“Social Media Full of Vitriolic Myths in the Aftermath of the Gerald Stanley Trial”

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> “Yet all those Natives seem to want more and more welfare and free shit. Got welfare? Thank a settler. Got clean water? Thank a settler. Got infrastructure? Thank a settler. Got a civilization? Thank a settler.”
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> “And if they were even a little bit grateful things would get better. Their kids get free post-secondary schooling and we’re paid lump sums of cash. Sounds like we purchased some real estate, with a payout that keeps going!”
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> “I don’t see any of them denied welfare. On the contrary they are rewarded via our tax dollars for every kid they have with different dads. That teaches the kids it’s ok to be a bum.”

As the above quotes show, social media posts on Facebook and Twitter, and online comments in the days since Gerald Stanley’s acquittal have been saturated with disturbing rants. Many of them are written by Canadians who — from my perspective as a researcher of Indigenous and settler history — are expressing anxiety that the privilege and comfort afforded them through our system of settler colonialism might be slipping away.

Rather than exploring the structures that have provided privileges to some while denying them to others, or finding ways to express empathy for those who are hurting, some Canadians are seeking solace in tired, hurtful and long discredited settler colonial myths.

These myths generally fall into two categories: Those we tell about ourselves, and those we tell about Indigenous people. Together they serve corrosive purposes that risk driving Indigenous and settler Canadians farther apart and making reconciliation ever more elusive.

Myth: Colonial discovery and settler destiny

Starting with the myth of the Doctrine of Discovery in the 15th century, settlers have rationalized that we could claim North American lands because Indigenous peoples somehow didn’t really own them.

This concept is principally based on the ethnocentric prejudice that Indigenous people did not look and act like Europeans. The British legal concept of *Terra Nullius*, which incorrectly defined tracts of North America as empty lands, reinforced the idea that Indigenous people had no right to the land.

In the United States, settlers invented the myth of Manifest Destiny: A God-given “obligation” to expand from the Atlantic coast to occupy and control the entire continent. As settlers transformed forests and plains into agricultural lands and won several strategic battles against

both European and Indigenous peoples, they reasoned their success was proof of America's right to displace Indigenous people.

In the late 19th century Social Darwinism helped to give such myths a degree of quasi-academic credibility. Scholars began describing the successful American expansion across western frontiers as a product of Anglo-American racial superiority.

In Canada, the mythology was similar. The biblically inspired name, "Dominion" of Canada, literally embodies the idea of settler Canada assuming God's "dominion from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth" (Psalms 72:28).

Thus, Canada assumed sovereignty over vast territories by positioning Indigenous peoples as mere occupants of lands within their Dominion.

Meanwhile academic historians like Harold Innis and Donald Creighton provided an interpretive framework that explained how the pursuit of natural resources by British capitalists and French fur traders had facilitated Canada's east-west, coast-to-coast orientation. In this narrative Canada exists not because of the continent's natural north-south system of mountains and rivers, but despite it.

Myth: Good and bad Indians

If our national story was one of transcending nature, the Indigenous peoples' narrative, according to settler beliefs, was one where they had allowed themselves to become prisoners of nature. Settlers believed Western history and belief systems explained all humanity. Within this framework, Indigenous people were treated as having not yet acquired all of the rights and privileges associated with modern civilized society.

Therefore, settler policies and actions aimed at acquiring Indigenous lands did not take into account the multiplicity or sophistication of Indigenous cultures, politics and economics. Rather, Dominion settlers defined all Indigenous people monolithically as "Indians."

Over time, settlers began dividing Indigenous people into groups according to how they responded to us and our agendas.

In the 18th century, settlers regarded Indigenous people who sided with them in conflicts as "noble" Indians; those who sided against were "savage" Indians.

By the mid-19th century, such labels and belief systems increasingly served the settler colonial agenda — to displace Indigenous peoples from their lands and resources. "Noble Indians," were the "wise" ones who accepted the inevitability of settler colonialism; they recognized that resistance was futile. "Savage Indians," conversely, were considered "savage" precisely because they rejected American Manifest Destiny or Canadian Dominion. Their resistance justified state violence to remove them from their lands.

Myth: The vanishing Indian

After witnessing the effects of rounds of devastating diseases (smallpox, influenza and measles) to which Indigenous people had no immunity, settlers additionally developed the myth of the "vanishing Indian."

In the 19th century it would have been accurate to describe the number of Indigenous peoples as "diminishing" — their population had been steadily, and sometimes rapidly, declining ever since first contact with Europeans. But by assuming that "diminishing" would necessarily result in extinction, settlers conveniently absolved themselves of having to account for Indigenous peoples' futures.

So long as Indigenous peoples were destined to die out, there was little need to prioritize compensating them for their lands (as in British Columbia), honouring treaty agreements (as in the Prairies) or in working with them to envision a future where they might exist as distinct peoples with their Indigenous rights and cultures intact.

Myth: The generous settler

The myth of the "vanishing Indian" also allowed settlers to create a sub-myth. If Indigenous peoples were destined to disappear and if Indigenous cultures were incompatible with the Western industrial society (as the myth maintained), then according to settlers, the only thing to do was to invite (and later to compel) Indigenous people to assimilate.

Residential schools were, as the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School explained, designed to "kill the Indian and save the Man."

Once these programs were established, settlers congratulated themselves for their generosity, and boasted how the creation and funding of the residential schools took place despite Indigenous people not contributing directly to the government's tax revenues.

Settlers believed themselves benevolent as they reserved specific tracts of lands for Indigenous peoples' exclusive use, even though their quality and quantity were well below what was offered settler families and communities.

They thought themselves altruistic as they provided welfare relief to Indigenous peoples who remained on reserves where there were few economic opportunities. This spawned yet another myth, that of the "lazy Indian."

Time to put these myths to rest

Indigenous resistance to these policies simultaneously reinforced in settler minds the myths of the "ungrateful Indian" and of Indigenous peoples as "tax burdens."

Efforts to explain how these systems created not only trauma for those directly affected, but also inter-generational injuries for their descendants has served to reinforce for some settlers the myth of Indigenous peoples who can't "get over" the past.

To the extent that isolated reserve life highlighted territorial displacement and social marginalization, some Indigenous people fell victim to chronic unemployment and binge drinking; laws preventing them from purchasing or consuming alcohol meant that social drinking

was not an option. Thus emerged the myth that Indigenous peoples were genetically predisposed to alcoholism.

Too often young Indigenous people fall victim to predators who steer them into tragic situations. The need for the current national inquiry into the fate of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls speaks to the power of the myth that paints Indigenous people as victims of their race and culture, rather than as victims of colonial attitudes and circumstances.

In the wake of the Stanley trial, a large number of non-Indigenous Canadians have shown that they have no qualms about using the most vitriolic and hurtful of these long-discredited colonial myths to protect their own privilege and comfort.

We can do better.

If reconciliation is to ever be more than an aspiration the onus must be on us to abandon the myths that blind us to our culpability for the historical systems of oppression that continue to marginalize Indigenous people.