



## UNDERSTANDING ATROCITIES: REMEMBERING, REPRESENTING, AND TEACHING GENOCIDE

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## “A Tragedy to be Sure”: Heteropatriarchy, Historical Amnesia, and Housing Crises in Northern Ontario

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### Introduction

In October of 2012, the Grand Chief of the Mushkegowuk Council (a regional chief’s council representing seven First Nations located in the western James Bay and Hudson Bay region) signed an official Declaration of Emergency in response to housing crises in the communities of Kashechewan, Attawapiskat, and Fort Albany. During the ensuing media frenzy, conservative news outlets such as the *National Post* and Sun Media focused almost exclusively on Attawapiskat and its Chief, Theresa Spence.<sup>1</sup> Among Canadian settler society, Kashechewan and Fort Albany disappeared from the public view, and what was going on (or not going on) at Attawapiskat took centre stage. This chapter interrogates the complex social and political meanings ascribed to the housing crisis in Attawapiskat in the dominant Canadian media; specifically, we situate the structural history of the housing crises on northern First Nations reserves alongside an ideological or discursive history of settler-colonial disavowal.<sup>2</sup>

Our examination of media coverage in this chapter does not represent the breadth and the heterogeneity of news reporting across Canada during this period; rather, it focuses on the backlash to Theresa Spence’s protest as a means of illuminating certain structures of feeling and logic that inform

settler colonialism at its worst.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while we briefly critique the institutional policies and material conditions that produced the housing crises in northern First Nations communities, we think it is equally important to understand the ideological conditions that made the state of emergency possible. As Taiaike Alfred writes, “colonialism is, more than anything else ... a way of thinking about something fundamental to who we are as a society: the relationship between the past and the present, between the newcomers and the original people of this land.”<sup>4</sup> On that basis, we argue that the sexist and racist discourse that framed these events emerged from a particular constellation of masculinist and settler-colonialist heteropatriarchal thought that has been well theorized by Indigenous feminists such as Lee Maracle, Paula Gunn Allen, and Janice Acoose.<sup>5</sup>

The scope of our conversation is limited to the realm of representation and the meaning-making processes that depoliticized the genocidal violence experienced by these three northern First Nations. As settlers we are deeply embedded in the systems of violence and discourses of disavowal that we are critiquing in this chapter. Indeed, we are the system’s intended beneficiaries. Accordingly, we cannot communicate how the people of the Attawapiskat First Nation or other northern Cree communities experienced or felt about these events. We acknowledge that Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and reactions to Chief Spence were diverse—many people supported her, some did not, and many others fell somewhere in between. For the majority of the Canadian population removed from the reality of Attawapiskat both literally and conceptually, media representations—informed by settler discourse and white supremacy—fashioned the colonial grammars through which Canadians came to know and understand current events and the history of the community.<sup>6</sup>

As the housing crisis began to loom large in national and international media coverage, we saw in action how media discourses were “critical in determining who exercise[d] authority and who accept[ed] it.”<sup>7</sup> In this instance, the state transformed the “raw historical event” into a “communicative event,”<sup>8</sup> and created a story that was palatable for the dominant society and which resonated with pre-existing narratives about poverty in First Nations communities. Media discourses with regard to Attawapiskat placed the “problem” of Indigenous governance and corruption on the public agenda, thereby erasing the long colonial history that had created the poverty and housing crisis by offering an image of Chief Spence

that embodied many of the most pernicious and colonialist stereotypes of Indigenous women and political leaders. In so doing, many Canadian media outlets failed to situate the housing crisis within the larger genocidal history of settler colonialism in Canada; they preferred instead to blame Indigenous peoples for this historical and deeply political violence. Thus, when the media drew on historical examples, they did so in a manner that reiterated the myth that Canada is a benevolent nation that has always treated Indigenous peoples in a just and righteous manner. Such a myth disguises the fact that as settler Canadians we live on lands stolen from Indigenous peoples and we continue to benefit from settler-colonial systems of apartheid, marginalization, and genocide. In denaturalizing the dominant narrative, then, we seek to outline the contours, nature, and structure of Canadian settler-colonial ideologies, and critically discuss how the media not only denied the deeper historical meanings and particularities behind Spence's hunger strike, but also obscured how her actions were symbolic of a larger Indigenous struggle against Canadian settler colonialism.

The scorn that was directed at Chief Spence revealed the deep pathological denial of colonialism and genocide that has prevented and continues to prevent a more accurate representation and deeper understanding of Canada's national history. The words of one journalist reveal the utter failure of Canadian settler society to see how the past shapes and informs the present. According to Lorne Gunter of the *National Post*, although the situation in Attawapiskat was "a tragedy to be sure ... political correctness is the root cause. It has paralyzed our political and bureaucratic establishments against taking the bold action necessary to give aboriginal-Canadians a fresh start."<sup>9</sup> Thus, instead of genocidal relations and colonial violence, what settlers saw, and indeed expected, were clichéd racist and gendered stereotypes that confirmed the innocence of settler Canadians.<sup>10</sup> As our discursive analysis of Canadian news media reveals, the constructions of Chief Spence and her actions can be read contrapuntally to show the deep connections between colonialism and patriarchy. Representations of the protest followed a deeply racialized and gendered logic that constructed Chief Spence as the stereotypically corrupt band council chief *as well as* the stereotypical "Indian" woman. As Audra Simpson notes, "when you are an Indigenous woman, your flesh is received differently."<sup>11</sup>

Canadian-settler exercises of governance have as their condition of historical emergence a long intellectual history of understanding Indigenous peoples as less than human (or at least as less than white settlers). These ways of knowing are *destructive* of what Sherene Razack called “suppressed knowledges,” which is based on an “experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms.” However, they are also *constructive* of ideas about Indigenous difference.<sup>12</sup> As Joyce Green writes, settler colonialism is “legitimized not only through racist construction but through creation of language celebrating colonial identities while constructing the colonized as the antithesis of human decency and development.”<sup>13</sup> Such rhetorical strategies—what Emma LaRocque calls “discourses of dehumanization”<sup>14</sup>—are as central to the maintenance of the Canadian settler-colonial project as the more physical and institutional manifestations of Indian policy. Thus, while we review the material history of colonialism and the structures of band funding in Canada to dispel some of the more popular myths and rumours circulated about Chief Spence, we also seek to make visible those colonial grammars that efface, obscure, elide, and disregard the genocidal policies that have created repeated crises and emergencies in Attawapiskat and other northern Indigenous communities. As we shall see (and as numerous Indigenous feminist scholars have explained at length), the racial grammars and logics of settler-colonial genocide reveal themselves as profoundly gendered, masculinist, and heteropatriarchal.

## A Note on the Conceptual Limits of “Hunger Strike”

The term “hunger strike,” widely used by the media to describe Chief Spence’s protest, operates as a sign or placeholder in a semiotic system of the Canadian media. In our schema, the term refers not to the reality of Spence’s protest, but to the representation of that event within the settler imaginary. In this respect, we draw on the knowledge and words of Anishnaabeg scholar, writer, and storyteller Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who reminded readers in the midst of Chief Spence’s protest of the deep symbolic importance that fish broth holds for many Indigenous peoples living in the geographical area now called Canada. Chief Spence’s decision to subsist mainly on fish broth prompted more journalists than can be

counted to claim confidently that this was not a “real” or “true” hunger strike. However, as Simpson explains,

[fish broth] symbolizes hardship and sacrifice. It symbolizes the strength of our ancestors. It means survival. Fish broth sustained us through the hardest of circumstances, with the parallel understanding that it can't sustain one forever. We exist today because of fish broth. It connects us to the water and to the fish who gave up its life so we could sustain ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, “Chief Spence [ate] fish broth because, metaphorically, colonialism has kept Indigenous Peoples on a fish broth diet for generations upon generations.”<sup>16</sup> A “hunger strike” is a conceptual category deeply embedded within a Western historicity that is productive of the same power relations challenged by Chief Spence’s protest; it is an outside predicate foisted onto the event that carries with it a kind of discursive baggage or historical excess that has done more to cover up the reality of Chief Spence’s leadership than to illuminate it.<sup>17</sup> Acknowledging the historical specificity of Chief Spence’s protest, we use the term “hunger strike” only when it is employed by journalists or when making direct reference to their comments and constructions of the events in question. Our usage of the term is meant to mark the difference between representation and reality.

## Defining Genocide and Atrocity in the Canadian Context

In this chapter, we treat the housing crises in Cree communities in northern Ontario as a manifestation of the continued genocidal project of Canadian settler colonialism. However, we want to begin by suggesting that the persistence of definitional debates surrounding the concept of “genocide” is counterproductive and indeed destructive to the formulation of an effective resistance to the ongoing colonial violence against Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. Such debates serve only to reify and legitimize the profound denial in which non-Indigenous settlers live. Admitting and owning the benefits accrued from centuries of colonialism and genocidal

policies would destroy the comfort zone of many settlers. To better illustrate our perspective we employ storytelling.

The genesis of this volume was a conference held at Mount Royal University in February of 2014 entitled “Understanding Atrocities.” During the conference, attendees were privileged to have the opportunity to hear from a Residential School Survivor about his experiences. Speaking on a panel with genocide scholars, the Elder shared his story of survivance and resistance that, while ultimately life-affirming and triumphant, also spoke of trauma and brutality. During the question period that followed, an individual, whom we will not identify, raised his hand to caution the room against the naming of the Indian Residential School system as an act of genocide. According to this individual, residential schools were not real “death camps” like those that existed in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War Two because, he argued, it was not the primary purpose of residential schools to bring about the physical or biological destruction of Indigenous peoples. Putting aside for the moment how offensive and inappropriate it is for someone to advise a Residential School Survivor how they should know and feel about their experiences, this incident also spoke to the frequent and insidious ways in which exclusive definitional debates characterize the professional and popular discourses of settler-colonial genocide in the Canadian context. These comments compelled us to wonder: What motivated this person to tell a Residential School Survivor how he should understand his experiences? In thinking through these and other questions, we found resonance in the following words from Israel Charney:

For me, the passion to exclude this or that mass killing from the universe of genocide, as well as the intense competition to establish the exclusive “superiority” or unique form of any one genocide, ends up creating a fetishistic atmosphere in which the masses of bodies that are not to be qualified for the definition of genocide are dumped into a conceptual black hole, where they are forgotten.<sup>18</sup>

In a later conversation, the individual mentioned in the story above acknowledged his exclusivist tendencies, questioned his own motivations for evicting residential schooling from what Charney called “the universe of genocide,” and admitted that the Elder’s experience was certainly a story

of having survived a genocide. While such an admission has no bearing on the ongoing nature of Canadian settler-colonial projects of Indigenous elimination (some of which we discuss in this chapter), the point we are trying to make is that participating in such debates regarding the definitional difficulties of the crime of genocide are the privileged practices of a scholarly community far removed from such realities and experiences. As academics, we need to acknowledge the privilege of being able to participate in such debates at a safe distance, as well as recognize the epistemological violence that we risk creating and perpetuating in doing so.

## The Historical Context of the Housing Crises

The Attawapiskat First Nation is located at the mouth of the Attawapiskat River in northern Ontario, on the western shores of James Bay.<sup>19</sup> It is a signatory of Treaty 9. The First Nation's traditional territory extends out from the present-day reserve up the coast of Hudson Bay and stretches hundreds of kilometres inland.<sup>20</sup> Year-round settlement did not take place until the late 1960s, and many families delayed settling permanently on the reserve because they did not want to send their children to the infamous St. Anne's Residential School (located in Fort Albany).<sup>21</sup> A school—the J. R. Nakogee Elementary School—was finally built in Attawapiskat in 1976.<sup>22</sup> The history of the J. R. Nakogee Elementary School embodies the long history of neglect and indifference the First Nation has received from the federal government. In 1979, an industrial oil pipeline malfunctioned, leaking over 30,000 tons of diesel fuel directly under the school.<sup>23</sup> Neither the federal and provincial governments nor the pipeline's owners undertook cleanup or restorative measures, although Health Canada ordered residences provided for the teachers to be torn down due to contamination.<sup>24</sup> The school was not closed until May 2001, despite growing evidence of health concerns (many parents had long stopped sending their children to the school due to the prevalence of noxious fumes).<sup>25</sup> Currently, classes are held in seven portables, which reside on top of the former school's playground. The portables are in deplorable condition: the doors do not close and the heating systems are broken, forcing students to wear their coats in the classrooms.

A similar situation in Attawapiskat exists in regards to housing, and has unfortunately existed for so long that it has become normalized.<sup>26</sup>



Conditions of substandard housing, overcrowding, and homelessness are allowed to persist in northern First Nations because of commonly held, but patently false, beliefs that First Nations people get free housing on reserves.<sup>27</sup> This assumption holds that market-based housing and home ownership is non-existent on reserves and that Indigenous peoples get special treatment from the government that amounts to “free housing.” While home ownership is certainly lower on reserve than off, it is still common (31 percent on reserve versus 69 percent off).<sup>28</sup> Still further, the federal funding that subsidizes poor and under-housed peoples on reserve comes from the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, which is the same institution that funds low-income housing off reserve. Thus, the state does not offer different or special treatment to Indigenous peoples on reserve, but enacts social welfare measures that attempt (so far extremely unsuccessfully) to mediate the severe poverty that characterizes life in many remote reserves. For example, the average on-reserve annual income is \$16,160, and the cost of living in the North is substantively higher than in southern Canada.<sup>29</sup> This information is key to understanding the reasons why recent studies found that 41 percent of on-reserve housing stock in Ontario was inadequate or in need of major repair, with a further 5 percent needing to be replaced entirely, or that 12 percent of on-reserve housing is not “serviced by any type of sewage disposal system, roughly eight percent have no electrical servicing, and about half of the on-reserve communities have either no solid waste disposal services or those services that are provided are inadequate.”<sup>30</sup> These are examples of what Adam Barker calls “the contemporary reality of Canadian imperialism.”<sup>31</sup>

We also need to consider the discrepancies that exist in regards to how much federal and provincial money is spent on ensuring the well-being of settler Canadians and the existence of effective infrastructure in urban and reserve spaces. For example, federal, provincial, and municipal budgets allocated \$24,000 per citizen to provide programs and infrastructure to Torontonians. In contrast, Attawapiskat First Nation received money from just one source—Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC)—that amounted to \$11,355 per person.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, AANDC has also placed a cap on all core program expenditure increases at 2 percent a year.<sup>33</sup> When combined with low annual incomes, high rates of poverty and unemployment, extraordinarily high costs of living, and

long-term government neglect, it is not surprising that the Attawapiskat First Nation declared a crisis in housing conditions in 2011.

Seven years earlier, in 2004, the United Nations special rapporteur, Radolfo Staghaven, visited Attawapiskat and expressed his concerns over the housing crisis in the community; he noted a prevalence of poverty, toxic living conditions, and government underfunding.<sup>34</sup> This was followed in November 2007 by Miloon Kothari, United Nations special rapporteur on adequate housing, who also commented on the conditions of overcrowding, inadequate housing, and the lack of basic services like water and sanitation.<sup>35</sup> These two reports were not the first time the federal government had been made aware of inadequate housing in First Nations communities, and northern First Nations especially. Reports by academics, health-care professionals, and non-governmental organizations have repeatedly called on the federal government to address First Nation's housing needs and by extension Indigenous poverty.<sup>36</sup> In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples described on-reserve housing as "in a bad state," and other studies have drawn clear connections between health, well-being, and housing.<sup>37</sup> For instance, poor housing contributes to the spread of contagious diseases such as measles, intestinal, skin, and middle ear infections, as well as respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis, to name but a few.<sup>38</sup>

In October 2009, Chief Theresa Hall made public her concerns over the lack of federal support for the recent sewage flood in Attawapiskat, and in November, an Elder from the community embarked upon a protest walk of over 100 kilometres to raise awareness for the housing crisis (with two artificial knees, no less).<sup>39</sup> Taking office as Chief in August 2010, Theresa Spence was from the outset very vocal about her concerns regarding the lack of federal response to the previous two states of emergency. However, it was her decision on 28 October 2012 to declare a third state of emergency that brought her to the attention of the national media.

Initially, this state of emergency garnered almost no media attention, and Ottawa, the provincial government, and aid agencies did not step forward to offer any assistance to the communities in crisis. It was not until 21 November 2012, when Charles Angus, member of Parliament for Timmins-James Bay, published an article and posted a video on YouTube showing a mother and her small children living in a shed in frigid temperatures, that housing conditions in Attawapiskat made headline news.

Otherwise, it was business as usual in Canada. On 23 November 2012, the Red Cross announced that it would be sending a team to conduct a needs assessment in the community. The federal government responded by placing Attawapiskat under third-party management on 1 December 2013. John Duncan, minister of aboriginal affairs, explained that Ottawa was taking this step to “ensure the funding provided to [the] community [was] being spent effectively,” suggesting that the community’s problems stemmed from mismanagement instead of underfunding.<sup>40</sup> Later that August, a federal court ruled that the decision to place the First Nation under third-party management “did not respond in a reasonable way to the root of the problems at Attawapiskat.”<sup>41</sup> The court ordered Ottawa to repay Attawapiskat for all costs accrued by the third-party manager.

From the very beginning, the federal government maintained that they were totally ignorant of living conditions in Attawapiskat. Duncan claimed to have been unaware of the extent of the housing crisis—even after two United Nations reports, two states of emergency, and the efforts of Shannen Koostachin, who had met with Duncan just that summer in regards to the need for a new school building in her community. Such assertions of ignorance are difficult to believe, given that pursuant to section 61 of the Indian Act, the minister of aboriginal affairs is responsible for approving all funding allocations. The media, however, accepted such disavowals of responsibility and its coverage of Chief Spence’s efforts blamed her administration and its alleged mismanagement of funds for the community-housing crisis.<sup>42</sup> On 12 December 2012, Spence announced her intention to stop eating solid food until Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the governor general, the representative of the British Crown in Canada, agreed to a nation-to-nation meeting.

## The Corrupt Chief, or “The Crooked Indian”

Despite the very real problems faced by the community of Attawapiskat, journalistic responses were on the whole racist, dismissive, and stained by the well-worn assumptions that characterize settler discourses of dehumanization. Of course, none of the stereotypes trotted out and perpetuated by the mainstream media were new. The first and perhaps most common trope used by the media and promoted enthusiastically by the federal government to discredit Spence and distract non-Indigenous people from

the real problem was the stereotype of the corrupt band council, which suggests that all First Nations leaders are dishonest, nepotistic, and unable to manage themselves.<sup>43</sup> Pam Palmater recently described this cliché in a piece titled “Stephen Harper and the Myth of the Crooked Indian”:

This racist stereotype is recycled again and again when Harper is pressed to account for the fourth world conditions in some First Nations. The response always seems to be: “Well, we gave them  $x$  million dollars, where did all the money go?” What Harper never tells Canadians is that in giving First Nations  $x$  million dollars, he has given them half of what is needed to provide the specific program or service. Without all the facts, this propaganda serves to distance Canadians from First Nations.<sup>44</sup>

Essentially, the “crooked Indian” or “corrupt band council” stereotype implies that Indigenous leaders steal money from honest white taxpayers to purchase luxury vehicles or million-dollar homes while their communities suffer.<sup>45</sup> This stereotype suggests that Indigenous people are exclusively responsible for the poverty in their communities and that they lack real political leadership.

Operating in concert with this stereotype are discussions of accountability and the lack thereof amongst First Nations politicians. This stereotype flourishes in mainstream Canadian discourse despite the fact that First Nations are overburdened by federal regulations that require constant reporting. Indeed, Sheila Fraser, Canada’s auditor general, criticized the federal government for this excessive requirement, which amounted to ninety-five reports per First Nation every year, or one report every three days.<sup>46</sup> Even so, journalists eagerly recited an orthodox racism that called Indigenous leaders irresponsible, unaccountable, and always asking for more than their fair share. Instead of government negligence, indifference, and settler colonialism being discussed as the root causes of poverty in the Canadian North, Chief Spence came to embody and signify all Indigenous politicians: she was constructed as solely responsible for conditions in Attawapiskat (conditions that were almost a century in the making). A piece published in early January 2013 by Lorne Gunter of the *National Post* was emblematic of this oft-repeated falsehood when it described Chief Spence as failing to take ownership of her actions and accept responsibility

for living conditions in Attawapiskat. Gunter, who also gave the present chapter its titular quotation, suggested that “there [was] no recognition that much of the plight of Canada’s aboriginals is self-inflicted. In [Spence’s] mind and Idle minds, everything is the fault of government and non-aboriginals.”<sup>47</sup> According to this journalist, childlike avoidance is a central feature of Indigenous peoples who have failed to take responsibility for the last five hundred years of colonialism and genocide. Or, as Kelly McParland of the *National Post* ignorantly penned, the reasons behind First Nations’ grievances are “difficult to comprehend, the origins lost in time.”<sup>48</sup> McParland’s comments operate on several levels: they suggest that Indigenous peoples are unreasonable in their continued efforts to achieve justice and equality. The comments also draw on the oft-repeated notion that Indigenous peoples should just “get over it.” In this manner, settlers are rewriting and retelling history so that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples is erased and can therefore go comfortably unacknowledged and conveniently forgotten.<sup>49</sup> The tacit approval of a false history serves to strengthen the state of white supremacy in North America. To borrow from Thomas King’s recent work, *The Inconvenient Indian*, which stressed the importance of historical meaning-making, it is essential to remember that while “most of us think that history is the past. It’s not. History is the stories we tell about our past ... [and] they’re not chosen by chance.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, when other people get to tell your stories, in “effect what they’re doing is defining to the world who you are, what you are, and what they think you are and what they think you should be.”<sup>51</sup>

## The Gendered and Sexualized Logics of Settler-Colonial Genocide

The construct of the corrupt and irresponsible band chief is also a highly gendered one and was employed together with the well-worn constructions of Indigenous womanhood as that which is licentious, dusky, and deviant. Numerous historians have shown that such racist and sexist representations of Indigenous women have been central to the socio-economic formation of a settler society that “has no place for Indigenous women.”<sup>52</sup> Significantly, these scholars highlight how Indigenous women’s bodies are often used as the “mechanisms of oppression against whole communities.”<sup>53</sup>

Journalists focused on Chief Spence's personal relationships, physical appearance, and the insistence that she was not undertaking a "real" hunger strike. In this last respect, she was routinely and unfavourably compared to famous male political figures such as Gandhi and Bobby Sands. Larry Miller—the Conservative MP who tastelessly compared the long gun registry in Canada to the legal regime of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party—offers us one example of how the corrupt band council stereotype operates in the settler-colonial imaginary.<sup>54</sup> Miller told the *Toronto Sun* that Chief Spence's hunger strike was "nothing but another project of hers to divert attention away from what she and maybe some other officials in her band have done"; Miller claimed that Spence's "people suffered because of some of the things she did. It isn't from a lack of money from the federal government, the provincial government or even the mine that's in that part of the country."<sup>55</sup> Echoing Miller, Iain Hunter of the aptly named *Times-Colonist* (Victoria, BC) argued that the media's coverage of Attawapiskat served as a useful reminder for Canadians because it drew "our attention to the fact that Spence lives in a 'well-heated' house on her reserve, drives a substantial vehicle, has stayed in a hotel, not a tent, while in Ottawa, and her 'boyfriend' has been making \$850 a day as band manager."<sup>56</sup> This quotation neatly reproduces not only the stereotype of the corrupt band council chief who starves her own people at the expense of Canadian taxpayers, but also the gendered logic of settler-colonial racism and its complicity with patriarchy. The special emphasis Hunter places on the word "boyfriend" signifies a symbolic order of North American colonial racism wherein the Indigenous woman is a degenerate figure who is sexualized, corruptible, and corrupting.

Christie Blatchford, well known for her anti-Indigenous op-ed pieces, went so far as to call Chief Spence a terrorist.<sup>57</sup> Highly critical of the fact that Chief Spence's partner, Clayton Kennedy, was allowed to hold an administrative position with the band, Blatchford reported that, at the beginning of Chief Spence's administration, the two "were already common-law partners, or life partners as they prefer, and presumably sleeping together. But no one was aware that could be thought to be a conflict of interest?"<sup>58</sup> Originally published in the *Regina Leader-Post*, Blatchford's article was so well received that it was republished in the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Vancouver Sun*, and the *Star-Phoenix* in Saskatoon (a good example of how one author's work gets picked up and published by

numerous Canadian newspapers). In her opinion piece (we refuse to call it journalism), Blatchford made connections between what she characterized as the inevitable and sneaky underhandedness of Indigenous womanhood and the failure of band governance. She wrote that “the revelation that the purportedly professional financial co-manager who was appointed by the Attawapiskat council ... is none other than Chief Theresa Spence’s boyfriend is a revelation of the order that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow.”<sup>59</sup> Apparently, according to Blatchford and her audience, the “fact” that Indigenous female leaders are political and sexual deviants is as certain as the existence of gravity.

Underscoring the gendered and sexually violent ideology of Canadian settler colonialism were the oft-repeated comments of conservative politicians and media commentators regarding Chief Spence’s body. For example, Ezra Levant of the Sun News Network (easily the most inflammatory and unapologetically racist media source during Spence’s protest) felt the need to comment sarcastically that “there is a lot of her to love,” and he also referred to her as having a “trademark double chin.”<sup>60</sup> More famously, Senator Patrick Brazeau and Conservative MP Royal Galipeau made what can only under the most generous of interpretations be described as “fat jokes” at a fundraiser for the Conservative Party.<sup>61</sup> As feminist scholar Susie Orbach writes, the identification of a woman as fat serves to immediately isolate and invalidate her: “almost inevitably, the explanations offered for fatness point a finger at the failure of women to control their weight, control their appetite, and control their impulses.”<sup>62</sup> These comments on Chief Spence’s body thus revealed a blatant misogyny, but also a specific kind of settler-colonial masculinity that saw Chief Spence’s body as open to public censure and as a physical manifestation of the alleged weakness of her moral character or propensity to self-destructive indulgence. What is interesting outside the immediate context of our discussion here is the way in which fatphobia revealed itself in Brazeau’s comments to be a complex component of a broader ideological structure that upholds settler-colonial regimes of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and body-based forms of oppression. Brazeau—an Indigenous man—recruited misogyny as a means of establishing an internal solidarity within the larger, white-dominated Conservative Party of which, at the time, he was a member. In calling attention to her body as a site of poor self-control, these politicians and media figures enacted an implicit denial of Chief Spence’s leadership and

legitimacy that was both colonial and patriarchal, and she was invalidated to the extent that masculinism, fatphobia, and lateral violence (read: Brazeau's comments) constituted a settler-colonial configuration that sought to destroy and discredit the image of Chief Spence by any means necessary. This is why coverage during the end of her protest also claimed that, "prior to going on her fast on Dec. 11, Spence didn't look like she'd missed many meals in her life."<sup>63</sup> Borrowing Sherene Razack's words, these fatphobic and misogynist statements served to construct the Indigenous body "as the space of the greatest disorder" and thus reaffirmed the settler-colonial desire for further control of Indigenous peoples by constructing Chief Spence in particular—and Indigenous peoples in general—as unhealthy, out of control, and in need of outside help (which arrived in the form of third-party management). Of course, these continual comments about the physical body of Chief Spence also served the purpose of denying the authenticity of her protest.

The objectification of Chief Spence's body went hand-in-hand with the purported failure of Chief Spence to carry out what the media saw as a legitimate "hunger strike." The media latched onto the information that Chief Spence would continue to ingest liquids and fish broth with shocking vigour. For example, Ezra Levant wrote that

Gandhi never lasted more than 21 days on his hunger strikes. The IRA hunger strikers looked like skeletons by 26 days, and started dying weeks later. Not Spence—she's still positively Rubenesque.<sup>64</sup>

Not to be outdone, the *Toronto Sun* claimed that there was an obvious "irony in Spence's hunger strike ... hers is not an ideological gesture like those IRA hunger strikers who died for their cause, but a blackmail attempt to force Harper to pay attention to her."<sup>65</sup> The important issue to note in these passages is the accusation of mimicry and the construction of a "real" hunger strike in relation to Chief Spence's protest. In this misogynist representation, Chief Spence is said to desire attention from the male gaze. What is more, constant comparisons to men such as Gandhi or Sands deny Chief Spence's political actions any rational, critical, or independent thought. Simultaneously, her protest is effectively removed from the broader historical context of Indigenous traditions. What is accomplished in these passages, then, is the complete removal of a sign from its cultural



context, and an elision of the historical specificity of Indigenous fasting as a mode of embodied resistance (as discussed by Simpson above). By suggesting Chief Spence's actions are a "failed diet," the symbolic importance and historical context of drinking fish broth is made invisible under the settler-colonial gaze, and the image of Chief Spence on a hunger strike became nothing more than a sign that reinforces the original structural relationships and common-sense racisms of the settler-colonial project.

Levant continually linked Chief Spence with the sexual and the indulgent. Not only did he refer to her body as sexually provocative and voluptuous when he described her as "Rubenesque"; in a tirade aired on Sun News Levant argued that "Idle No More is just an Aboriginal reboot of Occupy Wall Street. It has the same vague demands, summarized as 'give us more free stuff.' It has the same low-level criminality—Occupy illegally squatted in parks and was heavy into drug use and public sex."<sup>66</sup> This passage not only collapses Chief Spence's protest into the Idle No More and Occupy movements, but also enacts an erasure of all non-conservative, contrapuntal politics. To Levant, all of these social rights movements signify the same fundamental alterity to law, order, progress, civilization, bodily integrity, and respectability.

Together these specious opinion pieces construct Chief Spence as a lewd and licentious terrorist; they also reveal that there was a broad cross-section of the Canadian media that depicted Chief Spence as a kind of ultimate Other precisely because she was a political leader who was both Indigenous *and* a woman. The strength, determination, and righteousness with which she pursued her protest was, in the settler-colonial imaginary, an unsettling symbolic provocation that had to be reconstructed. In order to make these events understandable and palatable to settlers, deeply racist and sexist stereotypes had to be employed in order to avoid the events in Attawapiskat being seen for what they really are: genocide.

## Conclusion

As we see through reviewing these various passages, well-worn and deeply racist stereotypes and colonial constructions of corrupt band councils, Indigenous womanhood, and inauthenticity worked to produce a network of meaning that Canadian settler society could attach to the protest in order to understand Indigenous peoples as plagued by selfishness, indulgence,

corruption, and bodily irresponsibility rather than as survivors of an ongoing genocide wherein the resilience of Indigeneity threatens the legitimacy of Canadian settler society. The Canadian media served as the vehicle through which settler Canadians conveniently rewrote the public record of the housing crises in the Canadian North. Indeed, the rewriting that took place in this instance was part of the larger pattern of conscious historical reimagining that has enabled settlers to avoid the uncomfortable admission that land theft, broken treaties, the Indian Act, and other federal policies have been primarily responsible for impoverishing Indigenous communities, destroying matrilineal systems of governance, and replacing them with so-called democratic band council systems that are always set up to fail. What we see in this recycling of unoriginal colonial stereotypes is an attempt to protect the image of Canada as a neoliberal, multicultural paradise by dehumanizing Indigenous peoples. The fact that this dehumanizing discourse was obviously articulated through the language of patriarchy and women-hating reveals the connections between patriarchy and colonialism theorized by Indigenous feminists who articulate sexual violence as the very logic of genocide.

Indigenous feminist frameworks help to explain the otherwise curious conflation of band council stereotypes, constructions of Indigenous womanhood, and accusations of inauthenticity or mimicry in the dominant discourse of the hunger strike. In this event specifically, we can also see how discourses about women's bodies and access to nutrition continue to be bound up within colonial power relations. This example of fatphobia's intersection with settler colonialism—along with the fact that Spence was also routinely infantilized and called “childish”—orients us towards critiquing different discourses of domination (such as body shaming) as situated within the settler-colonial social order. As readers will see in this collection's final chapter, the signification of racial violence “between the spectacular and the embodied” may play a deeper role in the interpretative frameworks of genocides far outside a Canadian context.<sup>67</sup> The coverage of Chief Spence's protest, then, was not only the *destruction* of any public discourse about Kashechewan and Fort Albany, but also a *construction* of a new discourse or way of understanding the housing crisis in a single community as representing all First Nations communities. Media coverage consistently denied the fact that the source of the problem lies not with Indigenous peoples, but rather with the gendered racism of social and

structural white supremacy that remains foundational to the Canadian settler state and society. This coverage remakes and elides the history of genocidal policies towards Indigenous peoples in Canada and “whitewashes” the colonial stains from our national history.<sup>68</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Within this paper, we have drawn upon a representative, not exhaustive, set of Canadian newspaper articles. This method was selected over and against a method that compared the regional differences between the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Montreal Gazette* or the ideological differences between the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. We did this for two reasons: primarily, because mainstream Canadian media coverage of the event showed more glaring similarities than interesting differences; secondly, because the Canadian newspaper industry is itself much less heterogeneous than we believe. For example, a front-page article in the *Ottawa Citizen* might be reprinted in later issues of the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Vancouver Sun*, or the *Calgary Herald*. The database used for many of the sources in this paper was the Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies database, which uses the ProQuest website interface, see [http://www.proquest.com/products-services/canadian\\_newsstand.html](http://www.proquest.com/products-services/canadian_newsstand.html) (accessed 14 February 2016).
- 2 Lorenzo Veracini, “Settler Collective, Founding Violence and Disavowal: The Settler Colonial Situation,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (November 2008): 363–379.
- 3 For a more theoretically rigorous and analytically exhaustive critique of the reception of Chief Theresa Spence, see Audra Simpson, “The Chiefs Two Bodies: Theresa Spence and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty”, Keynote Address at R.A.C.E. Network’s 14th Annual Critical Race and Anticolonial Studies Conference: “Unsettling Conversations: Unmaking Racisms and Colonialisms,” University of Alberta, October 2014, <https://vimeo.com/110948627> (accessed 21 January 2016). Importantly, Simpson’s address wields a critique of what she calls the “ahistorical multicultural liberal handbook” alongside her theorizing of “the chief’s two bodies.” In this talk, Simpson includes references from sources such as the *Huffington Post*.
- 4 Taiaiake Alfred, “Warrior Scholarship: Seeing the University as a Ground of Contentment” in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, eds. Devon Abbot Mihesuah and Angela Cavendar Wilson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 82.
- 5 See Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Lee Maracle, *I Am Women: A Native Perspective On Sociology and Feminism* (New York: Global Professional Publishing, 1996); Janice Pelletier Acoose, *Iskwewak Kah’ Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princess Nor Easy Squaws* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1995); and Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2005).
- 6 See Stuart Hall’s *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publishing, 1997).
- 7 Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 12.
- 8 Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in *Stuart Hall*, ed. James Procter (London: Routledge, 2004), 64. It is useful to recall, moreover, Hall’s claim “that representation

- doesn't occur after the event; representation is constitutive of the event. It enters into the constitution of the object that we are talking about. It is part of the object itself; it is constitutive of it. It is one of its conditions of existence, and therefore representation is not outside the event, not after the event, but within the event itself; it is constitutive of it." For a transcript of the lecture containing this passage, see Media Education Foundation, "Stuart Hall: Representation and the Media," 1997, [http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/409/transcript\\_409.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/409/transcript_409.pdf) (accessed 12 February 2015).
- 9 Lorne Gunter, "Conditions in Attawapiskat can be blamed on political correctness," *National Post* (Toronto), 2 December 2011. The use of capitalization and terminology in this passage should not go unnoticed; as Janice Acoose argues, "What a culture deems important or significant according to its dominant ideological framework is signified by using capital letters." See her *Iskwewak Kah' Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak*, 34.
  - 10 Boyd Cothran has written extensively and powerfully on the cultural production of "American innocence" within the context of settler colonialism. See his *Remembering the Modoc War: Redemptive Violence and the Making of American Innocence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
  - 11 Audra Simpson, "The Chiefs Two Bodies."
  - 12 Sherene Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender Race, Class and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 36.
  - 13 Green quoted in Emma LaRoque, *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850–1990* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 37.
  - 14 LaRoque, *When the Other Is Me*, 37–58.
  - 15 Leanne Simpson, "Think Chief Spence is on a 'Liquid Diet'? I Think You're Ignorant," *Huffington Post*, 20 January 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/leanne-simpson/fish-broth-chief-spence\\_b\\_2517450.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/leanne-simpson/fish-broth-chief-spence_b_2517450.html) (accessed 12 December 2013).
  - 16 Ibid.
  - 17 Dennis McPherson, "Indian on the Lawn: How are Research Partnerships with Aboriginal Peoples Possible?" *APA Newsletter* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 3–24.
  - 18 Quoted in Ward Churchill, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of Indian Residential Schools* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004), 7.
  - 19 Some scholars and community members claim that "Kattawapiskak," and not Attawapiskat, is the proper place name for the Mushkegowuk Cree who live in this First Nation. We use the latter in this paper for the purpose of consistency.
  - 20 Attawapiskat First Nation Education Authority, *Important Dates in the History of Attawapiskat*, 2008, <http://www.afnea.com/about.html> (accessed 12 December 2013). Also, see Jacqueline Hookimaw-Witt, "Keenebonanoh Keemoshominook Kaeshe Peemishikhik Odaskiwakh (We Stand on the Graves of Our Ancestors): Native Interpretations of Treaty No. 9 with Attawapiskat Elders," PhD diss., Trent University, Peterborough, 1997.
  - 21 St. Anne's Residential School is the site of a federal cover-up operation in which evidence of systemic sexual abuse and the use of electric chairs to torture of children was actively suppressed. For an account of this, see: <http://www.ndp.ca/news/feds-suppressed-evidence-abuse-st-annes-residential-school> (accessed 12 December 2013); see also Colin Perkel, "Ottawa thwarting residential school compensation claims from 'electric chair' victims, advocates say," *National Post* (Toronto), 11 July 2013, <http://>

- news.nationalpost.com/2013/07/11/ottawa-thwarting-residential-school-compensation-claims-from-electric-chair-victims-advocates-say/ (accessed 12 December 2012).
- 22 Attawapiskat First Nation Education Authority, *Important Dates in the History of Attawapiskat*.
  - 23 For a journalistic account of this affair, see Kelly McParland, “The answer to Attawapiskat is ... well, we’ll get back to you,” *National Post* (Toronto), 12 January 2011, <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2011/12/01/the-answer-to-attawapiskat-is-well-well-get-back-to-you/> (accessed 12 December 2013).
  - 24 Karl Reimer, “What Other Canadian Kids Have: The Fight for a New School in Attawapiskat,” *Native Studies Review* 19, no. 1 (2010): 126.
  - 25 Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, “Attawapiskat First Nation Elementary School—Chronology of Events,” 4 November 2013, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100016328/1100100016329> (accessed 12 December 2013).
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  - 29 Nathan Compton, “Dispossession under the First Nations Property Ownership Act,” 31 January 2014, <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/mainlander/2013/01/dispossession-under-first-nations-property-ownership-act> (accessed 12 February 2015). Also, see Daniel Wilson and David MacDonald, “The Income Gap between Aboriginal Peoples and the rest of Canada” (Ottawa: The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2010), [http://ywcacanada.ca/data/research\\_docs/00000121.pdf](http://ywcacanada.ca/data/research_docs/00000121.pdf) (accessed 15 February 2015).
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  - 31 See Adam Barker, “The Contemporary Reality of Canadian Imperialism: Settler Colonialism and the Hybrid Colonial State,” *American Indian Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 325–351.
  - 32 Lorraine Land, “Taking a Second Look at those Attawapiskat Numbers,” 13 December 2012, <http://www.oktlaw.com/blog/taking-a-second-look-at-those-attawapiskat-numbers/> (accessed 15 February 2015).
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  - 34 Radolfo Staghaven, United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, “Human Rights and Indigenous Issues: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People,” 12 December 2004, <http://repository.un.org/handle/11176/247309> (accessed 18 September 2016).

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- 41 Tristan Hopper, "Attawapiskat officials kick out third-party manager sent to control reserve's finances," *National Post* (Toronto), 5 December 2011, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/12/05/attawapiskat-officials-kick-third-party-manager-off-reserve/> (accessed 12 December 2013).
- 42 See Indian Act, section 61 (1), which reads "the Governor in Council may determine whether any purpose for which Indian moneys are used or are to be used is for the use and benefit of the band."
- 43 Hugh Shewell, *Enough to Keep Them Alive: Indian Welfare in Canada, 1873–1965* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 60–64.
- 44 Pam Palmater, "Stephen Harper and the Myth of the Crooked Indian," blog entry, 26 November 2014, <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/pamela-palmater/2014/11/stephen-harper-and-myth-crooked-indian> (accessed 12 February 2015).
- 45 For examples see Ezra Levant, "The Scandals of Chief Theresa Spence and Attawapiskat," *Sun News*, 3 January 2013, [http://www.ottawasun.com/videos/featured/featured-ott/1213592866001/the-scandals-of-chief-theresa-spence-and-attawapiskat/2070970263001#.UkuH2FM\\_xFU.gmail](http://www.ottawasun.com/videos/featured/featured-ott/1213592866001/the-scandals-of-chief-theresa-spence-and-attawapiskat/2070970263001#.UkuH2FM_xFU.gmail) (accessed 10 August 2014); Christie Blatchford, "Attawapiskat Audit Reveals Reserve Finances in Complete Disarray," *National Post* (Toronto), 8 January 2013, <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2013/01/08/christie-blatchford-attawapiskat-audit-reveals-reserve-finances-in-complete-disarray/> (accessed 27 August 2014); Anonymous, "Crisis of Management: Attawapiskat Reserve Plunged into Despair While \$34 Million Is Squandered," *Toronto Sun*, 3 December 2011, <http://www.torontosun.com/2011/12/02/crisis-of-management> (accessed 27 August 2014); and Kent Driscoll, "Chief Spence meets the spin cycle," *APTN National News*, 4 January 2013, <http://aptn.ca/news/2013/01/04/chief-spence-meets-the-spin-cycle/> (accessed 27 August 2014).
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- 48 Kelly McParland, "Theresa Spence's Carefully Woven Cause Starts to Unravel," *National Post* (Toronto), 9 January 2013.

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- 51 Lenore Keeshig-Tobias cited in Karen Coody Cooper, *Spirited Encounters: American Indians Protest Museum Policies and Practices* (Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2008), 1.
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- 53 Barbara Gurr, *Reproductive Justice: The Politics of Health Care for Native American Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 26.
- 54 Videos of this speech by Larry Miller are widely available online. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YmLKKho2P4> (accessed 9 February 2014).
- 55 Kristy Kirkup, "Conservative MP slams Theresa Spence's appeal to UN on racial discrimination," *Toronto Sun*, 26 February 2013, <http://www.torontosun.com/2013/02/26/conservative-mp-slams-theresa-spences-appeal-to-un-on-racial-discrimination> (accessed 9 February 2014).
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- 64 Ezra Levant, "Chief Spence Knew What She Was Doing."
- 65 Peter Worthington, "Chief Spence's Hunger Strike not Ideological."

- 66 Ezra Levant, “Chief Spence Knew What She Was Doing.”
- 67 Our language here is borrowed from Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon, eds., *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 5. Readers can find a fuller and more exhaustive theoretical treatment of the relationship between the body and the spectacle in Donia Mounsef’s chapter in this collection, “Atrocity, Banality, and *Jouissance* in Performance.”
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