

} HEALING THE SICKNESS OF MENDACITY by Elaine Enns }

Crazy Horse, it says in my American Heritage, was “killed while resisting arrest.” Lies can make you crazy . . . The dictionary tells us the root for craze is krasa, Old Norse meaning “to shatter.” This is not a lie.

—CHRISTINA PACOSZ, *SOME WINDED, WILD BEAST*, 1985

IN PUBLIC SCHOOL, I learned that Canada had been “kinder” to Indigenous peoples compared to the U.S., evidenced by the relative lack of “Indian Wars.” Nineteenth century government policies, however, tell a different story.

I grew up in a tight-knit Mennonite community in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, about 72 km (45 miles) south of Reserve 107, a small government-allotted plot given to the Young Chippewyan Cree band in 1876 as part of Treaty Six. But less than a decade after the treaty was signed, the Department of Indian Affairs began withholding payments to Young Chippewyans, then ceased to recognize them as a band altogether. Another decade later, the government gave Reserve 107, without consultation or compensation, to settlers (predominately Mennonites). The Young Chippewyans became a landless and federally unrecognized band, and have been struggling ever since to expose and rectify this injustice.

Albert Snake, former Chief of the Young Chippewyan band, testified in 1955 that he “was about nine years old when [his] grandfather Chief Chippewyan advised [his] people to leave their reserve for the winter . . . because [he] was afraid they would have nothing to eat . . . They were not getting provisions promised by the treaty . . . [with] no sign of any coming when [they] left [their] reserve.” Two decades later, Snake requested the Minister of the Interior to review the Young Chippewyan land claim, insisting again that it was desperate hunger that originally drove his people off Reserve 107 in the 1880s. His claim was denied.

In April 2015, Young Chippewyan hereditary chief George Kingfisher addressed Rosthern Junior College. He began with this poignant statement: “I feel like a refugee in my own country.” For me, a grandchild of refugees (and a graduate of Rosthern College), his lament was particularly painful. I am reckoning with the fact that what I learned about colonization’s impact on Indigenous peoples – in school, from the media, and through my community’s narratives – were at best romanticized half-truths, at worst outright deceptions. Meanwhile, what I *didn’t* learn functioned to socialize me into ignorance regarding this continuing history. Both lies and silences have deeply distorted my settler consciousness.



What I didn’t learn in school socialized me into ignorance.



The early church, living under the shadow of the Roman Empire, understood Christian discipleship as a primal struggle against mendacity: “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge of the image of the Creator” (Colossians 3:9–10). It exhorts us to resist internalizing imperial fictions, and reproducing “pseudo-understandings” (the Greek verb is *pseudomai*) in our communities. Using the baptismal language of “changing clothes,” it calls us to defect from ideologies of supremacy and embrace a consciousness of the *imago Dei* in all people.

In our new book *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade, 2021),

1



Wilful ignorance.

Some scholars call this “agnosia.” We don’t know about past and present violations, don’t know what we don’t know, and don’t really care. This culture of unknowing pervades our educational, media, and family systems and narratives.

2



Personal dissociation.

Detachment from history – a uniquely North American conceit of settler colonialism – presumes an ahistorical individualism that understands the self as a free-floating entity, untethered and unaccountable to a past which is not “our fault,” and concerned chiefly with one’s personal future.

3



Inheritance without responsibility.

The past is accepted as a *fait accompli* about which we can do nothing. This is a convenient dodge for those who have inherited land and wealth wrested from Indigenous peoples by colonial force, theft and/or duplicity, denying that settler economic, social and political advantages were structured *through* this history, resulting in contemporary disparities between our prosperity and Indigenous marginalization.

This is the basic architecture of what Dina Gilio-Whitaker calls “settler fragility,” or the “need to distance oneself from complicity” and “the inability to talk about unearned privilege.” But there are also contrary strands of settler “knowing” that circulate among political conservatives and progressives which, though differing drastically, function similarly to impute innocence.



If conservatives allow that colonization “may have” resulted in some violence, their acknowledgments remain vague, followed immediately by versions of the following rationalizations:

4



Historical determinism.

Human and ecological harms were the inevitable and unavoidable “collateral damage” in the march of civilization (aka “progress”). Moreover, if “we” didn’t conquer, others would have, sometimes flip-pantly stated as: “We won, get over it.”

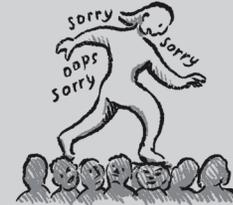
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Ideologies of supremacy.

Closely related are implicit or explicit beliefs in northern European racial, cultural, and technological superiority, which justify conquest *and* absolve us of transgression. White settlers are protagonists in a self-congratulatory narrative anchored in either theological or secular ideologies of “choseness.” How Indigenous hospitality and ingenuity facilitated European survival, and how colonial state subsidies and racial prioritizing advantaged white prosperity, are ignored.

6



Intent vs. Impact.

Any moral qualms about historical injustices are eclipsed by assertions that European colonization was/ is essentially “humane,” and that if damage occurred such was not the *intention*. Asserting intent over actual impact is what Robin DiAngelo calls “the foundation of white fragility.”

7



Fictimization.

This is when a group uses disingenuous arguments to claim they are the *real* victims – and is in the U.S. today a common strategy of the Alt-Right and Christian nationalism. A related expression is what social-psychologist John Mack calls “egoism of victimization,” in which a group that has experienced actual trauma (Mennonites historically, for example) is unable to empathize with the (often greater) losses of others.

On the liberal-left, the focus is not on denial of past or present injustice, but on “fixing” through critical consciousness.



8



Exoneration by conscientization.

“Progressive” academics and activists often imagine that reciting facts about past or present injustice, indicting the culpability of structures and regimes, and righteously denouncing them somehow affords us clemency. But Tuck and Yang warn that “decolonizing the mind” cannot “stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land.”

9



Scapegoating Christianity.

It is *de rigueur* to lay blame for all settler colonial pathologies and crimes over the last half-millennium at the doorstep of Christendom. But disowning Christian history and tradition does not exonerate us, nor change how settler colonialism has advantaged us whether religious or not. Settlers simply “washing their hands” of their culture’s conflicted religious history are of less help to Indigenous communities than those demanding accountability and restorative justice from their churches.

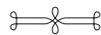
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Appropriation.

Too often the post-Christian void in settler “spirituality” circles is filled by arrogating Native culture and ritual. Using sage does not impute moral authority, nor relieve us of historical responsibility; it is another expression of colonial entitlement.

Coming to terms with our conscious (and especially our unconscious) reliance upon these kinds of moves to innocence is hard work. But our settler preoccupation with exoneration rather than liberation undermines “response-ability.” Though counterintuitive to an entitled people, the way to healing is through abandoning our personal and political innocence, in order to commit to “turning history around” – the root meaning of the old gospel call to repentance. This is the Great Physician’s strong medicine for those “who know they are sick” (Mark 2:17).



In a mendacious culture that makes us crazy, only “the truth can set us free” (John 8:32). But the process of uncovering that truth is so often excruciating. I awoke today to the shattering news that at least 750 unmarked graves of Indigenous children were found on the grounds of *another* former Indian Residential School – this time in Marieval, Saskatchewan. Such hauntings can only be healed by being faced: *our* settler discipleship of decolonization.

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This article is excerpted and adapted from Elaine Enns’ and Ched Myers’ new book, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade, 2021). Learn more at healinghauntedhistories.org.

