PUTTING IT INTO CONTEXT: TEACHING THE CANADIAN NORTH TO LEARN ABOUT CANADA

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning about the Canadian North is about more than just life north of the 60th parallel. This region, vast and complex, offers us so much in our understanding of Canada. In teaching the Canadian North, we cannot as educators perpetuate narratives of a North that can be understood as separate from its people. One of the central responsibilities for teachers of the Canadian North, I believe, is to *place* people in the Canadian North and to dispel the national myth of a vast but empty North. Placing people in the Canadian North requires a nuanced discussion of northern Indigenous peoples, their encounters with the colonial state, and broader Indigenous-Canada relations. Unsettling dominant narratives of the Canadian North in the classroom also means paying attention to the many ways in which northern people have not only influenced the course of northern history, but also Canadian history.

INTRODUCTION

Penpals were a 'thing' when I was growing up. On the back pages of the Archie comics I bought at the corner store would be a list of kids' addresses from across North America, hoping to connect with someone their age living in a different part of the world. I loved to write to penpals and to imagine what life might be like as a young boy or girl growing up in rural Montana, New York City, or Moncton, New Brunswick. They, in turn, learned a bit about my childhood in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.

In grade three, I was absolutely delighted when our teacher announced that our class had been paired with a class "down South"—Toronto, to be exact. We spent the afternoon deciding what we would write in our letters, and what we wanted to know about our penpals' lives. "Do you like living in a big city?" I wrote. "Do you go to Canada's Wonderland? What is your favourite subject in school?"

Two months later, our teacher came into the class carrying a fat stack of letters. She passed them out to us one by one. You could have heard a pin drop in the class, we were so thrilled as we opened up our envelopes.

Our quiet excitement turned first to a few giggles scattered throughout the room, then more and more until we were reading out loud to each other the questions our southern penpals asked of us.

"Do you live in igloos?"
"Do you travel by dog team?"
"Do you know what summer is?"

We weren't laughing at our new penpals. We were genuinely surprised at the questions. It was the first time I realized that life in northern Canada was something really unique, and largely mysterious for many school-age children in southern Canada. Yet the North was—*is*—so central to our collective understanding of what Canada is as a country, and what it means to be Canadian. I put a great deal of thought into my letter back to my Toronto penpal. I told him about the dark winters, and the midnight sun in the summer. We had grocery stores, I wrote, but we eat caribou and northern cranberries, too.

TEACHING THE CANADIAN NORTH

As a graduate student in Geography, I thought back to that experience many times. When I decided to pursue an academic career, and focus on researching and teaching the Canadian North, it was a decision I made in part because I wanted to bring my own personal experiences as a northerner into southern university classrooms. I wanted to teach the North to students who may have never before visited northern communities. When I was an undergraduate student myself, there was very little taught about the North in my classes. When there was, it tended to reinforce one or more of several popular stereotypes: a vast frontier filled with resource wealth; a region central to Canadian identity and national sovereignty in need of military protection; or, a place lost in time where Indigenous peoples live happily and in harmony with the land. Neglected was that many of the issues that we explored in an international context—development, independence, land rights, geopolitics, political mobilization, poverty—are also central to a deeper understanding of what is taking place right now in the Canadian North.

Today, as a university instructor, my goal is to increase southern students' exposure to the North and challenge common geographical imaginations (Gregory 1994) about the North, all the while placing northern peoples front and centre in that geographical understanding. Yet as I have gained more experience, I have quickly learned that teaching and learning about the Canadian North is also a place for exploring bigger, more difficult questions about Canada that are too often left unasked in grade school and post-secondary education: questions about colonialism, Indigenous land rights, and Indigenous-Canada relations. These questions are equally central to our understanding of Canada, both historically and in present-day. As we learn more about the Canadian North, we learn more about Canada.

PLACING PEOPLE IN THE CANADIAN NORTH

A quick scan of the syllabi for Geography course offerings across Canadian universities reveals an interesting, and telling, trend. Of all the regional geography courses offered (for example, Geography of Asia, Geography of Africa), most tend to focus primarily on the social, cultural and economic dimensions of those regions, save one—the Geography of the Canadian North, or other northern/Arctic regions. Here, most courses are either couched entirely in the biophysical 'side' of Geography, or lean heavily in that direction. A northern geography field course I recently reviewed had, out of its five modules, only one that addressed the human dimensions of northern life. The relative absence of northern people in these courses is representative of a common view of the North as a barren, pristine land full of biophysical wonders (permafrost, sea ice, non-renewable resources) and threats (climate change, resource development). Human beings, meanwhile, play only a marginal role.

In the winter 2013 semester, I taught an undergraduate course on the Geography of the Canadian North. Feedback from students on their anonymous course evaluations was overall very positive. Nevertheless, I was perplexed at two students who complained that I had "focused too much on Indigenous people". Perhaps they had missed the first class in the course where I mentioned that the majority of the population in northern Canada is Indigenous. This feedback, though, speaks to a persistent imagination of the North that sees the landmass as somehow separate from the people who live there.

Though this complaint was expressed by only two of 60 students, it confirms that the imagination of the North as 'terra incognita' persists (Doubleday 1999). One of

the central responsibilities for teachers of the Canadian North, I believe, is to *place* people in the Canadian North and to dispel the national myth of a vast but empty North most recently remembered to us by Prime Minister Harper's "use it or lose it"[1] justification for increased military presence in the Arctic. Instead, we must introduce students to the people who have been "using it" for generations—to their ways of life, their complexities and contradictions, and the ways in which they engage not only with the North, but also with Canada as a whole and, increasingly, the world beyond.

COLONIALISM IN THE CANADIAN NORTH

Placing people in the Canadian North requires a nuanced discussion of northern Indigenous peoples, their encounters with the colonial state, and broader Indigenous-Canada relations. Over the winter 2013 semester, teaching the Canadian North became an opportunity to discuss the Idle No More[2] movement with my students, to help them to understand the significance of the treaty system to Indigenous people across Canada in order to then paint a more detailed picture of fiduciary responsibility and the modern land claims process in the North. Discussing Idle No More was not a planned part of the course, but it was a relevant way to connect the course material with events developing in real time, as well as to encourage students to appreciate the shared struggles of Indigenous peoples Canada-wide.

The Idle No More movement provided an unplanned starting point for what was indeed a planned section of the course: colonialism in the Canadian North. Understanding the contemporary North requires an in-depth examination of how the past and present interact today, and how colonial continuities shape contemporary northern social, political, economic and environmental geographies. This includes a discussion of the early relationships with traders, missionaries, and the federal government, the Indian Residential School System (something I am always disheartened to discover many students have not learned about in previous classes), and the northward expansion of the Canadian Welfare State. Framing these developments within the overall context of colonialism can be a very difficult part of the class for students, because it directly challenges the popular belief that colonialism is something that has taken place elsewhere, not *here*. For my students, thinking of the Canadian North in relation to colonialism was not a task that had been assigned to them previously. Not surprisingly, there was push back from some. The whole notion of settler colonialism can elicit discomfort, particularly in those with settler roots. But teaching the Canadian North is not exempt from the call for "a different way of doing things" (Cannon 2011) in how we understand colonial relations, decolonization, and reconciliation. Despite the discomfort, I had office visits from several students wanting to discuss their own positionality, experiences of racism in their communities, and their understanding of Indigenous-Canada relationships more broadly. The emphasis on residential school experiences in the North were also a gateway for understanding the scope and scale of the residential school system, nationwide, as well as its international impacts not just in northern communities but Indigenous communities across Canada. This course on the Canadian North had opened the door to an important transformation in the ways in which they understood not only Indigenous experiences but how their own lives were intimately tied to those experiences. To consider the colonial past and present in Canada means not only dispelling the frontier myth (see Furniss 1999), it effectively unsettles the history of settlement in Canada as it is taught in Canadian classrooms. It forces us—teacher and students—to reconsider who we are in the context of settler-colonial Canada.

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

Unsettling dominant narratives of the Canadian North in the classroom also means paying attention to the many ways in which northern people have not only influenced the course of northern history, but also Canadian history. Here again, the Canadian North provides a wealth of potential for such inroads. In direct opposition to popular stereotypes of northern Indigenous peoples as passive, silent stewards of the land, is the presence of activist, politically-savvy leaders in direct engagement with territorial and federal governments, environmental organizations, and increasingly with industry (see Cameron 2012 and Martello 2008 for further discussion). For example, many leading Indigenous voices have come from the North. Many of the founders of the Indian Brotherhood (which became the Assembly of First Nations) were Dene from the Northwest Territories. The 1973 Paulette Caveat, initiated by then-Chief Francois Paulette, and filed with other Dene chiefs in Yellowknife, opened the door for the modern land claims process. The 1974 Berger Inquiry (known

formally as the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry) was a groundbreaking example of community consultation over a mega resource development. Despite the innovation of Justice Berger, the Inquiry would have never been what it was were it not for the efforts of Indigenous leadership in the Yukon and Northwest Territories, nor the will and resilience of the many Indigenous community members who gave testimony. The map of Canada was redrawn around Nunavut, the first modern land claim to result in its own public government, thanks to the work of Inuit innovators in the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK). Political developments like these have not only inspired self-determination in southern Canada, but similarly for Indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world.

"IN OUR OWN WORDS"

Though my own upbringing in the Canadian North ultimately inspired my northern research and teaching interests, my lived experience is only one version of what it is to be a northerner. Growing up as a non-Indigenous person in a northern city like Yellowknife is not the same as growing up Dene in the same city. Nor is it the same as growing up Inuvialuit in Paulatuk, Métis in Fort Smith, or Inuit in Grise Fiord.

One of the benefits of teaching the Canadian North today is the gift of technology. Students in my class in Vancouver can learn about life in the North through the perspectives of northern residents, young and old, Indigenous or settler or recent immigrant alike. A much deeper understanding of the ways in which colonial legacies persist, and are resisted, can be found in the many thoughtful firsthand accounts offered up on in the Internet and through social media. Inuit youth rapping in the YouTube video "Don't Call Me Eskimo"[3] teach students about settlement life in Arctic Bay, Nunavut. The youth describe their boredom of living in a remote village, the high rates of suicide, and the lack of employment. But they also rap about the pride in being Inuit, learning to drive skidoos and go out on the land, and speaking the Inuktitut language. Meanwhile, the "Feeding My Family"[4] blog calls attention to the high rates of food insecurity in Nunavut, providing detailed documentation of high food prices and other food security issues. A similar Facebook page was started in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut to raise awareness about chronic housing need across the North[5].

CONCLUSION

Teaching and learning about the Canadian North is about more than just life north of the 60th parallel. This region, vast and complex, offers us so much in our understanding of Canada. In teaching the Canadian North, we cannot as educators perpetuate narratives of a North that can be understood as separate from its people. Nor can we reinforce narratives of Indigenous people as passive or vulnerable. It is a place that still grieves the legacies of colonialism, but it is also a place of resilience, and a place where Indigenous people are actively engaged in the realization of a new North. It is a place where, through our classroom explorations, we can come to learn not just about northern peoples and place, but also about Indigenous-Canada relations and settler colonialism more broadly.

NOTES

1 http://www.canada.com/topics/news/story.html?id=7ca93d97-3b26-4dd1-8d92-8568f9b7cc2a

2 Idle No More is an ongoing protest movement that began in December 2012. The movement brings together Indigenous peoples in Canada (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) and their non-Indigenous supporters in Canada, and to a lesser extent, internationally in opposition to alleged legislative abuses of indigenous treaty rights by the Conservative federal government.

3 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS8RZcKQwBA

4 http://www.feedingmyfamily.org/

5 https://www.facebook.com/groups/211491972278951/

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