

# Theorizing colonial culture in Canada: Consumption, Indigenization, and settler moves to innocence on a national scale

It has been over two decades since Philip Deloria exposed the cultural anxieties underlying the long history of American settlers “playing Indian” (1998). The dominant patterns of settler culture are different in the Canadian context, however. Here, the symbols, tropes, and narratives associated with Indigeneity have been integrated so deeply into the national imaginary that they are now seen as essentially and quintessentially “Canadian,” and not—to cite Deloria—as Indian-play at all. “Indianness”—not as some essence of what it means to be Indigenous but as the dominant culture’s invented version of Indigeneity—has long been central to settler self-definition. The pattern in Canada, I argue, is less about *performance* and more about *consumption*.

## THE “CANADIANESS” OF CANOEING

Most of the symbols that are mobilized to define, market, and facilitate identification with Canada are either historically or imaginatively associated with Indigeneity (think inukshuks, totem poles, maple syrup . . .). Most infamous among them, as Daniel Francis, Bruce Erickson, and Misao Dean have all examined at length, is the canoe. The canoe’s mythic association with Indigenous people is what offers it such authenticity and legitimacy. Paddling through northern landscapes (imagined and constructed as “wilder-ness”) soothes the anxious settler desire to enact both possession of and belonging to the land on which they live (Dean, 2013), which is itself an “irreconcilable legacy of invasion and settlement” (Whitlock, 2006, p. 42). The canoe acts as a convenient resolution for the uneasy relationship between the settler nation-state

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and the violence on which it relies, “the national equivalent of saying ‘I’m not racist; look, I have Native friends’” (Erickson, 2013, p. 8). But settler Canadians who go canoeing are not *playing Indian*; the canoe has been adopted so deeply into the (especially white, middle-class) cultural imagination that canoeing is seen as a means to connect with one’s *Canadianness*. Indigenous *people* are deemed unnecessary since Indianness—its affiliate technologies and its fetishized proximity to nature—have already been seamlessly internalized by the recreational paddler and the nationalist imaginary alike.

The telling of Canadian history has also long been shaped, in ever evolving ways, by practices of internalization. In the decades before and after Confederation, the solidifying historiography displaced experiences of colonial violence to the United States, maintaining that “the Native people of Canada never suffered the . . . horrors of conquest” (Mackey, 1998, p. 155). From the 1880s until the mid-20th century, a “Mountie myth”—wherein the RCMP symbolized a particularly Canadian version of lawful, civilized, and orderly westward expan-

sion—further disseminated and popularized a narrative in which Indigenous peoples were peacefully absorbed into Canada (Francis, 1997). By looking at state-sanctioned pluralist histories proliferating, since the 1990s, through schools, museums, and more, Eva Mackey argues that some recent attempts to *celebrate* Indigenous histories have also exhibited absorptive tendencies. Indigenous people and cultures are too often turned into a tool for facilitating settlers’ and migrants’ connection to and harmony with the land or used to enhance and celebrate “our” cultural diversity. Settler angst about a lack of belonging is again transcended when “Aboriginal people become the ancestors of the nation who pass on an inheritance, [rather than] survivors of conquest and colonization” (Mackey, 1998, p. 161). Insidiously, different genres of historical production still function to erase colonial violence and uphold settler sovereignty, while foreclosing Indigenous futures beyond incorporation into the Canadian nation-state.

## MÉTISSAGE

Another glaring example of Canada’s incorporative tendencies is the recent evocation of *métissage* as a national origin story. Many have critiqued the conflation of Métis identity with mixedness and the resultant phenomenon of (heretofore) white settlers discovering a distant Indigenous ancestor and using it to refashion a Métis identity for themselves (Andersen, 2014; Leroux, 2019; Vowel, 2016). However, *métissage* has also been perniciously appropriated in constructions of the nation itself. In his 2013 article, Adam Gaudry analyzes emergent

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discourses that claim *métissage* as a founding metaphor or descriptor for the Canadian nation-state. While older oppositional narratives depicted Louis Riel as the quintessential Other, for instance, a newer representational mythology has co-opted him to symbolize the values of bilingualism, multiculturalism, and cultural hybridity that Canada likes to claim as its own. The trope that Canada is a *Métis civilization*, meanwhile, suggests that our national political institutions are shaped by their Indigenous roots rather than being mere European imports. While an appealing thought, such a framing replaces histories of colonial repression and anti-colonial resistance—and, indeed, histories of inter-nation cooperation and negotiation—with a naïve myth of different people coming together to form a new, mixed nation-state. Although often deployed with the intent of imagining a more just country, Gaudry cautions, these Indigenous articulations of Canadianness instead “hid[e] a pervasive settler-colonial reality within a mythological post-colonial fantasy” (2013, p. 67). Far from promoting genuinely respectful engagement with Indigenous peoples past and present, such claims allow the settler-colonial nation-state to merely define itself by its own supposed Indigeneity.

## ENTRENCHING COLONIAL POWER

In their influential 2012 article, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang identified a set of troubling strategies enacted by sympathetic settlers for whom the straightforward denial of colonial violence is not tenable. Recognizing that we benefit from colonial structures and wrestling with the resultant discomfort, settler allies too often seek superficial reprieve in ways that serve to entrench rather than challenge colonial power. Such “settler moves to innocence,” Tuck and Yang explain, are hollow attempts “to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10). By trans-

lating Tuck and Yang’s theory from an individual to a collective level, I suggest that these consumptive constructions of Canadianness function as “settler moves to innocence” on a national scale. Far from suppressing Indigenous histories or celebrating conquest, the Canadian settler imaginary has instead attempted to “ingest and subsume” Indigeneity (Erickson, 2013, p. xiv). Through appropriated symbolism, “inclusive” histories, the invocation of *métissage*, and other tactics, Canadian settler society has sought reprieve from culpability and responsibility. As has been argued with regard to state multiculturalism more broadly, this national claim to innocence is often defined in contrived opposition to the sins of “real” colonialism, racism, and imperialism, which are conveniently displaced south of the border.

These moves to innocence have dangerous consequences: eliding colonial violence in our history and undermining the actual contributions, struggles, and demands of Indigenous people. Despite their abstracted inclusion in nationalist myths that buttress the authority of Canada, many have resisted and rejected incorporation into the Canadian nation-state and are working instead toward decolonial and Indigenous futures. The dishonest national tactics of internalizing Indigeneity and establishing settler innocence must be unsettled in favour of more ethical (if more uncomfortable) approaches to settler–Indigenous relations. We must cultivate relationships based not on sameness, absorption, or consumption, but on self-determination, solidarity, and collective liberation. 🍁

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