Canadian colonialism, ignorance and education. A study of graduating students at Queen's University

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Abstract: Canada has long been a colonial country and an extractive economy. In the 20th century, with the adoption of multiculturalism and a global peace keeping mission, the country seemed to embrace a new ethos. However, Canada remains deeply colonial and, in spite of a judiciary that since the repatriation of the Constitution in 1982, increasingly recognizes Indigenous land, resource and identity rights, its economy continues to be extractive, with abiding impacts on the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (North America). Our study of the knowledge, ignorance and social attitudes of exiting undergraduate students at Queen's University suggests that students in this part of Canada (Ontario) are educated to misunderstand the fundamental geographies of Indigenous peoples, their land, and their identity. But the contradiction between image and reality is beginning to attract the students' attention and disrupt their sense of being part of a just society.

Key words: Indigenous, education, Canada, colonialism, ignorance

Introduction

This paper presents some of the qualitative results of an in-person survey of the knowledge of graduating university students from Queen's University, one of Canada's premier universities, about Indigenous people and topics.¹

¹ We use the following terminology in this paper: **Aboriginal** is a legal term, most often used by the government of Canada as an umbrella term for the Indigenous peoples of Canada. This includes First Nations and Métis people (status and non-status) and In-

Queen's is a prominent university in Ontario, the most populous province in the country with the largest number of Indigenous people and, as home to the country's capital, a major driver of Canadian identity. And it is prominent in Canada, as historically it has served as a key training ground for Canadian civil servants. Queen's University is a full service university from Bachelors to PhD programs and includes a medical school. As such, it is typical of medium-sized medical-doctoral universities in Canada. We entered fourth-year undergraduate seminars to survey 844 final-year students across 5 faculties and 20 disciplines at Queen's, which required the permission of Deans, instructors, and the students themselves. In this paper we introduce the colonial nature of the country and consider one of the key structures supporting ongoing colonialism: the education system's promotion of ignorance in university-age students. Elsewhere we have looked at the ways primary, and secondary curricula promote ignorance in Canada (Godlewska, Massey, Adjei & Moore, 2013; Godlewska, Moore & Bednasek, 2010; Godlewska, Rose, Schaeffli, Freake & Massey, 2016; Schaeffli, Godlewska & Rose, 2018). We have conducted numerous statistical studies of this ignorance in universities and colleges (Godlewska et al., 2013; Godlewska et al., 2017; Schaeffli, Godlewska, Korteweg, et al., 2018) with remarkably similar results around the country. First-year students are deeply ignorant of Indigenous topics and most final year students are equally so, though a small number do gain

uit. Many Indigenous people prefer that we use the most precise term for a people: so, Haudenosaunee, for example. **Assimilation** involves absorption into the dominant society. It can be either voluntary or forced. In voluntary assimilation, individuals or groups of differing heritage willingly become socially similar to other members of the society. In forced assimilation, the dominant society forces individuals and groups to conform to particular roles. Assimilative strategies include religious conversion, removal of children from their families, land appropriation, the disruption of gender relations, and the prohibition of some cultural practices. **Colonialism** is the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another territory or people, occupying the land with settlers, and exploiting both the land and the people economically. It usually involves domination, assimilation and marginalization of Indigenous peoples. **Settler colonialism** refers to the colonial strategies employed by settlers and their governments to continue to dispossess and deny Indigenous peoples. The term **First Nations** refers to the Indigenous people(s) of Canada who are not Inuit or Métis. The term indicates the richness, complexity and independence of Indigenous societies and that the Indigenous peoples of Canada were here prior to Europeans. The traditional territories of First Nations encompass all land from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. "**Indian**" is a legal term used by the government of Canada to define some Aboriginal rights. We use it only in that context. The term '**Indigenous**' refers to the diverse peoples whose ancestral territories and traditional systems of law and governance predate colonial nations. In Canada, 'Indigenous' encompasses First Nations, Metis and Inuit territories, communities, and forms of identification and governance that exist beyond those defined under the Indian Act. **Inuit** are many culturally distinct Indigenous peoples; whose traditional territories span the Arctic. The descendants of non-Indigenous fur traders and Indigenous women are amongst those called the **Métis**.

some understanding, primarily from taking courses dedicated to the topic in social science courses. As Indigenous land rights and identity are major points of conflict between Indigenous peoples, governments, citizens and resource developers in Canada today, more sophisticated education on these topics across all the disciplines from education to medicine to engineering to commerce, and arts and science is of paramount importance. In this paper, we focus on two of the essay-style questions on the survey conducted at Queen's because, as essay questions, they give us greater capacity to explore the nature of the geographic understanding, or lack of understanding, of these students about Indigenous lands and identities in Canada.

Canada's Colonial Nature

Canada was founded with the help of Indigenous people yet by their constant displacement. When Europeans first came to Northern Turtle Island², the Indigenous people they encountered were of vital importance to explorers, missionaries and settlers. Canadians often imagine that the French and English arrived with civilizations far in advance of those they encountered. In fact, they came with technologies and ideas adapted to the environment from which they came, but not well adapted to the more extreme and heavily forested environment they entered (stone buildings impossible to keep warm; guns nowhere near as reliable or serviceable as bow and arrow; horses and carts for travel through impenetrable forest, religious intolerance that kept them at loggerheads with each other and stifled independence) (Thwaites, 1896-1901; Trigger, 1985). They had to learn from the Indigenous people how to survive winter and scurvy, how to travel in this land, and the wealth of resources. They were dependent on the networks and knowledge of Indigenous peoples. They connected with and extended these networks to provide a constant supply of furs through trading companies like the Hudson's Bay Co (Ray & Freeman, 1978; Ray & Heidenreich, 1976). From the early 17th century, Europeans settled on the land in a more fixed and exclusive way. The Haudenosaunee fought settlement along the St. Lawrence River until the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701 (Havard, Aronoff & Scott, 2001) and, like many Indigenous peoples, continued to resist settler encroachment (Kallant, 2004; St-Amand, 2018). Europeans also brought their rivalries and hostilities with them, imposing a French/English divide and ultimately an American/British divide.

² Turtle Island is the term Indigenous activist use for North America to avoid colonial language. We use it in solidarity.

As a result of the Seven Years War (1753-1760), which substantially evicted France from North America, Britain gained control over much of Northern Turtle Island. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 was designed to set up the rules that would prevail in the enlarged British territory in Turtle Island (Borrows, 1997). At the time of the Royal Proclamation, Indigenous people still had virtually all their land in what was to become Canada. The Royal Proclamation established British title to the land formerly held by France. It was also a foundational legal document concerning Aboriginal rights. At that time, the British needed the support of the First Nations to continue expansion in the period after 1760. Without their support, trade and any degree of security in the land would be impossible. However, even in 1763, while the British sought to convince the First Nations that they would remain safe from encroachment, they also tried to lay the basis for a claim of Dominion and “sovereignty” over First Nations territory; establish a system of public purchases to extinguish Aboriginal title; and extend the rule of English courts into Aboriginal land (Green & Dickason, 1989). It is very clear from the surviving wampum belts and First Nations oral history that the agreement from the First Nations side was: “we shall each travel the river together, side by side” with “peace friendship and respect” “but in our own boat” with distinct laws, customs and ways, as separate nations (Asch, 2014; Gehl, 2014). Confirmed in multiple meetings with First Nations leaders, the Royal Proclamation was an important agreement: recognized in international law and as such, not open to change through expediency. Yet, Indigenous territory, rights, and identity have since been systematically eroded under a succession and hierarchy of colonial governments. This has included removing Indigenous people from their traditional lands and in the case of many First Nations, isolating them on reserves, starved of amenities and resources.

For much of Canada’s history, the existence of Aboriginal rights was substantially and effectively ignored by the governments of Canada. From 1910 to 1951 the Indian Act barred ‘Indians’ from raising funds ‘for political activities’ and prohibited hiring lawyers (Lawrence, 2004). But Indigenous people in Canada have always struggled to have their rights recognized within colonial systems that work against Aboriginal rights (Asch, 2011). In the repatriation of the Constitution in 1982, Canada recognized and affirmed “the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada” (“Constitution Act,” 1982). Precisely what those rights are is only being gradually defined in a series of often conflicting law cases about title, land and resource rights, what constitutes Aboriginal status, and what is acceptable as evidence. Furthermore, in the name of developing resources and en-

hancing Canadian prosperity, Canadian governments and settlers continue to erode Indigenous land rights (Bracken, 2019). Canada remains a colonial country (Morgensen, 2011; Veracini, 2010) and, within the ups and downs of mining and oil revenues, an extractive economy. These are the stark realities of Canada's historical and present-day geography.

In the 1950s, under the direction of the secretary of state, Lester B. Pearson, Canada took a leadership role in peacekeeping during the Suez Crisis, launching Canada on a 60-year trajectory that garnered the country a reputation among Canadians and internationally for global social justice (McCullough, 2016). In the 1970s, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Canada adopted a policy of multiculturalism. This policy means that the Canada recognizes circumstances in which its rule must be limited or devolved in order to respect the identities of its diverse people. That Canada must actively advance the interests of minorities and disadvantaged groups. That the rule of the majority is not always appropriate. That voting boundaries may be adjusted to give minorities a voice, and that Canada is not one people, but many peoples, sometimes with conflicting ideals (Kymlicka, 1995). What multiculturalism does not do is to recognize the country's colonial legacy or the link between Indigenous identity and territory. Neither does it relinquish the claim of sovereignty over Indigenous traditional territory. For this reason, multiculturalism has been rejected by some Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers as at best, window dressing, and at worst, a cynical strategy to neutralize resistance to continued colonial strategies (Coulthard, 2014; Povinelli, 2002).

Methodology

Understanding ignorance and its sources is as important as understanding knowledge and its development. While the study of knowledge fits into the established intellectual traditions of science and the history of science, the study of ignorance – understood as an active social force, rather than as a simple absence of knowledge, more comfortably resides with critical approaches to epistemology, critical race theory, and critical Indigenous research methodologies (Brayboy & Chin, 2018; Foucault, 1989, 1991; May, 2006; Mills, 1997; Steyn, 2012; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). The way we, as privileged by race, class, relative wealth, and geography, see the world, generally serves to support our interests. Perceiving self-interest is particularly challenging in settler colonial societies where citizens are trained to denigrate, devalue, and dismiss Indigenous realities in the subtlest and most intimate ways. This ignorance is strategic, highly defended and deeply related

to significant social inequalities. It is not about individual faulty cognition or a collective absence of knowledge, to be acquired. "It is an outcome of structural methods of not-knowing that, consciously or not, perpetuate the status quo, privilege, and domination. Ignorance in this sense entails an agreement to "know the world wrongly" and is powerful because it is socially sanctioned (Schaeffli & Godlewska, 2014, p. 229)." The fundamental challenge to understanding contemporary social ignorance is perceiving what one has been trained not to see. Exploring ignorance, then, requires taking a critical perspective to accepted understanding. Over the past decade the Awareness Team, through the co-design of a series of tests and questionnaires with over 300 First Nations, Métis and Inuit educators, community members, faculty, staff, and students, affiliated with 15 universities and colleges across Newfoundland & Labrador, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia, has been measuring student awareness of Indigenous realities in Canada (Schaeffli & Godlewska, 2019). Are students aware of the basic geography of Indigenous presence? Do they know the past realities that have shaped Indigenous and settler existence in Canada? Have they heard about Indian Residential Schools (a more than 100-year government policy of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families for placement in under-resourced schools, dedicated to the assimilation of Indigenous children and communities and the clearing of land for Euro-Canadian settlement)? Are they at all familiar with the Canadian laws that structure First Nations, Métis and Inuit lives? Do they follow and understand what is happening with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada today? And do they have any sense of Indigenous cultural continuity? We have measured what students know coming into university and here for the first time and at Queen's University, we have assessed what they know as they leave university. The questionnaire we delivered at Queen's includes six sections in which we ask questions to determine where students learned what they know (12 questions); what they think of what they know (seven questions); their social attitudes (14 questions); information about themselves (e.g., age, gender, program of study) (10 questions); and how they feel about the questionnaire. In total, 1,179 students were asked to take part. 1,000 students did so and 844 completed the questionnaire, giving us a response rate of 85% and a completion rate of 72%. The responses of the 844 students who completed the questionnaire are the focus of this paper. Using NVIVO and in vivo coding and inductive analysis, we used student words and expressions to build, in the case of the first question, 71 sub-themes, which we reduced to 13 dominant themes and in the case of the second question, 33 sub-themes which we collapsed to 24 dominant themes. We then selected clear expressions of those themes for discussion in this paper. Inductive

analysis allows data-driven themes to emerge “from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies.” (Schiellerup, 2008; Thomas, 2006, p. 238). In our statistical analysis we assess the relationship of the responses to these questions to performance on the test portion of the survey, self-declared identity, education, and social attitude. There is insufficient space to report on all the findings from this study. So here, as we are geographers, we will confine ourselves to discussion of the student responses to open-ended questions of geographic significance on the test-portion of the questionnaire.

What Queen’s Students Say and Know

Question 1. Reserves vs traditional territories

All the land, now occupied by settlers in Canada, formed the traditional territories of Indigenous people. Reserves were established by the Crown principally to remove First Nations from the land desirable to settlers and deemed useful for resource exploitation. The process of encroachment on Indigenous land began in the 17th century, intensified under the reserve system introduced by the Indian Act (1876), and continues today through a series of macro- and micro-processes that constantly erode even reserve land (Cameron & Levitan, 2014; Pasternak, 2015, 2017; Stanley, 2016; Tomiak, 2017). Yet First Nations people, although suffering from the predations of assimilative policies, persist in Canada. Do students understand what traditional territory and reserve land means and that the struggle over land remains a fundamental colonial reality in Canada? Our first open-ended test question was designed to explore students’ thinking around this fundamental issue.

Students’ responses reveal a number of important trends. 5.4% (43) of students showed deep understanding of the difference between reserves and traditional territories and its implications. Most common, however, is the perception that traditional territories no longer exist. While a little over a quarter of students could describe some of the colonial aims of the reserve system, the majority are silent about treaties and the Indian Act. Many students are also confused about the differences between First Nations, Métis and Inuit and assume that all Indigenous people live on reserves. Nearly a fifth of students, apparently unaware that all of Canada is Indigenous territory, believe that reserves themselves, as well as differences in taxation, are gifts from the government. A small but vocal minority insist that settlers today have no responsibilities. A further 15% (119) of students could not answer the question.

Figure 1 Living map of North America in which Indigenous peoples have described their traditional territories (left) and map of Ontario by Google based on Government of Canada information of First Nations reserves (right)

Note: The question was posed as What is the difference between reserves and traditional territories?

Source: Maps based on Native-Land.ca and Government of Canada information.

The most critical and well-informed responses came from students who had grown up in or near an Indigenous community and/or had been taught about topics related to colonialism and Indigenous peoples in university. As a Métis student in Consecutive Education (students who take an education degree after their Bachelors degree) stated, the creation of reserves is inseparable from colonial land dispossession, resource extraction, and attempts to destroy Indigenous communities:

Reserves were designed to be made of the worst land, the Anishinaabemowin word for reserve means “leftovers”. Canada took all of the best agricultural land for their settlers and wanted to kill off all Native people. Living with that legacy of attempted/on-going genocide is hurting our peoples and our youth (ID 828, many courses from Canadian Studies major with focus on Indigenous-settler relations and the Aboriginal Teachers Education Program).

A Concurrent Education student (taking an Education and Bachelor’s degree concurrently) likewise highlighted ongoing dispossession, focusing on settler failure to uphold treaties and exploitation of traditional territories through resource extraction:

Traditional territories are the lands that were occupied by Indigenous groups before the period of settler colonization began (it is still ongoing). Reserves are lands designated by colonizers that were formed

through treaties as areas where Indigenous peoples were expected to live. These treaties are frequently not upheld or have never been upheld by the government, and traditional lands are often disrespected and abused by large companies (especially for pipelines, tar sands, etc.) (ID 176, 3 some content (SC) courses).

Other students point to the role of settler self-interest in creating the reserve system:

Reserves...reflect what is convenient for the government with regard to resource distribution and land ownership for settlers (ID 174, Concurrent Education, 1 Indigenous focused (IF) course).

The difference is that the settlers took what was the Indigenous peoples, and made it their own, all the while keeping the First Nations' population in small 'communities', where they could be monitored, and controlled by the state (ID 273, Global Development Studies, 1 IF course).

Though they constitute a small minority of the students surveyed, these students articulate powerfully the dynamics of colonialism in Canada.

Troublingly, students also express a number of important misconceptions. By far the most common 28% (221) consigns Indigenous peoples and territories to the past: traditional territories no longer exist. The following logical structure is typical:

Traditional territories are the historical lands that indigenous communities resided within before colonial settlement. (ID 472, Commerce, no courses).

For students writing in this vein, traditional territories are of the distant past, succeeded and superseded by the settler present. There is little sense of the vitality of Indigenous connection with traditional territories or of ongoing treaty responsibilities (Asch, 2014; Simpson, 2017, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The assumption that traditional territories are past also denies that many traditional territories – such as that of the Ardoch Nation just north of the city of Kingston, home to Queen's University, have never been surrendered.

Nearly 13% (98) of respondents consider that, in the words of a Chemistry and Concurrent Education student, "Reserves are land given to indigenous

people from the government” (ID 3, no courses). Many students frame reserves as the product of government benevolence:

The reserves are areas that the government has “given” the Indigenous peoples to live on in the way that they feel is best for the development of society (ID 110, Concurrent Education, no courses).

For these students, reserves were created through government largesse and First Nations people(s) are passive beneficiaries of settler generosity and direction. This perception not only completely denies colonialism, it is easily mobilized to frame Indigenous struggles for restitution and self-determination as ungrateful or taking advantage.

The tendency to frame government as benevolent and generous is also apparent in the responses of 38 (5%) students who frame reserves as sites of privilege. Reserves are “tax-free land from the government” (ID 785, Consecutive Education, some SC courses) where “living and goods are heavily subsidized by our government” (ID 441, Commerce, no courses). People living on reserves “are not subject to many laws/regulations that people not living on reserves are” (ID 500, Civil Engineering, 2 SC courses). Disturbingly, some students consider taxation regimes a form of government compensation:

I think the difference [between reserves and traditional territories] is that there are designated “benefits” to those who live on a reserve, such as reduced government taxes, but this is an act of reconciliation on part of the Government of Canada. (ID 154, Concurrent Education studying Biology and Psychology, 1 SC course).

This student’s focus on perceived advantages accorded to First Nations people and their attribution of differences in taxation to Indigenous privilege reveals the power of settler self-interest to turn reality on its head. It also suggests the need for deeper conversations about what reconciliation is and is not in both national and educational forums.

Although a little over a quarter (220) of students demonstrate some understanding of the colonial aims of reserves, describing attacks on cultural continuity (74), strategies of forced displacement (71), and methods of social control (59) and assimilation (16), it is significant that out of 789 students, only 16 mention the Indian Act and only 56 mention treaties. The Indian Act is the most important, deliberate, cultivated, and sustained act of legis-

lated racism in Canada. Although our question did not focus directly on the Indian Act, it is fundamental to reserve creation and governance and thus critical to any discussion of land in Canada, reserve or otherwise (Lawrence, 2004). Likewise, treaties are central to understanding the relationship between reserves and traditional territories in Ontario. In much of Ontario, reserves were created as part of nation-to-nation agreements negotiated between First Nations leaders and representatives of the Crown (Long, 2010; Hill, 2017; Anishinabek Nation, 2018). That both treaties and the Indian Act occupy a peripheral place in the imagination of the majority of these students suggests a deep educational neglect of treaty history and responsibilities and colonial modes of governance.

In keeping with the overwhelming silence around the Indian Act, many students (24%, 189) are confused about identity terminology, often conflating Indigenous, Aboriginal, and First Nations or lumping together First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

From my understanding, reserves are land the government has set aside for Indigenous people. (ID 68, English Language & Literature, no courses).

Traditional territories are the areas that Indigenous people inhabited before contact with Europeans. Reserves are pieces of land that the Canadian federal government has assigned to specific FNMI groups for living. (ID 746, Consecutive Education, some courses).

Many students conflate First Nations, Métis and Inuit experience while also assuming that all First Nations, Métis and Inuit people(s) live on reserves. Reserves are “the current areas where Indigenous peoples live” (ID 297, Mathematics and Engineering, no courses); they are “lands within which people who identify as members of First Nations, Indigenous, or Métis groups reside today” (ID 52, International student, Political Studies, no courses). Other students are deeply confused about the relationship between identity, reserves, and government: “To maintain their recognition as Aboriginal people in the eyes of the government, they must live on the reserves” (ID 501, Civil Engineering, 3 SC courses). “A certain status is lost when the first nations people move off of reserves (ID 482, Commerce, no courses).

Overall, the geographic imagination of these students appears to be of distant and isolated pockets of Indigeneity, without relationship to lands beyond reserve boundaries:

Reserves are concentrated areas away from major urban centres that First Nations people live in. They are mostly located in Northern Ontario, and are isolated from major resources. (ID 137, Concurrent Education and Music, no courses).

- more situated in the north
- little/no access to health care/food options/government/cities
- remote
- no contact with “world” outside of reserves (ID 194, Health Studies, no courses).

The separation of reserves from the urban and modern in these students’ imaginations is in keeping with a long legacy of Canadian policies aimed at evacuating Indigenous people(s) from urban lands (Peters, 2011; Peters & Andersen, 2013; Peters, Stock & Werner, 2018; Toews, 2018). It is also deeply misinformed: Métis and Inuit do not usually live on reserves and the majority of First Nations people in Canadian provinces live off reserve (Statistics Canada, 2017). The persistence of such thinking suggests the necessity of combatting settler colonial tropes of Indigenous absence.

Some students work to distance themselves from colonial violence and dismiss settler responsibility. For a Civil Engineering student from British Columbia,

the difference between [traditional land and reserves] is a few hundred years of political and social change that have repurposed and reallocated the land. (ID 63, no courses).

Dispossession is, for this student, inevitable, a natural outcome of the course of history and a process without authorship or responsibility. A History student similarly absolves settlers of responsibility, stating that land dispossession was “perhaps necessary to accommodate European settlement” (ID 229, 3 SC courses). Another student considers that as land theft occurred in the past, Canadians today cannot be held responsible:

...an appropriate approach and quote can be described as this “The sins of the father are not the sins of the son.” However, it is our responsibility to humanity to try to break the cycle of poverty that was caused by some of our ancestors. (ID 341, Engineering Physics, no courses).

Only poverty, which this student frames as disconnected from Canadian policies of land usurpation and persistent and continuing attacks on Indigenous economies and identities, should be the focus of change. By rationalizing the status quo, these students can avoid engaging with the central issue of land dispossession and the consequences of that dispossession for all people living in Canada today.

In short, the majority of the 789 students who answered this question are deeply confused about the relationship between reserves and traditional territories. Very few understand the importance of treaties and the Indian Act to the reserve system. Many conflate First Nations, Métis and Inuit experience and assume, incorrectly, that all Indigenous people(s) live on reserves. For nearly a third of students, traditional territories no longer exist. Many students also assume that reserves were created out of government benevolence, a misconception that is particularly troubling for its ignorance of colonialism.

Question 6. Indigenous identity

As numerous place theorists have pointed out, we all live emplaced lives: our identities are formed by experiences, relationships, conditions, and possibilities shaped by the places we inhabit (Casey, 2013; Malpas, 2012, 2018; Massey, 2005, 2013). Many Indigenous people link identity to “all my relations” which includes a broad set of relationships with humans and the natural world, often encapsulated in their conception of land (Absolon, 2011). Our sixth open-ended question was focused on Indigenous identity and the impacts on that identity of prolonged colonial assault.

Q2.6 “Identity for Indigenous people can never be a neutral issue. With definitions of Indianness deeply embedded within systems of colonial power, Indigenous identity is inevitably highly political, with ramifications for how contemporary and historical collective experience is understood. For Indigenous people, individual identity is always being negotiated in relation to collective identity, and in the face of an external, colonizing society. In both Canada and the United States, bodies of law defining and controlling Indianness have for years distorted and disrupted older Indigenous ways of identifying the self in relation not only to collective identity, but to the land.” – (Lawrence, 2004, p. 1)

“What proves I am Indigenous is that I cannot prove to the government that I am Indigenous” – Ted Meyers

What effects do you think government definition of identity and repeated changes in the way identity is defined might have on a community?

Without mentioning the Indian Act, we began the question with a quotation from Bonita Lawrence, one of the outstanding interpreters of the Indian Act and of Indigenous, particularly urban Indigenous, identity in Canada. Her quotation speaks of the complexity of Indigenous identity and its relationship to historical and contemporary government policies. Students could reveal knowledge of the Indian Act and the way it functioned to reduce the Indian population and divide First Nations communities. Or they might have views on government policing of identity. To illustrate how such policing might be felt by First Nations and Indigenous people in general, we added an ironic comment from the father of one of our Indigenous co-designers in British Columbia, though we heard frustration from co-designers with exclusionary government definitions across the country. We then asked the students to imagine the impacts on a community of repeated changes in government definition of identity.

Approximately 20% of the students did not attempt to answer the question (142/709). A further 65 (9.2%) said they did not know or could not understand the question or provided an incomprehensible answer. So, engaging intelligibly on the subject of Indigenous identity was not possible or desirable for over a fourth of the Queen's students we surveyed. Some students, more difficult to enumerate, answered the question generically, with little demonstrated understanding of the issues beyond those presented on the surface by the question.

Frustration. They know who they are, they know who everyone else is, and they embody what it means to be indigenous by being alive. It is such an intrinsic quality that they must feel that they jump through hoops just to be recognized by an outside party. If it went on for long enough, it would probably start to wash away the ties that people have to their community. (ID 140, Concurrent Education, Mathematical Physics, no courses).

The Indian Act has been in effect for almost 150 years and its effects have been devastating (Palmater, 2011). Had this individual much understanding of the subject, he would have framed his answer very differently. Notice here too his exclusive focus on the individual when talking about identity.

Although the question focused on the impact on community, following neoliberal prioritization of the individual (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999), the largest number of students (192) focused strongly on imagining what the identity confusion might mean to individuals. These are examples of this reduction to the individual in student responses:

The most probable effect is confusion with respect to the individual's identity. (ID 318, Engineering Physics, no courses).

In many of the student's responses, community is no more than a container within which individuals find and express their identity. This is perhaps best exemplified in the following response:

I think that it is, and has always been unfair for the government to believe that they have the power to dictate a community's identity. It does not leave room for individuals to decide who they are, and to represent themselves to society in a way that is just and fair. By being told what their identity is, it would really impact the self-esteem and self-perceptions. (ID 651, Nursing, 1 SC course).

This Nursing student mentions community and individual but the focus is on community identity as determined by individuals. There is little sense of the autonomy or integrity of Indigenous peoples, as peoples and as nations. The limitations and harm in approaching Indigenous people without recognition of Indigenous cosmo-centric concepts of self and personhood and the value placed by Indigenous peoples on collective history and identity are discussed in (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips & Williamson, 2011). The invasive nature of individualism as a social value, increasingly enhanced by the prevalence of neoliberal values, is expressed well by this Nursing student:

It may be difficult for Indigenous individuals to identify themselves when they have been assimilated in the western culture and are in a "individual" rather than "collectivist" society. This assimilation makes it difficult to have a collective identity. (ID 680, Nursing, no courses).

Note that this student carries another deep and well documented settler prejudice, that Indigenous people are vanishing, their disappearance is inevitable (Dunbar-Ortiz & Gilio-Whitaker, 2016). Not all students lack a sense of the historical nature of community and identity. But for some of these 192 students, even ancestry is an individual matter.

The use of a changing legally defined identity creates a disconnect between a person and their ancestry when a person is told by the government that they are not a part of the cultural group that they feel they belong to (ID 327, Engineering Physics, no courses).

Some students seem to go through contortions to avoid the focus on community. Here in response to our question, this student considers the individual, the family and the group but not the community.

Having a constantly-changing government definition of Indigenous identity means that people cannot define their own identity and also that they can have it “taken away” when the official definition changes. It could also mean that members of a family or group are not allowed to have the same government-defined identity. This can cause division within groups and individual confusion. (ID 336, Engineering Physics, no courses).

Another way to bypass community and the concept of collective interests not associated with the nation state is to focus on the relationship between the individual and his or her culture, bypassing the idea of community altogether, what Charles Hale has called Neoliberal multiculturalism (Hale, 2005).

... As well, being told that you can't identify in a certain way might result in a deterioration of the relationship to the culture you are no longer able to identify with. the disconnect created between a person and their culture could be detrimental. (ID 239, History, some SC courses).

These student comments are probably unconscious denials of the distinctiveness of Indigenous communities reflecting a larger social valuing of the productive individual (Davies & Bansel, 2007). A small number of students (~30) express the multicultural neoliberal values of the day with some vehemence. For these students, the only identity is Canadian identity and discussion of any other identity is a distraction from the real problems of the day which are to be taken at face value, matters of fact to be dealt with as social problems.

Government should in NO WAY be involved with the individual's exploration of their own identity. A community is made up of individual identities, to assign a group identity makes a mockery of the concept of individualism and identity. Identity issues is something that

every person faces daily, not just Natives. (ID 63, Civil Engineering, no courses).

Sovereignty for this student begins and ends with the Canadian government which has clearly failed to fully integrate and assimilate Indigenous peoples.

The community feels restricted to having their own identities and instead being labelled by the Government of Canada. Rather than making change to Canada and benefiting it as a whole multicultural mosaic, Indigenous Peoples are treated like “the other”, and hence, cannot be able to work together to build up the country (it’s not their fault!) (ID 97, racialized student, English Language & Literature, 1 SC course).

Many students do understand the importance of community and the very damaging role the Canadian government and Canadian society has played in suppressing the fundamental values and ways of life that guide Indigenous communities (Wilson & Cavender, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

I think there is and has been pressure throughout Canada’s history to leave traditional practices behind which can result in fragmentation between the self that Indigenous people want to be and the self that they feel they need to be in order to be successful. I think this places extreme strain in communities that might be trying to preserve their traditional values and aspects of culture that are consistently being drowned by non-Indigenous media, politics, and social pressure. (ID 55, Engineering physics, no courses).

And some, roughly 6.5%, understand that the aim in Canada’s strategies around the Indian Act has always been reduction in the number of people who can claim status, so as to deprive Indigenous people of rights and land (Coulthard, 2014).

Identity is extremely personal and having your identity defined using specific terms created by a government with an agenda to break down a culture is very harmful. Because the government has put such specific parameters on what it means to be Indigenous, those left outside of that definition (the majority of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples) are left confused, are denied their lands, communities and history and cannot access their culture. (ID 181, Canadian with Aboriginal ancestry, History, 1 IF and 1 SC course).

27% (192/709) of students argue that the Indian Act and the assault on Indigenous identity is colonial. Students describe the Canadian government as colonial in a variety of ways. Some focus on the divisions that Canada's identity politics create within and between Indigenous communities and Indigenous individuals and Canada's sustained commitment to assimilation.

It really limits the people on being able to define who is Indigenous on their own. It gives the government a power where they can decide who gets the extra funding or benefits that they promised due to the history of poor treatment for Indigenous peoples, and allows them to make excuses for giving funding to one set of people over another; even though both might identify and be recognised by their community as Indigenous. This is not fair, and if anything, further perpetuates toxic power relationships that have led to problems today. (ID 371, Global Development Studies, 2 IF courses).

Others focus on the use of law, bureaucracy and paperwork to control Indigenous peoples as an issue of human rights and simply dangerous in the context of any government.

Somebody who has no knowledge of your culture or identity telling YOU who YOU are is completely ridiculous. The community experiences a loss of identity because on paper, in legislation they are being told that they do not make the cut. This is very dangerous. (ID 413, racialized student, French Studies, some SC courses).

Others see Canada as deeply engaged in colonial paternalism that blocks Indigenous self-determination.

It disallows self determination. It creates the perception that these peoples are subservient, creates a lack of identity, creates a tension between what they know to be true and why they are in the news and in the media, and most importantly it continues a legacy of paternalism that is unacceptable. (ID 619, Arts & Science student, 1 IF course).

Finally, some see Canada as committed to systematic undermining of community, culture and continuity, regardless of evident and tragic cost in human lives.

This may result in a dissociation from one's history, culture and community, and over time, community dissociation from those aspects

which define that community. This vagueness may see the generational destruction of a community's culture, and has profound effects on the psychological well-being of its members. This may play into the higher rates of suicide, depression, illness, and so forth seen in Indigenous communities. (ID 312, Psychology, 3 SC courses).

So, while many students apparently lack any knowledge of Indigenous identity and the history and continuity of Canada's attempts to undermine Indigenous existence, and others have accepted neoliberal values to the point of denying Indigenous collective identities, a significant number of students assert that Canada is an oppressive colonial power. As we have seen, students expressed this view in a number of ways: arguing that the Canadian government engages in divide and rule strategies, that it is paternalist and seeks to undermine Indigenous identity and autonomy, that it seeks to erode identity through paperwork and bureaucracy, that it may be racist and self-interested, that it seeks to isolate and marginalize Indigenous people, or that it has and continues to systematically undermine community and cultural continuity. We take this sense of Canada's colonial nature to reflect a deeper, more critical level of analysis on the part of these students.

Signs of Hope

As confused as many exiting university students are about many aspects of Indigenous existence in Canada, after completing the questionnaire most acknowledge and even lament their ignorance (741 or 91% considered the test a fair assessment despite having performed, as a group, at a mediocre median of 71.1% ($SD = 19.21$ percent)). Further, as is clear from the response to our question about Prime Minister Stephen Harper's public and international declaration that Canada is a country with no colonial history, most students despise such ignorance when they see it in their political leaders. The impatience and, even, anger expressed by the students at such political myth making suggests rising expectations of awareness for leaders and perhaps for themselves. The question was framed as:

"We also have no history of colonialism. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers but none of the things that threaten or bother them."

– Former Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015) made this assertion when presenting to the G20 summit at Pittsburgh on September 25th 2009.

What do you think of his comment?

Only 3% of the 760 respondents to this question considered that the Prime Minister was correct in asserting that Canada is a country free of colonialism. In denying a colonial past, the Prime Minister was also clearly denying a colonial present. Some of the students critical of his statement focused entirely on the colonial period of French and English control of what became Canada (11% of respondents), suggesting possible unawareness of continuing Canadian colonialism in its dealing with Indigenous peoples. That Harper himself framed colonialism as entirely historical, while also denying it, may have encouraged students to frame their answers in historical terms. Accordingly, we included in this 11% of students only those who unambiguously placed colonialism exclusively in the past. It is likely that many more students think of colonialism as past. The translation of past into unimportant is best expressed by a Commerce student:

I think this is wrong. We do have a history of colonialism. This is something that doesn't need to be a point of discussion at this point – it is in the past and Canada relatively speaking is fair and decent to a wide variety of cultures (ID 35, Commerce, no courses).

Removing anything concerning Indigenous people to the past, and particularly anything that might enhance the responsibility of non-Indigenous Canadians, is common among the students we surveyed and a common settler strategy (Fabian, 1983; Maxwell, 2014; Yee & Wagner, 2013). This was also clear in the student response to other questions on the questionnaire.

On the other hand, also approximately 11% of the respondents to this question stated very clearly that in their view, colonialism is alive and well in Canada, sometimes citing the Prime Minister's comments as evidence.

Stephen Harper's speech at the G20 summit was yet another powerful settler Canadian buying into the 'Canadian Myth' - feeding the idea that Canada is the peaceful nation that it makes itself out to be. In a global setting Canada is viewed as the peacekeeper, a country to look up to. It holds countries to a higher standard than it does within itself, withholding aid to countries with human rights abuses, when at home the abuses are unacknowledged and there is little to no action taken to deal with them. Harper is shifting the blame away from his own country to make him look better on an international scale, when realistically the history of colonialism is strong and persistent in Ca-

nadian history. It is not only frustrating to hear this comment but it is so untrue that it is hard to even believe he would say that. (ID 626, Global Development Studies, 4 IF courses).

Many students, roughly 20%, lamented the Prime Minister's ignorance and some of these focused on the inadequacy of education.

Stephen Harper is a donut...to put it in nicer terms. That statement is just so fundamentally flawed, and deplorable that he could consider that what the British, French, white settlers and then later the Government of Canada did to First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples could not be considered colonialism is staggering. He wouldn't dare say that Africa and the Caribbean did not have a history of colonialism but that is, I think, because that is what is readily taught. It is the example most commonly used and Canada's history is almost forgotten in this regard which is most certainly should not be. I remember a German friend who said that the most hard-hitting classes they took in high school were about the Second World War, Hitler, the holocaust and Fascism. He said that the exact point of making it so memorable was so that it could and would never happen again in Germany. Canada's history, while obviously not entirely comparable to that of Germany's, the two do bear some resemblance but in my high school education the talk of residential schools and the cultural genocide that was perpetrated against the First Nations, Metis and Inuit was relatively limited which I think is a huge problem. If we are not taught about it from a young age how can we ever expect things to change, ignoring our history won't work. (ID 238, Aboriginal ancestry, 1 SC course).

Among these respondents were students who, while decrying the Prime Minister's ignorance, framed ignorance as an active political strategy, designed to undermine resistance and advance the interests of the state.

Harper displays tremendous historical ignorance about the founding of the Canadian state as well as contemporary struggles of Indigenous people against the "effects" of this history. Obviously it is opportunistic convenience and indeed ideological relations (see, Althusser Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses) for Harper or indeed any other Canadian head of state to ignore these struggles in word while suppressing them in deed. (ID 247, Philosophy student, 1 SC course).

An International student, who has taken Global Development Studies courses, expressed horror at the systematic “uneducation” of Canadians “to erase the violent history of the Canadian colonial state” and to build the “representation of Canada as a welcoming, multicultural place with ‘no problems’” (ID 431, racialized student). A Drama student considered that ignorance of our own history is an important Canadian problem (ID 630, First Nations, non-status Indigenous person, several IF courses). A student hoping to become an educator considered the Prime Minister’s comments “cruel and thoughtless” and warned “No healing can take place and no solutions can be found if we continuously reject the realities of the past” (ID 619, Arts & Science, 1 IF course). A Geography major saw the statement in its context at the G20 summit as symptomatic of prioritization of economic growth over citizen well being (ID 294, Geography, some SC courses). While a Psychology student argued for interweaving Indigenous topics and approaches “into all courses as it is a lens that should be incorporated into the way we view and learn everything” (ID 405, no courses). A Concurrent Education student expressed the fear that many Canadians believe the Prime Minister’s “ignorant and arrogant statement” (ID 809, English Language & Literature, some SC courses) while a Global Development Studies student asserted that this ignorance is foundational to Canada today:

His comment reveals a deeply entrenched problem. Canada has a ‘selective memory’ regarding colonialism, and Harper’s comment demonstrates that quite clearly. It also speaks to how Canadian White Settler nationalism depends on the invisibilization of the fact that colonialism is intrinsically tied to the country’s existence. (ID 432, 1 IF and 3 SC courses).

A significant number of students (approximately 15%) used language suggesting that the Prime Minister was engaged in a politically informed process of denial (Regan, 2010).

Ridiculous. Colonialism is a part of the history of most “first” world countries because they achieved the power that they have through exploitation of people, cultures, and resources. To deny colonialism is to deny the lived experiences of people, which is misguided and problematic. Canada has exploited Indigenous people from the very beginning. It is scary and frustrating that the former leader of our country made these remarks. (ID 120, Aboriginal ancestry, Concurrent Education, some SC courses).

Many of these students identified such denial as particularly injurious to Indigenous people and a primary obstacle to a healthy nation with a bright future.

What a joke. It makes me angry, scared, and ashamed. I feel lucky to live in Canada and have access to all of the privileges of living here but I also feel ashamed. I think that Canada's biggest flaw is our denial of having flaws. I would like Canada to become a better nation but that is not possible unless we recognize our flaws so that we can try to correct them. (ID 634, Global Development Studies, numerous IF courses).

Although almost all of these students were young at the time of the Prime Minister's Residential School apology (2008) and his denial of colonialism in Canada (2009), the very small number of them (2%) who linked the Prime Minister's apology with his denial of the existence of colonialism in Canada suggests a relatively weak education on Canada's colonial nature and perhaps reluctance to recognize the superficiality and, often, cynicism of Canada's engagement with decolonization (Davis et al., 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Residential schools have come to the attention of many of these students; 13% of respondents to this question used residential schools as evidence of Canada's past colonialism. However, many have not been equipped to understand the contradictions between nationalism and decolonization and they are not prepared to interpret contradictions in Canadian government policies around reconciliation and resource extraction, for example. Similarly, amongst those who recognize Canada as a colonial country, too many place Canada's commitments to abiding colonial structures and Indigenous erasure in the past.

Conclusion

Answers to our open-ended questions suggest a deep ignorance amongst Queen's students particularly around land and Indigenous identity. The ignorance around these issues on the part of most students is not an incidental or accidental phenomena. Rather ignorance serves settler interest and is perhaps only beginning to receive attention as a result of astute political action on the part of Indigenous people. In the larger context of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples (2007), outstanding and unresolved violations of land rights, proposed land restitution, and disputes over access to resources are a major threat to both settler prosperity and self-image. The prolonged governmental assault on Indigenous identity

exposes Canada and settler Canadians as predatory at home, no matter what role the country chooses to play on the international scene. These are the harsh realities that contradict the uncritical multicultural and liberal ideologies that most Queen's students have experienced in primary, secondary and, for the majority, post-secondary education (Godlewska et al., 2010; Schaepli, Godlewska & Rose, 2018). Education capable of getting at the systemic nature of colonialism and grappling with concepts such as settler colonialism, biopolitics, states of exception, the politics of recognition, white supremacy, and land as pedagogy (Borrows, 2016; Coulthard, 2007; Morgenson, 2011; Rifkin, 2009; Simpson, 2014; Wolfe, 2006) is essential to opening students to awareness and social responsibility. There are deep structural barriers to such innovation. The first of these in Canada, is a lack of commitment to breadth of education, so in many Canadian universities, students from any discipline can graduate functionally illiterate in fields not in their program: so scientists untrained in critical thinking, humanities scholars ignorant of the fundamentals of science, business students with just enough understanding of ethics to breed contempt, nursing students incapable of understanding social disadvantage, etc. In addition, the professoriate and administration in Canadian universities includes many individuals who were taught to denigrate Indigenous thought and experience. Such individuals will block decolonial or Indigenizing education. Also much of the movement for social change comes from the humanities and social sciences, precisely the sectors most under threat from neoliberal assessment systems that accord less funding to humanities research, for example. Similarly, customer satisfaction-type teaching evaluations encourage faculty to not challenge students. With all these barriers, and more, universities are still better placed to decolonize education than secondary and primary schools, much more under the control of governments.

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