

# Making and Breaking Settler Space

## Five Centuries of Colonization in North America

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## Introduction

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In 1812, the United States of America declared war on the British Empire. Seeking to liberate their settler brethren from imperial control and convinced of the superiority of their republican citizenship, American forces invaded what is now Canada. One of the few major battles of this odd historical conflict was the Battle of Stoney Creek, which took place in June 1813. A ragtag group of British soldiers, their Indigenous allies, and settler militia, alerted to a much larger invading American force that was marching westward along the Niagara Peninsula, ambushed the American camp in the dead of night. In the darkness and confusion, many shot or bayoneted their own soldiers, and both sides withdrew without claiming victory, although the British did capture American artillery pieces and officers, and the American forces consequently withdrew back across to the American side of the Niagara River – perhaps an apt summary of the entire War of 1812 (1812–15).

Almost two centuries later, in 1978, my family moved into a suburban residential neighbourhood in what had since become the Town of Stoney Creek, Ontario. As children, my brother and I, along with our neighbourhood friends, often played in nearby Battlefield Park, a place dominated by a remarkably phallic faux-gothic castle built as a monument to the honoured dead of the War of 1812. We walked past Smith's Knoll, the battlefield cemetery for both British and American soldiers killed in the Battle of Stoney Creek, on our way to our elementary school, whose

playground was more than once the site of archaeological digs looking for buttons, musket balls, and other battlefield scraps and remains. We went on annual school tours of the Battlefield House Museum, a farmhouse that the American forces had taken as their headquarters, which has since been converted into an educational re-creation of white British pioneer life complete with animators – frequently local history undergraduates – in early-nineteenth-century frontier dress shearing sheep with iron tools or cooking in the large stone fireplace. We were taught about the battle that had taken place in the quiet middle-class suburb where we lived and played as part of the moment when Canada became Canadian, largely by refusing to become American. For me, as for so many others raised in this densely populated part of Canada, the War of 1812 quietly became a quotidian and important part of the landscape of ‘home.’

In the grand sweep of history, this relatively small and indecisive conflict is easily forgotten. As historian Alan Taylor (2010) argues, neither the Americans nor soon-to-be Canadians won the War of 1812, but Indigenous peoples very definitively lost. The history of the two hundred years that followed is well known: Canada and the United States pushed westward across the continent, with pioneers practically racing each other to occupy pastoral homesteads or to stake a mining claim while both nations competed to extend and consolidate their territorial holdings. From open war to friendly rivalry, Canada and the United States have become staunch allies, inseparable trading partners, and modern democracies offering some of the highest standards of living in the world.

Long before they were called Canada and the United States of America, these places already had other names – many of them. One common name for the continent as a whole or for the land writ large among the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe people is Turtle Island,<sup>1</sup> a reference to creation stories that explain how the land was built on the back of a giant turtle. Turtle Island is home to hundreds of Indigenous peoples with languages, cultures, and social and political traditions of incredible complexity and vitality, and it has been since time immemorial. These societies repeatedly assisted, traded with, and saved the lives of early colonists and imperial agents. It is no stretch to say that neither Canada nor the United States would exist in anything like their current forms without substantial aid from Indigenous people and communities from across Turtle Island at key moments. Yet in both nation-states, Indigenous nationhood and sovereignty are explicitly denied both by political institutions and by public discourses. Indigenous people have long faced racism and violence from average Canadians and

Americans and also from the state and its agents. Politically and economically marginalized, spatially restricted, and simultaneously culturally disregarded and exploited by American and Canadian societies, Indigenous communities are circumscribed within liminal or exceptional spaces. And in both states, Indigenous nations have built thriving traditions of resistance, repeatedly challenging colonial erasure, displacement, and persecution.

*Making and Breaking Settler Space: Five Centuries of Colonization in North America* makes a critical intervention in understandings of the geographies of settler colonialism by identifying patterns of spatial production that have recurred across time and in many places. In doing so, it describes the ways that settler people – those of us from cultures, nations, and states predicated on settler colonization – enable, identify with, expand upon, benefit from, and forcefully defend these spaces. This book focuses on embodied practices of making settler colonial spaces that span the continent and cross centuries and looks at the resultant spatialities that bind Canadian and American people together through common identifications with settler colonial ways of being. Under the rubric of the northern bloc of settler colonialism, I argue that both the Canadian and the American polities are primarily and particularly defined by their drives to dominate and monopolize land and to erase challenging Indigenous sovereignties; these objectives are pursued in many ways but with the same focus on eliminating Indigenous peoples and nations with functional and foundational ties to the land. Perceived differences between Canada and the United States distract us from attending to their shared processes of settlement facilitated by attempted genocide. The dominating narratives of both Canadian and American exceptionalism have common roots in settler colonial processes of land theft, racialization, and discrimination and in the attempted erasure of Indigeneity.

*Making and Breaking Settler Space* draws from pasts, presents, and imagined futures to demonstrate the remarkable consistency, relentless drive, and contemporary relevance of settler colonialism across the stories and geographies of the places currently known as Canada and the United States of America, while also tracing the contours of settler colonial spaces to identify – and then widen – the cracks, flaws, and failures that expose the contingency and fragility of settler colonial projects in these lands.

In this book, it is my goal to expose the ways that the settler nation-states of Canada and the United States of America, and the settler peoples who occupy them, remain bound to a “logic of elimination” (Wolfe 1999, 27)

and a desire to transcend settler colonial pasts in order to secure unchallenged – that is, settled – belonging on the land claimed by settler colonial orders. Despite their wide diversity, settler communities from across these two enormous nation-states are linked in a destructive dance that reshapes space and time. But this reshaping is neither absolute nor permanent, nor are all settler colonizers united in their strategies and tactics. There are weak points and there are limitations to the power of even this dominating assemblage. Learning to identify such weaknesses is critical, as it can direct efforts to make interventions with the best chances of success. Further, the development of tools to identify points of vulnerability in the settler colonial assemblage accelerates the pace at which interventions are possible in different contexts and lowers the resource investments needed to do so.

In settler colonial contexts, the overriding focus on land, belonging, and transcendence of the settler colonial past leads to the repetition of certain spatial patterns. It is these patterns that I draw out from their broadest origins in European imperialism to their insidious and disruptive spread both through activist and social movement spaces and through interpersonal relationships and internalized identity constructs. However, these patterns of spatial production also betray the limits of settler colonization both within this continent and more widely; these spaces are not destined to be or created by accident but are intentional. Consequently, by examining what relationships and ways of living on the land are eschewed by settler colonization, we can target the incommensurable – the things that settler colonization cannot tolerate and with which it cannot coexist. We can use these patterns to identify where material transformations of both the landscape and embodied behaviours, in addition to their associated sociocultural narratives, are required. It is then possible to theorize beyond the settler colonial assemblage and beyond a world dominated by its systems, structures, and stories.

This theorizing is vitally important because social justice and rights-based movements, from the mildly progressive to the wildly challenging, have rarely succeeded in addressing ongoing settler colonialism. Radical anti-capitalist imaginings of postcapitalist futures have long been mainstays of science fiction and utopian literature, as have many imaginings of post-statist and radically liberated futures. Yet imagining a future beyond what historiographer and theorist Lorenzo Veracini (2015) has usefully termed “the settler colonial present” still seems nearly impossible. That is, in part, because most of the inhabitants of Canada and the United States take these nations’ settler colonial contours so much for granted that the systems of

originary dispossession and domination are made invisible to settler people or recede both figuratively and literally into the landscape. By fully exploring the patterns by which settler colonialism structures space, and therefore life, across Canada and the United States – and by doing so from the perspectives not only of systems of power linked to states and capital but also of individuals and grassroots communities entangled with settler colonial space across the continent – I expose the ways that space, power, and identity are produced in these settler colonial societies, and I contribute theoretical and practical work on how to confront and ultimately dismantle the settler colonial assemblage.

The focus of this project has changed dramatically over the course of research and writing since I began in 2009. This change has been due in no small part to the shift that has occurred over the first two decades of the twenty-first century in social and academic discourses related to colonialism on Turtle Island, with the latter very much following the former. I initially set out to use the framework of settler colonialism to explain the distribution of spaces and development of non-Indigenous identities in Canada and the United States. At the time, settler colonialism was only unevenly discussed in academic research on Turtle Island. My first academic publication was an article in *American Indian Quarterly*, in which I argued that Canada should be understood as hybrid – that is, simultaneously enacting subtle acts of settler belonging and naturalization alongside overt colonial violence against Indigenous peoples (Barker 2009). I was grappling with a now definitional feature of settler colonialism: the fact that settler colonial spaces are imbricated with other imperial and colonial spaces. But I lacked the conceptual grounding to fully make sense of what I was seeing.

The scholarly terrain has shifted quickly. Settler colonialism is now a recognized and critically debated framework for understanding Canada and the United States (e.g., see Amadahy and Lawrence 2009; Elkins and Pedersen 2005; Hoxie 2008; Veracini 2007, 2008; and Wolfe 2006). At a foundational conference at the National University of Ireland in Galway, 2007, Canada was discussed alongside the United States (and specifically Hawaii), Israel-Palestine, and Australia, as a clear core of settler colonial geographies. By 2010, I had incorporated into my published work the use of the concept and the term “settler” as an accurate description of my own and most others’ positionality in the northern bloc. By 2013, “settler” had exploded as a term used both within and beyond the academy due in large part to a series of major Indigenous-led activist moments. In the winter of 2012–13, Idle No More emerged as the latest powerful expression of Indigenous dissent and quickly

spread across Turtle Island and around the world (Barker 2015; Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). Idle No More teach-ins often featured passionate and uncomfortable conversations as would-be allies expressed their deep dislike of the term “settler,” usually prompting decolonial activists to use the term more frequently. It became clear that the affective responses to the term indicated a point of intense feeling and therefore potential intervention. Whether or not one identified as a settler became, in some places, a baseline for indicating that one was ready to accept personal responsibility for ongoing colonial harms and to understand and work from the very different places of responsibility and accountability that non-Indigenous activists occupy with respect to Indigenous people and communities.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, in the academy, in community work and organizations, and around kitchen tables, discussions have continued over the appropriate use of the term “settler,” its relationship to whiteness and capital, and the extent to which the settler state or institutions like universities can ever be decolonized, all conducted in a way that would have been rare, if not impossible, a decade ago. A growing number of scholars from around the world are now doing exceptional research and making important interventions, some of which resonate closely with those of this project. Indicative examples include spatialities of place-based anti-colonial activism (Greensmith and Giwa 2013; Kilibarda 2012; Steinman 2012); settler colonial attachments to place and identity (Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010; M. Johnson 2011; A.C. Rowe and Tuck 2017; Veracini 2015); and intersectional struggles between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within and beyond the settler colonial context (Crosby and Monaghan 2016; Dhamoon 2015; Leroy 2016; Walia 2013). These interventions have allowed this book to provide a spatially focused synthesis of settler colonial literature in order to identify and describe the settler colonial assemblage, the patterns generated as it spreads across and transforms the material landscape of the continent, and the internal hierarchies, recruitment, and control processes that link the bodies of settler colonizers to the political projects and embodied assertions of settler colonial power. In addition, this book delivers an extended investigation of how this assemblage also restrictively structures the spaces of social change and activism of those who would oppose it and what we can ultimately do about this obstacle in the interests of supporting Indigenous-led decolonization struggles.

Rooted in my commitment to understanding and deconstructing the settler colonial northern bloc, this book has a number of specific objectives. First, it identifies the origins of the settler colonial worldview – how

it evolved from European identities and cosmologies and shifted to the creation of related but independent regional, national, and supranational settler identities in response to early contacts with Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.<sup>3</sup> Second, it describes the contours of the settler colonial world – the dynamic spatialities that inform shifting but related identifications with land and territory, which in turn generate systems of law, politics, and economics in support of dominating settler claims to property and state sovereignty. Third, it develops a model for how settler colonizers across the northern bloc have transformed and produced space, including the entangled generations of narratives of conquest, the “peacemaker myth” (Regan 2010, ch. 3), and other cultural tropes that go along with the transformation of the land itself, which are evident in particular patterns of spatial division and urban development. Fourth, it investigates the persistence of settler colonialism in anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and other leftist political spaces – an important intervention into progressive narratives common in both Canada and the United States that colonize Indigenous spaces and co-opt Indigenous political agency. Lastly, this book proposes a low theory of settler decolonization – an autoethnographic reflection on solidarity activism, self-identification as a settler Canadian, personal failure, and decolonizing affinity building. These objectives are framed by three scholarly subdisciplines: Indigenous studies and settler colonial theory, geographical theories of affect and assemblage, and social movement studies related to discourses and practices of decolonization.

### **Settler Colonial Theory**

Settler colonial theory argues that there are distinct types of colonialism and that the colonization of places such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, to name just a few, generates cultural narratives and political economies that display remarkable similarities despite varied geographies and histories. As critical Indigenous scholars had pointed out for many years, these commonalities can be traced to historical and ongoing efforts to destroy Indigenous societies and to usurp and exploit their lands to the benefit of settler peoples. The work of anthropologist Patrick Wolfe (1999, 2006) collects these ideas into a discourse centred on reading the history of Australia and North America as histories of *invasions that never ended*. Wolfe refers to invasion in the form not of marauding armies but of imposed structures, which have proven extremely durable, surprisingly flexible, and at times difficult to identify. Veracini (2010b, 33–52) discusses

the settler colonial processes of building structures of invasion through a series of “transfers” of Indigenous land bases to settler colonial control, which by extension also erase Indigeneity from the land being claimed. For example, historical geographer Daniel Clayton (1999, xi–xii) describes how between the 1770s and 1840s the Nuu-chah-nulth, whose territories are located along the west coast of what is now called Vancouver Island in British Columbia, “were engaged by three sets of forces” – “the West’s scientific exploration of the world in the Age of Enlightenment, capitalist practices of exchange, and the geopolitics of nation-state rivalry” – with the result that “local, intensely corporeal, geographies of interaction were gradually subsumed into an abstract imperial space of maps and plans.” In my own work with historian and sociologist Emma Battell Lowman on settler colonialism in Canada, we have developed the argument that settler colonial transfer is effected through the creation of interlocking structures (e.g., racialized relationships around labour or title to land), systems (e.g., legal and political governance structures such as the Indian Act), and stories (e.g., pioneering valour or peacemaker myths) that tie settler people to the land (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015). This trio of structures, systems, and stories will remain important throughout this book.

Settler colonialism has been constructed as a method of transferring control over land – conceptualized broadly – from Indigenous to settler polities, but geographical theories of settler colonization have remained relatively underdeveloped. *Making and Breaking Settler Space* addresses this problem. More than a decade ago, historian Frederick Hoxie (2008), through a historiography of settler colonial analysis, argued that settler colonialism has been underapplied and undertheorized in studies of place and space, especially with respect to the geographies of Canada and the United States. Although more recent work has explored settler colonial geographies in relation to geographies of resource extraction (Hall 2013; Hoogeveen 2015; Preston 2013) and to geographies of radical activism (Barker and Pickerrill 2012; Mott 2016), it still remains more common to see settler colonialism taken up in historical geography (e.g., see Clayton 1999; and C. Harris 2004).<sup>4</sup> Several excellent edited volumes speak to the richness of these studies, most notably *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity* (2010), edited by Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds, which examines how settler colonizers constructed the worlds that they inhabited around the Pacific Rim through complex means of dividing, ordering, and regularizing the spaces that they claimed. A parallel volume edited by Zoë Laidlaw and Alan Lester, *Indigenous Communities and*

*Settler Colonialism: Land Holding, Loss and Survival in an Interconnected World* (2015), considers the historical experience of settler colonization from Indigenous perspectives, examining how Indigenous communities have struggled to hold onto their lands and how they have been impacted by the loss of many of those lands. These are positive and important developments, but much work remains to be done.

Scale is still an especially thorny issue, as the connections between broad, abstract articulations of a general theory of settler colonialism and site-specific, localized practices of settler colonization are not always clear. In this book, I set out to articulate this middle scale with respect to Turtle Island, describing both how the dominating power of the Canadian and American settler colonial states came into being – which I collectively refer to as the “northern bloc” of settler colonialism – and how those societies continue to pursue and profit from the end goals of settler colonialism. That this articulation obscures some local dynamics and fits imperfectly within the established framework of settler colonial theory is not a problem; rather, it is proof positive that there are global patterns and trends in settler colonization that must be acknowledged and understood, while also remembering that settler colonization in practice continues to change, adapt, and evolve in response to local social, environmental, and political conditions. As a result, this book presents a snapshot of how settlers have long attempted to transform Turtle Island into this northern bloc.

Settler colonial theory predates what might now be called a “settler colonial turn” that has occurred across many disciplines – especially those like history, sociology, and geography that have engaged with earlier post-colonial and critical turns. Although contrasts have been made for years between settlement colonies – or “the colonies proper,” as Friedrich Engels labelled them<sup>5</sup> – and “franchise colonies” (Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010, 19n4), the distinctions were often hazy. Researchers have repeatedly attempted to address the settler colonial distinction, describing the colonization of the Americas either with metaphors such as “swarming” (Crosby 1978), through theories of fragmentary cultural replication (Butlin 2009, 10–12), or as part of processes of capitalist modernization (Bhambra 2007a, 2007b; Flanagan 2008).<sup>6</sup> Some foundational classic anti-colonial texts, such as French-Tunisian Jewish author and essayist Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965), take up early examinations of claiming foreign land and the psychological and sociocultural contortions that involvement in this project require. Martiniquan psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon’s (1963, 1967) reflections on the Native and

colonizer as locked in a dialectical relationship have proven prophetic in that they have been foundational both in establishing Indigenous studies as a field and in shaping settler colonial theory as a mode of analysis. Maoist intellectual J. Sakai's famous *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat from Mayflower to Modern* (1983), an early reading of labour and American politics through the lenses of colonialism and Marxism, undoubtedly laid the foundation for many later works. Most crucially, the rise of critical Indigenous scholarship, from Vine Deloria Jr. (1985, 1988, 2003) to Haunani-Kay Trask (1991, 1996, 1999) to Winona LaDuke (1994, 2002, 2005), fractured orthodox thought across many academic disciplines, making possible – and necessary – closer examinations of assumptions related to colonialism, whiteness, and Eurocentric and Anglocentric thought, along with examinations of many of the other underpinnings of power across Turtle Island. It is most proper to describe settler colonial studies as a sub-discipline of Indigenous studies more broadly. Settler colonial theory is a tool that has largely been developed through the analyses and critiques presented by Indigenous scholars and community leaders, which made the structures of settler colonialism impossible to ignore, even within the academic disciplines fundamentally created by those structures.

In 1999, two books were released by scholars located in settler colonial nation-states in the southwestern Pacific Ocean – New Zealand and Australia respectively – that fundamentally shifted engagement with settler colonialism as theory. The first, Maori scholar of education Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, incontrovertibly established the long-term and normalized colonialism and dispossession embedded in academic research and relationships. It had the longer-term effect of demanding that non-Indigenous scholars find ways to decolonize their scholarship, which inherently meant deeply reconsidering and revising their practice at every stage to take account of and address ongoing colonialism. The second, Patrick Wolfe's *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, saw previously nascent analyses of the settler as a distinct phenomenon deployed in a fully realized form. Settler colonialism is, in Wolfe's book, a functioning theoretical framework that – crucially – is most useful for demonstrating resonance across histories, institutions, and regions. It is important that his text is often located as the point at which settler colonial theory entered into contemporary usage because it was at this moment that settler colonial theory was first used as a tool of self-critique, opening an important avenue for non-Indigenous researchers to begin to effectively respond to Smith's challenge.

As discussed, settler colonialism has been usefully expanded by a number of scholars working to generate broad theories, develop historical geographies, and consider effective activist practice, all of which are foundational to this book. Further research, such as historian Walter Hixson's *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (2013), political theorist Kevin Bruyneel's *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of U.S.-Indigenous Relations* (2007), and Chickasaw critical theorist Jodi Byrd's *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (2011), has described the United States as a historical and ongoing project of settler colonization, mirroring works making the same argument with respect to Canada (e.g., see Battell Lowman and Barker 2015; Coombes 2006; and Regan 2010). Further, settler colonialism has increasingly been adopted as a useful frame of analysis by Indigenous scholars, including Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson (2014), who frames violence and territorial restriction in terms of the assertion of settler control over Indigenous lands and bodies, and Yellow Knives Dene political theorist Glen Coulthard (2014), who situates settler colonialism as necessary to understanding the dangerous effects of the politics of recognition in settler nations like Canada and the United States.

The development of settler colonial theory has raised a number of important points of consideration: the always localized character of settler colonialism in practice (Banivanua Mar and Edmonds 2010, 2); the settler collective as the primary unit of settler colonization (Veracini 2010b, 59–62); the interplay between settler colonialism and other types of colonialism and sovereign power (Cavanagh 2009; Morgensen 2011; Veracini 2010b, 66–69); the intersections between settler colonialism and anti-Blackness (I. Day 2015; Leroy 2016; Patel 2016); and the production of both material cultures and cultural anxiety among settler populations as a necessary part of the colonial process (Mackey 1998, 2016). These strands of settler colonial theory can be gathered together to help flesh out existing sketches of settler colonial geographical imaginaries. My focus on the imagined geographies of settler colonialism is in the tradition of geographical theorists like Derek Gregory (1994) and historical geographers like Cole Harris (2004). Even as this book differentiates settler colonialism from other forms of colonization, which decolonial frameworks suggest we must do in order to avoid confronting one oppression while reinforcing another (Tuck and Yang 2012), it emphasizes settler colonial continuity between periods and places across two vast nation-states comprising much of the continent. The goal is to identify and expose the imagined geographies that underpin

the spaces, power structures, and institutions of privilege that sustain settler colonialism throughout the northern bloc so that they can be fundamentally dismantled.

### **Always All about the Land, Always in Relationship**

In the broadest possible sense, settler colonialism inheres in relationships between people as collectives and between people and the more-than-human world, and these relationships – whether cooperative, indifferent, exploitative, or violent – come to define broad political and social organizing, cultural narratives, and expectations of social behaviour. Relationships structured by settler colonial ideologies, narratives, and histories come to structure the spatialities of both settler colonizers and Indigenous and other non-settler populations. In our book *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (2015), Battell Lowman and I argue that Indigenous and settler people must always be understood through a relational analysis (48–53, 116–20). This is to say that “Indigenous” and “settler” as concepts make sense only as a “non-discrete, non-binary” dual (Waters 2004); what we consider to be colonial or Indigenous depends heavily on how we define the complementary term. Similarly, the expertise of Indigenous scholars, mentors, critics, and friends has been crucial to my efforts to understand my own subjectivity and identity in settler colonial North America. The relationships in and through which these learnings were shared are absolutely central to my work, so it is important to define clearly what I mean when I say “Indigenous” and why decolonization and resurgence are absolutely essential to my conceptual framework and powerfully inform my engagement at every stage.

My work is situated in relationship to Indigeneity as a lived quality of being Indigenous<sup>7</sup> both in relation to land – as a network of more-than-human life, as a traditional territory, and as a basis for material self-determination – and in relation to other Indigenous people, communities, and nations. Being Indigenous in this context means inherently being in opposition to colonial forces that would displace Indigenous peoples from their homelands, disrupt Indigenous communities and cultures to attack their sovereignty, and destroy Indigenous territories through extraction and development (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 597). To be Indigenous in this context also implies being in relationship with particular Indigenous communities. Indigeneity is not genetic, ethnic, or racial, nor is it a nationality or other identity conferred by dint of simple residency in or recognition by

a state. Identifying as Indigenous is a collective act. A person must claim and be claimed by an Indigenous community, which itself has a concept of peoplehood rooted in sacred histories, relationships to particular places, a cyclical and ceremonial social organization, and a language and other forms of expression that encapsulate the unique worldview of the Indigenous community (Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 2003).

Specific articulations of and critical engagements with the concept of Indigeneity and what it means to be Indigenous on Turtle Island today can be found in the work of an exceptional and growing group of Indigenous scholars, and critical Indigenous scholarship is central to the foundations of this project. In particular, the work of the following experts has had the largest impact on this book: Indigenous geographers Jay Johnson (Delaware), Sarah Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw), and Michelle Daigle (Cree); political scientists Glen Coulthard (Yellow Knives Dene) and Sheryl Lightfoot (Dakota); anthropologists Audra Simpson (Mohawk), Theresa McCarthy (Onondaga), and Zoe Todd (Métis); sociologists Vanessa Watts (Mohawk and Anishinaabe) and Chris Andersen (Métis); scholar, activist, organizer, and poet Leanne Simpson (Anishinaabe); Haudenosaunee historians Rick Monture (Mohawk) and Susan Hill (Mohawk); poet and performance artist Janet Rogers (Mohawk and Tuscarora); and eminent theologian, legal scholar, philosopher, and activist Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota). I also draw from what I have learned through personal relationships with activists, warriors, and community leaders, particularly those in the wider Indigenous community around the University of Victoria (2004–09), including Chaw-win-is Ogilvie (Nuu-chah-nulth) and Sakej Ward (Mi'kmaq), two former members of the West Coast Warrior Society from whom I have had the privilege to learn. These scholars and community leaders have spent decades developing comprehensive and grounded critiques of colonialism and assertions of Indigenous identity and nationhood. Through their works, I position Indigenous relationships to place as essential for understanding settler colonialism on Turtle Island as not only a historical phenomenon but also an ongoing fundamental conflict over belonging on the land.

### **Assemblage, Affect, and Scale**

Indigenous scholarship and understanding of settler colonial theory are the core of this book, and I employ a variety of important geographical concepts and tools to more fully explore the spaces and spatialities of the settler

colonial northern bloc. A particularly useful geographical theory in framing this discussion is that of assemblage, which is a concept

often used to emphasise emergence, multiplicity and indeterminacy, and [which] connects to a wider redefinition of the socio-spatial in terms of the composition of diverse elements into some form of provisional socio-spatial formation. To be more precise, assemblages are composed of heterogeneous elements that may be human and non-human, organic and inorganic, technical and natural. In broad terms, assemblage is, then, part of a more general reconstitution of the social that seeks to blur divisions of social-material, near-far and structure-agency. (B. Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 124)

That is why assemblage is so useful for engaging with settler colonialism, whose materiality, apart from being dispersed among individuals making decisions based on a wide range of values, concerns, and limitations, is not only spread through systems of governance, law, and economics that are at once diffuse and durable but is also interconnected with and supported by even wider-ranging networks of capitalism and white supremacy. Crucially, although structures of power – the key to Wolfe’s development of settler colonialism as a distinct formation – remain important within a given assemblage, thinking in terms of assemblage allows for greater flexibility in considering how power shifts and how processes of domination change over time. Assemblages are defined not by a necessary internal configuration but by their interactions with their environments. As political geographer Jason Dittmer (2014, 387) outlines with the metaphor of the human body,

these relations of exteriority mean that component parts of a whole cannot be reduced to their function within that whole, and indeed they can be parts of multiple wholes at any given moment. The parts are nevertheless shaped by their interactions within assemblages, and indeed it is the *capacities*, rather than the *properties*, of component parts that are most relevant in understanding resultant assemblages. While the properties of a material are relatively finite, its capacities are infinite because they are the result of interaction with an infinite set of other components. (Emphasis in original)

A human is more than a collection of organs and limbs, and a human remains human despite remarkable diversity among humans. Likewise, the settler colonizations in nineteenth-century New York State and twenty-first-century British Columbia – just two examples – may appear different

on the surface, but they are revealed as contiguous through the consistency of settler colonial dispossession, the erasure of Indigenous peoplehood and nationhood, and the reconstruction of settler nation-states. They are varied in appearance but contiguous with the wider set of settler colonial formations. Thus made legible, settler colonial power cannot disappear behind banal or taken-for-granted social structures of race and class or narrative fictions of dying Indians and empty lands.

Both the human and nonhuman worlds are recruited into and impacted by settler colonization in a variety of ways, and unlike more traditional theories of geopolitical power and domination, assemblage thinking demands that these more-than-human relationships be foregrounded in attempts to map and analyze systems of power (Dittmer 2014, 388–89). This imperative is important because of Indigenous scholarship's emphasis that the more-than-human must be generally considered in research and especially considered in the context of settler colonial destruction of Indigenous spaces and place-based relationships. Viewing the settler societies of the northern bloc as an assemblage, I outline how multiple systems of power, interacting simultaneously yet at times seemingly without coherence, produce patterns across space and time that can be identified, described, and analyzed.

Scholarship on North America has developed extensive geographies of racism and white supremacy that detail the exploitation of enslaved, indentured, and racialized labour, the capitalist usurpation of land and environmental destruction, and imperial and colonial dispossession and displacement. Understanding settler colonization on Turtle Island through the lens of assemblage theory is intended to add important nuance by examining areas of resonance and dissonance between these entangled trajectories of power. The assemblage is multiple and shifting but also contradictory and subject to limits. I engage closely with the contours and limits of this assemblage by focusing on how settler colonizers transform the land and themselves in the process of building the systems, structures, and social narratives particular to settler colonialism and by looking at how they incorporate fragments of European and other antecedent heritage, as well as co-opted and assimilated aspects of Indigenous knowledges and cultures.

Affect is another concept from geographical theory that is particularly important throughout this book (see generally Barnett 2008; Carolan 2009; Dittmer 2010, 91–98; Pile 2010; and Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1–3). More than just a political transfer, the embodied experience of being a settler person has positioned the claiming of lands by settler colonial regimes as an intensely affective act that settler colonizers conceptualize, rationalize, and

describe in a variety of ways. Affect in this context refers to the diffuse force generated through the engagement between an individual and other people and things that can inspire action or change. My research accords with the stream of thought on affect that “focuses on relationships between people, or people and objects” (Dittmer 2010, 92). This is a “version of affect” that “is precognitive, or existing prior to active decision making,” meaning that it is a way of explaining how exposure to particular places or spatially shaped relationships can inspire or motivate action – not in a mechanistic or pre-determined way but “as ‘a sense of push in the world’” (92, citing Thrift 2004, 64). This “experience of affect comes in the form of feelings and sensations prior to their being labelled as particular emotions by the mind” (93). This last point is key. Political theorist William Connolly (2006, 69), who has frequently worked with theories of affect in relationship to media and politics in the United States, describes an “intrinsic connection” between mind and body, although not a strict correlation. This idea is important, as I frequently shift back and forth between articulating the perceptions and internally logical arguments of settler colonizers, on the one hand, and analyzing their bodily positions in space relative to each other, to Indigenous peoples, and to the material elements of place, on the other hand. This final point on place is crucial, as Chicana scholar of communications Aimee Carrillo Rowe and critical race theorist Eve Tuck (Unangax̂ Aleut) (2017) make clear in their critique of the ways that cultural studies is at times complicit in settler colonialism because it obscures the centrality of the struggle for and transformation of material lands by settler peoples.

The degree to which settler people enact colonization as a physical usurpation of place and the attendant mental process of justifying and forgetting this usurpation through a transformative and affective situation in place are significant. Settler colonization, as a project, relies on individuals and collectives rationally identifying particular opportunities as ripe for exploitation in what is, at least in part, a conscious process. However, the ability to perceive particular kinds of opportunity in place and to recognize the drive that transforms an almost infinite set of permutations of settler collectives into a limited range of self-constituted spatial forms is related to a preconscious, affective push toward particular colonial forms. Although it is tempting to assume that settler people are nefarious or unrepentant conquerors, that is too simple a construction, even if the vast majority remain unmitigated colonizers.

At various points, I engage with Veracini’s (2010a) discussion of narratives that settler collectives weave in order to justify their colonial acts and with

Eve Tuck and ethnic studies scholar K. Wayne Yang's (2012, 9–28) identification of “moves to innocence” by which settler people attempt to exempt themselves from colonial blame. I raise these considerations here to emphasize that settler people devote a great deal of personal and social energy to denying the existence of settler colonialism, the damage of colonization, and the personal implication of being part of and benefiting from a settler colonial society (Mackey 2016; Regan 2010). If settler people could be taken at their word when they express heartfelt remorse upon being confronted by colonial realities and their part in them, colonization would disappear from the social landscape. Thus affect here is explicitly deployed to counter “overly cognitivist models of action” (Barnett 2008, 188) that provide conceptual cover for settler colonization. The entanglement between conscious rationalizations and affective pushes in settler colonialism manifests as a sort of social “dysconsciousness,” an “uncritical habit of mind ... that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (D.M. Johnson 2011, 110).

Finally, as discussed briefly above, the scale of the areas engaged in this book is important to consider because discussions of settler colonialism simultaneously implicate a variety of scalar powers and perceptions. As discussed below, I work to develop a “low theory” (Halberstam 2011, 2) or “weak theory” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 619) that navigates a course between globalizing narratives and location-specific perceptions, exposing tensions and conflicts that help to explain how settler collectives invest their identities in spaces and societies to which they may be only tenuously connected. How settlers imagine themselves is a product of both meta-narratives and personal or site-specific experiences, and the two impact each other. The dynamic tension between global-scale theories of colonialism and local-scale histories of colonization is the arena where intermediary geographies – such as the Canadian and American nations, ranches across the historically highly networked Pacific Coast region of Cascadia, temporary middle-ground spaces like the eighteenth-century Great Lakes region, and a perceived continent-wide ‘land of opportunity,’ to name a few – are generated.

With regard to the concept of the northern bloc of settler colonialism, scale-jumping between local, regional, national, and international levels is crucial to exposing the operation of settler colonialism. Although there are differences in Canadian and American laws and policies and diverse communities across both settler states, it is important not to allow differences at the scale of the nation-state to obscure deep entanglements of power and

mutual complicity at broader scales or the ways that settler collectives and communities can remain diverse while still operating in a clearly colonial manner. For this reason, I have intentionally asserted a spatial framework that does not correspond to the settler-created boundaries of these nation-states and have sought to connect global flows both through regional structures and down to particular embodied effects. This spatial frame is roughly the territory claimed by the Canadian and American settler states, and where white Anglo-dominated settler colonial formations have become predominant. This northern bloc of settler colonialism encompasses both a unique and internally contiguous colonial history, with roots in the legal, political, and economic structures of British, French, Dutch, and Spanish imperialism,<sup>8</sup> and a paradoxical character that positions this territory as simultaneously metropole and colony, core and periphery. It is also important to note that the border between these two nation-states – the 49th parallel, recognized as the longest undefended border in the world – bisects Indigenous territories, serving itself as a colonial tool for controlling movements within a geography that is also very much a space that Indigenous people traverse in order to assert their sovereignty contra both settler states (A. Simpson 2014). Mindful of sociologist Raewyn Connell's (2007, 59) argument that definitions of global and local are "conceptually arbitrary," I emphasize that the settler peoples of this continent are entangled with colonial power and practices at multiple scales: as imperial architects and elites (Stewart-Harawira 2005; Tully 2000); as active, localized primary colonists (Arnett 1999; Kupperman 2000); as transient labour alienated from place by capital and dependent on colonial states and nationalisms for social cohesion (C. Harris 2004; Walia 2010); as both architects and profiteers of neocolonialism beyond the northern bloc (Blanchard 1996; French and Manzanárez 2004; McKenna 2011); and as the subjects of contemporary juridical neocolonialism in their own territories (Barker 2009; R.J.F. Day 2005).

### **Social Movement Theory and Decolonization**

Social movement studies is a broad, multidisciplinary field that seeks to understand effective practices for creating social change, especially those undertaken through grassroots and community organizing, and is generally invested in producing scholarship that supports struggles for liberation from the violence and dispossession of colonialism, capitalism, racism, and state intervention.<sup>9</sup> Geographical literature on social movements can provide important context, including ways of thinking through how settler and

Indigenous people can pursue solidarity on “uncommon ground,” a useful concept developed by social movement geographer Paul Chatterton (2006) in the context of anti-petroleum-industry protests in the United Kingdom. Likewise, political geographer Paul Routledge has developed the idea of “convergence space” (2003), which I directly discuss later in this book, and the idea of the “third space” of academic activism (1996), which has influenced my own understandings of ethical positionalities and responsibilities and which also finds resonance with Kevin Bruyneel’s (2007) “third space” of Indigenous sovereignty. Similarly, geographies of activism are some of the areas where geographers have explicitly grappled with the demands of Indigenous peoples while seriously attempting to trace the influences and impacts of settler colonialism in motivating different grievances (Barker and Pickerill 2012; Counter Cartographies Collective, Dalton, and Mason-Deese 2012; Mott 2016; Nash 2003; Pickerill 2009; Tucker and Rose-Redwood 2015).

More specifically, however, this book is aligned with an overlapping area of scholarship related to broader social movement research: studies of decolonization and Indigenous resurgence. Perhaps the best articulation of what “decolonization” means in the context of settler colonial states is Tuck and Yang’s landmark “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” (2012). The authors contest overly broad interpretations of decolonization, which have been generated in part by the historicization of colonialism through some postcolonial discourses (Lewis 2012, 231) and in part by the “moves to innocence” through which settler people try to exempt themselves from implication in and complicity with – and thus guilt or responsibility for – colonization (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9–28; see also Veracini 2010b, 14). By contrast, Indigenous articulations have been remarkably clear that decolonization means the return of Indigenous peoples’ land bases and the relinquishment of settlers’ sovereign claims to those places (Corntassel and Bryce 2012; Coulthard 2014, 171); the establishment of nation-to-nation political relationships, including the right of Indigenous nations to “refuse relations” (A. Simpson 2014); and a fundamental deconstruction and rebuilding of economic systems across the continent (Tuck and Yang 2012, 23–26).

Given the massive shifts required to decolonize the northern bloc and restore Indigenous nationhood and territories across Turtle Island, decolonization is frequently articulated as a process rather than a state of being; although settler colonial power is unevenly distributed and there are places where Indigenous and decolonial spaces are being asserted, nowhere is colonial imposition absent. For settler people who hope to support

decolonization, there is no ideal or fully realized decolonized state because we remain vectors for colonial power regardless of our intents, understandings, or spatial positions. Instead, the process of pushing back against these powers and working to disentangle ourselves from them must by necessity entail ongoing and uncertain processes without clear end. It involves a constant grappling with internalized colonial mentalities and external pressures that are both material and cultural (or narrative), and it is fundamentally a social and collective process about transforming interpersonal relationships at both intimate and larger social scales (Holmes, Hunt, and Piedaloue 2015). This process, for Indigenous communities, has been discussed under the rubric of resurgence.<sup>10</sup> Resurgence is an approach to decolonization centred on revitalizing relationships to land and place through the regeneration of Indigenous languages, governance practices, and land-based economies and international trading routes, and it is conducted within the self-conscious frame of the need for flexibility and cooperation in both personal and political relationships. Key here is the decentring of imposed colonial systems and approaches in favour of a focus on applying traditional knowledge in a contemporary context and on embodying specific Indigenous legal, political, and spiritual relationships to land. Resurgence, as a social movement practice, has often taken the form of direct action to assert Indigenous presence, persistence, sovereignty, and identity in places of importance, from Idle No More round dances in shopping malls and urban intersections (Barker 2015; Dhillon 2017, 243–48; Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014) to pulling invasive species and planting traditional food plants in public parks, as Cheryl Bryce of the Songhees First Nation does in Victoria, British Columbia (Corntassel and Bryce 2012), to building houses and settlements in traditional territories that are under threat of development and exerting the authority to remove surveyors and other colonial agents, as the Unist’ot’én have done for over a decade (Barker and Ross 2017). None of these acts in and of themselves dispel settler colonialism or restore Indigenous nationhood, but as Bryce articulates, they are each individually insufficient yet collectively necessary (Corntassel and Bryce 2012, 159–61). They must be understood as “overlapping and simultaneous processes of reclamation, restoration, and regeneration” through which “one begins to better understand how to implement meaningful and substantive community decolonization practices. Future generations will map their own pathways to community regeneration, ideally on their own terms” (161).

My hope is that this book will help to further a growing discourse on how settler people can and should support Indigenous resurgence and develop

their own decolonizing processes and that it will help to embed these imperatives in geographical approaches to understanding North America. Academic discourses on settler decolonization and support for Indigenous resurgence often lag well behind efforts and experiments in grassroots activist communities, but there have been important developments in this area over the past few years. Special journal issues (e.g., see L. Davis, Denis, and Sinclair 2017) and edited volumes (e.g., see Maddison, Clark, and de Costa 2016) that focus on the potentialities and limits of settler ability and willingness to confront settler colonialism, while remaining inextricably bound up with it, have made significant inroads into unpacking the complex baggage that even the most educated, practised, and critical settler people bring into their anti-colonial activism. By synthesizing much of this literature through a theoretical lens created by framing this study within settler colonial theory and critical geographies of power and belonging, this book brings diverse examples into productive proximity through a regional theoretical model of settler colonial spatial production.

The conceptual frameworks introduced above, in particular Indigenous thought and settler colonial theory, assemblage thinking and the issue of scale, and social movement theory in the context of decolonization, serve as the high theory of this work. They shape and limit the extent of this research, providing a broad framework but one in need of detail and sustained critique. To that end, I have also framed my methods and approaches through low theory. In taking into account the personal and particular, low theory allows for the perception and articulation of possibilities obscured under larger narratives and helps to maintain a focus on what people – individuals and communities – can actually do about structures of power that may seem invulnerable and monolithic. Here, low theory helps to maintain a focus on the spatialities of colonial relationships that people – Indigenous, settler, and otherwise – form with the land and with each other. The resulting intellectual-experiential conversation between the two approaches is effective in meeting the challenge of pinning down the notoriously slippery and shifting settler colonial assemblage.

### **A Low Theory of Failure**

The academic world is meant to deal in truth, facts, proof, and evidence. As scholars, we are meant to make claims that, despite pushing boundaries and creating new knowledge, are also ‘made safe’ by adherence to disciplinary

protocols and by accepted and valorized forms of knowledge production. However, for many years I have referred to myself as a theorist when asked what type of scholarship I pursue, identifying not with a particular tradition of thought but with the contingency and possibility of theory. Theory is risky, as theorists often make claims that are unprovable in some fundamental sense, and the more interesting and groundbreaking the theory, the more it stands out on a ledge, at risk of proving to be unsupported by the material evidence of conventional scholarly practice. This inherent risk, or perhaps necessity, of pushing a theory to the point of rupture is why I came to identify so strongly with gender theorist Jack Halberstam's description of "low theory" in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011, 2).

Halberstam's (2011, 15–16) "low theory" is an attempt to break free of the rigid dialectics of "high theory" by attending to the messy, the interpersonal and private, the unexpected, queer, and unsuccessful. Low theory, in Halberstam's use, is intended to reveal "subjugated knowledges," those that are either officially or popularly denied, submerged, or suppressed (11). For Halberstam, these knowledges encompass the many possible queer alterities that do not correspond to the aesthetics and modes of being deemed acceptable to the dominating status quo, which seeks to recapture queerness in heterosexual, patriarchal, and cisnormative practices and symbols. Halberstam investigates what 'failures' to live up to these standards of acceptable queerness can say about how invisible and unspoken standards are enforced, the consequences faced by 'unacceptable' queer people in society, and the creative ways that artists, activists, and other everyday folks are defying or rewriting these normative standards. In so doing, Halberstam marshals a broad range of queer art and expression, from erotic art to a "silly archive" of animated television shows (20).

Halberstam (2011, 2) engages with eminent Jamaican-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall's work to develop an approach to thinking about queerness in contemporary society in a way that avoids the "usual traps and impasses of binary formulations." This approach is particularly relevant given that so much work invoking settler colonialism fails to avoid the pernicious "Manichean binaries" of Indigenous and settler (Byrd 2011, xxix). Low theory works through diverse representations in fields ranging from popular culture to avant-garde performance art in order to interrogate what success means in the context of living a contemporary life. Rejecting the narrative of success as economic stability and social integration, Halberstam attempts to envision the paradoxical possibility that success is actually found in failing. Failing need not be terrible even if it is painful, and as Halberstam

(2011, 5) discusses in reference to pop culture portrayals of failures to meet the American middle-class norm of success in films such as Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), failing has the potential to reveal a great deal about the obscure processes, hidden meanings, and assumed realities of contemporary life.

In this book, I take a similar approach. However, my low theory is directed at exposing subjugated knowledges regarding how to be a non-Indigenous person on Turtle Island in an ethical way, whether or not settler colonialism has structured one's identities and perceptions of power, class, race, gender, and so on. Following Halberstam, I too must investigate 'failures' to do what settler colonizers are supposed to do, and to this end, I assemble my own archive of motley memories and pop culture moments. For this archive, I have chosen places where I unexpectedly encountered settler colonialism through the formative years of my life – including childhood stories told about family migration and history, encounters with the landscape of the overlapping Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe territories near my home and with the Coast Salish territories in and around Victoria, British Columbia, and television shows situated around Turtle Island that I watched while homesick in England. Reflecting on this archive is partly an autoethnographic process, as I examine my own experiences as a settler Canadian in association with media representations, stories from activist events and conflicts, and the reactions of Indigenous individuals to my own actions in and through settler colonial spaces. I thus fail to normalize settler colonialism in my own experiences, making it possible to map the ways that settler colonial societies like Canada and the United States discipline settler colonial subjects by disappearing them into the emergent spaces of the settler colony.

This engagement with low theory looks at two types of failure at once: my failures to ignore settler colonial norms and instead to actively seek out settler colonization happening in the spaces around me *and* my failures to effectively challenge settler colonial spatialities, identities, and power structures. Throughout this book, I move from memories of my grandmother to discussions of contemporary television to the knowledge generated when activists fail in their aims, all in an attempt both to show the extent of settler colonization in structuring social, political, cultural, and economic life across a continent and to demonstrate the myriad ways that this vast settler colonial assemblage can be and is being confronted, countered, and dismantled. My practice of low theory takes the idea of failure as inevitable – in this case, the individual failure to fully decolonize as a settler person and

the collective failure to bring about the decolonization of settler society. But as I hope to demonstrate in this book, the fact that failure is inevitable does not mean that all types of failure are undesirable; it depends on how a settler fails and at what.

### **Autoethnography and the Settler Self**

Given that low theory dwells on the messy and odd in the otherwise banal and quotidian, autoethnographic exploration is a fruitful method for investigation. Phenomenological and autoethnographic approaches have increasingly informed my work (e.g., see Barker 2013, 2018; and Barker and Battell Lowman 2016) because the intellectual, the personal, and the political are very deeply intertwined. This book is fundamentally the culmination of an intellectual project begun in 2002, when I committed to Indigenous studies during my undergraduate course work at McMaster University under Mohawk professor of anthropology Dawn Martin Hill. Since then, numerous personal and professional experiences have given rise to profound transformations in my thinking about myself, where and how I belong, and my responsibilities and lines of accountability. Emma Battell Lowman and I similarly positioned our co-authored book as resulting from ten years of discussion, learning, and experimentation (Battell Lowman and Barker 2015), and *Making and Breaking Settler Space* is likewise a result of years of intellectual and scholarly attempts to theorize how colonization works and to identify its connections to the processes of my own life. Developing a habit of self-critical reflection is vital to this work, so each chapter opens with a story that connects to how the concepts developed in the chapter have played out in my life. These stories are intended either to establish touchstones of personal experience that readers may find familiar or relatable or to illuminate choices in research development and production that might otherwise remain obscured.

The analysis that I derive from this combination of high and low theories, conducted through an autoethnographic effort to unpack the entanglements of my agency and sense of self as part of a larger decolonizing effort, is – predictably – messy. ‘Unsettling’ experiences have been key moments of disruption and spurs to critical self-reflection as I have failed my way toward understanding what it means to be a settler Canadian and a part of the settler colonial assemblage. Sociologist Eva Mackey, in *Unsettled Expectations* (2016), describes the way that Indigenous land claims unsettle many Canadians and Americans whose lived experiences are premised

on Indigenous absence from the land. Mackey discusses the way that these unsettled expectations are often expressed through feelings of discomfort and the assertion of narrative turns that evidence affective panic and fear as well as the denial of facts and logical argument. For example, in her examination of attitudes toward the Caldwell First Nation claim for land in southern Ontario, Mackey points out that many rural landowners' opposition to the creation of a reserve in the area was rooted in imagined rather than expressed intentions for the land on the part of the Indigenous community (79–83, 92–95). The emotional responses of these landowners were evidence of pre-existing fears of Indigenous peoples and taken-for-granted understandings of terra nullius and similar concepts explored throughout this book that made Indigenous claims to land unimaginable. Confronted with the unimaginable, many of these settler people became unsettled – destabilized, uncertain, and conflicted – and thus sought to rapidly re-establish comfort at the expense of actually engaging with Indigenous people and their voices.

This book is intended to contribute to scholarship on the geographies of settler colonialism and decolonial social movement studies, while also raising deeply personal questions about belonging, relationship, identity, and responsibility. In finding myself to be a settler person, and therefore an everyday, 'normal' embodiment of the settler colonialism that I was seeking to understand and analyze, I ended up becoming my own "strategic exemplar" (Stevenson 2012, 602). By self-consciously reflecting on my own emotional, affective responses to failing in my intent to be a 'good settler,' I expose the unavoidability of these moments and the necessity of moving on from them as part of the process of limiting the control that the settler colonial assemblage exerts over individuals and society writ large. My experiences are not universal or even representative, as my whiteness, cisgendered male identity, lower-middle-class suburban upbringing, and experiences in education and work all draw stark dividing lines between my lived experience and those of many others across the northern bloc of settler colonialism. That is partly why my analyses and arguments for particular kinds of decolonizing action are not prescriptive and why I reflect openly on my own experiences, following the example set by historian Paulette Regan in her own work (2010). The intention is to create accessible moments that may help readers to make their own personal connections with this work, whether because we share elements of identity, positionality, or experience or because I share key characteristics with settler people with whom they are connected or in conflict. By joining the intellectual and the affective, the

high and the low, *Making and Breaking Settler Space* demonstrates that this approach is a necessary part of efforts to achieve fundamental changes in settler colonial relations and to expose and dismantle settler colonialism on Turtle Island.

## Chapter Overview

This book looks first at broad studies of historical imperialism and settler colonial encounters on Turtle Island, then at regional examinations that consider both the production of the northern bloc of settler colonialism as a space and the functioning of the settler colonial assemblage in producing that space, and finally at the failures and successes of work undertaken by settler activist groups and individuals in solidarity with Indigenous people in the here and now. This progression through scale and time is intended to establish a framework for understanding how complex and broad systems of power operate in hidden or taken-for-granted ways in the lives of everyday settler colonizers. Ultimately, in identifying these connections, I hope to provide tools for scholars to further intervene in and disrupt the (re)production of space and power in the northern bloc.

I begin in [Chapter 1](#) by investigating the large-scale historical legacy of European imperialism and colonization that instigated settler colonization in the northern settler bloc. I frame the spatialities of colonization through the perception of a core-periphery binary and terra nullius thinking, both of which not only set the material foundation of private property and state sovereignty in the northern settler bloc but also persist in the ways that settler people perceive the lands that they call home. This investigation connects with historical constructions of early colonial contact, with articulations of sovereignty through the creation of a legal-political regime by means of concepts such as homo sacer and designations such as spaces of exception and terra nullius, and with settler colonial theories of isopolitical shift and transfer. The analysis of these elements of colonialism is coupled with low theory autoethnographic engagements regarding family history and narratives of becoming settler Canadian and, more broadly, with discussions of settler origin stories and “mythhistories” (Battell Lowman 2014, 143).

[Chapter 2](#) moves from the scale of international and intercontinental imperialism to the scale of settler collectives engaged in transforming the lands of Turtle Island in order to generate power and privilege, produce social hierarchies of belonging, and seek the elimination of Indigenous

peoples, nations, and histories. I examine the settler colonial assemblage through its spatial products, which comprise a series of spaces that generate settler colonial aspirations, movements of populations, and perceptions of social belonging and exclusion. These spaces form the basis of institutionalized power and the experiences of increasing privilege that structure many aspects of the settler nation-state. These spaces are also analyzed here as dynamic, for they are always in the process of being constructed in concert with the deconstruction of Indigenous spaces. I analyze entwined acts of occupation, erasure, and bricolage as essential to the creation of both material and imagined spaces that weave settler national, regional, and personal identities into the land itself at the expense of Indigenous relationships to place and practices of self-determination.

In [Chapter 3](#), I show how the settler colonial assemblage recruits materials and bodies and spatially configures them by examining how issues of difference and diversity are subsumed into a homogenizing settler colonial landscape. I consider the interlocking processes of racialized dispossession, class-based oppression and dehumanization, and the settler colonial remaking of land and place, while interrogating the extent to which these processes mutually reinforce each other. Crucially, however, I also identify the limits of the imbrication of state and capital with the settler colonial assemblage. I then describe the ways that the resonances and dissonances between these large-scale processes inform imagined geographies of urban, rural, frontier, and wilderness spaces. Finally, I consider the suburban form of North American settlement as an ultimately failed attempt to transcend the settler colonial legacy of Canada and the United States.

[Chapter 4](#) shifts the discussion from higher-level theories of state formation and capital production to the experiences of those who try to moderate, modify, resist, or revolt against state and capital. I examine the broad spectrum of the North American left – from liberals to radicals, including anti-state anarchists and anti-capitalist socialists. I work through social movement theory, critiques of the “limits of liberalism” (Grande 2013), and intersections of racial and class politics to two primary ends. First, I disentangle settler colonialism from capitalism and state power, demonstrating not only the ways that the settler colonial assemblage overlaps and is interconnected with assemblages of capital accumulation and nation-state sovereignty but also the ways that it can function apart from these assemblages through a very different set of political-economic structures and imagined geographies. Second, I examine the ways that many actions by settler political activists are not actually anti-colonial but reinforce settler colonialism

through assumptions about Indigenous nations and colonial formations. Here, I sketch out the limits of contemporary anti-colonial activism in order to turn attention to the possibilities of an authentically decolonial activism for non-Indigenous people on these lands.

The narrative of settler becoming and of my own understanding of myself as a settler comes full circle in [Chapter 5](#), where I return to the considerations in [Chapter 1](#) through the frame of low theory, asking how did we get here, what are we doing, and how could we be otherwise? This time, the investigation is not historical but urgently present as I examine the role of scholar activists and work to generate a relational, ethical framework with which people like myself can engage in grounded, relational, decolonial projects. I work through understandings of affect, relationality, and place-based struggle. The low theory approach in this chapter draws inspiration from the work of Indigenous poets, moments in which pop culture brushes against settler colonial analysis, and my own messy recollections of proximity to Indigenous-led activism. Ultimately, I advocate an attempt to be a ‘bad settler’ as a way of refusing both the siren song of settler futurity and the arrogant assumptions of postcolonial responsibility.

In [Chapter 6](#), *Making and Breaking Settler Space* concludes with a persistent question: how can we scale up individual experiences of being unsettled so that they form the basis for decolonial alliances that are transformative at both the individual and societal levels? Driven by the concept of “co-becoming” (Bawaka Country et al. 2016), I work through the necessities of settler-to-settler engagement, the imperative of turning toward and centring Indigenous systems of governance, and the possibility of supporting Indigenous resurgence by generating complementary movements and engagements on “uncommon ground” (Chatterton 2006). Inspired by mentors who have helped me to grapple with my own settler colonial affective responses, I situate critical compassion as necessary to reformulating relationships – to each other, across difference, and with land and place – in pursuit of decolonizing social movements.

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