

Working to Decolonize History Education in Canada

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FNST/HIST 326 students eager to present their work on Indigenous histories prior to 1850 at the Mini-Conference during the last day of class

It was not until the second year of my undergraduate degree that I learned that much of British Columbia was not treated. Although my family had occupied unceded Coast Salish territories for three generations, and despite my interest in history, and the fact that my high school was just a five-minute drive from the Tsleil-Waututh reserve, it was almost two decades before I learned that most Indigenous peoples in BC had never ceded or surrendered or in any way relinquished their claims to their territories. At the time, this was a shocking realization, and it felt unfair that prior teachers and schools had not ensured that this history was taught in their classrooms.

I often think about that moment now as an instructor here at Simon Fraser University. It reminds me of how deeply ingrained settler colonial sensibilities are in our educational system and how important it is to work towards decolonization in both our teaching and our research. Thomas King, an

American-Canadian author of Cherokee, German, and Greek heritage, used a powerful motif to conclude each of his 2003 Massey Lectures. After sharing a story about Indigenous issues, he would conclude by explaining to the audience that it was okay if they didn't know about that aspect of Indigenous history before. But, he would add, now that they had learned about it, they couldn't ever again say that they would have done things differently if only they had known.

King's words galvanized me as I began to relearn Canadian history, this time from Indigenous perspectives. This decolonial relearning fueled my dissertation research, a community-engaged history of Stó:lō cultural heritage and political sovereignty in the twentieth century. In terms of my work on that project, decolonization

Photo: Naxaxalhts'i (Dr. Albert "Sonny" McHalsie) and students near Xwexwó:stel (Thunderbird), during a Halq'eméylem place names tour in S'ólh Téméxw, Stó:lō territories.

included: following the advice of and being guided by the historical interests of Stó:lō community members; relearning the history of the Fraser Valley and southwestern BC; taking Halq'eméylem language classes to be able to communicate with people in their ancestral language and to better understand certain cultural precepts; putting aside my dogmatic atheism and adopting a more agnostic sensibility that includes space for Stó:lō and other spiritualities; following Stó:lō protocols in the community at large, and in my own home when appropriate; being open to critique about my conduct or statements, especially from Stó:lō community members, and reflecting on that critique and making amends; establishing reciprocal relations with interview partners; returning to community members with my research interpretations and sharing them for feedback and to ensure they are comfortable with that knowledge being

made public; reflecting on how I continue to benefit from privilege as a white settler and holding myself accountable; initiating learning about how I and my family have been complicit in settler colonialism, historically and today.

I have also been able to rely on many of the lessons from my research in working to decolonize my own teaching in whatever way I can. I start by bringing King's words into classrooms, to share with students that not knowing something is fine, but that

once you learn something, you have to decide how you're going to respond to or enact that information. Other practices I've tried to implement include: centering Indigenous peoples in their own histories; acknowledging Indigenous peoples and their territories on which we live; developing land- or place-based learning activities; directly addressing the historic and ongoing

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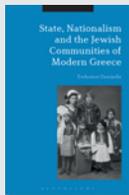
violence and acquisitiveness of settler colonialism; teaching about the history of treaties or lack of treaties in the region; bringing Indigenous guest speakers in and compensating them accordingly; sharing activities to help students develop a critique of glossy nationalist narratives that obscure historical trauma; encouraging students to grow their political sensibilities; creating opportunities for students to participate in public Indigenous community events; setting assignments or discussions that help students learn about their families' history and connections to the region; encouraging students to share their viewpoints respectfully, both with each other and with the broader public. Other scholars may have other ways of working toward decolonization.

And yet, even as we work toward decolonization in our research and teaching, we still have to remind ourselves that this alone is not enough. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue persuasively that “decolonization is not a metaphor”—decolonization needs to include real, actual changes that restructure relations of power and privilege. In the context of academic decolonization in Canada, this means foregoing what Tuck and Yang identify as “settler moves to innocence” to take up the unsettling and incommensurable work of decolonization itself.¹ Tuck and Yang point out that developing a critical consciousness, while perhaps useful in working towards decolonization, cannot be the only end goal because this would obscure “the need to give up land or power or privilege.” In an era when universities across Canada are attempting to implement decolonizing practices, these observations need to be at the forefront of our minds. Decolonization is not metaphorical and it cannot only be intellectual—it must be accompanied by material change. As yet, decolonization is an unfinished process, and it is one that will continue to unsettle the more deeply and seriously we engage in it. ■

Madeline Knickerbocker is a white settler of English, Irish, Scottish and German descent. She is a PhD candidate in the Department of History and a limited-term lecturer in First Nations Studies, also at SFU. She successfully defended her dissertation, *Sovereign Culture: Stó:lō Cultural Heritage and Political Activism in the Twentieth Century*, in Summer 2018.

¹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

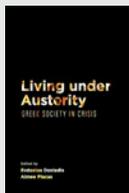
Faculty Books



DOXIADIS EVDOXIOS

State, Nationalism, and the Jewish Communities of Modern Greece

Bloomsbury Academic, 2018



**DOXIADIS EVDOXIOS
WITH AIMEE PLACAS, EDITOR**

*Living under Austerity:
Greek Society in Crisis*

Berghahn Press, 2018



JACK LITTLE (EMERITUS)

*Fashioning the Canadian Landscape:
Essays on Travel Writing, Tourism, and
National Identity in the Pre-Automobile Era*

University of Toronto Press, 2018

Former Student Publications



IAN ROCKSBOROUGH-SMITH (MA 2005)

*Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights
Activism from World War II in the Cold War*

University of Illinois Press, 2018

Faculty Awards

PAUL GARFINKEL

American Historical Association, Helen & Howard R. Marraro Prize
for the best book in Italian History published during 2016, for his book
Criminal Law in Liberal and Fascist Italy (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

TINA ADCOCK

Wilson Associate, L.R. Wilson Institute for Canadian History
McMaster University

2018 Cormack Teaching Award

Simon Fraser University

JEREMY BROWN

2017 Excellence in Teaching Award

Simon Fraser University

MARK LEIER

2018 Dean of Graduate Studies Award for Graduate Supervision

Simon Fraser University

JOSEPH TAYLOR

2018-19 Ruth W. and A. Morris Williams, Jr. Fellow

National Humanities Center, North Carolina