

Indigenous City – Decolonizing and Indigenizing Urban Studies education

→ Summary of investigations and learnings from two courses

Report on experience of Kamala Todd, Adjunct Professor, Urban Studies, 2020

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Introduction

Adjunct Professor Kamala Todd offered two new special topics courses in Urban Studies in summer and fall 2020. In summer, the course was called *Storyscapes: Decolonizing the city through arts and culture*. In fall, the course was called *Indigenous City: Stories, teachings, and practise in decolonizing the city*. Both of these courses were also cross-listed with Indigenous Studies and included both graduate and undergraduate students.

At the same time, Kamala engaged in a Decolonizing and Indigenizing curricula project to better understand the shifts, challenges and opportunities in this new direction for teaching within SFU Urban Studies. This report aims to synthesize key insights gained from these experiences and to frame important topics for further discussion. Opportunities exist for faculty, students and community members across teaching, research and outreach activities in Urban Studies to decolonize our approaches. Lessons may apply, for example, to how we approach teaching across the curriculum, how we evaluate students, how we think about knowledge, voice, and place.

In recent years, there has been tremendous growth in recognition that Vancouver is on unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh lands. This recognition calls for new urban studies courses, carefully researched and designed to begin to answer questions such as:

- How can declarations like Vancouver's City of Reconciliation framework translate into decolonizing policies, governance and economic understandings, and cultural shifts?
- What are other cities around the world, such as Auckland, New Zealand doing to decolonize and Indigenize urban and community planning and decision-making? What are the approaches of the host First Nations of this place to planning and decision-making that we can learn from?
- How can Indigenous voices be meaningfully centred in conversations and pedagogy about how the city is shaped? How are the city's stories told, and how are the laws encoded and enforced?
- Does the Canadian city and governance system need to be dismantled and remade to truly decolonize?

This research project sought to:

- Identify relevant Indigenous sources to bring important perspectives into the urban studies repertoire and widen understandings of diverse ways of looking at urbanized lands, waters, and built environments.
- Demonstrate the value and relevance of Indigenous knowledge to talking about how we live on the land and shape urban centres.

- Be inspired by the work that is being done around the world to recognize that building sustainable and equitable cities means decolonizing and making big shifts in fundamental understandings of the land.
- Build strong relationships with people from Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh as part of the proposed course, and as valued knowledge holders for all inquiry and discussion about Vancouver.

About Kamala



I'm an Adjunct Professor of Urban Studies. I also teach at UBC SCARP as Adjunct, with similar content. I am a Metis-Cree community planner, filmmaker, and educator steeped in the stories and generous teachings of the Coast Salish people, in whose lands I was blessed to be born and raised. I have spent several years in university (8 in total), but I have been schooled by the land, adopted Uncles, and the Indigenous matriarchs who keep me on my toes.

And so I come to these conversations and questions with the dreams and critical view of someone who has been taught that this city is really the traditional, unceded, ancestral, stolen territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations — that there are extensive cultural landscapes, languages, belief systems, laws, protocols, cosmologies, cultural teachings, etc. that belong to these lands. The effects of colonization continue to erase, deny, and overwrite the people of these lands and their uninterrupted continuity upon their lands for thousands of years/since time out of mind. I do what I can to address this, as a mother, and through my work as a filmmaker, curator, educator and community planner. I believe in the power, brilliance, and importance of Indigenous knowledge and ways of being, and that our very future depends upon undoing the colonial systems and impacts which have created the unsustainable, hierarchical, individualistic society that has come to dominate across Canada.

I have worked within local government as a Planner, and within community as an artist, consultant, and facilitator advocating for transformation of the dominant narratives and ways of living in this place. From 2000-2006, I was the City of Vancouver's Aboriginal Social Planner. There I created a project called *Storyscapes*, an oral history community arts project sharing Indigenous stories to address colonial narratives and erasures. I was also part of the Vancouver Dialogues Project, as consultant and also as filmmaker documenting the project in the film [Sharing our Stories: The Vancouver Dialogues Project](#). From 2018-2020, I was the City of Vancouver's first Indigenous Arts and Culture Planner. In all my work I try to honour Indigenous knowledge and protocols and help non-Indigenous people, especially planners and decision-makers, think about their responsibilities to the lands they make decisions for. In 2017, I wrote the Park Board report [Truth Telling: Indigenous perspectives on working with municipal governments](#), based upon conversations with Indigenous artists and cultural leaders.

My recent film work with Indigenous laws, as well as my work as a Gladue Report writer have helped me to better understand possibilities for transforming the colonial systems and assumptions that have been imposed onto Indigenous lands and bodies. I made a series of videos for the Indigenous Law Research Unit at UVic and videos for the RELAW project at Westcoast Environmental Law. I bring my video work into the classroom, as a multimedia resource to share Indigenous voices and hopefully inspire deeper understanding.

Some of my video projects:

[Welcome to Our Homelands](#)

[Indigenous Law Research Unit Video series](#)

[Indigenous Plant Diva](#)

RELAW videos:

<https://www.wcel.org/program/relaw>

<https://www.wcel.org/heiltsuk-oceans-act>

Course Demand and Evaluations

About Course Demand

Kamala's two courses were both oversubscribed. We took efforts to increase access to the courses in order to meet the high level of student demand, including by assigning a TA to the summer course, which had an enrolment of 37 students (17 graduate, 20 undergraduate). Students in this course came from multiple departments in FASS and FENV, from Business, Health Sciences, SIAT, Education, and Communications. This size of course, particularly given the entirely remote teaching requirement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, proved to be less than ideal and the course size in fall 2021 was reduced to half this size, more in keeping with the norm for an Urban Studies seminar. A total of 15 students enrolled in the fall class. Students on the wait list for the course were turned away, suggesting a high level of latent demand for Kamala's teaching. Several students across the University got in touch to request approval to register in the class, many citing their desire to learn more about Indigenous people, cultures, and issues in planning.

About Course Evaluation

Students were evaluated and graded similarly in both courses. The grading was divided into three categories: participation (10%), assignments (50%), and a final research paper (40%). The only significant difference in the grading process between the two courses were that students were asked to lead a discussion as part of their assignments in the fall. The discussion-leading portion was worth 10% of the overall grade.

Storyscapes, summer 2020

Participation	10%
Story of Place	20%
Story Project	30%
Final Research Paper	40%

Indigenous City, fall 2020

Participation	10%
Leading Discussion	10%
Story of Place	15%
Analyze/Decolonize	25%
Final Research Paper	40%

The participation assessment was based on attendance, participating in group and class discussions, and contributing to the weekly online discussions on canvas. Students were asked to complete two major assignments for 50% of their entire grade. The assignments were meant to challenge traditional academic thinking and process by asking students to use sources and references from Indigenous authors, and other mediums such as song, poetry, video, and visual arts. The final research paper could be about anything related to the major course themes and issues (i.e., (de)colonization of the city, transforming urban planning through a decolonial lens, etc.). Similar to the case with the assignments, for their final projects, students were encouraged to be creative, to use non-traditional references, and to be self-reflexive about their positionality and relationship to the lands they inhabit.

Kamala reflected the high level of engagement that students had with this approach to presenting their work for assessment:

I think for some people it's just kind of new to approach things that way. And of course it's a skill and there's a few who... their writing... like this one woman, she's an undergrad, her writing just blew me away. I was just like, you got to publish this. It was just very rich... I would read it and just be so moved.

Project Design: Decolonizing Teaching in Urban Studies

This research project sought to raise and engage with big questions about how Indigenous people around the world are working to transform the municipal systems that have been imposed on their lands, while looking closely at the local context of Vancouver. This means not taking the city at face value, or as a given. It's a radical questioning of this system as a legitimate form of government imposed on Indigenous people's lands. The approach is to ask who has authority to make and shape places? By what means did they assume that authority? The courses created here are designed to ask: What are other narratives of Vancouver? What are the consequences of erasure and displacement, and how can we transform that?

Course content emphasized going beyond the usual academic sources to highlight the validity and importance of Indigenous stories, arts, and other knowledge expressions that reflect thousands of years of continuity and relationships with their lands. Recognizing that over time, many dominant voices have perpetuated mistruths about Indigenous people, Canadian history

and society, and have normalized colonial methods of shaping place. To Indigenize and decolonize the curricula, this project generated an Indigenous urban studies “bundle”, a rich constellation of Indigenous perspectives, approaches, and knowledge that present different visions and understandings of how to live on the land and with each other – with an emphasis on the context of these unceded Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh lands.

Kamala’s own Metis-Cree cultural teachings of reciprocity were embedded into the design of the project and the ways in which she conducts the work. That means being humble, and not replicating the ‘extraction’ and appropriation approaches that academic research so often take. That means valuing Indigenous knowledge and other forms of knowledge besides text-based as equally valuable and valid. Very careful attention was given to clearly recognizing the owners of cultural knowledge, and forefronting to whom/where the knowledge belongs. The idea of bundles also forms a nurturing circle around the work and the ways in which it is shared, so that it’s never stripped from its cultural origins.

In addition, an important part of Kamala’s approach to teaching is to practise compassion and aim for learning that is nurturing and transformational. Many traditional western ideas of education reflect their colonial origins, and they reinforce hierarchy and harmful ideas about productivity, standards, excellence, etc. which don’t take into account the whole student and their story and circumstances. Kamala is intentionally approachable and flexible, and strives for collaborative learning as much as possible. Teaching during a pandemic means recognizing that there are layers of stress, anxiety, and other challenges, and student wellness must come first.

[W]e were all going through a hard time, right? So the level of compassion I think was appreciated that we had for each other but also... I really was trying to be nurturing and that's a really important goal for me...

Evaluating Effectiveness of the Project Design

This research project was designed to evaluate and synthesize key insights from the work of creating and offering two new courses in Urban Studies that explicitly recognize that urbanization and urban planning have been used as tools to dispossess and displace Indigenous people of their lands and ways of life; and that uphold the need to address this by including Indigenous thought and action as essential to shaping healthy Canadian cities. Colonial erasure is very much reflected in North American cities and contributes to the perpetuation of colonial methodologies and assumptions about shaping cities, and ongoing exclusion of Indigenous people from urban planning. Research for this project entailed gathering writing, videos, artwork, song, cultural expressions that in some way reflect/speak to the issues of decolonizing and Indigenizing cities, and the ways we live on the land. With every weekly module, efforts were made to find local Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh sources – videos, reports, websites, poetry, music, artwork, projects, etc. The next step was to find similar forms of content from Indigenous authors from other territories. For the more academic sources that

speak to planning, urban design, colonialism, reconciliation, and the like, only sources by Indigenous people were compiled as possible course materials—even if “settler scholars” wrote about these topics with care, they were not included, as there is such an urgent need to undo the white supremacy built into universities and ideas about who should speak, who has expertise, etc. There are extensive resources by Indigenous people talking about decolonizing pedagogy and building place-based learning, and their voices are key. Making a list of guest speakers from each of the local Nations was also part of the plan to ensure students would hear directly from the people of these lands.

Very often urban studies is presented as a progressive discipline, just as cities are normalized as progressive landscapes representing the very best of human achievement. Viewed in this way, the work of critical urbanists is characterized in terms of examining the ‘problems’ of the city when ‘disorder’ or ‘unregulated’ activities and markets falter, or to ‘re-imagine’ our urban spaces within ever more aspirational frameworks such as sustainability, liveability, equity and access, most often removed from the contexts of the local First Nations who have ancient relationships with the urban lands and their own planning traditions. This is part of the ongoing narrative that upholds Canadian cities as the creations of brave, white, founding fathers, generating and regulating order, structure and opportunity for profit as if from the void. A decolonizing perspective on urban studies compels us to question the basics of urban history, form, and urban systems themselves.

Decolonizing urban studies entails ripping away the seemingly natural and embedded basics of the urban built environment to see, as in the case of Vancouver, that these are very recent intrusions onto Indigenous people’s lands, cultures and ways of life. These lands have contained and supported a rich diversity of forms, ecosystems, storied-landscapes that have been the basis of the people’s legal orders, governance systems, knowledge systems, food systems, and more, for thousands of years. From this perspective, the entire opus of urban development, planning and governance theory and practice at work in Canadian cities today are very recent intrusions into systems that were successful for millennia, pre-contact. This opus has to be seen as bearing part of the responsibility for rendering the existing cultures, languages, structures of governance and built environments illegal, amid concerted efforts to remove or eradicate the pre-existing societies, along with the ousting of the thousands of species that made up thriving ecosystems within which the local Nations lived and prospered. The opportunity to decolonize urban studies is an opportunity to re-imagine progressive urban studies in a longer-term and more radically open context, informed by the layers of landscapes in Canadian cities that have always existed and continue to exist today.

Most narratives and planning systems of the North American city reflect shallow understandings of the Indigenous lands they are on, as well as the ongoing harms and systemic nature of colonialism. As a discipline, the origins of urban studies itself, along with the profession of urban planning, are usually traced to the early 20th Century. This is a particular picture of urbanization that holds us captive; it does not hold any inherent truth or value. But it’s hard to imagine beneath or beyond the entrenched systems in which we find ourselves.

And, given that Canadian cities were built by imposed colonial concepts such as Doctrine of Discovery, terra nullius, and capitalism,¹ they tell stories that erase the value of the intact societies already in place for millennia at the time of contact. The initial work of decolonizing urban studies is to acknowledge the limitations of the opus of urban studies to date.

So my other big approach that I think is probably unique and maybe challenging for people —and I don't know how it would be received in the wider academy or whatever—is I don't take the city for granted as a given, as a legitimate natural thing, at least in the case of Vancouver. But in all North America, I see the city as a colonial imposition onto Indigenous lands and so it would never be a straightforward, "Okay so this is what Vancouver does and here's their policy and here's a project." It would be always about: this is what the entity, this kind of imagined constructed identity of Vancouver does. And this is part of my newest learning and thinking: Why do we even presume the right to go and make that plan for that area? Why do we even assume we have the authority to be the ones to say, "Okay now we're going to do Marpole, now we're going to do the West End, do a plan for that neighbourhood?" when the fundamental question is, "Who says we even have that authority?" And why is it that the City is seen to have jurisdiction and legal authority over these lands?" So I really questioned that at the very beginning, which is, you know, maybe for some people, completely destabilizing.

But that's where I'm at. It's like what is this entity and who decided, and who made these boundaries and the naming and the charter and the laws and the policies; like where does that come from, you know. And are we just going to live with them or can we actually remake them? What would it look like to have Indigenous laws which have always been here and they're actually thousands of years on these lands; what would it look like to have decision-making either come from that or include that or respect that.

A Bundle For Indigenous Urban Studies

This work has included the compilation of a rich bundle or collection of important voices from these lands, in a variety of forms and media. In developing the course material and curricula, Kamala's intent was to highlight Indigenous and non-traditional sources of knowledge such as art, poetry, story-telling and the land itself, while avoiding using any white academics as sources and class readings unless it was used to critique a city or colonial document. Through the course development processes, Kamala ensured that Indigenous forms of knowledge were prioritized and valued as intelligible and trustworthy sources, as necessary voices in any effort to build healthier urban futures.

And then the sources, so there were still some students who either through habit or maybe they thought that's what I was looking for, they would still go to kind of typical

¹ For more information on these concepts, see Hayden et al. (2019).

sources. So like for example I had a student talking about history, -- talking about the Nation's history there and their reference was from the Vancouver Heritage Foundation. And like I made it really clear from the beginning that the Nations have their own websites, there's videos, there's books, like there's so much there to get their perspective and their voice and you don't need to go to a colonial source. Most people especially the grad students of course, were very keen to explore these things in a deeper way.

And then things like videos as a legitimate source and you can quote from an interview and there's somebody whose voice is important. And there may not be a lot of academic texts from people of these lands but there's lots of videos about them or artworks. There's many different sources.

The bundle includes: articles, reports, and other forms of creative writing from Indigenous authors such as Lee Maracle, Justin Wilson, Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Kamala Todd, and Dylan Robinson, local Nation websites and videos that explain, for example, the expression of Indigenous legal principles, the use of art as a form of expression and protest, and relationships to the land and local plants. The bundle also includes two assignment curricula, along with two completed assignments from graduate students. For a comprehensive list of the bundle, please see the appendix.

Listening to Stories

So then another area is, you know, the story and the understanding of the land. So, trying to help the students and planners in general see the land is not just "Vancouver" and try to understand what that means. What is this place? What is my relationship with this place? What is my responsibility to this place? So I have them do a self-reflection/self-location thing called, Story of Place.

[T]hat seemed to be kind of interesting to people about story being a source, you know, really the ultimate source of knowledge. It's the foundation for Indigenous laws which we discussed from the very first class, about Indigenous laws coming from stories.

Bringing in her own teachings about the importance of stories, Kamala emphasized stories as a source of knowledge, and also one of the main ways in which ideas about the city are perpetuated. The dominant narratives of Vancouver as a young city built onto an empty land by brave white male pioneers perpetuate colonial assumptions about the caretakers and decision-makers of the city. Changing these systems means changing the stories – decolonizing and Indigenizing the narratives and understandings of the city. Through sharing local stories from the host Nations, as well as Indigenous stories from elsewhere, Kamala aimed to show the limitations and problems of the colonial stories that need to be rewritten in order to decolonize urban studies.

Story of Place

This assignment was the first piece of writing in both classes. It was intended to have students deeply reflect upon their own positionality, and how they relate to the land and see themselves on the land. For some people it can be unfamiliar to think about their identity within place, and also how they relate to lands that are not their own, within the realities of colonialism.

And you know, not all of them are living here so sometimes it's about a different location but the idea of like, do you see yourself as a settler? Or are you living to a place that you're indigenous to? How would you describe your sense of place and your connection to that place? And then, trying to get a certain mindset about, you know, do you know it very well? What is your understanding? Maybe you've been taught a certain thing and you have to kind of unlearn that. Or maybe you carry a sense of your responsibilities? Maybe you don't. Like getting people to think about that...I definitely got a range of some very self-aware people and then others who were just like, "Oh yeah and I love to garden and I love to walk in the forest," without that sense of the place that they're on.

All of [the Indigenous students] were from other places. So I think all of them definitely had that sense of being on someone else's land and what that looks like. So that was nice...[S]ome people who are from other cities, they would say, "Oh First Nations", but it'd be like yes, who? And how can you find that out? Because it's actually really easy to find that out at least in Canada; actually even in all of North America. I think pretty much any city if you look it up, dig around, you'll find whose territory it is.

The Story of Place [assignment] is supposed to be a personal narrative. You can write about your story. You can just go for it and get creative with that. I think for some people that was new for them, you know, and then the second assignment for the last class was also supposed to be kind of story based or could be. It wasn't very successful and like most people just did an essay and that's fine. So I think if I tried in the future I'd be more clear around like, you could choose a piece of art and talk about it and interpret it, tell the story of that; still you need some analysis within it but...

Engaging People and Protocol

Kamala brings 20 years of working with the local Nations in various capacities, as well as having connections with many community members. Her work is grounded in her own teachings of reciprocity and showing gratitude back to the lands where she was born and raised, that her children also call home. While the original proposal for this work was ambitious with the hopes of creating a course in collaboration with someone from the local Nations (one SFU grad in particular), the reality is that people from the Nations involved in this kind of work are over-subscribed with multiple demands on their time. In retrospect, it was perhaps presumptuous to assume that collaboration could be done within the year that these courses were taught.

With her own experience as a practitioner, educator, and storyteller, Kamala continued her approach by focusing on: 1) colonialism within planning and dominant narratives of Vancouver/Canadian society and the ways to work towards decolonization within those systems and myths – sharing personal experiences within the local context; and 2) Indigenizing through upholding Indigenous voices and perspectives, and prioritizing sources from people of these lands, including guest lecturers from each Nation (with honoraria provided). Where appropriate, depending on course content, it might also be helpful to have someone from the City of Vancouver and the urban Indigenous community to speak to their respective areas.

I'm constantly critiquing the kind of fixed or dominant story and identity of Vancouver. Getting [students] to think about that and then hear other perspectives. So that's where I'm trying to bring in voices from here. It seems a lot are from Tsleil-Waututh. There's a lot of writers from Tsleil-Waututh! Trying to find writers from the other Nations too, like beautiful poetry. And Lee Maracle in particular who is Tsleil-Waututh and Sto:lo. Her writing is just so amazing. I feel like her stuff would be a good resource for the department. She does a whole range from poetry to nonfiction writing to fiction. My Conversations with Canadians (by Lee Maracle) book is the one that I read from a lot.

[Zoe Todd] has been influenced by a lot of other Indigenous thinkers, but she talks a lot about kinship. Her focus is fish and like our relationship to fish and how fish are being affected by all the environmental damage. But she had this Twitter essay...kind of like a poem. So I've used in both classes now and I just love it because it talks sort of similar like, you might think of the city in this way but to me, it's this, and to my ancestors it's this, and you know, relationality and kinship. But then she also talks about citizens and... and I posed it to the class and...one of the students actually emailed me...and she said, "Oh to answer your question, I think of citizens as -- everything like the plants, the animals, and people." I was like, yes! That's what I was hoping. Like that idea. Because you know, is it voting people? Is it all the humans? Like what is your idea of who the citizens are that you're making decisions for?

And Zoe and others have helped me to put into words this idea especially here on these Coast Salish lands. It's, you know, raven is a really big figure here. Wolf is a really big figure here. Cedar, you know, the Sisters, like the various beings that make up this place. Are we making decisions with them in mind as well? and why not? Like this idea that it's just for humans and it's this human made thing.

Guest Speakers:

1. Gabriel George, Tsleil-Waututh Nation language and culture leader, currently head of Treaty, Lands, and Resources (TLR) department, former Councillor
2. Christie Charles, Musqueam Nation artist, hip hop artist, cultural leader
3. Cease Wyss, Squamish Nation ethnobotanist, artist, cultural leader
4. Carleen Thomas, Tsleil-Waututh Nation Special Projects Manager, TLR

5. Sierra Tasi Baker, Squamish Nation urban design consultant, artist
6. Metha Brown, City of Vancouver, lead planner on the culture plan

Gabe George was the first [guest speaker]. He spoke and told like really important stories that I hadn't heard before and it just even changed my understanding even more. He sang a song and people were very moved by what he shared.

Christie Charles [was a guest speaker]...[W]e were talking about music and I was hoping that she would sing... she is such a big powerful speaker and she'll sing and talk about her community. And she did tell stories but she was at home with her kids and they're all quite young and they kept coming in and going into the microphone and asking for things. Everybody loved it because it was the exact thing of like, this is who she is. She's a mother, she's a single mother, and she did sing for us at the end...So I think that was an interesting dynamic.

Cease Wyss who, of course, already was quite well known to them and like kind of a rock star to them. And she was able to just share amazing stories and perspectives and she's also used to that.

Critiquing the Colonialism Embedded in Urban Planning

I guess it's just in how you look at the city, right? Like oh I'm going to look at this building and I'm going to just think about the square footage and the use and the blah blah blah. Or can you deepen that approach and that knowledge? It especially comes out in the sustainability stuff and the greenest city stuff which [we critiqued].

Dominant stories of Canadian urbanization obliterate recognition of and respect of pre-existing laws and ways of living. They tell stories of not valuing creeks and other important food sources, of asserting white Western European men as the height of thought, development, ability and authority. As such, planners and the municipal systems that they operate within continue to be upheld as the experts, decision-makers, authorities in shaping the city and deciding how things happen. Even with efforts at community engagement, participation and consultation, the assumptions of the validity of the system and how its power was obtained leave little room for a rethink of the urban government itself.

One of the approaches Kamala took in class was to examine City documents like neighbourhood plans, strategies, and such, to analyze the colonialism embedded within them. For example, did they recognize the original rights and titleholders of the land? How did they present the story of Vancouver? When discussing things like health and wellness, or heritage, did the City talk about the longstanding traditions of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh on their lands, or how their health was impacted by Vancouver and its colonial policies? Some reports and projects which were examined in class and also as readings included: Greenest City Action Plan, Healthy

City Strategy, the Vancouver Charter, Southeast False Creek, Marpole Community Plan, Stanley Park Environmental Art Project, etc. Within these discussions, Kamala brought first-hand knowledge from time spent working at the City, or working on projects as a consultant to help illustrate the persistence of colonial mindsets within how the City does its work.

And in that first document there's not one single reference or mention of Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh in the whole document. So you're talking about how to make this city the greenest city, you know, a healthy environmentally rich land, and you're not even going to think about the people of these lands. Whose lands these are? Not to mention how the environmental degradation has affected them. So, huge blind spot.

That's been the history. That's the thing is like the people and the true nature of these lands has been so erased that even people who are relatively aware and you know, thoughtful people, like it's just not even on their radar. It's like: oh we're making decisions for this city, as opposed to: we're making decisions for these lands which also had this cultural history. And I'm running up against it so much right now and that's where I think the big focus needs to be right now which I'm happy to talk about.

Bringing Your Own Cultural Teachings + Lived Experiences

How I approach the class and my teaching in it -- looking at the city and then that's where you bring in your own cultural teachings...[It's] a holistic approach that we bring our whole selves. Kind of rejecting that idea of you know, you have your professional self and you have to separate out other parts of who you are.

Like people talk about intersectionality and identity and all that and I know that there's much more openness to that. But even things like, right now, while we're online, with your children, like you're a parent, your children are there and they need something from you, you know, by all means. As opposed to like, "Oh sorry", you know trying to hide that. I always feel [the separation of different parts of one's identity] is so strange. So the holistic thing, and it's about what you bring.

Another approach Kamala consciously took was to value knowledge that's not just from people in the academic world. Growing up with a filmmaker mother and having many mentors and teachers from the wider Indigenous arts and culture community who aren't in the academic world, Kamala knows and values the importance of Indigenous stories and knowledge as invaluable for learning and citing Indigenous thought. While there is a brilliant world of Indigenous scholars, Kamala takes a more grassroots approach in terms of looking to people who speak from their cultural knowledge, from the land, from lived experience—not necessarily from published writing, which is often upheld as the main source of knowledge in academic systems.

As a practitioner who has worked with the City and Park Board for 20 years, Kamala has a lot of first-hand observations and stories to share about the colonialism embedded within the system—both from a long view, before “reconciliation” was even talked about in local government, and also from a view of current projects, given her recent employment at the City and ongoing consulting work with the City and Park Board. Based on evaluations and comments in class, students seem to enjoy hearing these accounts from an Indigenous person who has been at the tables, who has seen the way things work on the inside, and who can ground her critique in lived experience.

Relationality Against Rationality

Whereas the urban planning cannon is constructed around a spine of rationality, part of Kamala’s intention in her teaching was to destabilize the notion of rationality as a filter for normative value in cities. Decolonizing urban studies entails, in part, introducing relational, emotional, and gift practices and values into the conversation and the lexicon of justifying our plans and actions in the urban space. Part of this work, in turn, is to challenge the rational resistance to these other ways of understanding and being, and to refuse to turn off that within us that is driven by love, relationship, and reciprocity, for example, when forming our positions and making decisions about the city.

And so my other thing is how the professional, sort of disembodied, the idea of expertise and...the profession being quite Western, rational and not being about things like love and relationship and nurturing... and that's where Lee Maracle has some really good writing about relationships. Because I think it's generally considered flaky or unprofessional or new age to talk about mother earth or the land and loving the earth and caring for all those things, in planning. It's, you know, would I sit in a meeting and say, what about our love for...? We need to be able to talk like this, that's how I feel. So Lee Maracle and others help give me that language of how to talk about it in a way that hopefully legitimizes that perspective, that it's not just flaky, that it's very scientific.

[T]here's an article called [Looking Back to the Potlatch as a Guide to Truth, Reconciliation, and Transformative Learning, by Justin Wilson, Aaron Nelson-Moody (Tawx'sin Yexwulla), 2019] it's basically the idea of potlatch as guide and I've been using it a little bit... Aaron Nelson Moody, who's Squamish, and Justin Wilson who teaches at Langara and is Heiltsuk. So they both come from potlatch cultures and they talk about those things like relationality and respect and circles of reciprocity, and all these basic teachings, and in a way that you can incorporate it into learning in a way that should be okay, as a framework, you know? So really try and normalize that and not have it just be disembodied, you know, professional, that planning thing.

That's what I said in one of my classes: it has to be about love because we're making decisions for the land and the land takes care of us. We need to show love for that land and also the people too of course, but we don't always think that way.

Can we even think about supernatural beings or the ancestors or future generations? Like a completely holistic, you know, it is a law or it is a science that all Indigenous people have and their own way of articulating it, that we are interconnected with everything so we should be, you know it sounds obvious and flaky, but we should be thinking about all who share these lands.

Creating Circles

A major part of Kamala's approach in teaching is to create a circle that includes all participants in the course. The circle is a representation of the non-hierarchical relationship that she sought to create through the teaching and learning experience, and a representation of reciprocal trust and respectful regard of one another. Within the circle, conversations about difference and inequity became more approachable and more amenable to resolution, less liable to marginalize or alienate class members. Kamala described how this approach served as a way to build a better relationship between older and younger members of the class, as well as the special opportunity as well as the challenge of creating a virtual circle in the context of the online classroom.

And then I did have another class that also talked about youth and elders which apparently quite a few students really appreciated because there's also those things too around like what kind of dominant voices are and how young people and old people— young people because they're not citizens and voting people, and often get left out of conversations, and seniors as kind of, you know, disposable or marginalized and yet they're the most revered in Indigenous communities.

But a big part of my thing is that we're making a circle together for this whole class and even though we're doing it online, it's a virtual circle. And we're creating that circle whether it's through imagining networks or constellations or roots or branches or however people want to visualize it. We are creating a circle together. And how amazing that in the last class, we had the teaching assistant TA] in Ghana, we had a student in Dubai and somebody in Winnipeg, but we're still able to make a circle together.

Project Evaluation

Both courses were evaluated very highly by participating students. These evaluations were particularly notable in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on face-to-face gatherings that resulted. Students commented:

The strongest feature of my course instructor is her knowledge, interest and experience in the topic. I loved how open and free the class felt, it was everything I would want if we were in a classroom.

Kamala is a fantastic instructor. I am someone who generally likes a lot of structure, and so I appreciated that all of the modules and readings were available before the class began, but I also really appreciated that our discussions were open ended and less structured; they allowed for more sharing and getting to know each other, even in an online environment. I also felt very supported in discovering new things that I wanted to learn about or read more about.

Limitations

The pandemic meant that the classes could not get out on the land together. Being online also made discussion more difficult, as some people were not as comfortable with the platform. With some international and newcomer students, there were language barriers and less knowledge of some of the basic concepts around terminology, for example, and cultural conversations. For some international students and newcomers, there was a less nuanced knowledge of the complexities of colonialism and the lands which were the focus of the course, though people seemed to take this learning on as part of coming to these lands. The course is not intended to ‘teach about Indigenous people’ in an ‘Anthropological’ way, and some students may have been expecting that approach, but hopefully the critical ways in which the course focuses on the urban environment as the focal point for talking about ongoing colonialism and conversations around decolonizing and Indigenizing, the students gained new understandings. Some students who are used to more structured and formulaic approaches to learning, such as pre-determined and defined learning outcomes and rubrics might find Kamala’s more open and decolonizing approach frustrating, but this approach is by design, and will hopefully contribute to decolonizing learning and ideas about how to learn.

Were the funds disbursed as outlined in the application for the grant?

The restrictions from face to face gatherings meant that none of the on-site activities were possible. Amounts budgeted for visits to important sites with Indigenous hosts were reallocated to honoraria for virtual guests and for research activities that could be completed remotely.

Would you do it again?

Absolutely! The courses were very thought-provoking and rich with conversation. Based on the experience of 37 students and 15 students, the happy medium would be a maximum of 25. With Kamala’s background in arts and culture, the preference is to continue to talk about planning and decolonizing the city through an arts and culture focus, and continue to bring in

cultural leaders from the local Nations and develop a large bundle of Indigenous perspectives on the city and living well in urbanized environments.

...are you willing to really question and rethink the whole idea of Vancouver, and the fact that it was imposed onto these lands? Are you willing to look at actually rethinking the idea of Vancouver?

Appendix: Bundle Index

Readings

- Armstrong, J. (2017). Land Speaking. In S. McCall, D. Gaertner, D. Reder, G. Hill (Eds.), *Read, listen, tell: Indigenous stories from Turtle Island*, Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Gilio-Whitaker, D. (2018, November 14). *Settler fragility: Why settler privilege is so hard to talk about*. Beacon Broadside. <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/11/settler-fragility-why-settler-privilege-is-so-hard-to-talk-about.html>
- Hayden, K., Pasternak, S., et al. (2019). *Land Back: A Yellowhead Institute Red Paper*. Toronto, ONT: Yellowhead Institute.
- Maracle, L. (2010). Blessing song. In *First Wives Club : Coast Salish Style*. Theytus Books.
- Robinson, D. (2015). Reconciliation Relations. *Canadian Theatre Review* 161, 60-63. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/567441>.
- Todd, K. (2017). Truth-telling: Indigenous perspectives on working with municipal governments. <https://parkboardmeetings.vancouver.ca/files/REPORT-TruthTelling-IndigenousPerspectivesOnWorkingWithMunicipalGovernments-2017.pdf>.
- Wilson, J., & Nelson-Moody, A. (Tawx'sin Yexwulla). (2019). Looking Back to the Potlatch as a Guide to Truth, Reconciliation, and Transformative Learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2019(157), 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20329>.

Local Host First Nations Websites

<https://www.musqueam.bc.ca/our-story/who-we-are/>

<https://www.squamish.net/about-us/our-culture/>

<https://twnation.ca/about/>

Video Resources

Acts of Resistance

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pe_R9XyLNIY

An exhibition at MOV of the artwork of Indigenous artists whose designs flew from the Iron Workers Memorial bridge in 2018 to protest the Trans Mountain Expansion Pipeline project.

Indigenous law: an introduction

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uNgg7raxk4&feature=emb_title&ab_channel=UVicIndigenousLawResearchUnitILRU

This video provides an introductory discussion about Indigenous law, including different interpretations about what the term means, and about legal pluralism.

Land Grab? Indigenous plant foraging protocols, relationship, and responsibilities

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iK4XZ8s1RL4>

Featuring Kamala Todd, Cease Wyss, Dionne Paul, Bardia Khaledi. Part of the *Land & Sea* project, a community research project looking at shared coastal textile traditions.

Musqueam Through Time

<https://vimeo.com/310233135>

Squamish Nation

<https://youtu.be/X0QrolqLIWQ>

Speak Of What You Know by Ostwelve

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNSqA_fTB2k&ab_channel=ostwelve

For Intangible: Memory and Innovation in Coast Salish Art exhibit at Bill Reid Gallery, 2018.

Tsleil-Waututh Nation "People of the Inlet"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paWn3fKaLkk&ab_channel=TsleilWaututh

Assignments

Full Criteria and student sample of assignments available upon request.

Story of Place / Self-Location

- Please write a 500-800-word piece reflecting on how and where you situate yourself on these lands. What is your personal/family history that brought you here? How would you describe your identity? lineage? your sense of place? How do you see your relationship with Vancouver, or the city you connect to the most? How does your own identity and positionality affect/relate to your relationship to place? This can include your own origin story, culture, positionality, identity, etc. Have you or your family experienced displacement or dislocation from your own lands? Do you know whose lands you are on (if your ancestors are from other lands)?

Analyze / Decolonize

- Approximately 2000 words, plus visual content. For this assignment, please choose a site-specific city planning project (neighbourhood plan, report, development project, community project, historical context statement, park plan, public art project, etc.) and immerse yourself into thinking about that place and project.