



“Reclaim, Rename, Reoccupy”: Decolonizing Place and the Reclaiming of PKOLS

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Abstract

The naming of places is one of the primary ways in which the spatial imaginaries of colonialism have been entrenched within the spaces of everyday life in settler-colonial societies. Consequently, the reclaiming of Indigenous toponymies has become a key strategy for decolonizing space and place in the neocolonial present, thereby revalorizing place-based Indigenous ontologies and challenging the neocolonial state’s assertions of authority over geographical naming practices. This article examines the efforts of Indigenous peoples in WSÁNEĆ and Lekwungen Territories to reclaim their “storyscapes” through the renaming of PKOLS, a mountain known by the settler society as Mount Douglas in Saanich, British Columbia. In doing so, this study highlights how the reassertion of Indigenous ontologies of place challenges the white supremacist logic embedded in the commemorative landscapes of settler colonialism as part of the broader struggle for Indigenous self-determination. The article also draws attention to how institutions of higher education are themselves implicated in the legitimation of settler-colonial spatial imaginaries and calls upon scholars and activists to move beyond a politics of recognition, which reinforces the authority of the settler-colonial state, by decentering the heroics of settler political agency in the struggle for decolonization both on and off university campuses.



Our place names offer a direct connection to our languages, sacred histories, and creation stories, and the reclamation of these names is vital for the continuation and resurgence of our cultures and knowledge. Our elders have called upon us to return our original names to the places where they belong. Therefore, we have come together to reclaim the traditional SENĆOFEN name of PKOLS, currently known as Mount Douglas. Stories of PKOLS, which can be translated as “White Rock” or “White Head,” go back to nearly the beginning of time for WSÁNEĆ people. The current name [Mount Douglas] does not represent our original connection to this land and was imposed without our consultation and consent ... We are united to restore the original place name of PKOLS for the benefit of all people living on our territories, for our descendants, and for all who visit this spiritual place.

—Declaration Reclaiming PKOLS (2013)

On the evening of May 22, 2013, over 600 members of Indigenous nations and their non-Indigenous allies gathered at the base of a mountain in WSÁNEĆ and Lekwungen Territories — at what has come to be known by the settler society as Mount Douglas in Saanich, British Columbia — to “restore the original place name of PKOLS” (Figure 1).² With drums beating and signs reading, “Reclaim, Rename, Reoccupy,” the march up the winding road to the summit embodied a hope that the land might once again sing the songs of creation by returning the “original names to the places where they belong.” At the top of the mountain, the ƧÁ,UTW_ (Tsawout) hereditary chief WEC’KINEM (Eric Pelkey), among others, welcomed the crowd that had gathered. This was then followed by a re-enactment of the signing of the Douglas Treaty (1852), which was responsible for the expropriation of these lands to become “the entire property of the white people for ever.”³

² The orthographic system developed for the SENĆOFEN language employs the convention of using only upper-case letters (Poth, 1990), and I have tried my best to follow SENĆOFEN conventions in this article.

³ The Douglas Treaties, also known as the “Fort Victoria Treaties,” are a series of agreements signed during the 1850s in which various Indigenous peoples on Vancouver Island allegedly surrendered their lands to James Douglas as an agent of the Hudson’s Bay Company (for full text of the treaties, see Government of Canada, 2013). However, the procedure for signing these agreements has been called into question, as it appears that “Douglas initially had the indigenous leaders of the community sign their ‘approval’ at the bottom of a blank sheet,” only later filling in the details of the agreement (Claxton, 2004, 11; also, see Hendrickson, 1988). However, oral histories suggest that, in contrast to other agreements, the WSÁNEĆ were presented with the full text of the treaty, but they “did not know what was said on the paper” (Arnett as quoted in Claxton, 2004, 12; also, see Arnett 1999; Tsawout First Nation, 2014). It is therefore quite doubtful that the WSÁNEĆ signatories would have agreed to allow their lands to become “the entire property of the white people for ever” as stipulated in the Douglas Treaty of 1852. Interestingly, James Douglas himself was “Scotch West Indian,” born in British Guiana to a “free coloured woman” and a “Scottish merchant” (Ormsby, 2008), leading some to claim that he was therefore responsible for working to “create a multicultural British Columbia” (Olesen, 2013). Yet the conflation of Douglas’s own “mixed-race” familial background with his legacy as colonial



Figure 1. Assembling for the march to reclaim PKOLS.

Both the treaty and the mountain had been named after James Douglas, an officer of the Hudson's Bay Company who served as the governor of the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia during the mid-nineteenth century. Naming the mountain after the man whose namesake underwrote this treaty has served as a daily reminder that the material and symbolic violence of colonial dispossession continues to shape Indigenous-Settler relations in the neocolonial present (Figure 2).

After the treaty re-enactment was finished, a carefully crafted wooden sign with the name PKOLS carved into it was installed amidst great applause by the peoples assembled (Figure 3). The sign was carved by the WJOĒĒLP (Tsartlip) artist TEMOSEN (Charles Elliot), who explained that:

when you take a name like PKOLS and take it off, then you have no regard for the people who honored that name ... I want to try not to speak too harshly but the enactment of taking the names off our territory and putting on the English names, and French names, or whatever they may be, is not a nice thing to do to any people. So today is a great day and I know that our ancestors would be proud of us for doing what we're doing ... They must be wondering when we were going to start moving and reacting to the things that have been done to us. We know Idle No More is a movement that's been going

governor obscures how Douglas's land policies, as expressed through the Douglas Treaties, were indeed based upon the ideology of white supremacy. For a discussion of white supremacy within the context of settler colonialism, see Smith (2010) as well as Bonds and Inwood (2015).



Figure 2. The cultural landscape as a space of white supremacy at Mount Douglas Park, Occupied Coast Salish Territories, Saanich, BC.



Figure 3. The reclaiming, renaming, and reoccupation of PKOLS.

on across Canada, the United States, and other parts of the world ... We're not idle by doing this, we're actually doing something outside of the confines of the Indian Affairs jurisdiction [audience applause] ... Today, I think, is a happy day because we're acting and not just reacting [audience applause] ... as far as we're concerned, we are sovereign nations.

The ceremonial renaming of PKOLS was about more than reacting to a past injustice of colonial dispossession; rather, it was a performative enactment of Indigenous ways of knowing and being with the land, a declaration of cultural resurgence, and an assertion of the right to authorize the decolonization of "place" without seeking prior permission from the settler-colonial state.

The reactions to the PKOLS renaming ceremony amongst the organs of settler-colonial public opinion were mixed. The local newspaper, fittingly named the *Times Colonist*, published an editorial supporting the co-naming of the mountain, arguing against the erasure of colonial place names but in favor of "bringing back some of the old names ... [to] acknowledge that Vancouver Island didn't just suddenly spring into existence with the arrival of European explorers" (*Times Colonist*, 2013). The anonymous commentary posted on the newspaper's website, however, was less sympathetic, with one commentator stating, "these people [think they] can just stick up a sign, expect it to stay there, 'with respect'. On whose authority? ... You cannot just stick up [a] sign ... you have to apply for PERMISSION!" Yet it was precisely the authority of the settler-colonial state that this renaming ceremony sought to call into question through the reassertion of Indigenous ties to the land. As Taiaiake Alfred, a Mohawk scholar and one of the lead organizers of the PKOLS renaming, later explained:

We did not ask permission ... One of the biggest problems in Canadian politics is we're always asking for permission ... I think the strongest move you can make is just to act Indigenous, and to act on your teachings ... In fact, I think the authorities respected how well organized we were (as quoted in Ball, 2013).

The significance of reclaiming PKOLS was therefore larger than the name itself; the act of naming was a resolute answer through direct action to the broader question, "On whose authority?"

Several months after the renaming ceremony, the PKOLS sign vanished from the mountain summit where it had been installed (Petrescu, 2013). As the news of its disappearance spread via social media, the mayor of the District of Saanich, Frank Leonard, announced that government workers had removed the sign due to safety concerns, since the bolts had apparently caused damage to the roof of an emergency communications building below it. The sign was eventually reinstalled in a less central location directly next to a plaque of the Mount Douglas Park Charter, the latter of which reaffirms the authority of the Crown and the District of Saanich — and ultimately the Douglas Treaty itself — to maintain the



Figure 4. The relocated PKOLS sign next to a plaque of the Mount Douglas Park Charter.

site “in perpetuity” (Figure 4). Although neither the Saanich government nor the Province of British Columbia have officially endorsed the use of PKOLS as a geographical designation, the reinstatement of the sign by Saanich government employees was a tacit acknowledgement of its legitimacy. The provincial government has also now listed PKOLS as the “traditional” name of Mount Douglas in its “Original Notes and History” section of the BC Geographical Names webpage, thereby recognizing PKOLS yet relegating it to the realm of “history” while maintaining Mount Douglas as the official name of this landmark in the settler-colonial geographical lexicon (GeoBC, 2014).

As the reclamation of PKOLS illustrates, the naming of places often plays a crucial role in the cultural politics of place-making. In recent years, geographers and other scholars have drawn attention to the social and political struggles over place naming by situating such spatial practices within the broader politics of space and place (Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009; Rose-Redwood, Alderman, and Azaryahu, 2010; Rose-Redwood and Alderman, 2011). This so-called “critical turn” in the field of place-name studies has sought to move beyond viewing place names as *cultural indicators* and instead emphasizes the *contested processes* through which places are brought into being by an assortment of naming practices.

Critical toponymic scholarship has particularly highlighted how the act of place naming has been used as a strategy to inscribe political ideologies, historical memories, and social identities into the fabric of everyday landscapes (Azaryahu, 1996; Alderman 2000; Light, Nicolae, and Suditu, 2002; Light, 2004; Rose-

Redwood, 2008; Bigon, 2009; Adebani, 2012; Bigon and Dahamshe, 2014; Light and Young, 2014). Some scholars view the processes of place naming as constituting a *cultural arena* in which different social groups seek to attain cultural recognition by rendering their collective identities visible in the public sphere and sanctioned by the sovereign state (Alderman and Inwood, 2013). This is generally seen as a significant way for socially marginalized groups, such as racialized minorities, to achieve a form of spatial justice by challenging the ongoing legacies and structures of white supremacy. Yet, within the context of Indigenous struggles for self-determination, the limits to this emphasis on the politics of recognition are becoming increasingly evident (Coulthard, 2014), since one of the primary issues at stake in the reclamation of Indigenous toponymies is to call into question the seemingly self-evident authority of the neocolonial state as the final arbiter of geographical naming (Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015).⁴

We must therefore be cautious not to conflate liberal-pluralist efforts to be *recognized* by the sovereign state in officially-sanctioned geographical nomenclature with Indigenous assertions of their *own* authority over the naming of places within settler-occupied Indigenous territories. To be sure, these political projects may overlap in some cases, where both direct action and demands for official recognition are employed together as dual strategies to reclaim Indigenous toponymies. Yet we should not be surprised to find that, in such cases, the sovereign state will typically respond — if at all — by seeking to *domesticate* Indigenous assertions of self-determination in toponymic matters, channelling them through ready-made lines of sovereign authority delegated to geographical naming boards or related settler-colonial institutions.

In Australia, for instance, geographical naming authorities have begun to reinstate Indigenous place names within the “official placenaming system, and to represent them in a more accurate and respectful manner” (Hodges, 2007, 387). Such “progressive” policies, however, leave the authority for designating place names solely within the jurisdiction of the geographical naming boards themselves, thereby consolidating and reaffirming the power of the settler-colonial state.

Drawing upon Pratt’s (1992) notion of “anti-conquest,” Herman (2009, 103) argues that the official recognition of Indigenous place names by the neocolonial state often “involves glorifying the Other at the same time that the Other is denied real power.” Most critical place-name scholars would likely acknowledge this point, but it seems to me that much of the literature continues to operate within the orbit of a politics of recognition. However, the reclaiming of PKOLS, as outlined above, can hopefully help us better understand the importance of the shift occurring in contemporary Indigenous politics away from seeking “a conciliatory form of settler-state recognition” and towards a “resurgent politics of

⁴ For a useful discussion of decolonizing place naming practices among academic geographers themselves, see “Decolonizing Cascadia? Rethinking Critical Geographies” Conference Organizing Committee (2014).

recognition premised on self-actualization, direct action, and the resurgence of cultural practices that are attentive to the subjective and structural composition of settler-colonial power” (Coulthard, 2014, 24, original italics omitted).

Taking Indigenous struggles for self-determination seriously poses a significant challenge to non-Indigenous scholars who seek to promote social justice and oppose white supremacy yet are themselves an integral part of settler colonialism (Barker, 2012a). As Alfred (2005, 105) incisively observes:

[some settlers] may be progressive politically, but they usually hold a strong attachment to the colonial state and to their own privileges within Settler society. . . . They are effectively silenced by being caught in the squeeze between their intellectual deconstructions of power and their moral cowardice when it comes to doing something about injustice in a real sense.

This contradiction can be quite unsettling but it seems to get to the heart of the matter of what role, if any, non-Indigenous scholars and activists can play in struggles to reclaim Indigenous toponymies. At the very least, it should lead critical place-name scholars to reflect more critically upon our own social positionality within the field of power relations associated with the toponymic politics that we examine in our research.

As a non-Indigenous newcomer to Vancouver Island from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, I have been particularly struck by how entrenched the royalist-colonial imaginary is in the spaces of everyday life throughout the Greater Victoria Region of British Columbia where I currently reside. The city’s streetscape is a space of colonial commemoration par excellence with streets named in honor of European explorers including James Cook and George Vancouver as well as colonial officials such as James Douglas, not to mention King George himself (Figure 5). This is perhaps unsurprising in a city named after a British monarch on an island that bears the name of a British Royal Navy officer in a province the name of which is an assertion of British territorial control. Within this context, the utter ubiquity of colonial place names has had the effect of *normalizing* the colonial imaginary as the taken-for-granted order of the discursive universe through which neocolonial modes of being-in-the-world are experienced. Whether one is going to buy groceries at the local market, walking a dog through a local park, or attending a local high school, the legacy of colonialism is embodied in the mundane spaces of daily life (Figure 6).

When I first moved to Victoria in 2009, I lived in the Fairfield neighborhood near a street named in honor of Joseph Trutch (Figure 7). As a new arrival, I was unaware of Trutch’s legacy of dramatically reducing the size of



Figure 5. Victoria's streetscape as a space of colonial commemoration.



Figure 6. Banal namespaces and the normalization of the colonial spatial imaginary.

reserves for Indigenous peoples in the province during the nineteenth century.⁵ It was only after a group of students at the university where I work began lobbying the administration to remove Trutch’s name from a student residence hall on campus in 2010 that I began to understand how the struggles over decolonization were not only about ongoing land claims and treaty negotiations but also involved the more mundane practices of reclaiming the place-identities in the everyday spaces where I lived and worked (Figure 8).

Although the Rename Trutch campaign received the official support of the university student society, the Indigenous law students association, and numerous faculty and staff (Karstens-Smith, 2010), the university administration has not changed the building name. The strategy appears to be: hold out until the student petitioners finish their studies and graduate with the hope that their demands will be forgotten by the next cohort of incoming students. Meanwhile, as the university was dragging its feet on the Trutch petition, the very same naming committee voted to rename the building in which my own academic department is located in honor of the outgoing university president, David Turpin, who had turned a blind eye to the Trutch renaming campaign. One could hardly ask for a more exemplary case of the use of place naming to reinforce existing institutional hierarchies while marginalizing efforts to decolonize the commemorative landscapes of contemporary settler colonialism.

Each year, I teach an introductory cultural geography course in the Turpin Building, and, as part of our discussions of the cultural politics of place, I usually have the students debate the Trutch renaming petition as part of a lab tutorial. Overall, the majority of the students have been broadly supportive of the name change, but some have expressed concerns about the erasure of (settler-colonial) history while still others have been indifferent to the issue altogether. The argument against historical erasure is particularly ripe for interrogating the spatial politics of collective memory. This line of argument is based upon the position that Trutch’s legacy is part of the history of British Columbia whether we approve of his policies or not, and, therefore, removing his name from the residence hall is tantamount to denying the “facts” of history. Much the same argument was made by the editorialists at the *Times Colonist* with respect to the renaming of PKOLS, who argued that, “[w]e shouldn’t try to subdivide history, setting aside one part of it for this group, and another for that group. It’s a shared history all Vancouver Islanders should celebrate and seek to understand in its entirety, warts and all” (*Times Colonist*, 2013; also, see Olesen, 2013). This is a remarkable statement given the

⁵ In his capacity as Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works in British Columbia during the 1860s, Joseph Trutch dramatically reduced the size of Indian reserve lands, because he believed, as Fisher (2003) notes, that “the Indians should simply make way for the white population.” Trutch himself described the Indigenous peoples he encountered as “the ugliest & Laziest creatures I ever saw, & we shod. as soon think of being afraid of our dogs as of them” (as quoted in Fisher, 2003). Is this the sort of historical figure we should celebrate? Apparently the city in which I live and the university at which I work think so, because they have chosen to honor Trutch’s legacy through toponymic commemoration.



Figure 7. The celebratory commemoration of a white supremacist through honorific street naming in Victoria, BC, Occupied Coast Salish Territories.



Figure 8. The yet-to-be-denamed Sir Joseph Trutch Hall at the University of Victoria.

history of cultural genocide, territorial dispossession, and the erasure of Indigenous place names that accompanied colonial exploration and settlement in this region.

After all, it is the settler society that has subdivided peoples and territories, “setting aside one part of it for this group” (i.e., Indian reserves) and “another for

that group” (i.e., the vast majority of expropriated land for colonial settlers). Indeed, it is the names of Joseph Trutch and James Douglas which are most associated with these acts of material and symbolic violence against Indigenous peoples in British Columbia. Is this a history that all should “celebrate”? Moreover, is it not the settler society that has refused to understand history “in its entirety” by attempting to submerge Indigenous voices and relations with the land “beneath the settler colonial world” (Barker, 2012a, 329)?

Put simply, the argument against the erasure of colonial toponymy conflates the need to understand the past (itself a laudatory goal) with the *celebratory* commemoration of historical figures whose names signify colonial dispossession and white supremacy. The latter is most certainly not a requisite for pursuing the former, yet the reactionary politics that often surface within the settler society when the norms of colonial hegemony are challenged indicate how settler colonialism in British Columbia, and in Canada more generally, is an *ongoing* project that depends upon the continuous reiteration of colonial ways of knowing and being-in-the-world.

The naming of places is only one arena — among many — in which the practices of neocolonial world-making are (re)enacted,⁶ and its significance is often obscured by the very taken-for-grantedness that colonial place-identities have acquired through the repetitious enactments of cartographic representation, textual inscriptions physically embedded in the landscape, and the everyday speech acts that reinforce the “common sense” of the neocolonial geographical imagination. The banality of these neocolonial namescapes has played an integral role in the “processes of fetishization that efface the social relations that underpin landscapes of dispossession” (Berg, 2011, 17). Although the reclaiming of PKOLS will not single-handedly overturn the legacy of colonial oppression outright, it *has* demonstrated the “potential for Indigenous ontologies to unsettle dominant ontologies” (Hunt, 2014, 30). But, as Hunt cautions, there is always the danger that Indigenous ontologies “can be easily neutralized as a triviality, a case study or a trinket, as powerful institutions work as self-legitimizing systems that uphold broader dynamics of (neo)colonial power” (2014, 30). This neocolonial strategy seems particularly evident in the *Times Colonist* editorial quoted above, which uses the Indigenous reclamation of PKOLS as an opportunity to celebrate the history of settler colonialism, “warts and all.” By framing the matter strictly as a question of a “shared history all Vancouver Islanders should celebrate,” the politics of

⁶ There are many different arenas in which neocolonial world-making practices are enacted and contested, not all of which are primarily centered on land and territory. Much of the literature on Indigenous geographies has focused upon the latter to the exclusion of the more “intimate” geographies of Indigenous “bodies and homes” (de Leeuw, 2014, 60). While the present article considers the role that naming plays in the reclaiming of “place,” this should not imply that the practices of place naming are more significant than the geographies of “bodies and homes.” On the contrary, my aim here is to illustrate how the discursive act of naming is itself an embodied practice.

neutralization-through-universality fetishizes both the history of colonial dispossession as well as its ongoing effects for Indigenous communities.

The Eurocentric geographical imaginary is difficult to dislodge, even amongst those of us who claim to be critical scholars yet are nevertheless entangled in the institutional web of settler colonialism through our very places of work and residence on settler-occupied Indigenous lands (Morgan, 2014). As Barker (2012b) contends, “It’s hard to let go of the things we think we know, the stories we tell ourselves, the world we take for granted.” Critical human geographers — myself included — are by no means exempt from these challenges in both our scholarship and everyday life. By way of example, despite my support for the reclaiming of PKOLS, I initially found myself referring to this landmark as “Mount Doug” in ordinary conversations with friends and family before stopping in mid-sentence to recall the significance of PKOLS.⁷ In spite of myself, it seems, I had internalized the discursive practices of settler colonialism, which acquired a stronghold in my own “geographical unconscious” (Loukaki, 2014). This may seem like a trivial issue to some, but I think it illustrates that considerable work is needed if we are to “unsettle the settler within” (Regan, 2010, 13), challenging the material-discursive formations that constitute the dominant subject positions and place-identities within contemporary settler societies.

The act of questioning the taken-for-grantedness of neocolonial spatial imaginaries — while not a panacea — is a useful point of departure for settlers themselves to challenge the discourses and practices of settler colonialism with which they are complicit. As Morgan (2014) argues, “[w]ithout a willingness to question one’s position and the socially constructed and enacted power imbalances in which it is located, the cultural hegemony deeply rooted in settler colonial contexts may persist unscathed in mainstream society.” However, settler self-confessions may also function as part of what Tuck and Yang call “settler moves to innocence,” which consist of:

those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. In fact, settler scholars may gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware. Yet settler moves to innocence are hollow, they only serve the settler (2012, 10).

Furthermore, they argue that symbolic forms of decolonization — i.e., those which stop short of the full repatriation of Indigenous land — have the effect of reducing this term to an “empty signifier” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 7). Land repatriation is clearly a primary concern of decolonization movements, as Tuck and Yang (2012) rightly contend, but the opposition between “material” and “symbolic” struggles

⁷ Interestingly, this is less true now as I write the revised draft of this article in 2015 than it was when I first submitted my original manuscript in 2014.

seems particularly counterproductive, because it reinforces the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, which has underpinned colonial ontologies of space and place.

When Indigenous peoples reclaim their sacred place names, the dismissal of such acts as *merely* symbolic does not take into account how Indigenous lands are themselves “storyscapes” (Elsey, 2013). The reclamation of the creation stories and symbolic identities of places is an integral part of the reassertion of Indigenous authority over lands and territories. In the case of the PKOLS renaming, the re-enactment of the signing of the Douglas Treaty also provided an opportunity to publicly challenge settler narratives about the treaty-making process itself, with TEMOSEN (Charles Elliot) declaring at the PKOLS march, “there’s no way we gave away our land when that treaty was signed.” The signing of the Declaration Reclaiming PKOLS went further to insist that the settler name of Mount Douglas was “imposed without our consultation and consent,” which turns the question of “On whose authority?” on its head by questioning why the settlers did not ask for permission to rename the mountain after Douglas. The reclamation of Indigenous place names is thus about far more than the historical trivia of academic toponymy alone; it rather goes to the very heart of competing claims to authority over the performative enactment of “place.”

Yet it was precisely such trivia that was dragged forth in the popular press in an effort to discredit the PKOLS reclamation. Just days after the march up PKOLS, one commentator cited a *BC Studies* article (Duff, 1969) in which an anthropologist had recorded that two Songhees elders gave the name of Pkaals (p’q’als) for a nearby mountain known by the settler society as Mount Tolmie (Dussault, 2013). The *Victoria News* later published a related story in which a linguist at the University of North Texas suggested that Pkaals was phonetically different from PKOLS and confirmed that the latter was indeed “a very ancient Saanich name” for Mount Douglas (as quoted in Hill, 2013). Only through the intermediary expertise of Western linguists and anthropologists, it seemed, did the oral traditions of Indigenous peoples have any authority *amongst the settler society*. It was apparently not enough that the name PKOLS had been passed down to living WSÁNEĆ elders who marched up the mountain to declare its name. Prior to European settlement, different Indigenous peoples may very well have bestowed different names to the same landmark, or the same name to different places, yet this does not invalidate the Declaration Reclaiming PKOLS that was signed by Songhees and WSÁNEĆ chiefs in May 2013.

At the time of writing, the provincial government has yet to officially recognize PKOLS as the name of Mount Douglas. Yet the recognition sought from the settler society “promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonial power that Indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend” (Coulthard, 2007, 439). It does so by positioning the institutions of the settler-colonial state as the arbiter over geographical naming from which permission must be granted. It is for this reason that it is all-the-more significant

that the organizers of the PKOLS march did not wait to receive recognition prior to enacting their own authority to reclaim PKOLS.

These insurgent strategies of direct action are fundamental to Indigenous efforts that shift the political terrain away from the “narrative in which the Settler’s power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome or perspective on that power” (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005, 601). While there are multiple fronts on which Indigenous struggles for self-determination are currently being waged, the reclamation of Indigenous storyscapes through the rituals of naming is a powerful means of achieving what TEMOSEN (Charles Elliot) has called “a small bit of decolonization” that may very well go a long way (as quoted in Dickson, 2014).

By way of conclusion, I would like to come back to the question of what role non-Indigenous scholar-activists can play in the toponymic politics of decolonization. My aim here is not to return the narrative back to the settler as the fundamental point of reference but rather to *decenter* the settler-scholar as the sovereign subject of intellectual authority and political agency. The first point to underscore is that Indigenous peoples do not require the “expertise” of non-Indigenous scholars and activists in order to develop critical theories and practices that challenge settler colonialism through the reclaiming of Indigenous toponymies or by other means. This was clearly evident in the reclaiming of PKOLS, where Indigenous activists took the lead in organizing the event with some assistance from settler allies working with a local activist group called Social Coast. For my own part, I played a relatively minor role in putting up posters throughout the neighborhood in which I live, providing some financial support to help cover a portion of the costs of the beautifully-carved PKOLS sign, and showing solidarity for the cause by marching up the mountain to witness the reclamation. But neither the volunteers at Social Coast nor myself were at the center of this story, and rightly so.

Another lesson that I took away from this experience was that, to paraphrase Zinn (2002), those of us who are uninvited visitors on settler-occupied Indigenous lands cannot pretend to be neutral on the moving trainwreck that is settler colonialism on Turtle Island. It is simply not enough to offer critical scholarly accounts of the power relations involved in Indigenous struggles over the naming of places while framing oneself as somehow above the fray as a neutral bystander or disembodied narrator, since such claims to neutrality have the effect of privileging the status quo of settler-colonial power. The best we can hope to do is try cultivating “place-based solidarities” that recenter “both Indigenous resurgences and more relational approaches to settler colonial power” (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel, 2014, 27). Although the field of critical place-name studies has produced insightful deconstructions of the power of place naming, relatively little critical geographical scholarship has gone beyond the intellectual deconstruction of toponymic power to articulate an explicitly normative spatial

politics of *toponymic activism* with the aim of “doing something about injustice in a real sense” (Alfred, 2005, p. 105).

As noted earlier, Alderman and Inwood (2013) argue that the act of place naming constitutes a significant cultural arena for social justice struggles. This is clearly evident in the growing movement — led by students more often than faculty — to rename university buildings that continue to honor historical figures who were vocal supporters of white supremacy and anti-black racism (Rose-Redwood et al., 2015). Such toponymic activism certainly has an important role to play in challenging the social injustices and symbolic violence of the past and present with respect to the racism, sexism, and classism that are inscribed into everyday cultural landscapes.

Without discounting this important work, I would like to suggest here that our conception of the horizon of toponymic politics should also extend *beyond* the politics of recognition. If the ultimate goal of toponymic activism is simply to achieve recognition by an institutional authority to combat procedural and distributive injustices, doesn’t the act of “playing the game” of institutional politics further naturalize and legitimize the monopoly power that such an institution claims to possess over the authorization of place-identities? And what if that institutional authority ignores or denies these demands for recognition by refusing to rename a building, street, or mountain? Does this mean that the proposed name is thereby invalidated and the existing “authorized” name remains legitimate? Of course not. While intervening within the realm of institutional politics may be a useful strategy in certain circumstances, it is by no means the only way to bring new “toponymic worlds” into being or to reclaim subjugated, place-based knowledges. We must therefore be mindful of the *limits* of officially-sanctioned toponymic systems, and the recognition they confer, while at the same time revalorizing the performative force that everyday, embodied speech acts can play in undermining institutional assertions of a monopoly over legitimate forms of toponymic inscription.

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