**Learning to let go: Diagnosing the socio-psychopathology of settler-colonial Canada[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Ritwik Bhattacharjee**

**University of British Columbia**

**March 23, 2023**

**Abstract**

Western political theory’s engagement with settler colonialism has tended to consistently focus on its capitalist-materialist aspects viz., ownership of territory, extraction of resources, and the resultant genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples of the land. Insofar as radical Indigenous responses to settler domination move between the wholesale rejection of colonial relationship on the one hand and direct action against the colonial state (blockades, protests, etc.) on the other – this paper argues that until the socio-psychopathological aspect of settler colonialism is uncovered and addressed, reconciliation itself will remain impossible or primarily settler-mandated (hence, rejected). Using Canadian settler society as its case study, and further utilizing the recent turn towards understanding the thing-based nature of democratic polities, the paper follows Winnicottian object relations psychoanalysis to trace the logic of settler colonial attachment to land-as-object. It argues that the desire for and dependence on land as a transitional object turns into exceptional Oedipal psychopathology since the attachment not only fails to get decathected but instead ensures itself through the structural regulation and hegemonic domination of Indigenous peoples.

***Keywords:*  *settler colonialism, object relations, transitional object, Oedipus Complex, Canada***

**A**dvocates of reconciliation in Canada presentthe dominant Canadian polity in new, engaging, and supportive ways by studying its relationship to Indigenous politics. Contributors to this approach include political theorist James Tully (2018), Indigenous legal scholar John Borrows (2017), and others. **At the same time, scholars like Dale Turner (2006) suggest that discursively augmenting settler-colonial structures and institutions with Indigenous norms and practices can pave the way for reconciliation.** These approaches, in short, argue some form of acknowledgment of and engagement with mainstream state politics. On the other hand, there are advocates for a more radical approach against the structural and hegemonic domination of the Canadian settler colonial society. They can be grouped under two distinct-yet-related camps: i. The proponents of the outward-facing response that manifests itself through continuous, dynamic, and direct actions to protect Indigenous lands from the hands of the settler state. Idle No More, Wet’suwet’en protests, etc. are recent examples of such direct action, while the Oka Crisis of 1990, the Lubicon Cree struggle of 1987-88, the Constitution Express of 1980, etc. show that such responses have a rich historical background. ii. The proponents of the growing inward-facing movement towards cultural regeneration that guards Indigeneity from withering away under constant systemic assaults. This ‘politics of resurgence’ is championed by theorists like Glen Coulthard (2014), Leanne Simpson (2017), Audra Simpson (2014), and is exemplified by recent calls to *grounded normativity* - an ethical framework of Indigenous land-based practices and associated systems of knowledge (Coulthard and Simpson, 2016, p. 254). **They suggest that settler-Indigenous relations in Canada cannot be improved by politics of liberal recognition since such recognition remains tethered to a colonial framework. Reconciliation can only be possible when recognition becomes non-colonial, non-patriarchal, non-racist, non-capitalist and non-exploitative. In short, there can be no reconciliation without some type of radical *reconstruction*. In the words of political theorist Taiaiake Alfred,** “Reconciliation is recolonization because it is allowing the colonizer to hold on to his attitudes and mentality, and does not challenge his behaviour towards our people or the land” (2017, p. 11). **Following Alfred, I argue that the capitalist, racist, gendered, and exploitative oppression that result from settler-colonial institutions and practices are first order pathologies. By this I mean that there are specific psychological *conditions* that make possible the existence of these pathologies. Until these second-order problems – the psycho-pathologies – are addressed, the discursive approach to reconciliation will remain incomplete.**

Naturally, a radical psychosocial analysis of the settler-colonial logic will immediately raise two pertinent queries, foremost of which is the question regarding the necessity of this endeavour. Given the existence of well celebrated analyses of settler-colonialism, e.g., that of Patrick Wolfe’s, Glen Coulthard’s, etc. why the turn towards psychoanalysis? This is a serious matter especially since Patrick Wolfe identified the settler colonial logic as *structural genocide* premised upon the elimination of Indigenous peoples via their territorial dispossession (Wolfe, 2006) – a position that is widely accepted as offering a particularly robust understanding of settler colonialism.[[2]](#footnote-2) While I accept Wolfe’s influential structural argument, my focus here is more on the role of agency, asking how this structure is reproduced in an ongoing manner, especially in light of recent symbolic attempts to address colonial ‘pasts’ (e.g., Truth & Reconciliation Commission). When he declares that “the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388) – the irreducibility of territoriality in settler colonialism becomes explicit in his argument. Yet where this motive germinates is not questioned. Whereas accounts of settler colonialism that engage in psychoanalysis use it to study the impact of colonial trauma on the repressed/dominated (Million, 2013) or rescue psychoanalysis from its own internal colonial presumptions (Khanna, 2003), I am interested in finding the reasons behind the settler-colonial-self’s inability or unwillingness to confront its own complicity in the continuation of the structure. As a non-Indigenous settler my project thus follows Glen Coulthard’s call for “an exploration of theories and practices that move beyond liberal and ideational forms of discursive transformation” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 47) and finds in psychoanalysis the required tools to carry this out. This ties in with the second important question– what form of critique is my project offering? As Ahlhaus (2021) summarises in her recent article on the limits and scope of reconstructive methods, critical theory generally moves within the three pillars of reconstructive critique – immanent, normative, and rational. My project charts the contours of an immanent critique – deconstructing the origin story of settler colonialism in psychoanalytical terms. Once the pathology is established, the praxeological element inherent in the diagnosis provisionally points towards some form of normative reconstruction. Insofar as it relies on the use of language as part of the psychoanalytical method, it is focused more on excavating the political unconscious that ties the settler society to forms of domination exercised by the colonial state. It is my contention that without an immanent critique of **settler colonialism** culturally regenerative Indigenous practices will rightfully and justifiably continue to reject recognition as an extended modern project of colonial recognition (Coulthard, 2014), while open resistances will continue to result in piecemeal accommodations if and when mandated by the colonial state.

Offering a critical psychoanalytical reading without first diagnosing the problem (that is, to see if there is a psychopathological problem to begin with) would be akin to committing the methodological blunder of putting the cart before the horse. Thus, this essay seeks to only preliminarily and briefly diagnose the psychopathology that plagues the settler-colonial society. As such, I am not offering a reconstructive critique. I bring it up only to provide the larger context within which I plan to situate my overall work as a graduate student. The interdisciplinary argument I make here has three closely related parts. In Part I, I explore the meaning of attachment and object relations as theorized by British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (2009), and trace the political relevance of this analytical apparatus in recent democratic theorizations. I then show why *land* as an example of a public thing/object is aptly suited to the discourses on settler colonialism. In Part II, I use Canadian settler-society as a case study and show how *The Durham Report* (Lambton, 1839) unequivocally refers to the North American land as object. Here, I make two related claims. First, I show how the author(s) of the Durham Report owed their theories of colonization to that of John Locke (2017) who outlined the logic of attachment to land in western political thought, premised wholly on ideas of mastery. I then show how E.G. Wakefield, one of the key contributors to *The Durham Report*, influenced Marx’s (1990) theory of primitive accumulation that also described colonization in the context of object mastery. These clarifications, even as brief digressions, help us concretize the issue of settler-colonial attachment to land-as-object. In Part III, I show how the settler-colonial desire for and dependence on land, turn into an exceptional Oedipal psychopathology that run counter to both Winnicottian and Freudian (2010) analyses as the attachment to land-as-object fails to become diffused, and is instead re-ensured by the structural regulation and hegemonic domination of Indigenous peoples.[[3]](#footnote-3) I also provide a brief review of Freudian psychoanalysis to help us orient with some of the key assumptions of the orthodox claims of the discipline before offering a nuanced take on both Winnicott and Freud by showing how the agent’s violence/aggression on the one hand *creates the reality* in which it then situates itself, and on the other, is also a *response to the reality* in which it finds itself. In conclusion, I share a tentative plan towards how a psychoanalytical assessment may begin to address this pathology.

**Part I: *The politics of object relations/attachment***

In one of his most celebrated works *Playing and Reality* (2009), Winnicott presented his influential theory of the *transitional object* with reference to infant psychology.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is the object (generally provided by the mother or the primary caregiver: a soft-toy, blanket, etc.) that the child possesses outside of their[[5]](#footnote-5) own self. Winnicott calls this first possession the ‘not-me’ object that designates the intermediate area of experience which exists “as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated” (Winnicott, 2009, p. 3). As the child grows older, the dependence on the transitional object becomes diffused, but not repressed or forgotten. It “ordinarily becomes gradually decathected[[6]](#footnote-6), especially as cultural interests develop” (Winnicott, 2009, p. 7). This diffusion is helped along by the mother who “allows the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists” (Winnicott, 2009, p. 19). At the same time, through the eventual and frustrating process of weaning, this process makes way for the disillusionment that helps the child’s own personality to develop (Winnicott, 2009, pp. 16-18).

Democratic theorist Bonnie Honig uses the concept of transitional objects to define *public* things as those that “materially and symbolically transition us between private and public, and mediate our relations with others and with ourselves as subjects and citizens” (Honig, 2017, p. 38). Honig talks of ordinary yet public objects and things like public parks, libraries, bridges, town squares, etc. which make up what she calls the ‘democratic holding environment’ (Honig, 2017, p. 54) – the necessary middle-ground between the public and private spheres. Following Winnicott, her chief interest too is in the move from object *relations* to object *use* that effectively underscores the importance of the object’s survival even after being used, abused, and getting seemingly destroyed (Honig, 2017, p. 44).[[7]](#footnote-7) Insofar as Winnicott was interested in studying “the substance of illusion that … is allowed to the infant” (Winnicott, 2009, p. 4) by the mother/caregiver, Honig is curious about how this illusion in turn provides stability to the transitional objects through “affective, relational environments, and ultimately also by fantasy” (Honig, 2017, p. 46)[[8]](#footnote-8). This is how, for Honig, our attachment to these transitional objects that create the public space for democracies to survive in turn create our identities as citizens. In other words, *our political identity is shaped by our attachment to and use of public things*. This attachment is enriched by traditions, stories, experiences, myths, fantasises, etc. surrounding those ‘civic’ things, as generally evidenced by the ‘allegiance’ to or the sense ‘ownership’ of a nation (or a nation-state), a city, a neighbourhood, etc. Crucially, though, as the child grows, “the object ceases to hold the child in its thrall” (Honig, 2017, p. 116 endnote no.30) and it enters a ‘libidinal limbo’. Even though Honig doesn’t elaborate on this, it is clear from Winnicott’s thesis that the limbo refers to the gradual loss of meaning, and, subsequently, attachment (Winnicott, 2009, p. 7) – which for Honig can be taken to mean that as societies develop and become more complex, attachment to public things start reducing as the private sphere becomes more demanding and robust. In other words, detachment from the public institutions leads to more investments in private things while the public places, things, etc., become important only insofar as they help us secure and maintain our private interests.

Honig’s critical purchase of Winnicottian object relations for democratic theory has tremendous potential in terms of stimulating democratic collectivity. However, her understanding of land as a (public) thing is where her ideas become somewhat questionable, especially in the context of this essay. One of the key examples she uses to make her case about the importance of public things is that of Indigenous land-defenders of the Unist’ot’en Camp struggling against land and resource exploitation by state-supported[[9]](#footnote-9) capitalist institutions like Chevron and Trans Canada from 2015-16[[10]](#footnote-10). Here she interprets a tribe member’s impassioned declaration – “we’re protecting *our* critical infrastructure” to mean “the land, itself, and the medicine, berries, fish, and wildlife hunting it provides” (Honig, 2017, p. 22). Yet following her thesis, as explained above, it can be argued that what Chevron and Trans Canada are being accused of is essentially the use and abuse of things (Honig is using ‘land’ as an example of a public thing) that are supposed to be a routine part and parcel of ‘thing-based’ democratic life anyway in her own formulation. Whereas Honig might counter this by suggesting the forced entry without permission is undemocratic and thus not really suited to *Dingpolitik[[11]](#footnote-11)* where the use of public things is democratically granted to all – it begs the further question of whether Indigenous peoples are being incorrectly assumed to be part of the same *public* that relates to *land-as-object*?

I contend that for Indigenous people land is *not* an object/thing. As Coulthard explains, in the Weledeh dialect of Dogrib (his community’s language), land “is translated in *relational terms* as that which encompasses not only the land (understood here as material), but also people and animals, rocks and trees, lakes and rivers, and so on” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 61, emphasis added). Indigenous ethical frameworks and worldviews arise from the land-based practices and knowledge systems. The reciprocity that is inherent in Indigenous attachment to land makes it distinctly different from non-Indigenous object relations as the latter is explicitly unidirectional. As the child’s use of the object involves their feelings of mastery, contempt, disgust, love, addiction, fantasy, etc. *for* it, the thing of first possession is always seen as an *object* – a non-subject not-me. Since Indigenous peoples objectively *do not* subscribe to this, Honig’s land-as-object argument is better suited to discourses on and about non-Indigenous societies. This application becomes particularly crucial in the context of this essay since I am arguing that while colonized lands can be construed as transitional public objects in the colonial *Dingpolitik*, through various decolonization movements they were relegated to the cultural-libidinal limbo where their relevance and dependence became diffused. Yet, for *settler*-colonies like USA, Canada, Australia, etc. this necessary disillusionment never took place. In Part II below I will use settler-colonialism in Canada as a case study and take a closer look at one of its most significant founding documents, *The Durham Report,* that implicitly referred to this land-as-object assumption in the construction of the settler *Dingpolitik.*

**Part II: *Colonization as object mastery in Canada***

In 1839, John Lambton – the Earl of Durham – submitted the *Report on the Affairs of British North America* (Lambton, 1839) to the Crown, which is widely known as The Durham Report (TDR). TDR had a tremendous influence on Canada’s future as a self-governing democracy. The writing of TDR was preceded by the political tensions surrounding the lack of representation of the middle classes in Lower Canada, and social tensions between the new and old settlers in Upper Canada.[[12]](#footnote-12) Both colonies realised that “fundamental political rights enjoyed in Great Britain were being denied in the colonies” – which had seen more than a million immigrants arrive from Great Britain between 1815 and 1850 (Conrad, 2012, pp. 107–109, 122–123). Appointed as Governor General in 1838, the Earl of Durham was requested to submit a report on the armed battle that finally broke out between the two colonies in the Rebellion of 1837-38. After spending only a few months, he prepared TDR with two key recommendations: the union of the two Canadas and the granting of responsible government (Conrad, 2012, pp. 127–128). Influenced by his persuasive report, the British Parliament passed the Act of Union in 1840 creating the United Province of Canada. Even though the recommendation for a responsible government was rejected in 1839, twenty-six years later it nonetheless found its way into the formation of a self-governing Canada through the passing of the British North America Act, 1867 (renamed the Constitution Act, 1867) – the founding moment of modern-day Canada.

While Durham’s assimilationist project to make a united and Anglophone Canada has been well chastised to the point that such criticisms have become wholly entrenched in the Canadian political culture, the rest of the report is often heralded as “one of the greatest studies of colonial government, and the most epoch-making state paper in Canadian history” (Ajzenstat, 1988, p. 4). Running counter to the accusations that portrayed him as racist and assimilationist, political historian Janet Ajzenstat’s contextual reading of TDR shows Lord Durham to be an English universalist simply working in the mainstream political tradition of the day – one influenced by John Locke (Ajzenstat, 1988, pp. 3–10). While Ajzenstat’s work focuses on Durham’s “Lockean assumption of the equality of man” (Ajzenstat, 1988, p. 6) which influenced his recommendation for a responsible self-government not tethered to the Crown, my focus here is on Durham’s Lockean assumption of the mastery of man over land as object/commodity that influenced the report on colonization. As such, by wholly ignoring Indigenous peoples from the report, it effectively overturned the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (George R., 1763) that acknowledged the necessary and strategic *alliance* between Indigenous people of the land and the Crown.

TDR unequivocally refers to land as an object in the colonial nation-building project of “war with the wilderness” (Lambton, 1839, p. 28). Throughout the report, the North American lands are consistently referred to as being ‘unsettled’ and ‘wild’ yet full of “unbounded materials of … industry”, the securing of which “may continue to bind to the British Empire the ample territories of its North American Provinces” (Lambton, 1839, pp. 4–5). Lord Durham’s land-as-object assumptions are nowhere more pronounced than in his colonization plan, which was “to promote the settlement of wild lands; and the *general improvement* of the colonies; to *add to the value* of every man’s property in land” (Lambton, 1839, p. 105, emphasis added). This reference to the lands as being the wild commons claims its inheritance directly from Locke’s unambiguous and widely influential assertion, “God gave the world to men in common… He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational…” (Locke, 2017).

Property, for Locke, is thus created only when land is removed from the common of Nature with the use of labour. Since labour “puts the difference of value on every thing” (Locke, 2017), for Lord Durham this labour – explicitly, his colonial project of settlement – was clearly understood to improve the common lands of North America. Insofar as Locke imagined the ‘great art of government’ to be in the correct use of accumulated land, since “subduing or cultivating the earth, and having dominion” (Locke, 2017) are coterminous for him, Lord Durham’s colonial plan was unabashedly predatory as he realised that Canada should follow the United States in its colonial project since “the amazing prosperity of the United States, is less owing to their form of government than to the unlimited supply of fertile land, which maintains succeeding generations in an undiminishing affluence of fertile soil” (Lambton, 1839, p. 106). In Honigian terms, Lord Durham saw North America to be the holding ground, the *transitional object* – the possession, attachment and use of which will help the Crown develop and grow. Not coincidentally, TDR ends with a clear message to the Crown to this very effect: “… bygood government, and the adoption of a soundsystem of colonization, the British possessions in North America may thus be made the means of conferring on the suffering classes of the mother country, many ofthe blessings which have hitherto been supposed to be peculiar to the social state of the new world” (Lambton, 1839, p. 106).

The material dimension of this psychology of object mastery through the use of labour can also be traced in Marx’s thesis on primitive accumulation through which the colonial system “proclaimed the making of profit as the ultimate and the sole purpose of mankind” (Marx, 1990, p. 918). For Marx, the commercial supremacy of the capital-seeking, resource-exploiting colonizers led to their industrial supremacy through “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment” of Indigenous population in the gold and silver mines of America (Marx, 1990, p. 915). However, the critique of colonisation put forward by Marx was focused on the proletarianization of Indigenous people as the original sin of capital accumulation (Marx, 1990, p. 873), but surprisingly *not* on land dispossession. What is of particular importance to us is the continued reliance on the Lockean assumption of North American lands being “the wild common of nature” (Locke, 2017) as exemplified by Marx’s assertion that native lands were public property. This startling claim, which does not immediately follow from Marx’s otherwise stunning analytical clarity, can be traced to that of E.G. Wakefield – whom Marx cites extensively in the final chapter of *Capital: Vol. 1*, aptly titled ‘The Modern Theory of Colonization’ (Marx, 1990, pp. 931–940).

Wakefield was one of the key contributors to TDR, and accompanied Lord Durham during his visit to Canada (Piterberg and Veracini, 2015, p. 461). He has been described as a “practical statesman, not merely a founder of colonies, but a reformer and transformer of the entire British colonial system” (Garnett 1898, xii). According to him, manufacturing wage-labourers in the colonies faced a major hurdle since the native lands were ‘public property’ (as a result of dispossession) on which anyone could lay *equal claim*. This propelled him to propose the scheme of ‘systematic colonization’ where the colonial government would set a fixed price on the free lands and turn them into commodities for purchase by the bourgeois – thus setting up the vicious cycle for perpetuity. For him, colonization’s primary meaning was ‘the creation and increase of everything but land, where there is nothing except land” (Piterberg and Veracini, 2015, p. 463). The ‘nothing except’ conditionality is crucial here since it already assumes “prior to white colonization, the said geography had been *terra nullius*” (Piterberg and Veracini, 2015, p. 463). Even though he critiques Wakefield’s theory of colonization, Marx’s notion of the “true colonies, i.e. virgin soil colonized by free immigrants” (Marx, 1990, p. 931: footnote) flows from this very assumption. On this true colony, immigrants labour and toil, and increase the value of the land, appropriate property, and generally develop the wild commons. They infuse the land with their mastery, desire, love, disgust, fantasy, etc. The North American land becomes their first object of possession, i.e., their *transitional object*.

**Part III: *The psychopathology of settler-colonial Canada***

*“It is not the object, of course, that is transitional.”* (Winnicott, 2009, p. 19)

In the preceding sections I laid out the basics of object relations and established North American land as a *transitional object* – a public thing that became the basis of settler-colonial identity, especially in the context of Canada. In this section I will first describe the role of environment as a facilitator in object relations, and then take a short journey into Freudian psychoanalysis to establish its key arguments and significance in terms of the instinctual drives as facilitators of change before underlining the distinct psychopathology of settler-colonialism.

**3.1: The role of environment in object-use**

Winnicott summarized the qualities of the relationship between a child and the transitional object with these seven assertions (Winnicott, 2009, p. 7):

1. The infant claims complete omnipotence over the object, and the illusion is maintained by the mother/caregiver.
2. The object is loved as well as mutilated/harmed.
3. The object remains the same, unless changed by the infant.
4. It survives the infant’s acts of love and aggression.
5. It provides the infant a reality of its own.
6. It is not a hallucination. It exists objectively in the real world.
7. It gradually loses meaning as the infant grows up in a healthy, caring environment provided by the mother/primary caregiver.

So far, the discussions surrounding the nature of land as transitional object in settler colonialism have unambiguously mapped onto all but one of Winnicott’s defining qualities. To summarise, colonizers *claimed* complete control over the territory; even as they use and extract its riches (harm/mutilate), they were in constant awe of the vast expanse that lay in front of them; the land was a perennial source of material wealth – inexhaustible[[13]](#footnote-13); colonialism brought with it a new set of rules, customs, social arrangements, etc. – it had a reality of its own distinct from the colonizers’ mother land; it existed in the objective reality – it was not a figment of colonial imagination. However, settler colonialism faltered at the final requirement. Land never lost its meaning even as the settler-colonial society developed, as the attachment never became diffused. In other words, the settler’s identity continued to be intricately attached to the object of its first possession. As decolonisation movements around the world reconciled the dispossessed peoples with their lands, colonizers were forced to grow out of (weaned off) the enthralling power of the object. Yet, for settler colonies like Canada the ‘weaning off’ never happened. Non-Indigenous Canadian settler identity continues to be wholly predicated on their attachment to land. Naturally, this begs the question *why the developmental trajectory stopped*. The immediately observable explanation takes the material-economic perspective which suggests that the settlers have come to think of the land as ‘theirs’ and have clear material interests in keeping it. Patrick Wolfe’s argument highlights this specific structure that helps maintain such interests. However, this material dependence on the transitional object, even after the overall cultural-libidinal development of the society, points towards a second-order problem. In other words, I am arguing that the Canadian settler society should have grown out of the colonial nature of their attachment to the land, one that is predicated on the continued erasure of Indigenous peoples. It is this overwhelming persistence of colonialism that piques my interest here. The inability to let go of points towards a psychopathology – something that cannot just be critiqued materially. Two further presuppositions that are crucial to the sequence of events mentioned above will help us understand this aspect.

First, for Winnicott, to be able to use the object, the subject must develop a *capacity* to use objects. This is not an inborn capacity and must necessarily be dependent on a *facilitating environment* (Winnicott, 2009, pp. 119–120). For the colonizers the capacity to *use land-as-object* can be traced back to their facilitating environment, one scaffolded by the Western European philosophical traditions. Ecologist Dennis Jelinski maintains that while benign and organic deification of Nature[[14]](#footnote-14) gradually evolved into more metaphorical representations, it was the Enlightenment-fueled Cartesian dichotomy of mind (man) over matter (nature) that “gave license to mastery over the natural world” (Jelinski, 2005, pp. 274–275). The subsequent Industrial Revolution modified this disposition into a large-scale enterprise in such a pathological manner that “nature and the ‘wild’ were often seen as an obstacle to human survival, progress, and civilization” (Jelinski, 2005, pp. 274–275). Thus, the facilitating environment within which the Euro-colonial psyche was born, already had the capacity to use the transitional object when it appeared (i.e., when it was ‘discovered’ as the *New World*). It is also worth noting that the homeland itself, i.e., England, referred to as mother land by E.G. Wakefield and others, is *not* the transitional object. In 1839 TDR had enumerated two models on governing conquered territory: if the conquered territory already has most of its land appropriated with little to no room for colonization, then the laws and rights of the conquered people must be obeyed; whereas in a ‘new and unsettled country’ the goal must be to ‘attract and nourish’ the future population that will help fill the empty lands (Lambton, 1839, pp. 20–21). TDR’s prescription for Canada was the latter model. ‘To settle’ was *to perpetuate* by using the new and free land – what prompts Patrick Wolfe to say, “invasion is a structure not an event” (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388).

Second, the change from object-relating to object-use is the moment when the (illusion of the presence of the) object is destroyed – only after which it can be used. The subject first relates to the object subjectively (part of itself), then it is destroyed (both cognitively and affectively) when it is grasped/used, and the object is *objectively* perceived as part of a shared reality. This is how the “object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes-in to the subject, according to its own properties”(Winnicott, 2009, pp. 120–121). It is the destruction that plays the part of making the reality and placing the object outside the self, as opposed to the orthodox psychoanalytical theory that says “aggression is reactive to the encounter with the reality principle” (Winnicott, 2009, p. 125).

Before diving into Freudian orthodox theory (that Winnicott critiques above), it is interesting to note that along Winnicottian assertions, settler-colonial violence/aggression has been shown to become constitutive of the lived reality. Attaching herself to cultural theorist Lauren Berlant’s excellent take on the *cruel optimism* that is inherent in the historical present – that is when a certain desire is itself an obstacle to the subject’s flourishing (Berlant, 2011, pp. 1–22) – Hagar Kotef eloquently hypothesizes that “sociopolitical conditions that are founded on ongoing violence—such as settlement or colonization—are likely to give rise to a particular mode of attachment to one’s own violence” (Kotef, 2020, p. 17). She reminds us that the desire is for the territory and not for violence as an end in itself (which she terms ‘the cruelty model’). We can mark this as a refinement of Honig’s thesis, in which she argued that our attachment to public things create our political identity, since Kotef’s optical focus is on how the stabilization of political identity necessarily takes the form of violence. Thus, for Kotef, “the attachment to territory is intimately linked to forms of violence that render it one of the conditions of living” (Kotef, 2020, pp. 17–18). However, this still leaves unanswered the question *whether violence/aggression creates the reality* as Winnicott asserted (as does Kotef)*, or whether it is reality that necessitates a violent response,* as Freud maintained, or whether they are mutually constitutive of each other, as I am arguing here. To answer this question, we must understand certain key aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis. While a broad engagement with Freud’s oeuvre to parse out the complex features of his theories is beyond the scope of this essay, in what follows, I will provide a very brief yet summative overview of his thought.

**3.2: Freudian psychoanalysis: An excursion**

As the creator of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud’s immeasurable influence on society is well documented. Yet, as someone who was committed to regularly updating and perfecting the discipline that he created, Freud’s ideas on the human mind can be somewhat confusing. However, a chronological approach to his evolving ideas can present us with a good overview of what is called orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis.

Freud presented us with three models of the mind (Sandler *et al.*, 1997, pp. 11–29). These are the *affect-trauma* model of the early period (between mid-1880s and 1897), the *topographical* model of the middle period (1897-1923) and the *structural* model of the late period (from 1923 till 1938[[15]](#footnote-15)). The first model argued that repressed traumatic experiences can have psychopathological repercussions in later life. The emphasis here is on external events as instigators of pathology. The middle period roughly refers to Freud’s regular use of the topographical model of mind, what is otherwise known as ‘depth psychology’. Here, Freud divided the mental apparatus into three systems: Unconscious, Preconscious and Conscious, which varied in their *depth* within the mental apparatus. Unconscious, whose basic unit is the instinctual wish, remains Freud’s greatest gift to psychoanalysis. The radical thought that unconscious instincts are the driving forces behind some of our actions, has been so influential that it has flowed into other disciplines as varied as literature, philosophy, culture, politics, etc. The instinctual wish is the mental representation of the instinctual drive – a species-dispersed primordial and primitive force that has both sexual (pleasure) and aggressive (destruction) potential[[16]](#footnote-16). By studying dreams and parapraxes (slips of tongue) we can understand the nature of Unconscious. In the topographical frame, Preconscious sits between the Unconscious and Conscious systems where it develops as a consequence of the psychological interaction between the instinctual wishes and the external world. Loosely understood, it plays the part of a censor – allowing those urges and wishes to flow to the Conscious which it thinks the external world will not find repugnant. Conscious is where mental contents (thoughts, ideas, feelings, etc.) that are tied to consciousness are to be found. Here imaginative content is known to be not-real and thus derivatives of unconscious instinctual wishes can be found here as daydreams.

Evidently, the middle period is also associated with Freud’s theory of the instinctual drives (as they play a constitutive role in the topography mentioned above) and his formulations on narcissism or self-love and object-love or love of another. In the final period, Freud fully embraced the structural model of the mind divided into the three structures or agencies: *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. Id is the “impersonal source of our unconscious desires” – the mysterious location of “the repressed and of fundamental instincts, yet also the source of energy, the original self, fueling the activities of the entire psychic system” (Frosh, 1999, p. 35). It is entirely constructed out of the unconscious, though the unconscious contains much more than just the id. Ego, on the other hand, controls external perceptions, reason, common sense and is formed in two ways: first, as a part of the id that gets modified under the influence of the child’s interaction with the external reality (Sandler *et al.*, 1997, p. 27), and second, as the growing child gives up objects (no doubt sexual in Freudian terms), the ego internalizes them and, in the process, changes itself and becomes “a home for lost desires and forsaken objects” (Frosh, 1999, p. 36). With experience, and ‘libidinous object investments’ by the id, the ego becomes stronger. Finally, superego is the critical and self-punitive aspect of ego which is “the vehicle of the conscience, of parental and cultural values, and of the child’s own ideals” (Sandler *et al.*, 1997, p. 27). Following from this structural model one can see that the ego is subservient to, or *responds* *to*, three agencies: id, superego, and the external reality itself.

**3.3 Oedipal psychopathology**

Following the introductory quote to this section we can surmise that the term transitional object is used not to describe the object itself as being transitional, but to indicate that it assists the subject’s transition “from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate” (Winnicott, 2009, pp. 19–20). For the transition to happen smoothly and for the object to be eventually decathected, a *caring environment* is essential, a key part of which is the transitional object. Thus, echoing Locke’s grand pronouncement that “God gave the world to men” (Locke, 2017), when Wakefield asserts, “the ample apanage[[17]](#footnote-17) which God and nature have set aside in the New World…” (Lambton, 1839, p. 5), it becomes obvious that in the Euro-colonial psyche the North American lands were Mother Nature’s gift. It becomes part of the unquestioned background of the settler social imaginary that the land is always free. The attachment to the transitional object as a social pathology cannot be reduced to a simple fetishization because with the founding of modern Canada through the *Constitution Act* (1867) – Canada became a self-governing dominion. Crucially this effected a subtle yet important change in the settler-colonial psyche since England categorically stopped being the primary caregiver. England was still motherland on paper, as most official documents from the period will attest to, given the existence of the Crown. Yet, it is not surprising that when nationalist historian A.R.M. Lower began an article by stating that “The history of the New World is a study in settlement”, the title he chose was ‘Canada – A Motherland’ (Lower, 1927). *The love for and attachment with the transitional object has over time become transposed to a cathected love for the mother.* While similar trajectory can be traced for nationalisms in general (nations articulated as motherlands), what makes this unique in the settler-colonial context is the concomitant ‘essential’ step of removing Indigenous peoples of the land and then constructing the ‘motherland myth’ on those stolen lands.

Maori scholars like Brendan Hokowhitu assert that the “Victorian heterosexual patriarchy …coalesced with Indigenous culture and … “tradition” to produce what might be referred to as a “dominant” form of Indigenous masculinity; the heterosexual patriarch” (Hokowhitu, 2015, p. 86). This patriarchal idealization along with the concomitant fear that colonizers felt from the perceived practices and customs of who they called ‘savage’ – both subjectified and hyper-masculinized them into what Barbara Arneil terms “the natural man” (Arneil, 1996). Further, many Indigenous cultures across Canada personify earth as Mother. Examples abound of such representations, including *Nokomis* – the Algonquin goddess Earth-Mother; *Eatenonha –* the Wendat concept for the common Mother; and even the proclamation of Mother Earth by the Assembly of First Nations. Even when femininity is not explicitly asserted, nature is generally treated with respect as it is strongly believed to be alive and self-conscious, “The belief in a conscious, living nature is not simply an intellectual concept for Native American cultures…In a most real sense, it is their life. This interconnection between person and land is not merely a thing of historical significance” (Booth, 2003, p. 331). In psychoanalytic terms, Indigenous people thus became the true *Other* in the Oedipal sense – one whose relationship with the Mother (land in this instance) is originary. In the settler-colonial unconscious they took on the signification of the Freudian primal Father (Freud, 1946) – whose death and continued destruction at the hands of the child (settler-colonizer) forms what I am arguing is the Oedipal psychopathology of settler colonialism.[[18]](#footnote-18)

For Freud, humans are pleasure-seeking instinctual beings – thoroughly guided by the *pleasure principle*. However, as we saw earlier, the core instincts are the two primeval binaries: life and death, manifested in sexuality and aggression. This means an unregulated pleasure principle can bring about interpersonal destruction and social chaos. The regulations that are required to keep society from devastation are encountered as the *reality principle*: “society is constructed to curb individual instinct…”, and to organise human sexuality as “it needs the energy that might be put into sex to be diverted instead to the task of building culture” (Frosh, 1999, p. 41,46). Since a linear formulation of conditioning children to turn them into social adults presupposes an already existing social order and regulations which is mediated by the superego, Freud’s complex scheme emphasises the unconscious and formative function of social construction. Psychoanalysis, focusing on the development of the child in the western culture, has maintained that the formation of the ego through internalisation of the lost objects takes place in the context of familial-social relations (i.e., the Winnicottian environment). Such relations themselves are governed by particular ideological structures that shape the society, of which the predominant one is the structure of the Oedipus complex (Frosh, 1999, pp. 47–48). At the core of the complex lies the structuring of desire by society – for example, universal incestuous desires turned into taboos for regulative purposes. For a child growing up in a family[[19]](#footnote-19), as soon as he becomes aware of the potential love objects outside of the self, the conflict expresses itself as the Oedipus complex. This is schematically constituted by the child, his object of desire, and the authority figure (son-[mother/object]-father figure; daughter-[father/object]-mother figure). What is important to note here is that “The real father slips away in this; what emerges instead is a description of the impossibility of interpersonal relationships (child with object) that are not already structured by something outside them, the 'law' by which society operates” (Frosh, 1999, p. 50). The generation of the super-ego is also connected to this matrix as the prohibitions and the symbolic violence are internalized by the child and turned into self-ideals and regulations. Further, death/aggression as the other predominant instinct enters the matrix, first by way of the child’s own feeling of the threat from the authority figure, and then, by the aggression felt towards the authority figure. The choice to kill the authority figure gets repressed due to the child’s fear of retaliation and also due to his ambivalent attitude towards the father/authority figure. Instead, guilt arises out of this aggression, and it is internalized: “Whether one has killed one's father or has abstained from doing so is not really the decisive thing. One is bound to feel guilty in either case, for the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death” (Freud, quoted in Frosh, 1999, p. 52).

Let us summarize our findings thus far:

1. Our socio-political identities are shaped by our attachment to and use of public things.
2. The North American land was the first object of possession of the British colonizers, i.e., it was their *transitional object*.
3. Whereas a healthy development involves gradual loss of attachment with the object, there was no such diffusion for settler-colonizers, even as the metaphorical weaning took place for imperial non-settler colonies through various decolonization movements.
4. The love for and attachment to the transitional object became transposed to a cathected love for the mother, as the idea of the mother in the settler-colonial social unconscious changed with the change from England as motherland to Canada through the establishment of the Dominion of Canada.
5. In the settler (child) unconscious the ‘savage’ Indigenous *Other* becomes the primal Father who maintains an originary relationship with the Mother (land).
6. In claiming the territory as their own, settler-colonial government has continued to eradicate and destroy Indigenous people and their forms of life.

Settler colonialism’s Oedipal psychopathology finally becomes explicit. The uniqueness of this psychopathology is that both the pleasure principle and the reality principle are co-existent, contrary to Freudian formulations – simply because here the fulfilment of the desire requires the necessary destruction of the Other. *The inexorable desire for the land (pleasure), now transposed to the incestuous love for the mother, is maintained by aggressively destroying (death) the Other/Father figure that holds authority over the land/mother*. Further, through this act, the regulations that are put in place in terms of the self-ideals of the superego are also directed towards the Other. That is, the colonial state’s continued pathological desire for and mastery over the land is ensured by its structural regulation and hegemonic domination of the Indigenous people. As long as the Other continues to be structurally dominated, legally regulated, and eventually genocidally eliminated, the settler-colonial self’s desire – the undiminished object reliance – can continue to be fulfilled uninterrupted.

This psychopathology results in a type of *personality disorder* that is perpetually plagued by anxiety, and paranoia – constantly wary of the prophesized return of the repressed (Marcuse, 1998). Such an upswell of paranoia and anxiety can only be kept at bay by the constant reassurance of obsessive and repetitive claims to inclusivity and impartiality – both being purported hallmarks of the Canadian liberal and multicultural democratic culture. On the other hand, guilt, as a major symptom of a properly developed Oedipal complex is absent here since the rules and regulations that define what is guilt-worthy are also set by the colonizer, which in this case naturally sanctifies the complex as *not* guilt-worthy. Hence, performative examples of guilt – that help the settler-self maintain a modicum of esteem in the external reality (the larger global order) – manifest through perfunctory practices, e.g., calls for reconciliation and issuing apologies as piecemeal correctives while the domination and regulation continue unabated. In his critique of the Canadian government’s official 2008 apology to the Indigenous survivors of the residential school system, Coulthard astutely observes, “There is no recognition of a colonial past or present, nor is there any mention of the much broader system of land dispossession, political domination, and cultural genocide…” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 125). Finally, in answering the question posed in section 3.1, we can now see how the subject’s development is conditioned, on the one hand, by the reality (colonization) it helped create with his aggression towards the Winnicottian object (settling the ‘free’ lands), and, on the other hand, by the Freudian aggression (destroying the primal Father) which was a response to the reality in which he found himself (the originary Indigenous relationship with the land).

**Conclusion**

In this all too brief essay I argued that: i. Colonized lands can be construed as transitional objects that help settler-colonizers form and maintain their political identities; ii. In the Canadian context, such an interpretation can be corroborated by analysing The Durham Report; iii. Settler-colonialism follows both Winnicottian processes of object attachment as well Freudian instincts of aggression that pathologize the identity development into that of a parricidal complex. A normative reconstruction of settler-colonial society that therapeutically addresses such a personality disorder would need to presuppose that the settler society is genuinely attentive to calls for a move beyond performative acts of recognition and reconciliation, and that there is a consequent desire to change. Inasmuch as that is far from the truth in the actual *Dingpolitik* of present-day Canada, the utopian element – which is the *inescapable* part of all reconstructive critique – is also prevalent in mine. That said, such a reconstruction would necessarily need to establish the political unconscious as its first theoretical fulcrum. Here, investigations might begin by turning Frederic Jameson’s (1983) prescription to use literary narratives as symbolic markers of the unconscious into a study of political narratives (speeches, official documents, treaty archives, etc.) to show the parapraxes and underlying tension of a dynamically evolving society that unconsciously still holds on to the social-instinctual drives as well as the attachment to the land as object of first possession. It would also need to reflect on the sex-gender assumptions that discolour conversations surrounding the Oedipal complex, especially within the larger context of how settler-colonialism is essentially patriarchal and heteronormative in nature. Moreover, the relationship between the Canadian state and the settler society needs to be established critically such that levels of analysis remain distinct where required. Evidently, this is a project that needs to guard itself from becoming reductive and essentializing by focusing on dynamic identity markers that are not temporally or spatially restricted. Yet, if we are to construct an emancipated future free of settler-colonial violence and oppression, we must work towards learning to let go of the instinctual and unconscious attachment to land as object. Critical theory’s recent turn towards re-embracing psychoanalysis (Allen, 2021) is a promising starting point from where this project can spread its wings.

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1. This paper was originally submitted as the final research essay required for a graduate seminar on *Contested Territories.* While I have re-worded a few sentences and made a few structural updates, the core argument and analysis remain unchanged from the essay submitted for gradation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Since its publication in Dec 2006, this *academic* article has raked up an unprecedented quarter of a million views (261,509) and has been cited more than 1,100 times. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psychoanalyst Joel Whitebook has shown how Winnicott’s object relations effectively ‘completed’ Freud’s instinct theory (Whitebook, 2021: 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Winnicott was a pediatrician and had consulted over 60,000 mother-child pairs (R. Rodman in Winnicott: *Preface* (xii)) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Throughout the essay I use all three third-person pronouns to describe the child: he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs to avoid essentializing any singular usage. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To withdraw one’s feelings of attachment from an object, an idea, or a person. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For example, there is a strong sense of permanence to public things, e.g., the town square that outlasts the decades of use/abuse subjected to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here, the illusion refers to the infant’s self-understanding as the creator of the object. Of course, the object is *not* created by the infant. But the mother helps maintain the illusion *as if* the contrary is true. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Insofar as the Canadian state essentially granted the permit to the agencies to enter Indigenous territory without permission and exploit its resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Wet’suwet’en protests are still ongoing at the time of writing this essay and has become one of the longest running acts of direct Indigenous resistance. The Unist'ot'en (C’ihlts’ehkhyu / Big Frog Clan) are the original Wet’suwet’en Yintah Wewat Zenli distinct to the lands of the Wet’suwet’en.  [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bruno Latour’s term to designate the thing-based character of democratic polities (Latour, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The *Constitutional Act* (1791) had already divided Quebec into two colonies: Upper Canada and Lower Canada. The former mostly referred to British laws while the latter was driven by French civil law (Conrad, 2012, pp. 95–96). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This is of particular significance today as the limits of exploitation are brutally exposed through climate change. Still, during the colonial period this was the existing view. See Locke’s *Second Treatise* for an extended discussion on the inexhaustible fullness of the earth (Locke, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Personification of nature as Mother can be traced to the Latin word ‘*natura*’ which means birth or character. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Freud passed away in 1939. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Death instinct was added to Sexuality and arguably began Freud’s late period. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Meaning ‘a gift of land’, ‘a rightful endowment’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This is not to be confused with the oral and written instances of Indigenous peoples addressing the colonizers as ‘father’ as a form of kinship. For a nuanced reading of such Indigenous kinship formalities, see: Peter Cook (2015), “Onontio Gives Birth: How the French in Canada Became Fathers to their Indigenous Allies”, in *The Canadian Historical Review*, 96 (2), pp. 165-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The patriarchal family is the *sine qua non* element of this complex. Oedipus Complex exists because of the patriarchal family structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)