Canada Watch

SECTION IV: TEACHING/RESEARCHING CANADA

Finding balance in teaching Indigenous Studies and settler colonialism: One historian's journey

BY CAROLYN PODRUCHNY

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Teaching Indigenous histories has always been a journey for me. I am a non-Indigenous White settler-scholar who teaches Indigenous histories to primarily non-Indigenous students in a large, urban, multicultural university. I occupy a place of discomfort. I was drawn to this place of discomfort because I grew up in a small prairie town, where Indigenous and settler inhabitants grew up together, went to school and church together, worked together, and lived beside one another. Racism, cooperation, and compassion existed side by side. I wanted to understand the deep history of my town.

My personal story on the land began at the turn of the 20th century when the Canadian government sponsored my Ukrainian great-grandparents to come to Manitoba to farm the land. I wanted to go deeper, to find out who occupied the land since time immemorial, and I was drawn to the histories of Métis, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), and Nehinaw (Cree). Over time, I got my PhD and found a job in the History Department at York University. I carved my academic life as an ally, researching the histories of colonial encounters in the fur trade and building courses about early Canada, which were necessarily dominated by Indigenous stories. I want to share some illustrative stories of my journey in finding ways to best teach Indigenous histories.

TEACHING SAQIYUQ

Early in my career, I taught a fourth-year seminar on "Cultures and Colonialism." I assigned the book *Saqiyuq: Stories from the Lives of Three Inuit Women* (Wachowich, 2001) to highlight Indigenous women's voices, to show the value of oral histories and oral traditions, and to introduce students to a landscape foreign to Toronto—that is, the Arctic. The book is divided into three autobiographies of women from one family representing three generations. "Saqiyuq" is the Inuit name for a strong wind that suddenly shifts direction, and the book depicts the dramatic changes of life in the Arctic during the 20th century.

The grandmother, Apphia Awa, born in 1931, experienced the traditional life on the land, while Rhoda Katsak, Apphia's daughter, was part of the transitional generation sent to government schools. In contrast, Sandra Katsak, Rhoda's daughter, grew up in Pond Inlet (on the north shore of Baffin Island) and negotiated video games, coffee shops, alcohol, and drugs. The life stories of this grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter show the contrast three successive generations experienced in childhood, adolescence, marriage, birthing, and child rearing. During the last years of Apphia's life, Rhoda and Sandra began reconnecting to traditional culture and learning the art of making skin clothing. Through the storytelling in the book, all three women explore the transformations that have

taken place in Inuit lives and chart the struggle of the Inuit to reclaim and integrate traditional practices into their lives.

I divided the class into three groups, and each read a section, which they taught to the rest of the class. I was shocked by the results. Those who read the grandmother's section loved the book and found her stories encouraging and uplifting. Those who read the mother's section were neutral about the book and slightly depressed about government efforts at colonization. Those who read the daughter's section were devastated by the stories and could not contain their grief at her life's trajectory. They cried in class. In retrospect, I should not have been shocked. The three dramatically different reactions of the students underscored the changes in Inuit lives and showed me that it is necessary to find balance in teaching about Indigenous topics. In this case, the balance of the three generations was integral to the successful transmission of the message of the book. Although the last third of the book focuses on the trauma of the granddaughter's generation, who were fighting a suicide epidemic (directly related to the loss of cultural traditions due to colonial policies), the authors meant to convey the resilience of all generations in fighting increasingly sophisticated, insidious, and vicious forms of colonialism.

DEVELOPING COURSES THAT CENTRE INDIGENOUS HISTORIES

In a more recent example of my efforts to teach Indigenous histories, I developed a course on ancient North America from time immemorial or the end of the last ice age to roughly 1500 CE. I was frustrated that all Indigenous and national histories seemed to start with the arrival of Europeans to colonize Indigenous places and peoples. To understand the context of colonization properly, one needs to have a full appreciation of the millennia of Indigenous presence on the lands that came to be known as Canada, the United States, and Mexico. North America is often considered a young continent with a brief history. Yet, over thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have developed rich civilizations with sophisticated technologies, including large earthen works on par with Egyptian pyramids; cities that matched in numbers and architectural wonders those of ancient Rome and Greece; the domestication of plants and animals; extensive irrigation and road systems; and histories of exploration, empire, art, and technology.

The course starts with the ethics of studying the history of colonized peoples. It turns to a discussion of the controversies surrounding the peopling of the Americas, including the theories of the Bering Land Bridge, coastal travel, oceanic crossings, and Indigenous oral traditions of independent origin. It next examines the emergence of hunters, gatherers, and fishers across the continent, the megafaunal mass extinctions, and the curiosity of the Clovis Point explosion. The course traces the emergence of corn as a consistent food source and the growth of corn-based civilizations, including the Olmecs, Zapotecs, Mayans, Toltecs, and Aztecs in Mesoamerica; the Hohokam, Mogollons, and Ancient Pueblos (Anasazis) in the US southwest; and the rise of Hopewellian and Mississippi Mound Builders in central North America. It focuses primarily on change over time, human migrations, economic expansions, and cultural developments.

Significant themes include comparing the use of oral history and archaeological evidence, trade connections among civilizations on the continent, the spread of agriculture, massive engineering projects, artistic explosions, the splendour of cities, and the technical and social sophistication needed to live in harsh environments. The course explores various methods and sources for studying ancient history, including archaeology, art, oral history, landscapes, experiential evidence, and documents. The course engages with Indigenous-centred perspectives that challenge conventional colonizing methodologies.

When I first proposed this course, my department rejected it. They thought that it fell within the purview of anthropology. They thought students would be confused because our "ancient" courses were centred on the Mediterranean and used written sources. They wondered how I could master such a vast amount of material falling outside the disciplinary canon of history. But they took a chance on me, and the course has succeeded. Students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have loved it. But I am haunted by the feeling that I am ignoring the Indigenous realities today by deleting the study of colonialism. How can this course possibly resonate with Indigenous peoples today? In the final assignment, I

asked students to show how one element of the course connects with Indigenous communities today. I am constantly surprised and delighted by their findings, which draw direct lines from ancient Indigenous peoples to present communities.

TEACHING INDIGENOUS HISTORIES AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

In the CanSearch project, Jean Michel Montsion and Dominik Formanowicz surveyed and interviewed scholars from outside Canada regarding their teaching and research about Canada. The survey results show that people want to know more about Indigenous Studies in Canada, but they feel ill-equipped to teach it and that the field is changing fast. At the same time, participants were not particularly interested in settler colonialism. Once again, I found myself surprised. I always thought these two subjects were different sides of the same coin. Certainly, Indigenous Studies and Settler Colonial Studies are distinct areas of scholarship, but they share many linkages. Some speculate that Indigenous peoples as a category would not exist without the existence of colonialism (Merlan, 2009).

Settler colonialism is a system that perpetuates the destruction and elimination of Indigenous peoples. Outsiders come to the land inhabited by other peoples (who are later called Indigenous) and claim it as their own in perpetuity. It is not just a vicious act of the past; it exists as long as settlers are living on appropriated land, as in Canada (Hurwitz & Bourque, 2014). Settlers dominate the land based on their doctrine of discovery, and they reduce Indigenous peoples' rights to the land from sovereignty to occupancy. The violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land and livelihoods is maintained across generations of settlers (Wolfe, 2013). One cannot tell stories of Indigenous peoples without explaining how they came to be Indigenous through the process of colonialism.

I worry that teaching Indigenous histories from this perspective overemphasizes the importance of colonialism and denies Indigenous peoples' histories outside of the process of their dispossession. At the same time, I do not want to silence the past, whitewash history, and focus only on nice things. I think that in the case of Indigenous histories, we need to find the balance between conveying the horrors of settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession and articulating the triumphs of Indigenous resistance, resilience, and continuity. I am still on this journey of discomfort. ■

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