

**An Unsettling Presence:
Indigenous Spectres in Settler Ghostlore on Coast Salish Territories**

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A graduating Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements, in the
Honours Programme
For the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the
Department
of
History

The University of Victoria
April 26, 2019

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Acknowledgments

This thesis is the culmination of an intellectual journey that could not have been undertaken without the invaluable guidance, collaboration, and support of many people. It is to my father that I owe my love of history. My father did not attend university, but his passion for storytelling and appreciation for all things historical taught me that the past is not the exclusive domain of academic historians.

My own transition to life in the academy has been greatly eased by the guidance of several brilliant scholars. I'd like to thank Dr. John Price for helping me realize that being an academic does not preclude a life of activism and for giving me my first opportunity as a research assistant. I am eternally grateful to Dr. Tom Saunders for showing me that history is so much more than converting archival material into unquestionable narratives. His honours

Part I. Introductions

woods and that I would find out what if I only spent enough time there. I remember feeling the same way about the old brick houses on our street in Hamilton and the rail line that ran behind them. Sara's mother and grandmother were big fans of ghost stories, magic, and horror films—naturally, Sara and I became obsessed with the paranormal. We boldly declared our intentions to become paranormal investigators when we grew up: we were going to get to the bottom of all these funny feelings we felt around old buildings and in the woods. As an adult, I have come to understand our quest to investigate and summon the mysterious forces we sensed all around us as a longing to reach out to the spirits of the land and our ancestors, whom we instinctively felt the presence of but had not learned how to listen to.

Many years later, I entered university as a mature student with the intention of analyzing the dynamics of settler-colonial power in Canada in the hopes that this might better inform a decolonizing praxis. I soon discovered that the halls of the academy harboured their own resident spectres—their unsettling presence looming over me in the archives as I skimmed through microfilms of colonial records, peering out at me from the pages of dusty books in the library's towering stacks. A deafening chorus of disembodied whispers rose to meet my insubordinate prodding: “Beware, ungrateful daughter of Empire, knowledge is our domain!”

Anti-colonial scholars around the globe have elucidated the connection between knowledge-production and the colonial enterprise.¹ Within the context of settler colonialism, academic institutions in the colonies came to represent bastions of colonial authority over what constituted valid knowledge and intellectual inquiry. I aim for my work as a researcher to challenge this colonizing intellectual tradition. By engaging the topic of ghosts as real and capable of acting on the living, I seek to undermine the domination of empiricism and positivism

¹ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012).

² Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood

in the academy. I endeavour to continually ground my approaches in Indigenous-generated theory to counter the tendency among settler academics to dismiss the brilliance of Indigenous thought in favour of a routine handful of European male philosophers. Taking inspiration from Shawn Wilson’s assertion that “research is ceremony”—that is, it should aim to “build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves”²—my research is guided by an overarching mission to create enchanted intellectual spaces where Indigenous and settler academics can meet to collectively theorize new ways of being together on these lands in harmony with its myriad spirits.

This project, as a process of becoming, has been in the making since a time long before my physical body entered this world. It gained momentum in the clashes between Sara’s ancestors and my own; through our friendship, this project began to take form as a shared quest to summon the spirits of those ancestors. The colonial ghosts I encountered holed up in the academy’s fortifications further inspired the project’s approach as a challenge to epistemological hegemony. The task of a humanities scholar has never been to expose objective and static truths of human nature; rather, it is to leverage our subjective positionality towards the invention and transformation of dynamic lenses for understanding our relational existence on this planet. Emerging from the web of relations described above, this project endeavors to offer a decolonizing lens through the re-enchantment of settler history and society.

Introducing the Project

This project is not an exorcism, it is a beckoning. In this age of “reconciliation,” urgings to “move on” and “put the past behind us” are commonplace in Canadian discourse. It is my

² Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 11.

contention that such an approach only serves to reinforce the settler-colonial project through an erasure of the Canadian state's violent colonial heritage. By contrast, I argue that Euro-descended settlers must learn to accept a haunted existence as part of our identity—to acknowledge that we are continually at risk of possession by those hungry ghosts that drove our ancestors across the globe in search of evermore wealth and power. Reckoning with *our own* revenants means keeping them in sight—telling the stories that make 'us' possible and recognizing the influence of our pasts in our presents. It also means speaking to them—interrogating their assumptions, contesting their motivations, and deconstructing their desolation. Ultimately, through recognizing the ongoing presence of our own ancestors, we might begin to acknowledge and respect the relationship between the Indigenous spirits of this land and their descendants. I consider such recognition and respect to be an essential precondition to any meaningful renegotiation of the terms for our continued residence on stolen lands. Decolonizing the land means returning jurisdictional authority to those relationships through territorial

the settler-colonial context, “uncanny” is not an appropriate adjective for Indigenous ghosts as it naturalizes settler presence while implying the un-belonging of the spectre. Freud’s original essay instructed us that “an uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.”⁴ Freud’s obvious subscription to a stadial model of human societies and his conflation of spirit belief with infantile complexes that should be “surmounted” drives home the inappropriateness of this term for discussing Indigenous ghosts. It is my hope that this project will begin to shift settler feelings about their experiences with Indigenous ghosts to be in line with the more literal translation of *unheimlich* as “un-homely.” Indigenous spirits are very much where they should be, it is the settler witness who is out-of-place. Let these visitations be a reminder to settlers: never get so comfortable in someone else’s home that you forget you are a guest—

decades of Indigenous and critical theorists interrogating the positivist paradigm, academia remains a hostile place for alternative ways of knowing and being.

This project seeks to break with the rules of the “Western cultural archive” in order to make space for Indigenous ways of knowing, inclusive of spirituality, within academic discourse.⁷ The choice of Indigenous ghosts as the topic of inquiry strategically challenges colonial constructions of space, time, distance, and truth. Ghosts, by definition, break with any conception of time and space as linear, as well as with empiricist constructions of reality as that which possesses measurable, concrete physicality. Experiences with ghosts are phenomena that link many diverse human cultures, although each culture has its own way of interpreting such experiences. No one will deny that Europeans have a long history of haunting; however, since the so-called Scientific Revolution ghostly phenomena have become increasingly overlooked as a serious topic of inquiry within Western academic institutions. There is a glaring disjuncture between the ongoing

and commentators have interpreted encounters with Indigenous ghosts. Decolonization is not a metaphor, and neither are ghosts.⁹

Reviewing the Literature

hauntings as significant elements of modernity.¹² Seeking out the ghostly—those alternative experiences and knowledges of reality that are dismissed in dominant academic discourse—

imagination.¹⁶ Bergman also highlighted the contradictory roles of the “Indian ghost” in the formation of American subjecthood. As a reminder of the original sin of genocide, the “Indian ghost” was a source of anxiety that challenged the moral legitimacy of settler society—but it also provided a comforting illusion that the settler-colonial project was complete and irreversible.

Bergland’s conclusions regarding the literary trope were enthusiastically recycled by a handful of academics in Canada. Some of these works pushed beyond the realm of fiction to deconstruct the use of ghostly metaphors in non-fiction writings by settlers about Indigenous peoples. Many of these early studies were settler-centric, written by settler authors, within a Western ontological framework that precluded treating ghost stories as anything other than “stories” in the literary sense. Two exceptions to this literary focus are Christine Nilsen’s 2005 MA Thesis at the University of Victoria, *Possessing Eden*

Part II. The Current Situation of Indigenous Ghosts in Settler Ghostlore

Before we can begin to collectively theorize a decolonizing discourse of Indigenous ghosts, we must first analyze the current trends within the ghostlore of settler society. The purpose of the present paper is to conduct such an analysis from within a particular spatialized context. As Judith Richardson has argued, hauntings are best examined from the ground up—situating the ghost in concrete relationships to place and to particular communities.

considered for this thesis, ten of those stories were first-hand experiences that had been shared with the authors. It is my contention that the intimate nature of these first-hand experiences greatly increases the potential for meaningful cross-cultural communication, as will be argued in the concluding section of this thesis. For now, however, we must consider how the process of narrativization undertaken by the compiling author may impact the resulting interpretation and presentation of these experiences with Indigenous ghosts.

As discussed in the literature review portion of this paper, most of the extant scholarly writings about Indigenous ghosts have been confined to its deployment as a character trope and plot device in settler literature. In my research, I have found that settler ghostlore displays many of the same colonial tendencies that have been described in the literary realm. I contend that the representation of the Indigenous ghost in settler cultural production has had a profound effect on how settlers perceive and interpret direct experiences with what they identify to be

Discursive Erasure

In 2000, Renée Bergland published the first monograph to investigate the proliferation of Indigenous ghosts in the literature of the United States. His argument—that “first and foremost, the ghosting of Indians is a technique of removal”²⁶—proved highly influential to subsequent scholars writing about Indigenous ghosts. According to Bergland, the American national consciousness is constituted through such a haunting:

Native American ghosts haunt American literature because the American nation is compelled to return again and again to an encounter that makes it both sorry and happy, a defiled grave upon which it must continually rebuild the American subject.²⁷

Bergland’s thesis is reinforced by the obvious fixation settlers have upon Indigenous remains and burial sites. Six of the stories analyzed for this project involved either the discovery of Indigenous human remains or hauntings in the vicinity of former burial sites. A common trend in these sorts of stories is the framing of the remains as belonging to an ancient and irretrievable past—or at TJ ET Q i (a) 51(om) 0.2 (m) 0.2 (on t) 0.2(re) 0.2359 47 0 50 0 n

looking.”²⁹ The remains of this Indigenous person are immediately considered to belong to so distant a past as to negate any sense of kinship to the living. As such, no consideration is given to alerting the living Lekwungen members of the family whose village site had been located in the vicinity. Instead, the groundskeeper places the remains in a box in his shed so that his amateur anatomist daughter can amuse herself with them. This ancestor’s body is rendered both a curiosity and an object of research. After experiencing several disturbing and unexplainable incidents in the days following, the groundskeeper resolves to rebury the skeleton in an unidentified spot. According to Robert Belyk, the author of the compilation in which this story appears, there have been several other reports of strange occurrences in the area. He postulates that “one explanation may be that a number of ancient remains had been disturbed there.” Belyk tells us that the Craigflower School is built on a “large Indian burial ground,” pointing to a *Victoria Daily Times* article from 1911 that reports the discovery of several skulls and arrowheads.³⁰ Once again, the possibility of any connection to living communities is ignored.

In her 2005 MA thesis for the University of Victoria, Christina Nilsen analyzes the Craigflower Schoolhouse haunting in light of Bergland’s thesis. Reflecting on the schoolhouse’s standing as one of the first museums established to preserve the history of white settlement in Victoria, Nilsen concludes that the unceremonious unearthing and quick reinternment of Indigenous remains in its vicinity reveals a settler desire to suppress Indigenous ties to the land: “Buried, as it were, beneath the ground, aspects of the past associated with First Nations peoples are rendered part of the natural landscape. House aboveground in a museum, the memory of white pioneers and settlers, by contrast, is associated with ‘living’ history.”³¹ Settler colonialism seeks to erase Indigenous presence on the land in order to replace it with settler presence. As

²⁹ Robert C Belyk, *Ghosts: True Stories from British Columbia* (Ganges, BC: Horsdal & Schubart, 1990), 113.

³⁰ Belyk, 16.

³¹ Nilsen, “Possessing Eden,” 100–101.

Nilsen points out, tangible evidence that could connect Indigenous presence in the past to Indigenous presence in the present must be suppressed to naturalize contemporary settler dominance and jurisdiction. Writing about the Lekwungen burial cairns at Beacon Hill, nineteenth century settler James Deans attributes their presence to an “unknown and long forgotten race.”³² Discursive erasures such as this are all the more egregious when we consider that Indigenous descendent communities have always remained highly visible in all of the locales where these tales are based. In this regard, the inability of Deans and others to link ancestral remains to the Indigenous people they encountered on a daily basis

These discursive practices of erasure found within settler ghostlore seem to mimic the “ghosting” practices Bergland identified in settler literature. Settlers have managed to conceptually turn the appearance of an Indigenous ghost into a confirmation of the myth that Indigenous peoples and nations have all but disappeared from the landscape. This process is framed as tragic, but inevitable—the impact of settler colonization is carefully circumvented. A poignant example of this is found in the subtle variance found between two versions of a first-hand account with Indigenous ghosts written by *Vancouver Sun* columnist Jack Scott. In both versions, Scott recounts an experience of waking up in the middle of the night while camping to see “a great crowd of Indians dancing in the moonlight.”³⁵ A short while after this experience, a friend of Scott informs him that the Valdez Island beach where they had camped was “the burying grounds of the Haida Indians.” In the original version of the article, Scott reports that it “seems there’s a thousand or more *Haida* buried all along the beach there, *many of them victims of a plague of smallpox*.”³⁶ When the piece was reprinted in a published collection of Scott’s columns, the line had been altered to “seems there’s a thousand or more *bodies* buried all along the beach there *from the old days*.”³⁷ Through this subtle shift, the age of the remains is projected backward in time to convey greater distance from the present and the guilt-inducing implications of a small pox outbreak (likely that of 1862-63) is removed from the account. The settler reader can now safely enjoy this story without the disquieting reminder that the arrival of Europeans was not entirely benign in its consequences. Further, the Haida ancestors have been robbed of their relational identities in the latter version and re-presented as neutral, unclaimed, and ancient “bodies.” Through the erasures exhibited here and in the stories connected to Beacon Hill and the Craigflower Schoolhouse, we can see how settler ghostlore casts all evidence of longstanding

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and ongoing Indigenous connections to place as mysterious and intriguing oddities to be absorbed as the “Indian inheritance” of settler society. As argued by Bergland, this “inheritance” fulfills a duplicitous role as both a source of anxiety and of fictive kinship narratives.

Settler Anxieties

Jeffery Weinstock, an American scholar of gothic culture, argues that ghosts are metaphorical tools that do cultural work for political purposes.³⁸ This involves the projection of contemporary anxieties about the past onto the figure of the ghost: “beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events.”³⁹ In cultural production, the ghost becomes an emblem of sublimated historical narratives—the skeletons in our national closet. In my analysis of local ghostlore, I have found this sort of historical anxiety to be consistently present in settler interpretations of experiences with Indigenous ghosts. Several of the stories examined dwelt upon a notion of post-mortem retribution for the sins of colonialism. Some of these ghosts were interpreted to be punishing settlers for disrespecting sacred spaces, others forced settlers to confront a legacy of racial and sexualized violence against Indigenous people.

Laurel Point in Victoria’s inner harbour is now home to a luxury hotel nestled in the heart of the city’s tourist district; however, the point is also a sacred space for the Lekwungen and a

trees came down, the men noticed the boxes and baskets of bones tumbling from the trees to the

Indeed, the consequences of doing so can be extremely disturbing and even life threatening.”⁴⁵ The land was “crying out for blood. The evil was in the earth itself.”⁴⁶ This story is followed by another involving a house in Victoria whose male occupants seem to be drained of their vital essence within a short while of moving in—suffering career setbacks, health complications, and marital dysfunction. Again, the personal troubles of these men are attributed to the obscured history of Indigenous land-use in the area. The house, Skelton tells us, was built upon a sacred space “used by native Indian women as a retreat following child birth . . . men were not permitted on the place.”⁴⁷ The chapter of Skelton’s book containing these two stories is titled “The Indian Inheritance,” suggesting that settlers have come to possess these places through a naturalizing kinship relationship. But the history and practices of these Indigenous “forefathers” has left many unfathomable mysteries hidden within the land itself. These mysteries are at once a source of anxiety and an eccentricity to be assimilated into local settler identity.

Anthropologist Colleen Boyd has invoked the metaphor of a palimpsest to describe the settler-colonial process of clearing the land of Indigenous markers to make way for development,

inter-racial marriages in Canada's heritage was no doubt a source of discomfort and anxiety for settler society after the arrival of European women to the colonies. The mixed nature of many of Victoria's founding families went relatively unacknowledged until only just recently. While this subject has become less taboo in recent years, there remains a degree of unease around the possibility that not all of these unions were as harmonious or consensual as that depicted in Disney's *Pocahontas*. Three of the ghost stories uncovered in my research attest to the anxiety induced by the return of female Indigenous ghosts who refuse to let their violent deaths at the hands of settler men be forgotten.

Hudson's Bay Company trader John Tod is considered one of the founding fathers of

power: “In recluse and repose race was put to the test. In these ‘tense and tender ties’ of empire, relations of power were knotted and tightened, loosened and cut, tangled and undone. These ties are not microcosms of empire but its marrow.”⁵⁸ While it remains speculation that Tod confined and murdered one of these women

sensation of “a cold hand moving slowly up her leg” as she lay in bed. The allusions to rape in these experiences render them intensely disconcerting. The traumas of the past erupt into the present, impeding the settler’s capacity to feel safe and secure.

Farther up Vancouver Island, near the town of Comox, there is a local tale about an ill-fated and “attractive young Kwakiutl woman named Mary” who married a white man in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁰ The marriage quickly became abusive; Mary’s new husband turned out to be a violent drunk and began regularly beating her. One day, Mary disappeared. When asked about her absence, her husband curtly reported that she had left him. While people found Mary’s disappearance suspicious and her husba

figure, the woman decided “it would be her responsibility” to release him from this world.⁶⁵ So, she attended a workshop by a “native shaman” and did some reading about Indigenous practices for honouring the dead. Armed with her newfound wisdom in “the ways of the native,” she crafted a hanging ornament and placed it in a tree near the location of her sighting. Reflecting on this experience, she conveyed the validation it gave her: “I felt his anger and I felt his desperation . . . but I also felt very privileged. He somehow communicated that he needed me to do something for him, and to do it was an honour.”⁶⁶

In the above related story, we can see how the anxiety-inducing appearance of an Indigenous ghost—even an obviously disapproving one—can be manipulated by the settler witness into an opportunity for moral ascension and the confirmation of a fictive kinship relationship. As Nilsen has pointed out, in these situations the settler endeavours to replace the Indigenous descendent community (which they have discursively erased from the scene) by assuming a role normally fulfilled by kin: honouring and tending to the dead.⁶⁷ This mechanism of assuming authority is repeated in many of the stories I encountered throughout my research. In the case of the Tod House, paranormal investigators had all sorts of suggestions for how to best pacify the ghost of the woman in chains. The Evanses were recommended to place a bucket of water in a corner of the room.⁶⁸ Another “expert” told them they should leave a pad of paper and a pencil out for the ghost to write on.⁶⁹ Needless to say, these strategies for appeasement were not terribly effective. In “The Indian Inheritance,” Robin Skelton and his witchy compatriots attempted to cleanse the bloodthirsty land through an elaborate and prolonged ceremony

⁶⁵ Belyk, 99.

⁶⁶ Belyk, 99.

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exhibiting a stunning pastiche of ceremonial rites, deities, and sacred symbols from cultures

Part III. Conclusion: Decolonizing Ghostlore

In recent years, there has been a move to reclaim the Indigenous ghost as a source of healing, strength, connection to place, and resistance to colonialism. An anthology titled *Phantom Past, Indigenous Present* was published in 2011 with the explicit intention of

to imply the absence of living Indigenous nations, or the completion of the settler-colonial project of self-indigenizing.

This paper has sought to begin the process of decolonizing the discourse of Indigenous ghosts in Coast Salish territories by searching out and compiling some of the more accessible settler stories about hauntings by what they identify to be Indigenous spectres. Through an analysis of these accounts, I have found that settlers have thus far been highly influenced by longstanding literary tropes in their conceptualization and narrativization of encounters with

collaborators might feel that particular ceremonies are necessary or warranted in which case Elders will be consulted for guidance on how to proceed. Because this research project concerns relations between humans and the spirit world, strict protocol must be upheld to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all involved, inclusive of the spirits. Such protocols would be dictated by the Elders of the Lekwungen and WSÁNE communities on whose territory and with whose ancestors the research is engaged.

In 1947, reporter Humphrey Davy paid a visit to the provincial archives to conduct some background research for an article he was writing about the haunting at the Tod House in Oak Bay. He began by asking the archivists on duty whether they knew anything about the haunting, to which they replied: “We’re not interested in ghosts, only history.”⁸⁶ This project has sought to directly challenge such a conceptual divide and advocate for spectrality as a legitimate and productive topic of historical inquiry. Ghosts are manifestations of people, events, and energies from the past in the present. They are as mysterious and seemingly out of reach as those histories that make us possible, and the appearance of a ghost—much like the reading or hearing of a historical narrative—provides the witness with a momentary sense of connection and understanding of their relationship to that past. Ghosts present the historian with a number of challenges capable of pushing the discipline into radical new directions, for “a history conceived as spectral would necessitate a reflection of how the past is both absent and present within the now moment, but also how the past can open up possibilities for the future.”⁸⁷ The spectre, as a non-physical entity outside of time, ruptures the assumption of a tripartite temporal division and upends ontological certainties about the nature of reality. Such challenges are necessary to

⁸⁶ Humphrey Davy, “Eerie Happenings in ‘Haunted’ Oak Bay Residence Intrigue Owner and Guests,” *Times Colonist*, January 18, 1947, Tod House/BC Heritage Fonds, F123/2004-003, Box 1, File 10, Oak Bay Archives.

⁸⁷ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities,” in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 14.

moving beyond the teleological, history-as-progress narratives that have dominated the discipline since the nineteenth century. The ghost presents us with an opportunity to consider and work with alternative ways of knowing and relating to the past, an opportunity we must take up if we are to uncover the occlusions they point to. The halls of our academies are rife with spirits; to deaf ears they taunt and beckon. It is time we attended to them.

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Appendix I. Glossary

ghostlore: a storytelling tradition and repertoire purportedly based upon first-hand encounters with ghosts.

“ghostly Indian”: A settler-generated stereotype, in which metaphors of haunting and ghostliness are used by settler authors to talk about living Indigenous nations as though they are doomed, vanishing, vanquished, or non-existent.

“Indian ghost”: A particular literary trope in settler fiction. I use this term to indicate that I am talking about a fictional, settler-generated figure and stereotype that is interpreted to exist solely for settler purposes.

Indigenous: Existing in relation with the land since time immemorial. In the context of this project, I will be referring most frequently to the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.

Indigenous ghost: This is a neutral term I use to describe entities perceived by witnesses to be the “soul” or “spirit” of a deceased Indigenous individual. These spectres can appear to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons, in waking hours or in dreams. In my research I seek to emphasize that these entities are real agents capable of influencing and acting on the living (see entry for “real”).

Indigenous spirit: In the context of my usage this term will generally imply a once-human, ancestral relation, with acknowledgment that there are many other kinds of spirit. In this project “Indigenous spirit” is used more restrictively than “Indigenous ghost” to imply that the witness is themselves Indigenous. A non-Indigenous person cannot claim, confirm, or deny the presence of an Indigenous spirit. Following the definitions here, every Indigenous spirit is also an Indigenous ghost, but not every Indigenous ghost is an Indigenous spirit

real: This is a loaded term which I use carefully, understanding that there are as many realities as there are minds—and perhaps more! When I use this term I mean to describe something that “is there” to whoever is experiencing it—that is, it has ontological substance within a relationship.

settler: someone whose ancestors or themselves voluntarily migrated to Turtle Island without explicit prior consent or invitation from Indigenous peoples. In my usage, descendants of slaves are not settlers.

settler colonialism: a particular brand of colonial enterprise in which the colonizing peoples

spectre: This is the term I will use most liberally and which can be applied to all the above manifestations.

Turtle Island: An Indigenous-generated, non-state-based term for the territories referred to by settlers as “North America.”