Cultivating the Soil of White Nationalism: Settler Violence and Whiteness as Territory

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Abstract: This paper considers the emergence of white nationalist movements in Canada and their relationship to settler colonialism. How do ideas of Canada as a white nation, and fear mongering about white Canadians being “replaced” come to be so effective in a context in which white people have typically been the replacers themselves? While the Canadian state frames itself as multicultural, many of its laws and practices cultivate white nationalist beliefs, affects, and feelings. The state informally deputizes white settlers as owners and protectors of private property and uses them to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their land in order to appropriate it. This deputization protects both the material territory of the state and the affective and ideological justification for the continuation of settler colonialism. Private ownership of land cannot be understood merely as a legal capitalist relation, but is felt by many settlers as a deep, primordial connection to the land. Acts of settler violence both express and shape the racialized core of Canada. I propose thinking about settler private property as what I call “settler whitespace,” which is not only protective and expansive, but also involves the fabrication of an idea of white nativity to Canadian territory. This racialization of space serves to naturalize racist violence, cultivate hypermasculine expressions of whiteness, and ground white claims of exclusive belonging to Canada, all characteristic of the resurgent far-right. The property regime of Canada is not just part of its territorializing project; it lays the groundwork for white nationalist movements.

Keywords: territory, Canada, white nationalism, far-right, settler colonialism, property, white rage
Introduction

On October 22, 2018, white nationalist Faith Goldy placed third in the Toronto mayoral race, receiving over 25,000 votes, making up about 3.4% of Toronto voters (Gray & Moore, 2018). Goldy has recited the fascist slogan the “fourteen words,” cited the work of holocaust deniers, propagated the “white genocide” and “great replacement” conspiracy theories, and appeared on a neo-Nazi podcast in the days following the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville (Picazo, 2018). The electoral success of Goldy, as well as her growing influence on social media, is not an isolated event; it has coincided with anti-Muslim and white nationalist groups like Pegida, Proud Boys, Yellow Vests, WCAI, and Le Meute gaining new members and increasing their public presence. Canada has also seen a substantial rise in hate crimes against Muslim, Jewish, and Black people over the last 10 years (Rieti, 2018). Online, far-right views are being proliferated on sites like reddit and 4chan, by YouTubers like Stefan Molyneux and Lauren Southern, and in private chat rooms, often leading to in-person meetings and organizing (Milton & Carranco, 2019). These views often reference and promote Nazi or fascist symbols, slogans, and strategies. In addition to the rise in prominence of once-fringe far-right and white nationalist groups, the mainstream right has magnified many of their leaders and views. For example, in February of 2019, Conservative leader Andrew Scheer shared a stage with Faith Goldy at the United We Roll convoy in Ottawa, years after he first appeared on her show on “The Rebel” (Khandaker, 2019). The closeness of a mainstream conservative party to far-right figures and tactics suggests an ideological affinity, a concern about not being outflanked to the right, and a willingness to traffic in racism.

While many have rightly connected the rise of white nationalist groups, beliefs, and figures in Canada to their international equivalents in countries like Poland, Hungary, the United States, and France, I am interested in their connection to the Canadian settler state and the larger settler society in which they emerge. While the Canadian government describes Canada as a multicultural state, many of its practices and norms cultivate white nationalist beliefs, desires, and affects. I will begin by considering the territorial basis of the Canadian

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I use the term white nationalism to describe a politics that aims for the creation and/or maintenances of a white ethno-state. It’s worth noting that the label of white nationalism has been self-applied by some wishing to avoid being characterized as white supremacists. It is my belief that white nationalism is an inherently white supremacist ideology and I do not wish to acquiesce to the rhetorical strategies of racists. However, for the purposes of this paper I will use white nationalism to describe this specific ideology, with the understanding that it necessarily involves white supremacy. I use this term to distinguish between systemic white supremacy, which, as is the case in Canada, may be compatible with some forms of multiculturalism, and the explicit call for a white ethno-state, which I call white nationalism.
settler state and exploring how Lockeian ideals of private property have historically been used as tools of the settler state aimed at securing territory. In addition to serving a legal purpose, the use of individual settlers to secure property for the state inspires violent, racist, and fascistic affects in many settlers. I will argue that settlers are not just informally deputized by the state, they are ontologically deputized as settlers, and this ontological deputization can be understood as the partial cause of violent expressions of defending property.

I will look at the case of the murder of Colten Boushie—as well as other cases of Indigenous people being killed by white men—to consider the tragic consequences of this type of deputization. I will then argue that settler attitudes towards violence and private property serve to racialize space and to create what I will call “settler whitespace.” Carol Anderson describes white rage in the American context not as emerging primarily in individuals or through interpersonal violence, but through institutions, as a backlash to “black advancement” (2017, p. 2). My paper will examine how white supremacy and white rage that are baked into Canadian law and institutions—and often directed at Indigenous people—have a tendency to erupt as white rage on a personal and political level. Impersonal, legalistic colonial practices lay the groundwork, I argue, for an affective investment in violent and rage-filled white nationalism among settlers.

The State and Settler Property

Classifying governments or even movements as white nationalist is not my primary objective in this paper. Rather, I want to identify white nationalist affects and map out their relationship to the state. The racist tendencies that the state produces often escape its own control, and yet the state still bears responsibility for them. Canadian laws around privately owned property, I contend, are intended to expand power and enforce the self-proclaimed legitimacy of the settler state. The state then uses settlers for its purposes, which I argue often emboldens settlers to act (and feel) violently towards racialized others. It also leaves settlers in a position to frame themselves as victims and valorize the use of violence in response—all characteristics of far-right, fascist, and white nationalist movements. According to anthropologist Patrick Wolfe, “territorality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (2006, p. 388). Settler colonial states implement many different strategies that are aimed at moving Indigenous peoples off their land and installing settlers in their place: “settler colonialism destroys in order to replace” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). Unlike franchise colonialism (in British India, for example), which is characterized by the use of Indigenous labour to
extract resources, settler colonialism works by displacing Indigenous peoples and replacing them with settlers (Day, 2016, p. 26). For Wolfe, strategies ranging from “frontier homicide” to policies encouraging miscegenation are aimed at the goal of the “elimination of the Native” (2006, p. 388). Elimination is not a single historical event; it is the logic that undergirds settler colonial regimes as long as they exist; as Wolfe puts it, “invasion is a structure not an event” (2006, p. 388). While this logic of elimination (and replacement) is at the core of the settler state, I argue that it often uses settlers who may not be official representatives of the state to achieve its goals. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard describes the role of capitalism in the territorializing aim of the settler state. Drawing on Marx’s analysis of “primitive accumulation” in Capital, Coulthard writes,

these formative acts of violent dispossession set the stage for the emergence of capitalist accumulation and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production by tearing Indigenous societies, peasants, and other small-scale, self-sufficient agricultural producers from the source of their livelihood – the land...The historical process of primitive accumulation thus refers to the violent transformation of noncapitalist forms of life into capitalist ones. (Coulthard, 2014, pp. 7-8, emphasis in original)

This paper shows the ways in which the establishment of a capitalist system of private property is one of the most important strategies of the settler state for securing territory.

In the liberal capitalist system, property comes to be owned legitimately when it is made “productive” by the transformative application of human labour. According to John Locke, the world is given by God “to men in common;” however, each man “has a property in his own person” (2003, p. 274). This property includes his labour, and so, “whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property” (Locke, 2003, p. 274). Property is therefore created by the mixing of one’s labour with the land, and by making land productive—as Locke states, “as much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property” (2003, p. 276).

Locke, in fact, explicitly contrasts the “well-cultivated” lands of Devonshire, England to the “wild woods and uncultivated waste of America,” which are viewed as unsettled and unproductive (Locke, 2003, p. 276). It is not just that Locke thinks the land of the Americas is underused by its Indigenous owners; rather, he thinks this perceived lack of cultivation and productivity means the land is no one’s property. Philosopher James Tully argues that Locke’s model of property is constructed explicitly “in contrast to Amerindian forms of nationhood and property in such a way that they obscure and downgrade the distinctive features of Amerindian polity and property” (1993, p. 139). As Lisa Lowe notes, Locke’s idea of land in
the common being “vacante soyle” maps clearly onto the concept of *terra nullius*, which represented Indigenous land as “empty” (that is, uncultivated) and therefore available for colonization (2015, p. 10). Locke’s ideas illuminate how the theft of land from Indigenous people was justified, and the role that individual settlers played (and continue to play) in this theft.²

We can see an example of how these ideas play out in policy in the practice of homesteading in Western Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Homesteading was part of the strategy by the government to settle the prairies. Settlers paid $10 in order to be granted a 160-acre plot of land to relocate to and then cultivate for three years, after which they could apply for a patent, which, if they received, meant they would own the land (Carter, 2016, pp. xx-xxii). Ownership was conditional on making land productive, and homesteading became a strategy for the expansion of settlement through a Lockean model. Unsurprisingly, the politics of homesteading were a racialized and gendered practice, with white men and women each playing an important role in it. After 1876, only men could homestead—with the sole exception of widowed (white) women with children—and the Indian Act passed the same year declared that “no one who was ‘Indian’ could homestead” (Carter, 2016, p. xxi).

Not only was this land racialized in opposition to Indigenous peoples, but British people were also heavily favoured over other Europeans to homestead (Carter, 2016, p. 6). As Sarah Carter points out, British women took advantage of this by claiming that single British women should be given the right to homestead instead of “foreign” men from other parts of Europe (2016, p. 11).

Throughout Canadian history, private property of (usually white) settlers has been used not just to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land, but also to justify and legitimize this dispossession. As Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows points out, tribes and nations who were seen as “semi-nomadic” by the Canadian state were not viewed as having a legitimate claim to territory on the grounds that they did not cultivate the land or make it productive (2015, p. 715). Homesteading was a practice that transformed land that was

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² It is worth noting that “private property” is not an undifferentiated thing and that the process of early settler labour, through practices like homesteading, created different categories of property. First, we have property that is individually and privately owned as one’s possession. This would include one’s home, their land, and the possessions on it. Second, we have property that is privately owned and productive—this is the category that includes most of the means of production. Finally, we have state owned collectivist property—Crown Lands for example—which can remain productive and part of the capitalist economy. The lines between these types of property are blurry; smaller family owned farms that produce a small number of products to be sold, for example, lie somewhere in between the first and second kinds of property. In addition to the categorical slippage between these types of property there is also an affective slippage. Canadian state property or privately owned infrastructure might be viewed as belonging to “the people” and individual private property might be viewed as a site in which Canada itself (often imagined as white) is seen as under attack.
imagined by settlers and the Canadian government to be vacant—because they thought Indigenous peoples had either not adequately cultivated it or had surrendered it through treaty negotiations—into productive settler owned land that was part of Canada. Homesteading, and other practices of making land “productive,” transformed supposed terra nullius into private property and, just as importantly, into part of the national territory. The Canadian state used private homesteading alongside practices like treaty making to enshrine the self-asserted legitimacy of the property of both individual settlers and the state itself. The numbered treaties include a surrender clause, according to which Indigenous peoples would surrender their land to Canada. However, recent research has suggested that when the treaties are viewed in their historical context, with attention to Indigenous oral histories and other often ignored sources, it is clear that representatives of the Canadian government seriously underemphasized the surrender clause and overemphasized promises of the benefits Indigenous nations would get (promises that were often broken) (Krasowski, 2011). Sheldon Krasowski argues that the process of negotiating the numbered treaties, when viewed as a whole, demonstrates “that Indigenous people did not surrender their land through the treaty process” (2011, p. 2).

To this day, the Canadian government (and apologists for it) use Lockean ideas of property to justify past land theft and to fortify land that is held by settlers. In his 2000 Massey lecture, political scientist and soon-to-be Liberal party leader Michael Ignatieff argued that Indigenous peoples do not have the sole right to the territory of Canada. Ignatieff claimed that European settlers “acquired legitimacy by their labour; by putting the soil under cultivation; by uncovering its natural resources; by building great cities and linking them together with railways, highways, and now fibre-optic networks and the internet” (as cited in Razack, 2002, p. 2). The invocation of the apparent legitimacy of property privately owned by settlers lives on not just rhetorically, but also in Canadian policy. Shiri Pasternak, Sue Collins, and Tia Dafnos explore how the Canadian state relies on settler private property in order to reject Indigenous land claims, invoking a number of examples to argue that “the government strategy on land claims is specifically designed to constrain Bands whose visions of land restoration are twinned with aspirations of political and jurisdictional authority” (2013, p. 71).

While legal mechanisms exist for Indigenous communities to make specific land claims, “reclamation is prohibited when the land has come under private ownership” (Pasternak et. al., p. 64). Even after the Trudeau government’s dissolution of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), the Harper era policy on land claims involving private property remains roughly in place. The page for “Specific Claim Settlements Involving Land,” on the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada website states:
It is important to note that Canada’s policy on specific claims protects the current ownership and rights of private land owners. Private property is not taken away from anyone to settle specific land claims. Nor is anyone asked to sell their land unwillingly. If land changes hands after a settlement, this can only happen on a willing-buyer/willing-seller basis. (Government of Canada, 2010)

Put differently, even if the state admits that Indigenous peoples have a right to some territory in Canada, property owned by settlers is off the table. Though the government claims powerlessness to return land that is privately owned, it is clear that this policy serves the settler state by implying the legitimacy of settlement. When the Canadian state feels vulnerable to land claims made by Indigenous peoples, it can reassert territorial expansion through the land privately owned by settlers. Settlers who own property, I argue, are thus part of the state’s strategy of both expanding and consolidating land. Relying on settlers to perform this role has a number of consequences, including, I will argue, implicitly encouraging their use of violence against those they see as a threat to their property.

That is, the historical practice of homesteading, as well as the use of settlers by the state to legitimize land holding makes settlers who own property, and in particular white settlers, a kind of unofficial deputy of the settler state. By deputy, I mean more than that they act as an unofficial functionary of settler colonialism. Rather, I am thinking of deputization as deeply rooted—ontological even. I am influenced by the concept of deputization put forward by Frank B. Wilderson III (2003). For Wilderson, white people are, in their very being, “deputized” against Blackness. As he puts it, “white people are not simply ‘protected’ by the police, they are—*in their very corporeality*—the police” (2003, p. 20, emphasis in original).

Similarly, white settlers are not just people who may commit violence against Indigenous people; their very existence as a white settler is based upon the genocide of Indigenous peoples and cultures and the theft of their land. The quasi-legal deputization of white settlers by the state reinforces the already existing ontological character of being a white settler. Consequently, one can view violence as an extension of this deputization.

My use of deputization, however, while inspired by Wilderson’s, is in many ways different from his. Wilderson critiques the use of analogy between the fungibility and destruction of Blackness and that of other groups, because he sees the relationship between Blackness and civil society as an *antagonism* rather than a mere *conflict*, which he sees between other marginalized groups (including Indigenous peoples) and white civil society (2010, p. 5). He also argues that Indigenous peoples are used as interlocuters to establish American sovereignty (Wilderson, 2003, p. 24). While I depart from Wilderson’s views on the relationship between Indigenous people and North American civil society, I am not trying to
make an analogical point. Wilderson himself admits that the “genocide of the Indian, like the enslavement of Blacks, is a precondition for the idea of America,” and argues that “Native Americans have no purchase as a junior partner in civil society” (2003, p. 27). Deputization in the Canadian context must not be thought of as involving just a dyadic relationship between white settlers and the destruction and displacement of Indigenous peoples, but must also involve a much more complex racial schema, which accounts for the enslavement, exclusion, and destruction of Black peoples, as well as other racialized people.

**The Executions of Colten Boushie, Jonathan Styres, and George Many Shots**

On August 9, 2016, a 22-year-old Cree man named Colten Boushie, a member of the Red Pheasant First Nation, was shot and killed by a 56-year-old white farmer named Gerald Stanley on Stanley’s Saskatchewan farm. Boushie and his friends were heading home from a day of swimming and drinking when their vehicle got a punctured tire and they pulled onto Gerald Stanley’s farm (Richards, 2018). Stanley chased some of Boushie’s friends away before entering the vehicle and shooting Boushie in the back of the head, killing him. Stanley claims that Boushie and his friends had been trying to steal from him, that he approached the vehicle because he thought it had hit his wife, and that he had not intentionally shot Boushie (Starblanket & Hunt, 2018). However, one of the witnesses in the vehicle, Belinda Jackson, claimed that Stanley intentionally fired two shots into the back of Boushie’s head (Roach, 2019, p. 154). In his trial, Stanley’s defense argued that he had fired a couple warning shots, and unbeknownst to him, one of the bullets had not fired immediately. It was this alleged “hangfire” that killed Boushie, the defense claimed, not an intentionally fired bullet.

However, while the legal case rested on the claim of hangfire (which experts testified was highly unlikely) much of the discourse around the case concerned Stanley’s alleged right

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3 Jackson’s testimony became a central and controversial element in the trial of Gerald Stanley. The autopsy of Colten Boushie found that only one bullet was fired into the back of his head (this was the prosecution’s position). However, Kent Roach argues that the prosecution failed to address possible reasons for inconsistencies Jackson’s testimony, such as the trauma of witnessing her friend being killed, the fact that she was held for 19 hours afterwards on theft charges, and the fact that the sound of the bullet might have echoed within the car (Roach, 2019, pp. 71, 153-157).

4 Experts testified that hangfires are rare, though more common when using an old gun with old ammunition, which was the case for Stanley. However, when they do occur the delay between pulling the trigger and the bullet discharging is only about half of a second, far shorter than the time Stanley claimed between firing the warning shot and shooting Boushie. In the trial, this half-second delay time was attested to by the expert witnesses but was conflated repeatedly with the safety guideline that one should wait 30 to 60 seconds after pulling the trigger to ensure there isn’t a hangfire. This 30 to 60 second guideline is simply a safety precaution and not scientifically credible and yet it received more attention during the trial than the half-second delay (Roach 2019, pp. 125-145).
to use force to defend his property. Roach argues that while the official argument focused on
the shooting being an accident, Stanley’s team made “implicit or phantom claims of self
defence and defence of property” that cast Boushie and his friends as “drunk, dangerous, and
prone to violence” (2019, p. 165, 168). Stanley’s lawyers repeatedly stressed that due to slow
rural police response times the Stanley’s “were on their own” to defend themselves and their
property (Roach, 2019, p. 165). Stanley himself claimed to have thought of the murder of two
farmers that had happened in 1994 at a nearby farm (committed by two men who had been at
the Red Pheasant First Nation) as well as the recent terrorist attack in Nice, France that had
left 86 pedestrians dead and close to 500 injured, when Boushie and his friends drove onto
Stanley’s property (Roach, 2019, pp. 168-9). Scott Spencer, Stanley’s attorney, alluded to
both these incidents throughout the trial and even brought up that the young men in the car
with Boushie had been wearing hoodies with the hoods up (Roach, 2019, p. 171). Roach
points out the connection of this image to the high profile trial of George Zimmerman for
killing Trayvon Martin in the United States, in which Martin’s wearing of a hoodie was
viewed as making him seem more threatening (2019, p. 171). Despite being the one who lost
his life, Colten Boushie was the one cast as criminal and dangerous, associated not just with
stereotypes about violent Indigenous people but also with terrorism. Roach notes this as a
common thread in settler violence against Indigenous people throughout Canadian history
dating back at least to the execution by hanging of eight Indigenous men in Battleford in
1885—the victims of anti-Indigenous violence are themselves marked as criminal and
dangerous (2019, p. 34).

Stanley’s phantom self-defence argument was not just about branding Indigenous
people as dangerous criminals; it also invoked a particular colonial spatial dynamic. In his
opening statements, Stanley’s defense lawyer, Scott Spencer, said, “for farm people, your
yard is your castle” (Starblanket & Hunt, 2018). Geographer Nicholas Blomley writes, “the
castle metaphor relies upon a spatial logic of defensive boundaries, with a sharp divide
between inside and a threatening outside...it invokes notions of lordship, dominion, and
sovereignty” (2016, p. 602). Though Canadian law does not contain a legal “castle doctrine,”
rhetorically, the idea of defending one’s castle was central to the case. On February 9, 2018,
an all-white jury acquitted Gerald Stanley not just of second degree murder, but also of
manslaughter and careless use of a firearm. While Stanley’s actions were not explicitly
endorsed by the state, and rested not on a self-defense claim but the “hangfire” argument, his
acquittal by the Canadian legal system suggests an implicit acceptance of his use of lethal
force to “protect his castle” from an Indigenous person, branded by the defence as a
dangerous criminal. Stanley was found to be acting acceptably by the court system, and his
ontological deputization as a white settler can be seen motivating the violence in the first place, as can the ways in which white nationalist affects surrounding ideas of (white) private property legitimated and contextualized his actions.

In the aftermath of the trial, the idea of defending one’s castle from “rural crime” became even more prominent, especially among Saskatchewan farmers. A GoFundMe page was created to pay Gerald Stanley’s legal fees, with many donors making thousand-dollar donations identifying themselves only as “concerned rural landowners” (in the end, the page raised $223,327, far exceeding its original $150,000 goal) (MacPherson, 2018). Many Saskatchewan farmers viewed Stanley as the victim of what had happened—with one farmer telling the press “it could have been me” (Canadian Press, 2018). Seven months after the execution of Colten Boushie, at the meeting of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, 93% of delegates voted in support of a resolution “to lobby governments for expanded ‘rights and justification’ for concerned property owners dealing with what was described by the resolution’s proponent as ‘out of control’ rural crime” (Robert, 2018). In 2017, the Saskatchewan government announced a $5.9 million plan to combat “rural crime,” with money put towards increasing police response time, the visibility of law enforcement in rural areas, and “cracking down on drug trafficking” (Giles, 2017). Part this plan included the establishment of a protection and response team consisting of new police offers as well as commercial vehicle enforcement offers and conservation officers with expanded punitive powers (Giles, 2017). The plan was widely criticized by Indigenous advocacy groups, like the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations, for its focus on enforcement rather than prevention, and the likelihood it would increase the incarceration and criminalization of Indigenous people (Giles, 2017). Fears of “rural crime” have become common on the prairies, and commentators have identified “rural crime” as a dog whistle intended to legitimize violence against Indigenous peoples (Cuthand, 2017). I argue that the moral panic around “rural crime” served not just to motivate Gerald Stanley’s execution of Colten Boushie, but also to cultivate a broader culture which responds to this perceived threat with violence and explicit racism against Indigenous people and their communities.

Protecting one’s property and family from “rural crime” and defending one’s “castle” are far from new ideas. The image of the white male farmer as a protector of his kingdom was used in early 20th century advertisements intended to encourage homesteading by Europeans (Starblanket & Hunt, 2018). In fact, homesteading was practiced widely in Saskatchewan on the land near the Red Pheasant Cree nation, where Boushie grew up. The Red Pheasant Cree nation developed farms despite the strict limits placed on them by the government, causing resentment among many white settlers (Lindberg, 2018). According to Yael Ben-zvi, across
North America, the language of feudalism and lordship was “a significant factor in settler’s [sic] disavowal of settler colonialism’s founding violence: instead of conquering the land, they imagine themselves as lords empowered to allot it” (2018, p. 24). The Lockean idea of making the land productive legitimizes its white ownership and the use of violence to protect it. Indigenous use of land was not viewed as true Lockean labour by the settler state and was therefore not viewed as conferring ownership. As such, I assert that Stanley’s ontological deputation emboldened him to use lethal force against Boushie, and still frame himself as the victim. The use of violence (or the threat of violence) to protect one’s property, and the narrative legitimizing it, from a racialized (usually Indigenous) threat is persistent throughout Canadian history, and seems to be consistently summoned by white rage. Following the public executions of Indigenous leaders involved in the North-West rebellions in Fort Battleford, Saskatchewan (not far from where Boushie was killed) in 1885, Sir John A. MacDonald said, “the executions ought to convince the Red Man that the White Man governs” (Starblanket & Hunt, 2018). The death of Colten Boushie can thus be viewed as a political execution (albeit one committed by an unofficial deputy of the state) to serve the same end—not only ending his life, but also marking him as a terrorist and a criminal.

The execution of Colten Boushie is not the only case of a white settler using violence against an Indigenous person in response to a perceived violation of their private property. On February 4, 2016, a white Hamilton-area man, Peter Khill, shot and killed an Indigenous man, Jonathan Styres, for attempting to steal his (15-year-old) pickup truck (Hayes, 2018). Khill claimed that he was afraid for his life (though he was inside of his house when he decided to go outside with his shotgun) and that his military training had kicked into gear, moving him to “neutralize” the situation (Hayes, 2018). Like Stanley, Khill was found, by an all-white jury, to be not guilty of second degree murder, manslaughter, or any other crime. Even when white people are found guilty of killing Indigenous people, the political significance of the violence, and its relationship to property is often obscured. Leslie Thielen-Wilson describes cases of Indigenous men being killed by white men, in which the motivation of the violence is viewed as random or based in personal violence, obscuring the affective or ontological connections of settlers to property as motivating the violence (2018). She describes the murder of 37-year-old George Many Shots (a member of the Blood Tribe, Kainai First Nation) by a 28-year-old white man named Bradley Francis Gray in Lethbridge, Alberta in June of 2008 (Thielen-Wilson, 2018, p. 503). Gray brutally attacked Many Shots and his brother-in-law when they were walking down a residential sidewalk near his house. He had claimed that he was “[sick and] tired of sharing the sidewalk with Aboriginal people” (Thielen-Wilson, 2018, p. 504). During his trial, he claimed that he had attacked the men because his pick-up truck had been
broken into earlier, which he blamed on Indigenous people (imagined, apparently, as a monolithic group) (Thielen-Wilson, 2018, p. 504). Gray was initially found guilty of second degree murder, but this charge was later downgraded to manslaughter after an appeal that concerned the judge’s “inadequate direction” to the jury (Thielen-Wilson, 2018, p. 503). Throughout the initial trial, the judge emphasized Gray’s many past infractions of the law—“seventy-three criminal convictions, including thirty property-related offenses and nine assault convictions”—as well as his lack of reason (Thielen-Wilson, 2018, p. 505). While the judge cited racial animus as a factor in the crime, his ruling obscured the underlying motivation concerning a racialized conception of property. Thielen-Wilson writes, “Gray repeatedly and explicitly mentioned the perceived transgression of spatial boundaries—the line between public sidewalk and public home—and his unwillingness to ‘share’ the sidewalk” (2018, p. 505). Gray’s deputization as a white settler disposed him to view the mere presence of an Indigenous person in public space as a personal attack on him and on his rightful place. Moreover, the legal system failed to identify the structural and affective preconditions of Many Shots’ murder, attributing it instead to Gray’s deviance. Gray’s rage at Many Shots (and Indigenous people more broadly) was drained of its political significance by the courts and attributed instead to a personal fault.

Even in cases of violence that are not as obviously about the defense of property as the murders by Stanley and Khill, property claims undergird a great deal of violence by white people against Indigenous people. Thielen-Wilson suggests that property ought not to be thought of as a simple legal category, and that we need to confront and extinguish “private property’s grip on the everyday psychic life of the collective settler occupier” (2018, p. 495). As geographer Neil Nunn writes, “property is not simply about land and possessions. It is a socio-historical and racialized process of spatial production that relies on a series of mythologies that are firmly rooted in traditions of dehumanization, exclusion, and privilege” (2018, p. 1342). Property exceeds its legal reality and is protected by a powerful affective and normative system. Settlers’ affective investment in property explains why Indigenous people who are viewed as venturing outside of their assigned space (even if they are not breaking any laws) are subjected to brutal violence, violence that is alternatively disavowed and justified by the state. It is this affective investment of property that I see as prefiguring white nationalism. This can be seen in cases like the 1991 killing of a Cree man named Leo Lechance by neo-Nazi Carney Nerland, who murdered Lechance when he entered his pawn shop (Roach, 2019, p. 59). Nerland claimed the shooting was accidental and was found guilty of manslaughter with a sentence of four years in prison. Despite the existence of video footage of Nerland wearing Nazi and KKK dress while burning a cross—and reports that he had referred to using
gays to defend private property as “Native birth control—the judge overseeing his trial found that racism was not a factor is his shooting of Lechance (Roach 2019, pp. 59-61). Importantly, a later government inquiry recommended cross-cultural training on racism for police officers and suggested that the trial may have gone differently “had the question of racial motivation been more fully investigated” (Roach 2019, p. 61). Nevertheless, this case shows that the line between settler violence against Indigenous people and white nationalist violence is a very fine line, and that even in cases of explicit racist murder, the Canadian justice system depoliticizes it. Racist violence is always deeply political and often connected to property. It is not just that the (white) settler can use force to protect their property, it is that their whiteness and their deputization as a settler seems to them to justify (and motivate) their violence against Indigenous people. This violence and affective investment—“feeling property,” as Thielin-Wilson (2018) calls it—is not simply about personal identity nor the connection of that identity to private property. The problem with this framing is that it risks implying, through a focus on deputization or subject formation, that politics happens simply between agents on territory. However, as this paper shows, it is crucial to understand the racialization of territory itself.

**Whiteness as Territory and “Settler Whitespace”**

The spaces of private property owned by settlers are hotbeds of white nationalist affect and violence. Not only do these spaces, and the perceived intrusion into them by racialized (usually Indigenous or Black?) “Others” help to create settler subjectivity, these spaces are irreducible to the domain of the liberal individual. It is crucial not to think of spaces as a given, especially in the context of a settler colonial state, and to recognize the violence and dispossession that made the space what it is. Katherine McKittrick writes, “the idea that space ‘just is,’ and that space and place are merely constraints for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which ‘just is’ not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are” (McKittrick, 2006, p. xi). Settler colonialism aims to hide the violence which created it, disavowing “conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of labour of peoples of colour” (Razack, 2002, p. 2). Famously, in 2009, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper said that Canada had “no history of colonialism” (Wherry, 2009). An adequate understanding of settler spaces, a “denaturalization” or “unmapping” as Sherene Razack (2002, p. 17) calls it, will illuminate not just the colonial violence that has created and protected these spaces, but also the violence and affects that emerge from them. The analytic of private property alone is
insufficient to recognize the white nationalist affects that spring from the very soil of what is now known as Canada. Rather, I argue, a more expansive account of how property, colonialism, and racism mutually constitute one another in settler colonial states is needed.

In her 1993 article, “Whiteness as Property,” legal scholar Cheryl Harris argues that, in the United States, whiteness can be understood as a kind of property. She argues that the legacy of slavery and the seizure of land from Indigenous peoples are not just informed by racist tropes or ideology, but that “the law has established and protected an actual property interest in whiteness itself” (Harris, 1998, p. 103). Although Harris’ focus is on the American legal context, it is not hard to see how her analysis can readily apply to Canada. In Canada, in addition to the Lockean ideas of “vacante soyle” and claims of terra nullius, the banning of homesteading by “Indians” on the prairies racialized those spaces in ways that remain to this day. That land and property rights are extended to white settlers to the exclusion of Indigenous peoples is not just about privileges for white people, but also indicates a discursive constitution of land and property as belonging to whiteness. Whiteness is not just a condition of becoming propertied, the holding of land is itself an expansion of whiteness. Such an expansion increases the value of whiteness, but it also makes whiteness itself a colonizing force and an agent of Indigenous displacement and elimination.

In his article “The White Space,” sociologist Elijah Anderson describes the ways in which white spaces and Black spaces are created, reinforced, and maintained in post-civil rights era America (2015). Despite the expansion of the Black middle class, Anderson describes the discursive construction of the “black ghetto,” which, reinforced as dangerous through media representation and political rhetoric, is feared and avoided by white people. White space, on the other hand, informally excludes Black people (and, in many cases, non-Black people of colour) in order to maintain its whiteness. However, while white people can usually avoid the Black space, “black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence” (Anderson, 2015, p. 10). Anderson explores a number of different kinds of white space, from the gentrifying brewery to the affluent white suburb in which a Black law student was targeted by police because a neighbour had assumed that he was responsible for a nearby shooting (which, it turns out, was committed by a white man) (2015, p. 18). Enforcement of the whiteness of the white space can be subtle and informal, or rigid and explicitly violent.

By viewing Anderson’s idea of white space together with Harris’ idea of whiteness as property, the policing of white space can be understood as motivated (at least in part) by the desire to protect the valuable property of whiteness. The value of whiteness as property is not just a case of privilege or enjoying the benefits of subconscious bias in a white person’s
favour. Whiteness as property is predicated on white supremacy, and its value is maintained precisely through the subordination of Black people, Black spaces, and Blackness itself (Harris, 1998, p. 108). Lisa Guenther develops Anderson’s idea, using the term “whitespace” to explore the deeper corporeal schemas that characterize it, noting two dimensions of whitespace (2019). The first is whitespace as “securitized,” surveilled and defended not just from crime, but also from non-white people that might infiltrate it. The second is whitespace as territorially expansive, which one can see, for instance, in gentrification. Guenther writes:

The two dimensions of whitespace—enclosure and territorial expansion—suggest a white corporeal schema with two divergent tendencies: on one hand, an investment in the body as an impenetrable shell, like a turtle that carries its house wherever it goes, and on the other hand an investment in the body as a site of continuous growth, like a snake that keeps shedding its skin, or a colony of yeast that keeps doubling its size. (Guenther, 2019, pp. 19-20)

Whitespace is defended and protected by a combination of these two tendencies. White settler claims to private property can be thought of in these terms. That is, on one hand, white settlers are agents of a project of Indigenous territorial dispossession and white territorial expansion. On the other, they actively defend and protect not just their own private property, but also the territory of Canada more broadly. This double movement of enclosure and expansion helps us to understand the racialization of space, not only insofar as white settlers attempt to protect racial property from Blackness (or Indigeneity), but also as they serve the territorializing function of settler colonialism. I want to suggest that in cases of white settler private property, there is also a third dimension at play: a sense of imagined rootedness or primordial connection to the land. I will call whitespace with all three dimensions “settler whitespace.”

Settler whitespace is not just protective and expansive; it also tries to establish a primordial claim to the land or territory it covers. Instead of simply trying to preserve the de facto whiteness of a space, settler whitespace implies a claim of belonging of the white settler to the territory. We see this idea emerge in the discourse surrounding the Gerald Stanley case. A white man’s presumed right to defend his “castle” from “rural crime” is not (just) a legal claim. The third dimension emerges in the image of the white farmer protecting his land from Indigenous or racialized intruders. It is not just that the whiteness of settler whitespace is protected, it is that this imperative to protect is naturalized. In a sense, a concept of white nativity to territory is asserted. As Ben-zvi argues, the very concept of “nativity” to place was developed by white settlers during their colonization of the so-called New World “in order to naturalize their claims to Indigenous peoples’ homelands” (2018, p. 13). Iyko Day claims that
this concept of nativity is wrapped up with being a settler at its most basic level: “settler identity is heavily invested in appropriating Indigeneity” (2016, p. 19). The image of the white male farmer defending his family and property is based upon the masculine ideal of “the ability to build a home, provide for and protect one’s family, and—most importantly—to exercise control over one’s private domain” (Starblanket & Hunt, 2018). This masculine ideal is highly racialized, and implies that his domain belongs to him ontologically. In other words, the white male farmer recognizes his ontological deputization and commits the violence required by it.

Private property serves as one mechanism through which the naturalization of whiteness in Canada happens and the fiction of white nativity can be asserted (Ben-zvi, 2018, p. 29). As this paper has argued, settler whitespace involves not just protection and expansion, but also a claim to white nativity, entitlement, or connection to the land. The white nationalist narrative of white victimization is expressed in the rage-filled claims that particular settler whitespace is under attack, and in the broader claims that the larger settler whitespace of the Canadian nation is losing its whiteness. The structure of settler whitespace is necessary for the structure of settler colonialism, insofar as it operates by an eliminatory logic that clears Indigenous people from their land in order to expand the territory of the settler state (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). Moreover, the structure and persistence of settler whitespace implicitly or explicitly fabricates a white nativity to territory, thereby encouraging the production of “blood-and-soil” ethno-nationalism. The line between typical white settler violence against Indigenous people and explicit white nationalist violence is a fine one. Settler whitespace, I argue, is the fertile soil in which white nationalism inevitably grows.

Epilogue

The affective and political consequences of the production of national settler whitespace through private and public property structures much of contemporary Canadian politics and has come to a head in recent months. Following the federal election of late 2019 a movement dubbed Wexit, which called for the secession of Alberta from Canada, rose in prominence. The Wexit movement viewed the Trudeau government as failing Alberta by weakening the oil and gas industry with regulations and allowing too many immigrants into Canada. Wexit became the name of a new political party, whose advocates claimed that there

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5 "Wexit" is, of course, a play on "Brexit," a portmanteau of "British Exit," referring to the movement and referendum to determine whether the UK should leave the European Union. The success of Brexit was largely attributable to anti-immigrant, xenophobic sentiments among many British voters, and so the anti-immigrant tenor of its invocation in the Canadian context is relevant.
is a colonial relationship between the federal government and the province—“‘There’s this eastern Canadian mentality—a willingness to throw the chains on us,’ said party leader Peter Downing, a retired police officer. ‘In reality, it’s a colonialist mindset and we’ve simply had enough. We’re going to walk away’” (Cecco & Agren, 2019). This inversion of oppression—to frame the colonizer as the colonized—is a common trope in far-right and fascist politics (Stanley, 2018, p. 137). In settler colonial contexts, fascists warn about the “great replacement” of white settlers by racialized migrants while, as Patrick Wolfe tells us, settler colonialism, at its core, works by a logic of replacement of Indigenous peoples by white settlers (2006, p. 388). White nationalists warn about “white genocide” in the face of the actual genocide committed by the Canadian state against Indigenous peoples. It is in the context of a country whose territory is racialized through private, state, and corporate property that such claims emerge and hold such power.

Since the election, other political moments have brought out white nationalist dynamics and revealed their connection to land, Lockean ideas of cultivating private property, and anti-Indigenous policies. In January of 2020, the RCMP moved to enforce an injunction by the British Columbia Supreme Court mandating members of the Wet’suwet’en nation, including their hereditary chiefs, to let the Coastal GasLink pipeline be built through their territory. On February 6th, members of the Mohawk nation in Tyendinaga (in Ontario) set up a blockade of rail lines in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en. Blockades and actions began to spring up all across the country. Both passenger trains and freight trains were delayed or stopped, and on February 13th, VIA rail announced the cancellation of all trains. In response to the blockades, many on the right described the Trudeau government as feminized and weak, unwilling to bring the force of the law down onto these “lawless” protestors. Some advocated fighting protestors or driving cars and trucks into them and through blockades (Boutilier, 2020). In Edmonton, white counter-protestors tore down a rail blockade, placing it, piece by piece, in the back of pick-up trucks. In response, Sheila Gunn Reid, a writer for the far-right website “The Rebel” tweeted a video of the counter-protestors disassembling the blockade, writing, “The protesters just stand there shitting their pants, totally stunned, as the scent of pure testosterone and vigor wafts past their nostrils and overwhelms their soy-dullened senses. Ladies, we almost don't deserve Alberta men” (Reid, Twitter, February 19, 2020). The fascist aesthetic of this statement, which imagines the virile, strong (white) men of Alberta defending the economic prosperity of the nation (for the defense and pleasure of white women) against Indigenous people and their feminized allies, illustrates the way the affective pull of far-right white nationalism emerges. It is not an individual’s private property that must be defended in this case, but the commercial infrastructure of Canada as a whole. White settlers are
unofficially deputized in defence of the nation, the expansive settler whitespace that is Canada (or, if Wexit has its way, Alberta). During the blockades, discussions of actions to disrupt and dismantle them were the number one topic on far-right message boards, with many calling for violence to oppose them (Boutilier, 2020). Such sentiments and celebrations of vigilantism were not exclusive to the fringe far-right. Conservative Party leadership hopeful Peter McKay, said of the same incident; “Glad to see a couple Albertans with a pickup truck can do more for our economy in an afternoon than Justin Trudeau could do in four years” (as quoted in Jones, 2020).

Even when it is not the private property of individuals that is viewed as threatened, the notion of a criminal, lawless Indigenous threat to Canadian property motivates vigilantism and calls to use force and violence. When land is racialized as white, any non-white (and particularly Indigenous) claims to land trigger white rage, both institutionally and interpersonally. While Canadian settler society operates according to its norms, Indigenous people simply advocating for their own rights will intensify far-right white nationalism and vigilantism. We cannot understand how white nationalist claims and movements emerge in the Canadian context without paying close attention to the racialization of space, the normalization of violence, and the creation of settler whitespace. The Canadian white nationalist resurgence cannot be adequately opposed by an appeal to liberal Canadian multiculturalism; it can only be stopped with a change at the very core of Canadian settler colonial society. As this paper has shown, white nationalist feelings, speech, and acts of violence are not anomalies, they are the natural consequence of our political, economic, and social structures.

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