Apologies in a Multicultural, Settler Colonial State

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Political scientists and novelists have noted that we live in an "age of apologies", in which governments sometimes apologize for certain historical wrongs (Howard-Hassman and Gibney 2008, Nobles, 2008, Rayner 2004). Sociolinguists, meanwhile, have analyzed apologies in face-to-face interactions and courtrooms, but have infrequently analyzed state apologies (e.g. Bartels 2000, Fraser 1981, Holmes 1989, Lakoff 2003, Smith 2008). In this paper, I place these bodies of literature in conversation by examining various kinds of apologies in Canada for racial and colonial injustice—-for residential schools in Indigenous communities, the internment of Japanese-Canadians, the head tax leveled on Chinese immigrants to Canada, and the razing of Africville, a predominantly Black neighborhood in Nova Scotia.

Research on racialization and colonialism in Canada, often focuses on or Native-Born/Immigrant relations (especially where these are understood as White-Non-White) or White/Indigenous relations, but rarely fully takes all into account at once. By examining apologies together this paper contributes to a new body of literature which has tried to overcome what some call the Aboriginal-immigrant parallax (Bauder 2011, Byrd 2011), by highlighting "the complex racial hierarchy developed by colonizing powers that introduced and sustained force relations not only among settlers and Aboriginal peoples but also among the other racialized groups ranked in the Canadian hierarchy as lower than whites but higher than Aboriginal peoples" (Thobani 2007:17).

This paper asks when and where do apologies arise? Which apologies shape subsequent apologies? What kinds of actions are not apologized for? Where and how (if ever) is reconciliation linked to restitution, resurgence and redress? Where and how do apologies invoke and rescribe Christian notions of confession and contrition in putatively secular states? What kind of disturbance are apologies what role do they play in restorative justice, reconciliation, redress and recognition?

Keywords: apologies, multiculturalism, settler colonialism.