

Experiments in Decolonizing and Indigenizing a University History Department

By John Lutz

Many Canadian universities, faculties and departments have responded to the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with new mission statements aimed at decolonizing or indigenizing the academy, and telling the story of colonialism in Canada and elsewhere, at least in part through an indigenous lens.

Over the last four years the History Department at the University of Victoria has experimented with ways in which to bring these aspirations to fruition, starting first with steps that cost nothing but time, and leveraging those initial successes into resources that have allowed us to make some major steps. Some of these ideas may be useful to other departments.

Our first step was the formation in 2016 of an ad-hoc committee among the department faculty who had an interest in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report – which turned out to be 6-8 members. Out of our brainstorming came the idea to create a brand new “special topics” course for the following semester called “De-Colonizing Canadian History.” Co-ordinated by Peter Cook, this was a once-a-week, three-hour block in which the first hour and a half was a guest lecture by an Indigenous or Settler guest speaker. These were widely adver-

tised and open to the public; the second half was a seminar with the class, the guest, and critical readings to complement the talk. We created a non-credit course for the community around the public lectures and had 20 or so (mostly retirees) community “students.”

The second innovation grew out of the realization that many of the faculty and students in the department had moved to work or study in Victoria and had little knowledge or connection to the local First Nations communities. Understanding the Indigenous peoples on whose land the university is based seemed like an important first step. Contact was made with the Songhees First Nation, a guide identified, a bus rented, and the first “Colonial Realities Bus Tour” led by Songhees knowledge holder Cheryl

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Bryce was offered to faculty and students of the department on a cost recovery basis (\$30 faculty/\$20 others) and it filled up. Since then the Department has organized two such tours a year expanding our invitation list out through the Faculty of Humanities, to include other faculty and grad students and partnering with the Indigenous Studies Program, the Centre for Global Studies, and the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society; up to now over 400 have taken the tour.

Our third step was to use a few hundred dollars of Departmental funds to locate Indigenous facilitators who organized a Kairos Blanket Exercise for the History Faculty and Grad students. The 2 hour exercise leads participants through a brief history of Indigenous settler relations in Canada, but with each loss via disease, residential school, reserve allocation, etc... some of the blankets that the participants are standing on get removed as a metaphor of the loss of people and land. In the end, few are left standing and many are profoundly affected by this simple representation. While this was the more profound, our university also has an Indigenous Cultural Acuity Training course which several History faculty have also taken.

Our fourth step was to use some grant funds from one of John Price's projects, and partner with the Faculty of Humanities to bring in a short-term Indigenous Scholar in Residence. WSANEC scholar Dr. Nick Claxton was seconded from his base in the Faculty of Human and Social Development to advise on research projects and to offer a 6-session evening and weekend course to 15 faculty on decolonizing scholarship for the Faculty of Humanities.

Step five was to reach out to the local Songhees Nation and propose jointly hosting a conference with them focussing on the local treaties that were signed in 1850. This offer was enthusiastically embraced by the Songhees who offered to host the event at their Wellness Centre on their reserve. The Temexw Treaty Association which included the Songhees, committed to bring 150 participants from the different treaty communities on Vancouver Island. That conference in 2017 was capped at 300 participants, half from the local settler and half from the Indig-

enous community, and featured speakers from both. As part of the event, translations of the treaties into the local Lekwungen and SENCOTEN languages were commissioned and presented to the BC Archives where they now co-exist with the written English treaties. A series of video summaries of the presentation and information about the treaties live on in a website www.uvic-songhees.ca and a book manuscript based on the papers has been accepted for publication. We have been able to use this relationship to start graduate students working on projects with the Songhees.

Step six has been to host several public forums on campus and downtown on the question of whether we should rename streets named after prominent colonial figures, remove statues, and different faculty offered biographies of four of the most controversial local characters: John A, Macdonald, James Douglas, Matthew Baillie Begbie and Joseph Trutch.

Finally, we have been able to use these activities, and our twenty-year old Ethnohistory Field School with the Stó:lō Nation to support our department's request for a second Indigenous scholar. That has now paid off and in July Patrick Lozar brings his focus on trans-border Indigenous histories in the Alberta-BC-Montana area to our department to add to Christine O'Bonsawin's work on Indigenous people in sport. This will double the undergraduate courses taught by Indigenous historians and increase our graduate teaching strength.

There is more to be done. Looking to 2019-20, our ad hoc committee carries on, planning to host a lunchtime reception for Indigenous students on campus to introduce and welcome them to the History Department. We have a grant from the Victoria Foundation to investigate how to "decolonize" the digital archives of the communication between the governors of BC and Vancouver Island and the Colonial Office. We will explore new funding options to bring a regular, visiting Indigenous scholar/elder to the Faculty of Humanities, try to make our Decolonizing Canada course a regular offering and see what new ideas emerge.