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Desire, Settler Colonialism, and the Racialized Cowboy

Beenash Jafri

In this paper, I consider how we make sense of racialized subjects' desires for settler subjectivity in settler colonies such as Canada, the United States of America, New Zealand, and Australia.¹ Drawing upon psychoanalytically inflected theories of race, I examine the effects of this desire and how it is articulated. By paying attention to the workings of desire, I aim to show how attachments to the colonial project may exceed the relationship between settler law and its subjects, even as they remain constituted by it. Importantly, I ask, how is desire constitutive of settler subjectivity and of the settler-colonial project more broadly? What does it mean for racialized subjects to desire belonging when this desire is limited by processes of perpetual social, political, and cultural misrecognition? I examine these questions by way of a somewhat anomalous, ambiguous figure—the racialized cowboy—as represented in the film, *Indian Cowboy*.² My argument is twofold: First, I argue that settler colonialism is a project of desire, articulated through narratives that appear natural and innate and that sustain colonial power. Second, I argue that attention to desire is particularly useful for understanding the relationship between racialized subjects, whose access to political power (especially in the formal sense) in settler-colonial regimes is tenuous and uneven. I use my analysis of the film to examine how the desire to access, and be included in, settler subjectivity is expressed by racialized subjects.

WHY THE RACIALIZED COWBOY?

Within popular cultures, the cowboy is associated with a particular kind of virile hypermasculinity and is often representative of American (colonial) ideals such as

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freedom, modernity, and independence. The cowboy is also racialized as White, signaling the racial dimensions of the American colonial project. What I am calling the “racialized cowboy,” though, refers to non-White subjects playing or performing cowboy. There is, of course, archival evidence attesting to histories of non-White cowboys in the American West. However, my interest is less in this history than it is in cultural representations of non-White cowboys. When racialized people are imagined as cowboys or, more generally, as belonging to the mythology of the Wild West, this creates a narrative link between the subjectivity of the racialized and that of the settler. My logic is as follows: If the figure of the cowboy is an icon for an idealized form of American masculine subjecthood, then the figure of the racialized cowboy is articulating something about the relationship between non-whiteness and American masculinity. The racialized cowboy disrupts, on the one hand, the presumed whiteness of the cowboy, throwing the racialization of settler authority into question. Incredulous and amused responses to the presence of the racialized cowboy, moreover, point to the failure to take seriously (to recognize) the racialized subject playing cowboy. At the same time, desires represented through the racialized cowboy are not meaningless, but are productive of the settler project. These desires, in turn—for recognition, for inclusion, for belonging, for settlement—are constituted through constructions of race, gender, and sexuality.

I should note that the racialized cowboy is less anomalous than we think;³ however, rather than surveying the trajectory of this figure, in this paper I zero in on his movements in the independent South Asian-American film *Indian Cowboy*. *Indian Cowboy* is a romantic comedy that was written, produced, and directed by actor and filmmaker Nikhil Kamkolkar (formerly a software engineer with Microsoft). Produced in 2004, the film was screened primarily on the festival circuit and received limited theatrical release in the United States. The basic premise of the film is as follows: Nick, a computer engineer, is an aspiring screenwriter searching for true love—what he calls “love-love.” His screenplay, which interrupts the sequence of the film from time to time, is a postmodern Western romance involving a love triangle between the hero Guru, his love interest Amano, and his enemy Dushman (fig. 1). The screenplay is set in a kitschy “Chinese Cowboy lounge” somewhere in the American Southwest, as suggested by the desert landscape, Stetson hats, and cowboy boots. Over the course of the film, Nick is schooled by real-life love interest Sapna on what “real” love entails and eventually abandons the fantasy of his Wild West screenplay to pursue his relationship with Sapna, based on compromise. However, while the Wild West is a fantasy sequence, it is very much embedded in the reality of the film.

One argument that might be made in relation to *Indian Cowboy*, and to representations of racialized cowboys more generally, is that these are merely imitations of the “real thing” or that because racialized subjects hold little power or authority within settler states, the effects of such representations are negligible. I am suggesting, however, that there is something productive about discourses of desire that demands our attention, even as they are limited and conditioned by failures to recognize racialized subjects as having the authority to perform the role of cowboy. Desire and recognition mark the tenuous relationship that racialized peoples hold with settler colonialism.



FIGURE 1. Indian Cowboy film still: the love triangle (l-r) of Guru, Dushman, and Amano (New Brunswick, NJ: Kamkol Productions, 2004).

To begin, I outline the relationship between race, racialization, and settler colonialism. I then present my arguments for settler colonialism as a project of desire. This is followed by an analysis of *Indian Cowboy*. I conclude by reflecting on possibilities for desiring differently, in the service of decolonial goals.

RACE, RACIALIZATION, AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

Settler colonialism is constituted through a native/settler binary. However, discussions of settler colonialism are complicated when the place of racialized subjects within this binary is taken into consideration.⁴ Theorizing the liminally positioned racialized subject requires that we think about the relations of difference structuring settler coloniality. For example, in their 2005 article, “Decolonizing Antiracism,” Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua take aim at antiracism activism and politics (as well as postcolonial theory, critical race theory, and theories of nationalism)⁵ for its erasure and dismissal of indigeneity, which, they argue, performs a re-colonizing of indigeneity.⁶ Lawrence and Dua provide examples of how the political rights and recognition granted to people of color make them complicit in the colonization of Indigenous lands. For instance, in Canada, all citizens, including people of color, had the opportunity to vote in a referendum on constitutional changes, called the Charlottetown Accord, which contained provisions that would have drastically altered the governance structure of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.⁷ Though these provisions were negotiated between Indigenous leaders and the Canadian government, the decision on whether or not to institute them was left in the hands of the general public. Another example concerning the complicity of people of color with settler colonialism given by Lawrence and Dua is with respect to Canadian policy on multiculturalism and languages. Under this policy, funding support for “heritage” languages of immigrants is given priority over Indigenous languages (after the “official” languages of English and French, of course).⁸ To reflect this contentious relationship among the Canadian state, people of color, and Indigenous peoples, Lawrence and Dua make the provocative assertion that “[p]eople of color are settlers,” explaining that: “Broad differences exist between those brought as slaves, currently work as migrant laborers, are refugees

without legal documentation, or émigrés who have obtained citizenship. Yet people of color live on land that is appropriated and contested, where Aboriginal peoples are denied nationhood and access to their own lands.”⁹

Lawrence and Dua are somewhat hasty in their relegation of people of color to settlerhood. Clearly, thinking of the racialized subject as intrinsically allied with either Native or settler subjects obfuscates the interlocking strategies through which settler colonialism operates in and through White supremacy, such that the labor of racialized subjects is exploited while at the same time racialized subjects are, at particular times, granted conditional access to settler privileges.¹⁰ However, their essay raises important questions regarding the complicity of racialized subjects in settler colonialism. While social constructions of race are integral to the maintenance of settler colonialism, at the same time, advocacy to address racism through the law may reinforce settler-colonial power. In a 2009 essay entitled “Blacks and Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Settlers or Allies?,” Bonita Lawrence, writing with Zainab Amadahy, offers a more complex analysis of people of color and settler colonialism, thinking through the kind of access Black subjects have had to settler-colonial power and reflecting on possibilities for alliances.¹¹

What makes the relationship between racialized subjects and settler colonialism so challenging to tease out is that even as racialized subjects access colonial power in settler states—for example, through political representation—they remain socially and politically unrecognized as settlers (and thus, unrecognized as wholly human). This failed recognition has implications for how mis- or unrecognized subjects negotiate their place within settler colonialities. It is the process of failed recognition or misrecognition—which creates racial injury as its effect—that I argue sets the terms for racialized subjects’ settler longings and desires. Misrecognition is, after all, experienced viscerally by racialized subjects. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng frames the racial injury of exclusion, misrecognition, and discrimination in terms of the Freudian concept of melancholia, asking how melancholia constitutes identity, shapes subjectivity, and conditions the life experiences of race subjects (African American and Asian American subjects in particular).¹² Though Cheng focuses singularly on racial subjectivity, eliding a conversation on settler subjectivity (that is also racialized), her insights are useful insofar as they provide a framework through which to think about the racial injury that constitutes the relationship between racialized subjects and settler desires.

As Cheng explains in her essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud identified two kinds of grief: melancholia and mourning. While mourning has a definite start and finish (one mourns loss, then recovers and moves on), melancholia is lingering, pathological, and infinite. The melancholic subject feeds on the mourned, or “lost,” object and comes to constitute the ego of the melancholic subject (who is, in fact, *made* into a subject in relation to the lost object).¹³ Cheng then uses this psychoanalytic framework to consider racialization in the United States. The social and cultural processes of inclusion, exclusion, and marginalization, she suggests, are made legitimate only by positing a racial other that is the “lost object” of the American nation. This racial other (“the foreigner within”) is assimilated (incorporated) into American nationality,

forgotten in, yet constitutive of, American national culture.¹⁴ Cheng's task in *The Melancholy of Race* is to elucidate the subjectivity of the melancholic object, that is, the racialized subject. Specifically, she is interested in how melancholia constitutes identity, shapes subjectivity, and conditions the life experiences of race subjects, African American and Asian American subjects in particular. She poses the question, "what can political agency mean for someone operating in a symbolic, cultural economy that has already preassigned them as deficit?"¹⁵ In her exploration of these subjectivities, through a review of American literature, Cheng avoids pathologizing or naturalizing the pain of racialized subjects, but considers instead the racial trauma that results from social relations. More than simply "sadness," melancholia is understood here as "a structural, identificatory formation predicated on—while being an active negotiation of—the loss of self as legitimacy."¹⁶ Cheng suggests that acknowledgment of racial melancholia does not signal defeat or conformity, but complicates notions of politics and agency through consideration of subjective processes of identification. I draw upon Cheng's ideas about race, grief, and melancholia in order to think about some of the tenuous ways that agency is exercised by racialized subjects such as Kamkolkar, who attempts to take back or return the gaze in *Indian Cowboy*.

Indeed, antiracist (as well as Queer/feminist) representational strategies are often concerned with giving voice to underrepresented and misrepresented or misrecognized subjects—in other words, to racially injured subjects. However, the marginalized filmmaker is not innocent but also implicated in relations of power. Representations that take back the gaze are also caught in shifting, overlapping, and multiple discourses and structures of power, including settler-colonial ones. Often, the remedy sought for the wound inflicted by misrecognition reinforces the matrices of power through which oppression is produced. For instance, as David Eng discusses in *Racial Castration*, the racial injury inflicted on some racialized communities, through their feminization within popular cultures and media, serves to shore up dominant White masculinities.¹⁷ Yet, when racialized subjects aspire towards this dominant construction of masculinity, he observes that "[t]he struggle to recompose the psychic and material body of the racialized masculine subject can often result in the ascribing of conservative norms to emancipatory political projects."¹⁸ In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown similarly warns of the pitfalls of speaking as a wounded subject, cautioning that centering attention on experience and injury, rather than on the violence, both discursive and material, which produces injury, risks reinstalling the subject at the expense of interrogating how the subject comes to be produced in the first place.¹⁹

SETTLER COLONIALISM AS A PROJECT OF DESIRE

Desire (noun): a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen; [mass noun] strong sexual feeling or appetite; something desired.

Desire (verb) [with object]: to strongly wish for or want (something); to want (someone) sexually; (archaic) to express a wish to.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Much of the scholarship on race, racialization, and settler colonialism has framed the relationship between racialized subjects and settler colonialism in legal or political terms.²⁰ This move makes sense, considering that settler colonialism is, at base, a political project concerned with governance. For example, when Patrick Wolfe critically asserts that settler-colonial invasion is not an event, but a structure, he argues that the “event” of invasion is made permanent through technologies of governance, such as settler laws, policies, and institutions.²¹ Similarly, Lorenzo Veracini, when distinguishing settlerhood from migration, makes this distinction by suggesting that “settlers are founders of political orders, and carry their sovereignty with them.”²² Like Wolfe, Veracini identifies sovereignty and political governance as the feature that distinguishes settler invasion from migration.

Still underexamined in the literature on settler colonialism are the kinds of emotive investments that settler subjects may have in settler coloniality. To be clear, I am not denying that settler colonialism is a political project. However, I do wish to emphasize the significance of desire, which I would argue enables settler-colonial governance and vice versa. This notion that settler colonialism is as much a project of desire as it is a purely political or legal project is certainly clear within the emergent literature on Queer Indigenous studies, which has shown how alternative models of kinship, through figures such as the *berdache* or two-spirit person, become objects of desire for Queer subjects searching for true or authentic selves and communities.²³ For example, in his research on Queer settler subjectivities, Scott Morgensen discusses how Queer Indigenous identities are appropriated by White LGBTQ activists to serve their own goals of building Queer movements without simultaneously challenging the logics of settler colonialism.²⁴ Similarly, in *When Did Indians Become Straight?* Mark Rifkin underlines how the fetishization of Native social structures by Queer settlers, or liberals more generally, is as complicit with the settler-colonial project as is the repudiation of these social structures by US imperialist politics.²⁵ In each case, argues Rifkin, Native social practices are framed strictly through the lens of cultural difference rather than as integral to processes of governance, and Native sovereignty is undermined.²⁶ The work of both Morgensen and Rifkin points to the ways that relations of desire sustain and reassert colonial power in settler states.

For the Queer settlers discussed by Morgensen and Rifkin, it is indigeneity (or a commodified form of indigeneity) which is the object of desire.²⁷ However, I would argue that settlerhood is also an object of desire, and settler-desires also do the work of sustaining colonial power. This is especially true in the case of the racialized subject seeking belonging in settler society or seeking access to the benefits and privileges of the settler society. Moreover, settlerhood is not only an object of desire in and of itself, but desires that are construed as natural or innate—such as “settling down” and starting a family—do the work of constituting settlerhood as natural and happenstance. It is this naturalization in particular which makes settler colonialism so tenacious. More specifically, the political relationship between “Natives” and “settlers” is sustained through the cultivation of settler subjectivities invested not only in asserting settler identity (for example, American, Canadian or Australian), but with seemingly abstract or “universal” aims, objectives, and ideals, such as settling down, heterosexual (heteronormative) love,

property ownership, the nuclear family, the separation of public/private spheres, and so on. Incidentally, these are values that dovetail with other political projects.

As indicated by Oxford English Dictionary definitions of the word, desire is generally associated with sexual desire, and it is almost always presumed to operate at the level of the individual rather than the collective. As suggested by the literature on critical psychoanalysis, however, the spaces of the psychic and social/cultural/structural are intimately intertwined. The desire I speak of in this paper is a settler/colonial desire, which manifests itself at the collective level even as it expresses itself at the individual level. When settler desire installs itself as individual desire, it makes invisible its structural dimensions. For example, the desire to “settle down” appears to be a neutral, arbitrary, personal desire, delinked from history or politics. In some ways, settler desire is analogous to the construction of race difference that Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks describes in *Desiring Whiteness*.²⁸ Though she is engaged in a different conceptual task than I am in this paper, there are nonetheless some useful insights to be gleaned from *Desiring Whiteness*. In it, Seshadri-Crooks draws upon Lacan’s theory of subject constitution to develop a framework for understanding the logic through which race difference is organized.²⁹ She argues that while the origins of race difference can be historically situated, its effects exceed language.³⁰ However, racial difference assumes the *appearance* of naturalness and ahistoricity. To do this, racial difference relies upon the order of sexual difference, where sexual difference (via Lacan) is that which cannot be fully articulated by language.³¹ Racial difference acquires its tenacity and pervasiveness by assuming naturalness and ahistoricity. One could ask a similar question about settler/colonial desire: How do settler desires become naturalized to the point that their violence is erased, their history disappeared? Even as there is recognition that settler colonialism (or its euphemism, “discovery”) has a clear history, and even as there is recognition of First Peoples, the process of settlement itself continues to be construed as benign. Like race, settler coloniality becomes naturalized or made “normal” by relying upon the order of sexual difference, such that the calls to own property or start a (nuclear) family become delinked from their historical contexts and reconfigured as natural, innate, ahistorical desires. At the same time, it should be noted that while settler desires are constructed as innate, settlerhood itself is not marked on the body in the same way as race or sex difference. Rather, the settler/Native distinction is imprinted on the body *through* race. That is, there is no inherent recognition of settler-ness except through some sense of racial difference, which is often ambiguous. Outside of this, claims to settler status are recognized only through political and legal technologies, such as birth certificates, passports, status cards, and so on. It is perhaps due to this lack of embodied recognition that settler desire is so significant to sustaining colonial power.

Indeed, settler/colonial desire is integral to the construction of settler subjectivities, to settler narratives, and to the project of erasure underlying the indigenizing efforts of settler projects. Settler colonialism is able to sustain itself because settler subjects are invested in its project. Because they are framed as belonging to the space of the psychic settler, desires are able to do the work of naturalizing settler imperatives. In other words, they are able to do this work because they are framed as universal

human desires. As Scott Morgensen notes in relation to gender difference, “Any naturalisation of Western heteropatriarchy or binary sex/gender also naturalises settler colonialism. . . . Settler colonisation performs the West’s potential universality, by transporting and indigenising Western governance upon territories far from Europe: in settler states that then may appear not to be perpetual colonisers, but rather to be natural sites of Western law.”³²

As a key aspect of this naturalization process, desire links settlerhood to the category of the human—with the implication that the binary counterpart to the settler, the “Native,” belongs to the category of the nonhuman. Such was the dilemma that Frantz Fanon described in *Black Skin, White Masks*.³³ The process of colonization, argued Fanon, institutes the binary of the colonizer/colonized, which seizes the subjectivity of the colonized, denying the ability of the colonized ever to be recognized except through the logic of racial difference.³⁴ For Fanon, only anticolonial struggle held the promise of recapturing the humanity stolen by colonization. Yet, as Denise Ferreira da Silva has argued, the category of the human is always already embedded in the politics of racialization, emerging from historical-material contexts, even as it has the appearance of being natural.³⁵ Claims to humanity rely on the figure of the “Other,” without which humanness cannot be recognized. Da Silva’s analysis thus problematizes the modernist quest for humanity itself.

The evocation of humanity, signaled through naturalized desire, is also what facilitates a project of indigenization—wherein it appears natural and inconsequential that settlers belong to, and are legitimate occupants of, land that was acquired through deceptive treaty processes and through policies of genocide and assimilation.³⁶ For example, in *Indian Cowboy*, love, marriage, and “settling down” are central themes. The film evokes the “American Dream”—the fantasy of marriage, nuclear family, property ownership, and success within a capitalist economy—while simultaneously making invisible the Indigenous histories and claims to land which make the American Dream possible. Because these erasures are enacted through desire—desire constructed as that which is natural, benign, and essentially human—the erasures are neutralized; the effects of their violence are rendered void.

The racialized cowboy performs, expresses, and negotiates settler desires, speaking to the inability to occupy particular spaces and subject positions and articulating a demand to do so. In *Indian Cowboy*, this is suggested by the fantastical representation of this figure—the cowboy is out of grasp in the real world of the racialized subject, relegated to the dream world.

RESOLVING RACIAL INJURY THROUGH SETTLEMENT: *INDIAN COWBOY*

Go West, young man!

—Horace Greeley

I was an American before I even knew what America was. It’s not just a country to me, but a concept, a way of life. I like America because it bucks old world traditions. I am a bit of a rebel myself and I like to shake up rigid, tradition-bound

entities that wish to impose their views on me. But today, I'm a little miffed with America too. I see it's becoming an old world itself. It's gathering and claiming traditions and becoming more conservative. Anti-immigrant sentiments are high. Not only do I have to worry about the terrorists who would love to harm my kind but also about fellow citizens who would like to act out their prejudices.

—Nikhil Kamkolkar

The film *Indian Cowboy* illustrates the complexities surrounding the articulation of settler desires by racialized subjects. As discussed earlier, racialized subjects' access to colonial power is conditioned by their failure to be recognized, socially or politically, as settlers. On the surface, however, Nick, the protagonist of *Indian Cowboy*, does not appear to suffer the injury of a mis- or unrecognized subject. On the contrary, he appears to be quite comfortable with his identification as a hyphenated American citizen and does not seem to have any hang-ups about his brownness or his masculinity. Despite this lack of explicit reference to dilemmas with identification, however, anxieties surrounding issues of race and masculinity lurk beneath the surface of the film's narrative, most notably through the fantasy Wild West sequence that is Nick's screenplay-in-progress. As a space of fantasy, the screenplay brings to the surface covert or hidden aspects of Nick's (and by extension, Kamkolkar's) subjectivity. The protagonist of his screenplay, Guru, represents the virile, cowboy masculinity that is the antithesis of Nick's nerdy masculinity (fig. 2). It is no coincidence that Nick's alter ego is a cowboy; the choice of the cowboy and Wild West setting expresses his desire to embody White settlerhood. The frequent slippage in the film between fantasy and real worlds further gestures to the interconnectivity of the two worlds. For example, Nick occasionally dons a cowboy hat and toy gun. When he first stumbles upon Sapna in his apartment, he cautiously approaches her with the toy gun. He also wears his cowboy gear when Sapna cajoles him into watching "classic" tragic Bollywood and Hollywood romances. In another moment, Sapna interrupts Nick as he acts out a kissing scene in his screenplay.

These anxieties about race and masculinity are resolved in the film through the trope of colonial settlement. In the interview passage quoted above, Kamkolkar's references to old-world traditions, to America as a rebellious cowboy nation that "bucks" these traditions, speak to the ways in which narrative enables access to settler desires.³⁷ Settlement is achieved not just through the act of migration; migration in and of itself does not transform one into a settler subject. If we think of settlement as a process of becoming, of continually asserting legitimacy (particularly when this legitimacy is never complete, but always challenged by ongoing Indigenous resistance), then the significance of culture to upholding settler colonialism is clearer. From this perspective, Kamkolkar's *Indian Cowboy* is an articulation of this process of accessing and claiming settler subjectivity.

Michael Yellow Bird writes that cowboys and Indians are "part of the colonial canon asserting white supremacy and Indigenous inferiority."³⁸ There is ample evidence linking the Western genre to settler-colonial expansion and politics in the United States, as scholars such as Jacqueline Kilpatrick have shown.³⁹ On the surface, *Indian*

Cowboy does not appear to be repeating this canon. Its heavy reliance on kitsch and its parodied representation of the Wild West might actually seem to indicate awareness of this colonial canon associated with the cowboy. However, the film embraces settler desires even as it mocks their fantasy. To walk through this argument: At the start of the film, Nick's perception of reality and love mirrors the fantasy of his Wild West screenplay. However, by allowing love-interest Sapna to write the ending, Nick lets go of his fantastical perceptions of love—separating reality and fantasy—and is eventually able to reach a real-life compromise with Sapna that allows them finally to unite (fig. 3). His fantasy about love and masculinity is replaced by the possibility of settling with Sapna. Now, this appears to be a rejection of the cowboy masculinity represented in Nick's screenplay. However, while the cowboy provides the initial link to the mythology of American colonial expansion (i.e., manifest destiny), Nick's rejection of the fantasy is not a rejection of the colonial settlement—it is only a rejection of the means through which the American dream is achieved, a remaking of that dream into something that is attainable. The cowboy and the Wild West, after all, are not in and of themselves settler colonialism, but metonyms for it. It is the acts of “settling down” and heteronormative love that constitute settler colonialism and enable it to materialize. While Nick may have left behind the fantasy of his screenplay, he is able to do so only through heterosexual union. Rather than a rejection of a colonial fantasy, then, the film is a tale about discovering how the contemporary racialized cowboy realizes this dream.

This is further suggested by a short piece of dialogue between Nick and his friend Skip. After Sapna invites Nick to live in India, Skip advises Nick to “head out east, Indian cowboy, you! That's what love-love is all about.” Instead of “heading west” to find freedom, independence, and riches, Skip encourages Nick to “head east” to find love. In other words, “cowboy” here stands in as a metonym for the pursuit of love. In the interviews about the film mentioned earlier, Kamkolkar's references to “bucking” old-world traditions similarly imply that he sees himself as a modern-day cowboy (incidentally, his twitter handle is @IndianCowboy). Thus, while the particularities of the fantasy screenplay in the film may be construed as unrealistic, the notion of finding true love and settling down certainly do not.

In addition, Skip's repetition and reworking of American politician Horace Greeley's popular nineteenth-century invocation to young men in the Eastern United States to find wealth in the West—“Go west, young man!”—both manipulates the original meaning and reasserts its logics. In the first place, Skip's suggestion that Nick head east implies that Nick is Indigenous to the West, rooted in the United States. On the one hand, this suggestion speaks against dominant constructions of the American nation, which position non-White bodies as perpetually foreign and outside.⁴⁰ Moreover, because the suggestion comes from a White character, it is vested with greater authority than it would be if spoken by a non-White character. However, the indigenization of Nick also displaces and erases Indigenous claims to land.

At the same time, the realization of this dream is far from simple in *Indian Cowboy*. Nick remains limited, to some extent, in his ability to embody the role of the contemporary cowboy fully. For example, if we read “Go west” as a statement that is always



FIGURE 2. Indian Cowboy film still: *Guru* (New Brunswick, NJ: Kamkol Productions, 2004).

already about colonial expansion, then Skip's "Go east" suggests that Nick's journey to India is also a form of colonial expansion. However, the fifty-fifty resolution of the film implies that the dream of heading east is one that Nick can't fully realize. Of course, beneath the failed possibility of going east lurks the truth that it is because someone has already gone west that Nick can even imagine the possibility of heading east in *Indian Cowboy*. More specifically, it is Euro-American settlers' westward expansion in the nineteenth century—and the system and discourse of settler colonialism that sustains the settlement in the present—that give meaning and significance to the phrase "Go east!" Still, I would argue that it is precisely in the spaces of difficulty and failed possibility to which *Indian Cowboy* gestures where possibilities for rupture and resistance lie. I reflect on these possibilities in the next section.

DESIRING OTHERWISE?

The discussion of desire in *Indian Cowboy* illuminates the processes through which colonial power "sticks" and acquires its tenacity. Settlerhood is, on the one hand, a political category reinforced through law, policies, and institutions. Yet settler-colonial power is collectively sustained through individual investments in settlerhood. These investments are articulated through settler desire. Settlerhood is not only an object of desire in and of itself, but desires which appear innate and ahistorical do the work of naturalizing the colonial imperative to indigenize the settler, while erasing Indigenous histories of, and claims to, land.

Paying attention to desire is particularly useful when considering the relationship between racialized subjects and settler colonialism. Racialized subjects are tenuously positioned in the settler state, with limited access to political power. Yet taking desire into consideration brings to the fore another dimension through which settler-colonial power is cultivated and sustained.

This raises another question: If colonial violence is inflicted, in part, through settler desires, is it possible to recast these desires of violence? In other words, can we desire differently? Judith Butler's work in *The Psychic Life of Power* is instructive here. Ruminating on the relationship between psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity on the

FIGURE 3. Indian Cowboy film still: Nick and Sapna (New Brunswick, NJ: Kamkol Productions, 2004).



one hand, and Foucault's theories of subjection on the other, Butler argues that resistance to one's subjection through the law may happen through that subjectivization itself. She writes that "only by occupying—being occupied by—that injurious term can I resist and oppose it, recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose."⁴¹

Following Butler's suggestion, this is where recognition of one's settlerhood becomes a powerful tool for its undoing, for example, by identifying as a settler of color. Yet this is also a risky position. "Occupying" settlerhood is, after all, inherently violent. Danger lies in becoming too settled in this identification. Nor do "declarations of settlerhood," like the "declarations of whiteness" observed by Sara Ahmed, do anything in and of themselves to eradicate colonial violence.⁴² Furthermore, identification with settlerhood is not an identification with injury (as racialized identity might be), but an identification with a hegemonic subject-position—even as, for the racialized subject, identification with settlerhood (achieved, in part, through desire) may be a means to transcend injury. Yet, like identities of injury, it is also constituted through the law. And, as I have suggested in this paper, because they are figured as natural or innate, the attachments, or desires, provoked by settler identity resemble the attachments to injured identities. While it may be dangerous to "occupy" settlerhood in the way that Butler outlines, considering how the settler is differentially constituted through race, gender, and sexuality might provide an entry point for mediating our attachments to it. Representations of the racialized cowboy, as observed in *Indian Cowboy*, repeat colonial narratives at the same time that they offer spaces in which to rupture their fantasy. In the film, the "compromised" success of Nick, the protagonist, leaves colonial narratives *mostly* intact, but also gestures to the limitations of realizing their fantasy. For the racialized subject, the failure to be fully recognized as a settler potentially offers an opportunity to expose the limits of settler desire and, in so doing, opens the possibility for different kinds of desire to emerge.

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NOTES

1. Racialization refers to “the multiple processes whereby bodies come to be seen as ‘having’ a racial identity. One’s ‘racial identity’ is not simply determined, for example, by the ‘fact’ of one’s skin colour. Racialization is a process that takes place in time and space: ‘race’ is an effect of this process, rather than its origin or cause ... racialization involves a process of *investing* skin colour with meaning, such that ‘black’ and ‘white’ come to function, not as descriptions of skin colour, but as racial identities” (Sara Ahmed, “Racialized Bodies,” in *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, ed. Mary Evans and Ellie Lee [New York: Palgrave, 2002], 46). I use “racialized” as a shorthand here to refer to those marginalized through processes of racialization.

2. *Indian Cowboy*, directed by Nikhil Kamkolkar (New Brunswick, NJ: Kamkol Productions, 2004).

3. My larger project follows this figure across several films.

4. Of course, the settler/Native binary, like all binaries, is inherently problematic, messy, and complicated. At the same time, colonial governance in settler states operates through the presumption that this binary exists and can be quantified.

5. Lawrence and Dua focus primarily on critiquing theory in their essay. For the purposes of my own argument, I am specifically highlighting their critique of antiracism advocacy, and the subjects centered in this advocacy—people of color.

6. Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, “Decolonizing Antiracism,” *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2005): 127.

7. *Ibid.*, 135.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 134.

10. See also Andrea Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy,” *Global Dialogue* 12, no. 2 (2010): np; Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

11. Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, “Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada: Settlers or Allies?” in *Breaching the Colonial Contract: Anti-Colonialism in the US and Canada*, ed. Arlo Kempf (New York: Springer Publishing, 2009).

12. Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. *Ibid.*, 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 7.

16. *Ibid.*, 20.

17. David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 136.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

20. For example, see Amadahy and Lawrence, “Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada”; Candace Fujikane and Jonathan Okamura, eds., *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008); Haunani Kay-Trask, “Settlers of Color and ‘Immigrant’ Hegemony: ‘Locals’ in Hawai‘i,” *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 1–24; Paula Madden, *African Nova-Scotian Mi‘kmaw Relations* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2009); Lawrence and Dua, “Decolonizing Antiracism”; Mona Oikawa, “Connecting the Internment of Japanese Canadians to the Colonization of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada,” in *Aboriginal*

Connections to Race, Environment and Traditions, ed. Rick Riewe and Jill Oakes (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007), 17–26; Robinder Kaur Sehdev, “People of Colour in Treaty,” in *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, ed. Ashok Mathur, Jonathan Dewar, and Mike DeGagne (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011), 264–74; Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy”; Thobani, *Exalted Subjects*.

21. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (New York: Cassell, 1999), 163.

22. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 3.

23. Fetishizations of indigeneity also appear across settler cultural representations in film, literature, and visual art. See Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000).

24. Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

25. Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

26. *Ibid.*

27. Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us*; Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight?*

28. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

29. *Ibid.*, 2.

30. *Ibid.*, 4.

31. *Ibid.*, 5.

32. Scott Morgensen, “Theorising Gender, Sexuality and Settler Colonialism: An Introduction,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 13.

33. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

34. *Ibid.*

35. Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

36. Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*.

37. Mehru Jaffer Vienna, “Cinema Cannot Change a Mind That is Already Closed,” *HardNews: For Those Who Want to Know* (Hard News Media, March 2006), accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2006/03/399>.

38. Michael Yellow Bird, “Cowboys and Indians: Toys of Genocide, Icons of American Colonialism,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 19, no. 2 (2003): 33.

39. Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians: Native Americans and Film* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

40. Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy.”

41. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 104.

42. Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *borderlands e-journal* 3, no. 2 (2004): np.