HISTORY IS NOT OBJECTIVE — NEVER HAS BEEN, NEVER WILL BE

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The following is the edited transcript of an interview with Dr. Sinclair conducted by journalist and Carleton University professor Randy Boswell, guest editor of this volume.

Q. What are your thoughts about the contemporary debate happening around statues, place names and other commemorative landmarks in Canada?

A. No one would expect someone who's been abused to come into a space honouring their abuser. It's as simple as that. There's a long history in this country of recognizing and honouring individuals who perpetrated incredible harms against Indigenous Peoples and were celebrated for doing so by putting their names on buildings, by making large stone statues to honour them. And these must be changed in order for safe space to be created. Period.

If you expect Indigenous Peoples to come to tables to discuss sharing of land or resource extraction projects or whatever else Indigenous Peoples need to be involved in — which, constitutionally, involves everything in the country — it is inappropriate, offensive and, frankly, racist to expect them to be in a room with the very perpetrator of their genocide.

You mean, for example, having a statue of John A. Macdonald outside of Victoria City Hall, where Indigenous leaders were supposed to be coming for talks about reconciliation?

Yeah, it reminds me a lot of the Lakota-Dakota-Nakota peoples, who have to see — every day, in the most sacred of their sites in the Black Hills — the chiselling of presidential faces, all of whom have perpetrated one harm or another against Indigenous Peoples.

Ah, Mount Rushmore you're talking about... How do you see historians helping to resolve this conundrum that you're describing?

Well, continuing to ignore and deny genocide, which many historians do — particularly retired and so-called emeritus ones — is not the way to do it. It is ironic that people who have made their entire career based on studying, using, engaging Indigenous Peoples, then decide at the end of their careers to stop listening to them and to (deny) genocide... I've had many fights with historians over this, and lost friendships...

The first thing I would say to historians is step aside and stand beside Indigenous Peoples. This is not to be subjective or lose your so-called objectivity (as if that ever existed in the first place.) But it is to recognize that history is something that is created collaboratively, with multiple perspectives, and — most importantly — with the very impacted people who have experienced first-hand the situations and moments you're talking about. It is, frankly, absurd to ignore their perspective on those events, simply because you claim things like, 'Well, is it written down?' or 'Where's the (so-called) factual evidence?' or 'Where is it in the archives?' — when we all know that the archives is one-dimensional, oftentimes written from the perspective of those who are the most inept, and ignorant, and incapable of understanding Indigenous People. There's also the fact that those in power at those times are the most illegitimate sources for what has happened to Indigenous Peoples.

So historians have a really tricky job. But it is a job that should only be filled by the most capable. And, frankly, a long litany of historians are some of the biggest problems of all. They are ignorant and refuse to be educated.

One of the arguments that's often raised is that removing a statue or renaming a landmark is "erasing history." How do you feel about this?

Anyone who thinks removing a statue or renaming a building or giving context to history is erasing history doesn't understand the way history works. Any historian who tells you that removing a statue is somehow harming history is not a historian worth listening to because they're not studying the very field they purport to study. For example, in the City of Winnipeg, the Queen Victoria statue was edited.* For decades, grassroots, everyday Winnipeggers had asked for it to be changed. And when the province wouldn't listen to them, even after being asked peacefully for decades, that statue was edited. People said we should have an Indigenous monument with Indigenous Peoples, honouring First Nations people. There is a statue for Métis, but there is no statue that honours First Nations' contribution to Manitoba. Just think about that for a moment. There is no statue on the Manitoba legislative grounds that honours First Nations people. Everybody else is recognized, but not First Nations people. That tells you exactly what First Nations people are thought of on their territories. Literally the birthplace of the country — Treaty One. And so, after being asked nicely, kindly, justly, reasonably

by Indigenous Peoples — and by non-Indigenous people, as well — the citizens of Winnipeg decided just to take it upon themselves and peacefully and justly edit the statue of Queen Victoria. They put their hands on it to remind this country that Queen Victoria wasn't just a hero (to some) but was also a person who perpetrated incredible harm. That is the full story. Now that is the most accurate statue in Winnipeg history — because it is involving First Nations people, non-First Nations people and tells a complete story. When that statue was edited, the trains didn't stop running through the city. The trains are here because of people like Queen Victoria and Sir John A. Macdonald. I didn't suddenly look out the next morning after that statue was edited and go, 'Oh, the train lines magically disappeared.' So that's a perfect example of how history is still here. History is still amongst us. History is safe and sound when you replace, rename, remake a statue.

[*On Canada Day 2021, the statue was covered with red paint — including many small, red handprints — and toppled in response to the discovery of hundreds of probable unmarked children's graves at former Residential Schools. Signs about the Residential Schools tragedy were placed against the overturned statue. The head of the Queen Victoria figure was later found in the Assiniboine River. In June 2022, the provincial government said the statue would not be reinstalled or repaired.]

As someone who has studied history and taught university classes on many subjects, how do you see the role of educators when it comes to instilling lessons in young people about Canadian history and contemporary Indigenous issues?

The biggest stain and infection in the field of history is the illusion of objectivity. The problem is that I think most historians think they're objective in some way and that their history isn't political — that they don't make choices, and that those choices haven't been made for them in lots of different ways. They've inherited those legacies of racism and power and dominance. I think as more historians realize that they are embedded in a subjective field, they would understand that you can't just simply do history the way that it's been done for 50 years just because it's called tradition, or some illusion of objectivity. Because it's not. History is not objective — never has been, never will be. So therefore, we all have that responsibility to construct that narrative — that story, those so-called facts — together. As we do that, we will come to the fullest form of history that has yet to be written. The responsibility of educators is to read — and not just read from people who look like you and think like you and have the same credentials as you. Read from people who have been ostracized by the academy; people who have never had access to the publishing houses and the research dollars that you had; people who are talking to those you've never talked to. Then let it impact you. Let it come into your heart and your spirit and your mind and your body. Then share that with your students. Share that experience of what that feels like, what that looks like, how that radically changes your perspective and others' perspectives and the so-called historical record. That's how we begin to change the field; that's when we take action. And when we take action, then we take the next step, which is to edit our previous work, to edit others' work, to build a better field.

Historians have a gift-giving role to play. Indigenous Peoples most often want to hear and be exposed to the research that you have had access to in your

privilege and opportunity. I can tell you that working with First Nations communities, they really enjoy when they hear anthropologists and historians and archaeologists have written about our people. They also take great joy in pointing out the inaccuracies of those people who have been distanced from their community and made gross generalizations and un-factual claims. But they do appreciate the idea of a conversation or a dialogue on who they are and why they're here and where they're going. First Nations, Indigenous Peoples really appreciate that there is access to that information because we've been devastated by residential schools. So seeing a ceremony that was written down 150 years ago does help us to re-establish our languages, our cultures, the ways that we teach our children. I use archival records in the work that I do on Ojibway history and culture. That's where the opportunity lies. I think when these actions seep into you, when they impact your everyday — not just the work at the university but with your children in your living room. Then you begin to realize that there's an opportunity here — an opportunity to never seen before — to remake, to recreate and to rebuild or educational institutions in the ways that we see one another.

You can never 'unsee' once you've been taught to see. Territorial acknowledgements are a good example of this. When you see a people or a set of peoples that you have been taught not to see, then you cannot unsee them. That means you now know you share a territory with people you had been taught not to see. But now you have to do something about it. You have to return stolen land. You have to share the vast wealth and resources that certain groups have benefited from and other groups have not. You have to look to see that when people are suffering on the streets or with boil-water advisories, with poverty, with addiction — those are not 'those people,' those are your people.

You're also a journalist, a public commentator. How do you think journalists can contribute to this re-understanding of the country's history and the whole project of reconciliation?

Journalists are under the illusion of objectivity, as well. But I think less so than historians. I think that journalists are fully aware that there is a problem in the industry. A newsroom 25 years ago looked very different than a newsroom today. There are racialized people. There are LGBTQ people. There are people with so-called disabilities in that room. Those perspectives are valued and welcomed... There is a thirst amongst Canadians to hear about multiple perspectives of lives. There is a desire among Canadians to hear about stories they've never heard before from marginalized people — people who had not been in those newsrooms. What newspapers have realized — much more so than academics who don't have a market to respond to — is that it's very marketable to have multiple perspectives. It actually sells more newspapers to have people from different genders and sexualities and races in newsrooms. That is very exciting.

What signs of hope do you see of an evolving approach to history?

The fact that the Canadian Historical Association recognized genocide and had a rebuke by almost universally all of those who had been retired or have been out of the field or irrelevant for decades shows you that they were doing the right thing — that they have been moving away from many of the

problems that have been endemic to history and now they are moving towards a field that is far more inclusive and accurate. I find that history, overall as a field, is far more accurate than it ever has been in the past, where it was full of one-dimensional white men sitting in rooms absent of Indigenous Peoples, never going outside, never talking to Indigenous communities, and then writing these books about us — and then (surprise, surprise) they got it all wrong, or they got it mostly wrong. One of the most encouraging trends I see in history is the increase in the number of women in the field. I find that the women I work at the University of Manitoba are just remarkable historians, remarkable activists. And the rise in Indigenous historians is also remarkable... They are contributing to the field in ways that make for more accurate history, more inclusive history, that tells a fuller story than has ever been told before...

We must be creative with the way histories are told. It's not good enough to write books that two or three people read and go in a library that nobody enters. We must think of history creatively. That's why most of my publications have been in so-called mainstream institutions that are accessible to Indigenous Peoples — online, in things like graphic novels, in places that are accessible like The Canadian Encyclopedia. It seems to me that publishing work in a source that few people read isn't the most productive use of your time as an academic. Yet that is the way we are rewarded as academics. So that means the problem is with universities, not with Indigenous communities. We have to go to Indigenous communities; we can't expect them to come to us, because they've been locked out of the doors until about 20 minutes ago.