

# Decolonization, Indigenization and the History Department in Canada

By Mary Jane Logan McCallum, Julie Nagam, James Hanley, Anne-Laurence Caudano and Delia Gavrus

Our aim in this article is to document some of the recent activities that we have engaged in as a History Department to think critically about colonization and decolonization as history teachers, scholars and faculty members in Canada in the early twenty-first century. A rigorous cadre of Indigenous scholars has offered substantial critiques of University efforts to respond to the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) and to “Indigenize the Academy.” These critiques tend to focus on the seemingly substantial gap between administrative goals and practical on the ground concerns and building alternative post-secondary philosophies of education.<sup>1</sup> Mandatory courses, such as the Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR) established at the University of Winnipeg in 2016, have been one example used in many of the critiques, with scholars identifying shortcomings of the model and indicating concern that they show only minimal efforts on the part of the university when much broader substantial change is needed.<sup>2</sup> Within this discussion, scholars argue that Universities need to undertake substantial hiring plans, and ensure that Indigenous faculty are directing these processes throughout. They also argue that Native/Indigenous/First Nations Studies Departments should lead and inform this process at all Universities. History departments also have a role to play and in our department, this conversation has been led by Indigenous scholars and energetically backed by our colleagues.

In some ways our department is currently in a unique situation to undertake Indigenization/decolonization work. Our Depart-

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, much of the media covering Indigenization at Canadian universities has focused on administrative decisions and policies, while scholarship tends to focus on the everyday faculty and staff work of making teaching materials, building curriculum and improving student services. See for example, Catherine Porter, “College Built for Canadian Settlers Envisions an Indigenous Future,” *New York Times* 21 June 2017, p. A6; and 2017 Meeting of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association Panel: Decolonizing Academia, Chair Robert Innes, University of Saskatchewan, “Politics of Place: Resurgence Pedagogy in the Post-Secondary Classroom,” Lianne Marie Leda Charlie, University of Hawai‘i at Manoa, “Reflections on the Implications of Wahkohtowin for Research and Teaching,” Robert Hancock, University of Victoria, and “Circular constructions of land and property in the Quebec Education Program: Implications for decolonization,” Christopher Reid, McGill University.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Adam Gaudry, “Paved with Good Intentions: Simply Requiring Indigenous Content is Not Enough,” January 13, 2016, see Active History Website: <http://activehistory.ca/2016/01/paved-with-good-intentions-simply-requiring-indigenous-content-is-not-enough/>; Rauna Kuokkanen, “Mandatory Indigenous Studies course aren’t reconciliation, they’re an easy way out,” March 18, 2016, see Rabble.ca website: <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/campus-notes/2016/03/mandatory-indigenous-studies-courses-arent-reconciliation-theyre>; there was also a motivating commentary piece on Facebook by Daniel Health Justice that is no longer available online.

ment leadership is supportive of Indigenous history teaching and scholarship and many individual department members are interested in gaining a sense of literacy in Indigenous (particularly local) history. Our department has, at least since the 1980s, been a centre for fur trade and ethnohistory scholarship and has recently built a substantial, committed and diverse Indigenous history area staff (including three Indigenous faculty<sup>3</sup>) offering a thoughtful and responsive curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Our department has a good working relationship with the Indigenous Studies department. Moreover, the University of Winnipeg more broadly has prioritized Indigenous education and has been led by a significant activist body of Indigenous students critically invested in uncovering, revising and understanding the impacts of local, national and global histories of Indigeneity and colonialism.

Recent Department activity was conditioned in part by the University’s Strategic Directions, adopted in late 2015 after an extensive consultation process, which identified Indigenization as one of five key strategic priorities. At the same time, a student-led initiative around a mandatory requirement for course work in Indigenous studies was actively debated in Senate. Approval in principle of this requirement in Spring 2015 led to the creation of a university-wide advisory committee whose recommendation was passed by Senate in November 2015. In the midst of this, in June 2015, the TRC released its findings, broadcast to an overflowing audience of more than 700 people in Riddell Hall. The History Department had the expertise, commitment, and responsibility to respond to this moment.<sup>5</sup>

The University Senate’s “in principle” support for an ICR triggered the creation of an ad hoc departmental committee. This committee included all members of the department who would likely be involved in delivering such a course and though it was not apparent to all at the time, it established the importance of collective reflection and responsibility for this work. The value of this

<sup>3</sup> Seven regular faculty members teach Indigenous history courses, including two tenured Indigenous faculty and one long time Indigenous contract academic staff. How many Indigenous faculty there are matters – it matters in the decision making process, it matters to our students and it matters in the philosophy and politics of our campus.

<sup>4</sup> For an outline of Indigenous history programming offered by the Department of History, see: <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/history/indigenous-history.html>

<sup>5</sup> In the fall of 2016, the University implemented requirement that all new Bachelor degree students take a course covering Indigenous content, also known as an “Indigenous Course Requirement,” or ICR. These courses can be chosen from an evolving list of offerings from a range of different departments including History courses at all levels. For more information about the Indigenous Course Requirement, see: <http://uwinnipeg.ca/indigenous-course-requirement/>

became apparent as the University rolled out the second stage of its Strategic Directions, what it called its Integrated Academic and Research Plan (IARP) in late 2015-early 2016. Consultations around this plan gave the department's ad hoc committee a chance to further reflect on what Indigenization meant at the faculty, departmental, and institutional level. One department member led the response by developing a document that was in turn vetted, revised and strengthened by other members of the Department ICR committee.

This document has helped articulate department-level activities and possibilities. The full document can be found at the following link: <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/iarp/docs/written-submissions/Members-of-the-History-Department-3.pdf>. Another small but concrete step followed. At our Department's Annual General Meeting (a full-day event), we had a break-out session on "Indigenization and Decolonization in the classroom." From this well-attended and lively session, the department created an Indigenization Committee to keep the conversation going and to enact some of our ideas. Though it was not apparent to all at the time, the decision to create a fresh committee apart from the existing ad hoc committee on the ICR was fortuitous; Indigenization and Decolonization required us to look beyond courses in Indigenous History.

One of the first projects of this Committee was to develop an optional statement that acknowledges Indigenous territory and history in department course syllabi. Devising this statement and sharing it with the department became an excellent opportunity for discussion among ourselves and with our students.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these discussions, and out of a desire to ensure that the statement does not become "pro-forma", the Committee is redrafting the statement. The provisional new statement is:

The department of history at the University of Winnipeg acknowledges that we live and work in the ancestral and traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Assiniboine, Cree, Dakota, Métis and Oji-Cree Nations. We also acknowledge that the discipline of history has been used to support programs of dispossession and assimilation directed against Indigenous peoples. Teaching and learning Indigenous histories allows us to confront colonial history as well as honour and respect the people who have called this place home for millennia.

In addition to the statement, the committee advocated for Indig-

<sup>6</sup> Following up with the Statement, over the course of the 2016-2017 year, the Indigenization/Decolonization committee planned two sessions about the Statement as part of our "Talking About Teaching" (TAT) series. Here we asked faculty to discuss where they put the statement in their syllabus, and how the statement was introduced to and discussed their classes. These sessions were incredibly generative as the adoption of the statement and its discussion ranged widely. For example, many chose to put the statement at the top of their course syllabus, others chose to introduce in the context of general course information. In one class, students approached the statement as a primary source of historical evidence and as such critically examined the source, intent and context of the statement.

enous cultural training or experiential learning about Treaty One Territory and Metis culture. The rationale for this experience was to move outside of regurgitating information of the territory and for History faculty to have first hand knowledge of Indigenous cultures within Manitoba. A second initiative of the Committee was to institute an undergraduate essay prize in Indigenous history. We chose to connect the prize to the ICR courses and to use the prize to especially encourage Indigenous students. To that end, we asked those submitting essays to the contest to self-identify and we are prioritizing those essays written by Indigenous students. As we currently have no funds for the prize itself, we are "passing the hat" among faculty and collecting a small "nominal" award. For more information about the award, see: <http://www.uwinnipeg.ca/history/awards/index.html>. In addition to the undergraduate prize, the department elected to prioritize Indigenous students and students studying Indigenous history as recipients of the newly-endowed University of Winnipeg Graduate Scholarship in History, provided annually to a student entering or continuing in a graduate program in History.

Further initiatives of the department include gaining a better sense of the numbers of Indigenous undergraduates who are declaring history as their major. We found that twenty per cent of history majors are self-identified Indigenous students, approximately 40 per year. We also developed a study of the faculty experience of teaching ICR courses in 2016-2017. This study will both document this historical moment and articulate comments, concerns and tips from the perspective of specialists in Indigenous history.

Being part of this committee encouraged those of us who do not teach courses or do research in Indigenous or Canadian history to reflect on the ways in which we could respond to the TRC's Calls to Action. On the one hand, it encouraged us to incorporate Indigenous content into our teaching and scholarship. It also accelerated and reoriented long-standing disciplinary efforts to reframe 'Western' narratives. In the history of science, for example, it provided a fresh rationale to highlight recent reinterpretations<sup>7</sup> and challenges to the notion of a Western 'Scientific Revolution' and most importantly illustrated for students the connection between colonialism in Canada and broader themes in intellectual history. Finally, it made one of us more keenly aware of the importance of reaching out to scholars working on Indigenous history and knowledge to make sure these topics were represented on the program of a national history and philosophy of science conference.

In order for Indigenization to take place within large institutions such as universities there must be champions at all levels that are working with administration, faculty and students to create this paradigm shift. Faculty has to be engaged and enrolled because western epistemologies are so pervasive in all aspects of the university. The history department is extremely proud to be leading the charge in breaking down these barriers and to make space for nuanced practices of teaching that acknowledge Indigenous worldviews and pedagogies in the area of History.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Rivka Feldhay and F Jamil Ragep, eds., *Before Copernicus: The Cultures and Contexts of Scientific Learning in the Fifteenth Century* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).