

# Indigenous Relations in Canada

RESEARCH BRIEF (JANUARY 2019)

## SUMMARY

- There is widespread online hatred (both explicit and implicit) directed at Indigenous people within Canada
- Public commentary concerning the Gerald Stanley/Colten Boushie trial used familiar stereotypes and racist tropes
- Dominant perception is that there is a difference in the way that White and Indigenous people are treated in Canada, particularly as it relates to the judicial system

# INTRODUCTION

On 9 August 2016, Gerald Stanley, a Saskatchewan farmer, was accused of second-degree murder in the death of Colten Boushie, a young Indigenous man who was shot after he and his friends drove on to the Stanley farm.

As news of the incident surfaced on social media, so did misinformation about the circumstances surrounding the shooting. This misinformation was fuelled largely by a lack of hard facts, well-entrenched stereotypes, and long-standing racial tension between settler and Indigenous communities in the prairie province.

As the case went to trial, online vitriol flared. While Stanley always claimed the shooting was an accident, his legal defence tapped into a powerful narrative, built around the right to defend one's property from intruders. This framing of events was neatly tuned to the historic divide between the settler and Indigenous communities of northern Saskatchewan and fuelled clashing narratives about the case.

The Stanley trial revealed for many just how far removed the settler and Indigenous populations are from a state of reconciliation. Old wounds were reopened and deep-seated attitudes shaped by more than a century of conflict and tension were revived.

## CLASH OF WORLDVIEWS

The death of Colten Boushie highlighted a long-standing racial divide in Saskatchewan between settler and Indigenous populations. Tensions came to the fore in 2016 when Stanley was arrested in the wake of the shooting, and again in 2018 when he was tried and then acquitted of second-degree murder (Friesen, 2018).

The news unfolded against the backdrop of the province's legacy of racism. Today, approximately 22% of the population of Saskatchewan is Indigenous, but few visible minorities are in positions of power or authority. Meanwhile, 80% of the province's incarcerated population is Indigenous and more than 80% of children in care are Indigenous. (Cowan, 2017; Macdonald, 2016)

## POLITICAL RESPONSE

In the immediate aftermath of Stanley's acquittal, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould took to Twitter to lament the decision and promise reforms, which was seen as a tacit acknowledgement of flaws in the judicial system and its treatment of Indigenous Canadians (Friesen, 2018). Critics, however, said these remarks only served to politicize the trial and discredit the Canadian judicial system (Fine, 2018).

## SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSE

Between the time Gerald Stanley was arrested on August 9, 2016—the day Colten Boushie died—until the start of the trial at the end of January 2018, little was known about what led to the Cree man’s death.

Stanley was arrested and eventually charged with second-degree murder. He pleaded not guilty. His trial lasted two weeks, at the end of which, on February 9, 2018, he was declared not guilty in the Court of Queen’s Bench in Battleford, Saskatchewan.

From the beginning, the hostile tone of social media commentary was part of the story. Shortly after news broke of Stanley’s arrest, a member of the Saskatchewan RCMP came under investigation for stating, in an RCMP Facebook group, that Colten Boushie ‘got what he deserved’ (Isai, 2018; Martens & Roache, 2018; Tunney, 2018).

The wave of racist hate on social media promoted the University of Saskatchewan’s Professor Robert Innes to tweet: “when people are celebrating the death of an Indigenous man and calling for the killing of more Indigenous men, we have to acknowledge that there is racism in this province” ([@Innes\\_Rob](#), 2016).

In a news release, Assembly of First Nations National Chief Perry Bellegarde stated that the social media comments “are racist, insensitive and ignorant. They are disheartening and a stark reminder of how much work we have to do to eliminate racism and discrimination. In too many ways, this is a sad day for Saskatchewan” (Assembly of First Nations, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

### CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CACDA)

The present study uses corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis [CACDA] (Thomas, 2015) to uncover linguistic patterns in online conversations pertaining to Indigenous relations in Canada—specifically as they pertain to the Gerald Stanley and Coulten Boushie case.

CACDA combines conventionally quantitative corpus linguistic techniques with typically qualitative critical discourse analytic methods. It provides an effective means of mapping out frequency information and association patterns related to linguistic phenomena appearing within large volumes of electronically encoded text.

Specifically, CACDA enables a researcher to identify the word pairs that appear frequently within a data set and the statistical significance of the pairings. Furthermore, it allows for an analysis of how statistically significant word pairs are used in context.<sup>i</sup>

## REDDIT

This research brief analyzes online conversations appearing on [reddit](#), a publicly available, open source website that is most aptly understood as a hybrid forum-based social network/news aggregator site.

As of November 2017, reddit counted over 330 million active monthly users, 138 thousand active communities (subreddits), and was ranked as the fifth most visited site in the United States.<sup>ii</sup>

Registered reddit users are able to customize what they see on their personal account pages by subscribing to ‘subreddits’. Any registered user may create a subreddit on any topic and under such categories as: educational subreddits, entertainment subreddits, discussion subreddits, and humour and image-sharing subreddits.

Registered reddit users are also able to submit content to the site in the form of a link (e.g., link to a news article, photo, video) or as a text (“self”) post. Once content has been submitted, registered users can then vote it ‘up’ or ‘down’, which moves this content to a different rank on the website’s pages. Users are encouraged to ‘upvote’ content if they think that it contributes to the conversation and to ‘downvote’ content if they think that it is off-topic; in short, “the popularity and prominence of material on the site are determined by voting from the reddit community” (Duggan & Smith, 2013, p. 2).

Registered users are equally able to comment on one another’s content and to vote on these comments, thus enabling discussion and accentuation of issues that users themselves deem relevant and meaningful.

Importantly, the voting functionality provided by the reddit platform is central to CACDA in that it provides one measure of how online content is being received by audiences.

This approach assumes that the more upvotes that content receives (i.e. the higher its point value), the more its audience agrees with it or sees it as valuable in some way. Whereas, the more content is ‘downvoted’ (i.e. the lower its point value or if it carries a negative point value), the less its audience agrees with it or sees its value.

Moreover, when content receives a high number of downvotes, it becomes ‘downvoted into oblivion’ and effectively disappears from reddit’s main interface, thus potentially signaling disagreement or resistance to mainstream thought patterns.

## DATA SET

Conversations that covered topics pertaining to Indigenous relations in Canada were sampled using combinations of the following search terms: Canada, Indigenous, native\*, aboriginal\*, “Colten Boushie”, “Gerald Stanley”.

All conversations contained within the data set were created in 2018.



# INDIGENOUS

Within the present data, analysis of the key word “Indigenous” revealed frequent and strong associations with terms such as: people, folk. These word pairings (highlighted in Figure 2 and Table 2) were used in comments that articulated primarily negative depictions of Indigenous peoples and their socio-economic impact.



Figure 2. Terms associated with “Indigenous”

Table 2. Collocation analysis of “Indigenous”

Keyword	Freq.	Associated terms	<i>logDice</i> <sup>iii</sup>
Indigenous (adjective)	141	people	11.53
		folk	10.23

Representative comments include:

*How about we start talking about the rampant criminal behaviour among Indigenous people. Colten Boushie was a criminal piece of shit as is his entire family/tribe. They participated in robberies. (9 points)*

*In Canadian prisons, Indigenous people make up 23% of the population. In response to that we can say one of two things: the people are broken or the system is broken. Whichever the reason is the Indigenous population is taxing on the prison system. (4 points)*

*Indigenous folks who are completely willing to lie to the police and the courts in order to manipulate the outcome. (51 points)*

The word pair “Indigenous people” was equally used to highlight perceived differences between the experiences of White and Indigenous populations within Canada:

*White people in Canada aren't given the same opportunity to rehabilitation as Indigenous people. (4 points)*

*If Stanley had been an Indigenous man or woman and Boushie had been a drunk white man with a criminal history a mile long having spent the day robbing other Indigenous people, no charges would have ever been filed period. In fact, Indigenous Stanley would have been universally praised by the very people complaining about the outcome of this case. (1 point)*

The majority of comments implied that Canada’s Indigenous populations receive preferential treatment; those comments that challenged this prevailing view were summarily rejected and ‘downvoted into oblivion’:

*Our society is tailored for white people and so many people (like [the original poster]) are too ignorant to even consider why there such limited participation by Indigenous people. Its fucking ridiculous. (-7 points)*

## WHITE

Analysis of the key word “white” also revealed frequent and strong associations with the term “people”. The word pair “white people” (highlighted in Figure 3 and Table 3) was used within conversations to highlight perceived differences between the experiences of White and Indigenous populations within Canada, particularly as they relate to the justice system:

*I wonder why more outrage isn't directed at [...] trying to get more white people put in jail. (6 points)*

*Our justice system already caters to aboriginals. Do you think that the aboriginal women who drunk drive and killed a family of four deserves to be let out of a manslaughter sentence with just 10 months in a healing lodge? White people aren't given this privilege in the justice system. (2 points)*

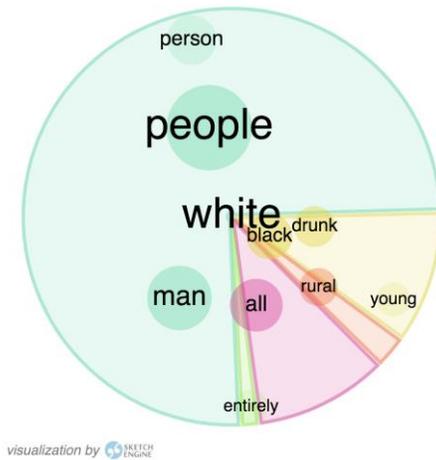


Figure 3. Terms associated with “white”

Table 3. Collocation analysis of “white [whites]”

Keyword	Freq.	Associated term	<i>logDice</i> <sup>iv</sup>
white (adjective)	187	people	11.47

As with comments that challenged the perception that Indigenous populations receive preferential treatment within Canadian society, those comments that spoke negatively of “white people” were ‘downvoted into oblivion’:

*Didn't you get the memo? All white people are racist. (-12 points)*

## NATIVE

Concordance analysis of the key word “native [natives]” enabled an examination of the ways in which the term was used in context within the online discussions sampled for this research brief (see Figures 4 and 5 and Table 4).

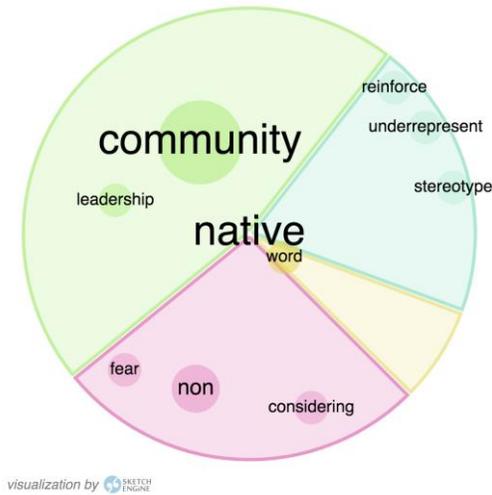


Figure 4. Terms associated with “native” (noun)



Figure 5. Terms associated with “native” (adjective)

Table 4. Concordance analysis of “native [natives]”

Keyword	Freq.
native (noun)	83
native (adjective)	60

Overwhelmingly, the word “native” or “natives” was used within comments to portray a negative depiction of Canada’s Indigenous Peoples and to express views about their perceived problematic exploits within society:

*Natives make up 5% of Canada's population and were responsible for 33% of Canada's murders. (39 points)*

*Every week there's another story of natives stealing shit. Literally every week. Vehicles stolen to be found burnt out by the reserves. (16 points)*

Furthermore, “native [natives]” was used within comments that appeared to support the position that Boushie deserved his fate:

*Maybe the natives will find a better pass time then stealing and vandalizing farmers? (22 points)*

*[This story] has given credence to those who stereotype young Natives. (17 points)*

“Native” was also used within comments to challenge statements made, in particular, by the Canadian media about the effects of race and racism in the Stanley/Boushie trial:

*A thousand Native on White crimes a year around here without a peep from anyone and one case reverses it and all of a sudden, all hell breaks loose with the whole country now racists???* (23 points)

*Bashing the drunken criminal thug who got himself killed through his own recklessness and criminal activity is not 'native bashing'.* (2 points)

*Not everything that happens to every native person is an attack against the entire race and not every insult directed at a native person is an attack against the entire race.* (5 points)

Finally, a trend could once again be discerned within comments that used “native [natives]” and were ‘downvoted into oblivion’—namely, comments that maintained that Canada has a racism problem, particularly as it relates to its Indigenous populations:

*This whole thing is sickening. That family deserves justice so Colten Boushie can rest in peace. We all need that. We need to account for the type of bias in our society that leads a white family to assume a bunch of Native kids are up to no good.* (-9 points)

*The native communities across the world have a history of being treated horrifically and so yes, they are asking this question because it's important. There is racism in Canada today. Colten is dead and his mom and his brother and his cousin are mourning.* (-2 points)

*One thing is for certain he is getting acquitted. And I say that being native. Now every white rural is going to go around shooting at natives* (-19 points)

## DISCUSSION

The online conversations analyzed as part of this research brief highlight the explicit and implicit hate levied against Indigenous people within Canada.

Significantly, of the data analyzed as part of this research series,<sup>v</sup> the online discussions concerning the Stanley/Boushie trial contained the largest amount of overt hatred.

The prevailing sentiment within these discussions is typified by the following comments:

*He was trespassing and stealing shit plain and simple. Fuck your son and fuck your family you trashy human beings. I hope you lose and [...] Gerald Stanley sues your whole fucking tribe for stealing from the surrounding areas.* (14 points)

*A lowlife scumbag died. And I am supposed to be upset because?? (15 points)*

*I certainly will never have to worry about the 'jury ignoring the law' because I don't go driving around at night drunk on other people's property trying to fucking rob them... like stealing an ATV. The little shit got what he asked for. (14 points)*

These discussions equally contained easily identifiable patterns in the types of views that were routinely rejected by the majority of commentators.

Specifically, comments that did not show support for Stanley, indicated sympathy for the Boushie family, or argued that anti-Indigenous racism is present within Canada (and that it is unwarranted and should be addressed) were consistently 'downvoted into oblivion':

*It seems to me that Gerald Stanley should go to prison for what he did. (-10 points)*

*Love the article and how it exposes the very obvious bias of the judge and jury their racism is easily found in the very specific details of this case and this is something that most non-first nations Canadians are going to have to grapple with as Canada's ugly history reemerges in the wake of whatever the verdict may be. (-10 points)*

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## URLS

[@Innes\\_Rob](https://twitter.com/innes_rob?lang=en) [https://twitter.com/innes\_rob?lang=en]

[reddit](http://www.reddit.com/) [http://www.reddit.com/]

## SUGGESTED READING

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[\[http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Modern%20Reports/canadian\\_public\\_opinion.pdf\]](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Modern%20Reports/canadian_public_opinion.pdf)

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For a full discussion of CACDA methodology, see the resources on the [Project Someone: Prejudice du jour web page](https://projectsomeone.ca/prejudicedujour). [https://projectsomeone.ca/prejudicedujour]

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.redditinc.com/press>

<sup>iii</sup> The *logDice* statistic is an account of how often two words appear within a body of text both next to, and away from, each other. The *logDice* statistic carries a theoretical maximum value of 14; word pairs (collocations) with a *logDice* value of 10 or greater are considered to be exceptionally strong discursive relationships. For a full discussion, see Rychlý, 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Other titles in this series: *The Far Right in Canada*, *Islamophobia in Canada*, *Online Misogyny in Canadian Politics*, *Multiculturalism in Canada*.