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## Complicated pathways: settler Canadians learning to re/frame themselves and their relationships with Indigenous peoples

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler society in Canada has been profoundly shaped and affected by the ongoing and insidious processes of settler colonialism operating within all spheres of mainstream life. Indigenous peoples, grassroots activists, universities, NGOs, church groups and governments have organized many initiatives to educate and provide information to settler Canadians about colonial histories and the contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. This paper introduces a research project which draws together many such initiatives in a website *Transforming Relations*. Through an analysis of the compiled initiatives, the complexities of transforming settler consciousness in Canada are demonstrated and discussed. Shifting settler consciousness has complex layers that must be engaged in order to disrupt the settler colonial status quo. We conclude that many initiatives are focused on changing awareness or consciousness and may not go further to name contemporary manifestations of settler colonialism where settler Canadians are positioned as its beneficiaries. The paper reflects on the need for analysis to understand what kinds of spaces and pedagogies lead to the most substantial shifts in settler consciousness, and how to effectively generate conversations that center Indigenous lands, sovereignties and resurgence.

### KEYWORDS

Settler colonialism; settler consciousness; reconciliation; critical education; anti-oppressive education

When Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on Indian Residential Schools concluded its work in December 2015 and left behind 94 'Calls to Action', the Government of Canada stated its intent to implement them.<sup>1</sup> It is too tempting to think we have entered a unique moment in the history of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada. When the newly elected Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, in his 16 December 2015 speech to Assembly of First Nations Chiefs, committed to working in partnership with First Nations on a Nation-to-Nation basis,<sup>2</sup> those aware of Indigenous-non-Indigenous historical relations could not help but be reminded of those throughout history who had developed personal relationships with First Nations, who had made agreements based on mutual understandings, and whose efforts to enact good intentions<sup>3</sup> were swept away by

the structures, processes, values, greed and actions of the settler colonial state, its industrial capitalist economic imperatives and its well-indoctrinated citizens.

The discourse of 'reconciliation' has become widespread in Canadian society in the last decade and has gained considerable momentum with the interim and final reports of the TRC. 'Reconciliation' has been extensively critiqued by Indigenous scholars and allies who have dismissed the term as a romantic attempt to smooth over Indigenous-settler relationships while leaving the status quo untouched.<sup>4</sup> Haudenosaunee scholar Taiaiake Alfred has advocated 'restitution' as a first step and many have pointed to resolving the occupation of Indigenous lands by Canada as central to any process of real change.<sup>5</sup>

There is strong evidence to suggest that these fears are well-founded. During the 2015 federal election, when the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations appealed to Canadians to 'close the gap', many Canadians saw the possibility of change in providing more financial resources to create equality in education, child welfare, housing, clean water access and jobs. Equality is a comfortable discourse in the Canadian lexicon. It is compatible with human rights and the 'peace-maker' myth that are part of Canadians' self-image.<sup>6</sup> As evidenced by the current eagerness of Canadians to welcome Syrian refugees, many Canadians readily embrace the role of 'helper'. Less comfortable – if not unthinkable – is the entanglement of Canadians in colonial violence, the removal of Indigenous people from ancestral homelands and the perpetuation of cultural genocide.<sup>7</sup> In an interview following the release of the TRC Report, it was telling to hear a media host begin questioning with the statement that many Canadians do not see a connection between themselves and Indian Residential Schools because that happened so long ago.

What will help shift the consciousness of contemporary Canadians to a new story, where Canadians recognize and acknowledge themselves as occupiers of Indigenous homelands, perpetrators of cultural genocide and sustainers of settler colonial practices in the present? Contemplating the difficulty of this task is not new theoretical terrain. 'Colonial mentality' has been well analyzed by Indigenous people; Marxists, cultural critics, critical theorists, anti-colonial theorists and anti-oppression educators have documented and analyzed the saturation of consciousness by hegemonic narratives of the colonial or settler colonial state. In the settler colonial context, we are faced with the daunting task of excavating the deep conditioning that settler scholar Paulette Regan refers to as a process of 'unsettling the settler within',<sup>8</sup> particularly as it manifests itself in the engagement of Canadians in their daily lives, wherein Indigenous peoples may be rendered invisible.

What decades of academic analysis reveal is that providing education and information to settler Canadians is not sufficient to shift the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settler colonial society.<sup>9</sup> Canadians have a deep emotional and cultural investment in the status quo and are the beneficiaries of past and present injustices, particularly with respect to the occupation of Indigenous lands which settlers consider to be their own.

Aleut scholar Eve Tuck and settler scholar K. Wayne Yang maintain that decolonization has one central meaning: returning the land.<sup>10</sup> As Mississauga scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has observed, 'Land is an important conversation for Indigenous peoples and Canada to have because land is at the root of our conflicts.'<sup>11</sup> If Canadians are to move toward concrete conversations about land, there is an important foundation to be laid. It will require a significant re-shaping of settler consciousness and the deep attachments that construct Canadian identities.

Insights from anti-racist, anti-oppressive pedagogical practices point to the emotional-ity of learning in which one's own investments and identities are called into question and the need to embrace a 'pedagogy of discomfort'.<sup>12</sup> Speaking in an anti-racist education context, Robin DiAngelo talks about 'white fragility' which includes a sense of entitlement to racial comfort.<sup>13</sup> Roger Simon raises questions about how settler people hear the stories of Indigenous peoples and the pedagogical challenge of avoiding reiterations of colonial discourses and simple storylines of victimhood that position Indigenous peoples as objects of pity.<sup>14</sup> Lenapé-Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion points to the difficulty that teachers face in recognizing their own implication in the oppression of Indigenous people when they are to teach contemporary First Nations materials. Taken together, the pedagogical literature points to the complexity of changing the consciousness of Canadians so that they hear and understand the voices of Indigenous peoples.<sup>15</sup>

The literatures on alliance building and solidarities emphasize the importance of learning and self-education as a critical part of the relationship process. Indigenous activists, community leaders and scholars have often commented on the need for non-Indigenous people to confront the racism and ignorance that flow out of the narrative, economic, political and geo-spatial structures of Canadian settler colonial society.<sup>16</sup> Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, organizations and communities have taken on this task of educating inside and outside the academy. The paper presented here represents a collaboration; it has been prepared by one Anishinaabe scholar (Cherylanne James) and five settler Canadians.

This paper addresses some of the complexities of challenging settler consciousness by reporting on a project that has documented many initiatives and events underway which are aimed at changing the way in which Canadians think about historical and contemporary Indigenous–non-Indigenous relationships. Initially, it was developed as a class project in a fourth-year undergraduate course called 'Transforming Settler Consciousness' in the Indigenous Studies Department, Trent University, Canada. We will describe the project including the *Transforming Relations* website and share our initial analysis of the entries, in particular the unsettling questions that come to mind for us in trying to think through what it means to take up historic and generational responsibilities in intervening in the narratives that sustain settler colonial mechanisms.

## Introduction to the research

The research project emerged from fluid, transformational discussions in 2014 by six senior undergraduates and a faculty member in exploring the concepts of 'settler colonialism' and 'settler consciousness'.<sup>17</sup> The research was born in exchanges that questioned what is taught as truth in schools, and how we understand our implication in the continuing legacy of colonization and in histories that have long been silenced. As these conversations deepened, we committed to creating the website entitled *Transforming Relations: A Snapshot of Initiatives which Create Space for the Transformation of Settler Consciousness*. The website concept emerged from a gap in research on settler consciousness observed by settler scholars Davis and Hiller, namely, that the many initiatives which work to engage Canadians in the process of transforming consciousness, had yet to be centrally compiled, a necessary first step in analyzing educational interventions. Thus our task became to document initiatives being undertaken that

attempt to reshape settler historic consciousness and transform Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations.

The *Transforming Relations* website currently documents over 200 initiatives undertaken by various parties to change the understandings of non-Indigenous people in Canada about Indigenous peoples, the historical unfolding of colonialism, and settler colonialism as it exists in Canadian society today. The website is updated and expanded annually by the ‘Transforming Settler Consciousness’ class at Indigenous Studies, Trent University. In the following discussion, we will share some decision points encountered in the website development process and how they were negotiated by the research team.

### Arriving at a definition of ‘transforming settler consciousness’

Over the course of the research process the class arrived at a definition, or a current understanding, of what the ‘transformation of settler consciousness’ means and entails for purposes of the website. Our working definition is grounded in the writings of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, including Patrick Wolfe, Paulette Regan and Susan Dion, and their explorations of settler colonialism and settler consciousness. It is also informed by our previous knowledge of Indigenous–non-Indigenous alliances scholarship.

This understanding is firmly rooted in Wolfe’s conception of settler colonialism as a continuing structure in which all contemporary institutions are based, as opposed to an event beginning and ending in the past.<sup>18</sup> Regan builds on this understanding of settler colonialism in *Unsettling the Settler Within*, in which she examines how this structure is perpetuated and sustained. She argues that settler consciousness, which permeates nearly every aspect of mainstream society, has allowed colonial practices and narratives to remain dominant within Canada. It is from Regan’s work that we draw our understanding of settler consciousness as the narratives, practices and collective Canadian identity that are based solidly in a foundation of national historical myths.<sup>19</sup> These myths, and the attitudes and ideologies they engender, pervade all institutions and all spheres of society. Upon examination, it is easy to see them upheld and reproduced within the public education system, through the media, and in government policy. In *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples’ Experiences and Perspectives*, Dion’s research within the Canadian public school system examines how educational institutions in particular are sites where settler consciousness is nurtured, and colonial narratives are rigorously cultivated.<sup>20</sup> Dion also describes the school system as a place of historical erasure, where counter-narratives are denied space, and countless stories are silenced.

Regan explains how it is easier for settlers to live in denial than to unlearn ‘truths’ and engage with counter-narratives – an inherently uncomfortable and unsettling process. From this understanding we, like Regan, began to wonder how to create conditions in which individuals choose to engage and act, instead of deny.<sup>21</sup> Where are the spaces where counter-narratives are valued? Where are the spaces in which Canadian history is being re-storied? Dion’s and Regan’s works helped us to understand where in our society settler consciousness is reproduced, and interestingly in our research, many of these sites were also spaces where we saw the potential to confront and interrupt the structures that sustain settler consciousness.

Equally important to our understanding of transforming settler consciousness was Davis’ (2010) *Alliances: Re/envisioning Indigenous-non-Indigenous Relationships*, which

demonstrates the complexity of Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations in contemporary Canada.<sup>22</sup> Her work sheds light on the dangers that can arise from even the best intentioned deeds when they are not rooted in a critical, self-reflexive consciousness and understanding of history, and how instead they can perpetuate and deepen paternalistic colonial relationships, often causing more harm than good.

Informed by this scholarly work, as well as by our own processes of transformation, and by our research up to that point, we collaboratively crafted the following definition. Our current understanding of transforming settler consciousness is:

- Creating narratives, processes and practices that hold settlers accountable to their responsibilities as beneficiaries of colonization, both historic and ongoing.
- Naming and upsetting the status quo, and challenging the power dynamics that perpetuate settler colonialism.
- Building just and decolonized relationships with Indigenous peoples, the land, and all beings.
- Engaging in an ongoing, complex and dynamic process grounded in a lifetime commitment, which occurs at the level of the individual, family, community and nation.

We are cognizant that the process of transforming settler consciousness embodied in our definition is not synonymous with, nor is it sufficient for, decolonization. Regan writes that critical self-reflection must be paired with action or else settlers risk never moving beyond guilt and shame, and settler consciousness and all it entails will continue to be perpetuated.<sup>23</sup> This being said, we understand the transformation of settler consciousness to be an uncomfortable but necessary *first* step in a lifelong and urgent journey of dismantling colonial systems and structures.

## Research process

The research responsibilities were divided into categories, which reflected the areas of Canadian society thought to be important sites of reproducing settler consciousness. Our foci included: law, arts, business, media and education. Within these broad areas, which guided our research, we documented individual initiatives ranging from workshops, conferences and art exhibitions, to elementary school curriculum reforms and faith-based efforts toward reconciliation.

Information was collected largely through online research, primarily using blogs, social media and the websites of different organizations and agencies. Current newspaper and media pieces, as well as follow-up phone discussions were also employed to ensure all archived information was up-to-date and relevant. We attempted to answer a number of initial questions about each initiative we sought to document. Information we hoped to ascertain included what the initiative involved and what its goals were, who was behind it and from what context it had emerged, what its duration was, who was targeted by it, what pedagogy or methods were employed, and, if applicable, what next steps could be taken.

A WordPress website was created as a publically accessible format to house and present our final research, and a system of easily navigable ‘tags’ have been used to categorize all of the initiatives documented since the project began.

## Research issues

A major hurdle in the research process was accepting the limitations of the tight four-month timeframe for the project and the impossibility of developing an exhaustive collection in its initial development. Further, some areas and types of initiatives had to be excluded. The first restriction was to limit the geographical scope of the research. As our primary focus was the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in contemporary Canadian society, we chose initiatives taking place within Canadian borders, despite our acknowledgment of borders as colonial constructs, and the fact that the work of the documented initiatives often transcended them. We also chose not to include resources, but to focus exclusively on initiatives such as programs or events. We recognized the impracticality of documenting the infinite variety of books, films and articles related to settler consciousness and Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, and saw value in collecting initiatives that interested individuals could join or replicate.

An additional issue we faced as our research progressed was the variable level of comprehensiveness of the sources available. Some websites, particularly those tied to initiatives led by government or well-established organizations, provided a wealth of information, while others lacked even the basic information we hoped to confirm for each initiative. This was especially the case for one-off events, where sometimes even contact information was difficult to determine, let alone the ideological underpinnings, background, or sources of funding of the groups and organizations carrying out the initiatives. This disparity created an unevenness in the level of detail provided from entry to entry.

Keeping the website updated is an ongoing challenge. New initiatives are born and others expire. In the wake of the TRC, there is a groundswell of grassroots activities with a reconciliation focus. The website remains embedded in the 'Transforming Settler Relations' course where it is updated and built upon by class members annually. Designing pedagogical opportunities for students to engage critically with the website is still a work-in-progress.

## Profile of the website

By May 2015, there were over 200 catalogued initiatives that work toward the transformation of settler consciousness inventoried on the *Transforming Relations* website. In order to create a straightforward user interface for website visitors, students grouped initiatives based on both category and duration. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the breakdown of initiatives based on duration, and [Figure 2](#) outlines the primary categories of initiatives.<sup>24</sup>

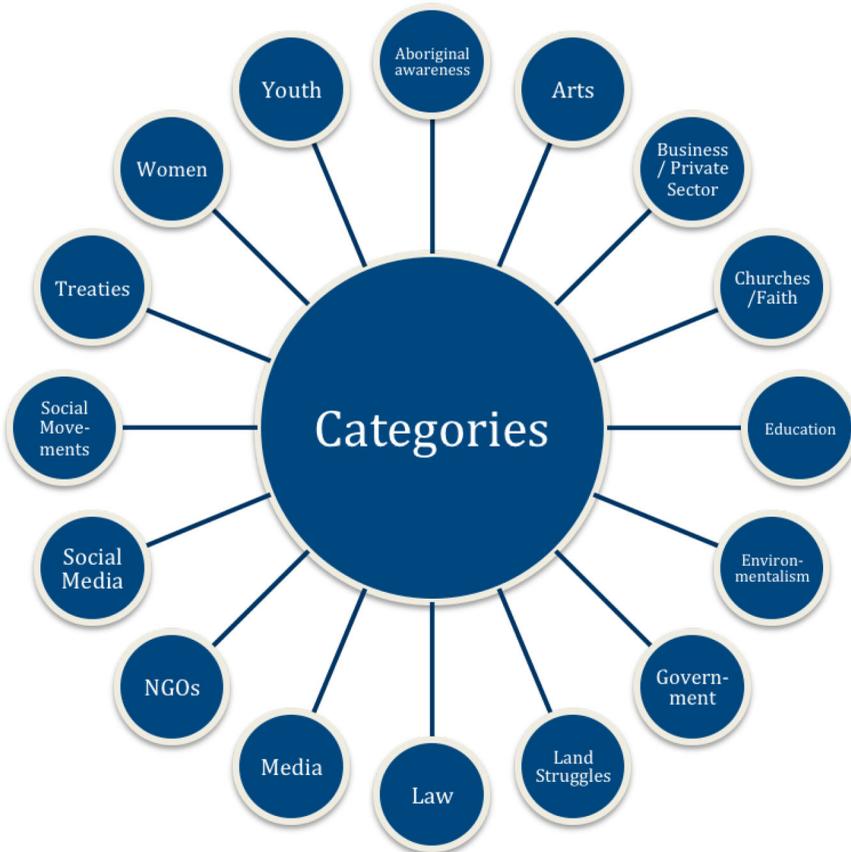
While there were 16 main categories of initiatives, we found that many initiatives spanned multiple categories and approached the transformation of settler consciousness through pathways that could not be fit into a single category. Therefore, we opted to categorize most initiatives into multiple categories. The total number of initiatives per category, including those that are cross-categorized, can be seen in [Figure 3](#).

## Analysis of initiatives

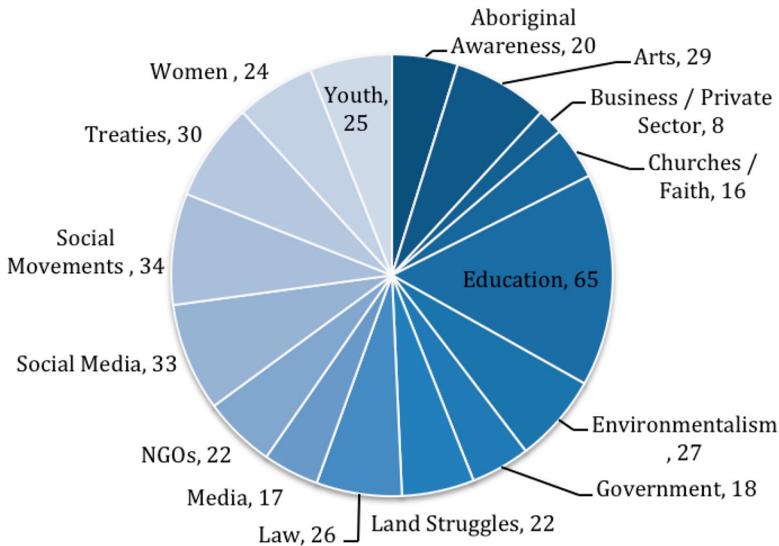
Decisions to compile the initiatives and create the website were motivated by the perceived need to establish a research data base to analyze settler Canadian consciousness,



**Figure 1.** Duration of initiatives.



**Figure 2.** Main categories of initiatives.



**Figure 3.** Number of initiatives per category.

the narratives that sustain settler colonialism, and the potential points of intervention in bringing about change. Here we are presenting the results of a first analysis of the collection.<sup>25</sup> Twenty-five initiatives<sup>26</sup> documented on the *Transforming Relations* website, including art installations, Canada-wide organizations and youth-led conferences, were assessed in an attempt to answer the following critical questions:

- How are non-Indigenous identities constructed and non-Indigenous people positioned?
- How are histories constructed and mobilized?
- Are settler colonial positionalities being challenged, and if so, in what ways?
- What discourses are being drawn upon to construct arguments and frame issues?

It is important to emphasize that our findings are based strictly on our interpretations of publically available information, and not upon the experiences of those who have been involved with the organizations or participated in the events we analyzed. However, this baseline analysis has provided us with enough information to identify emergent patterns and to note some concerns. We immediately recognized how seldom the language and understanding of ‘settler’ as advanced in settler colonial studies are actually employed; this discourse appeared to be used by a relatively small group of academics and more radical activist groups. The initiatives we analyzed draw upon many other, often conflicting, discourses to frame the issues they address. We identified many examples that relied upon a social justice or liberal discourse, while others applied language of reconciliation, cross-cultural awareness, anti-racism, human rights, Indigenous resurgence, environmentalism, decolonization, anti-colonialism, feminism, nationalism and neoliberalism.

Examples of education-focused initiatives are many, including First Story Toronto’s cell-phone App using geo-spatial technologies to help people access the Indigenous story of the land now occupied by Toronto. CBC Reporter Duncan McCue (Anishinaabe) has

created the 'Reporting in Indigenous Communities' website to help reporters do more Indigenous-focused stories with stronger and more culturally appropriate analytical skills. The provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan have both introduced 'We Are All Treaty People' curriculum beginning in kindergarten.

We noted the rapid pace at which the framing of initiatives evolves, and how different discourses, or individual words and phrases, become more salient at particular moments in time. For example, two years ago when the compilation of initiatives began, the word 'reconciliation' appeared so infrequently in the research that we did not even use it as a reference category on the *Transforming Relations* website. In contrast nearly all of the most recent additions to the collection, posted in the spring of 2016, either focus on or make mention of reconciliation. Following the conclusion of the TRC in 2015, the discourse of reconciliation is clearly having its 'moment'. Whether bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Reconciliation Canada's diverse educational experiences or engaging school children in Project of Heart's arts-based activities in relation to residential schools, reconciliation projects and activities are flourishing in Canada.

While this sample analysis allowed us to make note of these discursive patterns, it did not provide us with concrete answers regarding the ideal political, ideological or pedagogical approaches for achieving the goal of transforming settler consciousness as it is embodied in our definition. Instead, the analysis unearthed a multitude of tensions, concerns and questions.

## Tensions

### *Language use*

As noted above, very few of the initiatives employ the term 'settler' in reference to non-Indigenous Canadians, and many do not explicitly refer to colonization. The label of 'settler' can be deeply discomfiting and at times defensively dismissed, often by individuals who have not yet embarked on a journey to transform their own consciousness but also by some who choose not to use the term because of the negative reaction of others.<sup>27</sup> However we found that when this language is not specifically employed, critical insights about the nature and workings of settler colonial society are lost, and liberal discourses based in notions of equality and social justice persist. While this framing may draw many people toward an issue or encourage participation in an event, it does not position non-Indigenous Canadians as beneficiaries of colonization; nor does it imply specific responsibilities and commitments on the part of non-Indigenous Canadians to challenge or undo current colonizing practices or structures. Such omissions severely limit the transformative potential of initiatives, such as Project of Heart where teachers or facilitators may take the classroom discussion and activities in any number of directions, depending upon the facilitator's own understanding and analysis of the Canadian settler state.

Conversely, a group or organization that has mastered the art of using decolonial rhetoric, without demonstrating the necessary accompanying action, further illuminates the tension that exists between the relative importance of language use and taking appropriate substantive action. Groups using the 'right' language and claiming allyship without earning that claimed identity through committed action risk further entrenching colonial

relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. While it is not the responsibility of Indigenous peoples to educate settlers, consultation and engagement with Indigenous peoples remains crucial. Moving forward with actions based on well-meaning assumptions, or speaking on behalf of Indigenous peoples is extremely problematic.

### *Role of Indigenous peoples in settler education and transformation*

The second tension revealed through the analysis is inextricable from the first. Experiential learning that involves being in relationship with Indigenous peoples, entering Indigenous spaces, and participating in ceremonies, teachings and on-land activities, is an undeniably rich source of learning and decentering for non-Indigenous Canadians. Non-Indigenous people are often invited to participate in direct action activities of Indigenous peoples such as in the Tsleil-Waututh Nation's opposition of the Kinder Morgan pipeline expansion in their traditional territories or the biannual River Runs organized by Grassy Narrows First Nation to publicize mercury-poisoning from the waters of their polluted river. Yet, a tension exists in knowing how big a role Indigenous peoples should play in settler education, and in striking a balance between, on the one hand, learning from Indigenous peoples, knowledge and pedagogies, and on the other, settlers taking responsibility for their own education and unlearning of dominant narratives and histories. Finding ways to include Indigenous voices and perspectives respectfully without burdening Indigenous peoples is a balance to be considered.

### *Being critical without undermining importance of initiatives*

Each initiative represents a complex mix of perspectives, ideologies and voices. In some initiatives conflicting discourses, such as reconciliation and nationalism, are simultaneously being drawn upon to construct arguments and frame solutions. A third tension emerged in navigating how to raise critical questions about initiatives that circulate problematic or harmful discourses, and position non-Indigenous peoples in ways that leave settler privilege and power untouched, without undermining the value of these initiatives and the important momentum behind them, especially when they are Indigenous-led or supported.

## **Concerns**

### *Intent*

We questioned the focus and goals of a number of the initiatives analyzed, registering our concern that they were not implemented to address the needs of Indigenous peoples, or to offer the support that Indigenous communities are actually seeking. In particular, initiatives that discuss reconciliation without using the language of colonialism often use the rhetoric of 'moving forward' for the benefit of 'everyone' or 'all Canadians', and speak of closing the door on a dark chapter of history without addressing the underlying issues and contemporary ramifications. This could well be the case in some of the government and corporate cultural competency training programs that impart a narrow range of information at a very basic level in a short period of time. In their initial formulation, church

apologies for residential schools were unlikely to make the link to the larger agenda of colonization, although more recent initiatives that follow-up on apologies have explicitly included themes related to Indigenous lands and sovereignty. The experiential ‘blanket exercise’ developed by KAIROS is a strong positive example of this shift in discourse.

### *No challenge to settler positionality*

Very few of the initiatives address questions of land reclamation, reparations, Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction, or Canadian sovereignty on stolen Indigenous lands, a finding echoed in the research of Denis and Bailey with self-identified allies involved in reconciliation processes.<sup>28</sup> The majority focused on liberal goals of ‘raising awareness’ or imparting information, positioning settlers as consumers of information, and establishing awareness raising as the end game. Initiatives like these do not address identity or privilege, nor do they confront settler positionalities or hold settlers accountable. As Tuck and Yang advance, critical consciousness does not in itself rectify the occupation of Indigenous lands by the settler colonial state.<sup>29</sup>

In Canada, a significant issue is the large number of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women (MMIW). On the *Transforming Relations* website, there are many initiatives that have been developed to push for a public inquiry into the MMIW, to honor the women and their families, and to work to end racist, gender-based violence. While this work is led first and foremost by Indigenous women’s organizations, MMIW organizers have attracted many allies who come out to rallies, lobby politicians and donate funds toward this cause. In fact, a public inquiry has now been called by the current federal government as a result of these relentless efforts. Given the diverse discourses at play around this issue, however, it is possible to participate in such protest and solidarity initiatives with a feminist, anti-racist or human rights analysis without necessarily grasping Indigenous understandings of the larger settler colonial context in which MMIW is embedded. Such discourses do not challenge settler positionalities in any fundamental way.

Furthermore, all 25 of the initiatives analyzed invited participation, but most required no further commitment once the workshop, performance or lecture drew to a close. Our concern is that initiatives posing no challenge to settler positionality become just one more way for settlers to move to innocence, achieving redemption through the act of listening.<sup>30</sup> In this moment of reconciliation, the TRC has opened up a range of possibilities for engagement by Canadians. However, without the critical learning and unlearning necessary to unsettle Canadian identities and name settler colonialism, reconciliation initiatives may succeed in making settlers feel good about themselves while failing to promote substantive change.

## **Questions**

### *How do we move beyond the easy shifts?*

We recognize that many of the initiatives position settlers as knowledge gatherers who are invited to make easy or superficial shifts in the process of settler transformation. Critical educators recognize that learning is an individual journey, with insights gained over time through many different critical turning points. If gaining new knowledge or

perspectives, or interrogating a certain concept for the first time, represents an unsettling moment of insight, then initiatives facilitating these easier shifts are crucial for Canadians to experience, especially for those just beginning to acknowledge settler colonialism and consciousness. However, we worry whether or not these easier shifts in understanding will have the power to facilitate greater, more substantive shifts in the future. Most importantly, we question how to foster movement toward the next stage of thought and action in the transformation process, in which the realities of settler colonialism and consciousness are understood plainly, and the land and Indigenous sovereignty are central to discussions of reconciliation.

### ***What constitutes a challenge to settler colonial positionalality?***

We questioned how we would recognize a challenge to settler positionality when we saw it, and by what criteria such an occurrence could be measured. Is it enough to hear the 'truth' about residential school history or the history of colonialism? Is it enough for settlers to recognize Indigenous territory? To grapple with their own implication in history? To support Indigenous struggles to alter the way things are? To actively interrupt and challenge processes that recreate settler privilege and Indigenous dispossession? To work on issues of restitution and returning land and land access?

In particular, we were left questioning whether the centering of Indigenous perspectives and leadership, and the related decentering of settler narratives, is in itself unsettling or transformational. If these processes of centering and decentering are two necessary pieces of the same transformational puzzle, how do we get to the stage where settlers are both engaging with and centering Indigenous knowledge and narratives (learning) while *simultaneously* deconstructing settler identities (unlearning), and actively challenging settler colonial practices of Indigenous displacement and settler encroachment?<sup>31</sup>

### **Other thoughts about settler Canadians learning about and from Indigenous peoples**

Behind each of the initiatives collected in the *Transforming Relations* website, there is an individual or team of organizers with particular intentions. Many of the organizers are Indigenous and/or settler Canadian educators or activists. One of the findings in alliances research is that alliances and coalitions are sites of learning and transformation, particularly for non-Indigenous people. Davis and Shpuniarsky<sup>32</sup> have documented that alliance building brings settler Canadians into contact with Indigenous spiritual ceremonies, protocols and cultural practices, opening their eyes and minds to other ways of being in the universe. Such contact also brings challenges to the Canadian narratives that undergird Canadian historical consciousness. Rick Wallace has also documented three important case studies where transformations in learning were evident as non-Indigenous individuals engage in solidarity actions in Grassy Narrows, Kenora and Nawash in Ontario, Canada.<sup>33</sup> Chris Hiller's research on learning amongst non-Indigenous activists who work on Indigenous land issues points to an ongoing process of transformation with critical moments of insight which propel a lifelong learning process.<sup>34</sup>

In 2014–2015, Davis conducted a pilot project to understand in more depth how activists involved in long-term solidarity work might think about their own learning

through the actions that they undertake over time.<sup>35</sup> She invited members of a social justice group to reflect on what they had learned over 20 years of solidarity work on various Indigenous issues. In a focus group, she asked participants to talk about specific events, individuals or issues that had changed their understanding of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations. She wanted to know how their perspectives may have shifted over time, whether there were perspectives that caused them discomfort, and how their changed understandings may have been brought into their personal lives.

From this early analysis, there were two findings that gave pause. The first is what Davis terms, ‘My brother-in-law said that ...’ Often, the participants would reference conversations that had taken place with family and friends who seemed to be particularly persuasive sources. This phenomenon points to the dynamic construction and circulation of settler colonial narratives that are ongoing through various media, through family conversations, through print materials and through educational activities. One of the participants summed up the group conversation by reflecting that we get information from many different sources. This observation references that counter-narratives exist in a sea of many voices. What voices are given enough credence to effect change?

The second point is that despite providing deep analyses and insightful critiques of Canadian society, participants did not talk about themselves as beneficiaries of Indigenous dispossession from their homelands. The settler colonial literature, particularly Veracini, Regan, Tuck and Yang, Wolfe, and Hiller all comment on settler moves to innocence and the potency of settler colonial narratives to distract attention away from one’s own implication in the status quo.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, one of the successes of settler colonialism is its power to ‘naturalize’ settlers to the land while invisibilizing Indigenous peoples.<sup>37</sup> This pervasive power of settler colonial narratives was evident in this group interview. Certainly solidarity work events, guest speakers and educational materials were important for effecting shifts in understanding for members of this focus group. But learning is not confined to a narrow site of change. Change takes place within the pervasiveness of settler colonial narratives that obscure the seams of their own construction.<sup>38</sup>

While taken together, the large number of diverse initiatives collected on the *Transforming Relations* website offers the suggestion of momentum for change, we cannot lose sight of the need to ‘unsettle’ the settler colonial logic, narratives and practices embedded in everyday life. This pilot project helped to clarify that further research needs to explore the dynamic interplay of forces that impact the complex layers of settler consciousness transformation. Of particular relevance is research that points to the simultaneous processes of learning and unlearning that are engaged in any ongoing journey of decolonization and change.<sup>39</sup> Although writing in a non-Indigenous context, Margaret Heffernan’s work on ‘wilful blindness’ is instructive in understanding the ways in which one turns away from truths that are before our eyes but which are unsettling or disturbing.<sup>40</sup> Paulette Regan has offered a very insightful analysis of the pedagogical process and the discomfort of learning, following Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas’ work on a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’.<sup>41</sup> These are important theoretical resources in exploring the challenges of transforming settler consciousness and disrupting settler colonialism.

## Conclusion

The final point in our definition of transforming settler consciousness states that it requires 'engaging in an ongoing, complex, and dynamic process grounded in a lifetime commitment, which occurs at the level of the individual, family, community, and nation'. Each of the initiatives documented on the *Transforming Relations* website represent entry points to different stages in this unfolding process, not panaceas for transformation in and of themselves. Our analysis showed that most of these initiatives represent early 'learning' stages, and that a disconnect exists between these and later stages that actually confront settler positionalities and privilege.

The need remains for a more nuanced examination of the documented initiatives in order to more fully explore the tensions and concerns we have noted, and to continue to grapple with the questions we have posed. Furthermore, more work is necessary to assess the actual impact of initiatives; which have catalyzed further action and which are dead ends. Despite the claims or the language employed by each initiative, it remains to be seen whether or not they have created the critical spaces necessary to engage people, hold settlers accountable and challenge the colonial status quo. Three years later, *Transforming Relations* remains a collection of initiatives featuring a variety of different voices and approaches. As conversations regarding decolonization and reconciliation continue to grow, these initiatives will remain valuable points of entry for those embarking on journeys to transform settler consciousness.

The study of 'transforming settler consciousness' is unfolding through different disciplines through the study of the complex psychological and sociological demands involved in shifting the way the beneficiaries of colonization come to see their place in relationship to Indigenous peoples. Further research is needed to understand the conditions that help settlers turn toward, and acknowledge, their own implication in the settler colonial project. Understanding such conditions is crucial to creating a pedagogy that brings about change rather than denial or paralyzing guilt. The *Transforming Relations* website bears witness to the current momentum in organizing educational opportunities and creating spaces where settler consciousness can be engaged with and named; it is imperative that this momentum be strategically analyzed. It is necessary that future efforts seek to understand the conditions that allow the move from simply acknowledging, to meaningfully transforming settler consciousness, in a way that furthers processes of decolonization and supports Indigenous resurgence and nationhood.

## Notes

1. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls for Action can be found at [http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf). Prime Minister Trudeau's response can be found at <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2015/12/15/statement-prime-minister-release-final-report-truth-and-reconciliation-commission> (accessed September 21, 2016).
2. Prime Minister Trudeau's speech can be found at <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/prime-minister-justin-trudeau-delivers-speech-assembly-first-nations-special-chiefs-assembly> (accessed September 21, 2016).
3. Celia Haig-Brown and David Nock, *With Good Intentions: Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal Relations in Colonial Canada* (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2009).
4. Victoria Freeman provides an interesting overview of critiques of 'reconciliation' in Victoria Freeman, 'In Defence of Reconciliation', *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence* 27 (2014): 213–23.

5. Taiaiake Alfred, 'Restitution is the Real Pathway to Justice for Indigenous Peoples', in *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey*, ed. Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Research Series (Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009), 181–7.
6. Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010).
7. The term 'cultural genocide' was used in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report (2015) to describe the Indian Residential School system.
8. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 83–110.
9. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*; Roger Simon, 'Towards a Hopeful Practice of Worrying: The Problematics of Listening and the Educative Responsibilities of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission' in *Reconciling Canada*, ed. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham. (Toronto: UTP, 2013), 129–42. Chris Hiller, 'Placing Ourselves in Relation: Euro-Canadian Narratives of Grappling with Indigenous Sovereignty, Title, and Territory' (PhD diss., Wilfred Laurier University, 2013).
10. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not A Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2007): 1–40.
11. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'Land and Reconciliation: Having the Right Conversations', in *Electric City Magazine*, ed. Gabe Pollock and David Tough (Peterborough, ON, 2016), 10. <http://www.electriccitymagazine.ca/2016/01/land-reconciliation>.
12. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 52; Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas, 'Discomforting Truths: The Emotional Terrain of Understanding Difference', in *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking Education for Social Change*, ed. Peter Pericles Trifonias (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 110–36.
13. Robin DiAngelo, 'White Fragility', *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.
14. Simon, 'Towards A Hopeful Practice of Worrying', 131.
15. Susan Dion, *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples' Experiences and Perspectives* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).
16. There are many examples of this kind of discussion, including Lynne Davis and Heather Shpu-niarsky, 'The Spirit of Relationships: What We Have Learned About Indigenous/non-Indigenous Alliances and Coalitions', in *Alliances: Re/Envisioning Indigenous-Non-Indigenous Relationships*, ed. Lynne Davis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 340–3; Regan, 'Unsettling the Settler Within', 228; Hiller, 'Placing Ourselves in Relation'; Gehl, 'Ally Bill of Responsibilities', [http://www.lynngehl.com/uploads/5/0/0/4/5004954/ally\\_bill\\_of\\_responsibilities\\_poster.pdf](http://www.lynngehl.com/uploads/5/0/0/4/5004954/ally_bill_of_responsibilities_poster.pdf) (accessed August 10, 2016).
17. The six undergraduate students were Brody Ferguson, Cherylanne James, Kristen Lloyd, Tessa Nasca, Sara Taylor, and Julian Tennant-Riddell (webmaster). The faculty member was Lynne Davis. One member of the team is Anishinaabe and the others settler Canadians. Members of subsequent website research teams are noted in the 'About Us' section of the website.
18. Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.
19. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 83–110.
20. Dion, *Braiding Histories*, 56–76.
21. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 41–2.
22. Lynne Davis, *Alliances: Re-Envisioning Indigenous-Non-Indigenous Relationships* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).
23. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 236–7.
24. Initiatives are added and deleted on a regular basis. These figures represent a snapshot of the website as of May 2015.
25. The analysis team consisted of Lynne Davis, Chris Hiller, Cherylanne James and Kristen Lloyd.
26. We choose the 25 entries most recently entered in the data base, as of December 2015. No other filtering criteria were used.
27. See Emma Lowman and Adam Barker's expansion on this topic in 'Why Say Settler?' *Settler Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing,

- 2015), 1–23. See also ‘Settler Anxieties’ in Corey Snelgrove, Rita Kaur Dhamoon and Jeff Corn-tassel, ‘Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 13–17.
28. Jeffrey S. Denis and Kerry A. Bailey, “‘You Can’t Have Reconciliation without Justice’: How Non-Indigenous Participants in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Process Understand their Roles and Goals’, in *Non-Indigenous Responsibility to Engage: Scoping Reconciliation and Its Alternatives*, ed. Tom Clark, Ravi Da Costa and Sarah Maddison (London: Springer, 2016).
  29. Tuck and Yang, ‘Decolonization is Not A Metaphor’, 19.
  30. *Ibid.*, 9.
  31. *Ibid.*
  32. Davis and Shpuniarisky, ‘The Spirit of Relationships’, 342.
  33. Rick Wallace, *Merging Fires: Grassroots Peacebuilding Between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Peoples* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2013).
  34. Hiller, *Placing Ourselves in Relation*.
  35. Lynne Davis, unpublished findings, 2015.
  36. Lorenzo Verracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*; Tuck and Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is Not A Metaphor’; Wolfe, ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’; and Hiller, *Placing Ourselves in Relation*.
  37. See Veracini’s discussion of settler indigenisation. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 31.
  38. Many critical and cultural scholars have built on Gramsci’s influential concept of ‘hegemony’ which outlines a theory of ‘rule by consent’ in which dominant classes through persuasive narratives in the ideological realm shape the ‘common sense’ of the people. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 12.
  39. A good example can be found in Hiller, *Placing Ourselves in Relation*.
  40. Margaret Heffernan, *Wilful Blindness* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2011).
  41. Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*; Boler and Zembylas, ‘Discomforting Truths’.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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