

STUDENTS ON ICE

In this 2018 article Heather E. McGregor reflects on what she characterizes as a “pedagogical encounter” that occurred during her research on a program called “Students on Ice, a ship-based expedition to the Arctic with youth and adults, including a large number of Indigenous Northerners.”¹ Together, they visited a National Historic Site where they “confronted part of Canada’s history of colonization.”² McGregor frames her “powerful pedagogical encounter” with Dwayne Donald’s theory of decolonizing education, wherein processes of decolonizing and historical consciousness are deeply linked.³ She found that as students studied colonialism “they did not resort to voyeuristic distance, but rather recognition of connection,”⁴⁵ what Donald terms “ethical relationality.”

Acknowledging that she has elsewhere worked with other theories of decolonizing the curriculum, here McGregor restricts her focus on Donald’s explanation of “why processes of decolonizing education are warranted and how to go about them in the Canadian context,” emphasizing “his ideas about the myth of the fort” signifying “the perpetuation of colonial frontier logics, the purpose of confronting colonial histories with an eye to interconnections, and ultimately the pursuit of ethical relationality,” each of “these theoretical reference points provid[ing] a frame for the pedagogical encounter I describe, and the generative dimensions of pedagogy that I work to identify.”⁶

During her research with the Students on Ice program, “a ship-based expedition to the Arctic with youth and adults, including a large number of Indigenous Northerners,” during which they “confronted part of Canada’s history of colonization,” specifically in “the abandoned village of Hebron, a real place where evidence of colonization cannot be hidden or ignored.”⁷ McGregor reports that the “focus of our visit became the intergenerational effects of colonization, including the contemporary suicide epidemic in Inuit communities,” testifying to “the presence of the past in the lives and relationships of participants.”⁸ She notes that “Being on a journey together also provided for percolation, or the opportunity for participants to return to thinking about their experience as it set in over the days and weeks afterwards, along with others who had experienced it too.”⁹ Rather than viewing these places and what had happened there, McGregor found – listening to comments from research participants - that “they did not resort to voyeuristic distance or settle into separate realities, but rather recognized *connection*,” what she associates with Donald’s notion of “ethical relationality,” all of which “help[ed] to enliven Donald’s theory of decolonizing education.”¹⁰

For McGregor, “the premise” of Donald’s theory is “that Canadians and Canadian education systems have not taken seriously the implications of colonialism for our shared society,” an assertion McGregor’s – and other curricular – research (by

its very existence) qualifies. She points to his postulation of a “prevalent and problematic assumption that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples inhabit separate realities, thus denying our multi-layered and long-time relationality in the country we have come to call Canada.”¹¹ McGregor affirms her own interest “in Canadian tendencies towards constructing, or at least perceiving, separate realities within our borders,” something she speculates “has been a survival tactic in such a huge country marked by significant regional differences, but it has also resulted in deep alienation on the part of those whose realities are marginalized.”¹²

After acknowledging that the Canadian Arctic is “the region with which I identify and where my research is based,” McGregor names “three dimensions of separateness [that] are at play,” (1) “rurality and remoteness in contrast to urban life;” (2) “predominantly Indigenous populations rather than non-Indigenous;” and, (3) “Northern environments ... and their intense influence on human experience.”¹³ She then alleges “that a great deal of ignorance and intrigue ... characterizes most Canadians’ relationship with the Arctic even now.”¹⁴ Issues of “separateness, and the invisibility of Indigenous peoples, are very real for Arctic peoples,” she continues, and “for many reasons, not the least of which is their ability to bring attention to, and mediate, how climate crisis is already deeply affecting human lives.”¹⁵

Undermining Dwayne Donald’s positioning of the “fort” as defining metaphor for colonialism in Canada, McGregor reports “there are few forts in Arctic Canada,” that instead “there were both fur trading posts and churches or mission stations of several denominations.”¹⁶ Then she moves to mitigate the damage done she offers that “just as with forts, these posts and churches” signaled colonialism, including the “arrival and ‘gift’ of Christianity.”¹⁷ Maybe more than forts “the remaining old Hudson’s Bay Company posts and churches stand across the Arctic as a testament to that hegemonic value structure and worldview.”¹⁸

McGregor defines “decolonizing education” as the pursuit of “ethical relationality through historical consciousness,” the key constructs of which are (1) “coming to know the past differently,” (2) “overcoming perceptions of separateness,” and (3) “relational processes of reforming historical consciousness with decolonizing aims.”¹⁹ McGregor notes that “Donald theorizes primarily from Blackfoot and Cree territory in what is now called the province of Alberta,” but “some of the same constructs [sic] may translate, albeit with some adaptations, to Inuit territory in the Arctic.”²⁰

To illustrate the first construct, McGregor summarizes the history of Hebron a “Moravian mission station located on the north coast of Labrador, in a region now officially recognized as the Inuit homeland of Nunatsiavut.”²¹ Hebron had been established in the 1830s; it was not the first mission station in Labrador, but “early in comparison to European settlement in other parts of Inuit territory across the Canadian Arctic.”²² She continues:

The German missionaries delivered religious instruction, supported Inuit language literacy, celebrated Christmas and Easter, started church bands and choirs, and provided medical and commercial services to Inuit. In turn, Inuit increasingly settled nearby the mission station, ultimately creating a permanent community. This situation continued for more than 100 years, and Labrador eventually became part of Canada in 1949.²³

In 1959 the provincial government of Newfoundland, which governed Labrador at the time, judged the settlement “too expensive,” and “during an Easter church service, community members were informed that they would be relocated elsewhere in Labrador.”²⁴ Inuit were “not consulted or given any choice in the matter,” and an appeal composed by an Inuit leader was ignored.²⁵ “The relocation that followed was deeply painful,” McGregor reports, “and the integration of Hebron families into other communities to the south was not well supported, causing what is now recognized as significant intergenerational trauma.”²⁶

Hebron remains, “partially intact despite abandonment,” declared a National Historic Site in 1976; in 2005 the Newfoundland and Labrador government officially apologized to the families who had relocated, and in 2009 a monument was erected at Hebron, registering the government’s apology and a response to the apology from affected Inuit.²⁷ The Nunatsiavut (local Inuit) government has funded restoration of the mission house and church, and those Inuit families who continue to feel ancestrally connected to Hebron are voluntarily conducting this restoration during the summer months, and taking care of the site, a place “no longer decrepit or devoid of human connection.”²⁸

The history of Hebron, McGregor suggests, forces us “to confront the early processes of missionary contact with Indigenous peoples in Arctic Canada and the gradual changes to Inuit life that followed.”²⁹ That history also requires us “to confront the manipulations of Indigenous lives by colonial governments in the 20th century under the welfare state, the complicity of the church in efforts to control Indigenous life on Eurocentric terms, and the drastic, deepfelt pain caused as people were forcibly disconnected from their homelands.”³⁰

In 2016 McGregor visited Hebron with 120 youth and 80 adults, participants in the Students on Ice (SOI) program, a non-profit foundation founded in 2000, based in Gatineau, Quebec that takes students aged 14-24 from around the world on ship-based educational expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic.³¹ Whereas climate, environmental and biological sciences structured the program in the past, more recent expeditions—especially to the Arctic—feature the arts (music, theatre, visual arts), social sciences (history, economic development, healthy communities) and Inuit culture (sewing, drumming, politics).³² On Arctic expeditions, SOI seeks at least a 30% rate of participation by youth from the Arctic including Alaska, Canada (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik/Northern Quebec, Nunatsiavut/Labrador), as well as

Greenland or other circumpolar countries.³³ A majority of these “Northern” youth are Indigenous, mostly Inuit.³⁴ SOI provides all Northern students with scholarships and involves Inuit Elders, northern leaders, and northern residents as onboard staff.³⁵ While McGregor asked the participants a number of questions,³⁶ here I’ll focus on her – and the participants’ – visit to Hebron, scheduled the same week as the launch of the *National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy*, sponsored by Canada’s national Inuit representative organization, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK).³⁷

SOI participants were invited to attend the event. McGregor reports that the President of ITK – Natan Obed - is descended from a family that had lived at Hebron; he had selected the site to launch the suicide prevention strategy” in honour of the deep anguish felt by the people of Nunatsiavut, and the ongoing struggle with suicide in that region, where rates are highest among the Inuit homelands.”³⁸ With Obed’s encouragement, SOI held “its own impromptu ceremony to recognize suicide as a legacy of the site’s colonial history,” which took place in the partially refurbished church and sat, as Moravians had, with men on the right side and women on the left side.³⁹ Inuit youth read aloud the provincial government’s apology for the relocation, and the official Inuit response to the apology, followed by an address from Natan Obed (who, due to weather conditions, was unable to attend), followed moment of silence for victims of suicide, prompting a number of participants to cry as they thought of people they had lost or who had struggled from other effects of historical trauma, while Inuit Elders sang and played instruments and several young women performed Inuit throatsinging.⁴⁰ A participant from Labrador performed the Nunatsiavut anthem.⁴¹ McGregor notes that “throatsinging and drumdancing would never have been allowed in church in the past, but on this day we overturned that restriction and became part of reclaiming Inuit tradition, perhaps renewing the sacredness of the space.”⁴² Afterward, students toured abandoned buildings, the monument and the nearby cemeteries, meeting Inuit families who were caring for Hebron over the summer, one member of which had descended from a family who had lived there, and who said the “ceremony we assembled was the happiest thing that had ever happened in the church.”⁴³ McGregor concludes that the “day inspired hope for the future as participating youth mobilized around the idea that Inuit communities can rise out of the intergenerational trauma of their ancestors.”⁴⁴

What struck McGregor during the day was that students were no voyeurs, as if they were only “learning *about* Indigenous people and their separate realities,” but were “coming to think and feel *alongside* the people directly affected by Hebron,” in each instance “draw[ing] connections to their own context of colonialism, and the challenge of healing from it.”⁴⁵ She cites a student from Nunavut who perceived “parallel impacts of residential schools and Inuit relocations on her family, and the parallel challenges with intergenerational healing,” a student from Palestine who spoke of “displacement and decay, where once there was a vibrant community,” a student from Atlantic Canada who expressed concern over the absence of Indigenous people, displaced from their

traditional territories.”⁴⁶ Each had experienced being present at Hebron as an occasion of “healing.”⁴⁷ These testimonies – along with one by an SOI mental health counselor concerning the embodied and deeply moving experience of being at Hebron – testify to “the powerful nature of experiential learning, of visiting real places.”⁴⁸ McGregor herself testifies to “the uniqueness of a pedagogical encounter such as the one I have described,” concluding that “it was just about as emergent, sensory and immersive as learning ever gets. It was incredibly unique.”⁴⁹

Returning to Donald’s notion of ethical relationality, McGregor reports that “something like this relationality [was] built during our visit to Hebron.”⁵⁰ The experience “produced a strong bond and a sense of the importance of equity in the present and future so as to recover, and so as not to perpetuate injustice.”⁵¹ Theoretically, McGregor also interprets what happened at Hebron as an instance of “historical consciousness,” which she defines as “thinking with the awareness that both *what* we think about, and our own *way* of thinking, are historically conditioned.”⁵² Referencing what she terms as a “Gadamerian sense of historically ‘effected’ consciousness,” she concludes that “processes of knowing are never objective” as the “experiences, and the forces that shape our experiences such as place, time, identity, and relationships, always shape processes of knowing.”⁵³ Consistent with that statement, McGregor characterizes it as a “premise” – not an objective fact – suggesting that, if we “accept” it, “then we also accept that knowledge can, and must, be remade as experience shifts—in response to place, time, identity and relationships,” declaring that “openness to such shifts in knowing, and to shifts in ourselves as a result, is the same openness warranted in advancing decolonizing.”⁵⁴ She concludes:

What we “know” about Canada and its history, what we “know” about Indigenous people, should never be static, never fixed, never secure in a single narrative or a single experience. We must recognize the extent to which our perspectives on Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations are historically conditioned.⁵⁵

This would seem to be – would it not? – one of those “objective truths” McGregor has eschewed.

The contradiction continues when McGregor asks “how do educators help youth become aware of how their consciousness is historically conditioned, and will this contribute to their ability to participate in decolonizing Canada?”⁵⁶ It would appear that only settlers are “conditioned” and only the Indigenous – and those non-Indigenous in the know – know the objective truth, a certainty that sparks “Confrontations with coloniality, in the presence of others who see places in the same moment, and yet know them differently, help[ing] to make this real in the learning experiences of youth.”⁵⁷ “In my view,” McGregor continues, “educators are called to invite youth to become aware, and then remember, that everyone’s view of the world

is historically conditioned—particularly by identities, places and relationships, adding: How teachers go about this in decolonizing teaching and nurturing historical consciousness will likewise depend on their identity, place and relationships.”⁵⁸

That McGregor accepts objective truth is implied when she writes that “an embodied encounter with a real place that strongly elicits the history of colonization in Canada,”⁵⁹ the adjective “real” suggesting no “premise” but an objective fact. There is an acknowledgement of educational potential of reactivating the past when McGregor writes that “the place likely would not have held such potential in the absence of group of individuals still affected by that very history, those who show that the past comes with us into the present.”⁶⁰ When the past becomes felt – experienced - by those submerged in presentism, historical time starts again, including awareness of their emplacement in it. And the persistence of the past in the present is acknowledged when McGregor writes that “the suicide epidemic ... flows from intergenerational trauma linked to relocations such as the one from Hebron.”⁶¹ McGregor also notes that the expedition itself “offered space, time and relationships within which the encounter percolated, or set in, especially through dialogue among peers.”⁶²

“[M]oving together through time and space, and changing conditions,” McGregor continues, “we literally came to see the world anew, but not all in the same way,” and “students seemed to recognize that we came with our own lenses, but nevertheless could learn and grow side-by-side.”⁶³ McGregor suggests that “these conditions of the encounter helped to mirror, and nurture, learning that serves purposes associated with historical consciousness and decolonizing,” thereby, in their “illumination of historical conditions, of difference and of connection, also may help overcome the perceived separateness of Northerners and other citizens of Canada and the world.”⁶⁴ McGregor concludes:

Confronting realities associated with histories of colonization can bring out emotion, and for us at Hebron, it certainly did. But without the chance to acknowledge these truths that surround us, we cannot work towards the healing that is needed within us and between us. As demonstrated by student remarks, the holistic, experiential learning journey to Hebron touched many individuals deeply. While the emergent pedagogical encounter will never be repeated exactly, I hope it stands to show that educators can continue to seek and facilitate learning experiences associated with difficult histories and contemporary challenges, and mobilize Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to stand alongside each other in understanding, respect, solidarity and resilience.⁶⁵

To the cynical, that final sentence can seem a stretch. Even if McGregor overstates what was achieved, clearly the event impacted several, including the scholar herself.

COMMENTARY

The research assistant - Anton Birioukov-Brant, now the Director and Co-Founder of Ridge Road Training & Consulting: <https://www.theridgeroad.com/ourteam> – who reviewed this article (and who acknowledged he knows Professor McGregor) notes that “McGregor uses Donald’s fairly well-worn concepts of colonial frontier logic and ethical relationality (the fact that the latter term was introduced to Canadian Indigenous education by Willie Ermine is not mentioned) to a new context,” and in doing so (again quoting Birioukov-Brant) “explicates and exemplifies how the process of reconciliation and decolonization outlined by Donald can be accomplished.” He continues: “Although as McGregor correctly points out, this voyage is an extreme example in its uniqueness and inaccessibility to most students (due to logistical considerations), it is nevertheless an illuminating example of the power of experiential learning in shifting the historical consciousness of settler, international and Indigenous youths. This experience is a far departure from the ‘traditional’ classroom-based approaches to teaching and learning about Indigeneity, although its uniqueness is also its shortcoming, due to its inaccessibility.” With these insights Professor McGregor might agree. As a theoretician, my appreciation for this scholarship is associated with its theoretical advances, one of which Birioukov-Brant mentions, namely the educational potential of being removed (estrangement) from the everyday, what Kiera Brant-Birioukov has also studied, referencing the memorably explication of this potential by Maxine Greene. I would not regard “uniqueness” as a shortcoming, as classrooms are also unique, but I do share Birioukov-Brant’s appreciation of the “power of experiential learning.” It is the educational potential of reactivating the past to which McGregor’s scholarship testifies that excites me maybe most of all.

REFERENCES

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Greene, Maxine. 1973. *Teacher as Stranger*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Hare, Jan and Barman, Jean. 2006. *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2018, 90. For more on the program see: <https://studentsonice.com/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. McGregor cites Donald's 2012 essay; see research brief #11 and the research brief index for additional Donald references.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in 2018, 90.

⁶ 2018, 90-91.

⁷ 2018, 91.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Again, I am reminded of Susan Dion's conception of "braiding." See CSinC index for multiple references.

¹² Ibid. See CSinC index for multiple references to the concept of "survival" in Canadian curriculum research.

¹³ 2018, 91-92.

¹⁴ 2018, 92.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ 2018, 93.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

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- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 2018, 93-94.
- 29 2018, 94. For a specification of these “processes” see Hare and Barman 2006.
- 30 Ibid. That “complicity in the church to control Indigenous life on Eurocentric terms” was not, evidently, universally resisted nor rejected, as the restoration efforts of the Indigenous testify.
- 31 2018, 94.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 See 2018, 95.
- 37 2018, 96.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 2018, 96-97.
- 41 2018, 97.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 2018, 97-98.
- 46 2018, 98.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 2018, 99.
- 53 Ibid. While not disputing her statement, I do worry that it inadvertently undermines the powerful educational experience the reactivation of the past made possible. What happened at Hebron did in fact – objectively – happen. For one gloss of this historiographical controversy – and one tentative resolution of it – see Carr 2014, 108ff.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 2018, 99.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ 2018, 99.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ 2018, 100.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.