

Resource Extraction, Indigenous Women,
and the Violence of the Settler Colonial State

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Indigenous women and girls experience violence at a rate that is roughly three times higher than that of non-Indigenous women in Canada, and this rate of violence is most heavily borne by Indigenous women living close to resource extraction projects (Department of Justice Canada). The heightened violence against Indigenous women in the context of 'man camps' supporting resource extraction projects is a concentrated expression of the ongoing colonial processes of racialized violence and dispossession that are pervasive in broader Canadian society, permitting racialized violence by individuals. While the connection between resource extraction and settler colonialism is one that is addressed in the broader scholarship, there is more to examine regarding how this process impacts violence against Indigenous women and girls. I will begin this analysis by describing the social context of resource extraction projects and then discuss the patterns of behaviours and power dynamics by drawing from the insights of settler colonial studies and critical race theory, and more specifically by employing principles of intersectionality and police abolitionism. Addressing nationwide anti-Indigenous sentiment and policy is needed to prevent victimization of Indigenous women and girls living near resource extraction projects.

I am a white settler Masters student at Athabasca University, descended from German immigrants after the Second World War. I currently teach full-time at a public high school in a small rural town that relies heavily on extractive resource industries, particularly coal mining and a pipeline recently built. I am motivated in this area of research linking resource extraction with violence against Indigenous women and girls out of concern for my most vulnerable students and the options they *should* have for their futures, to live and thrive in safety in their home communities. I also aim to treat this subject in the style of Eve Tuck, critiquing the violent patterns and systems created and maintained by capitalist settler colonial society, rather than the damage done on the bodies of Indigenous women and girls, thereby repeating harm (149-50).

The pattern between the presence of resource extraction projects hosting 'man camps' and

increased violence against Indigenous women and girls is widely documented through academia (Eckord; Lucchesi; Stienstra; Tordimah), yet only occasionally mentioned in mainstream news outlets. Resource extraction corporations propose their projects for seemingly unused land in the settler perspective, conduct townhall meetings and environmental assessments, and then offer large paycheques and relatively cheap company-owned accommodation to attract a large supply of labour for the project. These housing projects are colloquially known as 'man camps' and the process creates what Amnesty International calls a "shadow population": temporary workers, who are overwhelmingly young men, arrive en masse to a remote community, usually near a reserve, and are not counted in the Canadian census (4). Their absence in the census data results in inadequate social services for the actual size of the population needing support near resource extraction projects. The environment for the young men living in the camps is one of great isolation from their loved ones, long shifts of hard work, high pay cheques, and increased use of alcohol and drugs to "blow off steam" (Amnesty International; Eckford and Wagg 102; Buller 590).

A settler colonial lens draws our attention to the significance of having such a "shadow population" and resource extraction projects in close proximity to an Indigenous community and/or reserve. Theorizations of settler colonialism shine light on some of the processes that define nations colonized by white European settlers and still living with an Indigenous population. Settler colonial studies understands colonization to be enacted through multiple processes which include: acquisition, erasure, dispossession, containment, settlement, and appropriation (Crosby 414; Starblanket and Coburn 89). All of these processes make use of interconnected logics - a 'logic of domination' according to Starblanket and Coburn, a 'logic of elimination' in the terminology of Patrick Wolfe, and a logic of 'white possession' in the terms of Moreton-Robinson (Starblanket and Corburn 88; Wolfe 388; Crosby 414, 416). Scholars interrogating settler colonialism recognize that these processes are ongoing and not relegated to a time period in the past - colonization is not over.

Resource extraction projects are a front where one can see these processes continue to play out. The 'logic of elimination' works to ensure that the settler population must eventually replace the Indigenous population (Wolfe 388). The settler colonial project and logic of elimination function by interconnected processes of *dispossessing* Indigenous peoples of their land (land treaties with the Crown), in order for white Europeans to *acquire* the land to settle themselves, exploit for natural resources, and 'preserve' in parks, while attempting to *contain* Indigenous people on reserves. Reserves are often far from the larger white settlements, and thus 'out of sight, out of mind,' to borrow a phrase from the Amnesty International report (1). While Indigenous people are contained on reserves and dispossessed of their land, the land becomes a white settler possession. However, Indigenous people are not gone.

Processes of settler colonialism are characterized by an inherent instability that drives the logic of elimination. As long as settler infrastructure is built on land stolen from Indigenous people, there is the possibility of the Indigenous people pushing back against settler claims of possession over the land (Crosby 416). This inherent insecurity spurs violence from white settlers against Indigenous people through the logic of elimination, and plays out today in the violence inflicted upon Indigenous protesters at resource extraction sites and violence and sexual violence against Indigenous women and girls by white assailants. Resource extraction projects near reserves are the contexts that bring these two groups into close proximity to act out the oppressive, ongoing work of colonialism. This pattern plays out across Canada and the United States. For example, when the oil boom began in 2015 at the Bakken oilfield in North Dakota, there was a 75% increase in sexual assault on the reserve nearby, and a decrease in crime in neighbouring settler occupied counties compared to the years prior (Stern).

Amnesty International writes in their report on extraction projects "that failure to adequately address the unintended social impacts of resource development contributes to the risks faced by

Indigenous women and girls" (4). I would argue that this 'unintended' impact, through the lens of settler colonial theory, is business as usual for white Europeans living in a settler colonial state. 'Unintended' by the individuals involved, but exactly intended by the systems established in the early settlement of Canada that still resonate today. The initiation of an extraction project dispossesses the local Indigenous nations of their land and turns it into a 'white possession', which is inherently unstable as stolen territory. As long as Indigenous people exist, whose relationship with the land is central to their cosmology, ethics, political systems, legal orders, and kinship, they pose an obstacle to the corporate interests of capitalist accumulation through resource extraction and must be eliminated to continue the project. The increased risk of violence for Indigenous women and girls from settler extraction workers, attracted to the area by high-paying jobs, is how the 'logic of elimination' plays out. As Melina Laboucan-Massimo of Lubicon Cree First Nation expresses, "The industrial system of resource extraction in Canada is predicated on systems of power and domination. This system is based on the raping and pillaging of Mother Earth as well as violence against women. The two are inextricably linked" (Buller 586).

Much like the sexuality of white and black women needed to be controlled by white men in a slave state to ensure the purity of the white race and the continued production of black slaves (Collins 677), the targeting of Indigenous women controls their sexual reproduction. Eliminating Indigenous women, who play important roles as knowledge keepers and leaders in Indigenous communities (Starblanket and Coburn 94-5), works toward eliminating Indigenous people overall that threaten the fragile settler state. Framing these "social impacts of resource development", including violence and sexual violence against Indigenous women and girls, as 'unintended', minimizes the responsibility, and even suggests innocence, of corporations and the governing systems of Canada to ensure Indigenous women and girls' safety and ignores Canada's current colonial aggression.

To explore how these systems of settler colonial oppression play out in remote resource extraction contexts, I will be using Wendy Hulko's definitions of intersectionality and social location. For Hulko, intersectionality refers to the theoretical interlocking of identity categories and how they interact, while social location refers to "the result of this interaction in terms of privileges and disadvantages" and "describes an externally imposed situation" (Hulko 45, 47). This section will explore the workings of gender, race, and social class through the intersectional lens. While the full spectrum of gender identity and sexuality certainly plays into increased or decreased vulnerability to oppression in the context of resource extraction projects near Indigenous communities, this paper focuses on a gender binary and uses gender binary language.

Tension between white European settlers and Indigenous women can be traced to the early days of colonization. White European social norms dictated that men were the leaders and decision-makers, while "Indigenous women's power and centrality within communities constituted a particular threat to settler governance, as they represented a fundamentally different form of political organization" (Starblanket and Coburn 94). Indigenous women are uniquely vulnerable at the intersection of heteropatriarchal and settler systems and narratives, which shapes how they become targets for elimination in order to secure the sovereignty of the settler state.

I pause here to note that my white settler identity has posed a dilemma in how to write sensitively and ethically to explain the history of settler narratives of Indigenous women, aiming to keep the focus on settler systems rather than Indigenous pain. Dehumanizing narratives that are created and repeated within a white settler dominated state create a vulnerable social location for Indigenous women, and this persistent dehumanizing rhetoric in broader Canadian society permits the violence that occurs when (settler) extraction workers are in close proximity to Indigenous communities or reserves. Early colonists portrayed Indigenous women using terms that were objectifying and dehumanizing, which developed over time to validate settler domination and "civilization" (Buller 386). This is particularly salient as Indigenous women traditionally played significant leadership roles in their communities and are

culturally, spiritually, and relationally connected with the land; their valued existence diametrically opposed and threatened white European settler norms for leadership and sovereignty that were inherently fragile (Buller 136). The impact of dehumanizing language in portrayals of Indigenous women, such as modern Halloween costumes and the tabloid style or absent reporting of missing Indigenous sex workers in urban settings, continues to diminish their value as human beings (Blaze Aubrey 43; Buller 663).

These stereotypes that were deliberately constructed in the white European settler imagination work to systematically devalue and dehumanize Indigenous women as 'things' to be desired and disposed of with limited, if any, consequence. This construction serves the settler colonial project. Ideas of Indigenous women were deliberately constructed to represent the untamed, desirable land - if settlers wanted to acquire the land, they would need to conquer the Indigenous women. Indigenous women become the obstacle that has to be eliminated in a settler colonial state in order to exploit the land for its resources. The social location of Indigenous women, resulting from the intersection of femaleness that is constructed as a heterosexual settler man's possession, indicating entitlement and access, and race that is constructed as 'other' and inferior, makes them uniquely vulnerable to violence and sexual violence in the context of the settler colonial state.

There is a further intersection with settler social class systems that work to make Indigenous women's social location more vulnerable in the specific context of resource extraction projects in the settler colonial state. Women in Canada continue to earn 89 cents to the dollar that men earn when all parties are working full time, and Indigenous people in general experience "low income at twice the rate of the general Canadian population" (Department of Justice; Trovato). Economic insecurity in general creates increased risk of violence against women (Amnesty International 4; Manning et al. 9) and the intersecting narratives created by the heteropatriarchy and settler society compound to create an acute economic vulnerability for Indigenous women.

This vulnerable social location for Indigenous women across Canada is exacerbated by the economic insecurity created specifically with resource extraction projects. When a pipeline is being

constructed or a new mine goes in, corporations bring in large populations of labourers, usually young white men. The influx of labourers either require a 'man camp' to be built, or they create a suddenly high demand for housing which raises rents in a community, making housing scarce and precarious for everyone in the community. The high wages and high numbers of extraction workers also increase local food prices, adding food insecurity to housing insecurity in the fight for survival (Amnesty International 4; Eckford and Wagg 102; Buller 590).

Indigenous women feel this struggle more acutely because they are more often in caregiver roles and less frequently have access to resource sector wages (Amnesty International 4; Manning et al. 6). The imbalance of power and struggle for survival is concentrated and exaggerated in the context of resource extraction, but simply reflects the overall processes of settler colonialism that are ongoing across Canada. The influx of labourers dispossess the local Indigenous nation of the available housing, and the increased vulnerability of Indigenous women to violence in this context mirrors the logic of elimination, actualizing the colonial goal of replacing the Indigenous population with a white settler one.

In interviews with Indigenous women that have been victims of sex trafficking in these environments and/or victims of violence, they are consistent in the assertion that there are plenty of people who work in resource extraction who support families and "lead good lives", but for those with predilections toward violence, sexism, and racism, the 'man camp' environment exacerbates those problems (Buller 587; Morin). These pre-existing attitudes are learned in broader Canadian society through the processes of settler colonialism, and can be seen more clearly with the magnifying glass at resource extraction sites. Principles of police abolitionism are helpful in understanding how these processes are allowed to continue, particularly regarding the role of criminalization by the settler state, how criminalization is tied to private property in a settler state, and how each of those ideas is reproduced in what Joel Dyer calls the "Prison Machine," as summarized by Julia Sudbury (Sudbury 166).

A central tenet in settler colonial studies is that settler colonialism is an ongoing process,

refuting the idea that the colonial era is a thing of the past and no longer a source of violence for Indigenous people. In abolitionist thinking, Julia Sudbury argues that current systems of power and control build on older systems of exploitation rooted in racism and patriarchy (162). In the ongoing settler colonial state, tools enacting Indigenous dispossession work alongside stereotypes of what “civilized” people looked like, could do, and were entitled to. Racist narratives positioning Indigenous peoples as dying nations and helpless wards of the state have shaped the white settler narrative that Indigenous lands should become white possessions. Settler ideas of “civilization” are just one previous system upon which ideas of critical infrastructure and current policing are built, supporting the continued dispossession of land from Indigenous peoples. As Crosby writes:

"Critical infrastructure is operationalized around... ‘white possessive logics’ that work to dispossess and dislocate Indigenous peoples from their natural infrastructures, which secure Indigenous life... Indigenous communities that oppose settler encroachments on their territories and thereby challenge settler sovereignty and claims to ownership over Indigenous lands and resources are articulated as threats to critical infrastructure in the internal records of national security agencies such as the RCMP " (416 - 17).

Dispossession of Indigenous lands allows white settler acquisition, appropriation, and exploitation of the land's resources through extraction projects, the ‘critical’ nature of which is defined by the settler state and secured by police to protect settler capitalist accumulation. The Canadian settler colonial state is a system that establishes, authorizes, and enforces its jurisdiction and authority through the use of police.

The role of police is integral to the defense of settler capitalist interests and has been carefully shaped over time. Rinaldo Walcott argues that police are part of the "system of institutions and norms that are all tied to property and have their origins in protecting property and capital" (Olaniyan). In terms of a settler colonial state, the fetishization of private property and the

mobilization of police to defend the interests of private business fits neatly into the process of dispossession, acquisition, and appropriation. The settler colonial state uses criminalization as a "weapon for social problems caused by globalization of capital and the protest it engendered" (Sudbury 166). Namely, criminalizing the protests of Indigenous land defenders in the face of resource extraction projects to ensure that settler infrastructure and acquired property is prioritized. This criminalization serves the overall logic of elimination in a settler colonial state by providing grounds for arrest, containment, and removal of Indigenous people when settler capitalist interests are challenged.

The role of police in the specific context of resource extraction projects can be illustrated through Joel Dyer's model of the Prison Machine, which argues that the media, public policy, and private corporations work together to oppress people of colour (Sudbury 166). Reports of Indigenous protests blocking pipeline construction or logging are regularly in the news media; the conflict between corporations and Indigenous protesters causes law enforcement to become involved, and begins to shape public policy, e.g. the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act in Alberta; these processes benefit the interests and profits of the corporations working in resource extraction, as the private corporations are partnered in reporting activities that disrupt their production (Crosby 419-20; Morgan et. al 419). As Andrew Crosby explains, "securitization of critical infrastructure in Canada relegates Indigenous bodies and places as a threat to settler life" (419). The relationship between resource extraction corporations and police goes a step further: corporations are included in RCMP work by divulging which communities - almost always Indigenous - are a threat to their "critical infrastructure" (Crosby 414). This perpetuates the narrative of Indigenous people as a dangerous 'other' that threatens settler life, and settler life is always threatened when its infrastructure is built on stolen land (414). This also means the private (settler) corporations have the power of defining criminality, causing corporate interests to become intertwined with the colonial

work of containing, by arrest or prison, the Indigenous 'other' who obstructs the 'critical' exploitation of land resources. This police / corporation relationship serves the ongoing work of the settler colonial state and the logic of elimination: finding legal ways to replace Indigenous life with settlers.

The above relationship between police and resource extraction corporations that operates across Canada allows the increased violence that Indigenous women experience when resource sector workers flood into their communities. According to the Indigenous survivors of sexual exploitation interviewed by Brandi Morin for Al Jazeera (Morin), Indigenous women struggle to report instances of violence or sexual harassment perpetrated by resource sector workers to police because they know the workers have the "backing of the police." For example, the workers for the Coastal Gas Link pipeline are escorted across the Indigenous barricade by police officers, blatantly displaying the priority of RCMP to protect corporate interests and settler infrastructure (Crosby 413). This distrust in and disdain from police is further confirmed by the truths shared in the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Buller 663-666). Indigenous women's safety is not a consistent priority for police. Corporations have been given the power to decide what and who should be rendered safe in the interests of capitalism, and the police have been given the power to enforce those capitalist interests that serve the colonial project, to the detriment of Indigenous women and girls.

Police are mobilized to protect private property in the interests of resource extraction, which communicates policing's wider role in the dispossession of Indigenous lands and erasure of Indigenous people, prioritizing settler colonial capitalist interests. Any young white men in the 'man camps' who are already prone to violence, sexism, and racism, receive this message from police activities and know that they can prey upon Indigenous women with little consequence, if not from the encouragement of a hypermasculine environment - plus the geographical factors of being isolated from their families and homes but close to Indigenous communities. Media coverage of Indigenous women's deaths or victimization is sensationalized in a tabloid style or not covered at

all, suggesting how little settler society needs to care about Indigenous women's lives when the overall process of settler colonialism is working toward elimination (Buller 385). The vulnerability that Indigenous women experience is systemic and intersectional, compounded by the increased economic vulnerability when resource extraction projects begin near their communities, bringing to their doorstep an influx of men who have been taught by a settler society that Indigenous women's lives do not matter.

This pattern of increased victimization for Indigenous women in conjunction with 'man camps' belonging to resource extraction projects constitutes an expression of the ongoing colonial processes that permit and reproduce such racialized violence. The settler state aims to dispossess Indigenous people of their land, rendering the land a white possession, by creating narratives that devalue Indigenous lives. Indigenous women and girls occupy a dangerous social location created by the intersection of constructed narratives of femininity, Indigeneity, and economic insecurity that makes them targets for the settler logic of elimination. Abolitionist principles allow us to recognize how the police are mobilized to protect private property and prioritize the corporate interests of extraction projects, increasing the vulnerability of Indigenous women who have few support services in such remote communities and understand that the police are not always there to help them but instead to protect capitalist settler interests in accordance with legislation around critical infrastructure (Crosby 413).

This pattern of racialized violence can begin to be broken when we start breaking down the settler colonial power dynamics in Canada as a whole. Canada needs to initiate the Calls to Action made by the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Our media and education systems need to positively frame and center the stories of Indigenous women to break the harmful stereotypes that were designed by the settler state with the purpose of devaluing their lives (Buller 392). Funds devoted to the RCMP in Indigenous communities need to be redirected to social services that support Indigenous women in preventing and recovering from

violence and sexual violence, and prioritize their safety over capitalist accumulation. RCMP funds should also be invested in further training for officers working where resource extraction projects and Indigenous communities are in close proximity.

The minimum change required for RCMP officers working in these contexts is training so that when Indigenous communities turn to police for safety, they can count on a standard of care. “It is imperative that our loved ones are respected throughout the process. When the RCMP and justice system see them as a person and not a stereotype, it makes a huge difference. Cultural competency, gender competency, and trauma informed care training is needed for RCMP and court and justice workers” (Buffalo 8). Indigenous women and girls are the best people to speak to how they can stay safe, and have made practical actions for police in reports published by advocacy groups including faster callout times for missing Indigenous women and girls, and timely communication with loved ones during investigations (Buffalo 8; Federal-Provincial-Territorial 7-8; Civilian Review). Given that risk is so heightened in resource extraction project contexts, the Canadian government needs to work to resolve the root systemic causes of Indigenous marginalization and dispossession that create vulnerability when these projects arrive, and consider women’s safety in all stages of a resource project’s development (Buller 592; Hoogveen et al. 1). If we can confront the settler-imposed state of anti-Indigenous racism in our everyday lives across Canada, we may have a social impact that ceases the colonial elimination of Indigenous women and girls in resource extraction contexts.

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