

**ARTICLE**

# What is a settler-colonial city?

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**Abstract**

What is a “settler-colonial city” and how does it differ from other forms of imperial urban spatial organization? This article seeks to answer these questions by attempting to urbanize recent insights in settler-colonial theory. It begins by considering well-established theorizations of the “colonial city”—particularly those developed by geographers and urbanists in the 1970s and 1980s—in order to assess their suitability for analyses of contemporary settler-colonial milieu. Building on this discussion, the paper asks if and how the insights of settler-colonial theory offer new opportunities to renovate earlier theorizations in ways that are more explicitly relevant to making sense of the urban process in North America and other societies where colonists have “come to stay” and no formal process of decolonization has unfolded.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Geographers have been key contributors to scholarly debates about colonialism, both as interpreters of its spatial effects (Blunt, 1999; Braun, 2000; Cameron, 2015; Gregory, 2004; Harris, 2004; Holmes, Hunt, & Piedalue, 2015; Pasternak, 2013) and as critics of their own discipline's complicity in its historic practice (Blomley, 2003; Driver, 2001; Godlewska & Smith, 1994; Smith, 2003). Urban geographers, in particular, have been at the center of long-standing multidisciplinary efforts to interpret and understand colonialism's role in the production of cities (Blomley, 2004; Jacobs, 1996; Kipfer, 2011; Peters, 2005).

Until comparatively recently, however, work in the latter subfield has been disproportionately concerned with the urban forms, cultures, and governance practices that have prevailed in so-called “exploitation colonies,” or what Dan Clayton (2009, p. 95) describes as territorial units established primarily for the purpose of mercantilist or capitalist extraction in which a “minority” of “expatriate colonial elites” govern “large subject populations,” generally at the behest of a European state. Thus while work in this vein has yielded an important literature on what have long been called “colonial cities,” it has remained comparatively silent on the question of how the production and governance of urban environments differ in milieus where colonial settlers have established a permanent and demographically majoritarian presence on the colonized territory, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, among others. In the broader social sciences, these questions have achieved a greater salience, as theorists from a range of disciplines have worked to theorize “settler colonialism” as an ontologically distinct form of social, political, and geographical domination (Banivanua-Mar & Edmonds, 2010; Bateman & Pilkington, 2011; Belich, 2009; Brown, 2014; Coulthard, 2014; Elkins & Petersen, 2005; Goldstein, 2008; Veracini, 2010; Wolfe, 1999; Wolfe, 2006), with the help of a handful of geographers (Hoogeven, 2014; Inwood & Bonds, 2016; Pasternak, 2013). In spite of this

flourishing, however, few researchers have sought to explicitly urbanize the insights of settler-colonial theory, and only a very small number of studies have gestured toward theorizing the settler-colonial city on its own terms (Baloy, 2016; Blomley, 2004; Coulthard, 2014; Edmonds, 2010; Hugill & Toews, 2014; Toews, 2015; Tomiak, 2013; Veracini, 2012).

In this article, I contribute to the closing of this gap in the research by asking whether the theoretical innovations of settler-colonial theory offer geographers new opportunities to renovate and extend their interpretations of the “urban” implications of colonial practice. To do so, I begin by looking closely at some of the core premises that have animated existing geographical research on colonial urbanism with a keen focus on the writing that has dominated geographical thinking on these questions since at least the mid-1960s, or what we might call the “colonial cities” literature. I then turn to an explicit consideration of how settler-colonial theory poses challenges to these long-established premises and demonstrate why the “colonial city” frame is perhaps a poor fit for urban analysis in societies where colonists have “come to stay” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388), and no formal process of decolonization has unfolded. I then conclude by surveying some of the perils and the promise of adopting settler-colonial theory as a frame for urban and other sorts of analysis.

Before proceeding, however, it is critical to sound a couple notes of caution. First, rigidly construed ideal-typical constructs (such as “colonial” and “settler-colonial” cities) fail to capture the dynamic fluidity of actually existing social environments. It is important to point out that by provisionally adopting a formulation that theorizes “colonial” and “settler colonial” political forms as distinct, I am not suggesting that elements of both cannot coexist in the same place at the same time. Indeed, “reality is inevitably complex,” writes Lorenzo Veracini (2010, p. 12), and these two modes inevitably “interpenetrate each other and overlap in a variety of ways.” Second, neither colonial nor settler-colonial relations articulate in a vacuum; they are elements of complex social totalities that differ markedly between and within diverse geographical sites. For this reason, it is critical to point out that the clear cut distinctions that I draw in the analysis that follows are perhaps best understood as heuristic interventions aimed at demonstrating the inadequacies that inhere in conventional colonial analysis (and not least of the production of urban space) as much as they are about promoting “settler colonialism” as a framework for urban interpretation. In my view, settler-colonial theory is persuasive and generative because it orients our interpretative energies towards the complex persistence and centrality of the colonial relation in the urban present, not because it offers a definitive account of the social totality in places where no formal end to colonization has been achieved.

## 2 | PART 1: THEORIZING THE COLONIAL CITY

Geographers and urbanists have been at the centre of efforts to theorize the “colonial city” as a distinct urban form and have contributed to the development of a robust literature that has attempted to do so, even if the provision of anything like a “universal account” has proved an elusive scholarly task (Home, 2014, p. 75). In general, research in this vein has been concerned with the ways in which metropolitan imperial power has shaped and reshaped urban spaces in the colonized world (Abu-Lughod, 1965; AlSayyad, 1992; Home, 2013; King, 1976; Legg, 2007; Ross & Telkamp, 1985; Simon, 1984) and, to a lesser degree, the ways in which colonial relations have shaped and reshaped urban spaces in the metropolitan “core” (Driver & Gilbert, 1998; Kipfer, 2011; Ross, 1995). Interpretations of the politics of “colonial city” building have generally been consistent with well-established interpretations of “colonialism” as a form of metropolitan domination, often undertaken by a minority of colonial expatriates, and aimed primarily at exploiting the wealth and resources of a colonized space (Osterhammel, 2005; Said, 1993). In geography and beyond, the “exploitation” mode of imperial practice has so long dominated academic interpretations of what “colonialism” is that its core assumptions often function as a kind of scholarly common sense. For our purposes here, it is critical to point out that this is particularly true in the key writings of the “colonial city” subfield. To illustrate this point and elucidate what, precisely, is meant by the term “colonial city,” I turn now to a brief survey of some of the core premises that have animated this conceptual framing.

First, conventional theorizations of the “colonial city” tend to define their objects as nodal points in the networked geographies of European empire. In general, contributors to this subfield have been keen to show how cities like Cairo, Madras (present-day Chennai), Algiers, Leopoldville (present-day Kinshasa), and Hanoi, among hundreds of others, were developed (or redeveloped) as key loci of coordination that were capable of linking “metropolitan” interests in western Europe to vast stretches of territory in the colonized world, and vice versa (Abu-Lughod, 1965; Home, 2013; Nightingale, 2012). As such, their empirical work demonstrates how “colonial cities” operated as key centers of military and administrative coordination, staging areas for incursion into continental interiors, markets and entrepôts for extracted raw materials, residential collection points for missionaries, settlers and imperial agents, as well as theaters for performances of imperial strength, among other things. Thus Anthony King (1985) (perhaps the leading theorist of the “colonial city”) stresses that “colonial cities” need to be understood as relational multi-scalar productions, shaped not only by local dynamics but also by their substantial linkages to regional hinterlands, broader imperial networks, and the shifting imperatives of the “world system” of capitalist production.

Secondly, conventional theorizations of the “colonial city” tend to interpret their objects as historical artefacts. By and large, they are focused on the urban effects of the world-historic processes by which imperial administrations remade the political geography of nearly the entire world in the modern period, employing shifting forms of predatory expansion in order to accumulate wealth, extend influence, enhance global standing, and resolve domestic contradictions, among other motivations. This temporal and thematic orientation is certainly warranted in geographical study. Indeed, the geopolitical implications of imperial conquest in the era of high European imperialism are simply staggering. By the zenith of what the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1989) calls the “age of empire” (1875–1914), giant swaths of global space had been neatly carved up into European “possessions.” The British Empire alone controlled nearly one quarter of the globe’s inhabitable surface and claimed roughly 500 million people as “subjects” at the height of its influence. In imperial “cores,” meanwhile, colonial accumulations fuelled massive industrial growth and urban development. On the strength of conquest, European domestic economies grew exponentially and so too did European cities. Certainly, Joseph Conrad (2002, p. 103) could not have described late 19th century London as the “biggest, and the greatest, town on Earth,” without the economic boon of empire. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that imperial practice played an integral role in the making of the contemporary global order. What is critical for our purposes, however, is the way in which such theorizations have tended to treat colonial urbanism as a “historic” process of city building, as the property of a bygone era, a now-concluded “age of empire.” Thus although many analyses acknowledge that contemporary inequities often have their roots in colonial occupation and administration (Davis, 2006; Home, 2014; Prashad, 2007), the “colonial cities” literature generally promotes the idea that the time of colonialism has passed.

Finally, conventional theorizations tend to insist that the “colonial city” is an environment designed to secure the dominance of imperialist actors by concretizing hierarchical divisions in city space. “From Rangoon to Cairo, Luanda to Singapore,” writes King (1976, p. xii) in his seminal study on colonial urban development, “cities were laid out by the rulers and not the ruled.” Indeed, “colonial cities” were often rigidly segregated, and theorists have routinely emphasized their “dual” character (Abu-Lughod, 1965; Nightingale, 2012; Simon, 1984; Wright, 1991). In such accounts, the “colonial city” is depicted as a space divided between a quarantined zone of privilege, defined by spaciousness, relative luxury, and European planning practices, on the one hand, and a so-called “native” zone, defined by dense settlement, privation, and “traditional” infrastructures, on the other (Immerwahr, 2007; King, 2009). Thus in King’s (1990, p. 34) terms, “the fact of race” is the “distinctive social characteristic” of the “colonial city.” Indeed, the spatial segregation of “races,” observes Robert Home (2014, p. 75), was very consciously embedded in the legal and political frameworks that governed such environments. Notably, these theoretical formulations resonate with Frantz Fanon’s (1967, p. 4–6) memorable description of the compartmentalized geography of colonial space in “The Wretched of the Earth.” “The colonial world is a Manichean world,” he writes, with its cities violently carved up between the abundance of the spaces of the colonizers—sectors with “lights and paved roads, where trash cans overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed of leftovers,” and the generalized precariousness of the spaces of the colonized—“a world with no space,” where “people are piled one on top of the other, squeezed tightly together,” a “famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal and light.” In their design and function, then, “colonial cities” communicated and enforced

an acutely racialized segregationist social order designed primarily to ensure the uninterrupted persistence of metropolitan accumulation.

Taken together, then, the interpretation that emerges from this thinking is that the “colonial city” was designed to function as a kind of exploitation machine. By assembling the analyses that emerge from the texts cited above, we can define the “colonial city” as a “historic” form of spatial production that is typified by a highly segregated urban organization and designed to facilitate the smooth flow of human and resource surpluses from a colonized “periphery” to a metropolitan “core.” But as we shall see, such interpretations, with their characteristic emphasis on metropolitan forms of domination, have only limited explanatory purchase in contexts where a demographically majoritarian group (or series of groups) has settled permanently on existing Indigenous territories and asserted a settler sovereignty distinct from that which emanates from a far-flung metropolitan “core.”

### 3 | PART 2: THE SETTLER-COLONIAL CHALLENGE

In an effort to address this analytic inadequacy, scholars across the social sciences have sought to draw clear lines of demarcation between a metropole-oriented form of “exploitation” colonization, on the one hand, and a more internally-oriented form of “settler” colonization, on the other. Indeed, a growing chorus of scholars has begun to insist that “settler colonialism” ought to be interpreted as an ontologically distinct form of colonial practice. For example, the anthropologist Patrick Wolfe (1999), who was perhaps the leading proponent of this position before his untimely death last year, argues that “colonial” (i.e., “metropolitan”) and “settler-colonial” forms of imperial conquest are animated by fundamentally different relationships to the colonized territory and its inhabitants. In his terms, settler colonists differ from metropolitan colonists in that they “come to stay” and are foremost concerned with the construction of a “new” society on the expropriated land base (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388). They are, therefore, primarily driven by a desire to possess and settle the land in perpetuity, in addition to benefiting from new opportunities to accumulate. Of course, such efforts are never undertaken in a social vacuum and because the territories claimed by settler colonists are used and occupied by Indigenous people, the imposition of settler-colonial orders necessarily requires explicit forms of territorial alienation (Wolfe, 2006), as well as cultural forms of disavowal (Barker, Rollo, & Battell Lowman, 2017; Fortier, 2016; Mackey, 2016; Veracini, 2008). “Supersession,” or the “displacement of Indigenous peoples and their replacement with settlers,” is thus the “central dynamic” of settler-colonization (Edmonds, 2010, p. 5). Of course, in the materiality of actually-existing situations, such “replacement” is never fully achieved, in spite of the persistence of settler strategies of “elimination” that range from explicit forms of frontier violence (Daschuk, 2013; Wolfe, 2006) to coercive assimilation (Milloy, 1999), to strategic exclusion (Lawrence, 2004), and to more cunning forms of integrative pacification (Coulthard, 2014; Dempsey, Gould, & Sundberg, 2011; Pasternak, 2013).

If we take this analysis seriously, then we begin to see why the “colonial city” literature is of limited use in efforts to theorize and understand the production of urban space in settler-colonial milieus, even if we are not prepared to insist that the two forms of colonialism are “absolutely” distinct from one another. If theorists of settler colonization are correct in their assertion that “metropolitan” and “settler” forms of colonial practice are animated by different dynamics, then surely the forms of urban analysis associated with the former need to be recalibrated in order to render them useful tools for making sense of the latter. This basic insight has been the inspiration for a number of recent scholarly engagements, including a series of panels on “Settler Colonialism and the City” at the 2015 Association of American Geographers Annual Conference in Chicago (organized by geographers Daniela Aiello, Jessica Hallenbeck, and Natalie Knight), a forthcoming special issue of “Settler-Colonial Studies” dedicated to “Rethinking the Urban through the Lens of Settler-Colonialism” (edited by the urban planner Libby Porter and political geographer Oren Yiftachel), and a special session on “Settler Cities” at the 2016 European Association of Urban Historians in Helsinki (convened by the historians Carl Nightingale, Vivian Bickford-Smith, and Johan Lagae), among others. Inspired by this interdisciplinary energy and the preliminary questions that have animated it, I want to turn

now to a discussion of some of the ways that we might begin to renovate the insights of “colonial city” analysis in order to begin the theoretical work of defining, however provisionally, what a “settler-colonial city” is.

First, settler-colonial cities have a more internally-oriented political economy than their colonial city counterparts. Conventional geographical approaches have tended to theorize the latter as nodal points in the networked geographies of European empires that function primarily as instruments for the reproduction of metropolitan power and accumulation. For this reason, they should be distinguished from settler-colonial cities, whose very *raison-d’être* is the enrichment of local (or at least national) settler constituencies, as opposed to far-off metropolitan sponsors. Moreover, settler-colonial political imaginaries are fundamentally premised on the idea of a severed link with Europe and the idea that a “new” society is being constructed on settled lands. Exemplary of this thinking, for example, is Frederick Turner’s (1986) late 19th century view that the Euro-American conquest of Western North America constituted both a literal and figurative turning-of-the-back on Europe. Connectedly, interpretations of city building in settler colonies have often been shrouded in a mantle of colonial amnesia (Barman, 2005; Mays, 2016; Vicenti Carpio, 2011); in both official histories and boosterist accounts, settler-colonial urban environments are routinely (if dubiously) treated as sites of settler creation in “wasted” or “virgin” landscapes, great hubs of commerce, and exchange brought to life by the brilliance and ingenuity of rugged and ambitious arrivistes rather than spaces of conquest, eviction, and resettlement (Hugill, 2016a). In settler-colonial situations, such disavowals are commonplace and often function as an effective means of denying the very existence and persistence of Indigenous presences and claims. Thus “settler colonial” historical writing “frequently refer[s] to Indigenous people as “shadows,” figures lurking in thickets,” and members of “dying races” (Veracini, 2008: 368). In a certain light, all forms of imperialism are premised on what historian James Belich (2009) calls processes of “mass transfer” but what, precisely, is being transferred marks a key point of distinction between patterns of colonial and settler-colonial accumulation. In the case of the former, the “mass transfer” takes the form of steady flows of human and material resources between sites in the colonized world and the metropolitan “core.” Colonial cities were often built and sustained precisely to serve the function of coordinating the transfer of extracted raw materials and the fruits of colonial labour to Europe, for example. In the case of the latter, however, the “mass transfer” manifests as an arrival of a majoritarian settler population that is primarily concerned with the founding of a new political order grounded in permanent and comprehensive territorial appropriation. Thus in settler-colonial contexts, there is “no spatial separation between metropole and colony,” as the critical education theorists Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012, p. 5) put it. For Wolfe (2006), the project of settler colonization must therefore be distinguished from other colonial projects because its fundamental aim is “replacement” rather than exploitation, although the former need not preclude the latter. Of course, none of this is to say that settler-colonial cities were (or are) somehow isolated from transnational circuits of institutional, cultural, political, or economical exchange. In fact, the work of a number of historians has traced such connections explicitly (Mawani, 2016; Perry, 2001), and the work of other theorists has demonstrated that settler colonialism often articulates with (or is organically linked to) the deployment of very “outward” looking forms of imperial violence (Barker, 2009; Tuck & Wang, 2012). With that said, it is critical to draw a clear line of distinction between such forms of integration and the explicit mode of metropolitan command that defined “colonial cities” in the classic era of European imperialism.

Secondly, “colonialism” cannot be understood as a historical artefact in societies where colonizers “come to stay” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388), and no formal process of decolonization has been achieved. As Glen Coulthard and others argue—and abundant evidence demonstrates—the hierarchical political dynamics that have animated the inauspicious beginnings (i.e., moments of conquest) that gave rise to settler-colonial societies do not belong to a now concluded historical past. Indeed, one of the core objectives of settler-colonial scholarship is to understand how these inequitable dynamics have been recalibrated, recomposed, and transformed in ways that allow them to continue to shape relationships in the present. Because Indigenous presence and counter-claims persist in settler-colonial milieus and the project of replacement is always incomplete, even a “failure” (Simpson, 2014), settler-colonial dynamics continue to shape interactions between settler and Indigenous constituencies in the present. Thus, settler-colonial practice is not an historical “event” (Wolfe, 1999) but an enduring and constitutive element of the broader field of power

relations that shape outcomes in settler societies, a key element of the complex amalgam of intersecting forms of domination that are “structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous people from their land and self-determining authority” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 6–7). For this reason, the key task for scholars interested in interpreting the production of urban space in settler-dominated societies is to ask how the persistence of these hierarchical social relations continues to shape urban outcomes. Geographers and others would do well to start such investigations from the premise that colonization is a contemporary phenomenon because settler-colonial political communities remain, by definition, animated by the “unreformed immanence of fundamentally unequal relations between Indigenous peoples and their nonindigenous counterparts” (Veracini, 2015, p. 1)

Third, the abundant literature on “colonial cities” demonstrates how urban environments were carved up with the explicit intention of facilitating the exploitation of the colonized, as I argue above, but urban environments that emerged in settler-colonial societies have not necessarily followed the same developmental trajectory. Although many were (and are) profoundly divided along ethnic and “racial” lines (Burley, 2013; Comack, Deane, Morrisette, & Silver, 2013; Estes, 2014; Hugill, 2016b; Tomiak, 2013), Indigenous peoples themselves were historically more often removed from city life through a series of evictions, expulsions, and relocations than they were contained in urban enclaves. Of course, it is a matter of historical fact that most North American cities were built on geographies already used and occupied by Indigenous peoples (Peters, 2004), and an important body of literature has stressed the enduring presence of Indigenous people in many such urban milieus (Deloria, 2004; Peters & Andersen, 2014; Wilson & Peters, 2005). Yet because settler colonists were generally more interested in seizing the lands belonging to Indigenous people than they were in accumulations generated by Indigenous labour (Coulthard, 2014; Wolfe, 1999), their preference was often to seek removal rather than integration or local containment for the purposes of economic exploitation (Stanger-Ross, 2008; Wood, 2006). In Canada, for example, the history of settler urban development is partly a history of what Julie Tomiak (2013, p. 2–3) calls the “deterritorialization of Indigenous people.” As she observes, settler colonists achieved “radical reconfiguration[s] of space” by pursuing a diverse range of expulsive tactics, including denying aboriginal title, the “entrenchment” of a private property system “from which Indigenous people were excluded,” and the creation a network of reserves. In settler colonies, urban spaces operate less as sites where the interests of far-flung sponsors are coordinated and more as sites where the interests of a landed settler majority of “foreign invaders” are made manifest in the materiality of bricks and mortar. Although settler colonists did (and do) sometimes rely on Indigenous labour to achieve their objectives, their primary interest lies less in the systematic exploitation of a colonized workforce than it does in the eventual clearing of the expropriated territory for settler use and the incorporation of that territory into the regulatory ambit of settler institutions of governance. In other words, Indigenous land, not labour and its associated surpluses, is the *sine qua non* of settler-colonial desire, as a range of empirical studies illuminate (Carter, 1990; Harris, 2002). Of course, my point is not that Indigenous people have never been exploited as labourers in settler-colonial societies but rather that such exploitation has always been peripheral to the core objective of settler accumulation strategies, which have hinged primarily on the exploitation of expropriated lands. Thus in Coulthard's (2014, p. 125) terms, the fundamental organizing principle of settler-colonial political orders is not primarily to exploit local resources and populations but to “shore up” sustained access to territory “for the purposes of state formation, settlement and capitalist development.” The production of urban spaces has often reflected this imperative.

To summarize, then, if we take these points of departure seriously, it becomes clear that the insights of settler-colonial theory offer a provisional blueprint for a comprehensive theory of the settler-colonial city. Specifically, I have identified three key points of incongruence between the production of urban space in geographies that are animated by a metropole-oriented logic of extractive accumulation and those that are animated by a more permanent ambition to settle and permanently transform the colonized territory. To reiterate, I have argued that the “settler-colonial city” differs fundamentally from the “colonial city” because (a) its accumulation strategies are primarily oriented around the enrichment of settler constituencies, rather than far-flung metropolitan sponsors, (b) the colonial relation remains a central and enduring element of its contemporary life, albeit in dynamic and frequently recomposed

forms, (c) and Indigenous peoples themselves have more often been excluded from, rather than exploited in, its core economic activities. My hope is that these provisional points of distinction will stimulate conversations about how, precisely, we might theorize the “settler-colonial city” as a distinct sociospatial form.

## 4 | CONCLUSION: PERIL AND PROMISE OF THE SETTLER-COLONIAL FRAME

Importantly, there are good reasons to be cautious about a full-throated endorsement of settler-colonial theory as an analytical framework, as critics from a range of disciplinary backgrounds have pointed out. The legal historian Renisa Mawani (2016), for example, argues that settler-colonial theorizing has sometimes traded in crude binaries, including “imposed divisions between settler and native, colony and settler colony, and land and sea” that are incapable of capturing the complexity of colonial power and the varied movement of “people, ideas, and legalities” across a diverse range of imperial spaces. Others insist that an over-reliance on settler-colonial theory’s interpretive frame can lead us to overstate the completeness of the colonial enterprise. The Indigenous political theorists Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005, p. 601) observe that such interpretive strategies risk “allowing *colonization* to be the only story of Indigenous lives.” “It must be recognized,” they continue, “that colonialism is a narrative in which the Settler’s power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome of perspective on that power.” Connectedly, the anthropologist Tim Rowse (2010, p. 66) cautions that critical interpretations of settler-colonial practices in Australia have often problematically asserted Indigenous “helplessness” in the face of “overbearing colonial pressure.” And the effect of such presentations, he contends, is often to reproduce a “sorrowing” form of outrage in which “defeat and marginality are highlighted at the expense of understanding the nature and limits of Indigenous agency.” Meanwhile, Alissa Macoun and Elizabeth Strakosch (2013, p. 435) argue that scholarship in this emergent subfield has sometimes promoted a kind of “colonial fatalism” by presenting settler-colonial domination as structurally embedded, “highly stable,” and relatively impervious to serious interruption. They also suggest that analyses that rely too heavily on this structuralism can lead non-Indigenous scholars to treat “settler action” as “always already colonizing” in ways that present anti-colonial practice as futile and tacitly excuse those scholars from the ethical demand of engaging in it. More troubling still is the risk that the considerable attention being heaped upon scholarship in this subfield may actually operate to “displace, overshadow, or even mask over” long-standing traditions of knowledge production and colonial critique that have emerged from the field of Indigenous studies, including “feminist and queer Indigenous work that is centred on Indigenous resurgence,” as Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel (2014) have pointed out (see also Bhandar & Ziadah, 2016; Mawani, 2016). Indeed, much would be lost if a critical overreliance on settler-colonial theorizing operated to obscure the many promising and generative insights that have emerged from a recent surge of work in that vein (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014; Simpson, 2008; Simpson, 2011). Finally, it should also be said that settler-colonial theory has been perhaps overly focused on places that were first colonized by the British and French (most research has focused on Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, for example), but these are not the only places where projects of demographically majoritarian settler “invasion” are ongoing. Although settler-colonial theory has been put to promising use in Palestine (Badarin, 2015; Pappé, 2014; Piterberg, 2008; Shihade, 2012), more is certainly needed from Latin America and other geographies where its theoretical commitments can be put to new empirical tests.

For these and other reasons, it is critical that what we take up the insights of settler-colonial theory both with a degree of caution and alongside other critical literatures. As I argued at the outset of this paper, the relatively narrow category of “settler colonialism” is not sufficient to capture the dynamic complexity of the social totality, so we ought to treat settler-colonial theory as a set of heuristic insights that allow us to highlight and stress the “centrality” of the colonial relation in our analyses of places where settler populations have “come to stay.” In doing so, analysts would do well to heed the spirit of the critical interventions listed above, including the injunction that we recognize the

instability, impermanence, and contingency of the settler-colonial order of things. The good news is that the reproduction of settler-colonial economic, political, and territorial advantage requires sustained iteration in the present and is therefore always vulnerable to interruption and contestation (Blomley, 2004).

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