The Unsettling of a Settler - A Work in Progress

by Heather Ramsay

I never felt like a settler. At 10 years old, my parents dragged me to my mom's cousin's farm. Back in my Holly-Hobbie-style suburban Calgary bedroom, my outfit, at least, seemed perfect. Sandals for summer and an overall-style dress. But three hours later, out on the wide Alberta prairie, my bare legs swelled with bug bites and everyone laughed because I'd hopped off a fence into a cow pie. After that I didn't venture beyond pavement for a long time.

We were city people, or so I thought. Grandpa had owned a hat shop and worked in banks. Grandma, born in Victoria, the most colonial of cities, had taught school. They owned a house on First Ave in Calgary and took us on drives through the country. My mom worked as a nurse; my dad was a professor. We had a two-car garage. As a kid, I spent a lot of time in shopping malls.

Settlers? They lived in sod huts. They wore bonnets and overalls and their horses pulled the plow. All of that seemed like time before time. Even though I had a vague notion that my Grandma had once lived on the cousin's farm where I'd hopped onto muddied ground, I had never thought deeply about the meaning of those fences.

After high school, I intended to start a life somewhere real. I thought that meant New York or Paris. I got as far as Vancouver. Then in my mid-twenties, I moved north to Smithers, BC and lived among the mountains and rivers of Gitxsan and Wet'suwet'en territory. That's where I first began to grasp the concept of First Nations land. This was 1998 and I'd read in university about Delgamuukw, the hereditary chief and lead plaintiff navigating the colonialist's court system to prove his people held title to land they'd never ceded. I remember reading a book that said Europeans had simply asserted sovereignty over the country I'd sung anthems to in elementary school. They claimed they'd arrived in *terra nullius,* a place uninhabited by "civilized peoples" and therefore the land was up for grabs. I didn't know what to do about any of that.

Then I got a job at the local paper and covered the pond hockey scene. I wrote about the museum's new cookbook and went to school board meetings. I clung to the notion that Canadians offered a beacon of tolerance in a racially-charged storm. We were famed for multiculturalism and the diversity of immigrants that we welcomed to our shores. Even though I wrote about mouldy First Nations houses and high school students who felt safer at school then at home, I didn't understand.

Later I moved to Haida Gwaii and wrote stories about the Haida giving the colonial name of their islands back to the usurpers. I witnessed agreements being signed that ensured Haida gained the power to manage resources on some of their lands.

I became more aware of the violence and injustice involved in the history of this country, but I still clung to the notion that Canadians offered a beacon of tolerance in a racially-charged storm. We were famed for multiculturalism. For the diversity of the immigrants that we welcomed to our shores. I believed that the society that exists today was the result of progress.

When I moved back to the Lower Mainland and went to university again. That's when the word settler kept cropping up. Indigenous-settler relations. Settler-colonialism. These words tossed around in angry tones. I still did not think I was a settler. Besides, in the dictionary, a settler was TV-show blameless: "A person who goes to live in a place where, usually, there are few or no people."

But I knew I was living on unceded land, so I read further:

> *Settlers 'come to stay': they are founders of political orders who carry [their sovereignty with them]. . . Settlers want Indigenous people to vanish (but can make use of their labour before they are made to disappear).*
>
> *https://settlercolonialstudies.org/about-this-blog/*

This sentence was unsettling. I didn't want to believe that this had anything to do with me.

But when I thought back I realized that, where I grew up in Calgary, Indigenous people had all but vanished. The major roads carry names like Crowchild, Blackfoot and Sarcee Trails yet, I had learned about the Bushmen of the Kalahari in elementary school. My Gr. 4 teacher organized a visit to a citizenship ceremony and a synagogue. We drove 100 kilometres to a Hutterite colony, but I never once went to the Sarcee Reserve (now Tsuu T'ina), a five minute walk from my school.

I thought back to the farm where my Grandma grew up and the reality of time before time began to sink in. My Grandma, who had her hair set once a week in the neighbourhood salon, her parents had settled that land. Did she want Indigenous people to disappear? She died 30 years ago, so I couldn't ask, but I called my mom's 86 year-old cousin (first son of Grandma's brother), who still lives on that family farm northeast of Drumheller to see what he had to say. I wanted to find out what he knew about the First Nations in the area.The conversation wasn't very satisfying. They may have hunted over the land, he suggested when pressed. He didn't remember ever seeing any. I double-checked with his daughter, in case he wasn't very chatty over the phone. She texted back: "By the time Dad was born, most of the First Nations had signed treaties and were on reserves. . . . If anyone had First Nations encounters, it would have been Great-Grandpa Charlie. I've heard stories that he did, and they were always peaceful and with respect on both sides."

My second cousin had repeated the story that Canadians often hear. That story makes it sound as if nobody lived on the land when pioneers, backed by the British colonial authorities arrived. Many arrived convinced that their way of life was superior — that they were bringing progress and civilization to an unruly, empty, wind-swept place.

But Great-Grandpa Charlie had been different. Could I hold onto that?

The truth is he arrived during an intense time of settler/Indigenous relations, possibly on one of the very first trains that chugged into Calgary in 1883. He left Otley, Yorkshire with his brother two years before. English dandies were lured west from Nova Scotia and he ended up working for the Military Colonization Company, which held a 92,000-acre lease in the middle of Blackfoot territory. His boss, retired British artillery trainer, General Thomas Strange, had started one of the first horse ranches in the region. Then, only two years after Charlie arrived, Strange formed a militia to help the colonial government fight Riel and the Metis in 1885.

The colonial juggernaut was rolling its way across the prairies and Great-Grandpa Charlie rode the train. As far as I can figure out, Charlie stayed out of the fighting and possibly had "respectful relations" with his neighbours, including Crowfoot, the Blackfoot chief, who also chose not to get involved. Crowfoot gave him a buffalo robe, according to another of my mom's cousins. My sister found a beaded shawl that was donated to Heritage Park by Charles's wife. Nevertheless, my great-grandpa found himself smack dab in the middle of some troubling circumstances. Events that could have changed the course of history. That rising is known variously as the North-West Rebellion or the North-West Resistance (the two names for this event speak to the worldview differences between those who tell the story — ie. resisting authority in an occupied country or rebelling against an established and rightful government). My understanding is that the conflict came about due to justifiable grievances the Metis, Plains Indigenous people and even some white settlers, had against the colonial government's land dealings. Instead of dealing honourably with people's concerns, in the end, the government hanged Riel at the Northwest Mounted Police Barracks in Regina, and eight Indigenous men involved in other aspects of the resistance were publicly hung in Battleford. The colonial government charged Poundmaker and Big Bear, two respected and peaceful Cree chiefs who had not been directly involved in the fighting, with treason. These men both died after being jailed.

What if instead, Metis land rights had been honoured (as a Supreme Court decision recently required). What if Big Bear and Poundmaker had been treated as great leaders (the Liberals exon-

erated Poundmaker in 2019) and real nation-to-nation relationships had been maintained? These events could have turned the story of Canada in an entirely different direction.

No sense digging up the past. We have to learn to get along now. I've heard these arguments when talking about Indigenous-Settler relationships with people who bristle at these terms. I used to bristle too. But how can we move forward if people don't know the whole story? And how can we understand the whole story if we believe it all took place in the past?

The introduction to the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report states that the central tenet of Canada's Aboriginal policy has been "to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada." Languages were banned. Movement from reserves restricted. Spiritual leaders persecuted and families disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values. This, the report says, is the very definition of cultural genocide.

Things are getting better for Indigenous people: I hear that on the radio sometimes, but then at the beginning of 2019 (and again in 2020), the RCMP violently arrested Wet'suwet'en men and women trying to assert Aboriginal rights and title on their ancestral territory. A white farmer in Saskatchewan got off scot-free after shooting a young Aboriginal man in the head and another six Indigenous people were killed by cops while Canadians faced a pandemic between March and June 2020.

The beacon of tolerance that I once believed in has burned out.

In family photo albums and papers, I found a 1974 article that my Grandma had clipped from the *Big Valley News,* a small prairie town near the family farm. It described the big pow wow of 1919 when 1,000 Indians camped just south of a local homestead. My grandma would have been 11 years old at the time. Did she witness this? What made her save this article?

I might never know what was in my grandmother's heart, but I do know this: the land that my great-grandfather acquired was once home to millions of buffalo. Near Big Valley, their bones lay at the bottom of a cliff. In *As We Remember Big Valley,* a community history book, my 20-year old Grandma, a teacher in a one-room school, smiles at the camera. In the same pages, I read about a settlement of 2,000 Metis and Plains Cree destroyed by fire in 1878. The book doesn't say how the fire started, but nothing got rebuilt and the families apparently moved on because the buffalo disappeared. In another chapter, the book exclaims, "Canada was one of the countries that offered any adult the glittering prize of free land!"

I still live in British Columbia, a place with colonial history proclaimed by its very name. I spoke with Dalton Silver, chief of the Sumas or Sema:th First Nation, not far from Chilliwack, where I own a home. He told me they have a 100-year-old claim for 30,000 acres of territory taken from them in early settler times. His people did not sign treaties or cede land, but they were forced onto tiny reserves. Promises of a meagre 10 acres of land per family were made and broken in the 1860s and then dozens of settlers, who were given, pre-empted and/or bought hundreds of acres of land per family, moved in. How do we settle this now? The thing is, Dalton says, in this day and age, the province doesn't want to displace anyone from their homes.

I think of my grandma's house in downtown Calgary and my mom and dad's house in the suburbs, bought thanks to a system that made Indigenous people disappear. Some say Big Bear wouldn't sign the treaty because he believed the land and the buffalo were gifts to all. One person could not own them or forbid others to use them. I think of my own place near Chilliwack. All of it once First Nations land. I can see the connection to me now. I am benefitting from the results of policies that let Europeans steal this land. My great-grandfather was a settler.

I am a settler.

Should we just give it all back? Some settlers say this with distain. This is Canada now and all these settlers aren't going away. But for Indigenous people, land is the essence of reconciliation. Some say seized land should be returned. Compensation paid. Some say that at the very least, all property tax on traditional territory should be paid to First Nation governments instead.

I don't know what the answers are, but I'm unsettled. And I'm awake to the real history of this country. I don't want to disconnect from these stories or let others in my circles off the hook because after all of this time, we, especially the settlers, must work to find a way to make things right.