

# HOW CAN SETTLERS (re)LEARNING THEIR ANCESTRY CHALLENGE SETTLER COLONIALISM?

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## Settler colonialism

Colonialism is about the dispossession of Indigenous lands and oppression of Indigenous peoples (Manuel “From” 19). *Terra nullius* serves to remake settlers, “hwunitum” in SENĆOŦEN (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassell 16), as the “original people” through the immigration of a relatively homogenous settler population that secures ongoing occupation and control of Indigenous lands (Perry 345). Settler identities are always forged through the state’s refusal to recognize Indigenous nations as politically sovereign (Simpson 11) in order to legitimize land dispossession (Moreton-Robinson 30-31).

Fort Victoria, and other early colonies, were not “white” spaces as there was much ethnic and racial diversity; rather, settler states are intentionally built as white possessions by marginalizing people of colour and generating whiteness as the norm (Moreton-Robinson 31). Some early European settlers may not have been considered white when they arrived on Turtle Island, but through colonization, newcomers obtained a new “Canadian” identity which offers systemic benefits and continually seeks to bring as many people as possible within the category. Although the benefits of being a settler are accrued unevenly as a result of a racialized hierarchy (Jafri), all non-Indigenous people benefit from colonization (Walia, “Undoing” 251).

## Settler ancestry research & learning

Settler consciousness-raising in and of itself does not advance Indigenous sovereignty, resurgence or decolonization, and is inherently limited (Tuck and Yang 22). However, when ancestral research is paired with learning about Indigenous resistance to occupation, it could help settlers implicate themselves in colonization. For instance, the narrative that early settlers worked hard to be successful generates an entitlement and possessiveness that erases how colonial wealth is built upon the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and their lands (Moreton-Robinson 29; McLean 32). Such unlearning encourages settlers to “focus on the strategies that produce hierarchies, in contrast to privilege, which frequently re-focusses on the self” (Jafri).

Settlers must take on the work of understanding settler identity and how it affects their relations with Indigenous peoples, lands and knowledge. As Jeff Corntassel writes, “If someone is just simply saying ‘I’m a Canadian, and I don’t know my history’, how useful is that to deepening solidarity? Maybe that forgetfulness... is also sort of convenient. You haven’t done the hard work to uncover your role, or your family’s role in, whether it’s direct colonial actions or just settling here.” (Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel 20). Researching history will never be an objective project, but getting in touch with family stories, while being critical of colonial narratives, can be an intimate and personal process which challenges settlers to develop a deeper and greater understanding of how they are complicit in colonization.

## Points of caution: genetic testing & settler appropriation of Indigenous Identity

Genealogy companies have become increasingly popular but there are significant limits to what DNA tests can reveal about ancestry. First, a very small amount of ancestral data is available through typical consumer tests (Leroux 82). Advertisements that claim to trace ancestry to a specific region ignore historic migrations and the temporality of present borders (Eidinger). Furthermore, genetic testing can reinforce race as a biological category (Leroux 82) rather than as a floating signifier which is formed within changing social and cultural relations (Hall 43). In addition, the genealogy industry relies on patrilineal lines of descent (Scodari 209-10) and obtains data without the consent of Indigenous peoples (Reardon and TallBear 235). Genetics, then, is one, indeed not the only, story about identity (Reardon and TallBear 234).

There is also the problem of settlers inventing Indigenous ancestry. Kim TallBear, an expert in genetic science, is clear that there is no DNA test which proves Indigeneity (Geddes). Moreover, “ancestry is different from tribal membership; Indigenous identity and tribal membership are questions that Indigenous communities alone have the right to struggle over and define, not DNA tests, heritage websites, and certainly not the settler state” (Tuck and Yang 13). Some settlers mobilize claims to secure access to land, power and resources by usurping Indigenous identity.



Library and Archives Canada, “It’s Mine!” Canada: The Right Land for the Right Man; Canadian National Railways”, MIKAN no. 2905070.

Other claims, rely on self-fashioning, ancestral recollections or physical characteristics and are used to make abstract assertions of Indigeneity (Simpson 63-64). Often, settlers will “locate or invent a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had ‘Indian blood,’ and they use this claim to mark themselves as blameless in the attempted eradications of Indigenous peoples” (Tuck and Yang 10). Rather, “a willingness to decentre oneself and to learn and act from a place of responsibility rather than guilt” (Walia, “Decolonizing” 3) is necessary for settler ancestral research to be done with integrity and as part of a broader responsibility to anti-colonial solidarity.

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## Possibilities for solidarity

Through historical research and conversations with family members, settlers could “come to understand their social positions in a colonial context, and analyze how large group inequality is created and maintained” (McLean 33). Personalizing the past through genealogy research (Scodari 206) is one way that settlers can understand how they are complicit in colonization. For that learning to increase settler capacity for solidarity, the challenges of the present must be identified and recognized in the past (Scodari 219). Making public such histories and ongoing systems of wrongdoing can interrupt national narratives (Regan 73) of peacefulness and equality.

Decolonizing the settler imagination requires a process of truth-telling (Manuel, “Reconciliation” 56). Settlers must take agency and be accountable (Lowman and Barker 14) for unlearning the myths of their identity and existence on stolen lands. Such a “transformation of settler consciousness” (Davis et al. 401) requires settlers to identify how they replicate colonial systems (Lowman and Barker 22). Specifically, “this translates to taking initiative for self-education about the specific histories of the lands we reside upon” (Walia, “Decolonizing” 3) without asking Indigenous peoples to carry the burden of settler learning (Lowman and Barker 22).

Settler ancestry research is one way for settlers to “challenge the racist origins of the Canadian state” (Coulthard 41) in order to move toward an “ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition” (Coulthard 3). Likewise, Taiaiake Alfred envisions a new relationship, founded on respect and peaceful coexistence, which settlers are invited to join (*Wasáse* 35). Growing settler consciousness and relationships of reciprocity may increase solidarity, but settlers must remember that decolonization will always be about the land (Alfred, “It’s all” 11).

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