-offs, asthma, vomiting blood, chemical sensitivity, moose found with mottled green organs – and worse. I argue that the Peace Country is one of North America’s sacrifice zones, where human and environmental health is subordinated to economic development. Living amid the patch, both Indigenous and settler residents engage in strategic actions – repertoires of survival – with industry and government that they hope will improve not only their own lives, but the lives of their communities. To explore how interlocutors both shape and are shaped by fields of power and structural arrangements working at scales often invisible to outsiders, I compare two days of fieldwork: one spent with First Nations councilmembers documenting unmarked burial grounds, slated for pipeline development; and one day with a militant activist farmer living adjacent to the patch.

The conclusion reviews the argument and data above, but also briefly examines a recent Canadian Supreme Court decision that blocked the development of a bitumen pipeline that would have crossed the Alberta-British Columbia Border. Judges ruled both the corporation and government acted unconstitutionally by failing to adequately consult
with First Nations in the path of the pipeline, and who organized and agitated for years to halt its development. Albertan press, however, largely ignored the decision itself to assign blame to federal overreach – a longstanding source of conflict between Alberta and “the East,” a phenomenon prairie pundits term Western Alienation. Despite the recommendations of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Report, these reactions suggest “turning away” is ongoing since the time of my fieldwork. I suggest ways out of the binds of turning away, not just for Canada, but for white-settler subjects living through the U.S. and the rest of the colonized world.

**Final Notes**

Had this project begun on a different grounding than a settler colonial framework, perhaps this study would have more aggressively pursued a fuller picture of the racial landscape of the Peace River, rather than potentially reifying a fraught Indigenous-settler binary. I elided such moves for yet another reason: as far as activism and press coverage of tar sands and its violence are concerned, people of color and migrant workers were largely excluded from the dominant critical narrative. This was not universally true; occasionally, stories would pop up in the press on the difficulties of migrant workers or workers of color in the oil fields, typically in Fort McMurray where that town’s diversity is more visibly apprehendable than in Peace River, where workers are largely confined to camps and the chartered buses and planes that transport them out of sight of the town – as a town reverend told me, to “avoid the kinds of problems they have up in Fort Mac,” meaning public drunkenness, vandalism, a sex trafficking industry, inter-ethnic conflict, and shoddy overdevelopment of housing characteristic of Fort McMurray. It is my hope that future research will fill in
the for the general absence of non-Indigenous/non-settler voices in this dissertation, an absence for which I apologize to the reader.

Moreover, I want to allay concerns here that “settler colonialism” is deployed only as a pejorative, rather than an analytic. Settler colonial theory has grown into a large and wide-ranging body of literature that extends across time and place, stretched so far now that it could risk losing its critical rigor. Its core claims remain: that settler colonialism describes conditions in which a colonizing population successfully manage to remain emplaced on colonized lands, and that to do so it emerges as a structure, rather than event, requiring the elimination or dispossession of “the Native.” My work endeavors to nuance this discussion by introducing phenomenological approaches to understanding how the structure of settler colonialism is reproduced in daily practice. As such, it is less an application of settler colonialism as an analytic, and rather suggests a theoretical concept – turning away – as one of the major features of white life in a settler colonial context. My purpose is not, then, to apply settler colonial theory, but to nuance it and shift the course of its development in the coming years. In doing so, we can come to understand better not only how settler colonialism operates in the quotidian, but how race relations and white supremacy in North America are able to reproduce without settler-subjects really seeing these things as much as a problem at all even in academic and liberal milieus (Shaw 2019).

Indigenous interlocutors wished me to know and relayed that race relations in the town had greatly improved since at least the 1980s, when settler residents of Peace River felt empowered to “hang signs in store windows that said ‘No Lubicon Allowed,’” explicitly referencing Jim Crow signage of the American South in the Civil Rights era and before. All Indigenous interlocutors, and those in the settler community who knew local
Indigenous people and issues well, asserted that there was still a way to go, however. My own time in the region was only one moment in time, the social and racial dynamics of the area continuing to change rapidly. Through official channels – town social media accounts, institutional publicity materials – I’ve watched things develop from afar. In August of 2018, the Treaty 8 Gathering was repeatedly shared on town accounts; for town Aboriginal Day celebrations, tipis are erected outside RCMP headquarters and Métis Nation flags flown in the town center. Gone are the days of my time in 2014-15, when one interlocutor decried the absence of Indigenous representation in the town museum. Over the last few years, there have been multiple exhibits on reconciliation, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and Dene beadwork in the town museum, library, and municipal office buildings. From afar, it appears that the homogeneity of white and Indigenous spaces are beginning to dissolve, hybridizing in ways that suggest a brighter, if not yet fully decolonial future for Canada. Yet throughout this dissertation, I try to emphasize the disconnects between state multicultural discourse, and the quotidian practices of persons in Alberta who are not affiliated with governmental institutions and NGOs that possess a mandate to promote multiculturalism and state reconciliation between settler and Indigenous peoples. That is to say, official representations, themselves fraught, can mislead and reflect only what they themselves perceive as the best, but impartial, way forward out of the dominations and inequities of power that mark settler-Indigenous relations throughout Canada. Indeed, I frequently observed that when Indigenous spaces, practices, and bodies ruptured the homogeneity of settler space in the town, at the Pow Wow or official Aboriginal Day events in town, white attendees were nearly always absent, and those who were there were typically among the small cohort already engaged with and working within Indigenous
communities. Media representations, social or otherwise, cannot provide an accurate and complete picture of daily life in northern Alberta, and should always be approached skeptically.

In an era in which moves to repair race relations are so fundamentally misunderstood as the mere policing of language (“PC culture run amuck”) this study intends to show that the stakes and work of reconciliation that white settlers must make is likely a hard and long process – but these are qualities which should also lend it staying power. Changes in acceptable spoken language are a first and superficial step towards a retooling of bodily comportment, the organization of space, the writing of history, and the structuring of politics, and more. Overall, the work of overcoming ongoing coloniality and oppression is about changing the racial imaginary completely from top to bottom, and the ways we relate to one another in both representational-symbolic and material-structural realms. I believe this is the true meaning of reconciliation – not multicultural glosses that provide a controlled, tokenizing form of Indigenous inclusion in an enduring white-settler nation, but a complete reconfiguration of a settler society, politics, culture, and physical world where both settler subjects and Indigenous peoples can thrive and flourish until we reach the full realization of our human potential. The stakes are too high otherwise, an issue literally of life and death.
Overview

Coming to see how the Peace Country is racialized and spatialized took time, and to arrive there my project took several turns before settling on the Peace Oil Sands as the fieldwork site, a story I recount below. These stories emerge through the enabling conditions of race and the politics of anthropology and the Canadian nation-state both. White-settler activists and anthropologists alike orient themselves both discursively and bodily towards Indigenous communities in distinct ways which, without proper critical reflexivity, can reproduce racial antagonism, ignorance, or subtle discrimination against Native peoples despite settlers’ best intentions. In so doing, moments of disjuncture between Native and settler political and research praxis reveal important differences in how Indigenous and
settler activists (including the activist anthropologist) perceive themselves and each other; those perceptions are provided through the enabling conditions of politics, methodology, and epistemology discussed below. Closer attention to these enabling conditions on the part of white-settler subjects provides a clearer pathway towards not only a decolonized anthropology, but a decolonized Turtle Island as well.

Drawing upon participant-observation within anti-tar sands and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) social movements, I operationalize auto-ethnography of the settler researcher – myself – to better think about how racializing fields of power shaped the contours of this project. That is, historic and contemporary fields of power driven by colonial history – namely, the residential school, but from unintended consequences of the environmental movement as well – inform a deep distrust between white-settler and Indigenous interlocutors that any white-settler researcher or activist will have difficulty overcoming. Without an exquisitely fine-tuned reflexivity, informed by Indigenous perspectives on decoloniality, both researchers and activists will reproduce the very colonial dynamics they seek to overcome. In other words, white-settler activists and researchers cannot remain turned away from the instructions of Indigenous communities themselves lest they reproduce the settler coloniality they seek to dismantle. Only through a relational, listening-based approach (that is, a decolonial approach) to the work they do can they even begin to overcome the violence of settler colonialism. But even “turning towards” Indigenous lifeways instruction may never be enough; fields of settler power reproduce and reconstitute daily, and investment in Western political ideology and epistemology can obscure settler power effects to even the most astute and critical white-settler subject. Thus, even as activists and critical anthropologists, decoloniality requires a
daily renewal of self-reflexivity improved through practice, error, and reapplication. Only when settler-subjects refuse to apply ourselves to this uncomfortable task do we foreclose a decolonial future. In a word, daily vigilance on the part of white-settlers is required if decoloniality is to be achieved, lest settler anthropologists and activists alike become oblivious to their own reproduction of settler-whiteness and power.

Owing to the colonial foundations of anthropology, non-academic publics understand ethnography in largely outdated terms – that our project is solely to examine Indigenous cultural difference, and in the process produce and define the “the primitive,” a category that is fundamentally both racist and imperial (Asad 1973). Auto-ethnography, as a form of self-reflexivity, cannot totally resolve this tension, but points to a greater diversity of, and creativity within, the ethnographic genre. Kirin Narayan writes that auto-ethnography “dissolves notions of ethnography as dependent on encounters across cultural difference, instead turning a descriptive and analytic eye on one’s own experiences as shaped by larger structures and processes” (2012, 95), and that is indeed the purpose of this research project: to examine how formations of race, coloniality, and power converge in specific places like the tar sands in ways that both permit and perpetuate settler coloniality and its social suffering. By applying an auto-ethnographic sensibility, I do not intend to inoculate myself, or this project, against responsibility for that suffering, but to better understand my position – which is, of course, the position of an anthropologist and white-settler subject – amid the complex of discourses and material practices (both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic – i.e. activist), and the Faustian benefits settlers all derive from that complex.
Alongside an auto-ethnographic approach, I also aim to examine decolonial methodologies and their place among new forms of anthropological practice that have in turn been called “engaged,” “public,” “activist,” or “militant” anthropology. In large part, I sympathize with scholars who warn that a superficial application of decolonial methods to research reduces decolonization to a glib metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012). As I discuss below, decolonialization should have at its core a singular heuristic question in mind: in what way does this work restore Indigenous rights to their own lands and reconstitute relationships between settler and Indigenous persons and polities? Yet, as this chapter shows, the ethnographer always enters into fields of power that exist prior to, and independent of, their arrival, and these fields are arranged in ways that can not only impede engaged anthropology and decolonial research, but bring into question the ability of both settler researchers and activists to adequately deconstruct settler coloniality themselves. I thus argue that settler academics and activists should aspire to apply decolonial methods, but remain very sober-minded when considering the limitations – structural and positional – of that work.

As Kincheloe and Steinberg also note, “…walking the well-intentioned road to hell, Western scholars dedicated to the best interests of Indigenous peoples often unwittingly participate in the Western hegemonic process” (2008, 141). Indeed, my ethnographic evidence demonstrates that even in counter-hegemonic efforts – such as engaged anthropology or ally anti-pipeline activism – the white-settler subject at times more deeply entrenches whiteness, class privilege, and settler coloniality. Before settler anthropologists rush to throw in their lot with ally activists in an effort to emerge from our own fundamental

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8 Heuristic if only in part because it’s right to question how a single work of scholarship could achieve decoloniality where a range of social movements have not yet been able to.
imperialism (Asad 1973; Bejarno et al 2019), we should take time to critically assess how both researchers and settler ally activists reproduce hegemonic power. Doing so will better serve marginalized interlocutors with whom we work. Settler coloniality structures subjectivities throughout North America, and just as the academy is no refuge or escape from the workings of domination and power, neither are the settler-ally movements at work in anti-racist and environmental activism.

**Of Pipelines, Protest, and Whiteness in Settler Ally Movements**

Several methodological questions that arose in the course of my formal year of fieldwork in Peace River from 2014-15, illustrated poignantly through the single vignette below. Such vignettes also ask important questions regarding political concerns over the ascendency of an “activist,” “militant,” or “engaged” anthropology in recent years. To these important questions – what does it mean to enact an activist anthropology? What limits an activist anthropology? – I return below. For now, I recount the racial dynamics I observed and experienced at a pipeline blockade in Western Canada.

During the summer of 2013 I attended an activist training camp and Indigenous healing center hosted in rural western Canada, developed over years in order to build stronger anti-pipeline movements. While this site receives attention from both media and activists attuned to anti-pipeline movements, its status as unceded sovereign territory disallows me from naming it in full – in part because of the kinds of protocols I agreed to adhere to when entering the territory, and in part because of the political sensitivities of this space which I refuse to enumerate in full here (Simpson 2011).

The temporary camp was located on a forestry clear cut, high up in the rolling mountains. The border of this territory was a clean-running, deep blue river tumbling down
from unseen mountain valleys, and through which pipeline development was slated. Its water was so clean we drank directly from it, refilling water jugs with cold, crisp glacial melt. Down the center of the camp ran a wide, heavy-grade gravel road which tree planters were occasionally permitted to pass through, and which pipeline industry officials, including their surveyors, were expressly forbidden from using. Pipeline workers had grown so frustrated with their inability to access what should have been, for them, an incredibly easy construction site – with its upgraded roads and bridges, much of the infrastructure for pipeline construction was already in place – that they had resorted to flying in on helicopters into the interior of the territory to conduct their work. The week during which I arrived at the camp, there was a lot of discussion on what to do with the barrels of fuel and metal trunks of equipment that pipeline workers had left in the interior of the territory without consent.

The forests were thick, with tall stands of lodgepole pine dominating the campgrounds. Yet these forests were also very sick: no other species of trees grew abundantly, and there was no understory growth between the high canopy of the pines and the mossy ground cover. Even worse was the infestation of pine borer beetles, which had killed large swaths of the forest. Around a campfire, we noted the characteristic blue dying in the sapwood of the firewood; as we threw logs onto the fire, occasionally beetles would worm their way out of their holes into the flame.

Around 150 attendees were divided into several sub-camps. One was for indigenous persons and their invitees only – and while not the only non-Indigenous person invited into the camp, I was generously invited to stay within this camp by the guard at the entrance and an out-of-province Elder with whom I had travelled. Mindful of the effects of my
presence in this non-settler space, I made sure to avoid talking circles, campfires, and other group gatherings in which my uninvited entrance would have been an intrusion. Up the gravel road – with sublime views of the mountainous landscape at the top of the hill – was the Settler Camp.

The space of the settler camp itself would be familiar to many left activists who have attended grassroots events, especially in the bush. At its entrance was a large gravel parking lot, where logging trucks once idled. Now, tired old sedans, brightly-painted school buses, and equipment trailers were parked there. Footpaths led into a forested area, where attendees were immediately greeted by the kitchen tents, fully staffed and busily worked by volunteer cooks from sunup to sundown. A salvaged scrap of plywood served as a community schedule and messaging board. (The board later became a site of controversy: one settler attendee posted the schedule for yoga sessions she was offering, and other settlers had posted condemnations of yoga practice as cultural appropriation. A group of Indigenous youths I had been walking with stopped to read the messages. “Man,” said one twenty-something, “white people try way too hard.” Everyone laughed.)

Here, the paths forked. To the left were several wilderness johns, frames of pine poles lashed together around pit latrines with sheets and plastic lumber wrapping nailed up to provide privacy. Plastic bowls of grey water sat on the ground outside them for hand washing. To the right the path led to the large campfire, with activists dressed in work clothes mended with political patches, rain jackets, and boots and toques gathered around, the few Native elders there talking to one another or occasionally standing to address the ever-changing congregation. Further into the forest were rows and rows of tents, pitched wherever suitable space alongside the main path could be found. One clearing at the very
end of the path served as an assembly space. It was here that many of the dynamics and internal logics of radical Indigenous ally activism in the environmental movement were laid out, bare and uncritically examined for all attendees to see.

A powerfully disturbing moment in that space illustrates what I mean here, but before I describe what occurred I need to lay out some foundational information. The sovereign territory on which we stood, and through which the pipeline’s construction was slated, was held in common by the clan. While men held important positions as warriors and hereditary chiefs, decision-making power resided in the clan’s women both historically and today. As unceded territory – that is, land whose aboriginal title had not yet been legally “extinguished” by treaty or Canadian law – clan leaders sought not only to prevent the pipeline’s construction, but to revitalize the mode of governance that had existed before the arrival of colonial representatives and settlers from afar.

The first full day, we attended camp-wide activist training workshops. Indigenous activists from across Canada spoke of the violence, often environmental, that their communities faced in daily life. One speaker told of the contamination her eastern community faced, their reserve surrounded by a dozen chemical refineries whose spill alarms sounded frequently. Another spoke of the tar sands and how the land that is now a tailings pond had been a forested blueberry patch, an important source of food. One speaker from a large city talked of homelessness disproportionately impacting Indigenous persons – particularly those who had survived the violence of residential school, only to find solace in alcohol and drugs. “White people,” she said, “are always hungry. They want to eat us. They want to eat the land. Our word for them translates as ‘the hungry people.’” Their statements were critical analyses of the sources of violence that they, as Indigenous
activists, not only observed and experienced, but directly named: settler colonialism and racism.

Camp organizers decided that to address the issues speakers had enumerated, attendees should break up into race-based groups. Their intent was to produce safe spaces in which participants could dream up organizing projects that could assist the camp materially, and more broadly to help fight settler colonialism across Canada. To the largest forest clearing went the white-settler group; to the campfire went the Persons of Color settlers group – and not without controversy (one activists, who later became a close friend, confided in me that she preferred to select which group she felt would best help her address her own experience with race as a mixed-race Canadian woman. Noting the particular kinds of privileges she was afforded both by her class, her education, and her appearance she chose to join the white group – only to be turned away, told she was a person of color, and that the white group was to work through white privilege, not the distinct issues immigrants and POC (persons whom Indigenous scholar Jodi Byrd have termed “arrivants” (2011)) have regarding settler colonialism. Transgender friends likewise spoke of their discomfort of being forced into the white group – dominated by cisgendered, heterosexual persons; one transgender friend boycotted the event. All self-identified Indigenous and Métis participants proceeded to the Indigenous camp down the hill.

In the white-settler group, we sat on the ground, arranged in a large circle of about 45 people. A friend sat next to me, raising her hand to begin the meeting. As she began, a small middle-aged woman on the far side of the circle interrupted, her hair white and cut short. I had heard stories about this activist circulating through the camp. During the anti-logging blockades of the 1990s, she had been a militant participant – chaining herself to
trees, scaling them for tree-sits, and monkeywrenching logging equipment alongside peers inspired by the Earth Liberation Front. As much as I respected her activist work, she struck me as arrogant; she swaggered around camp, indulging in the admiration the younger activists directed towards her (“So much power,” said one activist, “in such a small person” after one of her impromptu story-telling sessions at the campfire). As an outsider to these activist networks myself I didn’t know her well enough to feel so reverent. My anti-hierarchical politics encouraged me to avoid Hegelian figures, to distrust those who appear to relish authority. “Excuse me,” she began. “But who told you that you could begin this meeting? Who are you?” My friend was from a western European country; she was not entangled in these western activist networks, but with others in eastern Canada and Europe. She turned red, her voice audibly quivering, and her hand shaking: “[The head of the clan’s women] told me I should lead this meeting…”

“Well, [the male hereditary chief] told me that I was supposed to lead this.” Several of the elder activist’s allies began nodding; others around the circle looked anxious, glancing at the ground and away from my friend to fix their eyes on the elder activist. It seemed, to me, they were looking to her for leadership in a fraught moment. My friend replied, “yes, I see – but I believe I was asked to do this first by [the women organizer of the camp].”

“That doesn’t matter,” the elder activist responded. “I was asked by the chief.” My friend was humiliated, but decided to let the consensus of the group determine its leader. It was clear from the camp’s adulation where this was headed. And indeed, the group

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9 Recording devices were not permitted into these work groups and even the camp itself, and as such this conversation is reconstructed from memory and field notes. It is not to be read as a verbatim exchange. It has been reviewed by another participant of the workshops.
consensus decided that, Clan governance notwithstanding, greater respect was due to this experienced leader of the radical environmental movement. My friend, close to tears, chose to leave and, apologizing to the group and thanking them for their time, stood up and walked down the path towards the kitchen.

We then began. Around the circle, we announced ourselves and our intentions in being both at the activist camp and in this workgroup; in a moment gesturing to Althusser’s theory of ideology (1971) and Foucault’s confessional theory of state power (1978, 58-61), participants declared their privileges, their politics, and their commitments to environmental and racial justice. We discussed, at length, what had impressed us about the speeches from the morning. Some took that moment to detail what they understood as their own complicity in the colonial violence Indigenous speakers described earlier in the day. To what end, I’m not sure. I’m not sure they themselves could explain why – fluent in activist discourse of the time, I’d speculate that an explanation would likely involve the language of raising visibility for political issues, of being accountable or taking responsibility for privileges. The performative acts of ally activists voicing privilege rarely extends beyond the self. In effect, they are an act of subject formation – of discursively situating oneself within the settler polity, issuing critique of the self’s relationship to colonial power and in so doing self-authorizing one’s own pardon for their structural complicity. In my experience, questions of long-term political strategy only infrequently become a topic of discussion in ally workshops. To that point, later in the day camp organizers expressed confusion (and frustration) that we had not developed tangible proposals for tactics and strategy within the settler circle – what they had initially
anticipated from each breakaway group. And yet, the confessional is common ally activist practice, the performance of which takes on particularities according to the spaces, networks, and causes within which workgroups such as this one occur.

Later on during the session, we broke away into smaller group sessions of four to five participants that further revealed the operations of settler whiteness within this anti-pipeline movement. We were asked by the elder activist to discuss how and why we could address the privileges afforded to us through settler colonialism. This was meant to be an exercise in which to exorcise demons, where the roots of (neoliberal) individualized racial privilege would be collectively revealed so that we could all better act on the calls for decolonization that camp organizers demanded. We sat around uncomfortably, nobody wanting to begin. But in my own settler move to innocence, I was committed to “being accountable” to my privileges – to confess but move beyond it to action – and so I began.

“I think,” I said, “that coming from the east coast, where Indigenous communities have been almost totally displaced, that coming to Canada and out west I’m lacking a lot of the basic cultural fluency that I think you guys have. I’m trying as best as I can to learn as quickly as I can, and I’m getting better, but I have more to learn. One of my problems being here, at [this camp], is that I know I’m an invitee to this territory and I’m really afraid of breaking protocol because I don’t understand the cultural context as well. But I’m here as an activist and as an anthropologist, and so I want to learn so I don’t offend anyone.” What I really wanted to say was that as a white activist and anthropologist, I felt like I was crashing a wedding without invitation, despite having an invitation; and I wanted some

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10 Settler participants offered only one serious proposal for an organizing project – an ally house in a nearby town to serve as a base camp – that was later rebuked for its potential to divert critical labor and monetary resources away from the blockade camp itself.
guidance from Canadian interlocutors on how to overcome that anxiety so I could more fully and respectfully engage with the hosts of the camp.

The persons sitting around me shifted awkwardly, some staring at the ground. The first person to reply gently stated that my fear “of Indigenous territory” was borne of racism – and that my presence made them uncomfortable. I said I understood their misgivings regarding my words, but still wanted to learn how to overcome and abolish this racism – that we (white settlers) all had ongoing work to do, as I understood from Indigenous organizers I had previously worked with in New York. One younger anarchist with blonde hair and smooth, blemish-free skin and clear blue eyes, decided to offer his advice. It was this moment that revealed the deep political disconnect between myself and these activists but the potential bankruptcy of radical theory and allyship with regard to decolonial praxis and the individualized confessional. In a word, it demonstrated that white-settler efforts to address racial privilege through the confessional, rather than the self-reflexive critique meant to deconstruct settler power, were opportunities to enact the settler move to innocence – thus reproducing whiteness, and in turn further entrenching settler coloniality. In a word, white-settler ally and decolonial politics can still be inflected with whiteness even in their most militantly anti-racist modes.

“I don’t think I’ve ever really had this problem,” he said. “The real solution is what I’ve been doing, which is to just live like the Roma.” I paused out of shock. “I go from reserve to reserve, telling everyone I can lend a hand. I’ve never been turned away; everyone welcomes me and I get to eat with the communities every night. But I’m just not tied to any place. When I get tired of a place or they’re tired of me I just move on to the next reserve. So I’m like, a nomad. Like the Roma. I go wherever people want me.”
A few of us sat in silence, while several of the other persons in the circle nodded quietly. It was clear that while not all of the five of us appreciated the entitlement and ignorance such statements entailed, some at least found it palatable and a workable solution for my own latent racism. I did not. I was disturbed that someone from a racially privileged background not only presumed his experience was analogous to the Roma, but that this was a practice that could challenge both interpersonal and structural racism. It presumed he had access to experience that was not his own (Deloria Jr. 1988, 2-5; Erickson 2011); it ignored the class and racial privileges that enabled his freedom of movement (Hall 2014); it elided any sense of sensitivity to the colonial character of white persons arriving uninvited and unannounced to Indigenous lands, presuming that he would be welcomed and provided material comfort, and that this was what Indigenous people on reserve actively wanted. Perhaps some did; perhaps some didn’t. Yet that unwillingness even to recognize that perhaps in some places, I am not forever already welcome suggests an orientation towards the world that both emerges from and reproduces colonial power (Mackey 2014). As politically fraught as anthropological research is, in that moment I learned to appreciate its capacity for self-reflexive critique. If settler colonialism reproduces itself by obscuring its power effects to white-settler subjects, then this was a fine example of exactly how decolonial allyship can both reflect and reproduce settler obliviousness – to themselves, and their own power. This dynamic of invisibility was not only limited to the activist training camp, however. It appeared also in preliminary fieldwork, walking alongside anti-tar sands activists in northern Alberta.
Preliminary Research

The Healing Walks, 2012-2014

Below, I detail the fieldwork I conducted over the course of six years, from 2012 to 2014, and one follow-up trip to the Town of Peace River in 2016. I began preliminary fieldwork in July 2012. Taking up with a homestay in Alberta’s capital city of Edmonton, I used this house as a home base to connect with researchers throughout the province. This field site had appealed to me for one significant reason. While during my MA program at Columbia in the interdisciplinary Climate and Society program I had focused on issues affecting my home state of Virginia – mountaintop removal coal mining (Burns 2007) – in 2010 there was scant awareness of expanding tar sands development projects in Canada. International perceptions of Canadian civic environmentalism keep awareness of its complicity (Hughes 2017) in climate change and violent mining projects globally largely suppressed. With the direction of important mentors at Columbia, I envisioned a doctoral research project that would draw broad public attention to oil sands mining so that its itinerant violence (e.g. Watts 2001) could be addressed politically.

As such, at the time this research commenced, it was envisioned solely as a project examining “spectacular” environmental destruction, from the perspective of political ecology and environmental justice. To pursue this line of inquiry, I engaged anthropologists, sociologists, and Native Studies scholars in Alberta for guidance on how to proceed. Generously, I was invited into the social science research lab of Dr. Brenda Parlee, Faculty of Native Studies and Sociology at the University of Alberta. Through purposive and respondent-driven sampling methods (Bernard 2011, 145-9), I developed preliminary research networks that led to introductions, more guidance, and a growing
familiarity with the social and political landscape of Alberta. Surprisingly, however, and despite the research interests of Alberta mentors, I was very rarely pointed in the direction of First Nations communities or activists themselves (apart from those whose social research lab I shared), instead encouraged to visit heritage museums that featured Indigenous actors for engagement, or to other university-affiliated researchers.

As such, when activist social media apprised me of a community “Healing Walk” near Fort McMurray, Alberta in the heart of the Athabasca oil sands – renowned now for its emblematic and aesthetically shocking images of strip mining and boreal deforestation – I embarked on the 5-hour northern drive expecting to encounter environmental discourses and activists. While I had visited Fort McMurray earlier in that summer, taking tours of tar sands mines and visiting the Oil Sands Discovery Centre, a joint industry and governmental museum venture, and had camped out in the public campgrounds where many oil workers made their homes in oversized RVs, the Healing Walk was an altogether different experience.
Organized by grassroots networks of community activists, including the Keepers of the Athabasca River, the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), and the Athabasca-Chipewyan First Nation, these walks through the heart of oil sands mines began in 2010 and invited participants internationally to attend. The walks, led by community organizers and elders and preceded always with multiple First Nations ceremonies, were envisioned to serve multiple purposes. Spiritually, they permitted ceremony-keepers to offer prayers to the land and Creator to halt environmental destruction and serious public health concerns. Politically, they served as peaceful marches on the 24km highway passing in a loop next to several tailings ponds, upgrading refineries, and a dry tailings desert. Decolonially, they allowed First Nations peoples and settler Canadians to come together as an oppositional
polity, bridging the generational and socioeconomic divisions that often keep Indigenous, settler, and arrivant peoples apart – the “gap” I describe in the introduction and subsequent chapters. For NGOs such as Green Peace and the Sierra Club, they raised the organizations’ profiles within the province and lent them a degree of legitimacy to grassroots and Indigenous-led social movements they only sometimes enjoy in other contexts.

The Healing Walks asked participants to “bear witness” to two phenomena: the environmental destruction of the tar sands on the one hand, and the suffering of some downstream First Nations communities on the other. In the words of organizer Jesse Cardinal, the walks were “distinct from a rally, march or protest. Instead [they were] conceived of as a ceremonial walk of prayer,” and its first instantiation drew only a few dozen participants (2014, 130). Faced with the loss of homes and an appropriate land base to support subsistence communities, Healing Walks were imagined in order to offer community space amid the patch for prayer – to “pray for ourselves, our families, the food, water, air, trees, other living beings, so that we can change this and make it better. We pray so that we can heal this land. Healing,” writes Cardinal, “turns the greatest adversities into the warmest and highest hopes, which our children and grandchildren can carry to light their way. This is the spirit we have brought to the Tar Sands Healing Walks” (128). Through prayer, participants built a social movement meant to raise awareness of the suffering northern First Nations face, drawing activists from places as far afield as Vancouver, Seattle, Idaho, New York City, Montreal, London, and Berlin.

The walks grew substantially following anti-Keystone XL protests in the States, which finally drew non-Canadian media and activist attention to Alberta’s oil sands. At my first walk in 2012, attendance was estimated at 150 persons and was a thoroughly
community-based affair; after the walk, the nearby First Nations community of Anzac opened their community hall for a group banquet, prayers, and youth performances on stage. By 2013, organizers had decided that to expand the efficacy of the event it was necessary to bring international celebrity to their cause, securing the appearances of journalist and climate activist Bill McKibben of 350.org and documentarian-activist Naomi Klein as guest speakers. In turn, these appearances brought a significant amount of international press to the Healing Walk. While in 2012, I only encountered local and provincial-level journalists at the Walk, in 2013 I observed reporters present from CBC News, the BBC, VICE, the Globe and Mail, and others. Some radical activists were critical of such developments, suggesting that the strong sense of community they had experienced at earlier events had been emptied of much of its substance. Indeed, while my first walk felt intimate and featured intimate ceremonies, with ample opportunity to offer volunteer services (in particular, my small pickup truck allowed me to deliver food and equipment to the activist camp, as well as drive organizers between community halls and Fort McMurray), 2013’s was significantly better organized – polished and professional, but more impersonal. Yet, while at an individual level the event was less powerful, its rapid growth attested to the efficacy of these organizing tactics, but brought into question the limits and extent to which grassroots-level activists are able to achieve their goals without the leverage provided by inter/national media, celebrity, and professional activists.

Out of that year’s Healing Walk I embedded with a group of Métis, settler, and First Nations community members to canoe from Fort McMurray to the northern fly-in town of Fort Chipewyan – a town on the edge of the one of the largest inland river deltas, where the Peace and Athabasca Rivers meet. Doubly impacted by reduced water flow from the
construction of the W.A.C. Bennett dam on the Peace River in British Columbia, and the draw of water and introduction of contaminants by mining operations in the Athabasca region, this community had become emblematic of the environmental injustice downstream Indigenous communities experience near the oil sands. The town was site of an emerging cluster of rare cancers, birth defects, and the decline of an ecosystem that provided wild foods for an isolated northern community, where supermarket goods were infrequently brought in by barge, and flown in during the winter. As one interlocutor stated, “people in Fort Chip and all the way in the north really depend on that [wild] food… You go in the bush, you get a duck, moose, any animal, fish, out of the bush, that was healthy food. Now, to get healthy food, living in a small isolated community, it’s pretty tough to get… when you’ve lost your healthy food that you lived off – the Native people – for centuries.” Consequently, many First Nations men had gone south to gain employment in industry, separating families and introducing intra-community antagonism between those that criticized the oil sands industry, and those that felt they had no other choice but to work there. “The health of the community – the people’s health,” he said, “seems like it’s going down as the water deteriorates, declines as well, the animals… because everybody still hunts and does a bit of fishing and stuff like that, but not as much as they used to. So they’re losing their language, they’re culture, and their values like I mentioned. Sad to see, but it all comes down to money.” He asked, “how do we rectify the problem? How do we correct it? How do we make it a win-win situation? It’s a very fine line to get that oil out of ground. But once you damage the environment, how long does it take to bring it back? …It seems it’s like – nobody’s listening. We keep telling stories and nobody’s listening, nobody really – for us, it looks like nobody cares.”
The final Healing Walk occurred in 2014. What had become an annual international gathering of environmental and First Nations activists had also produced exhaustion and burnout for its organizers. While during preliminary fieldwork, those organizers had verbally agreed to bring me into their organizing efforts for my ethnographic project – a plan reflected in my original project grant proposal – when I arrived to the field in October 2015 there were no more Healing Walks with which to assist. Moreover, I quickly learned that several of the organizers were not local to Alberta, but lived in Vancouver and Montreal. And, more troublingly for my research, I learned that most of the activists present at the Walks were not local to Alberta, either, but had arrived through activist networks and caravans primarily from large cities in the eastern provinces and British Columbia. Where my initial project sought to work with organizers and grassroots activists, the end of the Healing Walk and the realization that the Walks had cultivated an international, rather than local, social movement foreclosed the possibility of my original project.

As discussed in the introduction, an invitation to Peace River offered by the director of that town’s museum brought my project to Alberta’s northeast. As a site only recently settled (the town was founded in 1911) and where, as I discuss in chapter 3, the last swath of unceded Indigenous territory in Alberta exists amid prolific oil sands industry operations, Peace River proved not to be a site rich for the exploration of anti-extraction activism, but within which the quotidian operations of race and power amid an oil field were readily observable. In the next sections, I explain my methodology – the philosophy of why I conducted research in the way I did – and the challenges of working both in that field site and as an anthropologist among activists. I do however briefly discuss my involvement in a local committee organizing a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)
community walk. While difficult to describe this as a “movement” per the types usually examined in scholarship, the MMIW march demonstrated how rural community activists engaged in tactics and strategy distinct from that utilized by NGOs, urban activists, and media-driven international movements.

**Methods and Methodology**

Both the research and analysis for this dissertation was structured through two key methodological interventions. The first is a phenomenological methodology (and analysis), which I discuss in the introduction. The second is a decolonial methodology. This system of research methods attempts to account for both the privileged position of the Western ethnographer – attentive to the imperial politics of positivist social science – and to the politics of knowledge production and representation intrinsic to ethnography. It challenges both conventional Western models of conducting research, as well as its analytical purchase, asking not whether the produced work carries truth value, but whether it offers anything in the form of reparations for Indigenous peoples dispossessed of their lands.

In her seminal text *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that “the word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous [sic] world’s vocabulary…[stirring] up silence, [conjuring] up bad memories, [raising] a smile that is knowing and distrustful” (1). That distrust is historical, a cynicism born of researchers’ troubling and often uninvited incursions into Indigenous communities. Anthropology and Native peoples in North America have a particularly fraught history. Vine Deloria Jr.’s “Custer Died for Your Sins: an Indian Manifesto” (1969) offered a timely critique of that history, arguing not only that the particular methods anthropologists deploy in collecting ethnographic produce detrimental power differentials between the
researcher and “the subject,” but that the interpretation of that data was itself a racialized act of power. “The white man,” he wrote, “has the marvelous ability to conceptualize. He also has the marvelous inability to distinguish between the sacred and profane. He therefore arbitrarily conceptualizes all things and understands none of them. His science creates gimmicks for his use. Little effort is made to relate the gimmicks to the nature of life or to see them in a historical context” (1969, 189). The approach is, in a word, colonial – or extractive – and it is only through a decolonial praxis in research and representation that the ethnographer can begin to address the historical and abstractive violence of positivist methodology as Indigenous peoples have experienced and understand it (Kovach 2009, 27). The violence here is found in the reduction of a relational approach to research and being-in-the-world to modes in which (objective) “truth” value is elevated above the relational or interpersonal. At its heart is the question of distinct forms of knowing the world, or one another as fully human agents, tied to the politics of Indigenous vs. Western modes of the production of knowledge, and whether the latter reproduce settler colonialism in practice (Nadasdy 2002; Noble 2015; Simpson 2014).

In recent years Native scholars and other researchers working in Indigenous communities have called for a turn towards new collaborative, Indigenous, or “decolonized” methodologies (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012). These methodologies distinguish themselves through principles of mutual reciprocity and humble relationality between the researcher and the Indigenous community, and which mirror earlier calls in the discipline for a feminist anthropology (Mascia-Lees et al 1989). Beyond a mere methodological concern – i.e., what quality and form of truth-knowledge will this research produce? – decolonized methodologies resist the abstraction of interpersonal relationships, or the positionality of
the researcher as an objective actor. Instead, decolonial methodologies require an ethical stance that reduces the distance between the researcher and interlocutor: how should they relate to and know one another during and after the process of research? In a mode more familiar to Western scholars, Indigenous ethics of inquiry privilege “sharing, subjectivity, personal knowledge, and the specialized knowledge of oppressed groups… [transcending] IRB principles that focus almost exclusively on the problems associated with betrayal, deception and harm. They call for a collaborative social science research model that makes the research responsible, not to a removed discipline (or institution [or abstract principle]) but rather to those studied” (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 14-15). Less tangible to the Western researcher is the assertion that a decolonial methodology address questions Indigenous interlocutors asks but for which “a[n outsider] researcher cannot prepare for, such as: Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us?” (Smith 2012, 10).

In this context, a detached stance from the research and its informants – a stance associated with classically objective social science – is politically, ethically, and methodologically untenable in anthropological research (Denzin 2008, 14-15; Goldstein 2010; Hale 2008; Scheper-Hughes 1995). The methodology of this dissertation aspired not only to employ rigorous and testable research and analytical techniques, but attempts to account for calls to an engaged anthropology and decolonial politics that moves ethnographic research beyond the fraught tensions that have marked the relationship between anthropology and Native communities historically.\textsuperscript{11} The methods below are thus

\textsuperscript{11} Another option here is to abandon the ethnographic project altogether, as other disciplines have done (e.g., cultural studies). However, ethnography brings different peoples directly into conversation with one another, producing knowledges that other forms of scholarship focused solely on the representational or discursive cannot. And given that anthropological projects will likely continue, it makes better sense to move the
informed both by conventional social research methods (Bernard 2011) as well as Indigenous methods (Denzin 2008). Yet, as I return to below, the research conducted in the Peace Country for this dissertation entered into a colonial field of power, historic and contemporary, that structured how informants understood “research,” and “the researcher,” a field against which an ethnographer can make little headway without assuming that marginalized communities are in need of “education” about what engaged and decolonial anthropology does and says. That dynamic – which I worked to avoid – reinscribes a colonial power relation. If the subaltern can speak for herself (Spivak 1988), and the research is to be directed by interlocutors from below, without the right relations and shared epistemologies already established, an unfamiliar methodology (even critical or aspirationally decolonial) produced within the Western academy can appear as an imposition, and threaten to entrench the very power to which a critical study of settler whiteness speaks against.

Methods are the specific tools utilized by a researcher in the process of obtaining data for a study – that is, in the process of knowledge production. This study utilized participant observation (Malinowski 1984), the foundational method of ethnographic research in anthropology, in two phases covering the periods from July 2012 – June 2014 (preliminary research described above) and October 2014 – October 2015 (fieldwork), as well as a follow-up visit in September 2016. During the first period, I engaged primarily with local academics, and Indigenous and ally anti-tar sands activists, using the snowball method to develop an ethnographic network in Alberta and British Columbia. This work

discipline away from ethnographic research practices that Indigenous communities have found violent in the past to relational and decolonial modes of research instead. While one could justifiably abandon ethnography or the discipline for Deloria Jr.’s critiques alone, I choose instead to note its generative potentials (for knowledge, politics, and subaltern futurities) and work from that position rather than from the boycott.
took place in two key sites: in the province’s capital city of Edmonton, and at the epicenter of the Athabasca oil sands projects, Fort McMurray. Through these networks, I recorded eight semi-structured interviews using audio recorders, and collected hundreds of photographs and hours of video data, as well as uncountable hours of unstructured conversations on car rides, canoe and kayak trips, and Healing Walks (discussed below) – what Geertz referred to as “deep hanging out” (1998) – the impressions of which were later recorded as fieldnotes. Beyond preliminary work, over six years I collected over 20 hours of audio and video recordings, 4,575 photographs, and 43 recorded and unrecorded interviews (as explained below, Indigenous interlocutors in particular declined to be recorded for interview). Unrecorded interviews were written up in field notes. Recorded interviews were transcribed using simple music software and coded, alongside fieldnotes, in an encrypted Word document. As chapters were drafted for this dissertation, copies were disseminated to relevant and interested interlocutors, some of whom provided critical feedback that was incorporated into the writeup.

Within Peace River, research began with the director of the town museum, the Peace River Museum and Mackenzie Archives. Through chain reference methods – and through an invitation – I joined the monthly meetings of the Aboriginal Interagency Committee (AIC). The AIC was established in the 1980s as a working group bringing together representatives from all municipal and county agencies whose work directly engaged area First Nations and Métis communities: county administration, women’s shelter, library system, Métis nation local, area public and private schools, AIDS outreach services, the culture and tourism office, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) liaison officer, and office of traffic safety, among others. Its origins, writes UBC social work
scholar Judy Gillespie, relied on “a grassroots forum for information sharing between service providers, [and] over time has become more action-focused, oriented to the promotion of social change to improve the lives of Aboriginal [sic] people” (2018, 184). It operates without funding, relying on the volunteer efforts of agency representatives, and potentially from any Peace Country community member interested in addressing Indigenous social issues in the area. Yet only rarely did I observe the attendance of participants who were not affiliated with a governmental agency. Those who were unaffiliated were usually from nearby First Nations communities seeking guidance and support for community projects – for example, for the construction of a pow wow arbor on one reserve.

Its collaborative model was founded by a Métis elder social worker and is replicated in larger towns across the Peace Country and Alberta’s North. The committee was comprised of several other subcommittees, organizing and running the town’s soup kitchen, educational outreach programming, local Indigenous art show, and both the Sisters in Spirit (SIS) MMIW walk and the Peace River Pow Wow. All of these projects took up substantial amounts of time and effort from passionately dedicated members of those subcommittees, and I was frequently recruited (or “volun-told,” in the words of one committee leader) for projects orchestrated through the AIC. The most substantial of these projects for my research was the procurement and placement of a memorial marker in the town park for area Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, assisting with the organizing and execution of the pow wow, assisting with the organizing of the SIS MMIW walk and benefit film screening and silent auction, and working as a photographer and helping hand in youth outreach programs. Those included a student sweat lodge, an
Aboriginal Day program for the school district, speaking to students at the Aboriginal Youth Center about university education, and helping those same students maintain the community garden plot outside their house. Speaking to the substantial level of cross-community engagement each of these projects required, Gillespie notes that committee members mobilized outside of the AIC’s membership to successfully organize these projects; her analysis of the 2011 Sisters in Spirit Memorial walk engaged 33 community groups that donated “time, talent, money, or material goods to the event” (188). This included substantial AIC-Industry engagement, and many of the largest monetary donations were received through the community liaison offices of area oil operators and service providers, including Shell Canada. The logos of these operators regularly appear on promotional materials for the AIC’s annual pow wow, including its benefit calendar.

Wishing to perform a decolonial research practice, through the AIC I went only where I was invited, developed ethnographic network contacts through the suggestion and encouragement of AIC members, and offered to volunteer wherever and whenever it was feasible to do so. Much of the substance of this dissertation was facilitated through the AIC, and to organizers and members there this project is deeply indebted. Yet settler townspeople were often confused that I was engaged with the committee. One interlocutor, a friend working in the oil patch, treated the work of the organizers with suspicion. Over dinner, I mentioned I had spent a weekend learning to construct tipis with one Elder from the AIC for a youth outreach event. Trained by Plains Cree Elders in Saskatchewan, this Elder was a regular figure at official town events, often invited by town officials to offer ceremony or comment before community gatherings – for example, at the town’s celebration of Queen Elizabeth’s birthday. A leader in local and national Truth and
Reconciliation Commission (TRC) workshops, even his noncombative approach during town events drove my friend to ask, in an accusatorial tone, “I don’t know about that guy. *What* exactly is it that he *wants*?” Taken aback, I responded that he wants to bridge the divide between First Nations and non-Native people in the town, sharing his culture to settlers and Native youth alike. After an awkward pause, the conversation moved on to a discussion of upcoming travel plans.

The AIC meetings were typically held in the basement of a community center that came to be the focal point of my research, and about which I plan to conduct a future ethnography. The Sagitawa Friendship Centre is one of a network of Friendship Centres spread throughout western Canadian cities and towns. They emerged in the 1950s as fraternal space for Indigenous Canadians who had migrated from reserve communities into Canada’s urban centers, driven largely by the federal assimilation policy of Enfranchisement, which required Indigenous persons who desired to leave reserve communities to relinquish their Indian Status under the Indian Act. Enacted in 1857 and continued into the 1960s, “voluntary enfranchisement was the cornerstone of Canadian Indian policy” (McCardle 2014). Federal resources for Indigenous peoples, however, is allocated exclusively through and to reserves – a situation Mohawk scholar Taiaike Alfred describes as “colonial dependency” (2009) – and Indigenous migrants who had relinquished status cards or Indigenous women who lost them through marriage to non-Status men lost access to Indian Act federal support services. While Friendship Centres began as communal space to help ease the challenges of relocation to city life, over time they evolved into providers of critical social services – work outside their mandate, but
necessitated as a consequence of the structural allocation of government services along racial boundaries.

As such, when I arrived in Peace River in January 2015, I found a center vital to the wellness of Indigenous communities both within and outside of the town. Its main building, tucked away but only a few blocks from the central stretch of main street is a colorful building. Where most houses and buildings in town were stucco-ed and painted in drab beiges, greys, and browns, the signage, door, and trim of the Friendship Centre is brightly painted with the colors of the medicine wheel: blue, red, yellow, white. “Tansi,” Cree for “hello” or “how are you?” was emblazoned on the door. In its lobby sat a small table with a bowl and bundle of sweetgrass for smudging, and the delicious scent of smoke lingered in the room. A receptionists’ counter sat inside the small lobby next to a coffee counter where visitors to the center often gathered to discuss town events gossip; RCMP and paramedics were often present to discuss with the Centre’s director recent encounters with the town’s largely Indigenous homeless population, many of whom used the Centre as a place to wash up, stay warm, use a phone, and receive assistance to fill out and submit social services paperwork. A row of offices lined the left side of the hallway leading to the back of the building. On the right side of that hallway was a handicrafts and arts shop for local Indigenous artisans to sell wares. In the far back was a lounge and bathrooms, around which were glass display cases built into the walls, full of economic and ceremonial objects – a headdress, a Hudson Bay coat, fur samples, a small model of a moose-hide cleaning frame, beaded moccasins, birch baskets – all donated to the Centre. School groups occasionally took field trips to the Centre, where the director provided lessons about the objects and would lead smudging ceremonies for the students. (I heard at a later date that
several parents of students from the one of the town’s Catholic schools had taken serious offense to this practice, calling the director to inform her they did not approve of their children being “required” to partake in “pagan” ceremonies.)

The director of the Friendship Centre, T., was perhaps my closest friend, mentor, and interlocutor while in the field. Although non-Native herself, she seemed to be a trusted organizer among the Indigenous communities and Elders with whom she worked. While she and some Métis interlocutors hinted to me that there had been disagreements between her and other Indigenous organizers over the organizing style of particular projects coordinated through the AIC, all declined to detail these disagreements. This suggested to me that none felt their disagreements with her rose to a level of significance in which town organizers prioritized their critiques over their working relationship – a feature of rural activism I note below. Perhaps critical interlocutors felt the position and community would be better served by an Indigenous director, but none stated so, and my analysis of the dynamic between them stops at speculation.

T. was sensitive to these issues and explained that she understood Indigenous community members who distrusted her work, particularly when she first began. In an interview, she described how she resolved this tension through, on the one hand, empathy; and on the other, through good advocacy work that could earn respect. She related several stories in which she observed racism in Canada and felt compelled to speak out against it, or her own difficult childhood in a poor family plagued by alcoholism. But the most striking story was more personal. T. appears to be in her late 40s, and has very long, straight silver hair, flowing down her back. When she was younger, she said her hair had been jet black:
When I was hired, I said, do you really think that this is a wise thing, that I’m going to be a Native liaison and I’m not native? ... And it didn’t set really well with me because I was thinking, how do I advocate for people if I don’t walk in their footsteps? And so I had to think about it quite a while. I may not know Native and non-Native issues, but I know kids. I know kids. And when I looked at my upbringing, I realized that a lot of things paralleled some of the stuff that was on Reserve. [She recounts her childhood, her family’s frequent evictions, and hunger.] So that little bit there... and then when my dad died, my mum had that single mum label on her. So then all of a sudden, I wasn’t worth much, right?

And when I grew up I used to have black hair. It was really dark. And I remember being in [a town in southern Alberta] once, and... I was walking down the street and I remember being called ‘squaw’ and spit on. And I thought, what the hell was that? First of all, I didn’t know what a ‘squaw’ was. And why would someone that didn’t even know me spit on me? So I found out that squaw back then meant like a ‘dirty Indian,’ a woman that was... whatever. I remember thinking, ‘I’m gonna remember that.’ There’s a few things that I chose that were very uncomfortable for me that I chose that I would remember them forever so that I could help others overcome that. That was one of them. So I learnt then – that was my first eye opening to racism. That people weren’t liked because of what they looked like? I’d never even spoken to these people before, so it was based strictly on my looks....

When I went out to Reserve, and they saw there’s a white person, I remember the lady sitting across from me folded her hands and stared at me. She wasn’t listening to what the principal was saying or I was saying, she stared at me. And finally she looked at me and said, ‘What do you know about our kids? You’re white.’ Oh my god, I am! But I know kids. And I will have your kids’ back. And if you don’t believe me, you go talk to most of them now. Because I had already been there three months, and they knew me.

So, I think that when you look at a history of a people being oppressed, who would you trust? [Indigenous community members] don’t have to like me. That’s not their job. It’s my job to advocate in a way that is respectful, and I have to earn their respect. It’s not given to me. It’s all about building relationships.

Her work reflected this ethos. Perennially overworked and underpaid, I usually only caught her to chat after grant-writing season, during rare moments when she was between meetings. The Friendship Centre lurched from funding crisis to funding crisis, and at one point the surprise delay of a regular federal grant threatened to shutter the Youth Centre, which was administrated through T.’s office. T. was at the Youth Centre frequently, often daily, and several kids who lived there were students she had helped escape a small but
violent gang-driven drug trade that trafficked illicit substances from cities in the south up to Peace River and satellite communities. She felt a deep sense of responsibility for their wellbeing, and the youth welcomed her. To keep the Centre open she mobilized staff, community and industry connections, and city government to donate to the Centre to help it remain open. Crises like these seemed to be happening every time I set foot in Sagitawa.

In between crises and grant-writing drives, T. and her staff were busy volunteering at the food kitchen, orchestrating food box distribution, running outreach to the small homeless community in town. At one point, T. herself climbed on top of the Youth Centre to patch its roof before winter arrived in October, with no funding to hire a contractor or time to patch together another grant proposal. Yet she still found time to meet with me, to give me rides after volunteering events, and to connect me to different Indigenous leaders and communities all over town.

I came to understand her work, along with that of the AIC and particularly its leaderships, as a model for advocacy that far exceeded the immediate material benefits to Indigenous peoples that many of the environmental and ally activists I had worked with during preliminary fieldwork could. Put another way, the AIC and T. did not utilize the same critiques, tactics or strategy I had learned during my own activism or witnessed at the pipeline blockade. To organize with so few resources available, and within a dominantly white and politically conservative rural town meant networking and engaging as many sectors of the community as possible to provide needed services. These services were critical to the immediate survival of many members of area First Nations communities. (Tracy and her staff recounted stories of intervening to stop the suicides of, or deliver vital medications to, several persons they knew through Sagitawa.) While urban activists can
rely on distributed networks across cities, and have a greater freedom in general to agitate and protest, Sagitawa’s work required maintaining healthy relationships with the police; with business; with industry; with municipal and Tribal governments. Antagonistic condemnations or protest events against any of these actors would have meant quick death for AIC/Sagitawa advocates – and in turn, quick deaths for some of the people with whom they worked. To this point, the fundraising calendar the AIC sells to support the cost of their annual pow wow is festooned with oil company and oilfield services logos.

The work of AIC and Sagitawa was likewise rarely glamorous. The culmination of their organization was often lauded in the local town paper, but not always. The town paper, owned by right-leaning national media conglomerate PostMedia, frequently had its journalists’ stories rejected by editors in a large city 200km away for covering politically-sensitive subject matter. Journalists there told me that in particular, topics concerning First Nations rights or Industry pollution were rejected outright or edited down for palatability. But it almost didn’t matter – the AIC and T. worked to make lives better for people and community and not for recognition. When I congratulated T. on an award she won for community service she quickly brushed it off, was visibly uncomfortable, and began asking me how my work was going, and what she could do to help it succeed. In one instance, she connected me with leaders from the Lubicon Cree community – whose decades-long political struggle for a land claim I recount in chapter 2 – to assist them in composing an Excel document for their member rolls, which would determine how many acres of land they were potentially able to receive from government. On its face, the Lubicon struggle was a political spectacle, an instance of colonial injustice activists pointed to during blockades and moments of protest. But the few meetings I had with those community
leaders, and with T., taught me that most of the work of enacting long-term, sustained structural change – and the provision of immediate material survival to northern First Nations – was tedious, and boring. Their work involved grant-writing, haggling with contractors and city government, and filling out dozens of forms and Excel spreadsheets. I had come to Canada to engage in militant activism, through an activist anthropology. What I learned instead was that the daily work of making and sustaining structural change was largely thankless and exhausting, and required relationships built over years. Pipeline blockades, Healing Walks, and rallies in urban centers are critical in producing political change over large distances, and across borders. But in rural Alberta, especially in the north where resources are poorly allocated and the economy relies heavily on extractive industry, open resistance against the oil sands industry wouldn’t have meant justice, but the inability of local Indigenous communities to emerge from coloniality and the legacies of Residential Schools. Most immediately, it could mean the deaths of Indigenous community members on reserve, locked out from the economic and state resources readily available to the white community in Peace River. Racial boundaries, in other words, intervene in places like Peace River in ways that thwart glamorous urban activism – the type anthropologists valorize in ethnography. As I ask below: perhaps our political alliances with activists should be more attuned to the fields of power that enable or deny activism in (rural) places where the “activism” isn’t as recognized, isn’t as glamorous, isn’t as militant and confrontational. Their work may be even more invaluable, and I learned in Peace River that I did not want my anthropology to import an urban sensibility in a way that would damage AIC/Sagitawa’s ability to providing life-saving services to those they assist.
The Difficulties of Peace River as a Field Site

Despite the assistance of the AIC, Sagitawa, and the Peace River Museum, along with a dozen others who helped “fix” my work, it was difficult to build substantial rapport with many in town. For settlers, my appearance set me out-of-place – coding me as an urbanite and outsider (in the words of one interlocutor, “you don’t look like you’re from here”). Bearded, with large glasses and slim jeans, my partner and I would often notice furtive glances from townspeople – and learned which town spots to stay away from in order to avoid that attention when it was unwanted.

This visible status as outsider did not serve my research well, and I attempted to tailor my clothing and comportment to fit in more comfortably with the town. It was largely an exercise in futility. When meeting new people, through the AIC or elsewhere, I’d often be met with a similar set of questions: Which company do you work with? (“I’m actually not here with industry, I’m doing my PhD research here.”) Okay, but then who are you with? (“Well, I’m from Rutgers University in New Jersey in the U.S., but I’m affiliated with the University of Alberta, too.”) Okay, but who are you with here? (“I’m not sure what you mean?”) What [governmental] agency? (“Oh, I don’t work for government. I’m an anthropologist. I’m doing doctoral dissertation research here to fulfill my PhD requirements.”) Okay… but what is there to learn about here? This place is so boring! Nothing ever happens. (“There seems to be a lot going on with oil sands development, and I’m here to learn how that’s shaping or impacting the community.”) Okay, but what’s that got to do with anthropology? You’re not going to learn anything here. (Or, in another iteration: “be careful who you talk to and what you say. Say the wrong thing [i.e., “tar sands”] and no one’s going to talk to you.”) Sometimes I was asked how I learned about
the town and been introduced to it, and I said that had begun when I first met with the
director of the Peace River Museum, and explained that I still did some archival and other
research in their back offices. Later, I got wind of a rumor that I was working for/with the
museum – to the irritation of the director.

In a place where the economy runs on oil and gas, forestry, agriculture, or
government services, the presence of an ethnographer was more confusing and
consternating than I could have anticipated. It also led to several moments in which
awareness of my temporariness in town produced reluctance to engage with me deeply. I
was told, when I first moved to town, that there weren’t many young people my age (at the
time, 29-30); young people would move away for college, experience the world, but would
often return to their hometown to begin their families in a “safe” and close-knit community.
Those younger people who were around usually worked in industry but were confined to
work camps – massive complexes of dormitory or trailer-style housing – on production
sites. An Anglican revered who conducted a regular Sunday ministry in the largest camp
told me that town government had worked with industry in order to avoid the “problems”
associated with the other oil sands epicenter, Fort McMurray. Those problems included
widespread drug abuse and addictions; a large sex work and human trafficking network;
drunk and violent fights outside of bars on weekends; a housing crisis; and overwhelmed
government services. Instead, in Peace River oil workers were flown into the town’s
regional airport on private planes owned by industry, immediately shuffled into tour buses,
and driven directly to camps. Oil industry employment is largely seasonal, relying on the
freezing and thawing of the ground to move heavy rigging and drilling equipment from site
to site. Oil workers who did live in town were usually contractors (industry service
providers) and stayed in the town’s numerous hotels, or long-term employees who lived in town year-round to maintain facilities through busy and slow production seasons.

The cycle of migratory labor leads locals to refer to those who come to the town, but not to stay, as “transients.” Often town leaders would ask how long I would stay in town. “A year,” I would reply. They’d express regret; community leaders eagerly wanted to recruit younger, educated people to live in town. “But you’ll be back,” they’d say, repeating a local aphorism: “Once you drink the water [of the Peace River], you’ll always return.” Still, my temporariness foreclosed potential decolonial projects. While sitting with a group of Lubicon Cree council members, who were revising their membership roles in order to move forward with their outstanding land claim, one man asked in Cree how long he [I] was planning to be there. A friend translated and replied: for another ten months. “Oh, that’s not enough,” the man replied. Despite anthropology’s significantly longer fieldwork engagement than any other social science, the structural limitations of the academy and a doctoral research program precluded my ability to engage in a sustained, materially decolonial project. While I did help revise and format some membership data into Excel spreadsheets, I was not invited into their meeting again.

The Peace Country’s Indigenous nations’ reluctance to engage with me deeper was not a problem that was mine, or the anthropologists’, alone. Meeting with a white First Nations cultural museum director in a nearby town, we discussed what it had been like for her to arrive in and live in a home that was on the border of a reserve community. No one spoke to her for several months, she said. In fact, while she was now an accepted member of the community, it had taken her four years before she had even begun to build an adequate level of rapport with her neighbors. She did not blame them. Her museum was
located in a former residential school; decades of abuse in that school had produced a profound level of distrust between the settler and Indigenous communities there; ongoing racism had perpetuated it. (A circle of Elders told me, “that’s a redneck town,” referring to the nearby predominantly white-settler town. “We don’t go there unless we have to. I saw a friend on the corner, some guy threw a bottle at him out his window. You get called names.”) That four-year rapport timeframe was not hers, or that neighboring community’s alone, either. In directed interview questions, I corroborated her 4-year rapport claim with three other settlers who did missionary or social work outreach on reserve. “It can take that long,” T. quietly said, and a Catholic outreach worker confirmed the same. Historic and structural violence loomed large in the lives of nearly all the Métis and First Nations persons I spoke with – yet almost never for the white settlers with whom I built rapport.

The fields of colonial power that generated the distrust described above was not limited to a general distrust of white people on behalf of First Nations people. There was also a specific mistrust directed towards “researchers” writ large, and which my decolonial methodology could not overcome. Indigenous interlocutors explained this in two ways. More directly, interlocutors explained that they did have engagements with “researchers,” but that these researchers were largely contracted industry consultants who arrived in town to conduct Traditional Land Use Impact Reports, part of a regulatory requirement, to document impacts that proposed pipeline and other development would have on traditional territory. But the TLU process is largely regarded throughout Alberta as disingenuous (Westman 2013), and in the words of one Elder, “[Researchers] just come here so they could check a [regulatory] box.” Sitting at a table in the Métis hall at a consultation meeting between one of these industry consultants and a circle of Elders, this tension became visible.
The Elders seemed bored with what was happening. The consultant kept prodding them for replies to her queries. “We already told you all this once. You got to listen better,” said one Elder. A younger facilitator attempted to intervene: “From our culture,” she said, “it’s rude to keep asking the same questions over and over. For them, that’s rude; it means you’re not listening.” Eventually, the consultant lost her patience and, exasperated, proclaimed “but I’m just doing this to help you in case you missed anything!” The irony that she was helping them in the degradation of their land base was lost on her; it reflected a paternalism to which those Elders took offense, and she placed potential fault for her report on them, rather than on her own research methods or acuity as an interviewer. Although the projects of an industry consultant, and ethnography – engaged or not – are fundamentally divergent from one another, to residents of Cadotte I was subsumed into the category of “researcher” this consultant had laid out before my arrival.

Other Indigenous interlocutors’ familiarity with researchers impeded both the decolonial and positivist currents of my methodology. At the same meeting described above, when the consultant had pulled out her audio recorder, one Elder pointed directly at it and stated, “that’s not a good way. That gets between us. You need to just sit and listen and get to know us, and that gets in the way. It’s not a good way.” She eventually relented and put the recorder in her bag, but I believe the record indicator light had stayed on – a moment of colonial extraction of Indigenous knowledge. My decolonial praxis, however, made this a moment of learning for my own research: while I began every interview with a gentle request if we could record the conversation that was nearly always declined, and I would instead jot notes when I got home instead. Here, my decolonial methodology interrupted what is a conventional ethnographic research practice: the recording of
conversations (Bernard 2011, 170-1), and this is what accounts for the lower number of recorded interviews available for transcription. (Consequently, much of the dialogue from this dissertation is reconstructed from field notes and memory.)

Yet interlocutors’ familiarity with *positivist* research methods also impeded my decolonial praxis. Talking to one trusted Elder who had obtained an M.A. in social work in the 1980s, I explained that my approach to research was to “take people seriously as experts of their own lives” and that “I’m here to learn from you.” He explained this was confusing: I was the one from a university with training in methods and advanced degrees, working with a community where many members did not complete their high school education – that *I* was the expert. I went on to say that I was likewise wary of stepping into messy Indigenous inter-community fighting over outstanding land claims issues; that conflict loomed large throughout my research, where interlocutors in Peace River were often stated sympathy towards one political camp or another. “Well, you don’t really need to worry about that,” he said. “You’re the *objective researcher*. Your status keeps you out of the conflict. You can ask about it. You’re not going to be interfering.” My efforts to deny the objective status of the researcher were here thwarted, and I quickly realized that while my methodologies appealed to members of the academy, to explain the orientation of my research would have required significant explanation, and I could not conceive of a way to do this that was not patronizing, that did not impose my academic training over the words and perspectives of interlocutors – a practice I argue would be colonial, privileging the imposition of a Western academic approach to research over the local community’s positioning of myself.
This raises important questions for the practice of an engaged anthropology, as discussed below. In a decolonial or engaged anthropology, to what extent is “the researcher” able to set determine their own positionality via their methodology? As a corollary question, to what extent is the perception that the anthropologist may set their own positionality “in the field” the effect of racial, class, or gender power? As a matter of the ethnographer’s epistemological agency, to what extent is that perception universalizing, and thus masculinist, imperial, or (settler) colonial? Ultimately, if this project was going to enact a decolonial project, it could not impose a model of “engaged anthropology” in vogue within the academy as a methodology, but utterly contrary to the direction in which interlocutors pushed this research. While “the arrival” is a mythologized moment within anthropology, to arrive with the intention to pursue an anti-tar sands activism when no such grassroots movement existed in the community, and was not the concern of local residents, the education of an pushing of an engaged project is tantamount to a white savior complex (Stoler 2006, 133-34). It has no place in my research nor my anthropology, and consequently the activist dimensions of this project developed along an altogether different set of criteria more relevant to my interlocutors: to push for economic justice, improved regulatory frameworks, land claim resolution, and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women’s (MMIW) movement.
Engaged Anthropology and Considerations for Social Movement Ethnography

Fig. 2.3. The Sisters in Spirit 2015 Memorial Walk gathered outside of the town mall – an “Indigenized” space as noted in chapter 5 – and proceeded through main street to the town’s central park where ceremonies and public speakers were presented. The procession here is preceded by two RCMP officers in formal red serge uniforms. Photo by author.

For anthropologists attuned to the issues of imperial power in the production of knowledge enumerated above, an engaged or activist anthropology suggests one way to reduce the power differential between the “researcher” and “subject” (Schepers-Hughes 2000; 2004). Like decolonial methodology, questions of how (i.e., through methods) scholars can enact an engaged anthropology is an ethical and political issue. Citing Pat Caplan, anthropologist Rena Lederman notes that ethical discourse emerges “precisely at the moment when the boundaries of a discipline are redefined that ethical discourse increases… In other words, debates around the topic of ethics are part of the way in which anthropologists seek to constitute themselves as a moral community” (2013, 593). The question of methodology is, again, a question of what kind and quality of work anthropologists enact both in the process of research as well as its writing and dissemination. Caplan contends that,
Insofar as anthropology’s moral principles and most ethics writing still presume the discipline’s classic subjects – marginalized people with whom researchers hope to collaborate and make common cause, or for whom they seek to advocate – they are not a neat fit for anthropologists’ shifting orientations, including a sharper focus on metropolitan actors and technical and political economic elites, on social fields encompassing mutual antagonists among whom the fieldwork was never neutral and on social actors whom the anthropologist finds problematic or offensive. Nevertheless, the discipline’s methodological commitment to an ethics of intimacy is surprisingly durable, in the sense that even a ‘militant’ anthropology entails disclosure of the researcher’s identity and interests in backstage spaces. (594)

In this sense, all ethnographic work is relational; there is no intimacy without a close relationality. Militant, activist, decolonial, and engaged anthropologies thus work to address an extractive relationality by making common cause with informants (Fluehr-Lobban 2008; Lassiter 2005; Lederman 2013).

To make common cause through collaborative activist work with social movements is one mechanism to reconfigure the relations that historically govern the ethnographer’s presence in the field. Three main problems with this approach emerged through my own research: first, as noted in the first vignette above, activists themselves may in effect reproduce and entrench whiteness and coloniality in their efforts to perform a decolonial activism; anthropologists, I suggested, would better serve decolonial projects by refusing to participate in spaces of whiteness’ reproduction. And, as I discuss below, ideological barriers between academic researchers and activists severely impede the capacity of anthropologists to influence social movements in another direction – if that’s even ethically appropriate. Secondly, while whiteness may be reproduced within social movements, it may also be reproduced between social movements and non-activist Indigenous peoples. Thirdly, just as there are structures and histories that stymie relations between an ethnographer and Indigenous interlocutors, so too are there barriers between researchers
and grassroots social movements – particularly within radical environmental movements that are heavily infiltrated and surveilled by the security state.

**Problem 2: The Reproduction of Settler-Whiteness in Activist-Indigenous Relations**

The short-term tactics many activists use – the same which valorize direct actions against long-term strategy – produces racial effects that may, in the long term, further marginalize First Nations communities. Another vignette illustrates this point. All along the banks of the Athabasca River, small trapline and hunting cabins serve as recreation and lodging sites for the few who travel back and forth from Fort Chipewyan, in the north, to Fort McMurray, in the south. It’s a two-day trip by motorboat, and after only a few hours paddling on the second day of our canoe trip we encountered one of these larger cabins with several high-speed motorboats tied up to a dock at the water’s level. We had never heard about persons living along the river before, so out of curiosity we and our trip leader, Eli, stopped to investigate. Two or three families from the Fort MacKay First Nation were spending the weekend there. Parents and older youth congregated in folding chairs around a campfire and children ran around us. Invited to joining their group for lunch, we exchanged simple pleasantries and cracked open beers and then got down to the elephant in the room. The host, a middle-aged First Nations man in jeans and a ball cap hesitated, then asked: “So, you’re not with those tree huggers, are you?”

It was a difficult question to answer; we had all been drawn to this place for disparate reasons. For myself, I was on the trip both as an activist and ethnographer; for the three ceremony keepers it was to understand the tar sands better in order to contest a proposed oil development project on their reserve in Saskatchewan; for a paddler from Toronto, it was to collect materials for a photo essay; for the trip organizer it was to collect
interviews and other documentation to support the anti-development campaigns of environmental activists. Our leader Eli was a burly, muscular man, his head bald and his face tanned by the sun. Responding to our host’s inquiry, Eli shrugged and then said, “we’re not Greenpeace, but yeah, we are here to bear witness to the destruction.” Despite his distancing from a recognized environmentalist NGO, his declaration itself turned out to be just as controversial: this entire family had members working in the oil patch, and were grateful for the livelihood and material comforts that industry provided them. He gestured towards the boats docked at the water, pointing with his lips. “I couldn’t buy those without the money I earn in the patch. And besides,” he continued, “it’s those tree huggers that brought in all the development anyway.” Here, we encountered a deep rift between activist rhetoric and the diverse attitudes that many Albertans — including Métis and First Nations persons — have with regard to oil development. We asked our host to explain.

Prior to proliferation of industry in Alberta’s northeast in the 1990s and early 2000s, most First Nations communities in the Athabasca basin practiced subsistence lifestyles, hunting, fishing, trapping, and gathering foods and medicines from the land. Of all land-use practices, it was fur trapping that provided the most significant economic resource for area First Nations (McCormack 2010, 17-19). The Hudson Bay and other fur-trading companies had moved into the area as early as the 18th century and had well-established trade networks that exchanged both material goods and money for the pelts of beaver, muskrat, lynx, and other fur-bearing animals that shared in dwelling along the river and the Peace-Athabasca delta. The 1980s saw a period of sustained anti-fur campaigns by animal rights organizations like the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and indeed, Greenpeace. These campaigns are
remembered best by iconic photographs of the elite in metropoles like New York and London covered with red paint, thrown onto fur-wearers by activists to symbolize the blood of the animals killed in the fur industry. Yet these protests did not distinguish between factory-farmed furs and those caught by Indigenous trappers, whose “traplines” — long narrow stretches of land held in lease from the Crown, often passed down from generation to generation and an integral part of knowledge transmission from parents to children over decades — provided wild-caught pelts through a small-scale practice. But animal rights activists collapsed the distinctions between industrial and subsistence models of fur harvesting; their tactics deployed the universalizing logics of modernity to “flatten” cultural difference in the pursuit of a political project that scaled fur trapping from local to global contexts for protest in metropoles far from the sites of Indigenous wild fur production (Tsing 2015, 37-41).

Yet the tactic worked. The public backlash against the fur industry was widespread and intense, and many local wild trappers saw the market for fur dissolve, and were no longer able to support themselves or their families through trapping. Because of the colonial intricacies of trapline lease laws, once traplines fell into disuse the leases were extinguished and legal control of them reverted back to the Crown, administered by through provincial and federal governments. But reversion of these leases to the Crown meant that now industry could apply for leases to develop the land for its oil reserves. And thus, the acceleration of industrial expansion, fueled by rising oil prices, led to the displacement of trappers and hunters from lands they had previously been able to use. The family we sat with for that lunch were one of the very few that had preserved their trapline. Our host pointed up the river, naming oil sands projects that were already in development
over former tralines, and our host named dozens of families he knew personally who formerly trapped and hunted leases on those project sites. To him, Greenpeace stood as a strawman, like it is for many in Alberta, for the perceived hubris of all environmentalists working in the province. Whereas his tie to land brought him an intimate familiarity with the land’s changes, both physical and human, environmentalists arrived from afar with naïve critiques of tar sands phenomena they themselves were responsible for.

Similar barriers existed between working people, Native and non-Native, and environmentalists. In 2008 and 2009, following the deaths of hundreds of waterfowl on a Syncrude tailings lake, Greenpeace activists blockaded hauler trucks, shut down conveyor belts, and attempted to plug up some tailings outlet pipes (Globe and Mail 2009). While their efforts to plug pipes failed, it did bring a heightened level of securitization to development sites. Their protests also brought a fair amount of rumor to the workers I spoke to in the Fort Mac region. As one said: “It was so dangerous what [Greenpeace] did. I had buddies who had to go out there and repair the [tailings] pipe. The pressure was all built up. It could have exploded and killed the workers… Greenpeace are a bunch of tree huggers; they don’t care about us, they just care about the earth.” While this dismissal of activists’ concerns was premised on false information -- Greenpeace activists were never able to plug those pipes due to the enormous pressure from the discharge – their words evoke a local critiques and skepticism of outside actors interfering in the day-to-day operations of the tar sands (and by extension, the settler coloniality that enables tar sands development).

The vignette above raises once again the ethical dilemma of movement-based engaged anthropology: with whom shall the anthropologist make common cause?
Internationally-visible anti-oil social movements at odds with the interests of some non-activist local First Nations communities, or the workers at odds with those movements, many of whom are Indigenous or working class themselves? When conflict exists within communities, is it not then, as the interlocutor above described, to take a more detached “researcher’s” position, more ethically sound to avoid aggravating intra-community conflict – especially where the anthropologist is privileged to depart once the grant money has dried up and the needs of careers and the university beckon? While an engaged anthropology with social movements may be one avenue out of the fraught colonial relations between ethnographer and the subaltern, in the case of Alberta, it would have only been reifying of the very coloniality this project set out to critique in the first place.

Moreover, there is often disagreement and infighting within/between movements, and these conflicts often revolve around strategy and tactics. Several times during my work in Alberta, interlocutors informed me the reason First Nations in the province only reluctantly engaged in militant protest was due to Elders’ instruction. “The Elders here,” said one, “say the best way forward is to work together.” In a word, at least three different interlocutors informed me a consensus had emerged among Alberta Elders from oil sands development areas that militant protest would be counterproductive to the justice their communities sought. Treaty Elders interpreted the Numbered Treaties as land-sharing agreements; while settlers refused to honor the spirit and responsibilities of the treaties, Alberta First Nations would. Yet their approach to oil sands contestation was culturally contingent. In British Columbia, I overheard several Native and non-Native activists angrily condemn Alberta First Nations for their perceived lack of militancy. One white activist went so far as to call Alberta First Nations sell-outs. Another stated that they were
killing Indigenous nations in B.C. At a Healing Walk, I sat in the vans that transported walkers to and from bathrooms. A young white activist from Calgary complained to me: what are we doing here? She had driven all the way from Calgary to come “fuck shit up” and “all we were doing” was walking and praying. I once asked an activist Elder, who was from the Fort McMurray area why First Nations hadn’t engaged in more militant protest; why, for example, hadn’t they blockaded Highway 63, the only road in and out of Fort McMurray. She replied, “Yeah, we could shut down the highway for a few hours. But that town is full of tens of thousands of rednecks. The moment we shut down the highway they’d all come up. Blood would spill.” A less militant engagement, then, was not only culturally-specific and appropriate to the agreements Alberta First Nations entered into through treaty, but was an issue of survival. With whom, then, should the engaged, activist, or militant anthropologist throw in their lot?

Problem 3: Activist-Academic Cultural and Structural Barriers

To the third point, the ideological commitments of activists may preclude sustained collaborative work between anthropologists and social movements. Where radical and ally activists often fight against institutionalization of their movements (Milstein 2010, 59-61), academics appear as representatives of power, embodying the structural privileges their institutions afford them – regardless of their work’s methodology. Their positionality relative to each other even appears in the distinct performative repertoires of political resistance (Tarrow 2008) that distinguish, in part, academic from grassroots activist. At the pipeline blockade on Burnaby mountain, I met up with a grad student friend who was, successfully – for a time – involved in the anti-pipeline movement in western Canada. That day, area academics had organized a solidarity protest to voice support for the encampment
at the top of the mountain. In the morning, several hundred undergrads, graduate students, and faculty gathered at the road at the bottom of the mountain, and began what was a very solemn march up the hill. It was eerily quiet, academics murmuring and conversing among themselves in hushed – bourgeois, professional – tones. “This is so weird,” my friend said. “Yesterday there was an activist march up the mountain and we were really loud,” engaging in protest chants and carrying signs of angry condemnation of oil industry actors and Canadian government. Wanting to invigorate the march, we began shouting call-and-response chants; most academics glanced at us apprehensively, and only a handful joined half-heartedly with us. After a few minutes, we gave up, walked further ahead, and attempted another round of call-and-response. Again, the academic march remained quiet. My friend offered her evaluation: “this is exactly why activists never trust academics.” Embodied modes of protest performance were merely one marker, or manifestation, of an underlying cynicism most activists I had known expressed towards institutionally-affiliated scholars. While social movements have their own organic intellectuals (Gramsci 1977), scholars ranked structurally above the grassroots were always figures of suspicion: their loyalties resided in their careers and familial obligations – but could not sacrifice or commit themselves fully as bona fide activists did. And when academics did attempt activism or radical scholarship, only a rare few were truly embraced, and only more readily by college-educated activists who had learned critical social theory in their coursework. Otherwise, when academics did attempt activism, it was appreciated as something helpful when it worked in its own sphere, and less so when it attempted to cross into grassroots movements or space – those who did so just couldn’t get the activism quite right, marching quietly and nonconfrontationally rather than militantly and disruptively up the hill. Sometimes, this
was framed as condemnation of the liberal, rather than radical, politics of academics. More often, their critique was structural: scholars’ association with the university, an institution of the state, foreclosed a legitimate relationality between academic and grassroots activists.

The only academics I have known who fully appreciate the misgivings grassroots activists have towards the academy were former radical activists themselves, and often expressed reservations that they themselves could ever be radical again. Speaking with a colleague in Edmonton, he stated that, “I don’t think I can call myself an activist anymore.” Although his politics had not changed from his activist days, his energies were too devoted to writing, teaching, and service to permit the total immersion into movement life that marks activist legitimacy. Yet while most ethnographers I have known are unaware of the distrust with which activists treat them, they are aware of its most explicit expression: the accusation of affiliation with the security state. Student anthropologists are often warned that interlocutors in global contexts may accuse them of being CIA operatives, and social movements often possess developed “security cultures” to ferret out and ostracize potential infiltrators (Deep Green Resistance 2018). In the course of an ethnomusicologist friend’s work with anti-pipeline activists in western Canada, an accusation of CIA-affiliation led to that entire movement’s unified effort to drum her out of the movement, and ultimately the province entirely. In the course of my work, rumor circulated at a Healing Walk that I was working as undercover RCMP; organizers dispelled the rumor, but I was not always so lucky. In 2016, I learned that the lone anti-tar sands activist in the Peace River Oil Sands was frustrated with my inability to work on his behalf as diligently as he needed me to, and had circulated rumors among the press that I was working covertly for the oil and gas industry. Another activist lobbied an accusation on social media that I was “claiming
relationships with her” among interlocutors in Edmonton and encouraged her followers to disseminate my personal information in order to facilitate harassment – a rumor the origin of which I still cannot determine. As one of her supporters accused, I was “just another bullshit grad student claiming the work of Indigenous women” in order to propel my own career. For an additional example, at the end of my visit to the pipeline blockade described in the first paragraph I attempted to get contact information to keep in touch with activists I had hoped to befriend. Most were not forthcoming; one activist explicitly asked “What are you going to use it for?” I understand these allegations not only as my own personal inability to develop good rapport or manage ethnographic networks. Rather, they reveal the expression of deep-seated distrust between activists and the state and its institutions, decolonial intentions notwithstanding. The accusations both colleagues and I received were not interpersonal – more infrequently are the allegations directed towards researchers statements that the researcher was rude, or unpleasant. Rather, they pin the researcher to power: to the police, state intelligence, the oil and gas industry, or to university affiliation. And as is often the case in the Third World, U.S. citizenship further pins the researcher to power. Given Canadian leftists’ critique of American imperialism, my Americanness only intensified their reluctance to engage with my project.

Ultimately, none of these allegations may matter. Activists pursue their own work with those whom they trust, and while left infighting has led to the dissolution of many movements, they often reemerge in new configurations and with new leadership and decision-making structures. Social movement intellectuals continue their work; and scholars continue theirs, sometimes brought into movements when there is an immediate benefit they may provide. At a colloquium at Rutgers University, movement anthropologist
João Biehl mentioned in passing his assessment of the relationship between activists and academics. It’s pretense, he said, to assume that the anthropologist has anything of real value to offer the social movement through engaged anthropology. Activists have their own intellectuals, who are experts of their own movements and theory, and anthropologists are experts of theirs. Rather than attempt to bridge this divide through engagement, it is more politically effective to read and learn from the movement intellectuals the academy typically overlooks. Anthropologists in turn can produce scholarship that can inform or augment social movement theory, and leave activists to use that work as they see fit. In other words, it’s ivory tower hubris to assume that anthropology is as useful to activists as the work their own organic intellectuals produce, and full-time activists do.

This does not mean that anthropologists cannot conduct politically-committed research or develop scholarship that intends to assist activists. When movements are foreclosed to a researcher, ethnographic work pivots to more feasible projects. In the case of my own research, my inability to make headway with anti-pipeline activists lead to deeper and more innovative insights into the operations of settler colonialism than ethnography within the radical environmentalist movement would have allowed. AIC organizers frequently “volun-told” me where my efforts would be most useful to their work, and while this usually led to help organizing cultural events, I was also brought into a nation-wide social movement to address the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Rather than oil sands development in the area, MMIW was the greater concern of the Peace River social justice organizers I met.
The Sisters in Spirit: Organizing against MMIW in the Peace Country

The violence which many First Nations experience within Canada is not only structural, economic, interpersonal, or environmental; it is thoroughly gendered. Indigenous women experience disproportionately high rates of all forms of violence, including murder and sexual assault, compared to Indigenous men or non-Native women (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2017, 7-9). The drivers of this violence, as Native Studies scholarship and new policy documents outline, is thoroughly colonial and racialized. Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audrea Simpson, whom I quote at length here, explains that:

The ‘phenomenon’ of the disappeared women, the murdered and missing Native women in Canada, is not a mystery, is not without explanation. Sherene Razack (2002), Beverly Jacobs and Amnesty International (2004, 2009), Andrea Smith (2005), the filmmakers Christine Welsh (2006) and Sharmeen Chinoy (2006), as well as countless activists and heartbroken, devastated family members who have marched and petitioned, have all documented, theorized, and written about this disappearance, which is explained by Canada’s dispossession of Indian people from land. This dispossession is raced and gendered, and its violence is still born by the living, the dead, and the disappeared corporalities of Native women. The disappearance of Indian women now takes on a study sociological appearance: six hundred to nine hundred ‘missing’ in the past decade, gone from their homes, murdered on the now-legendary ‘Highway of Tears’ in Northern British Columbia, off streets or reservations. Indian women ‘disappear’ because they have been deemed killable, able to be raped without repercussion, expendable. Their bodies have historically been rendered less valuable because of what they are taken to represent: land, reproduction, Indigenous kinship and governance, an alternative to heteronormative and Victorian rules of descent. Theirs are bodies that carry a symbolic load because they have been conflated with land and are thus contaminating to a white, settler social order. So it is that they must be eradicated (A. Smith 2005). They are considered inviolable; in Andrea Smith’s language, they are ‘rapable,’ as Native women are constructed as ‘immanently polluted with sexual sin…’ already-violated (10). So they suffer disproportionately to other women. Their lives are shorter; they are poorer, less education, suffer more from illness, and are raped more frequently; and they ‘disappear.’ Their disappearance is thus not an unexplainable phenomenon… it is symptomatic of what administrators have called Canada (and sometimes in the United States) ‘the Indian Problem.’ This problem is a problem of arms, of smuggling, of disappearing (if you are a woman), of political insistences (this is mine, not yours), and citizenships of refusal rather than consent. This problem is the structure, actually, of settler colonialism. (Simpson 2014, 156-7)
The Peace River Country is not exempted from this phenomenon. While dozens of women (and some young men) had disappeared in the region, one particular case rose to national attention. The sister of a celebrated Greenpeace organizer from the Lubicon Lake Nation, Bella Marie Laboucan-McLean had moved to Toronto in 2011 to study fashion design. At a party in 2013, she fell from a 31st-story apartment to her death; although the RCMP designated the case suspicious, no attendees of the party claimed knowledge of what had happened (CBC 2016). On multiple occasions Bella’s other sisters were asked if she had lived a “high-risk lifestyle,” a stereotyped trope meant to explain the murders and disappearances of Native Women that often finds its way into media and RCMP reports, and dispel the bureaucratic designation of suspicious death (Razack 2016, 296). Bella’s sisters’ agitation elevated her case to national attention yet remains unsolved. But national cases are emblematic ones; hundreds more Native women disappear throughout Canada and the U.S. without recognition. The main Sisters in Spirit organizer in Peace River had directed me to join the organizing committee, and at meetings would bring plastic binders with her packed with profiles of individual murders and disappearances she had collected over the years, reading them to us at the ends of meetings.

For years Indigenous women’s groups, including the Sisters in Spirit, organized coordinated national rallies to honor lost women, console suffering families, and demand a national inquiry. Until 2015, Canadian governments resisted these calls. Former Conservative Party Prime Minister Stephen Harper dismissed the patterning of these cases outright, claiming that “we should not view this as sociological phenomenon. We should view it as crime [only]” (Toronto Star 2014). Although the Trudeau government initiated
an inquiry after its election to government in 2015, at the time of my research organizers were still frustrated with Ottawa’s inaction.

To elevate the case locally and nationally, the SIS committee engaged diverse sectors of the town to organize its memorial march. We accomplished several major projects over the course of ten months. The first was a fundraising effort. A new documentary on the Highway of Tears, which many young Native women hitchhiked and were often disappeared from – attesting to a lack of transportation infrastructure for First Nations women living in remote places – was released in 2014. As a committee, we worked with the town cinema to reserve a night for a screening. We collected donations from businesses around town – sleeping bags from the Canadian tire, artwork from Indigenous artists, a Pendleton blanket from a social services agency, an Oilers hoodie from a town embroiderer – and held a silent auction over several days in the lobby of the theatre to raise funds. With those funds, we hired a stone engraver to carve the SIS emblem and a poem into a large piece of granite as a memorial marker for mourning families to meet and reflect over. We met with local town government in council and with parks officials to secure a location in the main town park for the memorial stone’s placement. Organizers coordinated with RCMP and provincial transportation services to close the main street to accommodate the march. Elders, journalists, and mourning parents were invited to speak at the end of the march, and traditional healers were provided to comfort those parents should they need help. Youth dancers were brought in to perform healing ceremonies, and one of the area First Nations Council Chiefs was invited to unveil the memorial stone at the end of the day. This was not radical environmental protest, nor was an urban activism whose organizing efforts were contained within activist and non-profit networks. The work of the SIS in
Peace River was a sustained, tedious, and meeting-driven effort that sought to bring together the entire community to address an issue of violence. Whereas urban protest often has the numbers and resources to engage with the state antagonistically – say, in confrontations with police – any model of organizing in this rural, conservative town would have likely aggravated and alienated the town institutions and workers that organizers had to work with both in their professional as well as their personal lives.

Still, when I helped to organize in 2015, not many white persons from town attended the walk. Those who did were usually persons I had known through the AIC, or were affiliated with regional women’s shelters. In 2016, the rock was defaced – both the poem and image of Grandmother Moon were deliberately covered with mud. Yet when I returned for a follow-up visit in 2016, more of my settler interlocutors had begun attending the walk. In 2018, both Northern Sunrise County and the Town of Peace River declared October 4 Sisters in Spirit Day. Perhaps this is an indicator that race and gender relations in the region are improving. As this dissertation suggests, though, what state institutions promote and what settlers do and say in their everyday lives regarding Indigenous peoples are two distinct things. Regardless, though, to even move their concerns this far into the public eye was no small feat. And while SIS’s efforts did not revolve around spectacular, confrontational protest – much like the Healing Walk – it certainly demonstrated a spirit of collaborative organizing consistent with what I had heard Elders say was the better way forward: to honor the land-sharing agreements the Numbered Treaties represented, the critiques of outsiders and more radical activists be damned. In effect, these organizers were and are doing the thankless work of bringing together Indigenous and settler peoples across
colonial boundaries built historically over generations and reproduced in daily town life – despite the pain visible on the faces and in the tears of attendees of the MMIW walk.

**Conclusion – More on the Politics of this Dissertation**

Although interlocutors in Peace River wanted, and needed, to work collaboratively with the settler community, some still expressed privately to me their frustration that white people in the town weren’t aware that Indigenous persons still experienced racism in the community. Those interlocutors encouraged me to speak truth to power, where owing to their professional working relationships they could not. And so, let me be clear that this project is a decolonial one, one that attempts to explicitly address both environmental injustice and racial violence in the Peace Country.
I still worry, though, that this dissertation presents material that complicates the work of anti-pipelines activists in the U.S. and Canada. Alberta is a geographically expansive and regionally diverse province, and interlocutors in the Peace Country and nearby reserves often claimed that southern cities and regions “don’t hear our northern voices.” Consequently, much of what interlocutors reported to me, as well as my own observations and arguments, do not cleanly align with activist representational projects that serve political goals to transform resource and energy economies. It may seem that this dissertation contracts, or potentially disrupts, media and activist accounts of the tar sands, which are strategically reductive (and even essentialist) in their apprehension of the complex of tar sands phenomena. I believe their project and mine, however, are complementary. I hope to nuance the discursive representation of tar sands critique, but not to thwart Indigenous and anti-pipeline movement organizers; I’ve known several of these organizers personally and respect their work and politics. This also reflects lessons local Albertan activists taught me: that the tar sands situation within Alberta is too messy, entrenched, and embroiled in every aspect of daily provincial economic and political life for outsiders to fully appreciate. Between extra-provincial criticism of oil development, the province’s dominant conservative politics, and tense east-west cultural and economic conflicts in Canada\textsuperscript{12}, left activists in Alberta often described feeling misunderstood and at times resentful of outsider presence within, and stereotyping of the province. (“We’ve got to have someone [Alberta] to beat up on,” I overheard in a Vancouver coffee shop once.

\textsuperscript{12} These tensions are referred to within Alberta as “Western Alienation” – meaning western provinces’ perceived political and economic alienation from culturally “elitist” eastern provinces, pinned to 1960s oil industry royalty redistribution programs enacted by PM Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government. As discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation, the perception of Western Alienation informs political discourse in Alberta to the present.
“It’s the Texas of Canada.”) For all the criticisms heaped upon Alberta, even those persons who are aware and critical of the oil and gas industry and racial discrimination in the province love the place deeply, and want to make it better.

I also want to explicitly center and name processes of racialization inherent to the production of the tar sands. Race, I argue, is not only operative in the social worlds of the tar sands, but a very precondition of their production. Unlike political tactics of strategic essentialism, this isn’t to reduce indigeneity to a racial category; each Nation has its own distinct ancestral genealogy and criteria for belonging and citizenship (Simpson 2014, 192-3). But if we are to understand how settler power operates in a decolonial methodology, we have to examine it from its own vantage point, from its own optics, under which indigeneity is rendered and apprehended as a racial category. In that sense, this is a project which looks up at power to critique the lived experience of settler coloniality, reproduced in daily practice by the dominant in a settler society: white settlers who benefit disproportionately from resource development and spatial practices that reconfigure landscapes, and in so doing reconfigure people and the relations between them.

Structures of racialization and settler power emerge from Canada’s coloniality, but a study of their processes risk reducing Indigenous peoples to an explicitly minority status as liberal states attempt to do to better facilitate the management of populations and life (Foucault 1978; Povinelli 2016, 132-5). But the unique status of sovereign Indigenous peoples who exist prior to the arrival of the European requires not only a recognition of that special status that “defines” Indigeneity – relations of and belonging to a land – and that not all minority groups share, thus requiring a specialized set of decolonial politics in order for the settler polity to achieve a deep, enduring, and authentic reconciliation. In other
words, the tools that govern race relations and address racism in other non-Indigenous contexts will not, in many cases, fit cleanly with the particular inequities Indigenous nations face. As Peter Kulchyski writes: “Aboriginal rights are not human rights” (2013). Any research methodology or political project that does not hear or listen to Indigenous peoples through this decolonial framework, and which do not suspend the idea that a Western state is needed (á la Hobbes) or has the right to endure on Indigenous lands (á la Locke) is colonial in its optics and doomed to failure. But they do allow us to ask: if liberal reconciliation politics and methodologies do not adequately serve the unique status of sovereign Indigenous peoples, then whom do they serve, and to what end?

While the chapter here ends deeply agnostic on the ability of ethnography and activism to be congruent projects, in the conclusion I consider different pathways forward for both decolonial anthropology and reconciliation. In a word, anthropology possesses both superior analytical tools and commitments to field sites that make it a discipline better-positioned to assist in decolonial activism, more so than any other. Yet given the different time scales and institutional (anti-)commitments of anthropologists and activists, it seems better instead than to assume an activist anthropology, to provide the frameworks and resources necessary for activists to do their own professional work. In that sense, anthropologists and activists can collaborate on projects – but not only to decolonize society writ large, but to decolonize our departments and universities as well. That’s where the solution to the multiple binds above appears: in organizing projects where the ethnographer’s skills are requested, and in the production of scholarship and theory that can help inform and assist activists’ own work. Anthropology can provide platforms and critical tools for transforming the world; and once we clean up our own disciplinary (and
personal) houses (Todd 2018), perhaps then we can assume the mantle of the activist-anthropology. But until then, activism and academic are two prongs of the same decolonial effort; each contingent on their own contexts, they require distinct approaches and methods that will actualize decoloniality not only at sites of political contest, but within our profession and thus within the white-settler academic self, as well.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Foundations: Race, Nature, and the Transformation and Racialization of Space

The compulsion to perform the colonial fantasy [of racial miscegination] suggests that the settler’s crisis of identity is an ongoing one, born of a psychic and material need to emplace himself. Where the land is stolen, when entitlement to it must be performed over and over again in anxious repression of those indigenous to it, emplacement is the most urgent of tasks. (Razack 2000, 266.)

Race becomes activated in the context of the threat of social space having to be shared with the colonized… In the case of Indigenous people, it was a consequence of their physical containment within white society. (Wolfe 2002, 59)

Fig. 3.1. An industry sign erected on the edge of the oil patch, where farmland transitions into a forest crisscrossed with oil infrastructures. Photo by author.

Introduction

After a heavy prairie thunderstorm, water began pouring into my bedroom through the light fixture in the ceiling. Within a few days, a construction crew was outside our apartment building, finally replacing a long-neglected roof. A worker stood on the sidewalk, watching a man haul construction materials up a pulley on the scaffold. Stepping out of my truck next to him, we struck up conversation, and inevitably he asked if I was in Peace River working
in oil and gas. No, I replied, I’m a researcher, a “student anthropologist studying the impacts of oil and gas on social relationships in the region.” The conversation meandered for a while, the worker telling me of his Mennonite roots in the region. He had only recently returned to Canada from Mexico, where his family had emigrated to generations back, and where productive agricultural land was now scarce. He drew a comparison between his family, that had “worked the land” for generations, and the First Nations up the road, while he pointed in the air in the general direction of Cadotte: “Well, some of them have a bad attitude, like they got a chip on their shoulder. I guess they’re angry because what Europeans did to them, but they had to do it because they [First Nations] weren’t making anything of themselves. Like when they [Europeans] came here and start building roads. They were using the land. It’s too bad what they did to the Natives, but they still don’t work, they’re doing drugs, getting drunk -- all addicts. They just want more handouts from government.” He carried on with a litany of stereotypes, the same I had heard repeated time and again, in media and in passing conversations with strangers and hosts during my 19 months in Canada.

White interlocutors frequently pointed to visible conditions of poverty within reserve space, comparing that poverty to the “productive” settler spaces of non-Native Canada. It is a tactic deployed as part of a settler-colonial national discourse on white-Indigenous relations, as if to say: look what Indigenous peoples have not done with themselves; now look at Vancouver, or Toronto, or Peace River Country. Clearly, the argument suggests, settler governance and economic development is a superior form of social organization; who would want to return to the nasty, short, brutish condition of Indigeneity, as observed on reserves? These settler voices closely echo old colonial
ideologies of place and race, and void Indigenous life of politics and history, of treaty or of coloniality. They lead to state efforts to impose neoliberal regimes of “fiscal responsibility” onto formal reserve governance – the very mode of governance introduced through the Indian Act, and widely regarded by Indigenous critics as illegitimate and colonial (Alfred 2009, 134-7; Palmater 2014; Pasternak 2016).

Another vignette: at a party of academics one November evening in Edmonton, a middle-aged white research assistant and I began to chat. Learning that I was from the U.S., he told me that he thought that the racism and police brutality recently exposed through Black Lives Matters uprisings in the states were morally reprehensible, but also “sad.” A soft-spoken man with glasses and curly hair, he performed a version of the liberal Canadian subject that readily condemned racial inequity and violence in my own country. “It’s horrible,” I agreed, “But I’ve seen that in Canada there are serious divisions between white and First Nations people, too” – a scripted response I had developed, given how often I encountered this very same conversation.

“There are, I guess,” he said. “But I don’t really meet or interact with many First Nations people.” I said it seemed like that wasn’t unusual, that a lot of Albertans I had met had only limited interactions with the Indigenous people living throughout the province. “It’s weird,” he said after a moment of reflection. “I’m uncomfortable even looking Native people in the eye. The other day I passed a Native guy on the sidewalk, and I caught myself just instinctively glancing down at the ground, to avoid making eye contact.” Whether it

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13 For several examples of colonial officials’ denial of Indigenous land tenure on the basis of its agricultural “idleness,” see Daly 2005, 238-9.
14 One Woodland Cree interlocutor said to me, in half jest and in the company of the council chief elected per the Indian Act: “The [Act] chief isn’t traditional [to the Woodland Cree]; that comes from the plains. Frank and Sullivan and Irene, they’re my leaders.”
was a liberal settler guilt that compelled this response, or the kinds of habituated racisms of bodily comportment mentioned in the introduction, what was clear was this: despite his recognition of the problem, the idea of sharing space with that Native man, whoever he was and whatever he was doing – in this case, merely carrying himself down a city block – was affectively and physically unbearable for this white-settler. However fleeting the moment may have been, the “threat” of sharing a space for only a few moments was enough to force him to turn away.

Consider one final bit of evidence to open up our discussion of space and race in the Peace Country, and that spatialization’s tie into structural violence – into settler coloniality. During an interview with one Indigenous Elder in a small office in the Sagitawa Friendship Centre, he stated:

I don’t put the boundaries up… [But] There is a gap [between Native and non-Native peoples], and I was thinking of this on the way in yesterday. I travelled, and on my travels into town I come across some buffalo that were fenced up. And I thought, “holy wow. At one time they roamed free, like we did at one time. And now they’re fenced in and they’re here for a profit, and that’s it.” And then I got thinking about us as Native people. We are very fenced-in and really not free. But the general public doesn’t really see or understand that, and if I was to talk yesterday, I would’ve used the words – and I thought of this – I would have used the words: “My spirit is at war with non-Aboriginals, but not the community. It’s at war with the government.” Because the government keeps many things quiet or avoids – Idle No More, Sisters in Spirit walk – many things they ignore, yet they’re so obligated to Aboriginal people because of the Treaties. Yet today’s world does not understand the Treaties and how they are ongoing… I hear a lot, “Native people dwell so much on the past.” Unfortunately, the past of Native people is the future of Canada’s people, the newcomers and the Aboriginal people. Because unfortunately now we are like those buffalo. We are in a fence. The government still says what we can and can’t do. We are many living in Third World conditions. If we don’t behave, then funding is threatened to be cut off or cut back. So it’s a lot of us, the ones, the First People, have to really tiptoe on what we say and what we do. Otherwise, we pay a big price – like we paid the big price in the Residential School. We said our language, we were punished. We sang our songs, we were punished. We did anything traditional ways, we were punished. And that’s the same set up today with the government. We do the wrong direction of trying to improve ourselves, we’re punished by the government as a reserve or Aboriginal community. But the non-Aboriginal
people don’t see that. There’s a lot of segregation, but it’s not out there [in public consciousness].

**Overview: Space as an Enabling Condition**

Each of the three pieces of evidence provide examples of how white-settlers produce space (ideationally and through embodied practices), and one Indigenous Elder’s understanding of his place within the space of the nation-state, tied to race, structural violence and the demarcation of lands. As white-settlers construct demarcated spaces – Indigenous and white-settler – they create one of the enabling conditions through which settlers come to understand themselves and the Indigenous Other. Space is both ideational and physical here: white-settlers have personal ideas about space, about its proper (“productive”) use, and about sharing space. But space is also enforced through laws, treaties, and the policing of borders, and at a micro-level through minute bodily actions that signal welcome-ness or unwelcome-ness in a given space. I focus on the processes through which space, occupied by Indigenous peoples prior to large-scale settler migrations into the Peace River Country, was racialized as “white” (or colonial) space and then made to be so. These processes secure space for white settlers to emplace themselves upon a landscape and establish enduring access to land and its resources. They appear through legal frameworks that make a space settle-able. White-settler subjects are also agents who, through the spatialization and consequent dispossession of Indigenous lands, extend Western sovereignty over a landscape. To do so, and in so doing, settlers racialize the bodies ordered into spaces, both themselves and the Other. Thus, this chapter is about settlement and the (re-) production of white-settler and Indigenous space, structuring daily life and the settler subject’s imaginary: ideas of themselves, Indigeneity, and the places they live. Ethnographically, I consider seriously the disparity between narratives of space and place that Indigenous participants
provided to me, against what non-Indigenous Canadian participants did within those same spaces. This “gap” reveals that settler space is demarcated not only by legal, economic, and infrastructural techniques, but likewise through racializing habits of perception, bodily movement, and avoidance – that is, the very things that enable and are “turning away.” Ultimately, as an enabling condition these colonial processes allow white-settlers to see the landscape, themselves, and Others in ways that reproduce settler coloniality.

My sympathies here lie with Indigenous participants who were able to quickly enumerate their discomfort entering white space – including much of the town of Peace Rive – against white Canadians who routinely denied racism was a problem in multicultural Canada. But the problem of racialized space is not only that Indigenous peoples in Canada may feel threatened entering white space, and that white Canadians feel uncomfortable entering Native spaces. It is that within these spaces, “life-making” state services, including health and educational opportunities, are more easily accessed in settler space and denied to Indigenous space, like the reserve community. Thus, we must keep in mind that racialized spaces are a structural problem that “fence in” human bodies (and possibilities), and work to keep Indigenous nations in a state of material deprivation, denied the equal opportunity to overcome or change the structure of settler coloniality afforded to settler counterparts (Alfred 2009).

A Theoretical Review of Space, Place, and the Body

A large body of literature notes that “the politics of nature [and thus space] are always tethered to those of gender, class, race or ethnic identity and by extension, social power” (Baldwin et al 2009, 428; see also Moore et al 2003). Thus, to consider northern Alberta as a unique space, amenable to settlement and development, we have to consider how a
space and place come to be made both historically and in quotidian spatial practice (Lefebvre 1991) that demarcates and designates some spaces as white-settler. Given whiteness’ operation as an invisible and ordering “master signifier” (Buck 2012; Erickson 2011, 20-1; Hudson 2013, 264-5; Nakayama and Krizek 1995), those spaces and the people within them that deviate from the normative expectations of white spaces are, in the words of an interlocutor, “punished.” Settler society is, at its root, coterminous with white space; the two categories of subjectification are inseparable in a North American context, and so below I demonstrate that the making of settle-able space is the same as making a racialized white settler subject on the Canadian landscape, and by extension, settler subject, state, and civil society.

First, let’s lay out the landscape. Canada is an incomprehensibly large country, yet sparsely populated. As several interlocutors amusedly reported to me, the U.S. Netflix subscription audience is larger than the entire population of Canada; at other times, they noted that California has a larger population than Canada. On Canada’s 33.7 million square miles, most of Canada’s 36.29 million citizens live within 100 miles of the U.S. border – some of the warmest and most agriculturally-productive land in the country – and over seventy percent live in urban spaces. Canada averages 3 residents per each square mile, compared to 84 per square mile in the U.S., and 142 in mainland China.

North of the border region, there may be dozens or hundreds of kilometers between individual settlements, lending the landscape a feeling of *emptiness* that increases the further north one travels – until one reaches a resource center, bustling with the to-and-fro of trucks, workers, and machinery. Within Alberta, a traveler to the Peace Country first journeys across a familiar prairie landscape, fields of yellow canola and green wheat rolling
ever on. When one turns onto the northbound highway outside of the capital city of Edmonton, this agricultural landscape gives way to a boreal one. In healthy places, the forest is a mix of black spruce and trembling aspen, their trunks snow-white and bristling with green at their tops. Those forested spaces occasionally open up to wetlands and muskeg, where beavers construct their homes, and moose come down from the bush to drink at dusk, when the silhouettes of poplar are black against a violet sky. The road sometimes crosses or follows alongside railroad tracks, and sometimes passes underneath massive train trestles. After three hours, the traveler encounters Fox Creek (pop. 1,971), home to several gas stations and a dozen hotels, which advertise monthly rates for transient oil and forestry workers. Lines of tanker trucks park outside. After only a few minutes, the open town spaces closes up again, giving way to more thick stands of spruce. On it goes, for five hours. You’ve passed through Little Smoky – not much more than a single convenience store and gas station – and White Court, a larger pulp mill town on the Athabasca River. But at Valleyview, the forested landscape opens again to an agricultural one, marking the beginning of the Peace Country. From here, it feels like home: only one and a half hours to go to reach the river valley.

But it is a mistake to refer to this land as empty, and such claims, while supporting an idea of Canadian nationhood intractably linked to the wilderness concept (Baldwin 2009), are ontologically Eurocentric. Where the landscape is healthy, it teems with flora and animals in relationship with one another: songbirds and waterfowl, lumbering moose and industrious beavers, and the buzzing of so many mosquitos and blackflies. It’s a landscape filled with medicinal plants, trees, and mosses; brimming over with once-drinkable freshwater and berries and edible roots. Emptiness suggests terra nullius – a
space free of human people, in need of development and the infrastructures that settlers believe make a place modern and thus habitable, and in turn “productive” (Larkin 2013). In other words, the spatial ideology of Canada’s “emptiness” is likewise a racial ideology – a discussion to which I return below, after setting out some theoretical foundations.

Regardless of whether an observer sees the space of this land as full or empty is secondary to the question of how to bring it under the aegis of the settler state, and then develop the technologies of governmentality that make such a sparsely-populated place manageable. Indeed, Canadian scholar of communications Marshall McLuhan suggested that the making of the modern Canadian nation-state was achieved only through broadcast technologies, such as radio, that provide a common medium through which distant Canadian settler-subjects could imagine themselves as part of a coherent Canadian polity – important political, linguistic, and cultural differences notwithstanding (McLuhan 1964; compare with Anderson 1983; Berland 2009, 24, 91-2). Yet Canada’s spatial production and the social relations that constitute it were historically achieved not only through communication technologies but through much earlier colonial spatial practices – namely, the mapping and gridding of land. The grid, discussed below is itself an ideology of space, and producer of “the frontier”: the racial and economic zone through which settler nations, and thus settler subjects, are formed in North America. Thus, mapping practices are not only about the legibility of a landscape (Winichakul 1994, 52-5) but likewise about the racialization of space, whiteness, and Indigeneity – the stuff which sustains it and reproduces its power and the settler coloniality inherent to it. But to arrive at this discussion, we have to first ask: what is space? In what ways is space racialized, and race spatialized? And locally, what is specific about the spatialization of race in the northern Peace Country?
But Why Space?

Ethnographically, it was clear that racial difference in Peace River was produced through phenomenological and discursive interpretations and use of distinct spaces. From the oil lease maps provided in the town’s hospitality packet provided to newcomers; to the social, economic and political “gap” that exists between the town and the Indigenous communities bordering Cadotte Lake; and to the Indigenous spaces within the Peace Country – described to me by white-settler interlocutors as undesirable, and by Indigenous interlocutors as the only non-alienating spaces within the town – space informed all. Although my research project did not set out to examine racialized spatialization, by the end of fieldwork it was clear that spatial theory was critical to understand the landscape and social relations of northwest Alberta.¹⁵

Returning to Casey, we once again think through the construction worker vignette: in our embodied encounter and with a tacit Lockean logic, he infused the landscape with colonial value and thought. Through that technique, he was able to racialize both himself (as productive; see below) and the Indigenous communities of Cadotte (as slothful, pathological). And in so doing, he justified his, and white-settlers’ justified emplacement on the landscape of the Peace Country. Indeed, his visual perception of “Indigenous space” allowed him to understand his belonging to the place of the Peace Country. But what is

¹⁵ More broadly, spatialization is critical to the formation of settler polities and the settler-subjects who inhabit and reproduce them, racing settlers as essentially white. As Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson argues, empire works to deploy technologies of rule that enable settler access to both “space and resources,” then to “define and know the difference that constructed in those spaces, and then to govern those within it” (2015, 95). Those technologies, she continues, included categorization, ethnological comparison, linguistic translation, and ethnography. Thus, colonial access to space was first and foremost a project of control and extraction, both requiring the removal of Indigenous peoples and the transformation of both natural and social environments (Coulthard 2014; Cronon 1988) that fueled the economic engines of European empire. Yet prior to this management of peoples was the need to make a space knowable, or legible, primarily through the discursive and representational techniques of surveying and gridding that made “the frontier” conceivable, and which Nicholas Blomley argues is an inherent “geography of violence” (2003, 121).
racialization, and in what ways can the intersection of critical race and spatial theories help us better understand the ongoing reproduction of coloniality in places like the Peace Country?

The Racialization of Space and its Phenomenological Reproduction via Perception

Racialization is the process whereby racial difference – itself a temporally, geographically, and culturally moving target – is assigned to bodies and social formations. Patrick Wolfe puts a finer point on it. “Race,” he writes, “is but one instance of the much larger phenomenon of intra-human differentiating practice… naturalized and eternalized in Western culture… [reconciling] the great taxonomies of natural science with the political rhetoric of the rights of man” foundational to liberal democracy in the U.S. and Canada (2002, 52-53). Racialization, on the other hand, is the “activation of [the race] concept in the production of racial subjects… Racialization is an exercise of power in its own right, as opposed to a commentary that enables or facilitates a prior exercise of power” (ibid. 58). That is, racialization, much like the mythos of the frontier, justifies the exercise of colonial power, whereas the concept of race and its ordering effects facilitates it.

Scholars frequently locate processes of racialization in the colonial technologies of state-making, quite often through examination of the law (Blomley 2003; Razack 2002) or in the writing of histories (see chapter 3). While the law is certainly operative in all domains of colonial life, it is far more difficult to apprehend “the law” in quotidian life. Law demarcates spatial boundaries and the proper uses of those spaces, which is readily observable – e.g., the arrival of police when “too many” First Nations men congregate in a public space, as I observed in Edmonton’s Churchill Square in 2011. These interactions attest to the intersections of space, race, and law. The efforts of some townspeople to enact
bylaws in the Town of Peace River that effectively prohibited youth or street persons from congregating in groups larger than three in public parks or panhandling (both groups typically were majority, though not exclusively, Indigenous), as occurred at a town council meeting in 2015, likewise reflect these intersections. These moments reflect both the micro- and macro-processes that make and remake racialized space; but at its core, space is produced phenomenologically, as is race. The meaning-making of race and racialized space are, in other words, contingent upon both macro-scale innovations and policies, as well as everyday practice (Gieseking et al 2014, 285).

As noted in the introduction, no better treatment of the phenomenology of race in daily practice exists beyond philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff’s piece, “The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment” (2006). She argues that race is an ordering technique, as much a social process as it is a spatial one – the two, as always, inextricably co-productive. “Classification of human beings by race,” she notes, “had a strong conceptual relationship with mapmaking, in which the expanding geographical areas of the globe ‘discovered’ by Europeans were given order and intelligibility in part through their association with racial types” (179). Just like space, she says, race is contextual. That is, it is “socially constructed, historically malleable, culturally contextual, and reproduced through learned perceptual practices” (Alcoff 182). From Lefebvre, we know that one of the methods through which space is produced is that of spatial practice, the “close association… between daily reality (daily routine) and urban reality (the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, ‘private’ life and leisure)” (1991, 38). Spatial practice, he writes, is empirically observable – thus opening up its direct apprehension through ethnographic methods.
We know also that the ordering of space is in part the ordering of bodies – of determining who belongs where, which users of space are desirable or [unwelcome]. Interviews and observations recounted throughout this dissertation show that within the Town of Peace River, Indigenous persons felt unwelcome in particular spaces, perhaps not through explicit statements made directly to interlocutors (although interlocutors could point to those as well), but through the subtleties of body language and gaze – even through actions as minute as the downward glance, as the opening vignette for this chapter demonstrates. Again and again, the body appears and reappears in the production not only of race, but of racialized space; and thus, Alcoff can argue that “racial classification does operate on the basis of perceptual difference… [where, following Merleau-Ponty], perception represents sedimented contextual knowledges” about race (184-85). That is, the racialization of bodies, and by extension, of space, is inherently perceptual, found in the locus of the sensorium (Howes 2005); “the source of racialization,” says Alcoff, “is [found partially] in the microprocesses of subjective existence” (ibid). Much like Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus, perception is a form of practice, the repetition of which organizes perception into habitual modes of being-in-the-world (188). Settler moments of glancing away from Indigenous persons, or of feeling discomfort during moments of encounter in shared spaces, are habitual responses, learned over time through processes of enculturation; racialization itself is a habituation as settler subjects use their bodies in particular ways that not only reflect prior knowledges of race – typically stereotyped – but are (re)productive of race and racialized space itself. As Lefebvre likewise notes, “the relationship to space of a ‘subject’ who is a member of a group or society implies his relationship to his own body and vice versa. Considered overall, social practice,” of which racialization is a form,
“presupposes the use of the body: the use of the hands, members and sensory organs, and the gestures of work as of activity unrelated to work. This is the realm of the perceived” (1991, 40). Thus, as much as space and race are both products and productive of the social, so too is the body and its movements. Perception, argues Edward Casey, remains as constitutive as it is constituted… by cultural and social structures that sediment themselves into the deepest level of perception” (18).

Perhaps these “deepest levels” are even beyond cognitive awareness, the very stuff comprising unconscious biases and a foundation for unintentional microaggressions (Huber and Solorzano 2015). It would come as no surprise, then, that the very white-settler persons reproducing racialized spaces and hierarchy would lack awareness themselves of how they use their bodies in ways that make Indigenous persons feel unwelcome or threatened, and the same can surely be said of spaces that make women, trans* persons, persons of marginalized sexual identities, and non-Indigenous persons of color feel threat or discomfort in shared spaces that feel perfectly comfortable to the structurally-dominant, entirely unaware that their homes, businesses, governmental offices, locker rooms, or parks feel out-of-place to those unlike them.

Lack of awareness of habituated perception, both bodily and in thought, can have significant detrimental material consequences. Social psychologists note that even controlling for socioeconomic factors that define racialized space, the “mere presence of people [that is, bodies] from a particular racial group can automatically activate relevant space-focused racial stereotypes.” The dynamic becomes operative across a range of social circumstances: police officers are more likely to use force on persons when in spaces, such as the neighborhood, that is perceived as “dangerous.” Likewise, whites are less likely to
oppose the construction of environmentally-damaging industry (chemical plants, for example) when the proposed space of construction is racialized as non-white. In all, the rendering of a space as non-white leads whites to perceive those spaces as more dangerous, chaotic, “disorderly,” or of some lower-quality than normative white space, even when empirical data demonstrates that it is not so (Bonam et al 2017, 7-8). While the absence of explicit racial animus might suggest that socio-spatial conditions are beneficial to non-white persons and communities of color, both the ethnography within this dissertation and the studies enumerated in this section suggest otherwise.

Thus, embodied perception creates both space and race, meaning that only through the sensory orientation of the living body in the world around it is a place come to be known. This phenomenological insight does not mean, however, the body is only a receiving subject; rather, it is passive-active, both establishing a sense of place in the world at the same moment it receives sensory input from that place around it. This notion may provide us with an understanding of the “turning away” – in effect, it produces the world as settlers wish to perceive it. That is, if a space is made and known through the body, and as a place is already rendered space where users of that space can be coded through social, political, and historical relations that render certain bodies as legitimate or illegitimate to a space, then it follows that the settler body must discard from its perception that which disrupts the sense of place that a spatial understanding of a place requires. Space is produced in

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16 See discussion on environmental justice, chapter 5.
17 Theoretically, space and race overlap in additional ways than those enumerated above. Neely and Samura (2011) propose a conceptual model for mapping these overlaps, finding commonalities across four key thematic areas. Both race and space, they contend, are 1. Contested, involving political struggle for their meanings; 2. Fluid and historical; 3. Relational and interactional; 4. Marked by regimes of difference and inequality (1934-42). More concretely, they locate these areas in literature that examine ethno-geographically-apprehendable concerns such as “segregation, (dis)placement, spatial contestations and place attachments” (1935).
and through social relations, while being productive of them; but place is how a locale is known and lived. How a space is known – and thus phenomenologically experienced – is achieved through the enabling condition of settler-colonial space, but in turn the use and experience of space produces that space. This is a co-constructed feedback loop, the operations of which appear to the white-settler subject as “common sense,” until political contestation over a space’s use – say, during the opposition of a pipeline movement or a protest march – disrupts the quotidian operation, making visible what is otherwise invisible to the white-settler.

**“Redneck”: Marking the Unmarked-ness of White Space in the Peace Country**

Spectacular political contestations over the correct use of space arise wherever settler development appears. What are the treaty obligations of any corporation or government proposing development? How should the lands under which exist bitumen deposits be used? What forms of regulation should exist, and how extensive should they be? Is there adequate environmental monitoring? Where should there be spatialized development buffers, and who shall be entitled to them?  

Contestations over land use – proper utilization of space – are a huge part of the anthropological literature (for mining more specifically, see Ballard and Banks 2003), and ethnographic studies of these conflicts, Neely and Samura note, range from studies of park space in Nova Scotia to the development of national parks and forests globally. They also occur over education, and public housing, where race becomes and operative and critically salient dimension (1942-43).

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18 For the Fort Mackay First Nation’s political struggle over this very question, see Cryderman 2013; Wohlberg 2013.
19 For a list of citations that cover the profusion of geographical literature concerning race and space from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, see Neely and Samura 2011, 1943-45.
However, few white-settlers thought of tar sands development in the region as contested, tucking Indigenous struggle – including the Lubicon’s – out of sight and mind, at least in white-settlers’ conversations with myself. In quotidian life, the racialized production of space in the Peace Country is invisible. Instead, as I experienced it, residents of the town of Peace River, and many of those residing in the Peace Country regardless of racial background professed a deep and profound love for the Peace Country, and the “northern life” that came with it. Likewise, I have witnessed strong attachments to the place of Alberta on behalf of its long-term residents. These residents are keenly aware of outside criticisms of tar sands development and to a lesser extent the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Alberta yet choose to elide these criticisms or became defensive about them. After all, attachment to place informs the sense of self, or subjectivity (Nelson 70), and thus perceived attacks on the place of Alberta, or the Peace Country, is itself an attack on the subjectivity and identity of settler Albertans, their identities produced through the geopolitical space of “the province.”

Yet unknowingly, those interlocutors were in effect reproducing settler-whiteness and the environmental and spatial practices that drew me to the province to perform a critical ethnography in the first place. Additionally, this accounts for why, even when neighbors documented environmental pollution and international NGOs like Amnesty International documented endemic conditions of poverty in some reserve communities around Cadotte (2010), settler persons living in the town denied that contamination’s existence, and attributed Indigenous poverty to stereotyped moral and cultural deficiencies of the people themselves – a “culture of poverty” discourse – rather

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20 This accounts both for the reluctance, described in chapter 2, of many interlocutors to directly speak with me environmental degradation, or social and environmental injustice in the region (that is, the uses of land and the ordering of Indigenous settlers into structurally-delineated spaces), choosing instead to promote what they felt was the very best of the province.
than to the coloniality of power that marginalizes Indigenous peoples, and made a
manipulatable white space for their pioneering ancestors, of whom Peace Country settlers
are quite proud and whose artifacts are displayed permanently in the town’s museum. They
can do so because for the settler their spaces are racially un-marked, and in producing
unmarked white space are in turn able to focus on attachment to land and place (Hughes
2005) rather than international political critique of tar sands development.

Whiteness, normatively emptied of status as a racial signifier – steadfastly un-raced
but productive in the way it orders all non-white bodies (Hoops 2014, 193; Seshadri-
Crooks 2000, 3-4) – is likewise spatialized. Though unmarked, it is undeniable that for
many Indigenous persons and people of color, white space exists and is often inhospitable
or even dangerous for non-white persons to enter, even in passing. Space, as noted above,
is not only racialized but also gendered, classed, and heterosexualized (Oswin 2008).
However, in order to reveal the specific operations of whiteness in the Peace Country tar
sands, here I focus specifically on the production of a normative white space. Looking at
the region as a whole, both spatial and discursive practice see the crossing-over of racial
boundaries as people go about their daily business or describe their town and region – but
doing so in ways which entrench and ensure power dynamics that benefit white settlers
disproportionately in comparison to Indigenous interlocutors.

Sitting with a circle of Cree elders describing another town south of Peace River in
2015, we almost immediately got down to the topic of race. Black Lives Matter protests
had only recently erupted in Ferguson and Baltimore, and these elders asked for my opinion
on race relations in the U.S. White interlocutors were quick to distance themselves from
acknowledgement of racism in Canada – “we don’t have the same problems [i.e. black-
white antagonism] here that you have in the states,” numerous interlocutors insisted; “Canada is a multicultural country.” Evidence of this multiculturalism was easy to find in Peace River, they said. One only had to look at the community events calendar, which had featured in the past cultural dance troupes from West Africa, official celebrations of particular identity groups, and had non-white businesses in town, like the Filipino variety store or on a greater scale, the Japanese-owned and managed paper pulp mill. The space of the town was integrated and diverse, they said, “progressive” in its attitudes about race and ethnicity even more so than neighboring communities. But of the town the elders were describing? “Oh yeah, that’s a white town.” Even more damning: “It’s a redneck town!” And of Peace River? “It’s not as bad… but it’s still a redneck town.” They were both spaces that these Elders, most of whom lived on reserve, preferred to avoid, only hesitantly entering these economic hubs when required.

Although both Canadian and American readers may regard the signifier “redneck” as a term specific to a white Southern rural subjectivity, denoting both race and class formations specific to the system of chattel slavery that defined the Southern economy for 200 years, the term is widely used throughout Canada – and not only in the western, or prairie provinces, where east-west cultural, political, and economic tensions reflect North-South divisions in the eastern U.S. (Gibbons 1980).21 My point here is to demonstrate the very explicit marked-ness of whiteness to Indigenous interlocutors. As a signifier, “Redneck” explicitly racializes the settler. For the settler, it may be an unsettling term to

21 One very awkward white-settler man in my building, who appeared to be in his 50s, proudly hung a Confederate flag in his window as a curtain; trucks throughout Alberta likewise display the Confederate flag and other “rebels” iconography. To co-tenant of my building noted my Virginia license plates early on; he frequently pulled me aside in the parking lot behind the building to share stories of ancient alien giants who once roamed the American South.
hear pejoratively applied to them. Or, it may be a term for the production of rural identity and pride that “rejects but also aligns with liberal multiculturalism and its national investments in whiteness” (O’Connell 2010, 537). As Anne O’Connell argues, in its affirmative mode, redneck evokes a “frontier narrative about white settlers [that] is upheld by homogenous rural spaces that are apparently devoid of racialized bodies.” In turn, its discourse “foregrounds whiteness in ways that liberal institutions pretend does not exist, by rejecting the restraints of political correctness installed by [urbane] liberal multiculturalism” (556). In this sense, it brings to light a potential discrepancy between what Canadian state institutions (the museum, the town celebration) promote as racial discourse, against what non-state affiliated Canadians do and say. Given the pejorative tenor of the word redneck by interlocutors above, the word suggests that what white-settler social workers and government officials described to me as the town’s “tolerant,” “multicultural” character was not the experience many Indigenous interlocutors had when they were within the town’s space.

Settler Innocence: Working to Make the Great White North Pure through Attachment to Landscape

Although a perennial feature of whiteness is its desire to produce its own obscurity – denying its existence, racializing Others but never the settler self, its twin desire is to be seen as good. The same is true, by extension, of white space – voided of its racialization through discursive and spatial strategies enumerated below that deflect a real examination of whiteness, whether its historical production, or its contemporaneous spatial expressions.

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23 As one commenter on twitter stated to Métis scholar Zoe Todd, “settler is a racist word,” insofar as it works to mark the racial difference of white-settlers.
Together, these moves can be summarized as what Indigenous scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, deem “settler moves to innocence,” the turning away of settlers from the very violence they reproduce, and which are meant to make the work of reconciliation simple (2012, 4; see conclusion). Critical of the reduction of decolonial practice to the status of metaphor, they assert that these moves “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity [in the colonial project], and rescue settler futurity” – and, by extension, whiteness’ innocence and futurity (2012, 3).

Settler desire for innocence is in part manifested in both spatial and representational practices, among which are discursive strategies that work to keep whiteness in place through its spatialization (see also Hoops 2014, 196). Tuck and Yang identify a complex of these strategies the work to produce innocence on the part of settler subjects, which “ultimately represent settler fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation.” Each of these tactics represent “strategies or positionings [on behalf of settler subjects] that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all,” which is to say, to produce new modes of in the symbolic representation of settler-Indigenous relations without concomitant structural change – a shift itself commensurate with multicultural discourse and policy (Tuck and Yang 2012, 10; see also Povinelli 2002). Settler moves to innocence ensure also that white people – or any of the dominant classes that effect dominance through their adjacency to whiteness – entrench and maintain racial inequity in economic, political, cultural, and spatial realms. These strategies are likewise reflected in white-settler

These are: the claim of settler nativism; fantasizing adoption by Indigenous nations; colonial equivocation of forms of social injustice; cultivation of political consciousness in lieu of land return; rendering Indigenous peoples as “disappearing”; and re-occupation through urban homesteading.
perceptions and talk about race relations, in which “talk about race is carefully structured to avoid a charge of racism, and identifies strategies of self-denial that allow a speaker to present the ‘Other’ in a negative light, while not damaging one’s own self-presentation” (van Dijk 1992 in Nelson 2014).

More generally though, beyond the decolonial approaches that serve to address inequalities in settler-Indigenous relations more specifically, whiteness characteristically works to disavow itself of responsibility for its production of the structures that permit the existence of racism in the first place. This work not only absolves the settler subject of responsibility, but denies place-based, or spatialized racial inequalities as well (Erickson 19-21). Communications scholar Jacqueline Nelson identifies four discursive strategies for the avowal of settler innocence:

1. Absence discourses, wherein the existence of racism is denied outright.
2. Temporal deflection, wherein racism is relegated to a distant past and denied in the present.
3. Deflections from the mainstream, wherein contained pockets of individualized acts of racism are acknowledged, but denies structural and systemic racisms.
4. Spatial deflection, in which racism is acknowledged but denied in local, regional, or national contexts. (2014, 74)

Each of these denials has both symbolic and material consequences for those against whom racism is targeted – disallowing redress for racism (and coloniality) or rendering instances of interpersonal racist harassment as particular to specific persons or places. Such a perspective forecloses completely the claiming of responsibility for power and socioeconomic inequities that benefit white-settlers. They likewise operate like a set of blinders: by deflection or personalization, patterns of inequality are difficult to observe and consequently, difficult to address on behalf of either the dominant settler society or marginalized. They reduce the disappearance and murders of Indigenous Women to an
issue of “crime,” rather than “sociological phenomenon,” as Prime Minister Harper stated the issue in 2014 (Boutilier 2014). They “exalt” and assure the white-settler of their innocence, surely, but at great and violent cost to Indigenous, migrant, and POC communities and persons as the wheels of power grind on. In even their progressive or multicultural discursive formations, they work to deny the enactment of social enfranchisement, equity, or reconciliation. Ultimately, these discourse promote the language of multicultural “tolerance,” which in so doing demonstrates that a “dominant white culture has an interest in advocating tolerance, as this framing puts white [settlers] in control of national space… for the ability to tolerate is retained by the power, while minority groups are left to hope they will be tolerated” (73).

Nelson also notes a difficulty in anti-racism efforts in addressing localized structural inequalities. That is, studies demonstrate that stronger affective ties to place (e.g. place attachment) lend to stronger defensive measures, what she calls place-defending, over outside critique of a locale, in effect an act of spatial boundary-making that delineates insiders from outsiders. Such affective attachments are potent enough to transform embodied perception: a 1996 study found that those who strongly identified with a local beach designated as heavily polluted by the EU were more likely to deny the existence of beach pollution at local or national scales (2014, 71). So, ties to place – place here emerging in relationship to a spatialized polity (“Alberta”) – deliberately interface with the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism (i.e., settler state ideology) and help form, in part, national identity as well. But Canadian national identity also ties settler subjects to racialized perceptions of the Canadian landscape. These perceptions of nature and self produce agentive white bodies able to move freely through “wilderness” space, or physical space
more broadly – in effect also laying claim to it. If colonial space is universal space, as argued above, rather than relational or agentive, then white-settler representations of the nature-loving Canadian subject also work to justify and emplace settlers on the land.

*Canadian Race and Canadian Nature*

Canadian renderings and apprehensions of nature likewise serve to inscribe settler “goodness;” indeed, nature works as a foundation of white ontology; it is a “purification machine, a place where people ‘become white’” (Braun 2003, 197). As noted above, processes of space- and place-making require an eye turned towards the environment, built or natural. Settler Canadians are indeed thoroughly attuned to natural processes; every day in Peace River involved conversations about the weather, the conditions of the river, or the frequent landslides of valley hills that shifted foundations and collapsed roadways. “Canadians,” writes communications theorist Jody Berland, “are obsessed with the weather. We talk about it endlessly” (2009, 237). The weather – nature – is the “force against which settlers continually struggle. While in American literature these frontier struggles are eventually resolved through conquest, in Canadian literature the battle with nature is ongoing, domination is partial and transitory, and the struggle for survival is never-ending” (Furniss 1997, 27). Just as settler coloniality, subjectivity, and space must be constantly reproduced, “weather” becomes a site for daily engagement/struggle with the natural environment, and thus a site for the reproduction of settler emplacement. The idea that white-settlers form attachment to a natural landscape, and thus justifiably emplace themselves upon through a struggle is not a phenomenon limited to Canada alone. David Hughes notes the same process through agricultural land “improvement” schemes in colonial Rhodesia. “In large part,” he writes, “southern African whites [felt confident that
they belonged to the land] by idealizing, celebrating, and generally obsessing about the territory itself… If European-descended farmers could only master African land, they presumed, then all else would fall into place” (2005, 74).

But more specifically, in the space of Canada and in its citizen-subject formation a strong identification with wilderness or nature appreciation largely undergirds Canadian identity – an image of the Canadian that has been produced and proliferated globally, perhaps originating in iconic imagery of former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau paddling a canoe. Indeed, as media studies and race scholars in Canada note widely, one popular adage that a Canadian is “someone who knows how to make love in a Canoe” has moved through national advertising campaigns as well as in interviews with writer Margaret Atwood (Razack 2002, 4; Thobani 2007, 60). It is also perhaps this image of the nature-loving Canadian that sparked tremendous surprise among American and European audiences during the presentation of my own research on the extensive environmental impacts of tar sands production to non-Canadian scholars and non-scholars alike. Likewise, this ethos likely informs Albertan perceptions of tar sands development, which proponents uniformly assert has no long-term environmental impacts or is too heavily regulated and monitored, owing to the primacy Canadian governments place on environmental protection. How can the tar sands be environmentally destructive in a country that has no environmental destruction? How can they hurt Indigenous or farming communities in a democracy that values human rights and multiculturalism? At the very root of self-perception and the perception of space in the tar sands, beneficiaries of tar sands development – meaning

25 One interlocutor who lived in Fort McMurray described a conversation she had with an oil worker. Pointing to the boreal forest alongside the road, he told her, “look, they really overstate the damage we’re doing to the environment. There’s forest right over there. It’s everywhere.”
Albertans writ large – defer these criticisms away through a narrative of outsider interference, whether from the perennial straw man of “Green Peace,” or to eastern and Vancouver urban elitism, or to Indigenous persons who “want us all to live in the past/the stone age” – a discourse that indexes “the primitive” against the “modernity” oil production allows – the voices of Indigenous community leaders pursuing equitable development themselves notwithstanding (see chapter 3).

Each of these tropes are racialized, part of the representational practice of space-making in Alberta’s north that privilege settler persons and communities. To wit, these images nearly exclusively feature white-settler Canadians, the free-moving figure whose un-markedness provides them the privilege of moving throughout an empty northern wilderness, voided of the meaning and relationality that marks Indigenous engagement with the natural world (Nadasdy 2002, 252; Simpson 2014, 14-5) against that of the settler-colonizer (Braun 2000), or the threat of violence marking POC movement through white space (Hall 2014). The trope also permits advertising for tar sands industries and services to seamlessly move from images of Canadian wilderness – typified by scenes of snowy Rocky Mountains, cascading rivers, rolling prairies, or “boundless” boreal forests – to those of oil production facilities (Cenovus 2011).

“To be white,” writes geographer Andrew Baldwin, “is to filter oneself through what is imagined to be some form of a priori nature in an attempt to achieve some degree of cognitive and physical purity” (2009). Whether through the iconography of Canadian wilderness noted above, or in advertisement for outdoor adventure companies (Braun 2003) or in Canadian environmental education (McLean 2013), non-white bodies are either totally excluded, or violently “disappeared” into wilderness and dehumanized as a mere
feature of the landscape. Nature becomes a site through which not only whiteness and settler subjectivity is made, but the place where features of its goodness and whiteness are distilled into the body in space, and in turn remove “goodness” from non-white bodies. Thus, settler Canadian appreciation of the environment (as a national value and identity) reproduces “whiteness as innocence [as] a national discourse reified by environmental programs which construct wilderness as an essentialized, empty space… discourses that problematically entitle the white-settler society to occupy and claim originary status in Canada, signifying wilderness and the environment as white space” (McLean 2013, 355).

Through this lens, we can better understand conflicts over land use and tenure, of the kind seen in oil sands regions throughout northern Alberta, as racial conflicts (Kosek 2009, 431) that reproduce race, racialized spaces, and in turn settler coloniality.

Non-Relationality, Settler Distancing (Turning Away) and the Reserve

Reducing racialized conflicts to land use conflict effectively displaces colonial history, as well as the relations between settler coloniality and Indigeneity that powers the engine of settler colonialism. While that reduction upholds settler goodness and exaltation it likewise obscures the social violence of settlement. But obscuration and displacement are not an unintended consequence of nature discourse and perception in Canada, but a feature of settler-whiteness. Examining what they refer to as “white socio-spatial epistemology,” geographers Owen J. Dwyer and John Jones suggest that whiteness operates as an epistemology, a “particular way of knowing and valuing social life,” both productive of and produced by social space. Their work identifies two primary and dialectical aspects of this particular epistemology:

the first of these, the social construction of whiteness, relies upon an essentialist and non-relational understanding of identity. Whiteness offers subjects who can claim it an
opportunity to ignore the constitutive processes by which all identities are constructed. In effacing their construction, ‘white’ people can paradoxically hover over social diversity just as they become the yardstick for its measurement. This first moment is then linked to a second framing, a *segmented spatialization* that parallels the non-relational epistemology of white identities. This spatial epistemology relies upon discrete categorizations of space – nation, public/private and neighbourhood – which provide significant discursive resources for the cohesion and maintainence of white identities. It also relies upon the ability to survey and navigate social space from a position of authority.” (2000, 210)

Effectively, they argue, is that whiteness “taps” extensive and adaptive epistemological fields from in order to generate an authoritative and distanced subjectivity. Much like the local deferrals discussed above, space provides not only phenomenological encounters with and orderings of space that secure whiteness in a particular place, but also discursive locations to which rare acknowledgements of race and power inequities can be located. That is, where racism may be a problem “nationally,” or in any place elsewhere, “here” is a rendered a multicultural space absent of the racial antagonisms encountered in other spaces. These tactics not only displace an understanding of white spatialization as a localized process involved in the creation of *place*, but also deny the relationality of white identity construction. Whiteness here, “as an asserted positivity (i.e., I am White)… presents itself as a self-actualized achievement, realized in the absence of an Other” – in the Peace River Country and in settler polities generally, absent of the alterity of Indigeneity against which settler subjectivity emerges (212). Thus, the possibility of settler-whiteness to define itself through nationalized consanguineal kinship, Western or European ‘cultural heritage,’ and through pioneering and other narratives that define settler subjects as those hardy few who domesticated wild, empty lands and the Indigenous (non-) persons who dwelled in and transformed those spaces themselves, prior to colonial encounter, and in the present day.
Boundaries, the Frontier, and the Survey: Making “the Peace Country.”

Fig. 3.2. A 1914 survey of the lands demarcated for settlement near Peace River Crossing. Métis/French allotments are noted along the Peace River, center frame. The square gridding of the English cadastres cover the rest of the map. Note also, in the lower left corner, I.R. (“Indian Reserves”) Nos. 151 and 154, the reserve land for Duncan’s First Nation. (Leonard 2000, 196)

Having established a theoretical foundation for understanding space, place, and human agency above, it is generative to think now of how abstract space – the colonial ideology of space – came to be imposed on the Peace Country. In so doing, colonial cartographers in the 19th century not only demarcated landscapes for the production of cadastres; their activity, their movement through the landscape, produced the Canadian nation-state itself. In that regard, the nation-state is tied explicitly to the land through the imposition of a “vertical territoriality” (Braun 2005), produced relationally, but only in order to determine
and produce the boundaries that reproduce settler coloniality. Boundaries are critical here; they are what make a place legible to the newcomer, but likewise the site of power, control, and coercion. Africana studies scholar Houston Baker notes that

For place to be recognized as PLACE, as personally valued locales, one must set and maintain the boundaries. If one, however, is constituted and maintained by and within the boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place, but a prisoner of another’s desire. Under the displacing impress of authority even what one calls, and perhaps feels is one’s own place is, from the perspective of human agency, placeless.” (1991, 104)

Thus, boundaries and place are tied inextricably to racial violence and racialization – a discussion to which I return below. But for now, let’s consider the Peace River Country. 19th-century surveyors made it not just a space amenable to settlement but a place that can “gather” and “hold together” the region – and contain or cast out those whom settlers refuse to share space with, and to turn away from.

Technologies of universal spatial representation, definitionally Western and by extension colonial, work to measure and establish the settle-able spaces. In turn they then permit settler subjects to transform “their” environment, making both white-settler places and localized spaces. In Northern Alberta, Treaty 8 is the vehicle through which settler space has been juridically and structurally produced and maintained, determining its appropriate uses and the relationships between settler and Indigenous subjects. But while a Treaty map accords with Lefebvre’s model of representational space, material spatial practices were and are required to ensure settler (and industry) access to that space and its resources. The key material processes intrinsic to this process are legion: the construction of Christian missions and experimental agricultural stations; the construction of paddleboats and the portage trails connecting waterways; the extension of road networks and railways – in all, the proliferation of infrastructural technologies which themselves are
not neutral objects set atop neutral space, but laden with power and meaning (Larkin 2013). Yet before even these technologies can proliferate, space must be made legible for its knowing and ordering, and the hallmark spatial practice of making a landscape legible to the colonial project is surveying.

Although it’s by now only legal theory – a Canadian barrister friend couldn’t confirm this for me – all territorial claims of Canada remain in possession of the British Crown. As a domain of the Crown, this meant that while even white settlers have “customary tenure” claims to land they homesteaded, they could never receive title. In other words, to this day, all private ownership in Canada is technically rental from Britain’s monarch. Of course, this arrangement contrasts starkly to traditional land use relationships of First Nations in the north. These patterns of land use required knowing the land and the other living things with which one shared that land in order to have a “territorial” claim to it (Goeman 2009; Simpson 2014). And yet, this form of relating to land preceded the Canadian state – but was entirely illegible to it, especially in the 19th century as mapping techniques developed that, for the colonizer, made the land legible.

Today, “aboriginal title” is a minor field of Canadian law, protected and enshrined in Canada’s 1982 Constitution, and is a form of title that in legal theory grows from the Law of Nations: the act of state doctrine (i.e., every sovereign state is bound to respect the independence of every other sovereign state); the doctrine of continuity (i.e., Crown does not intend to extinguish private property upon acquiring sovereignty over new territory); and the recognition doctrine (i.e., that private property rights are presumed extinguished in the absence of explicit recognition) (Williams 1989, 97-108). In concert, these doctrines are legally codified in legislation, treaties, and the constitution; and in theory should ensure
the inalienable right to “customary tenure” – customary land held by Indigenous communities and administered according to custom (as other scholars note, a high and moving bar that has worked to deny Indigenous land claims as much as uphold them; see Bruyneel 2007; Daly 2005, 285-89). Against aboriginal title in Canada is statutory tenure: the kind of private property ownership system guaranteeing the land ownership rights of the individual citizen-subject, and upon which laws and policies that encouraged western Settlement relied. As geographer Nicholas Blomley puts it, property is “space [that] is marked and divided into places where people are put” (2003, 127). To get at this point, I want to think more about the development and formation of the modern state – diffuse, fragmented, and intersubjective as it is. As Krupa and Nugent argue, the state – the colonial state – in part preserves and projects itself through a state realism, a “model for consciousness and experience grounded in conventions mediating our interactions with the phenomenal world… Realism posits a fully representable world, a world in which transcription acts as a mirror of reality and reality emerges as that which can be mirrored in transcription. State realism is the proposition that the state assumes phenomenological form and can be apprehended as such, [positing] the state as ultimately locatable” (Krupa and Nugent 2015, 9). So in what concrete ways does the Canadian state both represent the world – transcribing it for the purposes of legibility – and assume its phenomenological form? The answer lies in part in the technologies and materiality of surveying which, following Lefebvre’s model, is both a spatial and representational practice.

Surveying plays a part even of national identity. Surveyors often departed national capitals with great fanfare and with the assistance of the military – think here of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Surveying is not merely a value-neutral set of standardized
techniques for the mapping of absolute space. Surveying and surveyed landscapes permit the emergence of the colonial state, and thus uniquely Canadian forms of white-settler subjectivity and coloniality. In this sense, surveying grounds the state, race, and settler coloniality in the physical land through survey markers – the spatializing posts, iron pegs, and stone cairns that establish boundary-reference points.

The history of surveying itself originates as far back as the ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the latter of whom used rudimentary surveying devices – ropes, staffs – to re-establish land boundaries after Nile flooding. Where nature had spilled over and disrupted the agricultural practices of ancient Egypt, surveyors appeared first in order to re-establish order. While modern surveying instruments began to appear in the 16th century, and the first gridded surveyor’s maps appearing in the aftermath of the Great London Fire of 1666, modern surveying emerged concurrently with industrialization and the expansion of the British Empire. The first comprehensive scientific mapping of a national space was the Great Trigonometric Survey of India, a project which took 69 years to complete, from 1802 to 1871. By the mid-nineteenth century, Canadian and British governments were conducting extensive geological surveys, intended to survey “the physical aspect of the country” (Innis 1985). Rendering a space as empty necessitated mapping, and in turn that mapping facilitated western settlement, exploration, and boundary-making. “The reorganizing and reordering of space,” writes Mishua Goeman, “in the forms of the nation-state, reservations, ghettos, barrios, counties, and other geo-political organizing are necessary to the workings of colonialism” (2009, 171). Such spatial practices were not isolated to North America alone, but found expression in the formation of what Winichakul calls “geo-bodies,” territorially-bound nation-states contingent upon immutable and
abutting borders (1994). Indeed, those boundaries are the precondition for Western state sovereignty. Out of surveying grew western Canada’s first formal cadastral maps; the Torrens system, wherein the state keeps and manages official registries of private land ownership; the Numbered Treaty system; and the Dominion Lands Act, which in 1872 provided 160 free acres to settlers willing to “pioneer and tame” a Canadian wilderness.

Yet none of these spatial technologies were possible without the grid and the markers that bind the Euclidian grid to place. Geographer Emily Matson notes that “The geometry of the point – specifically an array of points – [helps us] to understand the infrastructural matrix that undergirds and maintains the projected lines of borders… [providing] insights into [the] material dimension of staking territorial [and spatial] claims for empire” (Matson 2018). Dwyer and Jones identify a set of “three co-ordinates” that produce a segmented White spatial epistemology. The first is *Cartesian perspectivalism*, the delineation of the world in reference to specific points, which they argue is the very “precondition for the assignment of subjects to social space,” an effect of White power. The second they call *ocularcentrism*, or the ability of an “omniscient white (male) subject” to surveil, know, and gaze the world through which he [sic] moves. These two “moments” converge in the “epistemology of the grid, a spatial procedure for segmenting social life such that it can be measured and interrogated” (212).

As other scholars note, the grid itself is inherent to the production of frontier space, and is laden with power and violence at the moment of its inception. And while grids certainly order persons in ways which are inherently violent and coercive in their assignment of persons to those spaces, the same could be said of nature: after all, the lattice work of roads, pipelines, geoseismic survey lines, and mineral leases that are characteristic
of oil patches in the Peace Country and elsewhere are all determined against the lines of this representational space, and is strikingly visible through aerial photography and satellite imagery. The very form the landscape takes here, and the violent contaminations produced through its transformation, are thus the effect and producer of settler-whiteness and its desires to produce and enact power (i.e. settler coloniality).

The points of a national survey grid are literally physical points. They are markers that take the form of posts, monuments, piles of stone. Indeed, in the surveyor’s lexicon they are formally called *monuments* – which in other contexts are *lieux de mémoire*, laden with national meaning, suggesting that as monuments these survey markers have not only an important physicality to them but site *memory* (Nora 1996). In earlier days of surveying, these markers were often wooden states, sunk into a particular point in the ground and then surrounded with a pyramidal cairn of stone. By the late 19th century, wood markers were replaced with iron ones, the materiality of which suggested a permanence – a permanence not only to the marker itself, but of the settler state as well. In effect (and as state effect), these markers anchor or ground the state to territorialized landscapes. They produce a tension between the materiality of the state and the concept of the state, establishing the generative façade that state power is a thing beyond people – that it exists metaphysically, above and beyond agents, citizens, and other subjects of the state. And it is the presumed durability of these markers that suggest the durability of the Canadian settler state. Their durability is not only material, but temporal. Of special interest is a ceremonial marker on the Alberta Legislature grounds; it is the central monument against which all other markers are placed. Considering the centrifugality of centralized settler state power, this marker becomes the point from which settler power (i.e., coloniality) extends outward from the
capitol to every place spatialized as “Albertan.” Additionally, this marker was re-placed in 1967 as a Centennial Marker, lending durability to the state again not only materially, but temporally, too. And because they’re so close to the ground, they’re largely invisible except through their effects: titling, settlement, mining; invisible except on the controls they place on human movement. Yet, these markers are constantly swallowed by the earth itself. They have to be dug-out, replaced, and moved if the soil has moved – which it always does. As such, the durability appears as a way of ensuring state realism (Krupa and Nugent 2015), but must be constantly maintained, re-produced, re-emerging. Survey markers, as arrays of points on the land, thus permit maps that are ordered, gridded, and utterly oblivious to the contours and volition of the landscape itself.

Alternative modes of land’s demarcation exist, however, and conflict arising between distinct modes of demarcation have produced the Canadian nation-state itself. The French seigneurial system of was largely adopted by prairie Métis farmers in the 18th and 19th centuries. These elongated plots of land always abut bodies of water – ensuring equitable access to irrigation. The Red River Colony was one such settlement. Founded and used customarily by Métis farmers, the intrusion of English Canadians in 1869 came by way of survey parties dispatched from Ottawa in an effort to curtail the American purchase of Canadian prairielands from the Hudson’s Bay Company. Conflict led to massacre between settlers who had now statutory claim to the land, against the customary tenure belonging to the Métis community. Out of these conflicts over land title and tenure emerged Louis Riel, who stands as an ambivalent figure in the history of Canada. A leader of several Métis Rebellions, he is regarded as the founder of the province of Manitoba and thus a founding figure of the Canadian nation; and yet his rebellions against English-
Canadian incursions into tradition Métis lands led to his eventual execution at the hands of the Canadian state. The first of these Métis uprisings, the Red River Rebellion, specifically concerned the “French plots” of land along the river, disregarded in the process of Anglo-Canadian grid-making. As Riel himself wrote, English-Canadian surveyors imposed rectangular grids as part of the Dominion Land Survey and communities along the Red River “found their ancient surveys, land marks, boundaries and muniments of title, set at naught and disregarded, and a government established over their heads” (Riel 1985[1870], 111). Such disregard for traditional community land-use practices prompted Riel and other Metis leaders to establish an independent and provisional government for the proposed province of Manitoba. This represented a challenge to the emerging Canadian state whose eyes were trained westward, and in response the Prime Minister sent military forces to Manitoba to suppress the rebellion. Riel and his compatriots fled to the United States, where Riel lived in exile for several years. In time he would return to Canada as an elected member of parliament representing constituents in Red River. Several expulsions from the legislature prompted his return to Manitoba where he would lead the North West Rebellions, resulting in his eventual execution for treason. It is not possible to separate Riel from the founding of the Canadian settler state, both as a figure challenging Canadian state sovereignty and as a founder of the province of Manitoba. Likewise, it is impossible to disentangle Riel’s Rebellions from the Red River and the gridded space imposed upon it. Riel cannot be disentangled from the creation of the Canadian nation-state, and likewise cannot be separated from the Red River as his origin and site of conflict between philosophies of land-use and allocation. How, then, can we separate spatializing practices from the founding of the Canadian nation?
Thus, gridding is not the scientific, value-neutral surveillance technique that one might expect of high modernity, mapping out universal space as a container within which meaning and sociality operates. Yet that perspective reflects an explicitly imperial ideology of space – and thus, white-settler identity, as we’ll return to below. As Canadian historian I.S. MacLaren notes, white surveyor’s and explorers’ accounts and description of the lands they surveyed were embodied, phenomenological perceptions laden with the aesthetic ideology and language of the picturesque and sublime (1985). These are tropes that continue to today: Canada’s prairies, oceans, and arctic as vast, untamed, emptied wilderness, itself part of the racialization of the Canadian nation as white. And as scholars Bruce Braun (2005) and Bonita Lawrence note, this emptiness is not only an aesthetic interpretation of “untamed,” unfamiliar lands, but part of a racializing and national discourse. In particular, Lawrence writes that “Canadian national identity is deeply rooted in the notion of Canada as a vast northern wilderness, the possession of which makes Canadians unique and ‘pure’ of ‘character,’” (2004, 23; see also Thobani 2007, 59, 279) but that these “pure” spaces are also white spaces, relying on the exclusion or ignoring of Indigenous presence in order to secure settler identity and emplacement.

This terra nullis in turn may help us to explain the enduring discursive power of tar sands development. For where critics from outside the province describe those spaces as “Canada’s Mordor” or “an industrial genocide,” within the province there is large public support for the oil and gas sector. This support seems to also be a way of retaining the purity of the white Canadian subject, whose uniquely Canadian relationship to wilderness affirms the goodness of nature, the Canadian nation-state, and its citizen-subjects alike; such an approach may help us understand better why defense of the oil sands is often
couched in a discourse of environmentalism: that “Alberta has the best environmental monitoring system in the world,” even when evidence shows that it is not; “the boreal forest is so vast, the impacts from oil sands development is only a small speck – look at the end of that strip mine: see the forest there?;” OR “oil gives First Nations peoples jobs they wouldn’t otherwise have had.” In this rendering, Canadian subjects and their enterprises, industrial and other, always retain a discourse of benevolence, care, and goodness, even when structural violences and endemic poverty on First Nations reserves is a well-documented fact of Canadian national life (Gilmore 2015). And even beyond this rendering of the land as legible, empty space, and that emptiness’ position in a Canadian political subjectivity, gridding is also a technique of oil exploration (e.g., geoseismic survey lines) and exploitation itself. Is it that surprising that the discourse surrounding tar sands development shares much of the same language as that of the settler-colonial endeavor? Oil geologists must first conduct seismic surveys. They explore for oil; companies are granted leases to operate; the provincial-private museum celebrating northern oil development in Alberta is the Oilsands Discovery Museum.
Space in the town of Peace River is produced as white-settler space through law and subtle modes of settlers’ bodily comportment. As Indigenous and POC interlocutors reported, entering into certain spaces of the town could feel threatening. Glances, comments, and the shifting of white settler bodies away from Indigenous bodies produced a sense of unwelcome-ness that left non-white participants of the town feeling the town was hostile to their presence—settlers turning away from Native and person of color presence, accounting for the “gap” so many interlocutors reported, but also reifying the habitual embodied practices of producing white space. Yet although I contend that the town is a predominantly white settler space, there were spaces and moments of its rupture. The Town

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26 A feeling I can likewise corroborate through my own experience as an observably queer-coded person in the spaces of Peace River, and in my partner’s appearance as a woman of color.
itself was absent any Indigenous presence, and there were known Indigenous spaces contained within its borders. But even within the town, Indigenous space frequently emerged or was, in places of commerce, only reluctantly shared.

At the end of the main street, there is a small indoor mall, with space for no more than twenty businesses, some of which were empty and for lease. White-settlers in large part pathologized the mall, similarly to the reserve, though less intensely so: in my first few weeks in town, I was told to be wary and careful when in or near the mall, outside of the A&W fast food restaurant right at the entrance – it was “sketchy,” a place where drugs were sold and purchased and I might get caught up in youth gang violence. It was also a mall where Native youth liked to congregate, and where I often saw Native families gathered, exchanging laughter and conversation. It was certainly a classed space, with its dollar stores, head shop, and discount leather goods. But at the same time, there was a high-end camera store, a Mexican Mennonite food market, and a book store (which closed shortly before my arrival). Often though, Indigenous interlocutors indicated that this was one of the few spaces, along with Walmart on the West Hill, where Native persons and families felt they could enter and congregate without fear of harassment or being made to feel alien on land which, for First Nations residents, was originally their own. It seems no coincidence, then, that the annual march through the town in support of the families of, and for demands for an inquiries into the phenomenon of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), should have begun at the entrance to this mall. It did the symbolic and material work of creating Indigenous space in a town otherwise discomforted by that mall’s, and its users, presence.
Other permanent spaces existed within the town, noted in chapter 1: the Ground Level Youth Centre, and the Sagitawa Friendship Centre (the host, funder, and organizer of the youth space). Social workers and community leaders likewise sought to create temporary Indigenous space within the town itself, even if these spaces possessed a fleeting temporality – an ‘Aboriginal Art Show’ in the town’s library, for instance, or the construction of tipis outside of the RCMP headquarters, or Elder storytelling in government office building lobbies on Aboriginal Day (since renamed National Indigenous Peoples Day) on June 21. These were largely government initiatives, however – reflections of state multicultural policy, whose attendees were largely Indigenous themselves, or those who were already involved in Indigenous politics and affairs in their work and personal lives. In other words, there were few at these events whom I didn’t already meet or know. The rest of the settler townsfolk were absent. In other public ceremonies, Indigenous social workers – typically only a handful of those whom the town government already had working relationships with – helped to begin events like the Canada Day celebrations or the Queen’s Birthday with ceremony or commentary on the relationship between Indigenous peoples to the Canadian nation. These figures, with whom I spent most of my time, were trusted by the government – yet distrusted by townspeople. Over dinner one night, conversation arose over my activities recently. I had “been volunteered,” as one interlocutor jokingly put it, to help raise a tipi in a nearby public school for an Aboriginal education day. The name of the elder leading the raising came up. One of my hosts asked: “What exactly is it that he wants?” a statement which I can only interpret as suspicious, and certainly distrustful, even where town government regularly trusted him as both a professional working in Native youth services and the leader figure in town pursuing
cultural and ceremonial outreach services. What he “wanted,” as far as I could tell, was to help, in part, overcome the “gap” while also providing spiritual grounding for the Indigenous youth he helped in his professional life. He was selflessly and tirelessly, despite his Elder status and age, devoted to these causes.

Perhaps the most significant rupture of settler space in the town, alongside the MMIW march and ceremony, was the annual pow wow, a massive affair that required significant contributions of labor and funding, as discussed in chapter 2, from all sectors of town life: from government, local businesses, oil and gas, RCMP, food vendors, and community volunteers and societies. The event, held annually, is a non-traditional (meaning competitive) pow wow, occurring over the course of three days during the summer. Thousands attend. The year of my fieldwork, conflict arose over where to host it – the agricultural society wanted to hold events on its fairgrounds, where the powwow had regularly been held, on the edge of town atop the hill the same weekend for which the powwow was scheduled. (Note: organizers of the agricultural fair proceeded despite the site’s regular use for the pow wow – the agricultural fair trumped the pow wow.) Organizers considered proposals for new locations, including at a newly constructed arbor on a reserve a dozen kilometers south of town (the site wasn’t chosen, as the new constructed had left a lot of soil turned and exposed, and organizers were afraid that in the event of rain the place would turn into a mud bog). The organizers chose, that year to hold the powwow indoors, inside the town hockey rink, one end partitioned as the dance arena, the other as the flea market where Indigenous and some non-Indigenous vendors sold jewelry, clothes, and foodstuffs. My partner and I volunteered to help the organizers in the days leading up to the event, and throughout it, hauling chairs and floor mats to and from
schools, registering dancers at the welcome table, counting out prize monies, and helping with odds and ends whenever they were requested. Our biggest observation: that you could count the number of white-settlers who attended (and not affiliated with the AIC) on one hand. This was not a space white-settlers wanted to share, nor even observe, despite its year-long promotion by organizers, business, and government.

Disruptions of white-settler space are not always welcome, however. During my fieldwork, the offices of Treaty 8 negotiated with Provincial and local authorities to erect a sign on the main highway running northward from central Alberta to the northwest which read “Entering Treaty 8 Territory,” with the seal of the treaty printed in color. Within a few weeks, it had been knocked down and removed, two splintered wooden posts in the ground where it had previously stood. While Alberta Transportation quickly replaced the sign, the symbolic violence was inescapable: a reminder of the historical and legal fact of the space’s Treaty status could not be seen, and had to be removed from sight, in the darkness of night. Passive reminders of Indigenous presence and the land-sharing agreements that permitted the encroachment of white settler space into the Peace Country were perceived as a threat to an established spatial order.
Fig. 3.4. The annual AIC pow wow during the Grand Entry, within the town ice rink. Photo by author.

Fig. 3.4. Ceremony being held in the main town park, following the Sisters in Spirit walk in 2015. Photo by author.
Chapter 3

Historical Spectacle, Narrative, and the Exaltation of the Settler

“The Great White North is an enduring Canadian myth. It weaves history, geography, aesthetics, science, and even comedy into a national imaginary that invokes a metaphor of nature’s purity to reinforce norms of racial purity. The double meaning of the word ‘white’ parallels a double movement in our social and cultural history both to assert the dominance of whiteness as a cultural norm and to build a sense of national identity linked closely to nature and wilderness. Non-whites and Indigenous peoples have been excluded from that norm to one degree or another since the nation’s inception. But whiteness also suggests innocence. According to Sherene Razack, ‘a quintessential feature of white settler imaginaries is, therefore, the disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labor of peoples of color.’ (Baldwin et al 2011, 1)

Fig. 4.1. The Alberta Oil Sands Plaza at the Stampede Grounds in Calgary, AB. 2012. Photo by author.

Overview

Historical discourse is polyvocal. As people come to know and understand the spaces they inhabit, histories compete to explain the story of a place, and through contestation some narratives rise to the surface, while others subside organically or are obscured intentionally. At issue here is a power effect: who gets to tell which stories about a place? Who listens?
Who is ignored? Sites of historical spectacle – in performances, through museums, in textbooks, and in physical monuments are the places par excellence to observe these power dynamics. They are sites for broad publics to come to understand themselves and their relationship to their worlds and one another. Put another way, historical narratives distilled into monuments, museums, and spectacles produce enabling conditions through which spectators come to make sense of their own experience. As this chapter argues, the enabling condition of a Western settler history obscures Indigenous stories, histories, and perspectives – in effect, the enabling conditions of historical narrative and spectacle sets yet another precondition for white-settler turning away from Indigenous neighbors, to themselves more exclusively. And, as critical Canadian scholars note, this has the effect of exalting or valorizing the white-settler subject (and by extension, settler-whiteness) above other ways of knowing the political spaces of North America, Canada, Alberta, and the Peace Country.

When multiple histories are placed alongside one another, and interpreted analytically, the power effects within them quickly become visible. This chapter recounts several different histories of the Peace region, framed by a discussion of the relationship of power to historical narrative, and the formation of both a Canadian settler state and political subject. At its core, this subject is fundamentally white-settler, and mapped onto a nationalist discourse of nature and geography that uphold the purity of Canadian whiteness and its fundamental goodness. Moreover, this “exalted” settler whiteness (Thobani 2012) is recursively confirmed through a productive economic model: Canadian whiteness is goodness because of its historic ability to bring a civilizing capitalist modernity to an alterior *terra nullius*. White interlocutors evinced the goodness of Canada
in part through its historical transformation of landscape – the violence of this history notwithstanding. While I examined practices of space-making in further depth in chapter 2, here I consider historical discourses and the spectacular symbolic representations of Canada through the Calgary Stampede, along with regional and local historical narratives at lieux de mémoire – sites of memory – like public spectacle, museums, and monuments. While these sites are of course material, their legibility to Canadian settler subjects – the way they perceive themselves and their country – is enabled only through discursive formations that provide the Canadian settler subject with a context for understanding these sites, their nation, and themselves. Although these discourses reflect the doctrine of manifest destiny that drove American westward expansion, Canada’s expansion had no such explicit ideology, instead settling Alberta and its northern regions to stem the threat of an American expansion north of the 45th parallel. Thus, while the histories presented below are specific to the Canadian settler state, I’d like the reader to keep in mind that this was a dialogic formation; the two countries’ formation occurred in tandem, one informed by the other.

The Calgary Stampede

The Calgary Stampede, the largest and preeminent rodeo in the world, looks to a U.S. American observer like a state or county fair. Among massive cinderblock performance buildings, corrals with audience seating, and a large dirt horse track, are the same familiar vendors one finds at any carnival or boardwalk: funnel cakes, merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries. In the exhibition buildings are youth’s livestock projects, blue-ribbon adorned jars of jam and preserves, booths promoting businesses and local government offices and political campaigns. The event occurs at Stampede Park, a 200-acre fair grounds of a scale
suitable to host an international audience, and stretches from the western edge of Calgary along the banks of the Bow River to its confluence with the Elbow. Attendees travel primarily from the Western Canadian provinces – Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia – but many come from the U.S., as near as Montana and from as far away as Texas and California. It’s the pride of many in Calgary and Southern Alberta, where prairie Canadian hospitality and culture have been enthusiastically performed since its foundation in 1912. For its Centennial in 2012, the event hit record attendance at 1,409,371 visitors (CBC 2012).

Far more is on display here than livestock and jams, though. The Stampede is an emblem or symbol of the Canadian West more particularly, and for “the West” in general, emerging out of the Wild West shows that toured internationally as the frontier closed in the late 19th century. As such, it’s a site that not only explicitly represents the cultural values and historical narratives of a settler society, but reifies, reproduces, and normalizes them. In a word, it is an idealization, replete with identifiable tropes and types of an Albertan, a Western, and a uniquely Canadian identity. I argue that The Stampede is an enabling spectacle, and a space, which make the existence of Canada, and thus the Canadian political subject – the settler – a possibility at all. The types which present a mosaic of identity formations are also classed, raced, and gendered in ways that reproduce racial hierarchies (i.e., settler coloniality), thus entrenching the status quo of Alberta’s oil and gas industry, Indigenous dispossession, and the surveilling and control of space and bodies.

“Tails”: A Spectacle of Settler Historical Narrative, Land, and Political Order

I first arrived in Alberta during the summer of 2012 at a moment of high excitement and activity in the province: the Stampede would be underway in only a few days. The highway
was full of license plates from other provinces and the U.S., horse trailers, and semi-trucks moving collapsible carnival rides. Calgary was swarming with tourists, and red streetlight banners announced the 100th anniversary of the event. Restaurants and diners everywhere offered the traditional free pancake breakfasts for Stampede attendees. For many Calgarians, whose professional football team is named the Stampeders, the rodeo was a source of civic pride and identity for their city – a wealthy cosmopolitan town of 1.24 million where manicured parks and gleaming skyscrapers are emblazoned with the names of provincial, national, and international energy corporations.

My host, a McGill anthropology candidate living in Calgary, explained: the Stampede is “cowboy culture.” Even though the rodeo was imagined and originated in 1887 as an agricultural exhibition, it had become part of southern Albertan folk identity, tied up with stories of homesteading and pioneering, ranching and oil discovery. There was an event she insisted I attend: “Tails.” I needed to see Tails, an arena performance put together only for the Stampede’s Centennial in order to narrate the Stampede and province’s history, featuring “a compelling story line” combined with “equestrian arts, dynamic videography and special effects.” The 2012 Stampede’s media relation department described the show as:

A myth sprinkled with historical truths, [where] the audience is taken on a tumultuous journey through the eyes of three horses… Orphaned at a young age, the three heroes of the show stand in the face of fear and unite, forging an unbreakable bond where loyalty is without question. The gripping story line documents the challenges overcome by each horse to bring together the people of the land – ranchers, First Nations Tribes, and rodeo stars – and ultimately fulfill their destiny of ensuring The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth – the Calgary Stampede – comes to life. (Calgary Stampede 2012)

Critically, *Tails* was a post-humanist appeal to the animal world that, in practice, depoliticizes a narrative history of Alberta of race and colonialism (Gergan 2015, 268); it’s
not only disparate social worlds in Alberta that find their “destiny” through unity – the
divine and natural worlds also work to facilitate and anoint the formation of Canada’s body
politic (Gergan 2015). Likewise, where Tails’ equine protagonists drew together “the
people of the land” to ensure the founding of the Calgary Stampede, so too did the narrative
and visual spectacle ensure the discursive legitimacy of prairie settlement. In other words,
Tails narrates a story of settler entitlement (Mackey 2014) and belonging to Western
landscapes, compressing 400 years of colonial history into an immediate visual
representation of the racialized space-making I detail in chapter 2.

Fig. 4.2. The Tails Finale. Photo by author.

Tails was held in the ENMAX Corral, an indoor rodeo arena named for an energy
corporation owned wholly as a subsidiary of the City of Calgary. Passing through an arcade
of food stands, carnival games, and a military outreach center and war vehicles display,
spectators on route to the corral first encountered the agricultural exhibition hall and, beside it, a prominent placard naming the space the “Canadian Oil Sands Plaza,” and which claimed oil conglomerate Syncrude’s ethical commitment to environmental sustainability and cozy relationship with Indigenous workers.

Once inside, I took my seat on the opposite side of the arena from a large, colorfully-lit stage where the band sat. The arena itself looked like any indoor athletics space – like a hockey rink, only with an open dirt floor to accommodate equestrian sport. A drum began to beat, and in the center of the arena a spotlight shone on a single First Nations performer. He was performing the Hoop Dance, dressed in full ceremonial regalia. The emcee sang to accompany the dance. The place smelled of sawdust and manure, sweet and musky. The performance, nearly an hour long, seemed muddled. The three storylines revolving around each horse and their adopted human performers was at times disorganized, structured to privilege equestrian acrobatics over clean narrative. Yet the most remarkable moment of *Tails* occurred at the very end, and revealed the telos orchestrated from the start: three human protagonists, each representative of disparate prairie communities in conflict, are driven by both natural and spiritual forces into collaboration – no, friendship! – to produce a rodeo event that would be both the showcase for, and emblem of, Western history and identity.

Cowboys, First Nations, the Mounties and eastern pioneers; the mythology of the Stampede is not only emblematic of a valorized settler history and identity but is a metonym of the Albertan polity itself.\(^{27}\) *Tails* argued that just as the Stampede could only

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\(^{27}\) Notably, voyageurs are absent the historical narrative that *Tails* presents. Their introduction may have complicated the clean narrative historical spectacle requires: of predominantly French origin, voyageurs and fur traders established outposts in Canada’s West that operated for decades prior to the arrival of English settlers. Relations between these French trappers and First Nations eventually gave rise to the Métis Nation,
be brought into being through the collaborative friendship (note: not work, law, or treaty) of Indigenous peoples, cattle ranchers, and settler Cowboys – the “peoples of the land” – so too would their friendship have been impossible without the necessary intervention of industry. Despite its appearance as a community-based carnival, akin to a county or state fair, the Stampede was never the kind of small-scale, community-driven rodeo found throughout rural towns in Western North America. The first 1912 Calgary Stampede was the joint vision of Guy Weadick, an Ontarian vaudeville and Wild West Show performer, and H.C. McMullen, a livestock agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway. To secure financing, Weadick and McMullen recruited the backing of three wealthy cattle ranchers and one ranch manager-turned provincial politician, celebrated to this day as “the Big Four” on Stampede promotional materials. In its non-mythologized history, a cross section of turn-of-the-century Albertan industry and state emerges: a railroad agent, three wealthy ranch owners, one state authority, who all provided the financial backing and political support for Weadick, a vaudeville promoter who imagined the Stampede could become the largest rodeo in the world (Foran 2009, 255-56). This was the trick of representation in Tails: the charismatic and ungainly young rodeo star, one of Tails’ three human protagonists, each spiritually bound to their particular horse, was “for all intents and purposes Guy Weadick, founder of the Stampede” (Calgary Herald 2012). Yet while Weadick’s character was the driving force and imagination of the Stampede as Tails

its own unique cultural and politically-sovereign people forged near the Red River Settlement in Manitoba (McCormack 2010, 53-54). Métis people, as well, appear to be excluded from Tails’ narrative. For further history on the fur trade, argued by some historians to be the driver of Canadian nation-state formation (Innis 1999), see also McCormack (2010, 25-47) who focuses on the political economy of the fur trade, and Foster and Eccles (2013).
presented it, the Stampede – and by extension, Alberta and the confederated Canadian nation-state – could not exist without the financial interventions of industry.

But in its final chapter, this cleaner narrative was disrupted. After a round of musical numbers celebrating the “power of friendship” between First Nations and cowboy ranchers, agricultural settlers from the East (Ontario, Quebec) arrived, sowing social strife that threatened both the harmony of the prairies, and the continued cultural dominance of rough-and-tumble cowboys. This was a political conflict that mirrors perennial tension between the Western provinces, and particularly Alberta, regarding a perceived federal government overreach into provincial governance and the national redistribution of oil wealth – a phenomenon called Western Alienation (Lawson 2016), in which:

On the Prairies ... an almost conspiratorial view of national politics has existed, one in which political decisions by the national government are unfortunately seen as being all too predictable. In the eyes of the alienated Westerner, systematic and predictable political patterns are clearly discernible; and the West consistently gets shortchanged, exploited and ripped off. (Gibbins 1980, 168)

Thus, through the intrusion of “the East” write large, the West is threatened. The sociopolitical order that earlier emerged “organically” in *Tails* is upended. As it approached its apogee, a procession of characters emerge from the far end of the arena. A new character appeared to restore order and curtail conflict: the Mountie, a Royal Northwest Mounted Police (RNWMP) officer in red serge. Suddenly a mythologized Albertan prairie society was laid explicitly bare, spatially ordering representatives of the settler society in a

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28 The RCNWMP was founded by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald as the North West Mounted Rifles to police a large western territory the Canadian state purchased from the Hudson’s Bay Company. American politicians interpreted the new armed force as an effort on behalf of Canada to militarize the border and was reformed in 1873 as the North West Mounted Police, and “Royal” was added to its name in 1904. In 1920, the force adopted its current moniker, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and was tasked with policing Canadian territories west of Manitoba. While other polities in Canada have their own police force, in the Peace Country, all police officers are still RCMP – carrying an interrupted legacy a state body meant to securitize frontier zones.
temporal hierarchy (see Fig. 11). Native performers appeared in a line in front, holding the flags of existing Treaty Seven First Nations. Behind them stood the cowboys and ranchers. At the far end, agricultural pioneers perched on and near their covered wagons – the “Prairie Schooner.” But at the very front, singular and preceding all, was the figure of the state clad in vibrant red serge. A monolithic authority enabling both the coherency of prairie society and the figure who arrives first, he [sic] ensured a collaborative friendship between social actors previously in conflict. As the first (and only) representative of the state – in this space, visually set apart from “civil society” by merit of his uniform – Tails suggested that the state not only enables and embodies social order, but temporally precedes even prairie conflict. He is a figure of violence’s resolution, setting the very conditions for the formation of an Albertan society and the Canadian West. In him is prosperity, promise, destiny and desire.

**On History**

History is not simply a record of events which have occurred in the past. It’s also a construction – a way of narrating lived experience through time, the shape of which is formed through the particular interests, foci, and always framed to serve a particular purpose. In the case above, both the settler subject and society cohere to make sense of the present, a process of narration that is both ideological and political. French theorist Michel De Certeau helps us to understand that a dialectic between “history” and its popularization produces mythology; that:

> History would fall to runs without the key to the vault of its entire architecture: that is, without the connection between the act that it promotes and the society that it reflects...[that] ever since Western civilization has become secular and ever since it has defined itself, in a political, social, or scientific mode, by a praxis which engages its relations equally with itself and other societies. The tale of this relation of exclusion and fascination, of domination or communication with the other (a position filled in turn by
a neighboring space or by a future) allows our society to tell its own story thanks to history. It functions as foreign civilizations used to, or still do, telling tales of cosmogonic struggles confronting a present time with an origin… [Thus] historical discourse makes a social identity explicit, not so much in the way it is ‘given’ or held as stable, as in the ways it is differentiated from a former period or another society. (1988, 43-5)

*Cui bono?* In the case of *Tails*, the performance not only displays the normative arrangement of western Canada’s settler polity but likewise naturalizes and lends divine provenance to the political and racial stratification of the nation-state. Anthropologist Elizabeth Furniss, in exploring white identity and its relationship to the narration of Canadian history in British Columbia, refers to the kind of history displayed at *Tails* as a “frontier complex,” a set of values that determines the contours of the everyday lives of Euro-Canadians. “At heart,” she writes, “the frontier complex consists of a form of historical consciousness… that is culturally conditioned and deeply influenced by Canada’s colonial heritage.” It is a historical consciousness

… made manifest as a historical epistemology: a way of knowing about history that provides a certain set of rules and assumptions that guide how ‘truths’ about the past, and by extension the present, are to be created, understood, and conveyed… [Tied up in the doctrine of *terra nullis,*] at its deepest level, the frontier complex provides a set of metaphysical assumptions about the nature of history, individual agency, and one’s relationship with the social and natural worlds. (Furniss 1999, 16-17)

The frontier complex is additionally racialized. Settler historical narratives work to “valorize” or “exalt” both the historical Canadian subject, the explicitly white Western pioneer – in *Tails*, embodied by the cowboy, and later the homesteader. And in that process of exaltation, of course and as I discuss below, the nation-state is valorize as well.

Questions of subject formation concern how and why the individual subject comes to be known. Within anthropology, early traces of subjectivity theory appear in Geertz (1973, 1983). Here, subjects “embody culture;” that they “live in a distinct phenomenal
world – spirits here, mystical powers there, particular categories of kin in each – and have access to that world through a set of embodied practices” (Biehl et al 2007, 7). As I argue throughout this dissertation, a settler subjectivity is enabled through discursive practices (such as historical narrative) but likewise through quotidian habits of behavior, perception, and the use of space. In that sense, settlers very explicitly make and gain access through a cultural repertoire a settler world – one which privileges the settler, but also works to exclude from its optics that which disrupts a valorizing narrative of settlement, the settler-state, and subject. Thus, both individualized and collectivized subjects are “retained and remade in local interactions… The subject is at once a product and agent of history; the site of experience, memory, storytelling and aesthetic judgement; an agent of knowing as much as of action… [subjectivity provides] the grounds for subjects to think through their circumstances… [It is] the means of shaping sensibility” (ibid. 14).

For most of its demographic history, and certainly still today in essence, Canada is a white-settler nation; and whiteness (and subjectivity) is explicitly formed and informed

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29 The claim of an “essential” settler-colonial character for a nation as diverse as Canada is a political one, readily available to anti-essentialist critique. In one sense, historical spectacle like Tails can be interpreted as self-essentializing, and we could conduct a critical analysis of how Tails essentializes both white and Indigenous peoples and history here. However, Indigenous and critical race theorists urge caution on applying an anti-essentialist critique through the discourse of universal social constructionism that, done carelessly, can void questions of power and history from subaltern and marginalized peoples’ identities and political struggle. Indeed, essentialism critique is most problematic when applied to marginalized peoples, and this is where anti-essentialist critique is meant to apply – rather than the dominant within a given society. This trap is what intersectionality theorist Kimberle Crenshaw terms “vulgar constructionism.” She writes that “Vulgar constructionism thus distorts the possibilities for meaningful identity politics by conflating at least two separate but closely linked manifestations of power. One is the power exercised simply through the process of categorization; the other, the power to cause that categorization to have social and material consequences” (1991, 1297). Glen Coulthard extends this critique to a settler colonial and Indigenous context, writing that “In recent feminist, queer, and antiracist literature, the term ‘essentialism’ is often used pejoratively to refer to those theories and social practices that treat identity categories such as gender, race, and class as ‘fixed, immutable and universal,’ instead of being constructed, contingent, and open to ‘cultural variation.’ According to Ann Philips, when recognition-based models of cultural pluralism invoke essentialist articulations of identity they risk functioning ‘not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket,’ forcing members of minority cultural groups ‘into a regime of authenticity, denying them the chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves.’ In order to avoid this potentially
through settlement. Applying Foucault’s work on modern state sovereignty – on biopower
– we see that subjects are produced through discursive power that surrounds and molds the
individual through disciplinary regimes (1978). Techniques of habituating the body to
“correct” movements, spatial use, postures, and temporalities achieve pliable and
consenting state subjects not only through disciplinary control, but more importantly
through the instillation of self-perception that benefit power as much as it may benefit the
individual. In that sense, he argues, the subject is “an effect of power,” and one which
reifies and naturalizes the nation-state. Critical race scholar Sunera Thobani, however,
argues that subjectification for white Canadians is only partially understood through bio-
power. As a complement to Foucault, she argues that political technologies deploy
“exaltation as a technique of power that acculturates the national subject into the
isomorphic state-nation-subject triad… the efficacy of the complementary technique of
exaltation seduces subjects into reproducing their nationality” (2007, 8). Through these
two techniques, subject self-constitute and reproduce their nation and themselves as
political subjects. Within a white-settler nation that political subject is foundationally the
white-settler. As she notes, and as is reflected in the press release synopsis of Tails,
Canadian “national enterprise is popularized even now as ‘A new people building a new

repressive feature of identity politics, we are told that the various expressions of identification and
signification that underpin demands for recognition—such as ‘gender,’ ‘culture,’ ‘nationhood,’ and
‘tradition’—must remain open-ended and never immune from contestation or democratic deliberation…
[However,] normative appropriations of social constructivism can undercut the liberatory aspirations of anti-
essentialist criticism by failing to adequately address the complexity of interlocking social relations that serve
to exacerbate the types of exclusionary cultural practices that critics of essentialism find so disconcerting…
perhaps more problematically… when constructivist views of culture are posited as a universal feature of
social life and then used as a means to evaluate the legitimacy of Indigenous claims for cultural recognition
against the uncontested authority of the colonial state, it can serve to sanction the very forms of domination
and inequality that anti-essentialist criticism ought to mitigate.” (2014, 20-21). Here, I name Canada as a
settler-colonial nation to class its uneven power relations into an object for political and analytical critique
in order to better mitigate forms of domination that Coulthard and Crenshaw both explore at length in their
own work.
land’” (19), a language which is likewise featured in oil sands advertisements (Kim 2007; Haluza-deLay 2014; Cenovus 2012) and the “Oil Sands Discovery Museum,” discursively linking together Albertan political subjects, oil production in Alberta, and early imperial encounters with the New World.  

In the Canadian context, writes Thobani, contemporary commentary on race relations in Canada – between immigrants/arrivants, Indigenous peoples, and white-settlers – “reopen older histories of preferred and non-preferred races, of the internments and racial hatreds expressed in the projects to build Canada as a ‘white man’s country.” That “Despite the most ardent claims of national mythology, the constitution of the nation as Euro-Canadian, that is, as white, was neither a natural nor predestined inevitability. The shape that this nation has assumed was the outcome of the intense race battles waged – by the state and nationals against whose whom they sought to eliminate and exclude” (2007, 22).

In this sense, and in response to protests that Canada’s nature has been multicultural since at least its 1983 constitution, she argues that “the Canadian state can be accurately characterized as having been an overt racial dictatorship until the mid-twentieth century, as it organized the governance of Aboriginal populations through the Indian Act and upheld racialized immigration and citizenship legislation to produce a homogenous and dominant white majority. The outright exclusion of non-preferred races from social and political life gave way after the mid-twentieth century to a liberalization of immigration and citizenship

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30 Indeed, Haluza-DeLay argues that hegemonic consent for the oil industry in Alberta is assembled in part through an appeal to an essential Albertan-ness, and in the words of one industry representative, “‘Advocating for the oilsands isn’t just about preserving the resource’s commercial value. It speaks to who Albertans are as a people.” These statement, Haluza-DeLay notes, dovetail with historical narratives of Alberta that are more directly tied to oil than pioneering, with “well-established provincial narratives, and how Leduc #1 (the first major crude oil discovery in Alberta) as well as other energy booms have been used to forge Alberta’s identity.” Returning to Foucault’s biopower, “This energy-producer narrative is writ into Alberta’s public education system, as even the Grade 4 Social Studies curriculum focuses upon the province’s resource abundance, without any word of environmental [or social] consequences” (2007, 40).
legislation,” yet these policies still maintained the effect of “maintaining [immigrants’] constitution as cultural strangers to the national body” (2007, 24-25).

Consequently, perceptions of immigrant or Indigenous communities’ lower socioeconomic status relative to white Canadians become inscribed as moral or cultural defects; in older discourses, this is the pathology of respective “races.” As a vignette later describes, white Albertans often described First Nations as people who “don’t want to work,” who “want everything handed to them by the federal government.” In these moments, Indigenous peoples are resigned to personal, communal, and cultural failure – but always held in measure against the perceived “success” of the settler polity. This exaltation

ennobles the [national] subject’s humanity and sanctions the elevation of its [and the nation-state’s] rights over and above that of the Aboriginal and the immigrant… [exaltation] simultaneously ‘naturalizes’ these qualities as the essential possessions of the individual subjects who form the community, as being intrinsic to – and reflective of – the superior order of their humanity, arising organically from their natural, individual moral goodness… the technique of power naturalizes itself and appears as guileless, unexceptionally and ordinarily reflecting an ethical polity that is based on the inherently superior qualities of national subjects and not on the repertoire of governance. (Thobani 2007, 9; emphasis added).

Should the reader believe the process of exaltation is an exclusively historical one – that, despite the evidence Tails and the material below provides, that exaltation was a feature of Canadian political power that has ended since formal multiculturalism – consider 2017. Canadian sociologist Everton G. Ellis observes the same forms of exaltation and erasure as recently as the 2017 during celebrations of Canada’s sesquicentennial (Canada 150). Indigenous activists, frustrated with the alleged exclusion of Indigenous representation during the events – what was presented was tokenizing, they argued – the Algonquin Anishinaabe First Nation organized to erect a tipi in the center of the festivities on
Parliament Hill in Ottawa. They were met by police who forcibly removed them; 150 organizers reluctantly agreed to allow them to erect the tipi 20 meters outside the celebration zone. Interpreted decolonially, Ellis argues, “the erection of a Teepee [sic] from a mainstream Canadian lens is viewed as a form of transgression that is not desired in spaces exterior to the Indian Reserves” (2017, 151). Despite state progress on the “recognition” (see Simpson 2010) of Indigenous Canadians and structural reforms since the 1980s that have improved some conditions for First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, alongside immigrants and refugees, notions of Canadian history and heritage continue to privilege white subjects over others, and especially so in spaces of settler historical spectacle.

In other words, as an historical narration (and one that appears in diverse forms throughout the western provinces), *Tails* is one spectacle among many that seeks to entrench white belonging on the indigenous territories that comprise contemporary Canadian territoriality, suggesting that whatever inequities exist between white and First Nations people in Alberta are not only natural, but a potential site of entertainment – emptying Indigenous political struggle and the ongoing coloniality of Alberta of the gravity and serious contemplation they deserve. Even as it presents a multiculturalism in its aesthetics and narrative, incorporating the First Nations figure under the aegis of the Canadian nation-state, it does so by voiding Native life of the political, reducing settler-colonial relations to the interpersonal and divine. As discussed in the introduction, this is not an aberration of multiculturalism; it is one of its defining features. *Tails* works allegorically here: while Indigenous persons are incorporated into the settler polity discursively and symbolically, they are materially and politically excluded. Pushing the
analysis further, we can see the erasure of historical process and in *Tails’* multicultural inclusivity; we see the state strip the *bios politikos* of the Indigenous person, reduced to bare life and thus made sacrificial in order to preserve the nation-state (Agamben 1998; Povinelli 2011, 1-6; 2002; Mbembe 2003). Thus, in the same way that ubiquitous “living frontier” interpretive museums found in even the smallest towns of Alberta (including Peace River and adjacent communities), history is not only stripped of political content in favor of an explicitly ideological narrative that upholds a white Canadian “exaltedness,” but works to reify and entrench the settler nation-state and the coloniality through which it forms.

History is also a road map that shows how the present moment does not occur in a temporal vacuum, but is an ongoing culmination of the actions and ideas social actors – and the environments with which they live – circulate among and between one another. What follows below, then, is not merely a record of the history of the Peace Country or northern Alberta – the extant literature on which is already very thin, compared to locations which are less “remote” – but is about the ideology of Canadian and settler history. That is, the ways in which people in the Peace Country relate to and engage with the history of that region, or otherwise refuse to, is bound up with regimes of truth and power that not only set the terms for how people understand themselves and their place on the landscape, but how those terms set the conditions for social dynamics and political conflict in the north of the province today.
A normative settler history of the Peace Country typically begins with stories of British and French explorers, voyageurs, missionaries, fur traders, and their struggles against a hostile wilderness. These explorers are heroic figures, whose engagement with both Indigenous nations and the northern landscape provide a justification for their valorization, made material in monuments, markers, texts, maps, and museums. Indeed, many small Canadian towns – unlike their American plains counterparts – have such museums, funded by local, provincial, and federal governments under the aegis of “heritage” funding. The Town of Peace River Museum and Mackenzie Archives (only 28 kilometers from the next nearest small-town museum) is one such museum: located on the former site of the town ferry crossing and a famed Métis leader’s farmland, the museum itself is wrapped in wooden cladding, replete with faux towers, giving the cinder-block building the appearance...
of a frontier fort or trading post. Not only is the museum a material celebration of local pioneering narratives, it is also the repository of English explorer Alexander Mackenzie’s archives, who traveled the Peace River from 1792-1793 in search of the northwest passage – a celebrated explorer fitting ubiquitously into histories of early Canada. Indeed, there is a cottage industry of book publishers who recover and then press diary accounts of early pioneers and colonial officials, in celebration of the courage, strength, or bravery of these first settlers – books I have only ever encountered in local museums and university bookstores (see Hansen 1977; Kaiser and Aubrey 2006; Mair 1999; Marx 2004). These books are sometimes

Table 1. Peace River Settlement Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>Alexander Mackenzie sends A. McLeod to build a post about 35 miles downstream of present-day Peace River.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>Alexander Mackenzie sends A. McLeod to build Fort Fork, the most westerly post built by the Northwest Company, a few miles upstream of the confluence of the Smoky and Peace rivers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>David Thompson arrives at Fort Fork and appears to have used it as a base for expeditions until March 1804.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>John Clarke of the Hudson’s Bay Company establishes St. Mary’s House, near present-day Peace River. It is the first HBC post to be built that far upstream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>Reverend John Gough Brick, an Anglican missionary, leaves the upstream fort of Dunvegan after establishing a new settlement on the flats west of present-day Peace River, which he calls Shaftesbury. Here he establishes a farm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>Father Husson OMI founds St. Augustine Mission at Shaftesbury Flats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897-98</td>
<td>Klondikers arrive at Peace River Crossing to build rafts and scows to descend the river. NWMP establish a detachment at Peace River Landing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>Following violent conflict between Klondikers and area First Nations, Canada seeks to strike Treaty 8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>Bishop Grouard has the first steamboat on the Peace, the “St. Charles,” built at St. Augustine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>T.A. Brick, Peace River’s first MLA, is elected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>A government ferry is put in at Peace River Crossing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>First Agricultural Show is established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915-16</td>
<td>Construction on a famed steamship, the “D.A. Thomas,” begins at West Peace River shipyard in August, and is launched in 1916.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>First train arrives in Peace River on August 11. Peace River drops “Crossing” from its name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Construction begins on a railway trestle at Peace River. The bridge is completed on November 8, 1918.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Peace River becomes a town.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chronology adapted from (Hursey 1996, 250).*
dedicated to “all pioneering peoples of the Peace Country” (Marx 2004, iii).

If Alberta’s north ever held allure for Europeans settling westward and northward from urban metropoles, it was for two reasons: either the agricultural potential of the land or the oil beneath it. Mid-19th century British promoters argued the area surrounding Peace River Crossing\textsuperscript{31} – the Peace River Country – was perfect for agricultural settlement. Until railways were built, they said, its wider navigable rivers could support steamboat transportation, and the region’s open parkland possessed “more land suited for agriculture than there was west of Winnipeg – probably more than 65,000,000 acres,” with some estimates as high as one hundred million acres (Kaiser & Aubrey 2006, xvii). Already missionaries and trappers from a handful of fur companies, including the Hudson’s Bay, North West, and XY Companies, had established posts in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. By 1870, European outposts were pursuing experimental horticultural projects in order to demonstrate the potential viability of agriculture in the region (Leonard 2000, 176-77).

Fearing violent conflict between the Woods Cree and Dene-zaa peoples who already resided there and a growing European population, the federal government in Ottawa sought to strike a treaty that would cover a vast area extending from Lake Athabasca in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west. A treaty commission was organized and set out from Edmonton in May of 1899. Heading the commission was the former lieutenant governor of the Northwest Territories, David Laird. Already, Laird had helped negotiate several of the “Numbered Treaties,” a series of agreements extending across Canada intended to obtain land for settlement from any First Nations or Métis communities already living there. He arrived at the treaty grounds on the shores of the

\textsuperscript{31} As per the chronology above, the Peace River Crossing was renamed simply “Peace River” in 1916, and incorporated as a town in 1919.
Lesser Slave Lake, near present-day Grouard. Missionaries circulated word and fliers among many of the area First Nations in preparation for treaty negotiations, and on July 20 several hundred members of the northwest’s Indigenous communities were assembled for the Commission’s arrival. Laird opened the negotiations with an address, saying:

Red Brothers! [sic] We have come here to-day, sent by the Great Mother [Queen Victoria] to treat with you, and this is the paper she has given us, and is her commission to us signed with her Seal, to show we have authority to treat with you... I have to say, on behalf of the Queen and the Government of Canada, that we have come to make you an offer... As white people are coming into your country, we have thought it well to tell you what is required of you.... The Queen owns the country, but is willing to acknowledge the Indians' claims, and offers them terms as an offset to all of them. (Leonard 2000, 22)

Supporting him, another commissioner stated that “The white man is bound to come in and open up your country... We come before him to explain the relations that must exist between you, and thus prevent any trouble.” In a very real sense, then, the treaty negotiations began under threat: settlers will arrive regardless of any protestations; treaty is the only and best chance Indigenous persons possess to preserve your way of life. The Queen, he said, owns the country; only begrudgingly does the Canadian Government seek to acknowledge Indigenous’ claims – but that signing treaty is “required of you” regardless.

In response, chief spokesperson for the First Nations and Métis assembly Keenooshayoo expressed hesitation, claiming that, "You say we are brothers. I cannot understand how we are so. I live differently from you. I can only understand that Indians will benefit in a small degree from your offer." David Laird responded in turn, seeking to set indigenous concerns about their loss of land by offering “protected” reserves, and specified: “Your forest and river life will not be changed by the treaty, and you will have your annuities as well, year by year, as long as the sun shines and the earth remains. Therefore I finish my speaking by saying, Accept!”
The Treaty was agreed to in 1899 and over the next year, adhesions of First Nations who had been missed at the initial negotiation were made throughout northern Alberta, mostly along large navigable rivers like the Peace and Athabasca. From Euro-Canadians’ colonial perspective, Alberta’s North was now politically and legally open for full-scale European settlement. Excluding railroads, by 1899 every piece was in place: RCMP outposts, trading posts, ferry crossings, and able-bodied homesteaders. All that remained was a matter of state promotion and financial enticement for those settlers to begin moving into place. And the railroads would come eventually, pushing into the interior of this remote country as recently as 1912 – today, there are still living homesteaders in the Peace Country, and many more interlocutors who are able to recount stories of pioneering from their parents and grandparents.

Critically, some First Nations were missed in the adhesions process. The Lubicon Cree, a nation dwelling in the far interior of the Peace Country and surrounded by muskeg, was missed and thus “received” no reserve land, despite later petitioning for it (Goddard 1991:11-20). The traditional territories in which the Lubicon and other Indigenous nations live, only 35 minutes north of Peace River, covers an area of 33,000 square miles (Ferreira 1992, 12) and was never settled agriculturally. In the 1950s, the area became a hotbed of unconsented oil exploration and development.32 Fearing the loss of hunting and trapping rights afforded by Treaty to other local First Nations, the Lubicon launched an international campaign to both become signatory to Treaty 8, and to have set aside at least 90 square miles of reserve land, and up to 254 per Treaty 8 land claim criteria. Continually blocked by both the Alberta and federal governments, the Lubicon launched a prominent

32 For additional history of tar sands development in Alberta see chapter 4.
international boycott of the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics and soon after constructed a blockade on the paved oil road running through Lubicon, Métis, and Woodland Cree lands surrounding Cadotte Lake. Their efforts finally forced the Province into land negotiations. The federal government, however, refused to recognize their agreement – the 1988 Grimshaw Accord – and split the Lubicon lands into three different reserves, with three different councils, and three different names – allegedly through backdoor dealings and payments to Lubicon members tired of political struggle (Goddard 1991, 202-206; Martin-Hill 2008, 22-23). Other area First Nations, especially the Woodland Cree, vehemently deny this allegation – asserting that they are likewise traditional residents of that land base. They have rejoined that the Lubicon struggle’s leader, Bernard Ominiyaix, needlessly drew out the political struggle and antagonized potentially-sympathetic governments to bolster Ominiyaix’s personal and political allies’ incomes, or to sacrifice pragmatism in favor of militant idealism. Still Elders from Little Buffalo and Cadotte told me some of these members of the new reserve-based nations were not originally from the Lubicon nation at all; they had come opportunistically to take advantage of the government’s “divide-and-conquer” strategy: “Those guys over there,” said one Métis Elder while pointing towards the Woodland Cree reserve, “aren’t from here. Never were.” These claims have continued to stoke deep and complex divisions within and between area First Nations, but structured much of my interactions with interlocutors during 2015, who often expressed sympathy towards “Bernard’s” or “Billy Joe’s people.” While all recognized and appreciated the movement’s work in the 1980s, and its strategic engagement with global organizations (the
U.N., Amnesty International, Green Peace), many lamented the stagnation of the lands claim process in 2015.33

There exist abundant examples of a settler nation’s mistreatment of Indigenous populations across the colonized world, and the story of the Lubicon Cree in northern Alberta is no exception. Yet their story is no longer widely known outside of the immediate region. A friend of mine from the First Nations community of Maskwacis told me: “unless I had taken the courses I did at [the University of Alberta Faculty of Native Studies], I never would have known about the Lubicon.” Indeed, very few of the white-settler interlocutors I spoke to in the town of Peace River knew of, or shared with me either the history of treaty or the Lubicon Cree. Those Indigenous interlocutors who did were more focused on contemporary and internal political struggles within and between the three First Nations and one Métis Settlement that comprise the communities of Cadotte Lake,34 ringed around the lake at the geographical and historical epicenter of oilsands development in the north Peace Country. It is, in other words, an obscured history despite its locality and political charge. This was a recurrent experience living in the Town: what participants I had in the town itself, unless Métis or engaged in social work with the Cadotte communities, were disturbingly mum on social struggle in the area, regardless of whether this was an historical struggle, or more recent conflict. And yet, in one exchange, a Métis interlocutor

33 The land claim was resolved during the writing of this dissertation (October 23, 2018), but controversially. I discuss this settlement in further detail in the conclusion.
34 This speaks to settler rendering of Indigeneity more broadly: whereas Indigenous activists frequently need to assert that they are contemporary living, breathing peoples who exist within and as a part of modernity, settlers more frequently associate Indigenous peoples with “the primitive,” locking them outside of modernity. Indeed, pundits assert this is “the problem” with Indigenous peoples – they are those who refuse to accept and live within the terms and conditions of modernity the setter nation-state provides (Flanagan 2007). Politically, this can have the effect of ordering Indigeneity such that they are politically excluded; lands-claim processes often require First Nations to document a threatened “traditional” lifestyle and, when evidence emerges that Indigenous nations utilize the trappings of industrial modernity – motor boats, quads, trucks – or are engaged in contemporary political life, their land claims are denied (Bruyneel 1997).
informed me that during the Lubicon struggle in the 1980s, white shopkeepers in Peace River hung signs in their windows declaring “No Lubicon,” explicitly evoking the Jim Crow signage of the American South before and during the Civil Rights movement. These stories did not appear to me through white-settler residents – even those who were fluent in the town’s history, including the staff at the town museum. Instead, and I believe wishing to leave me with only the most positive impressions of the town, white-settler interlocutors pointed me towards pioneering and homesteading stories, or to the nation’s and region’s multicultural diversity. Even in its “inclusive” multicultural mode, Canadian and Peace River settler histories exclude and obscured the unpleasant, the colonial, the critical, or the racial.

In Their Own Spaces and Words: Visual and Discursive Settler Representations of Alberta and the Peace Country

Two ethnographic questions, now. Is the Town museum truly representative of how Albertans and Peace River (white-settler) residents understand themselves and their community? And do they themselves, in their historical narrations, truly exclude Indigeneity from the record?

Institutions form both discursive networks and phenomenological spaces for through which subjects encounter and experience that discourse materially. In effect, as institutions museums are “active hubs in the power/knowledge matrix” of nation-state, community, and racial formation (Wrightson 2017, 42). This is significantly more pronounced in a rural context than urban or even national ones, where the number of public

35 Given the racial slur applied to Native space in Ontario (see Introduction), a pattern begins to emerge in which Indigenous exclusion and anti-Indigenous racism learns its forms from U.S. anti-Black racism – whether in the 1980s, or in 2012; or, more likely, that transnational white-settler supremacy shares common features and anxieties that make them coterminous across borders, or at least complementary to one another.
institutions are smaller and generally have little authoritative competition. The Peace River museum is no exception. It’s prominently located downtown, where the Heart River joins the Peace, atop a hill such that it’s unobscured by the levee network. Throughout fieldwork, I walked the paved pathway on top of the levees nearly every day so to observe how town life (and the Peace River’s flow) was unfolding, always hoping to bump into interlocutors along the way. From my apartment on the southside, the path was only a block away. Lined with elm, poplar, and cottonwood trees, its course took users directly to the museum site. Numerous historical objects were clustered on its lawn: a re-created RCMP post cabin; the frame for a steamship’s paddle wheel; a historical placard and gravesite for the Métis farmer who turned the land under the museum; a Canadian flag, and more. To continue on the pathway to downtown, path users walk directly by the front door of the museum (with signage inviting visitors in, and where the doorway served de facto community events board plastered with ever-changing flyers). The path continued over a footbridge over the Heart into downtown, passing the mall, central downtown park (the 12-Foot Davis park), and continued northward where it terminated next to the town hockey rink, pool, and several local elementary schools.

If the pathway was an artery conducting Peace River residents from its northern- to southernmost extent, the museum was its heart, inescapable, and consequently the starting location for the town’s Canada Day celebrations. Indeed, when I first entered the community liaison office in the Town Hall, the first place I was encouraged to visit was the museum. Sitting in the museum’s library for hours at a time, I witnessed town residents come to visit; school groups touring; senior citizens arriving to donate artifacts for preservation; and out-of-town visitors from as far abroad as Montreal, the U.S., and
Germany. The museum was no mere afterthought for town residents: it was a site for community formation and producer of its identity, and thus a site of both collective memory and institutional (and colonial) power (Nora 1996; Wrightson 2017, 36).

I’ve described the museum in Peace River elsewhere throughout this dissertation, but it was not the only site or object in which colonial relations and settler identity find place, purchase, or production. Analysis of three distinct bodies of ethnographic objects help us to see and contextualize how white-settlers in Alberta and the Peace Country come to know and narrate themselves and their spaces. At the provincial level, a visual analysis of “the most extensive documentation of the province ever undertaken” – a thick, 12-inch by 11-inch photo essay of the province – reveals the social categories through which Albertans understand the province and themselves, and which categories are granted greater significance. In addition, textual analysis promotional brochures and of a regional magazine promoting business development and residential relocation to the Peace Country, Move Up!, provide additional data points for consideration. Lastly, obituaries in the town newspaper give a sense of how Peace River memorializes and commemorates its residents as settlers and pioneers.

“I Am Albertan”

I Am Albertan: A Modern-Day Photographic Essay of the Albertan People (2005) is a full color, 265-page book commissioned for Alberta’s Centennial celebrations in 2005. I found a copy of it for sale as a featured book in Peace River’s local Salvation Army, set aside from the mess of paperbacks packed into the store’s shelves. Its front matter shows that it was funded through government-industry partnership; funders include the Alberta Lottery
Fund, Canadian Heritage, Enbridge Inc. (a major international pipeline and energy company), The Camera Store, and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

While the book has its own topical categories, displayed in the table to the right, I conducted my own visual analysis of the subject of the photos themselves. This analysis is more revealing than the book’s own taxonomy, designed as an exhaustive celebration of every quarter and sector of Albertan society. Of the 707 total photos in the essay, 135 (19%) were of sports and outdoor recreation. Private (non-Native) workers counted for 11%, or 76 of the photos. We continue down the line: Public service workers – 65 (9%); Agriculture and homesteading – 62 (8%); Cowboys and rodeos including the Stampede – 57 (8%); Families, seniors, and children – 50 (7%). Oil and pipelines – 28 (4%); cities – 18 (2%). Most significantly, Native peoples and representative objects (i.e., the tipi or regalia) accounted for only 25 of the 707 photos, clocking in at a mere 4%.³⁶

Overall what the book presents as representative of the “Albertan people” – tied into Albertan identity and subjectivity (i.e., *I Am Albertan*) is a place that valorizes its landscape, family values, workforce, and agricultural and oil and gas industries above nearly all else. In its efforts to demonstrate “the spirit of Alberta… the can-do initiative that characterizes the wild rose province and the hard work that has built strong individuals, families and communities,” the book effectively obscures (and perhaps tokenizes) Native peoples in favor of its landscape, state agents (i.e., public workers), and private industry. Indeed, it is telling that images of oil and gas production account for three more images than that of the Indigenous peoples whose lands contain those very resources.

*Promotional Literatures of the Peace Country and Settler Identities*

Percentages and categorizations of the province can only tell us so much of how white-settlers of the Peace Country narrate that space to themselves, or how they find identity in the region. Consider how promotional materials situate Peace River and the region specifically within the history and discourse of settlement and pioneering. The Peace River District Chamber of Commerce’s *Business, Tourism, and Relocation Guide* states:

The Peace River has shaped our heritage for centuries. It once served as a major route of year-round travel for First Nations People, and later was renowned as the main route of Western Canada’s lucrative fur trade in the 1700s and 1800s. Whether it was flowing or frozen, it carried canoes and dog sleds for many of the explorers, voyageurs, First Nations People and the Metis [sic] in our region. As freighters, trappers and traders, guides and interpreters, the local Beaver, Cree and Metis were essential to the survival of the Euro Canadian explorers and early settlers. *Peace River’s legacy is due not only to the beautiful country, but also to the stalwart lives of our early settlers. They all shared one thing in common; each of them fell in love with the land that we now call Peace River. The town and community commemorate these men and women for their works as we strive to carry on their work and passion* for the Peace River Region.

This historicized account of the modern-day industriousness of Peace River directly links contemporary residents to “work” and “passion” of early settlers – settlers who only arrived
in the region roughly one hundred years prior. Moreover, the account flattens our colonial history: present-day residents are one the newest instantiation of a long arc of migration throughout the region. Indigenous attachment to land, for instance, is erased in favor of a narrative emphasizing mobility, and brings them into community with present-day settlers. Lubicon struggle or the early violent conflict between First Nations and gold rush prospectors is effaced.

Similarly, the Town of Peace River’s *Mighty Peace 2015 Visitor’s Guide* levels out important cultural and political differences between settler and Indigenous peoples, weaving them into the same Canadian multicultural tapestry:

*Beautiful by Nature. Diverse by Culture. Vibrant by Choice.* It took resolve, ingenuity and perseverance for early residents to live with and on the land by the mighty Peace River. From the early commercial ventures of the Canadian fur trade, to Alberta’s early oil and gas exploration, to notable agricultural achievements, today’s profile of the people of Peace River is no less tenacious and creative. Based on decades of such characteristics, the Town of Peace River is a regional hub... The original cultural communities of Aboriginal, Métis and Francophone people are today joined by residents from each corner of the world making their way in the social, cultural and economic features in the Peace.

That multicultural flattening is achieved through another appeal to the “perseverance” and “tenacity” of settler-pioneers. Notably, this account places oil and gas development within this arc of pioneering – no coincidence that the language of “exploration” is deployed here.

That linkage between pioneering, work ethic, and resource extraction appears in contemporary accounts of economic struggle in the region as well. In the only regional magazine circulating in the Peace Country – *Move Up!* – an economic development officer from the Winter 2016 issue (21) narrates the region’s history through the pioneer narrative as well in his commentary on dropping oil prices that hit the province hard economically in 2016:
…The question on everyone’s mind is, ‘How will the Peace Region fare through these difficult times [of falling oil prices]?

The Peace Region of Alberta has a long history of pioneer spirit and diversification. Pioneers came to the region despite the poor road conditions, the muskeg, the lack of people and services and the challenge of clearing forested lands.

The farming potential of the Peace Region was first promoted by the federal government in the early 1900s, but it was not until the opening of farmland for homesteaders in 1910 and the arrival of the rail in 1916 that farming and ranching really took off in this region.

Prior to this the area, explored by Sir Alexander Mackenzie in 1792, was a hub for forts built along the Peace River and a vibrant trapping and fur trade. In the 1970s the massive Elmworth natural gas field was discovered. Soon after, the Peace River oil sands and other oil finds throughout northwestern Alberta would change the region’s economy for many decades to come.

Blessed with a wealth of commodities, the region and its people have adapted to the many changes in politics, commodity prices and demands and industrialization that have forced the region to evolve… The Peace is evolving, just as it has in the past. Muskeg and poor transportation options haven’t slowed us down in the past and they won’t stop us now.

Not only does his narrative explain who the people of the region are and why they are there, pioneering and exploring figures come to help make sense of economic and political struggle in the present day. The landscape becomes oppositional, a thing against which to struggle: muskeg – boreal wetland – is named in particular. Of course, unlike governmental promotional brochures, this development officer’s narrative makes no appeal to Canadian multiculturalism. Indigeneity and present-day First Nations and Métis peoples are completely erased.

Returning to the museum, one director’s account of the region’s history and settler people includes an appeal to an early First Nations presence and culture in Move Up!’s Spring/Summer 2014 issue (74). But here, like in many multicultural recognitions of Indigeneity, Indigenous peoples are very nearly locked into nature and the past (Bruyneel, 2007; Povinelli 2002; Raibmon 2005), their culture reduced to the landscape’s influence.
The structure of the text alone sets up an almost-neat binary between Indigeneity and *civilized modernity*:

The Peace Region has a history of creative energy. It originates with the tangible and intangible artistry of our [sic] First Nations people. The influence of the northern Boreal Forest was expressed in their tools, food, clothing and spiritual ceremonies. This history and culture has been passed on from one generation to another and still reveals itself in today’s artistic interpretations.

Complementing this original DNA were newcomers to this land who brought the notion of adventure, the expectation of opportunity and the desire for independence.

Some newcomers were leaving the political and social confines that were building in their homelands. Some were avoiding or abandoning elements of their personal lives and looking for new beginnings. Unconventional and uncommon might describe the characteristics of some of these immigrants.

As a composite of experiences, education, languages, cultures, and spirituality, a newly formed disparate community of people learned how to create and manage a sustainable existence in this northern environment. Those who could not simply left for other pastures.

It took drive, tenacity, humor, love, a uniqueness of character, and in some cases, luck, to endure, survive and enjoy the elements of life in the Peace Region. While today’s challenges of living in the North look different, the resolve to venture out of one’s comfort zone, to be audacious and innovative, reminds a unique feature of the people of the Peace.

We see it expressed in our art galleries, markets, museums, libraries, school and college programming. It is also expressed in the number of industrial and agricultural innovations that are created and designed in the Peace. You find it expressed in the numbers of people who came for a three-year work sojourn and have remained and committed to their opportunities many years later.

This ambition to be remarkable is in our heritage, our culture, our environment *and how we describe ourselves today*.

A pattern emerges here: in formal literatures designed to represent the region – but also through the words of residents themselves – Peace Country white-settlers are those who struggled and tamed a wild landscape. First Nations were never in conflict with these settlers, either in the past or through oil and gas development through to the present day.
Indeed, the narrative goes, pioneering settlers not only arrived untroubled – Treaty, we note, is likewise erased from these narratives – they were assisted in their efforts (implying they were welcomed without complaint) by prior Indigenous peoples.

*Move Up!* also conducted online Facebook surveys that were published in the Fall 2015 issue, asking residents “Why is life better up here in the Mighty Peace Region?” Their responses nearly always appeal to one of two reasons: that the landscape is beautiful, and that people are closely connected and related to one another – an assertion which contradicts some of what I experienced, and what Indigenous interlocutors described to me. But in the words of contemporary white-settlers, “There’s something about the Peace River Valley that fosters a spirit of gratitude in the people of the region. We are in awe of its beauty, the people who live here and the resources we are blessed with.” Or, in an engagement with the weather and agriculture, B. writes that:

I love that we have the opportunity to enjoy/experience (in the case of -40 weather) all 4 seasons to their full extent. I enjoy the smells of spring, the run off, new crops being seeded & calving season, then comes the budding of the trees, fresh cut grass, long summer nights & Northern Lights, only to be followed by the picturesque beauty of the fall with magnificent colors of orange, yellow & red along with fresh crisp mornings & evening smells of harvest only to end with the very first snowfall which eventually blankets the area and is so beautiful as it shimmers.

A sense of community also defines the place, and the freedom that an empty-land discourse provides: “The basic friendliness of the people; the sense of community. You walk down the street and people make eye contact and smile and say a friend ‘hello!’”; and “Space, freedom, wilderness and the awe-inspiring valley!” And, in one final appeal to the
industriousness of the people, C. wrote that “The people in this area are independent and ambitious, yet still friendly.”

Finally, it’s illustrative to briefly consider how recently “the pioneer” arrived to the Peace Country. European migrants arrived to the Peace region as recently as the 1950s to homestead, some granted land by the Canadian government following World War II. One such person arrived in the region in 1950 to join her husband. Her obituary states that “the farm they bought had only a one-room log cabin with a sod roof to live in. Both [spouses] were city people so that very little (perhaps only the Nazi occupation) prepared them for this pioneer way of life.” Another woman, who passed away in 2016, encountered similar conditions within Alberta: in 1949 she and her husband “moved to [the husband’s] homestead, clearing and breaking the land.” Thus, pioneering narratives are not only recent history, but a critical lens through which Peace River settlers come to understand themselves, their landscape, and their relationships to one another and with local Indigenous nations.

37 For further textual examples of how Peace River residents describe the place, the landscape, their community – as well as some light engagement with residential school legacies, the Sagitawa Friendship Centre, and the AIC Pow Wow, see the Addendum.
On the Multicultural Histories (and Pre-Contact Histories) of the Peace Country

Fig. 4.4. A defaced placard along an empty highway south of Peace River. Both the content of the placard and its defacement speak to layered efforts to exclude aspects of regional history which trouble settlers, even within “multicultural” modes. Photo by author.

In spite of the exclusion of Lubicon politics and histories in white-settlers’ accounting of their town to themselves and to me, Indigenous leaders are routinely present in town celebrations and community space (in the library, provincial government offices, etc.). In effect, some settler interlocutors reported, Indigenous inclusion at these events demonstrates the Canadian nation-state’s (and peoples’) diversity, tolerance, humanitarianism, and multiculturalism. Yet O’Connell (2010) argues that while an urbane white multiculturalism defines official and popular narratives of Canada as a diverse and inclusive national space, white rural spaces are the site par excellence for the naturalization of settlement. Where “Canadian investment in multiculturalism is predicated on forgetting [intense racialized hierarchies set up between European settlers, Native Nations, Black,
Chinese and Asian settlers, and other more recent patterns of immigration] … mainstream histories of struggling pioneers and white settlement in rural areas (emptied of colonial crimes) uphold and complete Canada’s multiculturalism” (2010, 538). Here, settler-whiteness is undifferentiated: through relationships to different forms of racialized space (urban or rural), and the histories which multiculturalism obscures, whiteness on the one (urban) hand naturalizes and empties whiteness in cities, and on the other (rural) hand centers the narration of “struggling pioneers” so that across a rural/urban dyad (Neal 2002), white belonging to spatialized locales is rendered apolitical. Like Tails, white historical presence in the Peace Country is not only normalized, but obscures complicated and violent colonial histories. This is done largely through the spatialized mapping of race onto the Canadian landscape – a process which I explore in further depth in chapter 4, suffice it to say for the moment that a host of Canadian scholars have noted the ways that Canada’s national association with a “pristine wilderness,” or open natural space more broadly, works discursively not only to naturalize whiteness to the places that constitute Canada, but also lends to settler-whiteness its own purity (or, as noted in the introduction, a “settler move to innocence”). While I later examine this relationship – Nature-Innocence-Whiteness – with regards to space, here I want to continue to examine more closely the ways in which history does the same – voiding the Peace Country of politics and, in effect, voiding it of both its colonial history and contemporary settler coloniality. If history provides the means through which subjects understand themselves and their belonging to a place, we must infer that the exclusion of particular histories likewise works to emplace and subjectify settlers. That is, settlers come to know themselves and their rightful
emplacement on the land not only through the histories they actively disseminate, but also through absence – through what they choose to exclude.

As noted above, normative histories of the Peace Country can appear in several forms: treaty history, pioneering history, or political history. Another approach deploys Canadian multiculturalism in an effort to include First Nations – but more specifically through the inclusion of pre-Columbian history to treat Indigeneity. These accounts incorporate histories of the five major Indigenous groups that have resided in the Peace Country both in antiquity – often beginning with a mention of the Bering Sea Strait Ice Bridge theory – and more recently: the Métis, the Dene-zaa (or Beaver), Dene-thaa (or Slavey), Nîhithaw (or Woodland or Woods Cree), and Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois).38

These narratives are typically written from the perspective of Western commentators, even where they attempt to incorporate Indigenous history. In one 1996 historical overview of the region, one historian opens with a statement that, “It is a sad fact that most of the evidence of the thousands of years of human occupation in the Peace River Country can be reduced to a pile of rubble” (Hursley 1996, 25) – a perspective that privileges the works of “civilization,” found today as ruins, written records, and cultural and linguistic influences, thus suggesting Indigenous peoples in the Peace Country are other than civilized. This account goes on even to perform a familiar equivocation I heard often in Alberta: that

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38 On naming: the Métis nation derives its title from the French word métis meaning “mixed,” and is a distinct ethnic nation whose origins began in the 19th century near the Red River in Manitoba; while their ancestry is both Native and European, they maintain traditions, ceremonies, and cultural features through which Métis self-define as an independent nation. English language names for First Nations in NW Alberta were derived from Cree guides; among the Dene they can be regarded as offensive for reasons I do not have the authority to enumerate here. Cree is derived from an Anishinaabe word used to describe the peoples living near the Hudson Bay; within their own language the Cree generally refer to themselves as nêhiyawak, a word which has multiple localized variations. Iroquois is a French title to name the Six Nations Confederacy near the Great Lakes; those nations refer to the confederated nations as the Haudenosaunee. This term is in common usage and the correct title; “Iroquois” can be regarded as offensive.
Indigenous peoples were “the first pioneers” (26). These false equivocations work politically to dismiss the unique claims to belonging that Indigenous nations possess – that, in essence, “everybody came from somewhere else” in the great human migration out of the African continent, and thus Indigenous peoples have no unique claim to ownership of or belonging to the lands that comprise Canada. Even though these histories, which are “multicultural” histories, seem to do the work of incorporating Native history where it would have otherwise been absent (Wolf 1982), their incorporation benefits the settler and nation-state (Povinelli 2011) more so than sovereign Indigenous nations. Moreover, these histories often ignore or remain ignorant of the extensive oral histories transmitted by Indigenous peoples intergenerationally.

Each of the major Indigenous nations in the Peace Country – the Dene-zaa, the Western Woods Cree, and the Métis nations – have interwoven histories, both oral and colonial, that situate Indigenous communities on the land for at least a millennia – itself an outrageously conservative estimate.39 Whenever I was introduced to these histories by First Nations participants, interlocutors frequently began with the statement that “we have been here forever,” or for “time immemorial.” Such statements are no hyperbole, and in many ways operate as an explicit critique of the Bering Strait Theory. The now-debunked theory placed Indigenous peoples in North America roughly 16,000 years before present (BP) – often informing the aforementioned narrative that “everyone is an immigrant, everyone is Indigenous” that non-Native Canadians employ to dismiss Indigenous land claims. This

39 From a colonial perspective, Archaeological evidence of Paleolithic habitation of the Peace River Country places stone-working humans in the area at least 12,000 years BP, with important dig sites found in British Columbia (the Charlie Lake Cave waste pit), and atop the large hills and valley crests that formed the islands and shoreline of glacial Lake Peace (the Saskatoon Mountain waste pit). Closer to my own field site, and controversially, evidence exists for pre-glacial occupation of the Peace River Valley only a few dozen kilometers south of the Town of Peace River. This new data places Indigenous peoples in the area potentially over 21,000 years BP (Chlachula and Leslie 1998; Chlachula 2010).
long durée form of human migration history, has long been criticized within Native communities, and at least three Native participants verbally criticized to me during the course of fieldwork. Corroborating their words, Indian Country Today Media (ICTM) published an extensive six-part investigation into the Bering Strait Theory in 2014 entitled “How Dogma Trumped Science” – a full two years before the anthropological consensus on North American Migration finally accepted archaeological evidence that Native North Americans arrived not over Beringa, but along coastlines by watercraft which archaeologists previously assumed Indigenous peoples were “too primitive” to have designed and navigated. Linguistic analysis and the discovery of genetic haplotype supports this much earlier occupation, from South America to Alberta, potentially as far back as 30,000 years, although this evidence was deliberately and programmatically excluded from the scientific archaeological consensus from at least the 1920s. Indeed, archaeologists who challenged the theory’s champion, physical anthropology Aleš Hrdlička (the first curator of the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History and founder of the American Journal of Physical Anthropology), were expelled from the discipline (Ewen 2014). The “consensus,” in a word, was a manufactured one.

Indigenous archaeologists themselves who pointed to physical evidence that contradicted the shorter Bering Strait timeline were sometimes subjected to verbal and mental abuse within their departments. After a conference on Indigeneity at Columbia University in 2013, I spoke with Dr. Paulette Steeves, who at the time was challenging both the Beringia consensus and Clovis First model. She recounted how senior faculty had verbally attacked and insulted her. One went so far as to spit at her in a hallway. In a profile of her life and research on ICTM, she stated that “my first week of graduate school, I was
called a bitch, a damned Indian, and troublemaker” (ICTM 2016). She was forced to change advisors and reform her committee multiple times, but persevered. In our conversation, she said her work and critical methodologies were meant to honor her ancestors and the Elders that supported her along the way – that this was the source of the strength that permitted her to persevere through her faculty’s maliciousness. Such are the consequences and mettle required of Native women centering their own voices in the academy, or challenging dominant historical consensuses, mettle hardly ever required of white scholars in the academy.

Despite Cree oral record, a “standardized ethnological myth” (Smith 1987; Westman 2008) represents the dominant narrative of Cree migration into the area, and which local non-Native Peace River historians recounted to me. Originally, the story goes, Albertan Cree people resided primarily east of Lake Winnipeg in present-day Manitoba. Once European contact arrived in the mid-to-late 17-th century, Cree purchase of firearms granted them military superiority over nearly every neighboring Indigenous group. Pushed westward by European encroachment, the Cree established political dominance up to the boundary of the Peace River in the 18th century, where they frequently warred with the autochthonous Denne-Zaa and displacing numerous other nations, including the Slavey along the way. In 1781, the Cree and Dene-Zaa signed a treaty on the banks of the Peace River near Lake Athabasca, thus lending the river its English name.

Woods Cree interlocutors, when explaining to me their own history, stated they were familiar with this dominant narrative – one that is found in local historical materials, town museums, provincial historical placards, and on websites including Wikipedia. They asserted, instead, that they and their ancestors had lived in the area for time immemorial;
the colonial history, contrarily, suggests that much like white pioneers, the Woods Cree are themselves newcomers and migrants with no special claim to the area, who displaced many others before their eventual sedimentation in Northern Alberta. Detailed anthropological examination of the origin of this myth suggest that it is, indeed, unsubstantiated. Its origins first appear in Alexander Mackenzie’s accounts of his travels in 1801, in which he states that “[The Cree] drove both these tribes before them,” but that “who the original people were that were driven from it, when conquered by the [Woods Cree] is not known, as not a single vestige remains of them. The latter, and the Chipewyans [Dene] are the only people that have been known here; and it is evident that the last mentioned consider themselves as strangers” (1802, xxviii, 116-117). Yet even the archaeological record fails to support these claims, which through time have become established ethnological and historical dogma. As anthropologist G.E. Smith explains, excavations of pottery and other material across the subarctic beginning in 1971 demonstrate no occupation other than that of the Cree within the region from Lake Winnipeg to eastern Alberta, and north to Lake Athabasca. Thus,

The archaeological evidence confirms that Cree were the pre-contact occupants of northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Lake la Biche area of Alberta, well west of the mythological boundary of Lake Winnipeg-Nelson River. The immediate ancestors of the historical Cree lived there from about A.D. 1400. They may have lived there earlier… Wright [therefore] concluded his review of Algonquian subarctic archaeology with the statement that… ‘evidence strongly suggests that the Cree had a very long period of cultural development in the region under consideration and that they were not easterners who have pushed to the west and northwest in response to the fur trade.’ (Smith 1987, 438-39)

Linguistic and demographic evidence likewise supports this claim, as well as the ethnographic record. While Lubicon Lake Cree note that there are ‘Cree who have ‘recently’ settled to the east of the Wabasca… [and] are also aware of the Iroquois of the
Peace River valley,” as well as 19th-century Métis migration into the region, “they have no oral literature to indicate that their ancestors had migrated from east… [and] for generations they have had no fear of visiting [Dene-Tha] lands” (Smith 443-444). And, as University of Saskatchewan anthropologist Clint Westman writes in regard to the Lubicon land claim struggle, and suggestions that the Woodland Cree are “not from here,”

There has … emerged a revisionist history (advocated by lawyers for the federal government, among others) [of Cadotte Lake] speculating that most individuals or families in the isolated communities were originally ‘from’ Wabasca or Lac la Biche [to the west]… This position recapitulates the ‘anthropological myth’ of late Cree occupancy in Alberta, for the convenience of the state, while ignoring historical documents suggesting longer occupancy of the region. To set the record straight, although some migration in this direction [from east to west] likely did occur in the late nineteenth century, anthropological, archival, and oral history research alike suggest a long-standing Cree population in central northern Alberta, around the Wabasca River, including Trout Lakes. (Westman 2008, 232-33)

More recently, however, forced local migrations have occurred with the advent of oil exploitation in the Peace. Sitting at a table in the Métis community hall in Cadotte, elders explained that one story appearing time and again in oral records recorded by multiple sources (Goddard 1988; Hill 1997; Westman 2008). One Indigenous community in the 1940s originally resided on the shores of Marten Lake – in other writings named as Marten River, but explained to me as “Marten Lake” – only about 12km northeast from the present-day community at Cadotte. “They came with a bulldozer,” said one elder, “without warning. They just knocked all the houses down.”

“Why did they do that?” I asked. He replied: “For the oil. They said there was oil under there. But they never found nothing.”

Today the site is listed on Google Maps as a ghost town, nothing left but a single dirt road, and not even a pump jack to show for their dispossession.

One Final Note Concerning Settlers and Treaty 8
The historical construction (and the contemporary reproduction) of a settler polity and landscape in northern Alberta, and in the Peace Country particularly, meant overlaying different types of resource developments through history. First, hunting and fur trapping and some small-scale horticulture marked the region. Second, agriculture came to take hold, clearing away boreal forest and muskeg and transforming the land into the wide-open expanses of wheat and canola that an observer sees today. Third, in the post-war period the Peace Country came to be shared by oil and gas and forestry industries; liquid oil development came first, followed by the Japanese-owned Daishowa pulp mill, and now the rows of CHOPS tanks that distinguish the Peace River Oil Sands from other production zones. In a word, the Peace Country is an interlaced and layered social and physical landscape of settlers, arrivants, Métis, and First Nations, all living atop a landscape transformed into a hybrid agricultural, hydroelectric, forestry, and oil/ gas production landscape.

All of this, as I suggested above, was made possible only through the striking of Treaty 8. Treaty’s meaning and its interpretation vary, however, and speak as much to settler and Indigenous understanding of Euro-Canadian occupancy as much as those interpretations evince further historical erasure. On the part of settlers, I encountered several orientations to Treaty 8. The first was an outright lack of awareness of Treaty whatsoever. This is uncorroborated, but one interlocutor stated that treaty was not included in the public school curriculum; First Nations appeared only in his history texts as a people “out of time,” relegated to the past rather than as living, breathing modern peoples. The director of the town museum herself lamented a general lack of popular appreciation or familiarity of Albertan history, Indigenous or otherwise. In particular, she noted that
through research she had determined the site of an adhesion signing within the town of Peace River, but today was only a dilapidated one-story house whose yard was full of junk. She had been trying to erect signage detailing the historic significance of that site, but said it was an uphill battle with which she had made little progress. No one, she said, knew what treaty was or was interested.

The second perspective was the dominant notion – and Crown legal interpretation – that Treaty signing constituted the ceding or extinguishment of Native Title. In other words, when Indigenous nations signed treaty they forever relinquished their right to their traditional territories or to comment on industrial activity upon them, except for what the Crown had already set aside as reserve land; treaty was a surrender of Indigenous sovereignty to the settler state (see also St. Germain 2009; see also Price 1999). A few white interlocutors stated that treaty today was merely a form of entitlement that disincentivized First Nations to “do things for themselves.” The third settler perspective, shared with me exclusively by activists and academics engaged with First Nations politics, was that the Treaties represented a land sharing agreement to which settlers and the state possessed rights and responsibilities (Jay 2013) as much or more than Native nations.40

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40 As a corollary to this perspective, a few more critical Indigenous and settler activists asserted the Treaties were as thoroughly colonial as other law including the Indian Act, and for Canada to achieve a decoloniality would need to scrap all treaties and totally re-constitute Canada anew.
All Indigenous and Indigenous-engaged settlers I met in the Peace Country interpreted Treaty in the lattermost (and “truest”) way – as a land-sharing agreement. That land-sharing agreement permitted European use of the land, but only through consultation and with the free, prior, and informed consent of affected First Nations. To understand this perspective further, I visited both with an Elders’ circle at the Treaty Eight House on the Sucker Creek First Nation reserve (a community center holding an archive of Treaty 8 materials), and with the director of economic development at the Treaty 8 administrative offices in Edmonton. Both parties lamented settler misunderstanding of treaty, which they ascribed, along with scholars (see Fumoleau 2007, 108; St. Germain 2005, 153-7), to an ontologically-rooted incommensurability between 19th-century Euro-Canadians and First Nations understanding of treaty. For the former, treaty was indeed a legally-binding
document; that what was contained within the text of the paper was the extent and limit of
treaty’s obligations. Indigenous signatories to Treaty 8, on the other hand, understood the
document as corollary to verbal and oral agreements. Thus, Treaty 8 possesses two sets of
Crown promises to First Nations: verbal and written. Treaty 8 Elders have passed down
those verbal promises intergenerationally, and they are inscribed on the side of a monument
outside Treaty 8 house, as well as on literature (and bookmarks) generously gifted to me
by the Treaty 8 office. They read that “The spirit and intent of Treaty #8 as remembered
and understood by our elders” include: schools and education; doctors, hospitals and
medicines; hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering rights retained; Indians [sic] retain
mineral and water rights; sub-surface rights retained; land acquired by Queen was only 6”
surface rights; exempt from taxation; land purchased for farm did not include forests;
rations provided; policing; legal representation; exempt from war participation; no Indian
[sic] shall hang by rope; right to barer; canvas for tents; cattles/horses provided; farm and
haying equipment; gardening tools/seed; bullets were supplied; in case of hunger, all gates
shall be opened. In effect, these oral promises sought, on behalf of colonial officials, to
transform First Nations communities into sedentary, agricultural ones. Yet Sucker Creek
Elders reported a corroborated story that of the several First Nations families that had taken
up agriculture – implements, seed, and other tools were not readily or easily obtained,
despite treaty – those who became successful had their land appropriated by white farmers
and were forced to relocate to reserve.

Today, several First Nations host Treaty Days on which treaty-guaranteed Crown
payments are distributed to reserve members. Many interlocutors joked about this – the
amount was unchanged from 1899 and amounted to a total of five dollars. “I get my five
bucks,” one said, “but I’m still waiting on my plow.” More insidiously, one interlocutor stated that:

I was talking to a gentleman. He said, “They [First Nations] all get this and that [entitlements].” And I said, “So, tell me, where did you learn that?” and he went, “Well, I don’t know. Everybody knows it.” I said, “Mm. Does everybody know that that information is wrong? That – here’s what, if you live in Treaty 8, you’re – what the government gives you per year, is a five-dollar bill.” And the guy’s mouth just about fell on the floor. He says, “What are you talking about?” I said, “That’s what they get.” He said, “Well, they’re all driving new trucks.” I said, “You know what? I could buy a new truck just like that. You get it on credit, you have it for three months, you don’t pay your bills, away goes your truck. Sure. Anybody can get that.”

She concluded by stating that the state, media, and education system were all responsible for settler Canadian’s general lack of unfamiliarity with Treaty in lieu of stereotype. To get past stereotype, she said, “You got to start looking and asking the right questions.” Government and the institutions of civil society wouldn’t provide accurate information any other way.

**Conclusion: Race, Nature, History and the Pioneer**

Most of the white-settlers I met in town never specifically discussed First Nations issues. When pressed, they often deferred through vague statements like, “Yeah, a lot of us have had bad experiences with them,” and would promptly change the subject. Perhaps they sensed that what they were about to say did not fit in with the multiculturalist expectations regarding race in Canada; some couched their statements with a familiar, “I’m not racist, but...” However, in one encounter on the street, a middle-aged construction worker outside my building stopped to talk to me after seeing my truck’s U.S. license plate. After a little bit of chit chat, he began to lecture me about the pervasive racism he observed in the U.S.; Canada, he told me, is different; multicultural. “Yeah, it is a problem” I said, “but it seems as though there is some racism here towards Fist Nations people.” To which he swiftly
replied: “Well, some of them have a bad attitude, like they got a chip on their shoulder. I guess they’re angry because what Europeans did to them, but they had to do it because they [First Nations] weren’t making anything of themselves. Like when they [Europeans] came here and start building roads,” pointing northward to Cadotte. In a word, this interlocutor asserted that because the Indigenous communities of Cadotte Lake had not worked or transformed the landscape (despite evidence otherwise) – that they lacked a history of “making anything of themselves” – pioneers, who did work the land, were entitled to it instead. His assertion very explicitly references a Lockean theory of property, and we need to turn to him to make better sense of this interlocutors statement, both as an interpellation of his white-settler subjectivity and as a statement that “makes sense” of Euro-Canadian settler emplacement.41 As I’ve argued above, both phenomena only make sense through reference to exalting settler narratives.

Locke held that land can only be held in private ownership – that is, as property – when the person claiming ownership of property actively applies their labor to a delineated (or enclosed) parcel of land. He explicitly excludes Indigenous peoples from this conceptualization of property. In his principle text on property, The Second Treatise of Government, he writes:

God, who hath given the world to men in common, hath also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life and convenience. The earth and all that is therein is given to men for the support and comfort of their being. And though all the fruits it naturally produces, and beasts it feeds, belong to mankind in common, as they are

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41 I do not wish to offer the impression that discourse on property is monolithic or uncontested. As anthropologist Paul Nadasdy demonstrates, Enlightenment theorists thoroughly debated the nature of property, or the rightful ownership of land (2002, 250). Likewise, there is a history of discussion leading to the present day as to whether or not the ways Indigenous peoples in North America related (and continue to relate) to the land as constitutive of or consistent with European notions of property, ownership, and demarcated exclusion; many Indigenous peoples themselves extensively practice/d agriculture (Cronon 2003, 55-8; 127-32). It’s important to note that Indigenous peoples in Canada were and are, in large part, excluded from these conversations.
produced by the spontaneous hand of nature; and nobody has originally a private dominion exclusive of the rest of mankind in any of them as they are thus in their natural state; yet being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other before they can be of any use or at all beneficial to any particular man. The fruit of venison which nourishes the wild Indian, who knows no enclosure, and is still a tenant in common, must be his, and so his i.e. a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do any good for the support of life. (Locke 2002, 12)

The “means” of which Locke speaks is the application of human labor, which “thereby makes [a resource an individual’s] property.” It is that labor which pulls a thing from being held out of the “wild common of nature” into individual ownership. He goes on to explain that removing a thing from common ownership requires the “mixing” of labor with that thing, thereby making it property, which precludes “another from any right to it.” Indigenous people apply their labor to the animals they hunt, and the “fruits and acorns” they gather, but because they do not mix their labor with the land, specifically through cultivation, they therefore possess no right to exclude any other human from the use of it. And perhaps most telling is Locke’s assertion that one may apply individual labor to any land held in common “without the assignation or consent of anybody” (2001, 13). And thus in part, the philosophical justification for dispossession by whatever means available: by the treaty or by the gun, the pioneer deserved to get his hands on it – he is entitled to the land.42

Settlers’ understanding of empty land as a site for the realization of the kind of national moral and racial purity observed in Tails through the land’s transformation – i.e., pioneering – is likewise only comprehensible through the European encounter with the New World. From the very first moment of contact, Europeans’ production of sovereignty
in North America required a notion of self – namely, Christian – defined against the racialized alterity of an inferior Indigeneity. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) and literary theorist Christopher Bracken (1997) argue, European encounters with the New World provoked a new sense of West and Other. Upon “discovery” of the New World, Christendom was recast as the “West,” while the Americas, and the people that lived there, was imagined as utopian – a “terra nullius” (Richardson 1993). Emerging as early as the Crusades in 1096, Europeans’ imagined superiority meant that by the time of the conquest of the New World, Europeans already possessed “a systematically elaborated legal discourse on colonization … [that] unquestioningly asserted that normatively divergent non-Christian peoples could rightfully be conquered and their lands could be lawfully confiscated” (Williams 1991,13). As “divergent non-Christian peoples,” indigenous North Americans were “slotted” into savagery, a state of nature justifying the imposition of European sovereignty over indigenous lands.

Thus, histories which center pioneering achieve three major effects: to valorize the settler subject and bind him [sic] to the nation-state; to racialize the settler as non-Native, or white; and to justify Indigenous dispossession by appealing to tropes of European “conquering” of wild landscapes and peoples for their “productive” transformation. Spectacular images of the settler – of the type seen in Tails, Little House on the Prairie, or O Pioneers! – draw upon citationality, Judith Butler’s theory that images only make sense in relationship to those we have engaged with before (1993). As such, the emergence of a settler subjectivity – made visible in the figure of the pioneer – is situated within a long historical arc of (white) exploration and heroic struggle against the wilderness that mark the narratives of historical figures like Lewis and Clark, George Mallory, or Roald
Amundsen. Indeed, within the Peace Country it is a point of regional pride that Sir Alexander Mackenzie was involved in the exploration and settlement of the Peace River Basin. The town museum, itself a *lieux de mémoire* or site of memory (Nora 1996, 1-23), maintains a permanent archive and exhibition room of Mackenzie artifacts, cultural artifacts of the Indigenous peoples he encountered, stacks of furs representing the trappers’ outposts that helped him along the way, and the white-settler college students who recreated his journey down the Peace River in the 1970s.

Local settler identity is thus both discursively and visually informed through linkages that unite contemporary subjectivity to a deep colonial past; settlers cannot make sense of themselves or their emplacment on the landscape otherwise – without the total disassembly of settler identity [and potentially, the settler state]. Consequently, celebrations of western pioneers are not innocuous events, but uphold exalting narratives of a specifically white heroism that renders the landscape as both empty (e.g., wilderness in need of taming, sans Indigenous humans), conquerable, and conquered (e.g., successfully traversed, catalogued, and mapped). These tropes are thoroughly racialized not only at the level of national or regional identity, but likewise racializing via the proud “country” or prairie identity settlers on the North American plains champion. Rurality itself, writes Kate Cairns, “emerges out of colonialism as a spatialization of race, as ‘nature was troped as a site of moral and racial purity: the true foundation of the nation, and the true home of its original settlers’” (2013, 626 citing Braun 2003, 197).

While the skeptical reader could contend that these examples of settler history contained within this chapter are only limited, parochial instances of settler representation, I’d contend otherwise: that they’re merely one small piece of a broad tapestry of heroic
representations of the settler that appear so ubiquitously as to seem utterly remarkable in
daily cultural life in North America. Children playing cowboys and Indians – the former
coded as a good guy, the latter as the bad guy; *Little House on the Prairie* books and
television show; the Marlboro Man; the western film genre; *The Last of the Mohicans* to
*Dances With Wolves*; the Old Wild West Show; or the production and elevation of figures
like Daniel Boone and John Chapman to the status of national mythology in the U.S., and
Simon Fraser, Sam Steele, Louis Hebert, Marie-Anne Gaboury, Wasyl Eleniak in Canada.
Each represents only one segmented piece of patterned and enduring machine that
normalizes and glorifies settler colonialism across North America, and thus reproduces
white-settler coloniality and subjectivity. Of course, this tapestry of exaltations are not only
limited to historicizations of the settler, but are also found in anniversary celebrations of
the Canadian nation (Ellis 2018), and during military memorial events such as
Remembrance Day. Yet while these types of valorizations are a feature of many modern
nation-states (Anderson 1983), my purpose in this chapter has been to examine the features
of a historicized, specifically settler polity to understand that which makes the settler
nation-state’s formation, and reproduction, unique and distinctly settler colonial.
Fig. 4.6. The Pioneer Club in a Francophone community neighboring Peace River. Photo by author.

Fig. 4.7. A pioneer graveyard on a hill overlooking Peace River’s downtown in the foreground, and Misery Mountain on the other side of the Peace River in the background. Photo by author.
Fig. 4.8. A mural next to the main town park, where provincial and federal holiday events are held. The first passage of the signage reads: "For 160 Years the Peace River was the main artery of transportation for explorers, trappers, settlers and pioneers of the north. Peace River Crossing, as the town was originally called, was the center of distribution for mails and supplies heading north." Photo by author.
Chapter 4

The Invisibility of Contamination and Colonial Power

Fig. 5.1. Signage pointing the way to Cadotte, just outside of the main entrance to Shell’s facilities. Photo by author.

Overview

The enabling conditions of race, space, and history that undergird settler turning away inform not only how settlers perceive Indigenous communities, but how they understand their place in the world and relationships to others within it. Now that we understand how space, history, and settler (dis-)engagement with Native communities are racialized processes that uphold settler-whiteness directly or indirectly, we can turn our focus to the environmental and bodily violence produced at the site of tar sands production itself. In a word, I here argue that tar sands extraction is both a product and producer of sedimented structures of race – the settler-colonial relation, or settler coloniality – in northern Alberta, and that these power relations manifest themselves in human, animal, and community
bodies. Through this framing, we can better understand how phenomenologically white-settlers are able to turn away from not only Indigenous social suffering, but likewise from white-settler neighbors who challenge the legitimacy of industry operations in the north, thus bringing settler opponents of unfettered oil sands development into a perceived league with a stereotyped First Nations opposition to the tar sands. The effect of turning away here not only ignores the actual alliances and nuanced political position towards development that Indigenous voices within the province offer to the public; those nuances are flattened outright in order to dismiss concerns over critique of the industry. Bodily suffering in the tar sands thus becomes a site for the production of settler power and abandonment of Indigenous populations – a logic which here classes farmers calling for better environmental monitoring and regulation into the same category to enable their abandonment. For if settlers wish to maintain an unchallenged permanent claim to colonized land and its resources, then as a class settlers converge to isolate and marginalize those who would challenge that claim – even if those opponents only call to moderate white-settlers’ claim to and use of the land, rather than to efface it entirely. In so doing, white-settler subjects accept the severe illnesses and loss of livelihood their neighbors experience in order to preserves settler coloniality as business-as-usual.

For a phenomenon that activists, scholars, and the media alike have so thoroughly sensationalized, daily life amid oil sands extraction in and around the town of Peace River, Alberta, is remarkably mundane. Like other places in Canada, shopkeepers open their doors every morning; the drive-through line around Tim Hortons ebbs and flows throughout the day; the museum and municipal government offices see a steady movement of busy residents and visitors coming to and fro each hour. As a governmental and economic hub,
the town draws daily visitors from numerous villages, hamlets, and other small towns dotting the agricultural landscape, including from two Indigenous communities: Cadotte Lake and Little Buffalo (home to Woodland Cree First Nation, Lubicon Lake Band, Region VI Métis Nation settlements, and others). Despite its bustle, it is still easy to describe this town of 6,800 as quiet, wholesome, and close-knit. It is a place where locals were typically puzzled by my presence there: What could “a researcher” have to study in a place that was so “boring?” How could I stand being in a place with so little to do when not engaged and working in government services, forestry, or the oil and gas industry—the big games in town?

Yet this rendering of the region as a place where “nothing happens”—a place where boredom structures the experience of everyday life (Jervis et al. 2003, 38–41)—only barely conceals from the town the invisible contaminations, health impacts, and structural violence that nearby farmers and Indigenous communities experience in their daily lives. A mere twenty kilometers up the road, a large oil sands field (“the patch”) is allegedly leaking unknown and invisible pollutants into the air and water, which are finding their way into human and animal bodies. And though most of the operations within this patch—around a thousand production tanks and an in situ plant, hundreds of conventional gas wells and pump jacks (AER 2014)—were hidden among the boreal forest, the people I

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43 Although the town of Peace River had, as of the 2016 Census, a roughly 14.2% Indigenous (First Nation, Métis, and Inuit) population—higher than the provincial average of 5.8%—First Nations participants regularly described the town as a “white town,” or even pejoratively as a “redneck town,” hostile to their presence. That is, Indigenous community members experienced and perceived the character of the town as Euro-Canadian, rather than as multicultural or cosmopolitan as white participants reported it.  
44 Cold heavy oil production with sand (CHOPS) is a technique of oil extraction developed in the 1990s that intentionally injects sand into oil wells to increase their productivity. Its key feature are batteries of eight-meter-high black tanks on production sites, heated to raise the viscosity of the oil. In situ refers to oil sands production technologies that do not or cannot utilize strip mining due to the depth of the bitumen deposit. Strip mining techniques, like those used near Fort McMurray, are typically not found in Alberta’s other bitumen deposits.
spoke to who live in adjacent Indigenous and farming communities witness mysterious health impacts and were always keenly aware of the “slow violence” just outside their doors and inside their homes (Nixon 2011). These dissenters to unimpeded extraction, whose numbers have dwindled to barely a handful in recent years, defy projections of cozy community coherency with which the town presents itself. Having stirred up press and activist interest in their struggle to force an inquiry and regulatory review of oil and gas emissions in 2014, many research participants from these affected areas described town residents, government, and industry as indifferent or hostile to their claims of illness. In other words, participants described the town as having turned away from them, refusing to acknowledge the bodily and social suffering their neighbours vocally decry (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997).

In this chapter, to understand and differentiate diverse regional experiences of everyday contamination in northern Alberta on a finer-grained level, I put two days of fieldwork in concert with one another: each only a single day, a year apart, spent in the bush where leaders from neighbouring farming and First Nations communities generously invited me on guided tours. In the former, downwind of the patch, air and health concerns took priority; in the latter, water and game contamination were of central concern. Consequently, I argue that each of these communities, though both surrounded by extractive industry, experience subtle but important differences of environmental contamination in their daily lives. Additionally, comparing these two days moves anthropologists and activists alike beyond essentialist narratives of Indigenous political resistance against oil sands extraction. This approach forces a more nuanced understanding of how different communities live with the environmental contaminations of oil sands
extraction in specific ways, at the intersections of Indigeneity, class, and race. Allowing concerned readers to better apprehend Indigenous and farming community engagements with the state and industry in ways that are not solely recognizably “resistant” demonstrates that social actors in northern Alberta are engaged in strategic and savvy negotiations with oil sands encroachment, locally perceived as an unmoving fact of daily life in the province (Blaser 2004; Ramos 2003; Wanvik and Caine 2017).

One challenge of this material is the failure of current analytical frameworks to fully capture the complexities of everyday life in the Peace River oil sands. Settler colonialism, as a structure and not an event (Wolfe 2006), inarguably shapes social relations between white and Indigenous communities in the region—a point to which I return below. Indeed, the entire area is part of a decades-long struggle by the Lubicon Cree and other Indigenous communities to establish formal land claims over their traditional territories, despite the ubiquity of oil, gas, agriculture, and forestry activity on those lands.45 Yet as an analytic, settler colonialism fails to fully capture the complicated effects extraction has on adjacent non-Indigenous communities, including migrant and agricultural workers. That is, the Peace River oil sands effaces a reductive binary of settler versus Indigenous— but it does show the way in which settler coloniality shapes fields of power in the region. It is true that Indigenous communities and people of colour generally bear the greatest burdens of oil, gas, and mining extraction (Joly and Westman 2017); and given that these projects proximate to the town occur on lands that are currently subject to claim negotiations, the situation takes on moral and ethical dimensions that pulls it squarely into

45 As discussed in chapter 2, treaty commissioners failed to reach every Indigenous community in northern Alberta, the Lubicon Cree were never provided opportunity to sign treaty during the adhesions process. For works covering the political struggle of the Lubicon Cree’s land claims, see Goddard (1991) and Martin-Hill (2008). For a broader regional perspective on this history, see Westman (2010).
the realm of an environmental injustice produced through Canada’s settler coloniality. The slow violence of contamination and dispossession here is especially egregious given the historical context of treaty breaking, or treaty absence, and endemically high rates of poverty experienced in local Indigenous communities (Amnesty International 2010; see pp. 173-5). But contamination refuses to remain confined to the social and spatial boundaries with and through which humans live. Contamination is unruly, artificial yet wild, and acts in unexpected ways that spill over the technical and social limits we impose upon it. The situation in the Peace Country, then, is an ongoing disaster, the “accident” of which is not truly a disruption of norms, but always present within the invention of extraction’s technologies, manifested in material ways that spell the destruction of human and natural lifeways, thus revealing crude operations of power (Barrios 2017; Blaser 2004; Virilio 2007). Auyero and Swistun, along with others, note that knowledge of environmental contamination often begins with awareness of illness in the body or perceived changes in the surrounding landscape (Auyero and Swistun 2009, 7; Brown 2007, 77; Checker 2005, 83; Parr 2010; Petryna 2002, 125-7; Reno 2011, 518). But knowledge and experience are always mediated by the social and cultural. “Experience of [a] polluted reality,” write Auyero and Swistun, is “socially and politically produced: the meanings of contamination are the outcome of power relations between residents and outside actors” (5). Knowledge of pollution is “always, and profoundly, mediated by the social: what actors already know, what they want to know, how they think they can go about learning more, and the criteria by which they judge and make new knowledge – all these are not found in nature but are

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46 Distinguished from a normative environmentalism, environmental justice recognizes “that poor and minorities have been especially damaged by societal threats such as environmental pollution, runaway development, and resource depletion” (Shrader-Frechette 2002, 6).
socially determined” (Eden 2004, 50). My purpose then is not to diminish the significance of continuing violence inflicted upon Indigenous communities or their farming neighbours, but to expand and nuance our view of how the slow violence of contamination moves across boundaries as an effect and producer of power, whether social or biophysical (Kosek 2006; Shapiro 2015).

**A Brief Review of the History and Geography of the Peace Oil Sands**

Although the presence of bituminous sands – oil sands – deposits were known to settlers as early as Sir Alexander Mackenzie’s voyage down the Athabasca River, its commercially-viable development remained elusive for more than a century. First Nations in the area of the Athabasca deposit near Fort McMurray had long used seeps of bitumen from the riverbanks to tar and patch canoes – a material practice the Mackenzie and Hudson Bay voyageurs also used. In 1789, Mackenzie observed pools of bitumen “into which a pole of twenty feet long may be interested without the least resistance. The bitumen is in a fluid state, and when mixed with gum, or the resinous substance collected from spruce fir, serves to gum the canoes.” (Finch 2007, 100-1). Bitumen was mined in the region for asphalt during the early 20th century, but it wasn’t until a crisis of crude shortages following World War One that states in North America turned their eye towards the development of a synthetic fuel industry.

Separating oil from the sandy strata in which it was suspended presented a significant technical challenge to these early developers. As historian Paul Chatsko notes, oil sands development required sustained “interaction between these four separate entities – the state, the oil industry, the scientific community, and the world petroleum market” (2004, xiv) and the coordination of these sectors itself was a monumental task. In the 19th
century, the geological survey of Canada charted and tested the possible industrial application of the oil sands. Early “pioneers” of their development included the Alberta Research Council, who developed a boiling process to separate oil from sand in plants near Edmonton; by 1930, these pilot projects had produced three carloads of oil. Their success drew promoters from the U.S. to launch Abasands Oil Limited in 1935, but mining did not commence until 1941. In 1943, the Province of Alberta took ownership of the plant, and in tandem launched another small-scale experimental plant on the Athabasca River known as Bitumount – the ruins of which can be observed from the river today. But more productive, cheaper-to-develop conventional oil in the south of the province forced this project to shutter as well. The oil sands have thus always been driven by colonial state investment – tied to the economies of war and geopolitical cooperation between both the U.S. and Canada.

By the 1960s, technological advancements in unconventional oil production had advanced far enough for private industry to open its first large-scale production facility. The Great Canadian Oil Sands company (today renamed as Suncor Energy) began production in 1968. Quoting Chasko, its opening “represented a remarkable achievement: a Canadian company, backed by the investment capital of a U.S. multinational corporation, used a separation process researched and developed by scientists funded by the governments of Canada and Alberta to produce a synthetic oil capable of competing against conventional Saudi crude in world oil markets” (2004, xv).

Their success prompted exploratory development projects of bituminous resources elsewhere in the province, including the Peace River Oil Sands. One of the first companies
to do so was Royal Dutch Shell.\textsuperscript{47} That company had first attempted to develop the Peace deposit in 1963; state policies prevented their first charter project in an effort to protect conventional oil production profits (Alberta Culture and Tourism n.d.). Policy shifts in the 1970s led to a collaboration between a new provincial entity, the Alberta Oil Sands Technology and Research Authority (AOSTRA) and shell for the construction of a major \textit{in situ} project. The plant, still in operation today and one of the largest single-site facilities in the region, injected heated steam underground to melt bitumen and pump it to the surface. As I review below, \textit{in situ} technologies in Alberta continued to develop into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, and the invention of new Cold Heavy Oilsands Production with Sand (CHOPS) technologies made bitumen extraction in the Peace Country commercially-viable on a grand scale. In conjunction with rising oil prices in the 2000s-2010s, CHOPS and other \textit{in situ} production facilities expanded rapidly – and with little regulatory oversight – well until the 2016 dip in the global oil market.

While most of the Peace patch is tucked within boreal forest, the Three Creeks farming community sits on its southwestern edge, close to the Japanese-owned paper pulp mill; the Indigenous communities of Cadotte lie on the northernmost end of the most intensive zone of development, but still within the center of the bitumen deposit. Although Indigenous and agriculture settler communities have developed through different histories – albeit intertwined histories – challenges to loosely-regulated industry development in the Peace Patch have organized farmers and First Nations alike into a differentiated but

\textsuperscript{47} Although Shell was a major town player during the period of my fieldwork in 2014-15, in 2016 the falling price per barrel of oil had collapsed and Shell withdrew its investments, including a multi-billion dollar experimental facility and two-thousand person work camp. On social media, in the local press, and by word of mouth interlocutors expressed serious concern over the effect of that plant’s closure on the local economy, which had engaged numerous contractors and oilfield service providers to facilitate its operations. One interlocutor expressed to me a feeling of “betrayal” as Shell, which had made and promised many fiscal investments in town, had practically closed shop overnight.
singular class of persons, from which white settlers and government turn away with violent consequences. While below I do not suggest that Carmen, a suffering cattle rancher, is *racialized* as First Nations, I do contend that it is racial logic, epistemology, and structure – that is, coloniality – that allows settlers to avoid and ignore both the communities of Cadotte and Three Creeks. To see this dynamic in action ethnographically, I turn now to those two days to see how Carmen and Chief Isaac of the Woodland Cree First Nation each experience their abandonment.

**Day One: Chief Isaac**

![Fig.5.2. Chief Isaac, center. Photo by the Peace River Record-Gazette](image)

Chief Isaac Laboucan-Avirom is a young man, the chief of the Woodland Cree First Nation (WCFN). On the phone in October 2015, he invited me to join him and several other council members on a trip into the bush to identify important historical sites, including
abandoned trap line cabins and an unmarked graveyard. The area of the survey, north of the main WCFN community of Cadotte Lake, was slated for a new gas pipeline and compressor stations. It was crucial, Chief Isaac said, that we recorded these places to protect them from the aggressive expansion of the patch, which would thereby require industry to work more collaboratively with the community. Critical of both uncontrolled development and the light touch of Alberta’s regulators, at the time of our meeting, he also hoped for the economic opportunities industry could provide the WCFN; he had worked as a tradesman in the industry and found his own life in some ways improved by the experience.

While I sat beside him in his large black pickup truck on the way to meet our group, Chief Isaac detailed the issues his community members face: poverty, domestic violence, unemployment, health problems, a lack of infrastructure and adequate housing, and a lack of access to both educational and vocational opportunities. As he talked, his expression turned from pained to determined and back again—someone who had witnessed social suffering in his community, but with a resolve to fix it. Like many people I met from Cadotte, he had a keen critical analysis of this state of affairs, noting that it was the consequence of decades of state policy that forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families to place them in residential schools, breaking generational cycles of grandparents’ knowledge transmission, along with the hunting and trapping skills historically passed from parents to their children. Moreover, industrial development had reduced the very possibility of returning to a “prior” livelihood. He told me what many hunters in the region had also reported: game animals, especially moose, are rarer now and the ones that are cleaned are often diseased. A widely circulating account describes how,
when a moose’s organs were being removed to prepare the body for skinning, its liver was green and mottled. Other moose in the area, after being processed into drymeat, tasted “off,” unwell. In addition, ceremonial medicines in the bush were becoming scarcer, and trapping was becoming more limited as development encroached upon traplines. In a 2015 letter to the National Energy Board regarding the permit for a gas project expansion, Chief Isaac wrote,

One of the things our Nation has learned, particularly since the industrialization of our Traditional Territory began in the 1960s, is that all developments have permanent and profound impacts on our members. This project is no different… Our members are particularly wary of pipelines and associated infrastructure such as compressor stations due to recent examples of pipeline failures (at least 5 in the past 5 years), including the largest spill in Alberta’s history. We have concerns about the possibility of an explosion and/or a forest fire… We are also concerned about what a gas leak would do to the environment and waterways – would the leak kill plants, contaminate the soil, poison our air, water and fish? We do not have any confidence that this Project is safe. WCFN is once again witnessing our traditional lands being taken up. The Project will reduce the lands available to us for the exercise of our treaty and aboriginal rights. (Laboucan-Avirom 2015)

Although supporters of the oil industry in Alberta consistently assert that spills and environmental damages are overreported, Isaac’s skeptical line of questioning is clearly measured and reasonable. The open-ended questions he poses in this letter also appear to be deftly strategic and highly-informed, coyly deploying the discourse of industry. Despite the Chief’s critical perspective and astute historicizing of the problems his community faces, he remains open to collaboration with industry for the purpose of economic improvement. Such a position was corroborated by other comments some Indigenous interlocutors made to me during the course of fieldwork, captured succinctly in the remarks of a development officer in the Treaty 8 offices during an interview in Edmonton, that “we [First Nations] don’t want to stop development. We don’t want to shut down the oil sands – we hear that in the press, but it’s not us. We just want to make sure development works
[equitably] for everyone.” For Chief Isaac, with little economic opportunity in the region outside of oil, gas, and forestry, industry is a potential pathway for his community to lift itself out of unemployment and poverty – out of the legacy of Residential Schools, the 60s Scoop, and the constraints of the Indian Act – out of settler coloniality. Yet even such a moderate position is stymied at every turn. “Look at all the people I got here,” he said, while driving around the reserve. “I could get these guys [working] on site tomorrow. But industry flies people in from [British Columbia], Nova Scotia…and they’re on our land.” Compounding this bind is a lack of access to the basic safety permits (“tickets”) industrial workers are required to have to operate equipment on site. These safety tickets require the equivalent of a high school diploma, and given the high dropout rate at the WCFN’s school—the consequence of structural racism embedded in Canada’s educational system, participants told me—the possibility to earn even the basic prerequisites for employment in oil and gas are limited. But, Chief Isaac asks, why doesn’t Shell or another company establish more educational and training programs to move more First Nations workers into local employment? Recognizing that decades of inequitable and uncontrolled development are progressively foreclosing the possibility of a return to traditional livelihood, what Chief Isaac and others like him desire is opportunity – the very same thing homesteaders, like Carmen’s grandparents, came to the Peace River Country to find. As he stated in an interview three years after our meeting for the Financial Post, “If we have the ability to prove ourselves, we could show the country and the world how to do things collaboratively and co-existently… I want the ability to share the wealth that has been taken out of our

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48 Such allegations are not unique to the WCFN and are supported both by both my own ethnographic work and Canadian scholarship (Harper and Thompson 2017).
territories for the last one hundred years… [Otherwise,] I am just administering poverty” (Cattaneo 2017). Yet, even this meager request for opportunity continues to be elusive.

In 2013, at an anti-oil sands gathering near Fort McMurray, the chief of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation delivered a speech to an assembly of several hundred Indigenous and environmental activists from across North America. Participants had arrived to bear witness to and pray for the healing of the land disturbed by the open-pit bitumen mines of northwest Alberta. Chief Adam Allan began, “We’re not like…the environmentalists. We don’t want to protect the land just because it’s beautiful; we use the land to feed our families and communities.” He asserted himself, and those on whose behalf he spoke, as land users, rather than conservationists or environmentalists. Like Chief Isaac and others with whom I’ve spoken throughout Alberta, they contend that preserving the land is important because it preserves both the land and the people. This is why, for many, traditional subsistence and wage economies can work together – a mixed economy (Angell and Parkins 2011, 72–73) – and perhaps why the total shutdown of extractive industry is often excluded from the discourse of Indigenous leaders. Oil and gas, in remote places, can provide heating, light, and fuel to power the vehicles used to access hunting, fishing, and trapline areas. Often what I have heard in the province was a desire to have legitimate and sustained participation in the development process—not simply the Traditional Land Use Impact reports that are legally required for the approval of industrial projects, the thing for which consultants “come for just so they can check a box,” in the words of one Métis Elder I spoke with.49 What people wanted was an equitable share of industry’s bounty and a more robust regulatory and environmental monitoring apparatus, given its multiple historic

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49 For further information on land use reports and their problems, see Westman 2013, 111; and Joly et al. 2017.
failure. Knowing that the Peace deposits lie beneath traditional Indigenous lands, then—the very thing that brings extraction to this region—isn’t this request both reasonable and fair?

What’s at the end of struggle against development, when a years-long effort does not yield a more equitable politico-economic arrangement with the state and industry? The Woodland Cree are themselves engaged in a strategic activism, an exertion of Indigenous agency that goes beyond “the limitations of a ‘passive victim’ research perspective…[beyond notions] of stereotypical resistance, [a] local indigenous community [seeking] dialogue to negotiate settlements that would benefit community development” (Wanvik and Caine 2017, 2). Yet both models of engagement with industry—as well as Three Creeks’ residents sustained appeals to the provincial regulator—seem to keep people stuck, caught up in the structural conditions of settler coloniality. Such conditions are not insurmountable, however, but require greater efforts on behalf of non-Native Canadians to engage with their neighbors. As anthropologist Clint Westman observes,

...Industry and government representatives present oil sands development as inevitable, beneficial, and harmless. The flat and sometimes glib technical arguments used by such spokespeople have contrasted strongly with the emotional, experiential, and finally resigned petitions of hunters, trappers, gatherers, fishers, and elders. These hunters and bureaucrats...largely [talk] past one another, without sharing a common worldview. Thus, proposals to benefit the community through development have fallen short owing to the lack of a shared definition of community. (2013, 215)

There may then be a simple and elegant solution to the problems of development in the Peace River Country: the development of a shared definition of community, or at the very least, an effort to understand these fundamental human differences where they’re often lacking (Dunk 2003; Furniss 2000). As long as neighbors in the Town of Peace River are turned away from these issues, though—as long as, in the words of many of this research’s
participants, there remains a “gap” between sick farmers, Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal people; as long as the town remains “hostile” – it is difficult to see how this situation will resolve itself collaboratively and beneficially for all community parties involved. Likewise, it remains to be seen how alleged contaminants impacting Indigenous and settler persons alike can ever be fully apprehended, left meanwhile to drift on the water and wind into both non-human and human bodies.

**Day Two: Carmen**

The proud grandson of an early homesteader, Carmen was a bearded middle-aged man, tall and strong. Yet while we spoke, he was consumed with a racking, wet cough. His language was coarse but direct. When I told an interlocutor in town that I was meeting with Carmen on his farm for an interview, he responded, “Oh, yeah, Carmen! He’s a tough guy…a little rough around the edges.”
Carmen’s life had been upended through the explosive growth of the extractive industry that occurred in the region in the early 2000s. Sitting at his kitchen table near the hamlet of Three Creeks on a frost-covered September morning, he detailed a lengthy chronicle of his attempts to force provincial regulators to finally stop the odours that had saturated both his body and his farmland with some invisible thing. Regulators and health officials alike denied the production of any contaminants that could have conjured his symptoms – but phenomenologically his body was a site of knowing, its (lack of health) produced at the nexus of state power, capital, and coloniality. Having worked in industry for decades, and more recently navigated regulatory red tape, Carmen had an educated guess as to what that something in his body is: volatile organic compounds, hydrogen sulfide, benzene, toluene, or other invisible chemicals (AER 2013, 91), which manifested in his body most perceptibly through his coughing. Worse than his cough, however, were his accounts of leaning over a toilet vomiting blood, or the double vision with which he sometimes struggled after nights of a “heavy dose” from the patch. He suspected that emissions from the nearby pulp mill were mixing with airborne particulate from off-gassing oil production tanks, synergistically acting on his body in ways that are worse for him than even for his neighbours. In the last decade, Carmen’s cattle have all died, he said, and most of his friends and family have either left the area or died of “undiagnosable” illness: “I think [in] this community… everybody, is really, really sick. People have passed away, people are currently in the hospital.” At the time of my first interview with him, he was in the process of relocating his parents to places where they might escape the health impacts of living adjacent to the patch.
Carmen is not alone in his experience of bodily ailments that neither regulatory nor industry representatives acknowledge as the result of production tank emissions. Two other farming communities, both near francophone hamlets south of Three Creeks, began to issue complaints to Alberta’s energy regulator in the mid-2000s. In 2010, facing continuing health issues, area residents formalized an action committee, the Three Creeks Working Group, described by local reporters as “a collaborative effort between residents, industry, and government that meets on a monthly basis [to address] issues relevant to industrial development in the area” (Steele 2011). The multistakeholder working group began with roughly thirty members, and included representatives from several oil operators in the region: Shell, PennWest, Baytex, Husky, Murphy, as well as officials from the regulator (then, the Energy Resources Conservation Board, which reformed in 2014 as the Alberta Energy Regulator [AER]), Alberta Environment, Alberta Health, and local government agencies. This group “met monthly to discuss the concerns and issues relating to the heavy oil production operations…and allowed for education and awareness presentations on various aspects” (AER 2014, 65). The group’s stated goal was to alleviate both the environmental and public health concerns of local residents, hopefully establishing a new set of best practices with which industry could reduce its tank emissions and ease tension between industry and farming families. Carmen indicated that at first this group had attempted to collaborate with the First Nations and Métis communities near Cadotte Lake, but that those communities had different concerns that precluded a productive relationship. He wouldn’t specify what those concerns were.

By 2013 local concerns about emissions had not abated. Between 2010 and 2013, over 710 complaints were filed to the AER, and affected families were already relocating
to avoid the odours that wafted from the patch (Young 2013; Toledano 2014). Symptoms continued to appear in residents’ bodies: headaches, sore joints, exhaustion, sinus congestion, skin rashes, nausea, and changing hair colour. Consequently, in early 2014 the AER convened a panel inquiry into these health concerns. An eight-day event, the inquiry reviewed data and collected testimony from landowners, scientists and medical consultants, and industry operators. The transcripts of this event are indicative of the politics of oil sands extraction in Alberta: one doctor’s critical testimony was dismissed as biased; only a handful of companies sent representatives, typically asserting that they were already capturing emissions and needed no new regulation; and residents noted discrepancies between official reports and their own bodily experience. One resident stated at the inquiry that “There is some incongruence in between our feeling better and their trying to do something about it because we continue to experience ill health. We want to know if it’s related to emissions; there’s not enough study to indicate one way or another, but clearly there’s an association in our mind we want reviewed” (Steele 2014). On March 31, the AER released its Report of Recommendations on Odours and Emissions in the Peace River Area (2014), covering several thematic areas: geological surveys, health concerns, better industry monitoring, regulatory revisions, and stakeholder engagement. One company, whose name is emblazoned on the town ice rink, was ordered to temporarily cease operations until they could resolve several of these emissions problems, but had resumed activity by the time of my arrival to the region in 2015.
On the second morning I spent with Carmen, the unmistakable smell of oil production lingered over Carmen’s farm. The odour was something like the mingling of rotten eggs and freshly poured asphalt. Carmen’s cough had worsened from the day before. That morning we drove my truck around the patch together – Carmen’s “tour,” on which he had already taken numerous members of government, activists, and press – along a grid of high-grade gravel roads that extend throughout the boreal forest from Carmen’s farm northward to Cadotte Lake and other Cree-Métis communities. Signs on the forest edge marked a turn from an agricultural landscape to an extractive one: “NO HUNTING: workers in area,” “No Unauthorized Access,” “DANGER: S2S POISONOUS GAS,” “Warning: High Pressure Sour Gas.” This, despite the road’s passage through public Crown land, unceded Indigenous territory that is still regularly used for hunting, trapping, and fishing. On both sides of us, black spruce and trembling aspen gave way to open areas of muskeg, streams,
beaver ponds, and industrial development. What was one moment a thick, dense forest unexpectedly gave way to clearings for pipelines, pump jacks, and well pads alongside prefabricated trailer offices, work camps, parking lots, and pumping stations.

The extractive landscape of the Peace River oil sands is distinct from that of its more infamous counterpart, the Athabasca oil sands surrounding Fort McMurray. The latter’s bitumen deposits are usually nearer to the surface, and thus may be accessible to industry through massive strip-mining projects. Images of the Athabasca mines are often what come to mind even if one has only a passing familiarity with the oil sands, thanks to the efforts of activists and journalists alike. Indeed, images of these open pits are at first shocking, small-scale photographic captures of what some have called “the largest industrial project on earth” (Black et al 2014). Peace River bitumen, however, has its own unique materiality that shapes the aesthetics of this landscape, too far beneath the ground to extract through strip mining, an extra-heavy form of crude requiring energy-intensive and non-conventional methods of production. For these deposits, industry relies primarily on two in situ methods to extract the resource: steam-assisted gravity drainage (SAGD, “sag-dee”) and cold heavy oil production with sand (CHOPS). The former method is typically used on heavier, thicker bitumen, in which a mixture of steam and chemicals are injected under high pressure into the ground, heating and softening the oil to permit pumping it through wells to the surface. CHOPS is used instead when bitumen is viscous enough to flow without the assistance of steam, pumping both oil and sand to the surface where they are then separated. The waste sand is spread on municipal roads – a contribution to community infrastructure, industry claims – and the bitumen is stored in batteries of black tanks, each two stories tall, until tanker trucks haul it to pipeline terminals. To ensure
the extra-heavy crude remains viscous, heating elements are installed along the side of the tanks, keeping the oil warm but also likely causing the odours residents noted during the AER inquiry.\(^{50}\) We passed a dozen of these batteries as we drove through the patch. As we approached one to photograph it, several white company pickup trucks parked across the road or drove by slowly. Despite being on Crown land – public land that should be accessible to everyone – we were non-industry people and Carmen is a known critic, frequently reporting odours to regulators and the press; the company men in their pickups were clearly surveilling us. Carmen said,

> Every time we go to stop a fucking vehicle is on our ass...And it’s going to get really, a lot of traffic out here after I call the AER, ’cause they have to call all six companies [to inform them of the complaint]...and you’ll see how they’ll be reacting, and then they’re going to call back within two hours and say there was [no odour]. They always do. Oh, he’s got to smell that. But you can’t smell it after you work with it for years...Until you get away from it again, eh?

Such are the problems of addressing emissions from the Peace field: not everyone agrees that the odours even exist. On the town’s Facebook general forum in 2015, one member posted a *VICE Magazine* article regarding ongoing odour problems. What followed were a litany of comments denying that any such smells existed—some from oil workers themselves; commenters claimed that the smells were the product of nervous people’s overactive imaginations. If emissions did exist, said others, surely industry could be trusted to ensure that there were no negative health impacts. Some wrote that industry had provided such tremendous economic benefits to the region that even to speak about potential contaminations could irrevocably damage the town’s good relationship with industry. But after passing through a large dip in the road through a patch of muskeg, both Carmen and

\(^{50}\) Indeed, one of the AER’s recommendations to industry operators was to lower the temperature of CHOPS battery tanks (AER 2014, 64).
I could certainly sense the odours. As a friend working in reclamation told me, these low spots are where heavier gasses such as H2S flow. A wall of smell filled my truck’s cabin, and Carmen immediately began coughing. Even after such a momentary exposure, my eyes began to water, a wave of nausea overcame me, and my skin itched.

These types of symptoms are often more common, and intense, for people who are routinely exposed to chemical vapours in their homes (Shapiro 2015, 370–71). One chilly spring morning in 2015 I sat at the kitchen table of another Three Creeks resident, M., sick from exposure just like her neighbour, who would pass away from an undiagnosed illness only a few weeks later. Like Carmen, M. rattled off a list of the symptoms she experienced after a “bad night.” “You feel it [in your body] before you smell it,” she said, and apologized for being out-of-sorts and dizzy; the night before had been a bad one. Her small ranch home sat on a beautiful acreage, close to where the open farmland ended and the forested oil patch began; on the road in front of her house, gargantuan tanker trucks rumbled past every few minutes.

M. had been a government worker and active citizen in the town. After she and her neighbours began experiencing their shared symptoms, they began a good-faith effort to engage with both industry and the regulator to both discover and control what affected their health. Over the years and building up to the inquiry, her soft-spoken advocacy began to consume more and more of her time and energy, even as symptoms of fatigue began to set in. Like Carmen, when I spoke to her in 2015 and again in 2016, M. was frustrated with the circumstances in which she found herself: ignored by the regulator, feeling isolated as neighbours moved or passed away. These two addressed the situation differently, though. Whereas Carmen continued his press campaign and ceaseless calls to the AER and MLA,
M. began recording detailed notes of her symptoms and the frequency of their occurrence. Where Carmen became what I fondly call a citizen harasser, M. became a citizen-scientist.

Nearly every month, M. emails her reports to relevant parties, which I receive in a blind carbon copy. The numbers and symptoms are strikingly consistent. In October 2017 she reported joint stiffness and pain, sinus congestion, shortness of breath and nausea; the same symptoms appear in every other report. The percentage of days during which symptoms appeared are likewise curious: 29 percent of all days in February 2017, 36 percent in May, 26 percent in August, 40 percent in September, and 32 percent in October. Her quarterly averages are telling: 30 percent of all days for Q1 in 2017, 30 percent for Q2, 32 percent for Q3. One hundred percent of these days resulted in “extensive negative health effects.” Yet these reports seem to go unheeded—by everyone. A note on an April email states, “Please be advised that I have received only an out-of-office reply to my email of March 27/17 requesting additional information, and I redirected the request to another representative in the company. I have received NONE of the information requested.” Such a refusal on behalf of government, regulators, and public health officials to acknowledge these reports is discouraging; as each report claims, residents have “completely lost confidence in the AER investigative process and are no longer calling the AER with emissions complaint.” Given that, apart from the inquiry, Three Creeks residents’ concerns have largely gone unaddressed in the eight years since reports to the AER spiked, their lack of confidence is understandable. The AER’s official website for operator compliance reports three year-to-date emissions/odour complaints for Q1 to Q3 in 2017, indicating that the meticulous data M. supplies are disregarded.
Once, M. and I had planned to meet up at an industry open house, meant to inform residents of an already-approved project. When I arrived at the community hall, the building was locked with a letter taped to the door announcing the postponement of the meeting for four months. I had heard that only a few days before M.’s friend passed away and, out of sensitivity, I did not contact her. Later, I asked Carmen about it during our tour of the patch: “Well, I got that cancelled.” “How’d you get it cancelled?” I asked. He replied,

[The open house] was just a bunch of bullshit and lies and they weren’t prepared and, uh, we got gassed really bad right before that. And [our neighbour] just died, right…like, ten days before that. And I said, if you fucking rotten fucking terrorists want to do this and lie to people right after we buried a neighbour—that you guys killed—gassed. Like, [some of us] went crazy in their minds over this stuff as well as being gassed. It was so traumatizing…Yeah, so [our neighbour] had just died and they wanted to have this thing a few days later and I said, “there’s no fucking way that’s gonna happen.” Respect the dead.

Eventually, we tired of avoiding the white company trucks that appeared every time we passed a well pad. I drove Carmen back to his cattle-less farm, past the industrial landfill, past rows of harvested canola. On the horizon, a blue haze hung over the forest. I was still dizzy, and Carmen was still coughing. He spent the rest of his day on bedrest. In November 2018 I spoke to Carmen on the phone once again. He had recently filed for assisted suicide from the Canadian government. He couldn’t bear to continue bear to continue to endure in his suffering body.
The settler colonialism that produces resource extractive zones runs deep and is foundational to the formation of the modern settler state. Its power effects are evident not only in the ethnographic evidence recounted above, but appear even at the moment of Treaty 8’s imagining, designed as it was to order bodies and space, and render the land settleable.\footnote{See chapters 1 and 2.} As such, the cases above demonstrate not only the coloniality of power relations between farmers, First Nations, industry, and the state, but also within a local space that works – perhaps unwittingly – to dispossess peoples of the land from their land. Through ethnographic work with the persons settler society chooses to turns away from, then, we can look more carefully at the particularities of how local actors assert themselves against a more catholic settler power as it manifests locally, including those moments when
actors disrupt the expectations produced via reductive binaries of passive victimhood or militant resistance in the oil sands, as discussed in chapter 2 (see also Wanvik and Caine 2017, 2). In the province of Alberta, where often even opponents view the oil and gas industry as “here to stay” given its deep economic, political, and cultural entrenchment, both critical and cooperative engagements are vital to the survival of the very communities that extraction impacts most. Actors in the Peace River Country, like Carmen, M., and Chief Isaac, deliberately choose when, where, and how to engage in critique, cooperation, or to strike out on an altogether new path. Although each are caught up in the particularities of a settler coloniality structured through law and policy, they actively adapt their engagement in response to the contingencies of these power arrangements over time.

The coloniality of power that destroys the land and dispossesses the bodies upon it is neither determinant nor intractable, and changes over time. Its power arrangements are, as anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli might describe them, a fluid social “formation [that] pulls us in different directions,” revealing that “it is not humans who have exerted such malignant force on the meteorological, geological, and biological dimension of the earth but only some modes of human sociality” (2016, 7, 33). Dispossessed of the full extent of their traditional lands, however, Indigenous peoples in Alberta’s North are especially disadvantaged from shifting the course of development and power, and again: their dispossession is no anomaly. Marx described in Das Kapital the centrality of the process of dispossession to the formation of capitalism; Rosa Luxemburg in turn argued that capitalism requires “a constant source from which to dispossess” (West 2017). More locally, Dene professor of Indigenous Studies Glen Coulthard argues that

In the Canadian context, colonial domination continues to be structurally committed to maintain… ongoing state access to the land and resources that contradictorily provide
the material and spiritual sustenance of Indigenous societies on the one hand, and the foundation of colonial state-formation, settlement, and capitalist development on the other... Seen from this light, the colonial relation should not be understood as a primary locus or ‘base’ from which... forms of oppression flow, but rather as the inherited background field within which market, racist, patriarchial, and state relations converge to facilitate a certain power effect – in our case, the reproduction of hierarchical social relations that facilitate the dispossession of our lands and self-determining capacities. (2015, 6-7).

Thus, the oil sands industry’s violent effects upon the body are neither coincidental nor accidental, but an inevitable feature in securing land and emplacing settler subjects upon it – and sacrificing some in the process.

This stratified working of power is inescapably violent. Indeed, violence, both ecological and social, often accompanies oil and gas extraction at both the site of production and in its downstream movement. Such violence has been documented and analyzed more generally (Angell and Parkins 2011; Ballard and Banks 2003; Watts 2001) as well as in Canada and the oil sands more specifically (Preston 2013; Sandlos and Keeling 2016; Westman 2013a). More significantly, violence is also attendant to the arrangements of power that first enable and then maintain these relations. This perspective partially reflects what Michael Watts calls “petro-violence,” a concept that indexes “both ecological violence perpetrated upon the biophysical world and social violence – criminality and degeneracy associated with the genesis of petro-wealth” (2001, 189). Yet it significantly expands that which constitutes “social violence” – not only criminality and corruption, but bodily illness, economic disenfranchisement, social inequality, environmental injustice, coloniality, dispossession, and “slow violence.” Violence is not distributed evenly across society, and is impossible to hide away; even in its immediate absence it remains a part of

52 Although the anthropological literature on violence is vast and unwieldy (see Thomas 2014), for my purposes I define it as that which impedes the full flourishing of both human and non-human life.
our lives, ever-present and, like the gasses afflicting Three Creeks, forever threatening to spill over the boundaries placed upon them – classic pollution, “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966, 35). In this regard, and following Watts, the gasses spilling over the tops of CHOPS tanks are representative of the symbolic and material order of the industrial West, which otherwise aims to keep things – and people – in their established places.

The experiences of Carman and Chief Isaac also illuminate the threshold where the invisible becomes visible—or collapses any such distinction altogether. Like “the state,” in its diffusiveness coloniality seems to be an unseen force, akin to gravity or magnetism: something that binds the world together, seemingly intangible. So too with the unseen contaminants people in Three Creeks and Cadotte face: pollution phenomenologically known, although not immediately through the sensorium per se, but through slowly-changing landscapes and bodily illnesses. Like colonial power, we may wish to term this unseen pollution “invisible,” but this would be inaccurate: while the particulates themselves may be unseen, they are made manifest in bodies (human and non-human) in ways that are felt or seen. The unseen-ness of power thus emerges in the bodily sensorium as the seen. Pollution and power are thus known on a secondary order, as experienced in the body and land, but “made visible” through the technologies of a positivist science – denied to neighbours of the Peace River oil sands through inadequate environmental monitoring and public health interventions. The illusion of the intangibility of power and contamination may then be why violence and dispossession in the area are easily obscured by those non-Indigenous residents who are not directly impacted by extraction in the region. The “slow violence” of invisible contaminants facilitates this, foregrounding “questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual. The explicitly temporal emphasis of slow
violence allows us to keep front and center the representational challenges and imaginative
dilemmas posed not just by imperceptible violence but by imperceptible change whereby
violence is decoupled from its original causes by the workings of time” (Nixon 2011, 11).
And once decoupled, settlers may instead index local violence instead to racist narratives
of Indigenous sloth and criminality, as Euro-Canadians often recounted to me during
fieldwork. This, I suspect, is one constituent cause of the town of Peace River’s turning
away from the social suffering of their neighbors mere kilometers away: it ensures
continued dispossession through the relegation of Indigenous suffering – now coupled with
farmers’ suffering – to personal or community failures. Turning away thus denies
responsibility, marking the limits of who does or does not belong to the Canadian polity,
and who is thus then expendable, abandonable, or “sacrificial,” in M.’s words – and,
recalling discussion above of Peace residents’ denial of odorous emissions altogether, all
hanging upon the criteria of what one does or does not feel (and phenomenologically know)
in the body, or what one can or cannot smell.

Can this arrangement change? Lives and lifeways are at stake, and so it must. At
work already are citizen scientists like M., and agitators like Carmen; leaders in the
Indigenous communities such as Cadotte Lake, as well as those dedicated few in town
working to create spaces for reconciliation and collaboration between Indigenous and non-
Indigenous peoples. Each of these actors ruptures the enabling conditions that lead to a
sedimentation of power that seeks to entrench violent arrangements of dispossession, social
suffering, and violence. They demand not a turning away, but a “turning towards.” But are
such ruptures able to achieve sustained and permanent changes to the political and spatial
order of this place, and of Canada, and even the colonized world more broadly? However
it’s achieved, there must be a societal reorientation towards land and space that is collaboratively built following and listening to Indigenous peoples seriously, and upon foundations of relationality and community.
Conclusion

Turning Towards: Pathways out of Settler Coloniality

I want to begin this conclusion with the recognition that most of this dissertation was written on traditional Lenape land, in Philadelphia and New Jersey. Research was conducted on Woods and Plains Cree, Dene-zaa, Blood, Wet’suwet’en, and Coast Salish lands, and I am indebted to both the people and the lands that informed my work. But how far can “recognition” go? Is my “recognition” of these lands more than settler solipsism – the declaration of a “woke” white-settler consciousness that does little to affect material or structural change for the First Nations of this land, whose dispossession settlers currently benefit from? Native scholars are quick and right to point out that the logic of “recognition” itself relocates power to the nation-state; that the power to recognize often assumes the ultimate sovereignty of the settler state over the Indigenous nations that preceded its formation (Barker 2011; Coulthard 2014; Dhillon 2017, 239-41; Simpson 2017). What’s the point of “recognition” anyway, when the state recognizes but does not honor treaty obligations, or your neighbors recognize your existence, but not the violence and dispossession they experience? It surely makes the recognizer feel as though they’ve achieved something, without achieving something material.

Yet it is still critical to force this disruption; and it is a disruption. Settler colonialism works to obscure and normalize its processes to make itself invisible – for even the most politicized settlers, it’s often relegated to afterthought even within settler activist networks except when particular moments (e.g., Keystone XL, Standing Rock) enter the zeitgeist, to flourish for a moment and then slip back into obscurity. So these disruptions are important, because they reveal the utter invisibility of settler colonialism, but also
because they force settlers to rethink our/their relationship with one another in space, and to land, and to subjectivity, even if only for a moment. Yet as this dissertation suggests, it’s the accumulation of many small moments and seemingly-disparate social processes that produces settler coloniality, and over time this makes structure harder to see, harder to identify, and harder to fight.

To apprehend settler coloniality, I have identified and named a range of my own ethnographic experiences in Western Canada which I group as distinct “enabling conditions.” From my own encounters with white-settlers throughout Alberta, and comparing those encounters with those with Indigenous interlocutors, I noted a discrepancy between First Nations’ and Métis description of a sociopolitical, cultural, and economic “gap” between white and Indigenous peoples in Canada, and white-settlers’ refusal to discuss those same issues. This refusal I termed the “pivot”: a pivot away from First Nations and Métis social suffering itself, away from my questioning, and towards stereotyped tropes of Indigeneity which assumed a cultural pathology – rather than a colonial history or settler-colonial relation to explain their pivot (Coulthard 2015).

Ethnographic observation of the pivot led to three major research questions. First, what explains settlers’ silence on First Nations issues in the Peace Country, as ethnographically observed? Second, what is the nature of “the gap,” and how is it maintained and reproduced? Third, In what ways do the underlying social conditions in the Peace Country reproduce and allow dispossession and environmental contamination to proceed in multicultural Canada?

While the pivot appeared as an ethnographic moment leading to these research questions, I argued that white-settlers deploy discursive, spatial legal, and perceptual
techniques to produce a phenomenological orientation towards Indigenous peoples called “turning away.” Settlers turn away from Indigenous suffering because it produces a racializing and sedimented power structure (“settler coloniality”) that allows white-settlers enduring access to land and resources on dispossessed Indigenous lands. But to do so requires a set of phenomenological “enabling conditions” that provide white-settlers the stuff for the interpretations of their experience in Canada and their continued reproduction of the conditions for those experiences. The enabling conditions I identified through ethnographic research were: 1. Political and research practice; 2. Spatial practice and production; 3. Historical narrative and spectacle. Only through these enabling conditions can the tar sands, and perception and experience of them, emerge as a social phenomenon in its fully philosophical sense. Put another way, I argue that:

1. Settler colonialism as a process (and its enabling conditions) constitute the primary framework through which one can understand life in rural Peace Country. That colonialism reproduces itself through discourse and daily practice, and as such requires and produces a turning away from Indigenous marginality and struggle.

2. Tar sands extraction is then a consequence of this settler colonialism (to which activists protest and researchers study in different ways, sometimes reaffirming settler-whiteness and coloniality). Further, that modus operandi of settler colonial disallows or empties Indigenous political sovereignty from/of its full realization.

A complex of orientations, surely! To fill this out and provide evidence for my argument, drew upon a wide-ranging set of data – truly, a panoramic approach to anthropological
study – that moved in scale significantly. In chapter one, I considered both activist and research practices that produce and are constrained by settler-whiteness and coloniality. This included my own experiences attempting an engaged anthropology working at sites of pipeline protest, international Idle No More solidarity events, tar sands Healing Walks, and locally in the Peace Country with the Sagitawa Friendship Centre, Sisters in Spirit, and Aboriginal Interagency Committee. By observing dynamics within these political and research spaces, and my ability to work or not work within them, revealed in subtler ways how white-settler colonialism finds purchase in both anthropological and activist practices.

The second chapter considered spatial practice and white-settler perception of Indigenous and white spaces. The survey appears here as a colonial mapping technique that "made" the Peace Country and consequent Treaty governing – discursively, legally – the relationship between white-settlers, Indigenous communities, and the land. As an enabling condition, space then provides a way – alongside historical narrative covered in chapter three – for settlers to perceive and experience the Peace Country. Typically, these perceptions and experiences, in the words of white-settler interlocutors, upheld white-settler right and belonging to the land despite Indigenous contestation. In turn, the third chapter explored the historical spectacle of Tails, and brought this into conversation with local histories and discursive analysis of how Peace Country residents narrate themselves and the place known as the Peace Country. We noted either the erasure of tokenization of Indigenous peoples in these discourse – i.e., the voiding of history and politics (the colonial relation) between these communities.

Finally, then, we could explore and understand the tar sands as the manifestation of a settler colonial sedimentation of power relations, realized in white-settler daily practice
and discourse. Ethnographically, both farmers and First Nations are classed into a “population of abandonment,” disregarded and ignored even as environmental contamination and degradation eats away at bodies and communities. Power may be invisible in one sense, but violently visible in the havoc settler-colonial power wreaks upon living people. Ultimately, though, white-settlers don’t need to acknowledge or understand this violence. The entire world settler colonialism allows them not to look – or to turn away. And in turning away, they reproduce and perpetuate that selfsame settler colonialism. Nor should they necessarily want to look: by turning away, white-settlers can reap the comforts and benefits of the modernity the Canadian nation-state, industrial capitalism, and the oil industry all provide.

This dissertation could be read in a very bleak way. In attempting to show the ways in which settler coloniality and its processes are constitutive of everyday life – through history, the design of buildings, the use of space, the comportment of the body – settler coloniality may appear totalizing. Indeed, earlier attempts to formulate this thesis argument rested on this impression. What I observed in the Peace Country in 2014-15 suggested an “impasse” to me: a structure of settler colonialism so intractable as to keep the Lubicon Cree in a state of disenfranchisement for over 40 years, for example, or the seeming inability of Indigenous community organizers to bring white residents into their space. From those early experiences I overstated the intractability of settler coloniality; in effect I rendered it as a political structure, per Leach (1970 [1954], 1-17, 313-18), in which settler coloniality retained an enduring stability, that could only be disrupted in moments of political instability: through protest, rebellion, or revolution.
Yet if we understand that culture and the world is always changing, always in a state of becoming and emergence (Turner 1967, 273-4), then this thesis doesn’t work. Moreover, if we accept the conclusions of this research – that settler colonialism is reproduced through daily habit and perception – and we know that people and their habits change over time, we have to also accept that in changing habits of perception we can likewise change the extent to, and ways in which, which settler coloniality finds its durability. Or, ideally, settlers can dismantle it altogether. The point here is that settler coloniality and its ideological processes – settler colonialism – are contestable because of its fluidity, but this very foundation for contestation also provides settler colonialism as its fluidity allows it to adapt to changing social and political conditions. As such, we can examine challenges to settler coloniality both locally and nationally to see where challenges and ruptures to power work, or do not – and why.

But we also have to keep a tension in mind. Canadian multiculturalism is a theme woven throughout this dissertation; it forms the nation-state’s ideological field through which many of the racial violences here are obscured or denied. Multiculturalism is a state ideology, however, and institutional multiculturalism may not reflect local values, ethics, or cultural practice. This may be especially true in the context of Alberta, where an entrenched rural conservatism occasionally butts up against a more liberal federal policy. While the work of community organizers in the Peace Country shows that urban apprehension of rurality fails to capture how rural people work together across partisan divisions to accomplish material benefits for select communities, this still does not mean that everyone in town is united to address Indigenous exclusion. As this dissertation demonstrates, that’s patently not the case. Indeed, I’ve argued that until settlers begin the
work of changing their own subjectivities – formed as there are through historical representation, the use of space, and interpersonal relationships – exclusions, dispossession, and racism will continue to be woven into the Canadian settler polity. The same is true for white-settler subjects in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Thus, with regards to the settler-colonial relation in Canada, Jaskiran Dhillon writes that

In the contemporary context, Canada is often cited as a paradox in the international arena of Indigenous rights and emancipation. In one respect, there is global admiration for the “Canadian way” of exploring models for living together that balance a universal humanity with a commitment to personal autonomy and cultural rights (Kallen 2003; Maake and Fleras 2005, 155). On the other hand, Canada is criticized for failing to match theoretical ideals with changes in the material conditions facing Indigenous peoples and for the persistence of state power that grounds questions of belonging, identity, and rights for Indigenous peoples in a network of historical and current processes of dispossession. (Dhillon 2017, 51-2; see also Barker 2011).

So to conclude, I want to consider some changes I’ve observed from afar, through social media and the Canadian press to consider if and how settler coloniality is changing or not. Understood through the paradox Dhillon points to, we can evaluate to what extent the changes described below are truly reshaping the structures of power in Canada (and thus white-settler subjectivity), or simply provide further multicultural window dressing to cover Canada’s “child in the closet” (Povinelli 2001, 1-3).

**Changes in the Peace Country**

In 2008, parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) – namely, the Government of Canada and roughly 86,000 Indigenous survivors of residential school – established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). Its naming was meant to evoke earlier TRCs in South Africa and Rwanda. Even its earliest organization was controversial, however. Its first chair, judge Harry LaForme resigned over allegations that his fellow commissioners wanted only to document “truth” against his direction as
chair to emphasize instead reconciliation (CBC 2008). In his place, First Nations Senator Murray Sinclair was appointed as its chair, and after touring and collecting testimony from residential school survivors over several years, the TRC issued its report and recommendations in June 2015. In it, the TRC offered 94 calls to action “to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (TRC 2015, 1-11). Extending far beyond concerns “solely” related to residential schools, the report serves as a detailed record of the numerous ways in which the Government of Canada has failed Indigenous nations. In its final call to action, it even recommends changing the language of the Oath of Citizenship to include the declaration that the petitioner for citizenship will “faithfully observe the laws of Canada including Treaties with Indigenous Peoples, and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen” (11).

What the TRC report offers are both a diagnostic of settler coloniality and suggestions on how to restructure Canadian government and society to give Indigenous nations the seat at the table they deserve. On the morning of the report’s release, I tuned into CBC Radio as I usually did, where coverage of the public release in Ottawa dominated every news story. From my vantage point, algorithmically connections to First Nations issues in Canada, and with an ear closely attuned to Canadian press, I assumed the whole nation was united in finally enacting justice for marginalized Indigenous peoples. One of my elder friends had flown to Ottawa for its release, and it was a topic of conversation at the AIC, especially for the education sub-committee, whose work largely involved developing integrative programming to educate settler students on the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
But in town, I heard nary a peep. At the coffee shop, I asked baristas and customers in line if they were paying attention to the TRC release. Some indicated they had heard it was “going on,” but weren’t following events closely. As I bumped into friends on the street I’d ask the same; Indigenous friends were paying attention… settler friends were not. One was not even aware of the TRC’s existence. “Oh,” she said, “I think I heard something about that. What’s it about again?” This was far from a nation united in a spirit of reconciliation. Despite the TRC’s ubiquity on the front page of newspapers and television, some settlers were that disengaged (turned away) from Indigenous issues. If Canada were fully realized in its multicultural ideals, this would come as a surprise; but if we take this dissertation’s argument – that in their perceptions, settler Canadians are turned away from their neighbors, effectively racializing and reproducing settler coloniality – then it’s no surprise at all. It’s simply business as usual.

But most, if not all members of the AIC read the report closely once they were able to obtain it. We discussed how to enact its recommendations at the places AIC members worked – in town government, in the museum, in the library, in the public school system. Some members organized reconciliation workshops. I attended one of these in September 2015, which was open to the public. Yet only Anglican and Catholic clergy – themselves closely attuned to the residential school reports – were the only non-Indigenous persons to attend.

Still, things seem to be changing from afar. As one Catholic nun outreach worker said to me in 2015, the museum never addressed any issues related to aboriginal culture, the truth and reconciliation commission, or the issues facing communities in Cadotte and Little Buffalo. Yet, in 2018, the town and museum’s active Instagram accounts record a
series of efforts at Indigenous inclusion. On June 31, 2017, the town raised the Treaty 8 and Métis nation flags for National Aboriginal Day and signed a proclamation declaring commitment to reconciliation at the Sagitawa Friendship Centre;\(^{53}\) in 2018 the town flew the flag again. On July 30, the town hosted an historic Treaty 8 gathering – the first time since 1899 that all 40 nations signatory to the treaty convened, and once more flew the Treaty 8 flag downtown. On November 14 they raised the Métis flag to celebrate Métis week and opened the indoor town pool to extra free hours. In 2017, the town library hosted an event, “Every Child Matters,” to commemorate the survivors and victims of residential school, with paper crafting and documentary screening at the town museum afterwards. An exhibit at the museum in fall 2017 featured “our community, our culture” which included signage celebrating local Indigenous communities, and its next exhibit showcased Métis culture – “Beyond Fiddles and Sashes.” Since then, the museum has hosted Indigenous Lunch and Learns to celebrate National Indigenous History Month, and has become the new staging ground to begin the Sisters in Spirit Walk, which continues as an annual event for healing and political agitation.

From afar, these images suggest a happy possibility: that perhaps Canada is beginning to turn towards its marginalized Indigenous peoples, and perhaps someday soon the U.S. will follow suit. Hesitation is in order, however. As suggested in earlier portions of this dissertation, what I typically observed as a “decolonizing discourse” operated almost solely among governmental and institutional workers (see chapter 2). Thus, the image Canada projects – both as a state, but also among local social work offices, community centers, and museums – retains its cheerful surety of its own goodness. These

\(^{53}\) https://peaceriver.ca/national-aboriginal-day/
representations are incomplete. On the ground, person-to-person, these discourses and representations may well be reserved only for that symbolic. And while it’s certainly good that these images are circulating – surely an improvement over old colonial state imagery, steeped in white supremacy and grotesque stereotypes – let’s make sure the material promise of institutional representation is realized for living, breathing people. People who are sick, lacking clean water, adequate housing, in a land of plenty amongst vulgar oil wealth on their own lands: these people deserve better.

And yet, adequate resources may finally be realized for the Lubicon Cree: in October 2018, the band was finally able to achieve its land claim with the provincial NDP and federal Liberal governments. Additionally, after years of denial, the Trudeau government finally commissioned an MMIW national inquiry – though like the TRC, its leadership is falling apart, as I’ll discuss below. As one interlocutor stated, these massive changes were only possible through the confluence of political shifts at the provincial and federal levels: during fieldwork, in 2015 Rachel Notley’s National Democratic Party was elected to leadership, after 40 years of Conservative party governance that had descended into corruption and graft. On my final day in Alberta, the night before crossing the border back into the U.S., Trudeau’s Liberals were elected to federal government. Both shifts brought tremendous optimism for a decolonial future for Indigenous nations, where activists could finally imagine the full structural integration of Indigenous nations and governance into the settler state. I’ll return to this in a minute, and see how that promise has been thoroughly dashed, by looking more specifically at the Lubicon Lake Band settlement and 2018’s Mikisew Cree decision. But to get there, I want to shift focus to the
national scale to consider how local social movements have changed the course of settler colonialism in Canada, even if its coloniality remains adaptive and intractable.

*Hope: Idle No More, 2012-14*

The Idle No More movement emerged in December 2012, sparked by First Nations activists in Alberta opposed to the Conservative Harper Government’s Omnibus Bill C-45, which reduced federal environmental protections, and better facilitated the appropriation/dispossession of First Nations reserve land for state development projects (see Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). When the indigenous Idle No More (INM) movement first emerged, it produced some anxiety and confusion amongst settler Canadians: what did INM “want”? Why weren’t INM activists lobbying sympathetic political parties as their primary tactic? In many ways, Idle No More was a familiar social movement: a spectacle of marches, rallies, blockades, and protests that spread throughout the country. Its most emblematic protest was the flash round dance, which appeared in public space: malls, legislatures. But much like the Occupy Wall Street movement, INM articulated a politics that deemphasized formal leadership, was horizontal, and disaggregated. Radical Idle No More activists asserted that the movement went beyond specific legislative claims, and was instead a movement of decolonization justified by the uniquely sovereign status of Canada’s Indigenous peoples. Such a decolonial politics demanded that the state respect and uphold historical Aboriginal treaties, reconsider certain provisions of the 1876 Indian Act, and formally recognize the independent sovereign status of Indigenous peoples – i.e., the legal-political configuration (or, settler coloniality) ordering First Nations communities in relationship to the state. In asserting Indigenous sovereignty, many INM activists effectively denied the legitimacy of Canada’s “colonial”
government. Yet, such a position tacitly recognized non-Indigenous sovereignty as something with which to contend. Indeed, INM organizers demanded direct consultation with Prime Minister Stephen Harper – implying his status as the embodiment of Canadian state sovereignty. Thus, in making claims to indigenous sovereignty, INM activists invoked an historical record of negotiation between two distinct, yet recognizably sovereign peoples.

In its political activity and literature the Idle No More movement explicitly deployed the language of sovereignty in its claims of political disenfranchisement against the Canadian state. Indeed, the movement’s manifesto contends that:

The Treaties are nation to nation [sic] agreements between First Nations and the Crown who are sovereign nations. The Treaties are agreements that cannot be altered or broken by one side of the two Nations. The spirit and intent of the Treaty agreements meant that First Nations peoples would share the land, but retain their inherent rights to lands and resources. Instead, First Nations have experienced a history of colonization which as resulted in outstanding land claims, lack of resources and unequal funding for services such as education and housing. (Idle No More 2012)

Thus, Idle No More activists understood the treaties as both a recognition and manifestation of mutually-assured sovereignty, and the only grounds upon which to hold the settler state accountable.

However, treaties here not only to determine the political and material relationships between First Nations peoples and the federal government. They are likewise understood to ensure the viability of traditional land-use practices and relations of indigenous self-governance that only have meaning within the context of those land-use practices (Huntington and Watson 2012). It is for this reason that the treaties hold significant relevance for tar sands development and protestations against its expansion, led by a coalition of environmentalist, labor, and First Nations and Métis community activists. As noted above, the areas of northern Alberta slated for tar sands development fall under the
jurisdiction of Treaty 8, which has enabled political and legal contestations against tar sands development. Such is the case of litigation against Shell Oil’s expanding Jackpine Mine development. Brought to court in 2011 by the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation – located roughly 130 hundred miles north and downstream of most major tar sands development projects – this legal contestation was based on the grounds that tar sands pollution disrupts the practice of Treaty 8 rights within traditional territory. These protected rights include the ability to use the land for subsistence-based practices, which include fishing, hunting, gathering, and trapping. Because tar sands pollution threatens the health of waterways and air quality, the case was brought to provincial authorities to block the development of the Jackpine Mine project as a violation of Athabasca-Chipewyan First Nation’s treaty with the Crown. Provincial oversight committees have rejected a review of the Jackpine project in its relationship to negotiated treaty rights, and the Alberta Court of appeal has in turn dismissed the First Nation’s appeal for review (ACFN 2012). This has led to AFCN Chief Allen Adam to declare that “our people are being failed by all levels of government,” a statement which resonates well with the Idle No More movement. Indeed, Idle No More and the community activists organizing against tar sands development expansion had significant overlap in their leadership.

Idle No More never managed to defeat the Omnibus bill – speaking to the settler state’s ability to maintain its coloniality despite the abrogation of its own constitutionally-protected treaty law. But what it did do, just like the Sisters in Spirit Movement, was to force awareness of Indigenous issues into settler consciousness, even if only temporarily. As I overheard once in Edmonton, “I didn’t even know that First Nations were unhappy until I saw Idle No More.” Yet awareness only goes so far, particularly when the settler
state is recalcitrant to Indigenous sovereignty. Next, I look at the Mikisew Cree Decision, the current status of the MMIW commission, and the Lubicon land claim settlement – each appearing as a moment in which decoloniality could have been achieved, but to varying degrees of success.

_Hopes Dashed pt. 1: The MMIW Report_

Once the Trudeau government came to power in 2016, one of its first projects – suggested as an indication of the Liberal’s willingness to finally address Indigenous rights – was to commission an MMIW report. The commission can rightly be understood as a success for the Sisters in Spirit; while the healing walk, such as the one in Peace River described in chapter 2 was in part designed to commemorate lost life and console the families of disappeared Indigenous women, it was also a political act, demanding a inquiry from provincial and federal governments to determine the extent and causes of disappearance.

Yet the commission has been plagued by firings, resignations, and a lack of structural support. Namely, executive commissioners resigned over government interference; its sustained requests for a two-year extension to collect more data and testimony were routinely denied by the Trudeau government (in order to match election schedules, critics contend); and that the commission was underfunded (Radio Canada International 2018). Still, Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister Carolyn Bennett has proclaimed the commission a success (Tasker 2018), despite Canadian press referring to the commission as in a state of “meltdown” (Macdonald and Campbell 2017). This leads to further questions: what is the limit at which the settler state and settler society are prepared to meet to achieve decolonial and racial justice in Canada?
In response to two pieces of omnibus legislation the Harper government introduced to parliament in 2012 – the same legislation that sparked the Idle No More movement – the Mikisew Cree First Nation in northern Alberta sued for judicial review of the laws (Raymer 2018). At stake in the contestation were a set of protections for rivers and waterways. Owing to rivers’ vitality in sustaining Indigenous lifeways – for travel, trapping, fishing, hunting – the Mikisew argued that changing legislation that protected the environment was likewise, per treaty, a change to First Nations’ ability to sustain traditional economies. As such, to enact the omnibus bills, the Canadian Government had a treaty obligation to consult with all affected Indigenous parties before finalizing its legislation. The case was a direct challenge to “parliamentary sovereignty” (Raymer 2018) and its ability to enact laws without Indigenous consultation.

So tantalizingly close to a fundamental reordering of the settler polity! If the laws structuring Canadian government and life – and thus coloniality – could have shifted to require direct and robust consultation with Indigenous peoples whenever and however their nations were impacted by colonial law… then perhaps Canada could have once and forever realized its decolonial transformation. Yet such an effort was denied through the court’s legalese. In the Supreme Court’s decision, justices wrote that: “The appellant Mikisew Cree First Nation argues that the Crown had a duty to consult them on the development of environmental legislation that had the potential to adversely affect their treaty rights to hunt, trap, and fish… This Court must therefore answer a vexing question it has left open in the past: Does the duty to consult apply to the law-making process?” Their answer was no. Instead, Justice Andromache Karakatsanis wrote that “two constitutional principles — the
separation of powers and parliamentary sovereignty — dictate that it is rarely appropriate for courts to scrutinize the law-making process,” despite a recognition that this position may contradict the constitution itself (Supreme Court 2018).

Justices chose instead to turn away – to kick the decolonial can down the road. In the analysis of one of Mikisew Cree First Nation’s lawyers, “You can say that five judges said the honour of the Crown [to respect its treaty-based duty to consult] applied… three said, we’ll figure out how that works later… Four said the duty of consult doesn’t apply and we’re not going to mess with the process of Parliament.” The last two agreed that Parliament had a duty to consult First Nations in drafting its legislation, but asserted that the Federal Court could not interfere in the processes of Parliament (Raymer 2018).

Hope Sustained: The Lubicon Cree Land Claim Settlement

If the Mikisew Cree case suggests decoloniality is still just out of reach, tectonic shifts in the Lubicon Cree land claims process (discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4) show that however controversially, colonial binds can be unworked and broken.

After decades of stalled negotiations – during my fieldwork, stalled over the criteria for inclusion on the Lubicon’s membership rolls – federal and provincial governments, along with newer Lubicon council leadership, signed a land claim settlement. A generations-long end to struggle was no meager feat. In the words of Lubicon Lake Band Chief Billy Joe Laboucan, the settlement required an “aligning of the planets” for its success (Gerein 2018). For its 650 members, the Lubicon Lake Band was able to achieve:

1. A land allocation of 246 square km around Little Buffalo;
2. New infrastructure including 144 housing units, a recreation center, and new school;
3. Compensation of $95 million from Ottawa and $18 million from the province of Alberta.
Yet even this resolution was not without controversy. Intra-community fighting, which some attribute to a government “divide and conquer” strategy (see chapter 3 for further discussion and chapter 4 for some short discussion and footnote for caveat) meant that not all residents of Little Buffalo and Cadotte approved of Chief Billy Joe Laboucan’s authority as an elected – rather than the traditional, hereditary – chief. Indeed, the flashpoint struggles of the Lubicon in the 1980s and early 1990s were led by the hereditary chief, Bernard Ominayak, who today still leads the Lubicon Lake Nation (i.e., not Band). The Band, Ominayak’s supporters assert, is colonial: created in 1973 under the auspices of the Indian Act, rather than through a traditional governance structure. In a letter to Premier Notley, he writes that “the Nation remains willing and open to find a mutually acceptable resolution with respect to our unextinguished Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal title that is fair” (McQuarrie 2018).

Despite the endurance of settler colonialism’s legal structures here, though, we can take pause to appreciate the historic moment the land claim settlement represents. After eighty-five years of struggle, and dozens of aborted moments in which parties could have achieved resolution, power shifted and found confluence to restore lost material benefits – land, and thus sovereignty – to a severely marginalized First Nation. The future of this agreement remains to be seen; and only further ethnographic work can determine how community members, beyond the press’s representations, truly feel about the agreement. I’ll be looking forward to my return in 2019 to ask just these questions, and hope the resolution has found in settlers the perception that colonial injustices both exist, and can be righted.
Final Words

What each of the cases above suggest is a need for white-settler vigilance. Settler-state action will only go so far, and to make government action work decolonially requires constant renewal of effort to hold power accountable. It’s an uphill battle, and some anti-colonial actors and activists are so deeply disappointed by the coloniality of Canadian government they choose to organize outside formal channels to more effectively revive Indigenous governance and sovereignty beyond the margins of the state (see Alfred 2005; Unist’ot’en 2018). But vigilance against settler colonialism cannot be reserve for settler-state government alone. If my argument is correct, that race and coloniality are reproduced in settler perceptions, practices, and subjectivities, then settlers cannot be vigilant only against an exterior power: they must also be vigilant against themselves.

In this dissertation, I have argued that settlers perpetuate these inequalities through techniques of avoidance that rely upon racial boundary-making; I term these techniques together as “turning away.” They include historical narratives of white pioneering, spatial practices and treaties that demarcate white from Indigenous spaces, and racist habits of embodied perceptions of First Nations bodies and space. White and Indigenous Canadians in northwest Alberta have lived as neighbors since the mid-nineteenth century. Yet they’re largely strangers to one another, such that interlocutors regularly described the need for Indigenous persons to defend themselves against racist stereotyping and harassment in their daily encounters with settler space. Settler colonialism – has racialized these nations. Settlers have also violently spatialized their lands, to make them amenable for a complex of resource extractions. In northern Alberta, settler colonialism appears as a complex: one
that produces and ties together peoples and landscapes through race and space, producing new political subjectivities, reproducing the settler, reproducing settler colonialism.

To be a settler here is to comport oneself in fear with regard to space – as white interlocutors told me, to be avoidant of “Indigenous space”; to be “protective” of private property next to First Nations neighbors simply living their lives. A host of racializing discourses emerge from that comportment: they pathologize Indigeneity, and they exalt and valorize whiteness. We only need to think of “the pioneer” and Western genre to see this dynamic produce how settlers think not only of themselves, but of their nations, of the landscapes upon which they exist, and of the Indigenous peoples dispossessed and made to be invisible – unrecognized, or pathologized and obscured by a white mainstream – all in order to reproduce settler colonialism. Together, “turning away” provides the cultural conditions under which the settler’s presence and use of traditionally Indigenous lands may proceed as unquestionable to all but a few.

And so, at the end here and in summary, I offer some conclusions: that settler colonialism is an ongoing process; that its processes are reproduced in how all settlers apprehend nature, space, and landscape; and that these in turn produce settlers’ own subjectivities – with violent consequences. Thus, in order to begin the work of deep decolonization – not the piecemeal spectacles that multicultural states pursue – settlers have to begin to rethink themselves and their space not as a given, not as naturalized, not as divinely predestined to make claim to these lands. In other words, we need to reconfigure our subjectivities by understanding ourselves as settlers in our everyday orientations towards, and perception of the world. Decolonization is thus an everyday act; a constant process of considering the settler self in relationship to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle
Island, and the lands upon which we both still live, and should center in our politics and scholarship. Because, after all, this land is not my land, and if you’re non-Native it probably isn’t your land either. All North America is Indigenous land. And that mere, paltry, almost inconsequential *acknowledgement* is just the start of where we have to begin if we want to achieve sustained racial, environmental, and decolonial justice.
Addendum I

Excerpts from Local Publications: Promotional Brochures and Regional Magazines

Peace River and District Chamber of Commerce
Business, Tourism, and Relocation Guide

The Peace River has shaped our heritage for centuries. It once served as a major route of year-round travel for First Nations People, and later was renowned as the main route of Western Canada’s lucrative fur trade in the 1700s and 1800s. Whether it was flowing or frozen, it carried canoes and dog sleds for many of the explorers, voyageurs, First Nations People and the Metis [sic] in our region. As freighters, trappers and traders, guides and interpreters, the local Beaver, Cree and Metis were essential to the survival of the Euro Canadian explorers and early settlers.

Peace River’s legacy is due not only to the beautiful country, but also to the stalwart lives of our early settlers. They all shared one thing in common; each of them fell in love with the land that we now call Peace River. The town and community commemorate these men and women for their works as we strive to carry on their work and passion for the Peace River Region.

Mighty Peace
2015 Visitor Guide

Town of Peace River
Beautiful by Nature. Diverse by Culture. Vibrant by Choice. It took resolve, ingenuity and perseverance for early residents to live with and on the land by the mighty Peace River. From the early commercial ventures of the Canadian fur trade, to Alberta’s early oil and gas exploration, to notable agriculture achievements, today’s profile of the people of Peace River is no less tenacious and creative. Based on decades of such characteristics, the Town of Peace River is a regional hub… The original cultural communities of Aboriginal, Métis and Francophone people are today joined by residents from each corner of the world making their way in the social, cultural and economic features in the Peace.

Alberta Northwest: Peace River, Grimshaw, Fairview & Area
Peace River has been gifted with one of the most breathtaking landscapes in all of Alberta. Valley, river and mountain combine to provide a view that has proved inspiring and breathtaking for several generations. And because of these surroundings, life beside the Peace has resulted in a community filled with stories and adventures that are told everyday in a variety of ways for the cultural explorer to enjoy… History is also important in Peace River. The rich history of the area is displayed at the Peace River Museum, Archives and Mackenzie Centre. Museum staff are filled with knowledge of fur traders and peoples native to the shore; how the Peace was used as a waterway for the commercial steamers and traders as well as the men and women of local legend… So whether you are attracted to an urban setting immersed in culture, history and a wide-range of shopping choices, or
a true adventurist for a heart with a passion for open skies and bountiful wildlife, Peace River has something for you.

Move Up!
Winter 2016 (21)
Pondering Peace River’s Past.

“…The question on everyone’s mind is, ‘How will the Peace Region fare through these difficult times [of falling oil prices]?

The Peace Region of Alberta has a long history of pioneer spirit and diversification. Pioneers came to the region despite the poor road conditions, the muskeg, the lack of people and services and the challenge of clearing forested lands.

The farming potential of the Peace Region was first promoted by the federal government in the early 1900s, but it was not until the opening of farmland for homesteaders in 1910 and the arrival of the rail in 1916 that farming and ranching really took off in this region.

Prior to this the area, explored by Sir Alexander Mackenzie in 1792, was a hub for forts built along the Peace River and a vibrant trapping and fur trade. In the 1970s the massive Elmsworth natural gas field was discovered. Soon after, the Peace River oil sands and other oil finds throughout northwestern Alberta would change the region’s economy for many decades to come.

Blessed with a wealth of commodities, the region and its people have adapted to the many changes in politics, commodity prices and demands and industrialization that have forced the region to evolve… The Peace is evolving, just as it has in the past. Muskeg and poor transportation options haven’t slowed us down in the past and they won’t stop us now.”

Move Up!
Winter 2015 (28)
Travel Alberta

Explore. Historic Resources in Peace River. From the St. Augustine Mission to the Mackenzie Cairn to Greene Valley Park, Peace River has no shortage of fascinating historic sites to explore. Grab some friends and explore these gems or check out the guided historic tours hosted by the Peace River Museum in the summer, either way you’re sure to gain appreciation for the historic resources in this fine region… On the east side of the Dunvegan Bridge, you’ll encounter Historic Dunvegan Provincial Park – first established in the 1700s by First Nations peoples. It was one of the first areas settled in the region.”
The Witness Blanket (62)

There are an abundance of First Nations and Métis communities in the Peace Region, but many of us [sic] haven’t truly explored real Aboriginal history, specifically the cultural devastation caused by assimilation and Indian residential schools. It’s not because we don’t care; in many cases it’s because the opportunity to learn was not presented to us in school or otherwise, at least not in a way that didn’t incite a level of fear or guilt. We owe it to ourselves to set fear and guilt aside so we may be able to keep a compassionate open mind and learning how to love.

Experience the Mighty Peace: …Peace River Cabins & Outdoors (27)

When [H.] and [A.] bought the riverside property that would become Peace River Cabins & Outdoors in 2013, there was nothing there but grass and trees. A year later, they opened their venture to the public.

Even though the buildings are new, the [V.’s] have found a unique way to celebrate the region’s history – naming each of the buildings after an influential person from Peace River’s past. In fact, the property was purchased from the grandchildren of JB Early, for whom they christened one of their cabins. Mr. Early was famous for his gladiola garden – in the 1920s, the paddleboat D.A. Thomas would deposit tourists there by the hundreds to see it.

Welcome to the Heart of the Earth: The Peace River Aboriginal Gathering and Pow Wow (63-6)

“My nieces are young and they want to go to the pow wow – you don’t see that with many other events. It is a great example of how we are one community growing up and how the cultures are intertwined,” he said.

For some, the gathering is an initiation into a brand new world. For others, it is touchstone to all they hold dear. It can also be a life-changing event that alters misconceptions.

Challenging stereotypes and nurturing a sense of pride in young aboriginal people is a critical aspect for event co-chair [W.G.]. ‘It is important. It is an opportunity to see aboriginal culture in a different light. The youth get a chance to celebrate their culture where they are accepted. The way the dancers show pride is important for the youth to see,” she said.
Move Up!
Spring/Summer 2014
M.D. of Fairview No. 136 – Centennial
One hundred years ago, deep in the Peace River valley, an untouched terrain of fertile soil lay rife with potential. While early settlers were still carving out their homesteads, the first governing council of what is now the Municipal District of Fairview No. 136 was formed… Northern people are loyal, honest, hard working [sic] and hospitable.”

Move Up
Spring/Summer 2014 (74)

A Creative Economy in the Watershed of the Peace

The Peace Region has a history of creative energy.

It originates with the tangible and intangible artistry of our [sic] First Nations people. The influence of the northern Boreal Forest was expressed in their tools, food, clothing and spiritual ceremonies. This history and culture has been passed on from one generation to another and still reveals itself in today’s artistic interpretations.

Complementing this original DNA were newcomers to this land who brought the notion of adventure, the expectation of opportunity and the desire for independence.

Some newcomers were leaving the political and social confines that were building in their homelands. Some were avoiding or abandoning elements of their personal lives and looking for new beginnings. Unconventional and uncommon might describe the characteristics of some of these immigrants.

As a composite of experiences, education, languages, cultures, and spirituality, a newly formed disparate community of people learned how to create and manage a sustainable existence in this northern environment. Those who could not simply left for other pastures.

It took drive, tenacity, humor, love, a uniqueness of character, and in some cases, luck, to endure, survive and enjoy the elements of life in the Peace Region. While today’s challenges of living in the North look different, the resolve to venture out of one’s comfort zone, to be audacious and innovative, reminds a unique feature of the people of the Peace.

We see it expressed in our art galleries, markets, museums, libraries, school and college programming. It is also expressed in the number of industrial and agricultural innovations that are created and designed in the Peace. You find it expressed in the numbers of people who came for a three-year work sojourn and have remained and committed to their opportunities many years later.

This ambition to be remarkable is in our heritage, our culture, our environment and how we describe ourselves today.
“Our mandate is to increase opportunities for aboriginal people and sometimes the best way to do that is to engage and educate non-aboriginal people... it seems like our most disadvantaged and marginalized people, for the most part, are native people in this community,” said [T.]. “I don’t want to use wide brush strokes here. There are a lot of other people too, and that’s why it’s important for people to recognize that friendship centres are what we call status blind.”

Status blind means all people, regardless of ethnicity, age or disability status can access the services and programs the SFC provides.

W.P. There’s something about the Peace River Valley that fosters a spirit of gratitude in the people of the region. We are in awe of its beauty, the people who live here and the resources we are blessed with. Why go anywhere else?

D.L. People from large centres often do not understand the ‘connectedness’ and why we would want to be that connected to so many people. Maybe that is what makes rural Alberta different. The Peace Country has so many opportunities for creating friendships and support systems. We ‘know’ each other and truly care about each other. We are embedded in each other’s lives. Life is good.

V.S. I met a couple from England who now live in Manning. Whenever they travelled south they stopped at the Sagitawa [lookout] to view the two rivers join, and said in all their travels this was one of their most beloved views.

B.W. I love that we have the opportunity to enjoy/experience (in the case of -40 weather) all 4 seasons to their full extent. I enjoy the smells of spring, the run off, new crops being seeded & calving season, then comes the budding of the trees, fresh cut grass, long summer nights & Northern Lights, only to be followed by the picturesque beauty of the fall with magnificent colors of orange, yellow & red along with fresh crisp mornings & evening smells of harvest only to end with the very first snowfall which eventually blankets the area and is so beautiful as it shimmers. Yup, that’s what I like about living here.

J.A. The valley is awesome, the air if fresh, less traffic and less noise. Love it.

G.R. Here in the Peace we have all the best home grown foods, fresh God-raised meat and the beauty of seasons.
T.L. The long summer nights, our sun sets, sun rises and amazing northern lights, to the fresh air, from the variety of wild life to agriculture with cattle and grain fields….

J.C. The basic friendliness of the people; the sense of community. You walk down the street and people make eye contact and smile and say a friend “hello!”

M.B. Space, freedom, wilderness and the awe-inspiring valley!

D.L. Aside from the natural beauty of the valley which is reason enough to live here, it is that rural community feeling. We are large enough to have all the amenities but small enough to feel connected to each other, to know each other and to care.

S.S. The valley is breath taking. Boating on the Peace River is amazing. There’s something wonderful to see around every corner. We truly have a one of a kind river.

C.M. The people in this area are independent and ambitious, yet still friendly.
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