Un/Covering White Lies: Exposing Racism in the Era of Racelessness

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Abstract: This project examines a Canadian court case that involves the largest arson homicide in the history of Vancouver, British Columbia. In May 2006 a fire killed four members of a Congolese refugee family (Adela Etibako and three of her children, Benedicta, Edita, and Stephane) along with Ashley Singh, the South Asian girlfriend of the target and sole survivor of the fire, Bolingo Etibako. On October 5, 2008 the accused, Nathan Fry, a 20-year-old white male, was found guilty of five counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder. Fry received an automatic life sentence without the possibility of parole for 25 years. This paper considers this crime and the legal proceedings as a case study that can further our understanding of discourses of race, racism, and citizenship in Canada, and their link to Mbembe’s (2003) notion of necropolitics, what he terms as the politics of life and death. I argue that the viciousness of the crime, an offense involving a white male perpetrator and victims all of whom are racialized as Black and Brown, reflects the embodied practices and psychological processes that are both emblematic of, and integral to, the violence of coloniality, and the racial relations and structural arrangements of present-day white settler society (Martinot, 2010; Razack, 2002, 2005). I show how the crime, the investigation, and the trial communicate symbolically and materially what bell hooks (1992) characterizes as the “terrorizing force of white supremacy” (p. 344).

Keywords: fateful complacency, anti-Black racism, white lies, racelessness, settler colonialism, necropolitics, multiculturalism, white supremacy, white rage
Précis

At 3:00 A.M., on Monday, May 15, 2006 a fire was reported at 2484 Cassiar Street, a public housing complex situated on the eastern boundary of Vancouver, and in the city of Burnaby, in British Columbia. Located at the further most reaches of two fire-hall jurisdictions, nine minutes elapsed before the arrival of the first responders.

Twenty minutes earlier a neighbour had heard the voices of two young men below her bedroom window, one urging the other to “get down,” then to “run” (field notes, September 10, 2008).¹

The occupants of the burning townhouse, a family of six, had arrived in Canada nine years earlier as refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Fire investigators identified five gasoline containers at the scene. Four had melted, while traces of one remained; they determined that gasoline was poured into the townhouse through the ground floor windows. The investigators estimated that 12-25 litres of gasoline were used, with temperatures reaching over 1000 degrees in the three-story structure.

During the trial the jury learned that the gasoline had been purchased an hour earlier at a gas station located a few blocks away.

Five of the six occupants of the townhouse burned to death.

The five homicide victims comprise four members of the Etibako family, the mother Adela, aged 40, and three of her children: Edita, aged 13; Benedicta, aged 10; Stephane, aged 8; as well as Ashley Singh, Bolingo Etibako’s girlfriend, aged 17.

Bolingo Etibako, aged 16, the intended target of the fire and the sole surviving victim, leapt from a second story window, suffering third degree burns to 80 percent of his body.

When he awoke from his coma and was able to speak to the police, Bolingo unequivocally identified Nathan Fry (a 20-year-old white male) as the perpetrator. Homicide detectives subsequently learned that Nathan and Bolingo knew each other; they had been arrested for stabbing and robbing a man at a public transit station in 2005. Bolingo identified Nathan as his accomplice, and Nathan accused Bolingo of “ratting” him out.²

Although police investigators believed that Nathan had committed the crime, they were unable to secure any corroborating evidence. The Vancouver Police Department (VPD) subsequently contacted the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) undercover unit for

¹ The Vancouver police stated that they believed that Nathan Fry did not act alone, however a second person was not identified or charged; as a result, the Department said that the case would remain open until they are able to conclusively determine whether or not Nathan had an accomplice.
² During the videotaped interview/confession with Mr. Big Nathan Fry called Bolingo a “rat,” asserting that he took issue with Bolingo “ratting” him out to the police (field notes, September 25, 2008).
assistance in solving the crime. Following a five-month undercover investigation known as the Mr. Big sting, Nathan Fry confessed to the crime. In 2007 Nathan Fry was arrested and charged.

On October 5, 2008 Nathan Fry was found guilty of five counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder and received an automatic life sentence without the possibility of parole for 25 years for his role in what was acknowledged as the largest arson homicide in Vancouver, British Columbia’s history.

### White Ignorance, White Supremacy, and the Violence of Disavowal

This paper considers the above crime and the legal proceedings as a case study that can further the understanding of discourses of race, racism, and citizenship in Canada, and their link to Mbembe’s (2003) notion of necropolitics, what he terms as the politics of life and death. According to Mbembe (2003), “[t]o exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (p. 12). He goes on to state that his concern is with “figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (p 14). Describing sovereignty as the “right to kill” (p. 16), Mbembe (2003) considers how technologies of power are deployed to categorize people in to those who are to live and those who are to die. Thus, sovereignty signals the ability to identify and classify those who do not matter and are therefore expendable. In this context, elimination of the “Other,” namely those regarded as a threat or disposable, is deemed necessary to protect and sustain the dominant. Although Mbembe’s (2003) work does not refer to Canada, his discussion of the various techniques of social and political power that are exercised over life and death is helpful to my analytical project. I argue that the viciousness of the crime, an offense involving a white male perpetrator and victims all of whom are racialized as Black and Brown, reflects the embodied practices and psychological processes that are both emblematic of, and integral to, the violence of coloniality, and the racial relations and structural arrangements of present-day white settler society (Martinot, 2010; Razack, 2005, 2002). I intend to show how the crime, the investigation, and the trial communicate symbolically and materially what bell hooks (1992) characterizes as the “terrorizing force of white supremacy” (p. 344).

I recognize that the extreme nature of this horrific crime readily allows for the violence to be regarded as an aberration in Canada, a country whose national identity is constructed as
that of a safe haven and global peacekeeper (Arat-Koç, 2005; Mackey, 1999). Slavoj Zizek (2008), for example, argues the need to “disentangle ourselves” from acts of violence that are enacted by clearly identifiable agents,” (p. 1) since they serve as distractions from the more insidious and continuing forms of violence characteristic of this era. He argues for the need to be more attentive to forms of everyday violence such as symbolic violence, and that the violence associated with the economic and political demands of global capitalism, while less discernible, are no less effective, as they are the means through which power operates in the service of the dominant. While I agree with Zizek, I contend that it is precisely because the architect of the arson was white, and all of his victims were of colour, that the brutality of the violence renders the crime instructive (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). As many scholars have noted, ideologies and manifestations of white racial domination do not simply function through explicit acts of violence, but through the trivialization, repudiation, and the failure to notice racialized activities and beliefs (Essed, 2002; Yancy, 2012). I link these ideas by demonstrating how the overt is indeed linked to the mundane, by making visible the social relations, practices, and allegiances that protect and sustain settler colonialism in a country that simultaneously claims a national identity distinguished by formal multiculturalism (Bannerji, 1996; Glenn, 2015; Mackey, 1999). I explore how the politics of life and death are inextricably shaped by the repudiation of the relevance of race and its corollary, the existence of racism, denials of which are foundational to safeguarding white racial domination and settler colonialism (Glenn, 2015; Mbembe, 2003). In particular, I suggest that although the arson homicide represents an extraordinary level of violence, it also signals contemporary necropolitics wherein white European settler colonials regard themselves as real Canadians citizens/subjects whose “human value” (Cacho, 2012, p. 4) is made clear through white racial aggression expressed against the so-called racial Other (Mbembe, 2003).

In his influential discussion, “Society must be defended,” Michel Foucault (1976) outlines racism’s role in the state’s determination of the politics of life and death. He argues that the state (re)produces and creates a system of classification that distinguishes among groups based on the presumed intelligibility of biological difference. In his words,

In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable. When you have a normalizing society, you have a power which is, at least superficially, in the first instance, or in the first line a biopower, and racism is the indispensable precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed. (Foucault, 1976, p. 256)
Foucault’s discussion of the state’s role in the conception and regulation of hierarchies of humanity is helpful to my examination of how white racial domination exists alongside what Eva Mackey (1999) calls the “proliferation of difference” (p. 6). Race thinking has been integral to the making and maintenance of the structure of settler colonialism, and its attendant culture of whiteness, as evidenced by the country’s racial history, which includes genocide, dispossession of Indigenous lands, enslavement, segregation, and racialized immigration policies (Glenn, 2015; Rutherford, 2010; Thornhill, 2008). Despite this past, Canada’s national identity and renown is that of a country dedicated to social justice within and beyond its borders (Arat-Koc, 2005; Tagore & Herising, 2007). As Sherene Razack (2002) explains, “the official mythologies of white nation-states are narratives of innocence: through dint of hard work, the settler conquered the wilderness; the colonizer civilized the natives” (p. 129). Constance Backhouse’s (1999) analysis of the legal history of racism in Canada is also relevant:

the ideology of racelessness, a hallmark of the Canadian historical tradition, is very much in keeping with our national mythology that Canada is not a racist country,’ … ‘[A] ‘mythology of racelessness’ and ‘stupefying innocence’ – these would appear to be twin pillars of the Canadian history of race. (Backhouse, 1999, p. 14)

Drawing on Razack’s and Backhouse’s insights, this discussion is motivated by their understanding that the creation and maintenance of white settler colonial societies involves the pairing of declarations of racial innocence with the violence of disavowal (Tagore & Herising, 2007). I am interested in examining how the denial of histories of racial violence, and the contemporary rejection of the meaning and significance of discourses of race and racism, works in concert with the appearance of benevolence provided by official multiculturalism to bolster and maintain Canada’s identity as a white settler colonial society (Bannerji, 1996).

Toni Morrison’s (1988) presentation, titled “Unspeakable things unspoken,” provides an imaginative discussion of the erasure of a Black presence from American literature that is helpful to my examination of how white racial domination exists alongside national narratives that simultaneously promote the ideology of racelessness and diversity in Canada. She states, “We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily ‘not-there’…. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose…” (p. 136). Pursuing the matter further, Morrison communicates her skepticism as to the practicability and sustainability of expunction, through her query of the “intellectual feats,” and “strategies of escape from knowledge,” that must be
performed by writers who seek to deny her presence in a world formed by her existence (p. 136).

Following Morrison, I maintain that assertions regarding the irrelevance of race, combined with the renunciation of Canada’s history of racial terror and systemic racism, “call attention to themselves,” compelling Canadians to question avowals of virtue and racial harmony. That is, because claims of racelessness and formal multiculturalism are associated with national narratives of “tolerance and inclusion,” (Mackey, 1999, p. 3), they engender notions of a society in which white British and French settler colonial subjects recognize themselves as the rightful inheritors of status, identity, and power in Canada (Razack, 2002; Schick, 2014). As Goldberg (2007) explains, “Raceless states thus silently extend the structure of social arrangements historically fashioned through race” (p. 226). That is, the promotion of the tradition of racelessness and the fact of Canada’s diverse population convey generosity and goodwill, while simultaneously advancing narratives of white normativity and superiority (Bannerji, 1996; Mackey, 1999; Schick, 2014). Thus, while the ideology of racelessness signals the insignificance of race, and likewise the absence of racism, I contend that it reflects a consciousness about race that can be characterized as a “raced racelessness,” to borrow David T. Goldberg’s term (2007, p. 206). Moreover, because expunction and omission are necessary to sustain the social, moral, and psychological investment in innocence and racial harmony, the championing of racelessness simultaneously thwarts recognition, enabling white Canadians in their effort to not see, or contemplate racism, or even the probability of racism.³

I suggest that the narrative of racelessness represents a “white lie”; unlike the understanding of a “white” lie(s) as insignificant, I use the notion of white lie(s) to refer to lies told by whites in the service of power. Charles W. Mills’ (2007) discussion of white ignorance and its link to white supremacy resonates with my interpretation of white lies. According to Mills (2007), white ignorance speaks to “false belief(s)” (p. 16) which are communicated through white peoples’ rejection of the history of racial violence and discrimination that created contemporary racial hierarchies and structures of racial exclusion and hostility. Likewise, I consider the ways in which white lies, or lies told by whites, work to cover, or mask the falsity of the myth of racelessness and the promotion of Canada as a safe haven (Lubiano, 1992). My concern here remains with uncovering the white lies that

³ Thank you to Janine Jones for helping me develop this idea.
reinforce white racial domination to demonstrate how they denote a fateful complacency towards race and racism that is both everyday and systemic (Tutu, 2007).

Thus, I seek to make visible the “colonial absenting,” to borrow Tagore and Herising’s (2007, p. 279) phrase; the images, narratives, and arrangements that safeguard and sustain white racial domination in a country that claims a national identity based on narratives of diversity and openness (Mackey, 1999; Schick, 2014). In what follows I address these concerns in my examination of the relationship between the discourse of racelessness and the communication of white racial subjectivity and white national identity in daily life through various ways of seeing, knowing, and being (Schick, 2014). For example, our proximity to the United States, combined with its acknowledgement of a history of racial violence and the existence of racism, has contributed to the belief that Canada’s national identity is one of racial virtue. Consequently, the denial of the conditions that created this settler colonial society has created a social environment that perceives expressions of racism in Canada as isolated and uncommon, and therefore not as injurious as manifestations of discrimination south of the border (Goldberg, 2003).

This discussion is based on information gleaned from the following sources: my daily attendance at Nathan Fry’s trial in the fall of 2008 (September-October), from the opening arguments, witness and investigator testimonies, through the jury’s deliberations, and the sentencing hearing. In the tradition of qualitative research, participant observation is a key method of data collection and analysis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, the writing of field notes represents the most important way of gathering material obtained via thorough and sustained observation, thereby constituting an essential form of data that document integral and detailed information about people and processes in the setting under study (Kawulich, 2005; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). Correspondingly, I recorded each day’s proceedings in notebooks, recording the testimony of witnesses, the various arguments presented by the Crown, Defence, and presiding Judge I. Pitfield immediately as they occurred. This was a jury trial; consequently the pace and delivery of proceedings were geared towards enhancing audience reception. Good field notes are those that use precise quotations when possible (Kawulich, 2005); this format and structure also made it possible for me to document the proceedings in a verbatim manner. In those instances where I cite directly from my field notes, I use quotation marks and provide the date of entry; however, it is important to note that I did not cross-check my quotes with the official trial transcripts and therefore acknowledge the possibility for error. I also attended a one-day public seminar hosted by the British Columbia Chapter of the International Association of Arson Investigators (IAAI),
which included representatives from the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) and Vancouver Fire Department (VFD) in April 2010.

I begin with a description of the crime seen/scene, followed by a discussion of the early stages of the VPD’s search for the perpetrator(s), the RCMP subsequent involvement in the case, and conclude with a discussion of the trial. Following in the critical race theory tradition of counter storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), I seek to unsettle public and political discourses that regard Canada’s ethnic and racial diversity as evidence of its effectual embrace of difference.

The Crime Seen/Scene and Heard

Before the arrival of the first responders, there were two explosions. A neighbour, whose apartment faces the townhouse on fire, was woken up by the sounds of screaming (it had been a hot night and all of her windows were open). When she opened her eyes, her whole bedroom was orange. The screaming grew louder; barefoot and half-dressed she ran across broken glass cutting her hands and feet to the burning townhouse. She tried looking into the windows – her hair was making crackling sounds and she could smell it burning. The heat was intense, but she did not let it deter her. Days later the skin on her face and body peeled off; she testified that it was like having an extremely bad sunburn. She could hear 8-year-old Stephane and 10-year old Benedicta shouting her name from the top floor of the engulfed residence; she had gotten to know the youngest children because they had spent a lot of time playing with her daughter. She urged them to jump, but they refused, and moments later they fell silent. She panicked because she wasn’t strong enough to smash the door. She noticed a gas canister and the intense odor of gas on the patio before running around to the front door. She had no luck there either. Both the front and back doors were closed, the doors locked. She yelled for the neighbours to help but no one came, some merely watched from their windows.

Jeffrey Burns, formerly a captain at the No. 12 Firehall, was the duty investigator on call that night. When he arrived at the housing complex, the 25-year veteran who had responded to over 1000 fires as a fireman, including 300 structural fires, considered this the largest explosion he had ever seen. The perimeter of the scene was two blocks wide; glass was blown 28 feet and had a shrapnel effect with pieces strewn everywhere—one piece was embedded in a tree 109 feet from the scene. According to Burns’ testimony as an expert witness, “what sticks out and will remain with him forever,” (field notes, September 15,
2008) was the scene he encountered upon his arrival. He noticed two trees crackling in the heat with five body bags lying side by side. From the size and shape of the bags, he realized that he was dealing with children. The trauma of the incident would eventually lead him to take an administrative position.

Fire investigators confirmed the official cause of the blaze as the deliberate ignition of a significant amount of a liquid accelerant, gasoline, introduced through the ground floor windows that was subsequently ignited by a propane torch. During his testimony Bolingo recounted how his girlfriend, Ashley, woke him up to say that she heard water running; he told her it was the aquarium and fell back asleep. Some time later he would awaken in the family room, the room where the fire began, engulfed by flames. It was at this point that he jumped up, waking Ashley and they headed toward the stairs, up to the second level. Bolingo made it to the kitchen, escaping through the window. Ashley, however, succumbed to the smoke—her remains were found at the front door, the deadbolt still in place.

Bolingo Etibako, the intended target of the fire and its sole survivor, leapt from a second story window, suffering third degree burns to 80 percent of his body. A police officer at the scene described encountering a young Black man sitting on the grass, screaming and crying, talking about his family. She recounted how Bolingo’s skin was “literally dropping off of him,” and that “his face appeared to have melted” (field notes, September 10, 2008). Bolingo would be placed in an induced coma for two and a half weeks, following which he remained in the burn unit for nearly three months and endured multiple surgeries.

The Investigation

During the first two weeks following the fire, the police pursued several avenues of investigation: a) “the trouble back in Africa theory”; b) the $250.00 debt theory; c) the “all round asshole” theory; and d) the “not with my daughter,” South Asian “knuckleheads” theory (McLaren, 2010). In brief:

a) The “trouble back in Africa” theory: The police wondered if the arson was linked to the family’s connection to DRC. The father had ties to the previous government before it was overthrown. Had his actions there resulted in the death of his family in Vancouver, British Columbia several years later?4

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4 In 1997 Tutsi and anti-President Mobutu forces took over, renaming Zaire the DRC and Laurent Kabila became president. In subsequent years the Congolese Liberation Movement rebels, and the Rally for Congolese Democracy have been at war, while neighbouring countries Uganda and Rwanda participated in DRC’s civil war. In 2002 peace negotiations resulted in a deal between Kabila and the principal rebel groups.
b) The $250.00 debt theory: Bolingo was targeted because he was involved in the drug trade and this slaughter of his family and girlfriend was in response to an unpaid drug debt of $250.00.

The “all round asshole” theory: Bolingo started the fire because, according to Detective Kevin McLaren (2010), he was “just an all-around asshole... He was not a nice guy.” In addition to having a criminal file with the police, Bolingo was brought in as a suspect because the police had initially received information that this was a domestic disturbance (Bolingo had had a fight with his mother earlier that day).

d) The not with my daughter South Asian “knuckleheads” theory: Members of Ashley Singh’s family, or “knuckleheads” from the South Asian community, as Detective McLaren (2010) referred to them during the trial, did not like the fact that she “was going out with a Black fellow,” and so they retaliated (McLaren, 2010).

Un/Conscious Denials and Performative Erasures: White Racial Knowledge and the Tolerability of Violence

A metaphor that is central to this discussion is that of the cover story, a narrative that is designed to capture our attention, shifting our focus away from other stories. It is precisely because one of the racial hegemonies of our time is a consciousness that suspends public recognition of racial hierarchies and structured exclusions that I refer to the notion of a cover story. I am using the metaphor to refer to the ways in which formal multiculturalism, the fact of the country’s diverse population, and the ideology of racelessness work in concert to conceal the history of white supremacy and racial violence that created the Canadian nation state. In this context, white ignorance plays an important part in the denial of the reality of racial inequality, racial hierarchies and racial oppression. Wahneema Lubiano’s (1992) description of a cover story offers a discerning interpretation of the function of cover stories in the organization and operation of power. Lubiano’s description is useful to my discussion of how national narratives of Canada as a welcoming and safe haven for Black and Brown people

The ensuing years have been marked by tension and in 2005 a new constitution was introduced and a new national flag was implemented. In 2005 the International Court of Justice concluded that Uganda must reimburse DRC for its exploitation of the country’s resources and human rights violations in the years 1997-2003. In 2006 the first democratically held elections were held since the era of Mobutu.
exist alongside an investment in safeguarding white racial domination and related ongoing settler colonial projects. According to Lubiano (1992),

Cover stories cover or mask what they make invisible with an alternative presence; a presence that redirects our attention, that covers or makes absent what has to remain unseen if the seen is to function as the scene for a different drama. One story provides a cover that allows another story (or stories) to slink out of sight. Like the ‘covers’ of secret agents, cover stories are faces for other texts, different texts. They are pretexts that obscure context, fade out subtexts and, ... protect the texts of the powerful. (Lubiano, 1992, p. 324)

Following Lubiano (1992), I contend that the VPD’s singular identification of Black and Brown malfeasance in the early weeks of the investigation acts as a cover story, because it shifts our attention away from the broader context of the legacies of violence and systemic racism. Moreover, this story contributes to a fateful complacency that is integral to the maintenance of settler colonial society because it normalizes narratives of white innocence, while simultaneously locating those racialized as white as the real citizen/subjects of the Canadian nation state. Similarly, just as the primary undercover operator (PUC) had a cover story—that he was a lieutenant to “Mr. Big,” the undercover police officer who holds the top ranked position in a fictional criminal organization—Nathan Fry had a cover story for the night of the crime—he was busy robbing a marijuana grow operation. The ensuing section considers the VPD’s investigation, the brutality of the crime and the aftermath to make visible the various cover stories that were offered to conceal the white racial subjectivities, cultural practices, and social arrangements that animate and maintain white racial domination.

**Fade to Black**

Returning to the VPD’s four initial avenues of investigation, it is readily apparent that each of the theories advanced by law enforcement is organized around the white settler colonial gaze. For example, white racial subjectivities are conceived and communicated through the coexistence of the stereotype of Blacks/Blackness as dangerous and the attendant denial of anti-Black racism as a motive for the crime (Backhouse, 1999; Gabriel, 1988).\(^5\) Moreover, the notion that the cause of the arson may be due to the family’s origins in DRC.

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\(^5\) I am mindful of the fact that one of the victims is South Asian, however, my concern is with Nathan’s relationship with Bolingo, and the fact that the arson occurred at the Etibako family home.
raises the possibility that the assumed “barbarity” of Black Africans has travelled across the ocean. This framing is not made explicit; rather, it is organized around a Western interpretation that regards Africa as a place that is primitive, menacing, and, ultimately, out of control (Cacho, 2012). This simplistic and enduring construction of the African continent is typical of the West’s efforts to institute an impenetrable boundary between those deemed civilized and uncivilized, and those regarded as superior and inferior. As Achille Mbembe (2001) explains in his important work, On the Postcolony, this view of Africa has long been the means through which the

West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity. And Africa, because it was and remains that fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it thinks it signifies, is not simply part of its imaginary significations, it is one of those significations. (Mbembe, 2001, p. 2, emphasis in original)

Crucially, this identification of a suspect originating in the DRC reinforces nationalist claims that Canada is a safe haven. Moreover, the Etibako family’s status as refugees locates the family as outsiders; they are from “elsewhere,” implying that they brought trouble with them, or trouble followed them. Consequently, this avenue of investigation reveals how racialized discourses of citizenship and belonging are written on to bodies that arrive from beyond the borders of Canada. In addition, their status as refugees marks them as being of a lesser status, or value, than “real”—i.e., white—Canadians (Cacho, 2012). In this way the white cultural assumptions of supremacy are advanced through notions of safety and threat (Gabriel, 1998; Martinot, 2010).

The second avenue, the proposed drug dealer debt theory, is a variation on the first in that it too is a narrative that emphasizes the discourse of Black deviance. According to this theory, the family was killed because Bolingo had failed to repay money he owed for a drug transaction; as a Black criminal Bolingo was suspected of violating the criminal code by failing to pay a drug debt. Here the familiar image of the Black male lawbreaker is re-racialized to portray a figure incapable of adhering to the “way things are done” in the criminal underworld.

The third theory alleges that Bolingo started the fire because he had had a fight with his mother earlier that day (which happened to be Mother’s Day). According to Detective Kevin McLaren (2010), Bolingo had a criminal background that was on file with the VPD, and he was “just an all-around asshole.” I would suggest that McLaren’s characterization of
Bolingo communicates an understanding of the organization and operation of the Canadian racial landscape; McLaren’s identification of Bolingo reiterates whiteness as inherently innocent and superior in relation to Blackness. The connection that the Detective made between Bolingo’s Black maleness and his demeanor is reminiscent of Fanon’s (1967) recognition that the Black body is located in an “historico-racial schema” (p. 111) wherein the meaning of his presence is recognized outside of his experience: Blackness signifies the “already known.” McLaren’s view of Bolingo illustrates the normalization of white knowledge of Blacks/Blackness, revealing how ideas about race difference are the means through which “power masks itself as nature” (Farley, 1997, p. 467). In sum, the Detective’s perception of Bolingo reproduces public discourse that regards whites as deserving and legitimate citizen/subjects to whom Canada rightfully belongs (Schick, 2014).

The fourth perspective asserts that the interracial relationship between Bolingo and Ashley Singh prompted this act of anti-Black racism by her South Asian friends and/or family members. According to Detective McLaren, members of Ashley Singh’s family, or, as he called them, “knuckleheads” (2010) from the South Asian community, were opposed to her dating a Black man, and so they retaliated.

It is instructive that all four of the VPD’s initial avenues of inquiry invoke a discourse of Blackness as a threat. This perception of the cause of the crime not only renders the possibility of a white male perpetrator implausible, but this absenting of whiteness also simultaneously devalues and dehumanizes Black (and South Asian) people by refusing to recognize that they are the recipients of racist violence (Cacho, 2012; Tagore & Herising, 2007). All told these avenues of investigation authorize white humanity to the detriment of Black and Brown people (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Thus, the violence of Canada’s ongoing settler colonial projects, and the attendant “traumatic pain and anguish that remains a consequence of white racist domination,” are denied (hooks, 1992, p. 341).

While the extreme nature of the crime facilitates claims that this kind of violence is unusual, the conspicuousness of the crime also undermines the longstanding assertion that Canada is indeed a place of refuge. James Baldwin’s (1976) incisive commentary about race and power is useful: “[T]he victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: he, or she, has become a threat” (p. 134). It is precisely because the deaths of these racialized people have the potential to expose the myth of racelessness, and the white lie of benevolence, that responsibility for the crime must be re-assigned to the victims. The basis for the accusation is connected to the fact that they are refugees from the DRC, thus they occupy a status that already distances them from the body politic. That is, members of the Etibako family—as well as Ashley Singh—occupy a devalued standing within the
hierarchies of humanity associated with white supremacy and settler colonial society (Cacho, 2012; McKittrick, 2006). Thus, the dehumanization of the racially subjugated illustrates contemporary necropolitics, wherein the humiliated are deemed disposable (Mbembe, 2003).

Each interpretation also illustrates how representatives of the criminal justice system internalize and perform white racial logics and judgments that conceal the truth of what bell hooks (1992) defines as the “terrorizing force of whiteness” (p. 344). Martinot’s (2010) interpretation is also relevant: “[r]ace’ and whiteness remain a power hierarchy that takes that criminality as its tradition.” He adds, “the socio-political function of that criminalization is precisely to decriminalize whites in their acts of racialization. It is the relation between the criminalization of others and white self-decriminalization that marks the history of race and whiteness” (p. 20). Thus, the denigration of Black people/Blackness is necessary to reinscribe the racial boundaries of the Canadian nation as white.

In sum, racialized meanings pervade every element of the VPD’s initial interpretation of the crime, both in terms of the white settler colonial gaze, which explicitly identifies the racial Other, as well as in the co-construction of a white racialized identity that, although unmarked, was the standard against which the status and value of Black (and Brown) life was measured. Thus, the VPD’s line of inquiry simultaneously relies on, and sustains, the white racist fantasy that whites need to fear Black people/Blackness (Fanon, 1967; hooks, 1992).

**Terror, White Settler Colonial Power, and the Politics of Life and Death**

When homicide investigators finally got word that Bolingo was out of his coma and available to answer their questions, they had one question: did he have any idea who might have murdered his family? Without hesitation Bolingo replied: Nathan Fry.

The detectives subsequently learned that the two men had committed some crimes together, that they had been arrested together, and consequently they had spent time together in youth detention, and that Nathan had accused Bolingo of “ratting” him out (field notes, September 25, 2008). With no other witnesses or evidence to definitively tie Fry to the crime, but with enough circumstantial evidence to indicate his status as the prime suspect, the VPD turned to the RCMP undercover unit. As the head of the unit testified during the trial, it is an “assistance unit”; they set conditions for the target and get the target to “talk about participation in the offense if he has any participation” (field notes, September 16, 2008).

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6 Martinot’s focus is on the U.S., however, it is evident that his analysis resonates with the organization and operation of Canada’s white settler colonial society.
RCMP planned a sophisticated undercover operation, an approach popularly known as the crime boss investigation, or Mr. Big sting.

As a member of the RCMP undercover unit described during the trial, a Mr. Big operation is a covert project wherein police officers act as members of the criminal underworld. The goal is to develop a sting that would engage the target and facilitate the conditions for s/he to talk about his/her participation in the offense if in fact s/he was involved in a crime. The final phase of the operation involves a meeting between the target and Mr. Big, the man who holds the top ranked position in a fictional criminal organization. The target is told that s/he will have an opportunity to move up the ranks provided s/he was not involved in any issues that might harm the organization. However, if the target was involved in any illicit activity, Mr. Big has the means to clear it up. The undercover operators realized that the personality of Nathan Fry, someone who was solitary and resorted to bragging, would be susceptible to their overtures if they appealed to his need for belonging and power. It was decided that the key operator would behave as an older brother to Nathan, operating under the cover story of being a gang lieutenant to the fearsome Mr. Big. Nathan was told that Mr. Big liked loyalty and honesty. Five months later, Nathan Fry confessed to a hidden video camera, and the undercover operator known as Mr. Big, that he was behind the arson that led to the deaths of Ashley Singh along with four members of the Etibako family.

**Women and Children First: Diversion Strategies and More Cover Stories**

As explained during the trial, the RCMP’s undercover unit identified the crime as one that involved violence against “women and children,” and thus felt it necessary to establish Mr. Big as a man who didn’t respect “women” (field notes, September 16, 2008), performing a scenario in front of Nathan that showed the PUC enacting violence against a woman racialized as white. I contend that the RCMP’s characterization of the offense, and their decision to design a scenario involving the assault of a white woman to earn Nathan’s loyalty, is problematic because it ignores the particular forms of oppression that affect Black and Brown women and children owing to the history of their engendered racialized identities and status in relation to imperial and settler colonial projects (Razack, 2005). Thus, I maintain that the composition of this episode involves the privileging of gender over race, and represents a technique of denial that “de-races the violence,” to borrow Sherene Razack’s phrase (2002, p. 126), that is intrinsic to the organization and operation of settler colonial society.
Correspondingly, the suggestion that the fact that the alleged perpetrator was white, and all of his victims were Black and Brown had no bearing on the scale of the violence and its aftermath is a further aggression and humiliation that denies the humanity of the victims (Farley, 1997). That is, the denial of the relevance of race obscures how Nathan’s actions reflect his sense of white racial identity that incorporates superiority and entitlement (Schick, 2014; Yancy, 2012). I contend that the conspicuousness of the offense is aligned with the embodied practices and psychological processes that are demanded, and created by, the violence of coloniality and the structural arrangements of white settler society. Simply put, the killing of members of the Etibako family and Ashley Singh is tantamount to their expulsion from the nation; their deaths are the means through which Nathan Fry affirms and defends his white male identity as well as the whiteness of the Canadian nation (Martinot, 2009; Razack, 2005).

Furthermore, the nomination of “women and children” is hitherto racially normative; the omission of race precludes the possibility of arson as a manifestation of anti-Black racism and therefore a hate crime. Consequently, the RCMP’s characterization of the offense maintains gender and racial hierarchies because this interpretation rejects the complexity and diversity of the lives of Black and Brown women and children by placing them in a discursive position that marginalizes and/or negates their identities and experiences (Crenshaw, 1994).

Thus, the centrality given to gender functions as a cover story erases, or “e-races,” the racial element of the crime; the erasure of race constitutes a white lie and therefore this practice is in keeping with prevailing national narratives that race does not matter, and by extension this was not an act of anti-Black racism. That is, the RCMP’s un/conscious absenting of race represents a favoured perception of reality that indicates a specific understanding of race. Subsequently, the RCMP’s “unseeing” of race should be viewed as an avoidance strategy that reproduces the ideology of racelessness, a myth that supports Canadians in their efforts to not see, or comprehend racism, or consider even the possibility of the existence of racism (Tagore & Herising, 2007).

**Does It Matter If You Are a Black Rat? Or, Are All Rats Alike?**

...how people get mad, how that escalation from prejudice, to hate, to violence occurs, what and who is hated, and how it is expressed, is not unrelated to the world around us. (Franklin, 1991, p. 9, emphasis in original)
This section examines how Nathan Fry’s (NF) sense of white racial identity, racial supremacy, privilege, and belonging is communicated through his designation of his former friend, Bolingo Etibako, as a (Black) “rat” (Razack, 2005; Schick, 2014). Following Ursula Franklin’s keen observation about the relationship between prejudice, hate, and violence, I propose that the motive for the crime is inextricably linked to the identity of the perpetrator of the crime. That is, while the motive for the crime is indeed revenge, it is an act of retaliation actuated by racial hatred. This exchange occurred during Nathan Fry’s video taped confession to Mr. Big, which was shown to the jury (field notes, September 25, 2008):

Mr. Big: “You went there - what did you plan on doing?”
NF: “Burn it down.”
NF: “I saw a light on in his room ... I had been in the house many times, so I knew the layout and shit.”
NF: “I really fucking got him.”
NF: “He’s Black, ... not so much anymore” [Mr. Big: “I guess not”] “... pink a little bit.”
NF: “There would have been no charge if he’d kept his fucking mouth shut. But because he’s so African, they didn’t think he’d understand his rights or something like that ... I went in for six months.” (Bolingo was released on bail)7

Nathan Fry took the stand in his own defence on September 29th, several days after the Crown showed his videotaped confession to the court:

Philip Riddell (PR), Nathan Fry’s lawyer: “Did you have a racial issue with Bolingo?”
NF: “He was my best friend before he ratted me out so, ... no.”
PR: “What was your issue with him?”
NF: “He was a rat.”
NF: “When I saw him (Bolingo) again in the Youth Detention [Centre] in Burnaby, I jumped on him every chance I got...I would beat him up. [PR: “Why?”] Cause I looked after the kid, and he ratted me out...that’s not cool.” (field notes, September 29, 2010)

The preceding statements signal contemporary necropolitics, revealing the psychological and embodied elements of patriarchal racial violence, wherein those identified as a racial Other are deemed disposable (Mbembe, 2003). Bolingo’s actions challenged Nathan’s sense of self; consequently Nathan’s contempt for Bolingo, and the vicious brutality

7 The “something” that Nathan Fry is referring to involves both men being arrested for a stabbing that took place at a Vancouver Sky Train (rapid transit rail) station.
of the crime, are the means through which Nathan makes himself known to the so-called Black Other, and it is how Nathan recognizes and expresses his status as a white male in Canadian settler colonial society (Fanon, 1967; Schick, 2014).

Thus, in order to “restore” the racial order Nathan Fry expresses his white male rage “with interest” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 145); he knew that Bolingo’s family was home that night and by his own admission, he knew the design of the interior. Remember the five cans of gasoline? Clearly this amount of liquid accelerant would kill Bolingo—it would undeniably kill all of the occupants of the house as well. Consequently, although Bolingo was Nathan’s intended target, I contend that he also meant to obliterate Bolingo’s entire family, destroying the bodily evidence of (their) Blackness (McKittrick, 2006).

Nathan’s claims also convey the animus and character of white supremacist discourses. The ferocity of the language and the graphic images he used to describe Bolingo’s skin following the fire convey the pleasure Nathan draws from the violation of Bolingo’s Black male body (Farley, 1997). In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon (1967) offers compelling insight about the psychology of domination that that is expressed and experienced through the white colonial gaze. In his words, “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolo[u]red, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad... the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger” (p. 113). Building on Fanon’s observations, following the arson, Bolingo is forced to inhabit and experience his (scarred) body and his Black (male)ness anew.

That Bolingo Etibako lives alongside the death of five people that he loved means that his life personifies the status of the “living dead” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 40). As Mr. Big says to Nathan Fry during his video confession, “the fact that Bolingo survived, this is actually better, because ... he must live with the fact that his mother, his brother, two of his sisters, and his girlfriend are dead” (field notes, September 2, 2008). This immeasurable suffering, Mr. Big suggests, is better than simply killing him. The figurative expulsion of Bolingo from the living signifies what Foucault (1976) describes as “indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection” (p. 256).  

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8 In March 2008 Bolingo was granted a 20-month conditional sentence after pleading guilty to bank robbery. He told the judge his actions were a “desperate act” (Sinoski, 2008, para. 1) in an effort to provide for his pregnant fiancée and his family. In November 2010, the Immigration and Refugee Board announced that despite his conviction, based on compassionate grounds, owing to the loss of his family, consideration of his then two-year old son, and mental health issues, Bolingo would not be deported.
Furthermore, the embodied nature of Bolingo’s experience ensures that he will experience the violence much more intensely. Returning to the metaphor of the cover story, I contend that Nathan’s claim that he set the fire as retaliation for Bolingo’s violation of the criminal code (i.e., he ratted) is a white lie. That is, Nathan Fry’s categorization of Bolingo as his enemy and his inferior is the means through which Nathan constructs himself as the embodiment of a true citizen subject. In sum, white settler colonial projects rely on these kinds of acts of racial violence to both delineate the boundaries and to sustain the atmosphere of hostility and terror that has been foundational to the reproduction of white racial domination (hooks, 1992; Yancy, 2012).

The Trial

On September 8th, 2008 the trial of Nathan Fry began. This final section considers the dis/appearance of racial discourses during the hearing.

The Crown

The Crown’s case was straightforward—the established motive was that Nathan Fry had wanted to kill Bolingo and his family because, according to the accused, Bolingo was a “rat,” or an informer, which was unacceptable according to the dictates of criminal culture. The Crown also offered a cover story: the arson was revenge on a rat. The Crown’s evidence: The videotaped confession.

The Defence:

PR: “First question—on May 15, did you cause the fire?”
NF: “Absolutely not.” (field notes, September 29, 2008)

White... like ... Nathan

So, who is Nathan Fry? During his testimony Nathan expressed pride in his German heritage, describing himself as a “violent guy,” and a “super careful criminal,” who made “good money” robbing marijuana grow houses, and dreamed of joining the criminal underworld (field notes, September 29, 2008). Nathan also asserted that his mother regarded members of the Hell’s Angels gang among her cohort of friends.
When asked about his whereabouts the night of the fire, Nathan presented an odd choice of alibi, claiming that he could not have committed the crime, since he was busy robbing a marijuana grow operation—the very site where, in his earlier testimony, he had proclaimed that, during the attempted robbery, he had been threatened at knife point. It is notable that despite having been to the house on two occasions, Nathan was unable to provide its address to the court.

I would suggest that Nathan Fry’s testimony demonstrates an understanding of Canada as a place where he belongs—and Bolingo does not. Both young men were involved in the drug trade—what is to be made of the fact that Nathan offers stealing from marijuana grow houses as an alibi, while claims of Bolingo’s drug dealings meant that he was deemed a possible suspect in the death of his family? Nathan’s account of his whereabouts reveals assumptions about his sense of entitlement, reiterating the privilege of movement and conduct that are the hallmarks of settler colonial projects. That is, Nathan’s sense of self is expressed through his recognition that his status and identity offered him the opportunity of “presumptive innocence,” that stands in contrast to the fact of Bolingo’s Blackness, and, therefore, his “presumptive guilt” (Yancy, 2012, p. 164).

A male undercover RCMP officer, a witness for the prosecution, described a four-hour drive in Québec he took with Nathan during his testimony. On the drive, Nathan verbally expressed his antipathy towards Black people, proclaiming that “he hated niggers” (field notes, September 22, 2008). The undercover officer stated that while Nathan was typically undemonstrative, his demeanour changed when he spoke of Black people. According to the officer, he evinced “angriness” when he spoke of Black people, and that Nathan had said “niggers were too lazy.” During their journey the accused had also spoken of having had a Black friend who, in Nathan’s words, “was weak, and because of it they got caught doing something” (field notes, September 22, 2008). That same friend had “ratted him out” and consequently Nathan had spent time in jail. Nathan’s characterization of Bolingo as “lazy” and “weak” returns us to white supremacist discourses that locate Black people as inferior to white people, and concomitantly casts Nathan as the appropriate embodiment of heteromasculinity and citizenship.

In the context of claims of racelessness and thriving multiculturalism, Nathan’s overt expressions of white male rage can readily be regarded as an individual occurrence, thereby distinguishing his actions from the body politic (Cacho, 2012). Notably, the designation of a racial hate crime was never introduced: according to Crown Counsel there was no evidence to indicate that race was a motive for the crime. The rejection of racism is significant because it obscures the unmarked colonial culture of white normativity that pervades the legal system,
while simultaneously reinforcing the national narrative that manifestations of racism in Canada are unusual (Backhouse, 1999). These renunciations do not exist in isolation—they are part of white racial scripts and social formations, which combine to keep the world “as it is” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Thus, the dissociation of racism from the crime reveals the white lie of racelessness; the reiteration of this cover story protects and maintains white racial power (hooks, 1992).

On October 5, 2008 after one and a half days of deliberation, a jury found Nathan Fry guilty of five counts of first-degree murder, and one count of attempted murder, for which he received an automatic life sentence without the possibility of parole for 25 years.9

**Closing Remarks: Resisting Racelessness, Resisting Racism**

Throughout this discussion I have argued that the mythology of racelessness is a white lie that sustains systemic and mundane racial hierarchies and exclusions. Indeed, each of the cover stories offered by the VPD and RCMP investigations, and the Crown, communicate an obliviousness and a “fatally complacent” (Tutu, 2007, para. 1) approach towards the meaning and significance of race and racism that ultimately sanctions and normalizes white racial domination.

Returning to Toni Morrison (1988), the “unspeakable” violence directed against Bolingo Etibako, along with members of his family and Ashley Singh, “arrest[s] us with intentionality and purpose” (p. 136). Nathan Fry’s casting out of the unwanted indicates that those racialized as Black and Brown are deemed expendable; the brutality of the crime is a means of confirming and safeguarding both his identity, and Canada’s national identity, as white. Thus, while Nathan was found guilty and received an automatic life sentence, I maintain that this ruling does not indicate a decided victory for justice. Rather, this offense, and the aftermath, illustrate the deadly consequences of discourses which obscure, minimize, and at times deny the significance of race, which in turn facilitates the conditions which preclude the likelihood/probability of racism, as well as the contemplation of the existence of racism, since in a “raceless” society, individual/aberrant racism is the only kind of racism that is possible. In this context, “systemic and symbolic” racialized and racist violence “pass as natural” (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 140).

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9 Nathan Fry appealed his conviction and on September 29, 2011 the three-member panel of the British Columbia Court of Appeal rejected his petition, which centred on inappropriate jury instruction.
Given the history of racial violence that created the nation state, the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples, and the various forms of racism that confront racialized people in Canada, it bears repeating that violence is already here—it is, in the words of Leonardo and Porter (2010), “a way of life” (p. 146). Consequently, the vigorously and aggressively maintained naïveté constitutes a discourse of “raced racelessness” (Goldberg, 2007, p. 206) in and through which white racial domination is simultaneously denied and shielded.

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