

“This Land Is Your Land”: What Americana Taught Me About Being Canadian

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In 1999, conflict broke out between the Mi'kmaq residents of Egenôpetitj, New Brunswick, and their Settler neighbours in Burnt Church. The catalyst was a Supreme Court ruling, which found that applying existing fisheries regulations to the Mi'kmaq people was unconstitutional, given their existing treaties with the Canadian government. As the people of Egenôpetitj fished, the people of Burnt Church protested, and the situation quickly escalated to violence on both sides. Cottages and sacred places were burnt, trucks and fishing equipment were destroyed.¹ The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and the Coast Guard later intervened, and their violence toward Indigenous fishermen and protesters was documented on local and national news.² Independent observers largely disregarded the stake that the people of Burnt Church had in the issue.³ Although negotiators on behalf of the federal government insisted that the dispute was about lobster fishing, for many locals it boiled down to identity, and a potentially revolutionary question—who *really* belongs on this land? The dispute lasted nearly three years. The fabric of the towns, according to some residents, remains permanently changed.⁴

The Burnt Church Crisis, while maybe an extreme example, is not unique. Questions of place and belonging are simmering across the Canadian landscape. The migratory increase has overtaken the natural increase in population.⁵ Meanwhile, of those who are born in Canada, Métis, First Nations, and Inuit people together make up the fastest growing population group.⁶ Increasingly, White Settler Canadians, and by this I mean White people who do not consider themselves immigrants to

Canada, myself included, will be confronted with what belonging to this place called ‘Canada’ really means. It is not the job of Indigenous people to make us Settlers feel at home, but most of us cannot “go back where we came from,” either. In order to move forward productively, we need to find a way to think about place that does not displace Indigenous peoples’ rights to the land. I do not have the answers. However, writing frankly about my own experience can be a step in a good direction.

I am a young, White, English-speaking, cisgender woman from an upper-middle class family, whose history in Canada began with the colonization of the Great Plains. In many ways, my background and my identity put me in an odd position to be writing about connection to place. I have never lived in one community for more than three consecutive years, have crossed the continent a couple of times, and have been “from” somewhere else since the moment I was born, in Vermont, to two Canadian parents. So, I cannot speak about the sense of place that comes from generations of connection. Nor can I truly understand the grief and trauma of displacement; because of my economic and racial privilege, all my moves have been voluntary and smooth. What I can do is reflect on what my experience of place might mean, by pointing out Settler identity as an unmarked category, by discussing how my sense of place interacts with my colonial past, and by considering the roles class and globalization play in the way I connect to place.

Of all the memories I could use to summarize these conflicted strata of local meaning, above all a song comes to mind: “This Land Is Your Land,” by Woodie Guthrie, written in 1940. The version I learned in my Texan third-grade class was an ode

to land and country, with undertones of Manifest Destiny. It begins,

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California, to the New York island;
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me.

I loved that song. I loved its suggestion that I could belong to the land simply because I was *there*. To a young Canadian who could remember nothing but the dry Texan landscape, Guthrie's song was a precious invitation, a permission slip to call this place mine. I was not the only one to take notice of that particular quality. In his book *Red Earth, White Lies*, influential Native American activist and intellectual Vine Deloria Jr. drew an explicit connection between the song, and the long-standing colonial myth of a North American Terra Nullius.⁷ Guthrie's tune also acquired surprising traction among my classmates, going through a series of playground permutations. One oddly violent version was especially popular. We chanted it from the tops of hills and plastic castles. It went:

This land is my land, and it's not your land
From California to the New York Island
And if you touch it, I'll shoot your butt off
This land was made for me not you.

My classmates and I had gone from Terra Nullius to violent conquest in less than a day.

Somehow, the new lyrics made their way to my parents, who gently explained to me that this land was not, in fact, made for me. It belonged to people who had lived here for a very long time before any White people arrived and forced them to leave on something called the Trail of Tears. In *The Complexity of Identity*, Beverly Tatum wrote that "in the areas where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment."⁸ For most of my life, most aspects of my identity have gone unmarked and unquestioned. The revelation I had because of Guthrie's song—that I am a Settler—made me scared, angry, and upset precisely because it was a revelation. Yes, I had been told that I was not Texan, or was not American. But at a very fundamental level, whether or not it was right for me to be *in* Texas, living the way I did, I had never questioned it. Canadi-

an identity is much the same. In her recent book *My Conversations with Canadians*, Sto:Lo nation writer Lee Maracle said, "It seems that the identity of Canadians is never up for question. [...] It is as if it does not matter whether or not Canadians have an identity. It does not seem that they need one. [...] The point that they are making is that my identity is violable."⁹ When Settlers think and talk about Canada, our role as Settler Canadians often goes unacknowledged or at least un-confronted. I do not remember much of how I reacted to the news that I am a Settler. I do remember horror, anger, and guilt. My immediate follow-up question was something along the lines of "but *we* didn't do that, right?"

I feel incredibly fortunate that I had the time to feel those things and ask that question as a child. By no means has it meant that I am or have always been fully lucid about my privilege, or been an effectively anti-racist and anti-colonial ally. I am increasingly aware many White Settlers do not get this chance. Consequently, they tend to respond to racial stress as adults without an adult-level of experience in managing those emotions, resulting in defensive modes that channel attention away from questions about their legitimacy. Robin diAngelo described this trend in their article "White Fragility," and it showed up clearly in the Burnt Church crisis.¹⁰ This was most obvious in the behaviour of the Canadian government, which attempted to avoid discussions of sovereignty and treaty rights by explicitly and implicitly removing them from legitimate discourse, and by constructing a focus on the issue of conservation instead.¹¹ These all serve the same function as the question that I posed as a child, hoping to absolve myself of any connection to the violent history of my home. They are defensive ways of saying "but that wasn't us. That isn't *me*." Saying this preserves the status quo, protecting individual Canadian Settlers from the need to re-evaluate their relationship with Canada and the legitimacy of Canadian hegemony. Before Settler Canadians can come to an understanding of our place on the land that does not rely on the absence of Indigenous people, we need to overcome this tendency to imagine ourselves as separate from history.

In preparation for this essay, I took a minute to look up "This Land Is Your Land" and discovered that the version I knew represented only about two thirds of the original song. When Guthrie wrote it, the tune was a commentary on the human costs of

rising income inequality and land privatization. It achieved fame when music producers stripped it of its Marxist overtures and marketed it to elementary schools as ideal material for an American musical education.¹² This brings me to another important aspect of my relationship to place: wealth and class. It is easy for me to say that Canadians need to overhaul their sense of place—I have never been bound to place in the same way many Canadians are. For the people of Burnt Church, place was not only about feeling at home, it was about livelihood.¹³ In a natural resource-based economy like that of Canada, their situation is likely not unique. Rural communities are often constructed as backwards places, resisting the modernizing power of urban culture.¹⁴ They are subjected to a process of “McDonaldization,” which seeks to make place largely interchangeable and comfortable for visitors.¹⁵ Although I would hardly call myself urban, it is hard to imagine that the ease with which I have made myself at home across continents is *not* a result of this same homogenization. However, many rural communities rightfully resist. I think the fact that I, the outsider, am never allowed to be “from here” is a small-scale example of this tendency to assert the distinctiveness of local identity. King also pointed out this resistance among the people of Burnt Church, who criticized the government of Canada for being distant, high-handed, and unconcerned with their needs. When I, a definite product of globalization, say simply that Canadians need to transform how they think about their place in Canada, am I not committing the same error of judgement as the Canadian activists in Burnt Church, who saw the non-Native residents as “peripheral”?¹⁶ In a way, making broad statements about the need for all Canadians to reform their relationship with the land is just another form of renouncing personal responsi-

bility. The people calling for reform are usually, like me, economically privileged, not reliant on the natural resource economy, and relatively mobile. They (we) will not suffer any material loss from saying that the land is not ours, and we transfer responsibility to the peripheral, “backwards” rural communities for whom the land has direct economic and emotional significance. Therefore, privileged White Settler narratives about *not* belonging to the land, while perhaps not so dependent on the silence of Indigenous peoples, instead create further inequality for rural Settlers without as much political or financial clout.

A truly productive approach to reforming ideas about place, I think, would not only incorporate the historical and continuing violence done to Indigenous peoples. It would also directly address the shared responsibility urban and multilocal settlers like myself have in dispossessing Indigenous people. It would recognize that simply letting go of place is probably not possible. I know that even for me, an apparently landless person, land has profound meaning. I feel myself to be composed of stratum from all of the places I have lived. I still feel Canadian, American, Texan, Quebecois, Maritimer, and the list goes on. Eradicating those identities in myself, and attempting to eradicate them in other people, is an unnecessary and counterproductive violence. Settlers have been here for too long to simply take back history, and attempting to do so risks severing rural identity and connection to place for the sake of another Canadian nationalist feel-good story that refuses to meaningfully address social inequality in its myriad forms. While this land might not have been made for me, I am here now. The next step is figuring out how to be here in the best way possible.

Notes

1. Sarah King J, *Fishing in Contested Waters: Place and Community in Burnt Church/Esgenoôpetitj* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 5.
2. Tim Fontaine, "Remembering the Mi'kmaq 'War' in the Waters," *APTN National News*, June 19, 2013, <http://aptnnews.ca/2013/06/19/remembering-the-mikmaq-war-in-the-waters/>; and Sandra Jordan, "Lobster Wars Enrage Indians," *The Guardian: International Edition*, September 3, 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/03/sandrajordan.theobserver>.
3. King, *Fishing in Contested Waters: Place and Community in Burnt Church/Esgenoôpetitj*, 155.
4. King, 163.
5. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, *Population Growth: Migratory Increase Overtakes Natural Increase*, October 9, 2014, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2014001-eng.htm>.
6. Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, *Population Growth*, 2006, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-645-x/2010001/growth-pop-croissance-eng.htm>.
7. Vine Deloria, *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997), 68.
8. B. D. Tatum, "The Complexity of Identity: 'Who Am I?'" in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Sexism, Anti-Semitism, Heterosexism, Classism, and Ableism*, ed. M. Adams et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.
9. Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians* (BookThug: Toronto, 2017).
10. Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011), 56–70.
11. King, *Fishing in Contested Waters*, 144.
12. Lynne Margolis, "Behind The Song: 'This Land Is Your Land,'" *American Songwriter*, June 28, 2012, <http://americansongwriter.com/2012/06/behind-the-song-this-land-is-your-land/>.
13. King, *Fishing in Contested Waters*.
14. Peter Vandergeest, and E. Melanie DuPuis. "Introduction," in *Creating the Countryside: The Politics of Rural and Environmental Discourse (Conflicts in Urban and Regional Development)*, ed. Melanie DuPuis and Peter Vandergeest (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).
15. King, *Fishing in Contested Waters*, 120.
16. King, 155.