



‘They took our beads, it was a fair trade, get over it’: Settler colonial logics, racial hierarchies and material dominance in Canadian agriculture



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ABSTRACT

Canada is in a liminal space, with renewed struggles for and commitments to indigenous land and food sovereignty on one hand, and growing capital interest in land governance and agriculture on the other. While neoliberal capital increasingly accumulates land-based control, settler-farming communities still manage much of Canada’s arable land. This research draws on studies of settler colonialism, racial hierarchy and othering to connect the ideological with the material forces of settler colonialism and show how material dominance is maintained through colonial logics and racially ordered narratives. Through in-depth interviews, I investigate how white settler farmers perceive and construct two distinctly ‘othered’ groups: Indigenous peoples and migrant farmers and farm workers. Further, I show the disparate role of land and labour in constructing each group, and specifically, the cultural and material benefits of these constructions for land-based settler populations. At the same time, settler colonial structures and logics remain reciprocally coupled to political conditions. For instance, contemporary neoliberalism in Canadian agriculture modifies settler colonial structures to be sure. I argue, however, that political economic analyses of land and food production in Canada (such as corporate concentration, land grabbing and farm consolidation) ought to better integrate the systemic forces of settler colonialism that have conditioned land access in the first place. Of course, determining who is able to access land—and thus, who is able to grow food—continues to be a territorial struggle. Thus, in order to shift these conditions we ought to examine how those with access and control have acquired and maintained it.

1. Introduction

In light of growing calls for Indigenous sovereignty, reconciliation, and a renewed relationship between the recently elected federal administration and Indigenous Peoples in Canada, there continues to be a counter force toward capital intensive, neoliberal forms of land ownership, access and governance (Magnan, 2012; Sommerville, 2013; Holtzlander, 2015). This juxtaposition between recent *commitments* to a ‘nation-to-nation relationship’ (Liberal Party of Canada, 2017) alongside the *reality* of private land grabs and forceful government approvals of land-based projects (including the Site C Dam, the Pacific North West LNG as well as several pipelines) seems especially stark. It should also illustrate how settler colonial patterns and logics are sustained today, and done so to maintain white settler (social and material) domination. Indeed, the defining ‘here to stay-ness’ of *settler* colonialism is foundational to how this stark reality has materialized. If we acknowledge settler colonialism as an enduring structure and not an event (Wolfe, 2006), then the centrality of land—and its ongoing dispossession—in maintaining settler colonialism becomes clear. Meanwhile, scholarship

has revealed why settler colonialism must be analyzed as a distinct ideological and material force that continues to shape Canada. Hence, while concomitant, analytical distinction should be made between settler colonialism and colonialism broadly, as well as structures of racism and white supremacy (Smith, 2010; Lawrence and Dua, 2005; Wolfe, 2013; Morgensen, 2011).

As many scholars have shown, food systems are a product of socio-historic forces, and while they do not start or end with settler colonial forces, they are deeply shaped by them (Desmarais and Wittman, 2014; Burnett et al., 2015; Daschuk, 2013; Simpson, 2003). The Canadian agri-food production system encompasses millions of acres of land, and is composed of and governed by, largely, (male) farmers with white settler European ancestry.¹ By investigating white settler (national) farmer subjectivities, this paper aims to link the ideological and material forces of settler colonialism to explain its enduring legacy in land-based populations in Canada. ‘White settlers’ are cultural members—and remnants—of the founding political order, who ‘carry with them a distinct sovereign capacity’ (Cavanagh and Veracini, 2013). I aim to show how material dominance is maintained through ideological

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¹ This is not to say that some white male farmers don’t experience oppression under the agri-food production system as well. Increasing numbers of farmers are feeling deeply oppressed by the structure of export-oriented commodity agriculture.

and cultural strategies that shape settlers' perceived relation to two distinctly 'othered' groups: Indigenous peoples and migrant farmers/farm workers. I ask, how are these groups interpolated through the ideologies and narratives of archetypal national subjects, and what fields of power are involved in producing and maintaining these narratives? Here I analyze the relations between social construction and material condition to demonstrate how each group is distinct (in nature and function) for the national subject, determined by particular socio-cultural histories, proximities and relations to land and resources. This study isn't intended to 'blame the farmer', but rather to illustrate the social and cultural persistence of racially hierarchical narratives that often operate beyond individual agency. Accordingly, the following two sections lay the groundwork, first, by reviewing settler colonialism and agricultural industrialization in Canada, and second, by outlining racialized subject formation and othering as my conceptual approach to the analysis. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to the methods, results and discussion, the latter of which is subdivided by group for analytical clarity.

2. Settler colonialism and agricultural industrialization in Canada

Racial domination is reproduced differently based on relations of inequality over time (Wolfe, 2013). For instance, the logic of labour exploitation of African American slaves² is profoundly different from the Indigenous context in Canada wherein logics of assimilation and extermination were coded through institutional structures, like the Indian Act (e.g. through blood quantum discourse, any non-native ancestry compromises one's indigeneity (Lawrence, 2008)). Without such distinctions, their reproduction often gets lumped into general analyses of racism (Lawrence and Dua, 2005)—thus continually neglecting how these logics (of elimination on one hand, and exploitation on the other) shape the variegated racial formations we see today. In the Canadian case, land, resources, and people were seized by force to accrue capital and construct a society of *settler colonial* patriarchal domination specifically. In turn, settler colonial relations are distinct from but interrelated to (with different core logics than) other racial formations, and ought to be analyzed as such.

The idea of the 'frontier'—carried out by (largely male) 'unlicensed mavericks' and 'explorers' (fur traders, bounty hunters, gold-seekers, ranchers and farmers) rather than formal state procedures—was foundational for settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2013). Farmers have played a specific role: the land and freedom their communities gained in the 'new world' resulted directly from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. *Maintaining* that freedom and all its entitlements involves ongoing possession of native land as well as retaining a landless, dislocated labour population—queue racialized migrant farm workers. These processes don't look or feel like they did during initial seizure: they are bureaucratic, culturally and politically insidious, and not necessarily physically violent. Of course, many current farm families were not affiliated with initial seizure. In fact, many were fleeing their own hardships in Europe. However, they, like many of us, have privileged from this founding culture, which derives from land specifically.

The political-economic implications of settler colonialism are expressed in Canadian landholding. Historical accounts of dispossession reveal how English common law and private property rights buttressed land seizure. 'When a settler preempted land and met the terms of preemption, he (almost invariably, he) acquired title to the land in fee simple' (Harris, 2004, 177). This system of estate production 'embodied a perpetual and indestructible right to the land potentially for ever, and

gradually became normative' (Harris, 2004). Only through these conditions, wherein land rights were unilaterally seized from Indigenous peoples and distributed to incoming white European families, was the patriarchally structured 'family farm' able to emerge (Friedmann, 1978, 2005). Alternatives to wage labour were made available to large numbers of settlers in Ontario *through* the 'gift' of large plots of land, tools, and seeds, through which the household unit would supply labour so as to recreate its productive and personal consumption—demonstrating the centrality of patriarchy for settler colonial agriculture (Government of Ontario, 2006). In fact, household (kinship) labour was central to the emergence and success of simple commodity production during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Friedmann, 1978). The household simple commodity structure was competitively superior to capitalist agriculture due to the interacting forces of kinship labour production, the availability of land, and technological adoption. Indeed, 'the importance of the machinery lay not in its absolute reduction of costs of production, but in its reduction in the amount of labour required per acre harvested' (Friedmann, 1978, 566). While acreage expansion needed the other two factors in order to be viable in North America, such expansion was nearly impossible for the average farmer in Europe at that time. The magnitude of land expansion in Canada was made possible *through* the settler colonial relation specifically, and was central to the success of the agricultural production system over the twentieth century. Moreover, much of the early success of commodity production in North America was due to 'soil mining,' 'in which colonists brought forth crops from the fertile virgin soil without replenishing it, and then moved on to new homesteads' (Friedmann, 1978, 568). This was possible because of both (a) the breadth of settler colonial land seizure, and (b) the ways in which Indigenous peoples lived on and cared for the land prior to contact. Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples were largely restricted from practicing agriculture (particularly communal reserve production) and participating freely and autonomously in the colonial economy (Daschuk, 2013; Carter, 1990). As settlement proceeded, industry and commerce advanced, which was backed by extensive government support and credit extension to the settler farm base (Nelson, 2014; Friedmann, 2005). Effectively, European settlement on Indigenous land was tethered to colonial (and patriarchal) economic investment—a relationship that has only evolved and strengthened over time.

Today's agricultural production system has been shaped by these conditions. Over the century that followed, industrialization took hold, marked by aggressive mechanization and capitalization across the food system. As production increased and corporate intervention rose, farm-gate prices declined alongside rising farm debt (Qualman, 2001). This 'cost-price squeeze' has occurred cyclically, only emboldened by government support for land consolidation, capitalization and corporate integration (Troughton, 1989; Holtslander, 2015). Over this time, family farms have been driven to expand, where today the average farm in Canada is 778 acres, about 500 acres larger than in 1930 (Statistics Canada, 2011). At its root, this trajectory of agricultural production is built on and advanced by features specific to settler colonial domination. Colonial land settlement conditioned capitalization, and specifically, the collaborative deployment of public and private capital in agri-food industrialization. The colonial state had a vested interest in supporting distinctly colonial capital backed by colonial companies who developed the infrastructure and equipment—both on and off farm—that necessitated the prosperity of the settler economy (which hinged on the success of agriculture specifically). For instance, governments and universities across Canada have played a central role in extension research since the nineteenth century, supporting research and development for crop breeding and pesticide innovation to facilitate monocrop production (Reaman, 1970). Since settlement, government has worked alongside private colonial capital to facilitate cross-border trade and encourage increases in efficiency. Notably, these colonial dynamics are further tethered to the emergence of racist labour policies in agriculture, most notably, the Canadian Seasonal Agricultural

² Which led to systems and procedures for maximizing slave 'property' (e.g. 'enslavement' was transmitted to descendants rather easily through 'the "one-drop rule," whereby any amount of African ancestry, no matter how remote, and regardless of phenotypical appearance, makes a person Black') (Wolfe, 2006, 387–88).

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