Research Note

Toward an Understanding of International Students within Canadian Settler-colonial Capitalism

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Introduction

I first came to northern Turtle Island in 2009. Back then, I understood this part of the continent as Canada, known for its "friendliness," "safety," and "multiculturalism." Such are popular tropes that empower the country's branding for international education (Stein, 2018) and were reasons I decided on Canada for university. I have since learned how these tropes downplay a violent settler-colonial history and present of Indigenous marginalization (Stein, 2018). Moreover, as an international student I began interrogating how my living, working, and studying on these lands implicate me as a settler and participant in Canadian settler-colonial capitalism. However, as a racialized temporary migrant I also recognize my precarity. This paradox befuddles me, thus this inaugural attempt to locate international students within settler-colonial capitalism and articulate a relationship with Indigenous communities and sovereignty within the Canadian context.

I am not an Indigenous studies scholar, and because this is also my first dive into settler-colonial literature, I do not end this piece with a clear conclusion. This discussion is merely a starting point, a synthesis of ideas that inform a possible framework for understanding my social location – specifically, how my immediate reality is subsumed within a larger structure of systemic violence. A long-term goal is to eventually imagine an understanding of a "collective international student" location and from there, possible practices of subversion and resistance. For now, I hope readers who share my social position can draw from these thoughts as they build and refine their own praxes.

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International Education in Canada

International students are constituents of Canada's "education-migration nexus" in which immigration policies target our retention as "skilled" immigrants (Robertson, 2013, p. 3). The vision of international students as long-term immigrants came about in the late post-war era; up until then, international students were intended as short-term visitors, specifically "aid targets" in Canada's foreign policy of international development and the building of a "multi-racial Commonwealth" (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010, p. 316; McCartney, 2016). International students from former colonies were invited to study in Canada on funding programs (McCartney, 2016; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019), initiatives that were imbued with neo-colonial paternalism and Cold War goals to counteract the "spread" of communism (see McCartney, 2016).

   During the post-war economic boom-recession cycle, Canada's usual (and preferred) supply of white European labourers was growing scarce as recovery in Europe was skyrocketing labour demands (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010; Simmons, 2010). Canada's need to find other sources of immigrant labour, together with its mission as a "prominent, middle-power, honest-broker" country in a post-war world (Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010, p. 18) shifted immigration practices away from its previously "racist and exclusionary orientation" (Fleras, 2015, p. 94) and towards admissions of "any qualified person" based on human capital criteria such as education, skills, and language proficiency (p. 91). The 1967 points system further consolidated this approach with statistical measurements, and as the economy increasingly globalized and post-industrialized, an emphasis on admitting *and retaining* skilled workers was eventually integrated (Fleras, 2015; Simmons, 2010). By the turn of the 21st century, international students were being looked at not only as potential long-term immigrants, but also as skilled, in fact "ideal," due to their "made-in-Canada" education, language proficiency, assumed knowledge of and acclimatization to Canadian society (Government of Canada, 2017), assumed self-sufficiency in their preparation for and integration into Canadian life, and capacity to contribute to Canada's global competitiveness (Cox, 2014; Gates-Gasse, 2012; Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). The government set the goal of 450,000 international enrolments by 2022, which was surpassed in 2017 at 494,525, a 119% increase since 2010 (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018).

   In addition to contributing human capital, international students are also appealing for their "dollar contributions to the economy" (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019, p. 31). A shift from the aid model described above to a new model based on high international student tuition fees took place in the 1980s, initially to ease pressures of reduced federal funding for the post-secondary sector (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). Today, international education has proven more than just a financial solution; it is a top national commodity (Trilokekar & El Masri, 2019). International tuition alone entails

"35% of all fees collected" by colleges and universities, and contributes "9.3% of total revenue" (Usher, 2018, p. 3). Combining their expenditures on education and living, international students contribute around 15 billion dollars annually to the national economy (Government of Canada, 2019).

Canada's current standing as the fourth most popular study destination (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018) suggests that international students seek Canada as much as Canada seeks us, and for more than an education. It is estimated that 60% of international students wish to immigrate to Canada after graduation (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2018). Over 114,000 former international students held work permits in 2018 alone (Government of Canada, 2019). My concern is how these circumstances situate international students within Canada's settler-colonial project.

Defining Settler-colonialism

Coulthard (2014) defines settler-colonialism as a "domination" that "continue[s] to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority" (pp. 6-7). An operative word is *continue*, marking settler-colonialism as ongoing and present. Further, the central concern is the land, its resources, and implications for Indigenous communities. Processes of settlement and access to the land, specifically its transformations into capitalist spaces to be owned, occupied, or extracted by the Canadian state and private actors, are dispossession and violence. This is because such processes take place on unceded lands. Indigenous voices and viewpoints are also often excluded from these processes and the decisions leading up to them, which are ultimately made and enforced by the state and private corporations.[1] Moreover, Indigenous peoples *are* the land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Infrastructures of capitalism that extract from the land are an existential destruction, infringing on the "material and spiritual sustenance of Indigenous societies" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 7). In this understanding, a real right to Indigenous life is almost impossible within settler-colonial capitalism. Capitalism indeed "must die" in order "for Indigenous nations to live" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 173).

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[1] Gas and oil developments are notable examples, the most recent being the Coastal GasLink pipeline that would run through the traditional territories of the Wet'suwete'n Nation in northwest British Columbia against the Nation leaders' consent. In resistance, camps and blockades were set up in early 2020, which upon the orders of the Supreme Court were torn down by the RCMP (Kestler-D'Amours, 2020a, 2020b; Hopkins, 2020). Infrastructural blockades are common forms of "crucial act[s] of negation" by Indigenous sovereignty movements (Coulthard, 2014, p. 170). As state economic infrastructures are technologies of natural resource expropriation, Indigenous resistance is not a pursuit for "negotiation" with the state but a dismantling of structures like railways and pipelines "that [are] core to the accumulation of capital in settler-political economies like Canada" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 170).

Tuck & Yang (2012) argue that immigration, as a form of non-Indigenous settlement and capitalist development,   is a "colonial pathway" (p. 17) through which immigrants inevitably become a part of settler-colonialism. Although colonial displacement often compels outbound migration (Sharma & Wright, 2008/2009), in their new domain immigrants nonetheless "occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 7). Wolfe (2013) advances a complimentary argument that "colonised Natives from one region" can be "settlers in a different region" (p. 263), emphasizing that being a settler has little to do with voluntarism or compulsion: "the fact that enslaved people immigrated against their will… does not alter the structural fact that their presence, however involuntary, was part of the process of Native dispossession" (p. 263).

In the case of some immigrants of colour, who are positioned in variously racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies that ultimately cast them as "non-white," "the ability to be a minority citizen" is nevertheless "an option to become a brown settler" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 18). Indeed, the "high degree" of "internal heterogeneity" (Wolfe, 2013, p. 263) of social categories and inequalities does not have any bearing on whether one is a settler or not, as settler relations "uniformly require the elimination of Native alternatives" (p. 257). Standing unwaveringly amidst all the differences is an ultimate binary between "Native" and "settler." Within this framework, it seems that being a settler ultimately has much to do with place. Also problematic is the space of citizenship itself. The "endpoint" of acquiring "equal legal and cultural entitlements is actually an investment in settler-colonialism" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 18), because citizenship and residency rights are the terms of the settler-colonial state. This reiterates a key aspect of the wider debate within migration and settler-colonialism literature: the idea that citizenship and settlement, "whether by white people or people of colour," can ultimately "be used to restrict Aboriginal rights" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, pp. 135-136), and the lack of engagement with this premise in antiracism discourse can frame immigrants of colour as "innocent" (p. 132).

(Issues in) Complicating the Migration-settlement-colonization Dynamic

International students have been perceived as benefitting Canadian nation building since the World Wars. Today, international students are referred to by the state as ideal immigrants, due to their economic and human capital as students, workers, and eventually long-term residents and citizens. Part of our relationship to Canada's national space is thus a relationship to the land, one in which we are settlers.

The issue at hand is a tight consolidation of migration, settlement, and colonization, resulting in an ultimate binary between Native and non-Native, or effectively, Native and settler. I find Wolfe's (2013) argument *against* opposing this binary compelling, in that opposition to the binary means

rejecting its historic reality, and ultimately upholding colonial discourse. Wolfe argues that post-frontier settler-colonial policy in fact seeks to suppress the divide between Native and non-Native in the name of assimilation.[2] While this binary has gained traction in antiracism literature and solidarity efforts between immigration and Indigenous communities, Chatterjee (2019) notes that it "cast[s] aside" immigrant and diaspora perspectives and struggles, including that of labour exploitation (p. 647). Wolfe insists that settler-colonial policy suppresses the binary, whereas Chatterjee highlights how it also thrives upon that very binary. In many contexts, the division between who is Native or not is a colonial construction and extension of state rule (Mamdani, 2001, as cited in Sharma & Wright, 2008/2009), and the violent "destruction… of the solidarities among the expropriated and the exploited across space" is a purposeful tool of capitalist expansion (Sharma & Wright, 2008/2009, p. 127).

This paradox brings to mind Bhabha's (1983) conceptualisation of how colonial authority disavows itself from the "other" it defines. Colonial authority assumes an external and separate position from the other, hardening and normalizing it as the complete antithesis: as "fixed," "entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha, 1983, p. 23). The othered is "imprisoned in the circle of interpretation" (Bhabha, 1983, p. 35) in which they are an entity in their own respect. Disavowal allows colonial discourse to *justify* its superiority, warranting "discriminatory and authoritarian forms of political control" (Bhabha, 1983, p. 35).[3] I can understand the wariness in Bhabha's framework about transcending or dissolving the divide between Native and non-Native, as it upholds the disavowal function of colonial authority; but by the same token "the separation of human subjects" (Chatterjee, 2019, p. 650) and their respective projects is also a win for colonial-capitalist discourse. The caveat Wolfe (2013) suggests, that the path of deconstructing settler discourse via challenging the binary can "reconstruct it" (p. 274), applies to Chatterjee's (2019) concern as well: critical analyses in which the binary is upheld can in fact reconstruct the logic they aim to subvert.

Other scholars who challenge the binary model overall insist that the triad of migration-settlement-colonialism must be dismantled. It is a "mistake" to charge "migrants as seeking to colonize," (Walia, 2013) because it empowers the claim that *all* migrants are settler-colonists and effectively "renders the

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[2] Wolfe describes "assimilation" as "a range of strategies intended to separate individual Natives from their collective sovereignties and merge them irrecoverably into the settler mainstream" (Wolfe, 2013, p. 258).

[3] I suggest here "less overt" forms of control as well, such as assimilation, multiculturalism and politics of recognition. Wolfe (2013) discusses the former two in the United States, where "Natives have been subjected to a recurrent cycle of inducements [that] present domination as empowerment and thereby assert Natives' consent to their own dispossession" (p. 259). For the latter, Coulthard (2014) argues at length that in the Canadian context "colonial rule is reproduced through the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify […] with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition imposed and/or granted to them by the (settler) state" (p. 39).

entire process of human migration as a serious problem" (Sharma & Wright, 2008/2009, p. 123). "The only way *not* to be a 'colonizer' is to remain on the land with which one is associated" (Sharma & Wright, 2008/2009, p. 123; emphasis in original). This premise challenges the place-based discourse in the views presented earlier. Furthermore, there is little space in such views to consider migrants and asylum seekers escaping violence, abuse, or poverty; for whom remaining on one's native land is neither viable nor safe. Understanding migration as a form of colonialism minimizes or even "den[ies] the violence done to people who moved or who move today" (Sharma, 2015, p. 176).

Another issue in the migration-settlement-colonialism triad is the absence of race, or rather, the absence of consideration given to racialized precarity and dispossession. Day (2015) challenges Wolfe's binary by integrating the history and afterlife of Black slavery, while also rejecting the binary of Black/non-Black within Afro-pessimism frameworks. Her reconciliation reframes settler-colonial *racial* capitalism as an "ecology of power relations" – a dialectical analysis of race (labour) and Indigeneity (land) – rather than a "linear chain of events" (Day, 2015, p. 113). This interpretation brings to the forefront a "dual logic" of the settler-colonial project, of Indigenous elimination and "mix[ing] the land with enslaved Black labour" (Day, 2015, p. 113). Day draws from Coulthard to emphasize that "the colonial relation should not be understood as a primary locus of 'base,'" but rather a "background field" where "market, racist, and patriarchal and state relations *converge*" (2015, p. 113). Similarly, Chatterjee (2019) describes settler-colonialism as a "project of simultaneous dispossession (of Indigenous peoples) and precarious incorporation (of racialized immigrants)" (p. 650). Along with her concerns with upholding the binary at the expense of recognizing racialized labour and precarity is the discouragement of engagement between im/migrant and Indigenous social movements, which renders their "political goals" as "conflictual, at best irreconcilable" (Chatterjee, 2019, p. 645).

I find assurance in suggestions to explore interrelations of marginalized experiences. This is not a conflation between the goals and struggles of various groups, as these are differences that must be honoured. Quoting Viola et al. (2019) who paraphrase Marxist thinker Samir Amin, it is through a "critical specificity" that we can accomplish a type of engagement with one another that balances between acknowledging commonalities and "refus[ing] to circumvent historical differences and alternative visions for the future, overlook[ing] the important tensions that are evident within and across disparate freedom struggles, or gloss[ing] over the barbaric logics of global capitalism as a major impediment in realizing the multiple horizons of justice" (p. 8).

Imagining settler colonialism as settler-colonial-racial capitalism, or to "bring back racialized labour-capital-nation nexus into the settler-colonial question" (Chatterjee, 2019, p. 655), illuminates a matrix in which

"nonaligned theoretical frameworks and oppositional movements" (Viola et al., 2019, p. 8) are positioned horizontally rather than as rungs of a hierarchy. As Day (2015) alludes, the latter pulls us into questions of epistemic privilege, where the focus is on determining who is more oppressed and thus bears the most valid perspective on the world. While these discussions heed our differences, the approach can divide us further and ultimately empower settler-colonial capitalism towards antagonizing the marginalized against one another.

The Question of Labour

Considering racialized precarious labour allows international students of colour to imagine themselves within the settler-colonial question. We are sought after as profit and as the self-sufficient skilled labourer, a tagline imbued with discourses of exclusion and control particularly of non-white bodies (see Gomez, 2017). Programs such as work and study permits are marketed as opportunities to develop "Canadian experience" and eventually immigrate, but these opportunities are also essentially legally enclosed spaces. For example, international students cannot work full-time during the school year and are ineligible for government and private bank loans (Government of Ontario, 2019), exacerbating strains caused by steep international student tuition. The deportation order given to Jobandeep Singh Sandhu in 2019 for working more than the legal number of hours focused attention on the "irrationality" of work restrictions, especially as many international students reportedly balance full-time school with intense work hours to "pinch pennies" for tuition (Nassar, 2019; Ricci, 2019).

I had always depended on labour as an analytical category to understand the international student positionality and relationship to the Canadian state. However, I have since learned that labour falls short, in at least two ways. The first is as a tool for engaging with difference within international student populations. While it works as a way for "non-Black and non-Native people of colour [to] interpellat[e] themselves within settler-colonial relations," King (2014) articulates the framework's inability to incorporate the Black body and experience, as it sidelines the idea that slavery goes beyond "exploitation and alienation" to constitute "accumulation and fungibility". Day (2015) highlights that exploited workers' demands for "fairness and improved labour conditions" do not fully emancipate the Black slave, who requires "all production [to] cease regardless of its democratization" (p. 114). Although Day does not foreclose the conception of slavery as labour, she recognizes how slavery and labour are "decoupled" by some Afro-pessimist scholars, in that the slave's labour is not as labour is for the proletariat, because the former was more akin to property based on the "accumulation of Black bodies regardless of their utility as labourers" (Wilderson, 2003, as cited in Day, 2015, p. 114). Thus, if the exploited worker cannot put forward "any

demands… that can satisfy or solve the experience of Black social death" (Day, 2015, p. 115), then labour may fail as an analytic for Black international students.[4] Secondly, according to Tuck and Yang (2012), "'labour' or 'workers' as an agential political class fails to activate the decolonizing project" (p. 18). I return to Day (2015), who sees the Indigenous body, like the Black slave, as excluded from the labour paradigm; but instead of accumulation, the settler-colonial logic thrives on the elimination of the Indigenous body.

Subsuming the labour precarities of international students of colour within settler-colonial relations helps emphasize the colonial historicity of racialized precarious labour; but considering King's (2014) and Day's (2015) insights, it risks alienating Black international students from the conversation. As well, addressing racialized migrant labour exploitation and its colonial historicity, and grounding solutions in citizenship and labour rights, may cultivate international student agency and long-term security in Canada; but these approaches do not address the goal of honouring Indigenous claims to their lands. If a common ground is both possible and just, it seems to me that it can be found through engagement between differently marginalized groups, or nonaligned solidarities (Viola et. al, 2019).

In Closing (For Now)

As I close this piece, I reflect on contextual specificity when talking about decolonization. Throughout this discussion, I have spoken of decolonization as it relates to the original custodians of Turtle Island, to whom I and others have some relationship as we live, survive or thrive on their lands. However, for those of us who are racialized im/migrants, we are "displaced victims of a global empire and capitalism" (Walia, 2013). There seem to be opportunities to speak of decolonization in our "home" contexts as well.[5] Is it possible to speak about, and eventually practice, decolonization in our respective contexts simultaneously (across space but at the same time, in the same moment)? I ask this question while wondering whether it is even possible for subjects like me to have a role in decolonization in Canada alone, non-aligned but in productive solidarity with Indigenous peers.

I also learned that an understanding of the international student experience as "exploitation as capital" is one epistemological framework among a

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[4] My present knowledge on this question is limited, signifying an opportunity for future exploration, given the diversities of Black experiences of international education and immigration in Canada. An additional question is whether the idea of Black fungibility holds water for the Black or African experience outside the North American context.

[5] My case is the Philippines. I am struggling navigating this because my surname is that of colonizers and I grew up in Cambodia, a land not mine but "home" to me. Many others bear similar complexities in their own life journeys, indicating the limits of place-based frameworks. In saying this, I agree with Chatterjee's (2019) call for a vision of a space in between "place" and "space."

potential many. In the Canadian context alone, there needs to be a bridge with analytics of Black fungibility, as well as with analytics of specific (post-) colonial contexts.[6] These necessities mark both the richness and challenges of exploring the topic of international students and education. We leave home to study "here," but that is where the shared experience ends. Home bears different meanings for each of us, and here in Canada we are of different backgrounds, upbringings, and legal statuses – and have different aspirations and daily realities. Even as we are subjected to the same structures and politics that drive immigration and labour policies and discourses, how they condition our day-to-day and our envisioned futures is not the same.

To circle back, beyond our differences and similarities we all need to keep in mind our accountabilities, that as we "engag[e] in the very structures of the state," we possibly bolster "the project of settlement" (Chatterjee, 2019, p. 649). This awareness itself is a responsibility. To do otherwise, as Stein (2018) warns, "naturalize[s] the histories and structures of colonial violence" within which we are all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, "already unevenly positioned" (p. 472). From this point onwards, I hope to help unpack and untangle this web of intersecting oppressions, resources for which I am privileged to access as a graduate student. But academia itself is a work in progress. While there are efforts of "incorporating the study of settler-colonialism, racism, and imperialism into university contexts and curricula" (Stein, 2018, p. 472), more is needed beyond incorporating (including defining what "more" means). A crucial starting point is the matter of Indigenous representation in post-secondary education, and if the space of post-secondary education itself offers proper tools for decolonization for Indigenous scholars and their communities. In addition, how can non-Indigenous communities such as international students support such movements? These issues relate to the question of engagement, and I side with those who regard engagement as an important tool towards the ultimate goal of decolonial justice. There must be a way to honour our diversities without allowing them to divide us.

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[6] The current top study destinations are in the Global North, and most international students are from the Global South (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). In Canada, most international students are from China, India, and South Korea; streams from France, Saudi Arabia, Brazil and Mexico have been increasing in recent years (Kim & Kwak, 2019).

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