



“Let’s help our own”: Humanitarian compassion as racial governance in settler colonialism

OÑATI SOCIO-LEGAL SERIES VOLUME 10, ISSUE 6 (2020), 1270–1288: GOVERNING THE POLITICAL: LAW AND THE POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

DOI LINK: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.35295/OSLS.IISL/0000-0000-0000-1067](https://doi.org/10.35295/OSLS.IISL/0000-0000-0000-1067)

RECEIVED 11 JANUARY 2019, ACCEPTED 25 JUNE 2019

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Abstract

This article explores narratives of humanitarian compassion as rendered intelligible through the relational intersecting concerns about Syrian refugees and the suicide crisis in the Indigenous community of Attawapiskat, Ontario. Fuelled by a combination of anti-refugee rhetoric, racism and ongoing colonialism experienced by Indigenous people and communities, public and media discourse reveals how humanitarian governance is constitutive of the genealogy of settler colonialism. I suggest that examining the political genealogy of humanitarian governance in white settler colonialism assists in revealing the centrality of racial colonial violence in producing public and media discourse that is contingent upon the relational currencies of anti-refugee rhetoric, racism and humanitarian compassion. As expressions of a grammar of racial difference in liberal settler colonialism, these discourses ultimately reveal how racial colonial violence is constituted through the genealogy of humanitarianism.

Key words

Humanitarian governance; settler colonialism; Indigenous; Syrian refugees; Canada

Resumen

Este artículo examina las narrativas de compasión humanitaria entendidas a través de las preocupaciones interseccionales de relación sobre los refugiados sirios y la crisis de suicidios en la comunidad indígena de Attawapiskat, Ontario. Alimentado por una combinación de retórica antirrefugiados, racismo y colonialismo persistente experimentado por los pueblos indígenas, el discurso público y mediático revela que la

The author wishes to thank all of the participants of the workshop *Governing the Political: Law and the Politics of Resistance*.

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gobernanza humanitaria es constitutiva de la genealogía del colonialismo de asentamiento. Propongo que un examen de la genealogía política de la gobernanza humanitaria en el colonialismo de asentamiento blanco ayuda a revelar la centralidad de la violencia colonial racial en la producción de un discurso público y mediático que es contingente a la moneda de cambio relacional de la retórica racista y antirrefugiados y de la compasión humanitaria. Como expresiones de la gramática de la diferencia racial en el colonialismo liberal del asentamiento, estos discursos finalmente revelan cómo la violencia colonial racial se constituye a través de la genealogía del humanitarismo.

Palabras clave

Gobernanza humanitaria; colonialismo de asentamiento; indígenas; refugiados sirios; Canadá

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1. Introduction

The New York Times heralds the triumph of Canadian citizens in their aid of Syrian refugees. A headline declares: *Refugees Encounter a Foreign Word (in Canada): Welcome* (Kantor and Einhorn 2016). “Ordinary citizens, distressed by the news reports of drowning children and the shunning of desperate migrants, are intervening in one of world’s most pressing problems,” the investigative news feature declares (*ibid.*). Canadian national pride and compassion is a key ingredient in humanitarian efforts concerning Syrian refugees to Canada. Indeed, ideas about Canada’s unique version of humanitarianism – the will of compassionate ordinary citizens raising money to support Syrian families affirmed the success of private sponsorship succeeding where government sponsored refugee programs failed. On the face of it, such efforts fit within the dominant narrative of Canada as a haven of inclusion in a hostile world however, the determination of individual citizen groups also reveals the role of compassion and responsibility in the constitution of humanitarian discourse (Kristof 2017). Compassion or the “performance of compassion,” as Lauren Berlant argues, connects the “state as an economic, military, and moral actor that represents and establishes collective norms of obligation, and about individual and collective obligations (...) as a claim on the spectator to become an ameliorative actor” (Berlant 2004). Compassion involves an orientation to the other, a sense of good feelings toward a person, a group or a particular event or phenomenon. In a white settler racial state negotiating the arrival of new refugees, compassion is constitutive of racial relations of domination and subjection, of worth and worthiness.

While the Canadian state was administering compassion in response to Syrian refugees, Attawapiskat, a Mushkegowuk (Cree) community located on the west shore of James Bay, at the mouth of the Attawapiskat River, in northern Ontario, was reeling from a spate of youth suicides in the community. At the height of public debates concerning the arrival of Syrian refugees to Canada, Attawapiskat was featured in countless media reports as a result of the rates of self-harm and suicide among youth in the community. The media attention concerning youth suicides in Attawapiskat and the arrival of Syrian refugees intersected through discourses concerning humanitarian compassion and the various obligations of the Canadian state.

In the case of Attawapiskat, although families in this community endure the intergenerational and complex legacies of colonialism and racism, the spate of incidents of self-harm and suicide coincided with a general concern about humanitarian compassion as it was circulating in public discourse in Canada. Similar to other remote Indigenous communities in Canada, Attawapiskat often serves as a flashpoint of despair in public and media accounts of Indigenous life. Water contamination, youth suicides, disease, mould contamination, overcrowding in mobile homes built with materials that cannot withstand the weather conditions, mining incursions, land theft and environmental destruction and other forms of corporeal, structural and infrastructural violence is the public and media record of daily in this community. The effects of ongoing colonialism as rendered through the pathos of the media accounts of everyday life in Attawapiskat, and the particular concern about the levels of self-harm and suicide among youth, as well as the needs of incoming Syrian refugees, fuelled the public dialogue concerning the will to compassionate humanitarian governance in Canada.

The arrival of Syrian refugees is one of the latest episodes in the long national narrative of a country in which humanitarian compassion has been a central feature of national storytelling. Representations of a humanitarian and compassionate Canada has long featured in Canadian-nation building efforts. Canada has used strategies of humanitarian governance in which managing Indigenous and racialized populations is key. Humanitarian governance refers to the role of humanitarian principles (principles concerned with the life, well-being and the prosperity of individuals) as intrinsic to the work of government and governing. Here, I am borrowing Didier Fassin's use of Foucault's idea of governmentality.

'Government' here should be understood in the broad sense, as the set of procedures established and actions conducted in order to manage, regulate, and support the existence of human beings: government includes but exceeds the intervention of the state, local administrations, international bodies, and political institutions generally. (Fassin 2012, 1–4. See also Ticktin 2006, 33–49, Feldman 2012, 155–172)

Tethering this Foucauldian notion of "government" to the concept of "humanitarian" results in an idea of humanitarian governance that inserts the domain of governing into the domain of human life. Lester and Dussart (2014, 2) point out that practices of humanitarian governance have been part of the "moral vernacular" of settler states insofar as "a certain register of humanitarian thought and action (...) constituted the governance of these new settler states."

This article examines the relational processes of humanitarian governance as rendered intelligible through the intersecting concerns about Syrian refugees and the suicide crisis in Attawapiskat. Although it may appear that media stories concerning Syrian refugees, and the ongoing experiences of colonialism in the community of Attawapiskat, are two distinct national concerns, the issues at stake in both contexts work to elaborate a larger national story concerning breaches in the ethical contours of compassionate humanitarian governance. A relational analysis is key to understanding these connections since a relational analytic compels an approach that recognizes how particular subjects are differently positioned in relation to settler colonialism and racial capitalism (Murdocca *et al.* forthcoming 2020). Keith Feldman suggests that relationality helps to "account descriptively and analytically for connections, linkages, and articulations across the institutionalization of difference in disciplines and the nation-state cartographies they reference" (Feldman in Murdocca *et al.* forthcoming 2020). Relationality allows us to see that differing structures, experiences and representations of race are mutually constituted and entangled. Significantly, the recent *relational turn* in race critical theories, settler colonial and post-colonial studies insists on a move beyond racial comparison that "simply parallels instances of historical similarity across racial groups."¹ Instead, relationality consider "the parameters of settler colonial capitalism as an immanent frame for an analysis of colonial dispossession, racial capitalism, and antiblackness" (Medak-Saltzman and Tiongson 2015). In relation to a suicide crisis in northern Ontario and the arrival of Syrian refugees in Canada, an analytic of relationality reveals how disparate sites of racial abandonment are connected through discourses of humanitarian compassion in settler colonialism. The article has the modest objective of identifying several prominent themes that emerged relationally in media accounts

¹ For some examples see Hong and Ferguson 2011, Lowe 2015, Day 2015.

concerning Syrian refugees and the community of Attawapiskat and showing the relevance of these themes to the broader genealogy of humanitarian governance in Canada. An analytic of relationality helps to reveal how dialogues that circulate in western media assists in creating a global moral and emotional economy in which a focus on distant suffering prevails over other forms of social and economic despair and suffering and where each would require an interrogation of the racial colonial foundations of racial settler colonial states.

In exploring these links, this article is divided in two sections. In the first section, I examine some of the responses to the arrival of Syrian refugees and proposals for action that emerged in media accounts; these responses and proposals reveal how the community of Attawapiskat was positioned in relation to and in opposition to Syrian refugees.² This paper should not be read as a media analysis. Instead, I use the media reports to track particular debates and conversations concerning humanitarian compassion. In addition, the media sources canvassed should not be viewed as neutral accounts of particular events. Media sources are invested in and produced through power regimes governing national, regional and local contexts. In Canada, for example, the role and responsibility of the Canadian media in addressing issues that concern Indigenous people and communities has repeatedly been called into question (CBC Radio 2017). Fuelled by a combination of anti-refugee rhetoric, racism and ongoing colonialism experienced by Indigenous people, public and media discourse reveals how experiences of racial abandonment and violence is constitutive of appeals to humanitarian governance.

In the second section, I make a case for examining the genealogy of humanitarian governance in white settler colonialism as a form of legal obligation that works to define human and racial difference. I suggest that examining the political genealogy of humanitarian governance in white settler colonialism assists in revealing public and media discourse that is contingent upon the ambivalent currencies of anti-refugee rhetoric, racism and humanitarian compassion. As expressions of the grammar of racial difference in liberal settler colonialism, these discourses ultimately reveal how racial colonial violence³ is constituted through the genealogy of humanitarianism in settler colonialism.

2. "Let's help our own"⁴

There was considerable media attention at the height of public debates concerning the arrival of Syrian refugees that intersected with media accounts chronicling the rate of suicides by youth in Attawapiskat. In total, sixty-six news articles focussed on the intersecting national concern about Syrian refugees *and* the suicide crisis in Attawapiskat.⁵ The coverage was particularly prominent in the summer of 2016. At this

² I canvas coverage in Canadian newspapers, Indigenous community online sources as well as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

³ Throughout the paper I use the phrase "racial colonial violence" to signal the relational manifestations and regimes of violence that are constituted *simultaneously* through racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

⁴ Quinn 2015.

⁵ I conducted of media search using the following combined search terms: "Indigenous" and "Syrian refugees;" "First Nations" and "Syrian refugees;" "Syrian refugees" and "Indigenous people;" "Refugees" and "Indigenous people;" "First Nations" and "Refugees;" "Native" and "Refugees;" "Attawapiskat" and

time, several relational themes began to emerge in the media. The bulk of the media coverage focussed on representations of Canada's humanitarian compassion directed at Syrian refugees which coincided with public discussion about the ethical failure of compassionate humanitarian governance towards Indigenous people. Anti-refugee discourse, racism against Indigenous people (ie. blaming Indigenous people for their experiences of systemic and structural violence), and reflection on the possibility of reconciliation also featured prominently in the media coverage. These themes were reflected in mainstream news coverage as well as Indigenous community news sources. Through exploring these relational themes, I pay particular attention to how the relational media accounts compel an analysis of the genealogical connections between racial violence and discourses of humanitarian compassion in Canada.

Robert Sutherland, a member of the community of Attawapiskat asked a series of questions of Carolyn Bennett, the Minister of Indigenous Affairs, when she visited the community in the midst of increased media attention concerning the spate of suicides in Attawapiskat:

Tell me why we First Nations live in third world conditions (...). Why is it so easy for the government to welcome refugees and offer them first-class citizenship in our country? When will Canada wake up and open its eyes to First Nations communities? (...) Why are we living in third world conditions when the government is inviting these people in (...) spending millions on these people. (Kassam 2016. See also Perkel 2016)

Sutherland explains that although he has "no issue with Canada bringing in refugees," he chose provocative language in order to make a statement about government inaction concerning the conditions in his community (*ibid.*). Despite Canada being symbolically heralded for accepting Syrian refugees, a wave of anti-refugee activity flourished on the ground. Some of these activities included a petition signed by 50,000 Canadians demanding that the government stop resettling Syrian refugees (accompanied by comments requesting the government bring more Christians to Canada rather than "terrorists"), anti-Muslim graffiti in places of worship, anti-immigrant demonstrations, and a hate crime incident where Syrian refugees were pepper sprayed at a Vancouver welcome event (Kanji 2016). These events emerged alongside a significant CBC-Angus Reid poll that determined that 68 per cent of Canadian respondents said minorities should be doing more to fit in with mainstream society instead of keeping their own customs and languages" (Proctor 2016).⁶

Other news coverage cast Canadian humanitarianism through the combined challenges in Attawapiskat and Canada's support for refugees:

Canadians are quick to donate to flood relief overseas, to victims of earthquakes and hurricanes. But are they ready to reimagine how this country can respond to First Nations communities, many of them home to the most marginalized and vulnerable people inside Canada? When asked, Cindy Blackstock, the executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada notes 'Canadians' imagination for

"Refugees;" "Indigenous peoples" and "Syrian refugees." Articles were sourced from mainstream Canadian newspapers (*The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post* and *The Toronto Star*, etc.) as well CBC News, Macleans and non-Canadian newspapers including *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. In addition, several articles were sourced from *APTN News*, an Indigenous-run news source.

⁶ The poll was administered as an online survey and was conducted in September 2016 from a sample of 3,904 Canadian. "The results have a 2.5 per cent margin of error 19 times out of 20." (Proctor 2016).

what they can accomplish internationally is much sharper than it is for what they can do at home. (Hall 2015)

Importantly, Blackstock points to a critical fault line in the genealogy of humanitarianism. Indigenous people are never seen to possess the kind of humanity required to be subject to the discourse of humanitarianism. Blackstock's questions evoke the biopolitical and necropolitical consequences of living and dying in settler colonialism for Indigenous people. What forms of racial state violence evoke compassion and the language of humanitarianism? Who gets to live and die in liberal settler colonialism? The body of the colonized has always played a central role in the administration and organization of racial colonial violence in white settler societies. The racial colonial violence enacted on Indigenous people is central to the elaboration of the ethical administration of the liberal settler state incorporated as strategies of racial governance including, though not limited to the introduction of the *Indian Act*, residential schools, the reserve system, and the criminal justice system. Indigenous people have always been used to define the limits of the generosity and benevolence – the humanitarian impulse – of Canada. In this regard, as numerous others have noted, the discourse of humanitarianism indicates more about those seeking to rescue than those who are positioned as the subjects of humanitarian discourse (Razack 2007). These events demonstrate how public and media discourse trades in anti-refugee rhetoric, racism and moral outrage in order to constitute humanitarian discourse.

In this particular case, the historical legacy of racialized embodiment in the settler state is arguably manifest in the rates of self-harm and suicide among Indigenous youth. The rates of self-harm and suicide for Indigenous people in settler states is disproportionate to the general population. As I have noted elsewhere, in Canada, statistics show that self-harm and suicide among Indigenous people is two to three times the average for the general population (Miller 1995, Kirmayer *et al.* 2007, Murdocca 2013). Regional variations reveal that remote communities fare worse, underreporting further obscures incidents of death and deaths reported as accidental may in fact be suicides (Miller 1995). Furthermore, Indigenous communities have long demonstrated that where conditions of life and well-being for Indigenous people, and Indigenous youth in particular, are structured through practices of self-determination and supported by structural, infrastructural, educational, and health measures, incidents of self-harm, violence and marginalization are drastically reduced (Kirmayer *et al.* 2007).

Despite such evidence, there is the tendency for Canadians to blame Indigenous people for the issues in their communities thus wilfully dismissing ongoing colonialism. As Blackstock suggests, "[i]t is a deeply embedded stereotype in Canada. No one is blaming the refugees for their circumstances. But when it comes to First Nations, the view is that it is their responsibility. That they are the ones who created all this" (Hall 2015). Blackstock continues: "If we do this for Syrians, this outpouring of affection and generosity Canadians have shown, then let's step up to the plate at home. We need to embrace domestically what we so readily do internationally" (*ibid.*) Coded in the language of responsibility, this racialized narrative about the pervasive inability of Indigenous people to self-regulate in order to manage liberal social life reveals the political rationalities that underpin the limits of ethical considerations for addressing the structure of ongoing colonialism.

Editorials and letters to the editor during this time echoed the idea that Canada's humanitarian ideals must also be directed to Indigenous people: "In addition to our humane focus on the vast number of Syrian refugees whom we openly take in, with good moral conscience and the distinct Canadian multiculturalist spirit, we also must give intense focus to our 'first peoples' – to address the disturbing suicide crisis in Attawapiskat" (Mukerjee 2016). Governor General David Johnston statements rang triumphant about Canada's profile in midst of the horrors of the refugee crisis and the rates of self-harm and suicide among Indigenous youth: "This is a defining moment for Canada, a defining moment for all of us (...). It's even more than that. It's an opportunity to reimagine how we take care of the most marginalized and vulnerable among us" (Hall 2015). Johnston's statements position the response to Syrian refugees as connected to Canada's international image as a humanitarian nation.

Similarly, Canadian triumphalism and humanitarian compassion was on full display during Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's first speech addressing the United Nations General Assembly:

In Canada, we see diversity as a source of strength, not weakness. Our country is strong, not in spite of our differences but because of them. And make no mistake, we've had many failures. From the internment of Ukrainian, Japanese and Italian Canadians during the world wars. To the turning away of boats of Jewish and Punjabi refugees, to the shamefully continuing marginalization of Indigenous people. What matters is that we learn from our mistakes and recommit ourselves to doing better. To that end, in recent months, Canadians have opened their hearts and their arms to families fleeing the on-going conflict in Syria. And from the moment they arrived, those 31,000 refugees were welcomed, not as burdens, but as neighbors and friends, as new Canadians. Refugee camps are teeming with Syria's middle class. So when I say that I hope Syrian refugees will be welcomed and soon able to join our middle class, I'm confident that we can make that happen and we'll do it by offering them the same things we offer to all our citizens, a real and fair chance at success for everyone. We know we need to do this all together. We know it will be hard work. But we're Canadian and we're here to help. (Trudeau 2016)⁷

Prime Minister Trudeau is here advancing Canada's national story as a "humanitarian government"⁸ replete with a narrative genealogy celebrating diversity and the overcoming of histories of racial exclusion. It is worth noting that Indigenous people are not positioned within the framework of "diverse strength" as outlined by the Prime Minister. Indigenous people appear as a spectre of Canada's shame. Such pronouncements – the evocation of stories of humanitarian strife and overcoming – ultimately work to elaborate Canada's historical and ongoing role as a humanitarian nation. Sherene Razack describes (for the context of Canada's humanitarian role in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide) this process as "stealing" and consuming the "pain of others," (echoing Susan Sontag's phrase "regarding the pain of others") as shoring up a particular version of Canadian humanitarianism: "Believing ourselves to be citizens of a compassionate middle power who is largely uninvolved in the brutalities of the world,

⁷ It is noteworthy that historical redress concerning African Canadians is absent from Trudeau's speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

⁸ Didier Fassin describes "humanitarian government" to describe the "deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics" (Fassin 2012, 8).

we have relied on these images and stories to confirm our own humanitarian character” (Razack 2007, 376). The link here to Canada’s humanitarian role in the Rwandan genocide is not overstated. The Syrian refugee crisis has been described as the worst humanitarian crisis since the Rwandan genocide (Berthiaume 2014). Indeed, engaging in this “peculiar process of consumption” confirms that the project of humanitarianism requires ongoing legacies of settler colonialism.

In this case, the residue of racial colonial violence is manifest in self-harm and suicide among Indigenous youth in remote communities confronted by a bleak present and future defined by few paths towards self-determination. Indeed, talk about national security and refugees is a distinctly racialized project revealing the national racial anxieties that give content to the policing, surveillance and exclusion of refugees. It is in the humanitarian triumph of ordinary citizen groups that racialized concern about national security is revealed: “The fear is that all of this effort could end badly, with the Canadians looking naïve in more ways than one” (*ibid.*). Racial anxieties, the colonial form of the social, legal and affective production and management of racial categories, is here iterative of a securitized governmental and state concern about being overwhelmed by incoming racialized refugees (Stoler 2009). As national and international conversations proliferate concerning Canada’s individual and collective pledge to Syrian refugees, daily life in the Indigenous community of Attawapiskat continues to endure the effects of ongoing colonialism.⁹

The calls to “help our own” versus the humanitarian crisis “over there” served as a pivot point for anti-refugee rhetoric and for some Indigenous people to articulate outrage at state inaction in relation to the levels of self-harm and suicide among youth. This public and media discourse can be used as a portal to address how the historical legacy of the distinctly Canadian version of humanitarianism (in its different historical iterations) has always required a different positioning for Indigenous and other racialized people. The symbolic and material conditions that imagine one group through a framework of humanitarianism (as an international legal obligation) and, a second group, as so-called “wards” of the settler state belies a longer history of liberal humanitarianism that has been formed through the positioning of different racial groups in relation to the emergence of colonial capital states. How is the racial project of the modern liberal state in Canada made possible by positioning different of Indigenous and racialized people dialectically against one another in the formation of new regimes of racial governance?¹⁰

3. Humanitarian governance in settler colonialism

In order to address how public and media discourse concerning humanitarianism differently positions Indigenous and racialized people in Canada, it is necessary to explore the genealogy of humanitarianism in white settler colonialism. Humanitarianism signals specific forms of legal governance and regulation (including obligations) and, increasingly, should be viewed also as a discursive field replete with narrative and visual signifiers that invite consideration of the ethical dimensions of human suffering (Ticktin 2006, Feldman 2012). Anupama Rao has shown, for example, that the broader genealogy

⁹ These events occurred between October 2015 and April 2016.

¹⁰ I am mindful here of Jodi Byrd’s argument that settler colonial regimes work to re-caste Indigenous people as racial groups (see Byrd 2011).

of humanitarianism necessitates a focus on the legal dimensions of the concept as well how, and in what specific ways, humanitarianism necessitates violence in order to define racial difference and the contours of humanity. Rao explains:

[O]ne tends to forget that there are two (overlapping and connected) histories, two conceptions of humanity at stake in the political commonsense (concerning humanitarianism). The first is the idea of the 'human' encoded in human rights as a project of global governance and institutional capacity building (with a history stretching back to the League of Nations in the interwar period, followed by institutional responses to the Holocaust). The other is a genealogy of the 'human' that is inseparable from a global history of dehumanization, predicated on a paradoxical permeability between 'violence' and 'the human'. (Hall 2015)

In this regard, Rao has cautioned that we must remain attentive to the "political career of liberal humanitarianism" and the links between racial colonial violence, enslavement, bodily difference and governmental control (Rao 2006, 5). Rao describes this process as the links between the history of humanitarianism and the history of embodiment (*ibid.*). The body of the colonized and racialized is the locus for political and legal enactments about humanitarian claims concerning rights and protection. The violence of the embodied experience of domination and discipline are integral to the codifying, classifying, racializing practices that are necessary for liberal humanitarian concern and also reveals the racial anxieties of the state. Importantly, humanitarianism expanded as a concept in concert with colonial capitalist expansion. As Talal Asad explains, "humanitarianism emerged in the nineteenth century with the consolidation of European nation-states, the expansion of European colonial empires, and the development of capitalism" (Asad 2015, 401). The humanitarian project of colonial empire building was thus animated by European ideas of progress and benevolence requiring excessive violence. As Asad suggests, the "complex genealogy" of humanitarianism "partly older than the eighteenth century in which compassion and benevolence are intertwined with violence, an intertwining that is not merely a coexistence of the two but a mutual dependence of each on the other" (*ibid.*, 393). Although it remains conceptually challenging to draw a genealogical line from early Christian doctrine to modern humanitarianism, the transformation of humanitarianism by Enlightenment thinking (reason, progress) was fomented, in part, based on religious notions of benevolence and redemption (*ibid.*).

In the Canadian context, racial colonial violence (if we recall the project of residential schools, for example) was rationalized as a humanitarian project fuelled by the racial anxieties of the settler state aimed at "educating the native" which worked to redefine the so-called "uncivilized" in order to elaborate the category of "human" (or worthy "humanity"). There are other colonial humanitarian projects too. For example, Mary-Ellen Kelm's *Colonizing Bodies* shows how humanitarianism and colonial medical officers (doctors, nurses) furthered the project of assimilation in British Columbia in the early twentieth century. As Kelm clearly encapsulates, "humanitarianism" became integral to the colonial project, not in some self-aggrandizing way but in a sincere fashion that saw "doing good" as inextricably linked to racial superiority and the right to rule" (Kelm 1998, 101). Furthermore, as Anne O'Brien demonstrates, the white settler humanitarian project in Australia "drew strength from evangelical conviction."

Close examination of the sermons, meetings and newspapers of those seeking to protect the rights of Indigenous people reveals a mixture of religious impulses that informed humanitarian thought: exhortations of justice, charity, restitution, atonement and edification were intertwined with biblical narratives of banishment, judgment and the doctrine of the elect. (O'Brien 2011, n.p.)

These examples suggest that it is key to establish that the humanitarian impulse always works in tandem with forms of violence, control, and a grammar of racialized worthiness in order to demarcate the boundaries of humanity. In this regard, the grammar of difference (hierarchy, value, classification) necessitates and requires a dialectic of both racial colonial violence and protection (Pierce and Rao 2006, 3; see also Goldberg 1990). Although Indigenous people were the targets of the humanitarian projects of settler states, they were not passive victims. Historians have shown that in the early to mid-nineteenth century an imperial humanitarian project of "Indigenous protection" emerged across the British empire. Proposals for new forms of governance aimed at protecting the rights of Indigenous people were articulated in tandem with the ongoing violence of imperial settler states. The Aborigines' Protection Society, for example, began in 1836 and lobbied Britain's Colonial Office for almost eighty years with the aim of advancing humanitarian protection for Indigenous people in view of the colonial atrocities committed across the British empire (including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Congo, and South Africa) [Heartfield 2011]. Amanda Nettelbeck shows that at this time Indigenous people also deployed the concept of humanitarianism in their efforts to call attention to the conditions of their lives in developing white settler states and called upon the twin currencies of humanitarianism: the legal obligation of states as well as the affective dimensions of sympathy and benevolence of the colonial metropole. Nettelbeck explains: "From the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in the late 1830s, the concept of a humane system of colonial governance grounded in shared civil rights had circulated as a key principle within the repertoire of imperial humanitarianism, and although this principle would weaken in policy from the 1850s, Indigenous peoples from opposite sides of the world would continue to revive its political meanings and justifications throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth." (Nettelbeck 2016, n.p.). The racial management of Indigenous people in white settler colonialism has been rationalized through a liberal humanitarian ethos.

We must, therefore, address the particularity and relationalities inherent in the white settler state and the intertwined histories of racialized migrants, the enslaved and Indigenous people within the discourse of humanitarianism in white settler states. That the timing of this particular instance of anti-refugee rhetoric was made against a "crisis" or "scandal" concerning the levels of self-harm and suicide tells us something about how the precarity of the Indigenous subject and how forms of everyday racial colonial violence is apprehended by the state. In this regard, it reveals the interdependence of violence and protection in racial settler colonialism (Pierce and Rao 2006). The racial intricacies of public and media accounts welcoming Syrian refugees and the levels of self-harm and suicide in Attawapiskat reveal the simultaneous emergence of violence and protection in humanitarianism in a settler state. Canada can, at once, claim to be welcoming to those who are forced to flee even in the midst of public and media anti-refugee rhetoric while ensuring that structural conditions make it nearly impossible for Indigenous people to stay, let alone live. In the former scenario, humanitarianism is

antithetical to violence and in the latter scenario humanitarianism is constitutive of violence.

Furthermore, Indigenous youth engaging in self-harm and suicide – the annihilative consequences of the settler state (the experience of living and dying in settler colonialism; the biopolitical and necropolitical consequences of settler colonialism) is used as a fetish object where the moral, reparative and humanitarian aspirations of the state get played out. Notably, during this time period, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) disabled all online comments on stories concerning Indigenous people because of the levels of racist, hateful, and vitriolic comments; but also, as they point out, due to the racist sentiments disguised in benign language in response to the Attawapiskat suicide crisis (Office of the GM and Editor in Chief 2015). The racial colonial violence of settler colonial death as manifest in the suicide crisis in Attawapiskat did not evoke the language of compassion among Canadians. Instead, racism directed at Indigenous people experiencing and enacting the ongoing legacies of colonial racial lethality reinforced the limit of the ethical obligation of the settler state. Humanitarian compassion is not extended to Indigenous people with national bravado. For the people and youth of Attawapiskat, compassion fatigue, “the wearing down of moral sentiments until they turn to indifference or even aggressiveness toward the victims of misfortune,” is manifest as racist apathy in response to Indigenous annihilation (Fassin 2012, 3).

For racialized refugees, a compassionate humanitarian Canada structures humanitarian response as a form of difference. Hannah Arendt is often referred to when assessing the role of compassion in the political sphere. Arendt suggests the invocation of compassion is apolitical or “anti-political because it cannot be generalized to more than an immediate few without being transformed into pity, a perversion of compassion” (Hansen 1993, 179). Arendt sought to distinguish compassion (and its perversion, pity) from solidarity which can inspire political action: “Pity may be the perversion of compassion, but its alternative, is solidarity” (Arendt 1963, 88). Compassion, she declares, “always will fail” to guide real political transformation (*ibid.*, 89). In colonial contexts, humanitarian sentiments forms part of the grammar of racial difference that animates racial governance. As Ann Stoler suggests “Appeals to moral uplift, compassionate charity, appreciation of cultural diversity... were based on imperial systems of knowledge production enabled by and enabling of coercive practices. These were woven into the very weft of empire—how control over and seizure of markets, land, and labor were justified, worked through, and worked out” (Stoler 2006, 134). The genealogy of humanitarian governance required and enabled distinct forms of racial colonial violence and governance in order to establish and further colonial projects. Indeed, “social hierarchies were bolstered by sympathy for empire’s downtrodden subjects. Sympathy conferred distance, required inequalities of position and possibility, and was basic to the founding and funding of imperial enterprises – these were core features of empire that the elaboration of such sentiments helped to create” (*ibid.*).

Violence is written into settler colonial nations in ways that are unevenly distributed and experienced by whites, Indigenous people, Black people, refugees and other racialized or non-European people. The intertwined positioning of Indigenous people and refugees in these more recent public debates compels an analysis that requires genealogical consideration of Canada’s version of humanitarianism to show the

intertwined histories of “humanitarian projects” directed at Indigenous people and humanitarian practices directed at racialized refugees. It is also important to acknowledge that Indigenous people have been viewed within public and political discourse as outside of the frame of humanitarianism even as humanitarian rationalities underpin legal and political forms of discipline and regulation that structure Indigenous peoples lives. We must ask, therefore, why and how the content of humanitarianism gets discursively, politically and legally deterritorialized in relation to Indigenous people so that saving others from atrocities over there obscures the complicities of land theft, sovereignty, every day and ongoing racial colonial violence over here. Thinking conceptually and relationally in examining Canada’s reception of Syrian refugees requires mapping how, and in what particular ways, the Canadian humanitarian impulse has always been made against histories and ongoing experiences of racial colonial violence.

4. Conclusion

The final installment of the *New York Times* series depicting individual citizen groups sponsoring Syrian refugees sought to assess the yearlong financial commitment to the resettlement program. At month thirteen, the legal obligation of citizen groups to financially support Syrian families comes to an end. Some citizen participants “already considered the project a humanitarian triumph; others believed the Syrians would end up isolated and adrift, stuck on welfare or worse” (Kantor and Einhorn 2017). The mix of benevolence and anti-immigrant racism fuelled concerns of citizens sponsors: “We didn’t bring you here and give you all this help so that you could become a drain on our government system (...) we expected you to go out and get a job,” a member of a citizen sponsor group explains the concerns that she has as Syrian families transition from the citizen sponsorship program to financial independence. Compassionate humanitarianism is alive to and constitutive of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in Canada.

The intersecting responses to Syrian refugees and self-harm and suicide in the Indigenous community of Attawapiskat reveals that while everyday racism and racial colonial violence in settler colonialism occurs in complex, subtle and often mundane ways, state responses obscure connections between histories of racial colonial governance and the intertwined racial logics that govern settler state management of Indigenous and racialized people. As I have noted elsewhere, the racial violence of settler colonialism evident in practices of self-harm and suicide among indigenous youth foreclose a complex iteration of living and dying in settler colonial and precludes national public concern (Murdocca 2013). The racial colonial violence of the settler state make possible expressions of liberalism and appeals to liberal reformation and humanitarianism. Race and racial difference is thus an imprint of colonial difference and a testament to the violence required to sustain and establish a new nation. To track the conceptual mobility of compassionate humanitarianism in Canada is to address how liberalism humanitarianism is made possible through ongoing racial and structural violence. Attending to how, *and in what particular ways*, histories and ongoing experiences of racial colonial violence emerge coterminous with invocations of compassionate humanitarianism reveals how appeals to liberal conceptions of justice necessitate and require racial colonial violence. Settler colonialism presents unique

empirical possibilities for considering the interdependence of racial colonial violence and humanitarianism. The theft of land, forced removals, cultural genocide, and the declaration of settler sovereignty provides a spatial and affective template for the elaboration of humanitarian benevolence and for the particular imbrication of violence and protection.

In Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba, reception centres and welcome ceremonies for Syrian refugees included the participation of a number of Indigenous communities. In one particular welcome ceremony, a Blackfoot Elder, in his welcome speech, outlined the various atrocities perpetrated by the Canadian government against Indigenous people for over more than a century. When the smudging ceremony began at the event, the elder explained that the practice had historically been criminalized and that the Blackfoot community was required to secure special permission to be able to light the sage indoors which he viewed as evidence of further colonial erosion of Blackfoot culture. In describing this moment in the welcome ceremony, the reporter stated: "Intimating that arriving Syrians should somehow be wary of the country welcoming them with open arms was hardly appropriate, or even remotely helpful" (Dormer 2015).¹¹ The Blackfoot elder shows precisely *how* liberal humanitarianism governs the forms of ongoing racial and structural violence that are comprehensible in the Canadian public imaginary. We can read his introduction to Syrian refugees for what it might reveal about the interconnected histories of state racism and humanitarianism. Describing this historical context as "not remotely helpful" or incomprehensible (as to why this might be relevant at a ceremony welcoming new refugees) suggests we must continue to reveal the role that ongoing racial colonial violence plays in the constitution of humanitarianism.

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¹¹ This event was part of the Common Ground Project, a series of events that brought newcomers into conversation with Indigenous people in Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Alberta "to build and create understanding, acceptance and friendship" (see Common Ground Project 2015).

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