



## Decolonizing Cascadia?

‘Decolonizing Cascadia? Rethinking Critical Geographies’  
conference organizing committee<sup>1,2</sup>

This essay reflects on attempts to organize a conference that sought to trouble the colonial nature of conference structures, academic knowledges and hierarchies, and the ‘Cascadia’ bioregion of Northwestern North America. For the past seven years, geographers from universities in Washington, British Columbia, and beyond have come together for the Cascadia Critical Geographies Conference. Among other lively critical geographical dialogues, these meetings have generated discussion over the term ‘Cascadia;’ one that references a bioregion encompassing British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. In recent times, the ‘Cascadia’ name has also been taken up to promote tourism and business across the 49th parallel (Sparke, 2011), and previous meetings of the conference have analyzed the political economic interests at stake in delimiting the region in this way. Questions have also been raised about the intrinsic coloniality of the Cascadia denomination as well as the spatial politics of its framing. Given the complexity of these discussions, our use of the term ‘Cascadia’ in the conference title was to remain a sticking point throughout committee-efforts to organize the 2012 gathering at the University of British Columbia -- itself a legacy of the dispossession of Coast Salish Territory. To engage intertwined questions of Cascadia, place, and decolonization, we temporarily renamed the conference ‘Decolonizing Cascadia? Rethinking Critical Geographies,’ and oriented the keynote address, plenary panel

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and closing remarks – which included Glen Coulthard, Sarah De Leeuw, Margo Greenwood, Sarah Hunt, Coll Thrush, and Harsha Walia – around practices, strategies, and processes of decolonization within and outside the academy. In what follows we discuss how we navigated this terrain. We reflect on some of the de-hierarchizing strategies we used and how the conference shaped our participation in and understanding of the ongoing political project of decolonization.

### **Decolonizing Strategies**

Our committee agreed from the outset that ‘decolonization’ would serve not only as an intellectual theme, but also as a set of political strategies striving to foreground the legacy of colonialism in a broadly defined Cascadia region. Musqueam Elder Larry Grant opened the conference by reminding us that the University of British Columbia sits on the unceded, ancestral, and traditional territories of Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Skxwú7mesh-ulh Úxwumixw (pronounced squa-mish), and Tsleil-Waututh (pronounced slay-wa-tooth, also known as Burrard) Nations.

### ***Renamings***

Decolonizing Cascadia? was concerned with the process and politics through which ‘Cascadia,’ acquired its status as the title of a regional conference. Fittingly, three of us organized a lunch-time ‘renaming session’ to interrogate this denomination and work towards possible alternatives. Tables were arranged with markers and blank sheets of paper: if Cascadia is a problematic name, what would you call this regional conference instead? Over the ensuing conversations, we often found ourselves in what Ananya Roy (Roy, 2010) terms ‘zones of awkward engagement.’ What is the renaming facilitator’s role? Are advocates of renaming experts of some sort? As we struggled alongside the other academic and non-academic participants, themes emerged linking ‘Cascadia’ to concerns around conferencing, disciplinary specialization, and academic culture generally. Each group worked towards a new name for the conference, which were then posted to a ‘Renaming Wall’ - a hallway space dedicated to artful, creative, and spontaneous naming interventions. We asked conference participants to read and consider each of the names during breaks between paper sessions and cast a vote for the one they preferred.

Below is an excerpt of our follow-up discussion, presented in dialogic form with the hope of maintaining some of the direct exchange we sought to facilitate in the session. The conversation features the three organizing members (Lisa, Jonathan, and Jessica), an additional table facilitator (Max), and a scholar (Sarah H) whose critiques of the colonial nature of naming at the previous years’ conference inspired the session.

LISA: At the lunch-time renaming discussion, we actually focused on asking, ‘What work does a name do?’ and ‘How can renaming be understood as a decolonizing process?’ As part of that we had Sarah L, a Masters student at UBC

who works on a project titled Decolonizing Knowledge here on campus (see Decolonizing Knowledge - UBC, 2013). So, Sarah L came in and presented about their renaming and naming work with Student Housing. And she opened up those questions about renaming as a potential strategy or component of the process of decolonization and the kind of tensions experienced with that on campus, while also offering us some perspectives on the challenges and productivity that they found in their project. That's what opened the session, and then we had a couple of questions to go from there. And that's when we had the group discussions.

MAX: My table was really interesting. I was with two professors, a doctor, and two activists who had come up from Oregon. One of the first things that happened was there was this leveling process; basically everyone felt that they were equally confused about how to proceed. And I think that's really important to speak about in the context of naming, which is so much about hierarchy, especially insofar as UBC has established itself on Coast Salish Territory, named itself in certain ways, and affiliated itself with certain kinds of histories. So, I think that the leveling process that happened right away – where we were all kind of equally confused and unsure how to proceed – was really important and productive for setting the stage for those awkward and important conversations that followed.

JONATHAN: That's good to hear because I felt quite different about the process after the conference concluded. I remember going home, sitting on my couch, and having this overwhelming feeling of failure. What I was struck by was not the difficulties that had been directly confronted through the conversations, but my failure as a planner to institutionalize the right process – the lack of clarity, a failure of process. This process that you've highlighted as being really productive is the one that I totally lost sight of right after the conference...which is terrible.

SARAH H: In some ways, our process is kind of countering that need for clarity, in that we're engaged in this conversation of trying to destabilize the act of naming – naming that's usually taken for granted. After the somewhat open-ended group dialogue about the name, asking 'now what?' is part of that institutional drive to have a solid answer at the end. Whereas I think we've come to appreciate that the relationship building, the discussions in that room, and the dialogue leading up to it, were also productive. If we're thinking about something to leave with organizers for future conferences, I think we should emphasize the process they go through beforehand. The important part is to talk about the name 'Cascadia' and what it signifies, talk about the goals of the conference and how colonialism can either be made invisible in naming, or can be brought to the surface. That's the important part: that the naming is not just taken for granted.

LISA: It did; it brought the coloniality of both conferencing but also naming more broadly to the fore. And maybe for different people in different ways. But it made for a bit of a confrontation with that.

JESSICA: That gets back to the idea of discomfort, of feeling unsettled, and the way that privilege allows you to selectively engage with those feelings.

Through this conversation and the renaming process, it's made me take my own position more seriously in a lot of ways, as someone who is doing my PhD in geography and who is really trying to have these kinds of conversations more.

JON: More and at different levels. To not just question and then think that we have done the work; we've made our point. The work isn't something that ends. I think that's something that has come out of our conversation today. How can we carry on these conversations in productive ways? Not productive in terms of bureaucratic production but ways that are continually interrogating and constantly challenging.

SARAH H: I also want to recognize that the committee made a choice to take up the challenge of having these difficult conversations. It's really important to acknowledge this as a choice, because often people don't take up this work and instead just proceed as usual. After raising these issues of colonialism and naming, including the erasure of Indigenous geographies through place names, at the previous conference, I was happily surprised that the theme was taken up this year. It's important that people see these moments as opportunities to do something different.

MAX: I would like to see a culture – an academic culture – where people who are doing work that nominally is totally unrelated to decolonization wonder what the connections might be with their own work.

JESSICA: What I really appreciated – just going back to Sarah L's presentation for a moment – is she really emphasized renaming as something that needs to be connected with relationships and in a really deep way, which for me, profoundly complicates things; to think about renaming as a process within geography implies geography's or geographers' abilities to have those kind of relationships, to move across disciplines, to move beyond academic cultures, and actually come to terms with the ways in which settler-colonialism is deeply part of geography. Also, the fact or reality, that institutionally, I don't think we're anywhere near there yet.

### ***Logos***

In addition to the renaming process, we made an effort to incorporate decolonizing strategies into the design of our conference logo (see Figure 1). We wanted to draw attention to Cascadia as a commonly understood geographical concept while also questioning the validity of its settler colonial representation. The outlines of the legal boundaries of the states of British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon were included not to legitimize the violence created and continually re-enacted by those borders, but to question them. The interior borders between states and nations have been dissolved and 'Decolonizing' has been written across the landscape as a hopeful sign of positive change. However, the external borders of the states remain as acknowledgements of the biophysical demarcation of the border between land and sea and the significant political obstacles faced by

decolonizing efforts. The color scheme plays off the use of blue, green, and white in the unofficial flag of the Cascadia independence movement – the Doug Flag – by appropriating them for a different cause. By designing several logos and choosing a final design within the organizing committee, we were forced to make a difficult compromise between political goals and the realities of producing a legible logo. While some students involved in the design had experience in the visual arts, the process was a valuable practical learning experience in the process of non-hierarchical decision-making and compromise.



**Figure 1:** Decolonizing Cascadia? Rethinking Critical Geographies 7th Annual Regional Conference Logo. Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0) License. Original Cascadia map by Cascadianow (2012).

### *Conference processes and organizing*

A continual reflexive engagement with the organizing committee structure was the tactic we adopted to unsettle the traditional conference form. We practiced organizing principles such as transparency, consensus-building, and de-

hierarchization (Mohanty, 2003). We collectively brainstormed each of the organizing tasks that needed accomplishing, divided them into separate groups, and formed volunteer-subcommittees structured around these divisions. The subcommittees operated according to their respective needs: the relatively small budget and social/communications subcommittees met rather informally, while the plenary planning/content subcommittee used agendas and a rotating chair system. Because the latter subcommittee had to grapple with meanings of ‘decolonization’ and was tasked with the exciting but difficult process of selecting speakers, we spent many hours outlining decision-making matrices and working towards consensus. This is not to suggest that consensus was always achieved; indeed, we spent long hours debating various viewpoints and working towards common goals and often did not come to complete agreements. Due to the significant time invested in thinking reflexively about conference organization, an important outcome of the conferencing-process was a new understanding of non-hierarchical organization. This is an understanding each of us hope will inform the future work we do within and outside of the academy.

While the overarching purpose of this conference was to engage in processes of decolonizing conference methodology, critical thinking, and academic practice, we were also aware that an un-critical adoption of decolonization discourse could serve to blanket diverse experiences of oppression, hierarchy, and exclusion. As Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us, the inclusion of decolonization as a general theory and framework for critical thinking can enact a form of enclosure, a domestication and invasion of decolonization that resettles particular ways of knowing and being. The immediate context of settler colonialism in the Cascadia region complicated our commitment to ‘unsettle’ the traditional conference structure, producing an uneasiness about what decolonization means, what it wants and requires of us as students, conference organizers, participants, and community members. In our efforts to unsettle and render visible the links between knowledge and power, were we unintentionally rendering diffuse the very meaning of decolonization? Our struggle lay in navigating multiple understandings of colonialism and decolonization – as verbs, nouns, and adjectives – while maintaining an open conference structure welcoming of a wide variety of presentation subjects and styles.

Our discomfort with decolonization as a conference strategy and theme was reflected in the multiple iterations of the conference’s call for papers. Written collaboratively by the organizing committee, we struggled to strike a balance between maintaining an open conference welcoming of a range of academic and non-academic work and centering the important and material realities of settler colonialism. These attempts to emphasize the continuing legacies of settler colonialisms met with some resistance; because a key value of this conference has always been inclusivity of diverse scholarship, some conference participants criticized us for circumscribing the themes with which our conference could engage. Time and again we heard murmurings from colleagues that this or that

project was not relevant to a conference about decolonization. We suspect this trepidation manifested in the initial slow trickle of conference abstracts we received, all of them speaking explicitly to decolonization or colonialism. With each subsequent CFP, we attempted to broaden our publicized definition of what counted as critical spatially-oriented research relevant to this conference, while still foregrounding the particular importance we wanted to attach to decolonization strategies.

While working out how best to convey the focus and scope of this conference, we realized the value of rethinking the purpose of ‘calling for papers.’ Rather than framing them as coded messages with a predetermined audience, academics might better consider CFPs as open invitations to dialogue. Our final iteration moved towards this approach, and by the deadline we had received more abstracts than expected. In the end, our conference was indeed different than years’ past: it was larger – we had upwards of one hundred and fifty people passing through the UBC Geography building – and included a wide variety of scholarship, including many with substantial and sustained engagements with anticolonialism. Attendees came from a broader range of disciplines than ever existed in previous conference iterations, and scholarship included a wonderfully diverse array of methodological approaches, including polyvocal text-readings, documentary screenings, and even a one-person play. Our fears of foreclosing certain forms of scholarship ended up being off the mark. In actuality, our organizing efforts had the effect of reorienting interest in the conference and generating dialogue across a broader range of disciplines and methodologies.

The tensions and reorientations we experienced in and through the writing of the CFP beg important questions as we think reflexively about the discipline of geography. What are the political implications of understanding decolonization as outside the scope of one’s work, and upon what assumptions and silencings is such an understanding built? What flows of knowledge have become normative such that we cease to recognize the fundamental colonialisms of our universities? Sara Ahmed notes in her analysis of diversity work in the university that ‘[t]o be in this [institutional] world is to be involved with things in such a way that they recede from consciousness. When things become institutional, they recede’ (2012, p. 21). Racialized diversity workers speak of coming up against a ‘brick wall’ of resistance, which brings into relief the foundational racisms that are (re)produced as common sense within the university. Heeding Ahmed’s maxim, ‘don’t look over it if you can’t get over it’ (2012, p. 187), we write here in part to uncover the tensions and assumptions that informed our work before, during, and after the Decolonizing Cascadia? conference.

The university as an institution emerges from a particular historical, temporal, and geographic conjuncture. Founded on restricted conceptions of knowledge and the world, the university supports and (re)produces narrow epistemic structures and conventions, many of which are rooted in and generative of (neo)colonial exclusions (Kuokkanen, 2007). These structures, Rauna

Kuokkanen writes, convey the university's apparent desire 'to uphold a status quo that serves the interests of those in power' (2007, p. 5). In the process, academia has materialized as a highly exclusionary field of power, one all too often irresponsible to the immense value that inheres within epistemological and ontological plurality. Adherence to and reliance on the principles of liberalism, capitalism, rational reason, individualism, and colonialism have rendered Other alternative epistemological and ontological modes, cornering and containing them within specialized fields and disciplines (Kuokkanen, 2007). This process of exclusion is inherently material. Universities have long histories of participation in explicit acts of colonialism, and today they remain largely responsible for legitimizing the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. Residing on the unceded ancestral and traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, the University of British Columbia is founded on a denial of the collective existence of Indigenous Peoples and Nations.

Much like the university, geography has its roots in early colonial encounters. As a discipline, it has played a pivotal role in the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples and the extension of empire. Producing spatial representations that flatten, simplify, and universalize the complexities of its subject matter, geography has preserved abstracted, fixed, and objective modes of knowing (Wainwright & Bryan, 2009) including the 'management' – that is, oppression – of Indigenous Nations (Livingstone, 1992). And so we must ask ourselves: Has not our very occupation of academic spaces been made possible only through violent acts of displacement and colonization? Resistance to our 'theming' of the conference – experienced through assertions of 'irrelevance' and through relatively fewer disciplinary geographers in attendance – seemed to present us with a 'brick wall'; continually running against it revealed the durability of those colonial practices that persist in our institutions as structured forms of common sense.

The difficult task of bringing everyday colonialism into critical relief was compounded by the recognition that most of us on the organizing committee enjoyed certain privileges as settler colonials. How best do we pay attention to our own privileges and participations in various colonial practices while continuing to critique 'the ever-changing encounters – historical, geographic, and gendered – between colonizer and colonized' (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. xiv)? Alluding to such a difficulty in their keynote address, Sarah de Leeuw and Margo Greenwood spoke to a settler mentality in the academy that often positions Indigenous scholars as both the face of, and labourers for, diversity work; by reproducing this process, settler scholars can 'look over' issues of race and colonialism in their own scholarship and institutional work cultures.

These are challenges that will continue to confront future organizational efforts of the Critical Geographies conference. Our hope for future iterations is not that the organizing committees will reproduce a 'decolonization' theme per se, but rather that they will carry forward the practices and processes of decolonization that we hoped to forefront through our own organizational commitments. Such

practices include transforming the ways in which scholarship is produced and valued, engaging different epistemological traditions, and working in a collaborative, non-hierarchical manner. Indeed, we are optimistic that many of these commitments will continue. Paul Kingsbury, one of the founders of the conference and the annual host liaison, is an important figure for ensuring continuity of our decolonizing efforts. Paul's model for organizing past and future conferences is one 'based on desire rather than hierarchy' (personal communication), and principles of openness, horizontal decision-making, and the welcoming of non-academic forms of knowledge have always guided his vision. We hope that our efforts have brought to the fore the important decolonization facets of this approach, and that our practices will continue to be confronted as opportunities for engaging decolonization in subsequent years.

We are also cautiously optimistic that the discussions we prioritized in our hosting of *Decolonizing Cascadia?* will endure for some time; we foresee that past, present, and future hosts will continue to approach the naming of this conference as an invitation to dialogue rather than an ultimately closed discussion. Although as Jonathan iterates above, our inability to produce a 'new' name may have left some of us less than satisfied, there are indications that our efforts at destabilizing conference naming will have continued effects: the conference is no longer coined 'Cascadia', and the name will remain an open question for the foreseeable future. Despite our optimism, however, we are well aware that decolonization is not a one-time event, nor a finished process. As Jessica elucidates, the academy remains quite resistant to transforming its hegemonically Eurocentric and patriarchal structures and cultures. Indeed, we experienced our own difficulties with decolonization strategies, and thus recognize that an 'end-state' of decolonization is perhaps ultimately a utopic vision. Moreover, both complacency and the assumption that decolonization has 'been achieved' are obstacles that must always be consciously confronted by future *Critical Geographies* conferences. The dangers of such complacency are perhaps heightened by our efforts, if *Decolonizing Cascadia?* is perceived as the iteration which 'dealt with' decolonization and, therefore, has allayed the conference's colonial power relations. A major challenge, then, is to continually ask how this conference, and academic cultures more broadly, perpetually reproduce colonial-like relationships, even as we attempt to decolonize particular practices and strategies. Our committee members remain committed to these epistemological visions in our future work both in and beyond the academy, although how we, like the conference itself, achieve steps towards a decolonial future remains an open question.

## **Conclusions**

The question of decolonization presented us with a maze of practical, material and epistemological discomforts, as it surely did for certain conference participants as well. This manifested as polite differences of opinion, tensely-worded logical contradictions, charged or muddled room dynamics, changing bodily comportments, and myriad protracted silences. Epistemological discomforts

also foregrounded differences in positionality, as subjects variously interpellated within colonialism collectively exchanged experiences of an often taken-for-granted structure each of us lives and works within. The ethics of decolonization impelled conference organizers and participants to work through these differences, and take seriously the work of the conference (despite political and processual disagreements) and one another as hopeful agents of change. If the question of decolonization foregrounds difference and contradiction, it also already figures an impetus toward continued grappling with colonialism. As we moved through the intricacies of conference planning we were challenged not only to discuss and interrogate colonization but also to grapple with it, to understand how the logics of colonialism underpin many of our relationships with each other and our work. In many ways, this called for very intimate work, and injunctions to listen and to learn anew in order to critically apply what we discussed. This is a collective activity we hope will be continued and honored in future conversations and conferences.

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