

Department of History, York University: Statement on the unmarked graves at former residential schools

The revelation of unmarked mass graves at the sites of former residential schools in Canada, with the expectation of further recoveries of unmarked graves at the hundreds of other residential schools across Canada, has awakened Canadians to the evidence of the genocidal nature of Canada's settler colonialism.

The Department of History at York University, situated on territories held by the treaty-holders, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, expresses its deepest sympathies with the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island who are in mourning with the Tk'emlùps te Secwépemc community, the Cowessess First Nation, the ᑭᓐᓂᓐ band of the Ktunaxa Nation, and all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada for children whose graves were found and those whose graves have not yet been found.

Canada has a history of genocidal policies towards Indigenous peoples (see the Canadian Historical Association's Canada Day Statement, <https://cha-shc.ca/news/canada-day-statement-the-history-of-violence-against-indigenous-peoples-fully-warrants-the-use-of-the-word-genocide-2021-06-30>). The incarceration of Indigenous children in Residential Schools was a particularly horrific consequence of a blind and unquestioned faith in the virtues and efficacy of settler colonialism and state-building on Turtle Island. This example is one part of a larger system of economic marginalization, land dispossession, and assimilation. The damage that this has caused to Indigenous peoples is incalculable and continues into the present. As York's Vice-President of Equity, People and Culture, Sheila Cote-Meek, explains "First Nations, Métis and Inuit children continue to be disproportionately represented in child welfare systems across the country, and Indigenous children living on-reserve receive less money for health care and education than other children across Canada. There is also a need for greater awareness and understanding about the reality and the root causes of the violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people – who experience violence at a rate that is disproportionately higher than the general Canadian population." (See <https://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2021/06/20/a-statement-from-vice-president-equity-people-and-culture-sheila-cote-meek-on-national-indigenous-peoples-day/>)

The discipline of History bears a particular responsibility in this regard. Research on and the teaching of Canadian history in universities such as York has often helped promote a view of Canada's past that can blunt or conceal the destructive consequences of settler colonialism and assumptions of white supremacy in Canada. One path towards a more

just and more accurate understanding of Canada's history lies with insisting upon teaching Canadian history (at all levels, primary, secondary, and post-secondary) in a way that clearly grapples with the consequences of settler colonialism and the genocidal outcomes such colonialism had in the form of institutions such as Residential Schools and Day Schools.

The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission insisted that "history plays an important role in reconciliation; to build for the future, Canadians must look to, and learn from the past" (TRC, 2015, 8, see [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)). We take this statement to heart.

The department recognizes that there are other historical harms resulting from the Canadian nation-state, such as anti-Black and anti-Asian racism. These must also be addressed in our teaching of Canadian history. Nonetheless, the department acknowledges that the awful revelations of the past weeks starkly illuminate the unique consequences of Canada's state-led colonialist policies towards Indigenous peoples. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission recognized the "ravages of colonialism" imposed on Indigenous peoples in Canada throughout history (TRC, 2015, 18, see [http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)).

We support calls for a National Day of Mourning to recognize the tragedy revealed by the recovery of the mass graves at former Residential schools, as well as the countless other unmarked graves yet to be discovered. This recognition would entail a full implementation of the ninety-four Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, including addressing the issue of unmarked graves. The historical profession needs a greater and more substantial enquiry into the genocidal crimes embedded in Canada's settler past. The History Department endorses the implementation of York University's principles of centring Indigenous history and colonialism and its consequences in its teaching (see York University's Indigenous Framework <https://indigenous.yorku.ca/framework/>) and holds ourselves and our institution accountable.