



# “WE BUILT A LIFE FROM NOTHING” WHITE SETTLER COLONIALISM AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

BY SHEELAH McLEAN

**A**s a young white girl growing up on the prairies, I recall hearing stories of the hardships my grandparents endured when they first arrived in Canada. One narrative that stands out as particularly important was that my grandparents immigrated to Canada with very little money or goods. It was not until many years later that I came to understand these stories as narratives that reproduced the idea that our collective family wealth and status as white settlers was earned through ingenuity.

These family stories are national texts that position white settlers as having earned our social and political status in society through intelligence and hard work alone, erasing the colonial policies that enforced differential access to resources, such as land. The story that my family built a life from nothing works to make economic inequality between white settlers and Indigenous people seem natural and normal.

Like most Canadians, my identity as a white settler was formed through various national narratives that reinforce the myth of meritocracy. Meritocracy is the belief that success in life can be attributed to personal merit such as hard work and natural talent. Subsequently, lack of success is then attributed to lack of intelligence and work ethic, low morals, and the inability to know “how to get things done” (Schick & St. Denis, 2003).

The myth that Canadian society is created on individual work ethic ignores how racially dominant groups gain access to social and political power. This discourse also masks how racialized groups are denied access to these same resources and opportunities. The myth of meritocracy reinforces liberal individualism, providing the public with racist explanations for the vast inequalities that exists between Indigenous people and white settler society. While my grandparents certainly worked hard to provide for their families, it is essential to understand how government policies secured my family’s social and political status.

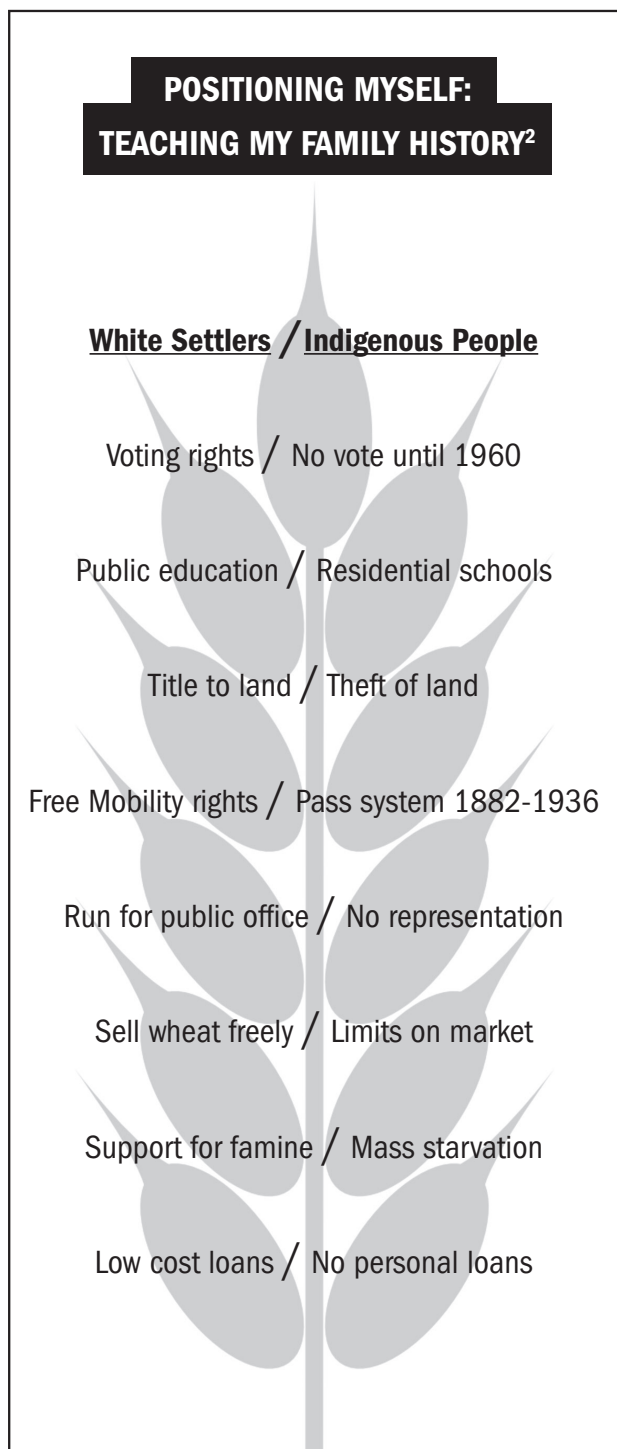
## THE MYTH OF WHITE SETTLER SUPERIORITY

I am a third generation white settler with Norwegian grandparents on my mother’s side, and a Scottish grandfather and Swedish grandmother on my father’s side. My parents, aunts, and uncles all spoke English and assimilated into the British culture through institutions such as church, community gatherings, and public education or what was then aptly termed Normal School, a one-room schoolhouse where students completed several grades. When I asked why my family spoke only English, I was told that my grandparents wanted their children to “do well at school”, and to “get good jobs”. This is just one example of how white settlers from various European countries worked to assimilate into the dominant white culture in order to gain access to social and political power (McLean, 2016).

In 1908, my grandfather (my mom’s dad) bought 160 acres of land in northern Saskatchewan for \$10.00 plus the promise of 10 acres of improvement. This meant that in order to secure his title he had to ‘prove up’, or till and use the lands for farming. He sold wheat, oats and barley freely on the market and could travel throughout Canada without any regulation from the federal or provincial government. As a white settler and Canadian citizen my grandfather could vote in elections, and was an important organizer for the CCF in his rural community. My grandmother could not vote until 1916.

My mom was born in 1930, during a particularly difficult time for people across the prairies. The government supplied farmers like my family with relief such as canned meat and other goods. This policy was enforced so that families would not abandon farms, securing the federal government’s national dream of a white settler state. My grandparents were successful enough to hire two or three farm workers at a time, and eventually seek bank loans to buy modern farm equipment.

The access my family had in the early 1900s to land, citizenship, public education, mobility rights, bank loans, and government relief during famine secured their upward mobility and our middle-class status. The political economy of white settler status has been handed down from one generation to the next.<sup>1</sup>



In the same historical moment that my family benefitted from their position as white citizens, Indigenous people faced policies of genocide. This included (but was not limited to) the ongoing theft and

dispossession of lands, racist and sexist Indian Act legislation, the violence of residential schools, the regulation of Indigenous bodies through the Pass System (Williams, 2015), disenfranchisement, and government enforced starvation (Daschuk, 2014). This accompanying chart is only a brief snapshot of a much longer list of policies that upheld white settler colonialism while violating Indigenous rights (Thobani, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Manuel, 2015). These racist policies have not disappeared, but rather take shape in contemporary forms of racial oppression today.

I use the accompanying graphic as a teaching tool to analyze inequality in a colonial context and invite students to create a *Roots* assignment that explores their own family history. Through photographs, interviews with family members, and historical research, students come to understand their social positions in a colonial context, and analyze how large group inequality is created and maintained. It is also important to include the interconnections of differential policies based on sexuality, gender and other identity markers.

The machinery of Canadian nationhood has produced racialized inequalities that appear to be natural and normal, particularly for those of us that benefit from it. Nation-building practices have advanced the social and economic power of white settlers, in particular those who were male and owned property, while dispossessing Indigenous people and subjugating groups marked as outsiders. These stories of white settler ingenuity need to be met with historical research on 150 years of racist, sexist and homophobic colonial practices. ●

---

**SHEELAH McLEAN** (PhD) is a high school teacher, researcher and scholar in anti-racist anti-oppressive education. Sheelah is also an organizer with the *Idle No More* network. As an educator, scholar and community organizer, Sheelah's work has focused on projects that address inequality, particularly focusing on the legacy of oppression experienced by Indigenous Peoples within a white settler society.

*This piece is a brief introduction to her research and teaching in anti-racist anti-colonial education.*

#### ENDNOTES

1. Details collected through interviews with my family.
2. S. McLean, Family Chart, Anti-Racism lecture & workshop.

#### REFERENCES

- Daschuk, J. W. (2014). *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*. University of Regina Press, Regina, SK.
- Manuel, A. (2015). *Unsettling Canada: A national wake up call*. Toronto: Between the lines.
- McLean, S. (2016). *Disturbing Praxis: a Foucauldian Analysis of Student Subjectivities and Classroom Pedagogies in Public Schools*. Doctoral Dissertation. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK.
- Simpson, A. (2014). *Mohawk Interruptus: Political life across the borders of settler states*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- St. Denis, V., & Schick, C. (2003). Critical autobiography in integrative antiracist pedagogy. In L. Biggs & P. Downe (Eds.), *Gendered intersections: An introduction to women's and gender studies* (pp. 387-392). Halifax, NS, Canada: Fernwood.
- Thobani, S. (2011). *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON.
- Williams, A. (Producer and Director). (2015). *The Pass System*. [Documentary]. Tamarak Productions, Canada.