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A Collective Grievance, A Collective Acquiescence: Rememberings and Hauntings in our Pandemic of Racialized Violence

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Abstract
Can grieving death be the presence of a haunting? In this brief think piece, I draw on memory studies to contemplate the ongoing pandemic of racialized violence against Black and Indigenous people specifically and people of colour more generally. Life and death, surviving and suffering, and tenebrous apparitions are discussed as I synthesize the work of Sharpe (2016), Dean (2015), and Gordon (2008) to consider how we, particularly white scholars like myself, are implicated in a present that is haunted by an insidiously active past. Vision and the nuances of sight are also discussed in relation to whiteness, accountability, and allyship with/in our seemingly over-and-done-with pandemic of anti-Black and settler-colonial violence.

Keywords
Memory studies, haunting, Blackness, Indigeneity, whiteness, allyship

The climate of our insidious pandemic

Saying the names of the Black people who have been murdered by police officers, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists are one of the many racialized and colonialized activist groups across the globe who participate in the memory work of reclaiming and refusing death. Other groups include the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who silently gather to remember their children and others who make up *los desaparecido* of Argentina, exposing their government's routine of terror through their presence and by sharing photographs of those who have been tortured, killed, or disappeared (Dean, 2015; Gordon, 2008). There are also numerous consciousness-raising art installations, such as Black's *REDress Project* (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019) and Cole's *Remember Their Names* exhibit (Dean, 2015), which preserve, honour, and memorialize the Indigenous women and girls who have gone (and continue to go) missing or have been murdered. Whether a silent accusal or collective cry, these memory practices are just some of the many acts of radical memorialization occurring across the globe today.

The practice of using memory work to protest injustice is not new but a consequence and remembrance of history itself. Once silenced histories spill out of these memorialization sites and challenge the stories of Western history that are often enunciated through repetition across high school curriculums, popular media, and (national) anthems. Indeed, the stories that have been amplified across time and space have induced "various forms of blindness and sanctioned denial" (Gordon, 2008, p. 5), thereby maintaining historic structures of anti-Black, racist, and settler-colonial violence through the omission of the harms committed by renowned historical figures. Moreover, by preserving, (re)articulating, and legitimizing particular (read: patriotic and white) histories, these "representations not only describe reality but transform it" (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 277), consequently producing a national amnesia that is complicit in maintaining social arrangements that kill and let die Black and Indigenous people (Orr, 2006; Puar, 2007; Sharpe, 2016).

Within this sociohistorical milieu, the long-lasting police brutality and health disparities experienced by Black and Indigenous populations are rendered into seemingly new phenomenon that are reducible to individual behaviours as opposed to the rampant pandemic of state-sanctioned violence that they are. Accordingly, the memory work of BLM, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, memorial artists, and others like them, operate as a disruptive tool that resists and dismantles the legitimized interpretations of history that many white people have come to accept as a comprehensive and conclusive version of the past (Gaudry, 2011; Johnston et al., 2018). By ensuring that loved ones are not forgotten, or remembered as mere victims of a bad choice, these groups draw unfaltering attention to the past that holds people and institutions in power accountable for their previous and persisting violence (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). These inextricable connections between the past and present make clear that violent histories of racism, anti-Blackness, and colonialism are not "settled" in a past that is behind us. Instead, we find ourselves "in a past that is not past, a past that is with us still; a past that cannot and should not be pacified in its presentation" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 62).

With attention to a past that is not past, Sharpe (2016) states that anti-Blackness can be thought of as an inescapable climate that is ubiquitous and "the totality of our environments" (p. 104), which has pervaded and haunted all life following the transatlantic slave trade. By giving saliency to historical events and practices, Sharpe produces a recount that reveals how racism is not a random anomaly but, rather, a belief firmly entrenched in prevailing structures that insidiously harm, oppress, and exclude Black people. Without this connection to and recollection of history, the reality and ordinariness of racism would be further obscured as an outcome of individual or familial problems rather than an expression of ongoing oppression, exclusion, and social fragmentation (Jamal, 2005; Loyd & Bonds, 2018; Sharpe, 2016).

The need to confront our (read: the West's) history of white supremacy can be equally applied to the ongoing symptoms and structures of settler-colonialism. Just as the legacy of racial slavery has left in its wake a society conditioned by anti-

Blackness, so too has settler-colonialism secured a climate that demands the constant disappearing of Indigenous people (Dean, 2015). Here, Indigenous peoples are made to disappear so that they are unable to "make claim to the stolen land upon which Western society is built" (Da Costa, 2020, p. 440). The ongoing violence of this is witnessed in the institutional silencing of Indigenous voices and knowledge across all educational and state levels (Fellner, 2018; Watts, 2016), the premature death and high mortality felt by Indigenous populations writ large (Hunt, 2018; L. T. Smith, 2012), and through the thousands of missing Indigenous women and girls across Canada (Big Canoe, 2015; Sayers, 2016).

It is necessary to note that, despite the Western narratives and white imaginaries that separate anti-Blackness (Black slavery) and settler-colonialism, these acts of violence are by no means mutually exclusive historical entities. This is not to suggest that the oppressions across history should be thought of through a recent white settler logic that smooths the "quotidian spectacle" of Black and Indigenous death as similarly unfortunate and unfair but, rather, acknowledged as distinctly harmful yet motivated by interrelated logics of white supremacy (King, 2019). Indeed, the interconnections of white supremacy result in a logic that places Black and Indigenous lives at the "horizon of death" (da Silva, 2007, as cited in King, 2019) – in greater proximity to slavery and genocide, and becoming property, disappeared, or a threat (Dean, 2015; Gordon, 2008). As mutually informing histories, whereby Black slavery was used to reterritorialize Indigenous lands to the benefit of the white settler (Da Costa, 2020), anti-Black racism and settler-colonialism constitute and maintain "an unresolved and incomplete project" (King, 2019, p. 77), one of intertwining violence, conquest, and death that is hardly a "history" at all.

Manifestations of these anti-Black and colonial violences have morphed across time. In the context of anti-Blackness, we saw slave law transform into Jim Crow and then into the chokehold of the police officer (Sharpe, 2016). The incessant loss of Black life and the dominant narratives used to discuss Black life and death have created forms of (white) desensitization towards Black death (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). For instance, the media coverage that positions Black death as "practically… excusable" exists parallel to (and as a consequence of) the overrepresentation of Black lives as violent and criminal (Chaney & Robertson, 2013). Anti-Blackness can be found in the health inequities between Black and white populations today and linked to the reduction of Black life to historical relics (read: slaves) (Da Costa, 2020). This inability to recognize Black life in the contemporary has resulted in a (white) public consciousness that assumes, "relative to whites… [Black people] feel less pain because they have faced more hardship" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 10), and impacts the time, concern, and treatment offered to them in healthcare and medical institutions (Jackson, 2020; Sharpe, 2016).

Regarding settler-colonialism, such violence shifted from apprehending Indigenous children and imprisoning them with/in residential schools to settlers' "fascination with Indigeneity as one of simultaneous desire and repulsion" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 8). This gawking intrigue and exotification, rooted in a lack of value and care for Indigenous peoples, inherently leads to the thousands of cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Turtle Island (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). At the same time, settlers simultaneously exotify and invisibilize Indigenous life and knowledge today through their romanticization of the "vanishing Native" and claim to have a "distant" or "long-lost" Indian grandmother – what Deloria Jr. calls the Indian-grandmother complex (Mojica, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Further, the role of social work and apprehension of Indigenous children today can be recognized as an ongoing enactment of Indigenous imprisonment and erasure.

Within our anti-Black and settler-colonial climate, these racialized harms are not random but explicit indications that our violent history has shaped our current context. Indeed, when we give saliency to these "historical" events, forces, and practices of anti-Black racism and settler-colonialism, we can move towards a more comprehensive understanding that reveals how we, as white people, are implicated in white supremacy and related systems of racial inequality that are also not random, an anomaly, nor always noticeable, but, rather, firmly entrenched,

sustained, and institutionalized across all spheres of contemporary Western society.

Acquiescence and implicatedness

The disappearance and death of Black and Indigenous people today is symptomatic of a "past" that is assumed, by white people, to be over-and-done-with, especially within a society that is constructed as postracist and postcolonial. The ongoing presence and enactment of racism and settler-colonialism is not news to Black and Indigenous people, nor is it news to many people of colour. My use of the "convenient invention" of these post-problem terms and their following assumptions – a practice I am by no means alone in perpetrating – further reveals how white settlers are still (and have always been) in a position of "power to define the world" (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. 14). As a white scholar within a privileged institution of "the Canadian intelligentsia" (D. Smith, 1987), my words about long-lived racial traumas hold a weight of legitimacy, value, and credibility. This speaks to how academia adopts and replicates the racial-colonial logics of larger society. Here, as in most other facets of the Western world, whiteness functions as neutral, undisturbed, and unintelligible (Carbado, 2013), allowing white speakers to intervene in racial matters with authority and declared insight.

Naming the power dynamics present in my writing is an essential part of tackling the colonial worldings I am examining. To simply report on them is to reproduce them, as my words are more likely to be read as "objective" and closer to "truth," despite the reality that I am writing about experiences that are not my own and imperial systems that hurt neither me nor my family (and, in fact, benefit us). There is violence in this. Contra to my supposed legitimacy, Black and Indigenous scholars regularly have their research projects deemed "contaminated" with deeply personal understandings and dismissed as merely motivated by a self-serving political agenda (Collins, 2000; L. T. Smith, 2012; Todd, 2016). Thus, I (and potentially you, the reader) am necessarily implicated in what Métis scholar, Todd (2016), refers to as the "academy's *continued, collective* reticence to address its own racist and colonial roots" (p. 10). When white scholars write about settler-colonialism and anti-Blackness, we need to question our oversights and motives. Whiteness leaves me blind to certain realities, creating boundaries to my vision, recognition, and understanding of racial violence that cannot be crossed with isolated research and conversation alone – let alone performances of empathy. Relatedly, this invites questions about my motives – and the motives of many white scholars studying race – given my warped insight, what is propelling me to engage the question of racial haunting? What should be named and examined in my approach?

When considering the question of Black and Indigenous life and death in a (neo)liberal public consciousness, white people's empathy is too often a short-sighted step "forward" and thus an ineffective mode of change (Anane-Bediakoh & Ali, 2020). Anti-Blackness and settler-colonialism permeate our past, present, and future, creating a climate of death to which we are all implicated. This implicatedness, as highlighted by Dean (2015), prompts one to move beyond mere reactions of empathy, as empathy alone can result in feelings of guilt and, consequently, the desire for an immediate reprieve to reconcile our white settler guilt "without having to change much at all" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10). Such liberalized empathy (that often manifests as sympathy or pity) does not consider the violent historical conditions that have shaped our social order today, and its resulting privileges and inequities, thereby negating any real potential for accountability. This results in genuine empathy being distorted into performances of empathy that are then practiced as a means to ending racism. The consequence of this is that white people's feelings are protected instead of integrated: contra to performances of empathy, the process of accountability should feel uncomfortable, if not painful, and located inward as it ruptures the core of white consciousness and ego in the West – supremacy (Anane-Bediakoh & Ali, 2020; Da Costa, 2020; Jackson, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012). It is when this unsettling self-reflective accountability takes place that white people can meaningfully direct that accountability outward. Immediate examples include donating to already established BIPOC activist and mutual aid groups, while long-term examples involve doing the work of fostering deep and genuine

connections with these movements to support BIPOC leadership.

The more common reactions of guilt, versus the desired reactions of accountability, as Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest, can lead white settlers to deny our culpability and complicity through hollow, settler moves to innocence: ahistorical, asocial, and apolitical strategies that make it possible for settlers to alleviate their guilt while the specific objectives and requirements of decolonization are neglected and rendered invisible. For example, recalling what Deloria Jr. refers to as the Indian-grandmother complex, a white settler may claim to have "Indian blood" as a descendant of an Indigenous grandmother to absolve themselves of responsibility for the harm Indigenous populations have and continue to face (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Without a historical context that links our past to today's racial pandemic, well-meaning acts of consciousness-raising may be more frivolous and flippantly sanguine than anti-racist and thus work to reproduce a white acquiescence that tolerates ongoing violence against Black and Indigenous people. While discussing the disappearance of Indigenous women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and Canada more broadly, Dean (2015) argues that the prolonged inaction by the state and police can work as an acquiescence that maintains and fosters the structures, culture, and values that tolerate this violence and, ultimately, death. Thus, Dean proposes that these harms are state-*supported*, which further implicates us – white populations benefitting, reinforcing, influenced by, or blind to these unequal systems – in this pandemic of racialized violence. As phrased by Dean, "the broader social fabric of Canadian society… is inextricable from its state formations in its tolerance for this inaction" (p. 27).

Attention to Black death and suffering at the hands of police officers also come to a halt after one has chanted or hashtagged "Black Lives Matter." Although a well-meaning display of allyship, this ahistorical (and often fleeting) approach to anti-Blackness will not take Black well-being and justice far, if anywhere (Anane-Bediakoh & Ali, 2020). As observed by Sanders (2020), such liberal sentimentalities do not assuage the "resting hum" of imminent death that he feels as a Black man: "It doesn't feel like the hollow rejection of an ugly breakup. It's not the stinging disappointment of missing out on a promotion. What I feel is the lingering fear of death. Heart emojis and positive vibes won't help" (para. 15). Indeed, a wider acknowledgement and conversation surrounding anti-Blackness will not "talk away" anti-Black racism, as anti-Blackness is fundamental to whiteness and Western society.

When I merely say or hashtag "Black Lives Matter" as a white person and scholar, or express hope that things will change surrounding Vancouver's missing Indigenous women, I neither recall nor challenge Canada's long history and violent role in the transatlantic slave trade and settler-colonialism (Turner, 2019). On the contrary, I cover up these histories through my engagement in a performative allyship that permits me the ability to (mis)represent myself as resisting white supremacy while still allowing me to benefit from its abuse, thereby maintaining the national amnesia towards the ongoing disappearance and death of Black and Indigenous people. I, therefore, cannot offer my feelings of remorse or guilt with ease and *hope* that systems of anti-Black racism and colonialism will change. I also cannot report their violence as if they are new. However, what I *can* do, along with other white scholars and colleagues, is name my position in the pandemic of racialized violence and take meaningful steps from there. This acknowledgement of our (read: white people's) implicatedness is a step away from a continued white acquiescence.

More specifically, I am attempting to simultaneously intervene into so-called "Canada's" history of racial haunting to the pedagogical growth of white people while also refusing to present this intervention as novel. In doing this, my goal is to not just use my unearned legitimacy to show other white people, particularly academics, how settler-colonialism and racial slavery are woven into the very fabric of our current society, but to do this in a way that disrupts, rather than invokes, the colonial impulse of speaking over and for BIPOC. I use this intervention to lean into institutional violence (publishing and "producing novelty") and turn a mirror to and interrogate my own reflection. Indeed, a "hope" that things will change will hardly trouble white supremacy, a violence deeply rooted in "the dreadful past… animating

our current conditions of racial inequality – a past that produced these conditions in the first place" (Walcott, 2019, p. 394), without such reflection.

This piece has simultaneously prompted me to contemplate allyship and how "being" an ally, as a white person, is hardly an immediate positioning, but, rather, one that is in an ongoing state of *becoming*. As a white person who is immediately implicated in white supremacy, my actions, words, and decisions can become a movement towards a complicit acceptance of this continued white acquiescence or an active, embodied effort and desire to produce change. White allyship must be revisited, as white performativity has only taken transformative justice so far (e.g., Canadian multiculturalism). White allyship is something we – me and white people, writ large – must be deeply invested in and ongoingly work towards. We must turn to the BIPOC activists surrounding us and follow their lead – an act that involves giving non-white life the same vitality that we have inherited through racial violence. Local and international BIPOC activists remind us that we are not starting from nowhere, although, as white people, it may feel like nowhere we have been before – in a space we do not dominate, get primacy, and get to conquer as our own. In this space, we are not white escorts for anti-racism.

As a white scholar and *aspiring* ally (as my allyship is never a given or something I can claim for myself), I have an obligation to the past, to learn from the harms of colonial violence, and know whose land I am on and my treaty obligations on that land. Moreover, I commit to recognize where the "past" manifests today – through the institutions I am embedded within, the people around and beside me, and in my behaviours. In academia, who do I cite? Whom do I recognize as an "expert" and a "revolutionary"? Outside academia, who do I make the space to listen to? Whose perspectives are informing and guiding me, from the quotidian to the "unprecedented"? How am I supporting social movements, and what beliefs and logic inform my actions of support?

Moreover, I have an obligation to the future. This obligation should not position me in yet another place of power as a "woke" white saviour wielding my privilege to amplify the voices of Black, Indigenous, and other colonized populations. At the same time, this white allyship is not me stepping down, washing my hands clean from responsibility while claiming an absence of experience with oppression (e.g., "'I don't experience the problems you do, so I don't think about it,' and 'tell me what to do, you're the experts here'" (Mawhinney, 1998, p. 103, as cited in Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10)). It is not racialized populations' responsibility to "tell me what to do." Lastly, it is not productive to attempt to reverse existing power relations, which would be institutionally performative, at best, much like Canada's multiculturalism, which simply disguises "conditions of racism that have been relatively unchanged since post-World War II and might be said to have intensified from the 1990s to the present" (Walcott, 2019, p. 396; see Walcott, 2019 for more on "the multicultural lie"). As white scholars, people, and aspiring allies, we need to put in the work to learn, to face discomfort and shame, to recognize white supremacy in our very reflection, as conquest "is not an event, not even a structure, but a milieu or active set of relations that we can push on, move around in, and redo from moment to moment" (King, 2019, p. 40). We need to step aside and listen and keep listening. I am still learning how to practice anti-Black racism and decolonization in my everyday life, and this learning would not be possible without listening to and following the expertise of BIPOC. Our support for anti-racist change will not stem from new forms of colonialism.

We are haunted by a present past

The above reveals that anti-Black and settler-colonial violence is something many, if not all, of us continue to produce and benefit from. This acquiescence continuously makes itself visible: when media reports on violence against Black and Indigenous lives are limited to "physical and extraordinary violence," consequently overlooking the structural violence and systemic violations that hinder Black and Indigenous peoples' quality of (and ability to hold onto) life (Nako, 2016); when decolonization becomes metaphorical (Tuck & Yang, 2012) rather than a process that works "to recover histories, lands, languages and basic human dignity" (L. T. Smith, 2012, p. 23); and when truth and reconciliation commissions across the globe do not prompt

structural redress, but, rather, promote *symbolic* redress by amplifying (some) once-silenced voices, composing a "real" and singular history, and acknowledging mistakes of the "past" (Milton, 2014; Nako, 2016). These acts restore nothing but the violence they rebuke.

I, therefore, conclude my piece by drawing on Gordon's (2008) theoretical field of haunting to reinforce the fact that white people – regardless of our support and understanding of BLM and Indigenous well-being – are implicated in today's current pandemic of racialized violence. Gordon recognizes haunting as an altering state, where once-clear distinctions between past and present, presence and absence, fact and fiction, and knowing and unknowing, are obscured (2008). Here, binary distinctions are intentionally obfuscated, and the logic that constrain people to believe that there is one thing *or* another and that they themselves are *this* or *that*, are mystified.

Applied to the contemporary Western world and the many discourses it generates, we see that it is haunted by continuities from the "past" (de Leeuw et al., 2010). These continuities are often difficult for white and monied people to notice, as they are eclipsed by permitted narratives that reinforce the West as exceptionally liberal, accepting, and progressive (L. T. Smith, 2012; Walcott, 2019). By depoliticizing and individualizing structural inequities across the West, these narratives fuel the flows of power that maintain colonial and racial violence (Anane-Bediakoh & Ali, 2020; Bannerji, 2005; Chávez, 2013; Puar, 2017). Despite these diffused "white lies" (Walcott, 2019), haunting brings rise to ghosts that "appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). Thus, at this point, it is not relevant to ask: Can grieving death be the presence of a haunting? Instead, we must acknowledge this: We have always been haunted.

What haunts us is made legible, visible, and heard through the names that are amplified across the BLM movement and the thousands of missing Indigenous women called upon by their communities. These are the same names that are only ever whispered by news outlets seeking ethical accreditation (Dean, 2015; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). We are haunted by a history that is unresolved. We, including white beneficiaries, are haunted by a "past" violence that continues to puncture racialized and Indigenous lives today. Consequently, we – white people, scholars, and aspiring allies – must continue to confront and learn from our past to recognize where its harms linger, not just in the cries of the "other," but in the scent of our breath. In this haunting, we are both colonizer and ally, and it is our responsibility to recognize and navigate this overlap. When we take seriously that the past is not yet past, we begin to dismantle imperial repetitions through informed interventions (Dean, 2015; Sharpe, 2016). This "remembering" has the potential to give rise to new understandings, critiques, and projects in which we are all responsible and implicated: "In this necessarily collective undertaking, the end, which is not an ending at all, belongs to everyone" (Gordon, 2008, p. 208).

This claim is not new.
This claim is not revolutionary.
This claim is not mine.
But it is I who bears the responsibility
of feeling it.

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