

Malissa Phung

**Malissa Phung** is completing a doctorate in English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. For the past three years she has been studying post-colonial cultures and Asian Canadian literature while living about 30 kilometres from the Six Nations of the Grand River. Living in close proximity to the ongoing Caledonia land claim dispute and being part of an academic community committed to teaching and writing about anti-racism and anti-colonialism have greatly influenced the scope of her dissertation project and her activist politics. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the ways in which representations of settler work ethic in Chinese Canadian literature and documentaries can potentially reproduce existing colonial discourses used to justify settler belonging on Indigenous lands and to maintain colonial stereotypes about Indigenous peoples that imply they are undeserving of contested lands and resources that have been misappropriated from them and their ancestors. Born in Red Deer, Alberta, to ethnically Vietnamese displaced immigrants of Chinese descent, Malissa grew up mostly in Edmonton where she and her family have benefited a great deal from Treaty 6. Being the daughter of a successful hair salon owner in Chinatown—a downtown business district that intersects with an urban Indigenous population—has provided her with a complicated upbringing of racist and classist views of Indigenous peoples. In her academic and creative work, Malissa strives to unsettle these colonial views she has inherited from both her community and the dominant settler society.

## Are People of Colour Settlers Too?

In their 2005 article, “Decolonizing Antiracism,”<sup>1</sup> Indigenous and critical race studies scholars Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua point out that “there is something deeply wrong with the manner in which, in our own lands, antiracism does not begin with, and reflect, the totality of Native people’s lived experience—that is, with the genocide that established and maintains all of the settler states.”<sup>2</sup> Lawrence and Dua take anti-racist and anti-colonial academics and activists to task for overlooking and effectively erasing from their analyses and political projects the histories, epistemologies, and political claims of Indigenous people. They claim that anti-racist and anti-colonial academics and activists have failed to make the presence and ongoing colonization of Indigenous people in the Americas foundational to their analyses of race and racism. They argue that these elisions have narrowed theoretical and historical understandings of race and racism, particularly in Canadian anti-racist discourses, which can render people of colour innocent in the ongoing colonization of Indigenous people. Though people of colour have faced and still face marginalization and exclusion in Canada, Lawrence and Dua contend that people of colour are still complicit in the ongoing land theft and colonial domination of Indigenous people.

Lawrence and Dua’s work compels us to think critically about how people of colour are complicit in the colonization of Indigenous people in Canada, a problem that has often been framed as a white settler-Indigenous issue. For too long now, issues of racial discrimination and exclusion that people of colour face in Canada have been framed as a separate issue from the colonial legacies that still affect the material experiences of Indigenous people today. It is as though the fact that people of colour face discrimination and exclusion in Canada somehow means that they cannot possibly contribute to the colonization of Indigenous people as well. Or, in the case of refugees fleeing from their places of origin to escape political persecution, even if they benefit as colonial settlers, how can we blame them for settling when their main priorities lie in the basic need to survive? In her groundbreaking 2007 book *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*, the feminist and anti-racist scholar Sunera Thobani forcefully argues that despite the magnitude of their dehumanization and exploitation, we cannot minimize

the fact that immigrants and refugees are also participants in and beneficiaries of Canada's colonial project, especially when they work towards achieving equality with Canadian settler subjects, thereby placing their political status above that of Indigenous people in Thobani's triangulated theory of Canada's racial hierarchy.<sup>3</sup> But this issue of whether people of colour are settlers is a complicated one that requires more than just a simple recognition or acknowledgement that people of colour are complicit settlers. And so, while I agree with Lawrence and Dua's central claim that people of colour are settlers, I have some questions about the implications of this complicated argument.

If people of colour are settlers, then are they settlers in the same way that the French and British were originally settlers in Canada? And what exactly does being a settler mean? Is it a simple descriptive term—settler proper—or is it a term that carries historical legacies inflected differently by race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability? Is it a unified monolithic subject position? Or can colonial settlerhood be stratified? Do different settlers operate on different levels with regard to access to power? What is even more complicated is the question of mixed race settlers: if all non-Indigenous Canadians are settlers simply because they or their ancestors migrated to Canada, then what do we make of settlers who have Indigenous ancestors several generations removed? Can someone who easily passes as a settler choose not to be a settler? I admit these are complicated questions to ask in light of the racist and sexist legacies of the *Indian Act's* marriage laws that used to determine and still does determine who is and who is not a status "Indian."

Though I may not have ready answers to these difficult questions, I would like to begin discussing their implications by questioning whether settlers of colour can be easily equated with white settlers. I am not disagreeing with Lawrence and Dua's main argument; I am not looking for some way to mitigate the complicity of settlers of colour. Instead I am interested in what a concept like *settler* can do, how this concept can recalibrate the methodologies and epistemologies that anti-racist and anti-colonial academics and activists use to produce knowledge and shape public discourses in Canada—necessary steps to consider as we work towards transforming Canadian policies and institutions to more fully acknowledge and affirm Indigenous claims to national and cultural independence.

If being a settler simply means being a Canadian, then how are all settlers equal when not all Canadians are equal? Whether a settler is of British or French or any other European descent, depending on a whole range of factors (such as time of emigration, mix of racial background and cultural heritage, the type of English or French accent with which a settler speaks), settlers benefit

from the ongoing colonization of Indigenous people to differing degrees. The more assimilated a settler, the more a settler shares the dominant physical characteristics, linguistic features, and nationalistic desires of a settler society, the more a settler will be afforded the material benefits and opportunities to become productive citizens of Canada.<sup>4</sup> Lawrence and Dua would rightly argue that when marginalized settlers of colour organize and demand equal access to citizenship rights and benefits, they risk staking colonial claims to belong and own land and resources that have been stolen through imperial land treaties that have never been fully honoured or that have been legally misinterpreted to advantage and benefit predominantly white settlers. What concerns me, however, is how we can equate the colonial status of settlers of colour with that of white settlers—how we can talk about settlers in monolithic terms when any non-Indigenous Canadian is not necessarily first and foremost only a settler?

If we look to the literary production of white settlers in nineteenth century Canadian literature, we can trace how settlers in Canada began to conceive and imagine their settler placement and belonging on Indigenous lands. This was also a period of colonial administration and land cession treaty negotiations that began to prioritize land acquisition and control over the establishment of peace and friendship between settlers and Indigenous people, which had originally been the primary objective of the 1763 *Royal Proclamation Act*.<sup>5</sup> Understanding concepts of white settlerhood during this shift in Indigenous-settler relations can shed light on contemporary settler-Indigenous relationships and reveal both the similarities and differences between contemporary people of colour and these nineteenth century colonial settlers.

Nineteenth century Canadian literature was deeply invested in telling stories and devising images that worked to affirm the myth of Indigenous people as a vanishing and dying race, only to be replaced by stories and images of *Indigenized* white settlers; that is, *Indigenous* in their ability to cultivate Indigenous attributes and skills.<sup>6</sup> Literary scholars have attributed the colonial trope of the vanishing “Indian” to white settler desires to vacate Indigenous people from the national imaginary and to overcome the unsettling knowledge that settlers would never be indigenous to this land.<sup>7</sup> So to justify their right to occupy and belong in Indigenous territories, nineteenth century white settler writers, I would add, conveniently constructed a labour narrative of hard work and enterprise to self-indigenize; meanwhile Indigenous people, according to colonial stereotypes, have been constructed as lazy and lacking in industry and civility. Stereotypes about Indigenous people in Canada stem from the colonial notion of *terra nullius*: when the French first came to colonize the so-called uninhabited *New World*, they assumed that “since the Amerindians led a mobile life without settled abode, ‘ranging’ the land ‘like beasts in the woods’, they could

not be classed as inhabitants according to European law.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, since Indigenous people were seen as lazy, uncivilized, nomadic people who did not cultivate the land for profit, according to these settler colonial labour narratives, white settlers earned their right to the land that Indigenous people had apparently allowed to go to waste.

People of colour engage in this process of indigenization when they work towards achieving, or, in some cases, have managed to achieve, upward class mobility while at the same time promoting similar settler colonial labour narratives of hard work and enterprise in the face of Indigenous claims to autochthony. Assimilated people of colour can produce similar settler colonial narratives in order to emplace their settler belonging on Indigenous lands: such narratives of immigrant origins and trials and tribulations can construct people of colour as exemplary settlers who have been able to work hard to rise above their racialized immigrant origins and succeed despite all of the odds stacked against them. But successful portraits of model immigrants and people of colour also run the risk of being mobilized to either blame marginalized settlers of colour and Indigenous people for not being able to contribute to the settler society, or to blame model minorities for taking away jobs from Canadian settler subjects. I will now turn to a particular group of settlers to further address these tensions.

Chinese indentured labourers were constructed in nineteenth century Canadian culture as a “model minority” group. Stereotypes of Chinese labourers as hyper-industrious labour machines willing to work for next to nothing abound in historical records, newspapers, government publications, and immigration debates at the time. These *positive* stereotypes came hand-in-hand with negative stereotypes as Chinese settlers circulated in mainstream Canadian representations as the “yellow peril.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Chinese labourers represented a racial and moral threat to the national fabric and an economic threat appropriating resources that rightfully, it is argued, belong to hardworking industrious white settlers when, in fact, these resources more rightfully belong to Indigenous people.

For example, from the 1870s to the Great Depression, white labour leaders lobbied for restrictive and racially discriminatory immigration policies to protect the standards of living of white Canadian workers; they conceived of Asians as “degraded workers who were unfair competition to white Canadians.”<sup>10</sup> More recently, there was also the racist W-Five news exposé, “Campus Giveaway,” broadcasted on CTV in 1979 on the supposed mass displacement of hardworking white Canadians from highly competitive and lucrative programs such as pharmacy, computer science, engineering, and

medicine by foreign international students, who were represented in the segment with images of Chinese Canadian university students.<sup>11</sup> A much more recent reiteration of the “yellow peril” discourse is the problematic coverage of a perceived Asian hyper-enrolment and unfair Asian-white competition in Canadian universities in the *Maclean’s* 2010 article “Too Asian?” Stephanie Findlay and Nicholas Köhler’s article sparked rigorous public debate and mobilized public calls to action from Asian Canadian citizens, academics, and activists across the nation in blog posts, newspaper articles, online commentary forums, and community meetings.<sup>12</sup> These long-standing racial and class inter-settler tensions suggest that there are multiple ways of being configured as an invasive settler. Although they may occupy Indigenous lands and benefit from the displacement of Indigenous people, Chinese settlers have also been figured as perpetually *foreign* or *alien*, unsettled settlers posing an invasive threat to the livelihoods of *Indigenized* white settlers. As this kind of historical analysis demonstrates, Chinese settlers cannot simply be equated with the original British and French settlers, either at the level of representation or at the level of material experience.

I have included the case of Chinese settlers in my discussion for several reasons. First of all, Canadian literary and visual representations of Chinese labour and colonial settlerhood constitute the main subject of my Ph.D. dissertation. I am interested in exploring what it means to represent the history of Chinese exclusion and marginalization in Canada and to formulate anti-racist discourses without being grounded in the history of Indigenous exploitation and oppression in Canada. Second, as a middle-class female junior academic settler born to Sino-Vietnamese immigrants in what is now known as central Alberta, I have benefited a great deal from Treaty 6.<sup>13</sup> This essay constitutes a reflection of my own complicity as a racialized Canadian settler subject. Because of Treaty 6, my immigrant family has been able to improve their socio-economic status and send me and my brother to university. Though I may have experienced my fair share of racial and gender discrimination throughout my life, I never had to worry about my employers making negative assumptions about my work ethic or productivity since *positive* stereotypes about Asians being hard workers and exceptional at math would exaggerate my physical and intellectual capacity. Given the inequity of these settler privileges and treaty benefits that my family and I enjoy, through my scholarly research I have come to be politically and ethically committed to undermining the ways in which anti-racist discourses regarding settlers of colour, particularly Chinese settlers, become mobilized among diasporic communities to stake claims of national belonging and acceptance.

Not only have I drawn on Lawrence and Dua's critical intervention but I have also nuanced the ways in which the entry of settlers of colour to Canada has put them in colonial relationships with Indigenous people. I recognize that relying on monolithic notions of the term "settler" runs the risk of reducing settler-Indigenous relations to overly simplistic binary models of thinking. If we lump all non-Indigenous people into a single category of settler, then do we risk erasing and subsuming the different histories and everyday experiences of settler privilege and marginalization from which white settlers and settlers of colour come from? As I said before, the questions and concerns I have been raising thus far are not meant to mitigate the complicity of settlers of colour; rather, I raise these complexities as part of a solidarity exercise that aims to recuperate the term settler as a politicized identification for white settlers and settlers of colour.<sup>14</sup> I am interested in invoking an anti-colonial conceptualization of the term "settler" that both recognizes non-Indigenous complicity in Canada's ongoing colonial project and stands in solidarity with the decolonization projects of Indigenous people. To self-identify as a settler rather than as a Canadian does not necessarily negate the rights and benefits of citizenship that settlers have come to accrue as a result of settler colonialism. But mobilizing all settlers to become aware of the ways in which their settler privileges are anything but natural and well deserved can constitute a first step in supporting Indigenous activism against settler domination.

I conclude this essay with an example from New Zealand/Aotearoa. *Pakeha*, the Maori word for the descendants of European colonizing settlers, came to invoke a particular form of politics in New Zealand, one which recognized Maori claims to sovereignty, was built on a revisionist conception of New Zealand's colonial history, and was sensitive to Maori claims of institutional racism within New Zealand society.<sup>15</sup> Somewhat equivalent to the term "settler" in Canada, the Maori word *pakeha* has been a source of contention in race politics in New Zealand. In the 1990s, non-Maori committed to an anti-racist politics began to self-identify as *pakeha* on a wider scale, whereas those who opposed the term opted for "New Zealander."<sup>16</sup> At one point, *this* term generated such extensive opposition that there was a call by a member of Parliament to ban public use of the word.<sup>17</sup>

I bring up this example of a politicized concept of settlerhood not to propose that the term "settler" can do the same political work that the Maori word does in New Zealand since the English term is rooted in a colonial language. I am merely suggesting that perhaps the term "settler" can aspire towards doing the same type of history work that the term *pakeha* does. When we identify as settlers or *pakeha*, we acknowledge where we actually come from—not



here. Settlers of colour and *pakeha* of colour are already quite aware that they are not from here, or that they have never truly belonged here. But given the propensity of settlers to retell enduring labour narratives of rightful occupation and belonging on this land, thereby overwriting the fact of this land being Indigenous territory, I can only ask that political allies of Indigenous people remain vigilant and committed to working towards undermining such “self-indigenizing” narratives within their own settler communities.

### Notes

- 1 Reprinted elsewhere in this volume.
- 2 Lawrence, Bonita and Enakshi Dua (2005:121). Decolonizing antiracism. *Social Justice* 32(4):120–143.
- 3 Thobani, Sunera (2007:16–17). *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- 4 I owe my conceptualization of settler privilege to the way in which Ross Chambers discusses white privilege as a set of cards one is dealt. He describes identity as a poker hand, “in which the value of the ace (whiteness) can be either enhanced, if one holds a couple of court cards or another ace (masculinity, heterosexuality, middleclassness...), or alternatively depreciated by association with cards of lower value (ethnicity, color, lack of education, working-classness...).” See: Chambers, Ross (1996:144). *The unexamined*. *The Minnesota Review* 47:141–156. Settler privilege can likewise be enhanced or depreciated, but to the degree of assimilation a settler exhibits.
- 5 Dickason, Olive P., with David T. McNab (2009:156–157). *Canada’s First Nations: A History of Founding People from Earliest Times*. (4th ed.). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- 6 Johnston, Anna and Alan Lawson (2006). Settler colonies. In Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (eds.). *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell: 360–376.
- 7 See: Goldie, Terry (ed.) (1989). Fear and temptation. In *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 3–18; Johnston and Lawson (2006).
- 8 Dickason with McNab (2009:146).
- 9 The term “yellow peril” was originally devised by Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, who used it to foster racial discrimination, and was later used to describe the supposed danger of Orientals overwhelming the West. For more on this topic in another settler society context, see: Walker, David (1999). *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939*. St. Lucia, AU: University of Queensland Press.
- 10 Goutor, David (2007). *Guarding the Gates: The Canadian Labour Movement and Immigration, 1872–1934*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- 11 Chan, Anthony B. (1983). *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World*. Vancouver, BC: New Star Books.
- 12 For the original article, see: Findlay, Stephanie and Nicholas Köhler (2010). Too Asian? *Maclean’s* 123(45):76–81. For an astute analysis of Findlay and Köhler’s xenophobic article, see Jeet Heer’s online commentary in *The National Post*: Heer, Jeet (2010, November 15). *Maclean’s* article on Asians familiar to anti-Semites of old. *The National Post* (retrieved 29 December 2010 from: <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2010/11/15/jeet-heer-macleans-article-on-asians-familiar-to-anti-semite-of-old/>); See also his blog-post for *The Walrus* at: Heer, Jeet (2010, November 24). Too

Brazen: Maclean's, Margaret Wente, and the Canadian media's inarticulacy about race. *The Walrus Blog*. Retrieved 29 December 2010 from: <http://www.walrusmagazine.com/blogs/2010/11/24/too-brazen/>

- 13 Signed in 1876 between delegates representing the British Crown and Plains Cree and other Indigenous people such as the Nakoda, Salteaux, and Chipewyan, Treaty 6 ceded the Indigenous territory now known as central Alberta and Saskatchewan for colonial settlement.
- 14 Throughout this essay, I have been employing the seemingly benign and neutral term "settler" rather than "settler-invader," which was first adopted by colonial and post-colonial scholars in the 1980s to emphasize the physical violence and representational erasure exacted on Indigenous communities that the more benign and seemingly neutral term "settler" conceals. In the Canadian context, I use the term "settler" not to mitigate these historical violences but to acknowledge Indigenous agency and sovereignty and to avoid affirming the colonial discursive myth of conquered vanishing Indigenous people when the history of Indigenous displacement and dispossession in Canada was more a result of legal imperialism than outright military conquest. See: Stasiulus, Daiva and Radha Jhappan (1995). The fractious politics of a settler society: Canada. In Daiva Stasiulus and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds.). *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*. London, UK: Sage Publications: 95-131.
- 15 Larner, Wendy and Paul Spoonley (eds.) (1995:51). Post-colonial politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*: 39-64.
- 16 Larner and Spoonley (1995:52).
- 17 Larner and Spoonley (1995:52).