STUDIES IN SOCIAL JUSTICE
Volume 14, Issue 2, 505-514, 2020

Dispatch

Reflections on Teaching Critical Migration Law in a Settler-colonial Context

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Situating Self: "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours"

This dispatch looks back at some of my attempts to teach migration and refugee law in a critical way that accounts for settler-colonialism in courses where this topic is not traditionally included in the subject matter.

In terms of briefly situating the reflections below, I am a Canadian citizen born in Ottawa to parents who immigrated to Canada from India and the Philippines. I only learned much, much later that I was also born on unceded Algonquin land. I am neither Indigenous nor do I live with precarious immigration status. I have been privileged with opportunities to read, talk, and learn about Indigenous laws and legal traditions on and off the land. However, I am only beginning to understand these laws in conjunction with my greater familiarity with the Canadian state's Aboriginal, immigration, refugee, labour, employment, and property laws. I live in Toronto and have been learning that Tkaronto and the surrounding territories are also the traditional, treaty and current homes of the Wendat people, the Seneca Nation, the Anishinaabe people, and the Metis Nation. In particular, I know that the Six Nations Confederacy, the Mississaugas of Credit and the Williams Treaty First Nations continue to hold and assert their laws, rights, title, and treaty relations here to this day. These laws include inter-Indigenous treaties like the One Dish Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe to share and care for these lands and waters, as well as settler-Indigenous treaties like the Two Row Wampum and the Wampum at Niagara (Voices From the Gathering Place, 2017; Koleszar-Green, 2018).

Through my family history, my personal work and learning experiences, and my research and advocacy interests, I have been focused for some time on critical approaches to migration law and their relationship to colonialism and postcolonial theory (e.g., citizenship, immigration, refugee, migrant

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ISSN: 1911-4788

worker, and non-status laws). After returning to graduate school in law, I became increasingly engaged in academic and activist conversations around the intersection of migration law and policy with settler colonialism and Indigenous laws in what is currently called Canada. By settler colonialism, I mean the removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands, the taking of those lands, and the replacement of these peoples with non-Indigenous settlers who keep and benefit from those lands (Wolfe, 2006, as cited in Bhatia, 2013).

I have tried to convey these interests and intersecting questions through my class materials, teaching and presentations both in and outside of the law school. I teach courses on globalization and the law (focused on migrant worker programs and commodification), property law, refugee law, and I co-direct an intensive program in Indigenous lands, resources, and governments. My teaching is informed by my own teachers, who have been kind, inspiring, and critical (Maracle, 2017). These attributes were not always found in the same people at the same time, but one of my best teachers in this regard is law and history scholar Professor Darlene Johnston (Anishnaabe-kwe/Chippewas of Nawash). When asked once whether she was considered too close to Aboriginal law and history issues to be objective, Darlene emphasized that there was no objective place from which to teach or learn about law or history. She said that everyone had bias and could choose to adopt a situated approach of "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours." I've tried to heed this lesson in my teaching, but have noticed more generally that Indigenous speakers and scholars (and some racialized, critical race, and anti-racist scholars and speakers) are required to situate themselves much more than non-Indigenous speakers. While there is no space to elaborate here, one explanation for this difference emerges from how Indigenous and racialized people can be marked out as more or less "visible" and visibly different from the white norm of Canadian society (i.e., "race," skin colour or family name situate us in others' eyes and minds without saying a word). Another explanation for this disparity would be Indigenous and critical race norms of situating oneself to announce and recognize political, kinship, migrant, and territorial relations. These norms compete with a generalized assumption of who belongs and can speak with naturalized authority in the absence of any context, including the past policy and ongoing legacy of keeping a "white Canada forever."

Situating Students: A Writing and Speaking Exercise

In teaching these courses, I find and make opportunities to share the colonial and settler-colonial context of Canadian laws and how these contexts are relevant to our current and future relations with one another. These relations span the spectrum from Indigenous lands and resources, to immigration and refugee law, to international and transnational law, to the law and policy of migrant work. While the courses that I teach may appear disconnected from

one another, the experience and theory of colonialism serves to tie them together in ways that I hope students find interesting and challenging.

As already noted, it is important for me to situate myself, my scholarship, and the place where our collective task of learning unfolds. I also encourage students to situate themselves in relation to what we are studying through their own lived experiences (whether individual, familial, or advocacy) and prior expertise in the areas of migration and Indigeneity. I've found that some of the best exchanges have taken place when students know where their colleagues are coming from, literally and metaphorically, and understand how these social locations relate to the theories and wider contexts that we are studying. This shared knowledge more closely approximates the complex, holistic lived experiences of the law that students will encounter through their clients and their clients' communities (Imai, 2002; Zuni Cruz, 1999).

In order to help students "break the ice" with each other and me I usually ask them to do a few writing, speaking, and sharing exercises (except for my property law course, although good examples do exist in larger lecture classes) (Curran et al., 2019, p. 135). On the first day of class, I ask students to break into partners and interview each other with a set questionnaire in order to get a sense of their fellow students' academic and work experiences, their interests in the course, and ideal methods for teaching, learning, and evaluation. After the interviews, they present their partner's answers to the class (with the chance to correct any mistakes). Although this exercise is useful for information sharing, it does not usually lead to much discussion about systemic racism, settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples, or Canada's treaties with them. On the second or third day of class, I usually ask students to do a specific writing and speaking exercise meant to strike a balance between drawing relations between students' lived experiences and expertise, and questions of settler colonialism and treaty relations.

Borrowing from Indigenous law scholar and an inspirational mentor and friend, Dawnis Minnawanigogiizhigok Kennedy (Anishnaabe-kwe/Roseau River First Nation), I ask students how the Immigration and Indian Acts, or their predecessor statutes, have impacted them or their families. Dawnis shared with me how she would ask her classes at the Shingwauk Institute and Algoma University how the Indian Act affected them; these classes were largely comprised of Indigenous and international students. I modified this question to include the Immigration Act, and to emphasize that students could talk about their wider families too. My law classes are mostly comprised of Canadian law students from various backgrounds in Ontario, although classes like refugee law regularly include exchange students. Putting this question to the class can serve a variety of purposes:

- it helps me to see if they are familiar with the actual legislation (current or historical) or choose to answer more broadly, as most students do;
- it situates students within the present or past of their individual or familial immigration or migration stories (e.g., from those whose

families settled here hundreds of years ago to exchange students who arrived by themselves just days before);
- it gives me a sense of their expressed awareness – or usually lack thereof – of the connection between immigration laws and Indigenous peoples (e.g., via mention of the Indian Act or treaties);
- it helps to draw students together in expected and unexpected ways (e.g., more and less superficial versions of "we are all immigrants here," "we are all settlers here" and "we are all racialized refugees or displaced persons here"); and
- it gives students a chance to think, write, speak and share their stories in a way that feels genuine and does not require an "oppression Olympics" or "race to innocence," which can immediately and unproductively narrow what's meant to be a semester-long conversation and discussion (Fellows & Razack, 1998; Xavier, 2018). For example, in refugee law, there are numerous occasions later in the term where other aspects of social location like racialization emerge, both in line with and separately from the recognized grounds of persecution (e.g., race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group).

I usually require students to answer this question quickly and briefly in order to encourage some editing and direction, and also for the practical reason that we need to be able to "go-around" and hear each person's answer. The instructions are brief and usually go like this:

> How has the IRPA (Immigration and Refugee Protection Act) or predecessor immigration legislation or the Indian Act affected you or your family? Please write down your answer to this question in the next five minutes using (max.) five sentences; when the time is up, we will go around the room and share our responses with each other. Please only share what you're comfortable sharing with the whole class.

In addition to what I've outlined above, students sometimes respond with typical law student questions or caveats, including the desire to do background research on the spot, to use more than five sentences (there are creative uses of semi-colons), and to have more time to edit or research their work. The majority of responses do not touch on the Indian Act (or treaties). Some responses relate familial immigration histories that are not tied to immigration law, because they predate what students consider to be the first statute. These stories of long settlement also do not usually mention Aboriginal law, because students do not always see the connection between treaties, the Indian Act, and settlement in Canada. However, some students do make these connections between immigration, the Indian Act, the numbered treaties, homesteading, and the granting of "free lands" to white settlers. In the only course I teach that sometimes has a majority of Indigenous students, the reaction is, understandably, reversed; the connections students draw between themselves and immigration law is much

more ambiguous than what they express about the Indian Act or treaties.

Although I have not constructed formal polls, students generally seem keen to share their stories in this way, especially in classes with predominantly racialized students, both in the law school and also in non-law departments where I've been invited to do guest lectures or cover a colleague's class. In classes like refugee law, I've noticed that students often have direct experiences with forced migration and displacement, or very immediate indirect experiences through their parents and other family members.

It is worth emphasizing that this exercise is structurally skewed by the fact that I'm asking these questions of law students who are usually citizens, sometimes permanent residents or permanent residents-in-waiting, or international students, and more rarely exchange students from the global North and sometimes the global South. Unlike undergraduate programs at York, or law schools in the United States, these law classes do not yet comprise those with precarious immigration status (Fernandes, 2017; Villegas & Aberman, 2018). This exercise also emerges early in the class and at a time when I hope students can hear and understand the experiences that they and their colleagues' families have lived through (and still live with), while also being open to hearing about how we have all found refuge and somewhat better or more stable lives on Indigenous lands. Hopefully, this discussion also works against the depersonalization that can, for example, occur through reading large volumes of refugee case law for the particular elements of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Imai, 2002; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).

Extending the Exercise: Revisions, Decolonization Lecture, and Responsibilities

After doing this exercise and going around to share these partial stories, I follow up on this work in a few ways. In some classes and years, students have chosen to pursue their full research papers on themes raised from their Immigration or Indian Act paragraphs. In one iteration of the refugee law course, I gave students the option of extending their initial paragraphs into take-home assignments with a slightly higher word count and the chance to do further research and revision. The resources I highlighted in this context expanded from the individual immigration stories that were shared, into ethnocultural group histories of immigration (Canadian Historical Association, n.d.; Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, n.d.).

I think this "situating" work is important in these particular classes for multiple reasons. First, this exercise coincides with earlier calls by scholars, government inquiries, and treaty commissioners for Canadian citizens to recognize that they, too, are treaty people and have been the main beneficiaries of treaties to date (e.g., Government of Ontario, 2007; Sákéj Henderson, 2002; Office of the Treaty Commissioner, n.d.). This call to

acknowledge that we are all treaty people has since expanded to include the contexts of naturalization (through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call for amending the citizenship oath) (Bill C-8, 2020; Bill C-6, 2020; Bill C-99, 2019; TRC, 2015), permanent residents, and even refugees (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2013). However, these calls to recognize that "we are all treaty people" also led me to ask whether acknowledgment of the treaty right to be here would serve as merely metaphorical decolonization and superficial "newcomer integration" (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Instead, it might be possible to actually "decolonize" the treaty right to be here if it led to Indigenous self-determination including fulsome powers to incorporate others, up to and including those with precarious or no immigration status in Canada (Bhatia, 2018). This decolonial authority would re-center Indigenous legal systems for making and maintaining relations and thus help to decolonize law and status determination from the current Indian Act system (Lawrence, 2004; Palmater, 2011). It would also give more than metaphorical meaning to the phrase "we are all treaty people" by making room for those who are not authorized by the Canadian state to enter or stay (cf. Asch, 2014; Miller, 2009).

I also give a lecture connected with this writing exercise on the wider topic of settler colonialism and the relationship between attempts to "domesticate" Indigenous lands and peoples and the construction and maintenance of the Canadian state and society. This lecture tracks how Indigenous peoples were displaced from Indigenous lands, which then become "clear" for European populations to take after they are recruited to immigrate here. I describe the elements of statehood in international law (i.e., defined territory, permanent population, government, and capacity to enter international relations), and how these elements were taken from Indigenous nations at the same time as they were garnered for Canada at domestic and international levels (Bhatia, forthcoming). The settler-colonial role of immigration and its tight relationship to treaties is often ignored in this context, especially in mainstream and even critical immigration and refugee law scholarship and pedagogy. The additional aspect of revitalized Indigenous laws and legal orders is even more absent, but these gaps and absences are slowly changing.

I believe these gaps and absences relate to some of the reasons why most students do not mention, let alone relate, Indigenous laws with Canadian immigration and refugee laws. These reasons include absences in legal and pre-law education, the methodological nationalism of immigration law, and the limits of curricular changes that do not center Indigenous authorities (e.g., Indigenous legal systems being reduced to post-conviction Aboriginal sentencing principles). As encapsulated in the debate published in *Social Justice* between leading Indigenous, critical race, and no borders scholars, there are other, non-state authorities that must be brought to bear on these questions (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Sharma & Wright, 2008/2009). More specifically, I have argued that Indigenous laws, legal systems, and treaty relations should serve as sources of authority in

immigration law, policy, and discourse going forward (Bhatia et al., 2017; Borrows, 2010).

As seen in my own classes, all of these interventions are entirely *ad hoc* within my discretion as the course instructor. They are structured by the selectivity of who applies and gets admitted to law school, as well as who signs up or is accepted into a particular course. And they also run up against the tensions that critical teachers have in every context: how to convey the conventional, longer-standing course content in combination with materials and voices that have not been included before? At a general level, this issue has been encapsulated by debates on reconciliation and Indigenization, including mandatory courses or universalized content (Gaudry, 2016). My own place of work (Osgoode Hall Law School) has struck a balance through the introduction of an Indigenous and Aboriginal Law degree requirement chosen from a suite of courses, while also emphasizing the need for all courses to incorporate Indigenous content (York University, 2018). These efforts echo those in other law schools, including the mandatory Indigenous Legal Orders course at Windsor Law, and the University of Victoria, which has introduced an entire joint degree in Indigenous law (University of Victoria Law, n.d.), while still offering numerous opportunities for students outside the joint program. Whichever approach is taken, I think that changing the surrounding educational ecosystem and structure is imperative, including the recruitment, retention, and promotion of Indigenous students and Indigenous professors. Additionally, curricular content changes should not be divorced from Indigenous pedagogies and modes of evaluation, which may not yet be legible to the job markets that students enter upon graduation.

In migration-focused courses, these tensions arise where the subject matter is already divided between refugee law, immigration law, and globalization and the law (migrant work). In theory, immigration law does not include refugee law topics, but this theory does not always hold up depending on the approach or the teacher in a given year. Similarly, globalization and the law did not focus on migrant workers until I chose to take that particular perspective when I first had the chance to teach the course. All of these separate topics can fill year-long courses, but they are offered in semester-long formats and there are always difficult decisions about what to include and what to leave out.

One particular struggle that I have had is how to take the relatively stronger focus on Indigeneity and settler-colonialism that I bring to the beginnings of migration-focused courses, and maintain that focus throughout the semester (cf. Scott & Smith, 2017). The necessity and benefit of taking students through the elements of the Convention Refugee definition, or the consolidated grounds for persons in need of protection, does not always overlap well with delving deeper into issues of Aboriginal or Indigenous law. However, immigrant and migrant rights scholars and advocates (including critical race scholars) should not solely be focused on recognition by the state at the cost of erasing treaty relations (Bhatia, 2013). While it is

necessary to pursue immigration status through rights and recognition, this quest for status does not undo structures of settler colonialism in Canada. If anything, the pursuit of permanent status in a capitalist system at least formally predicated on a "human capital" approach to immigration only serves to shore up settler colonial Canada.

Given reconciliation projects from both above and below, however, it seems likely that critical race approaches to reconciliation will complete the loop from activism and academic publishing to post-secondary classrooms and even "black letter" law classes (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). There will undoubtedly be a certain violence to this translation and transplanting process, seen for example in the adoption and appropriation of community terms by the government, its ministries, and extractive industries (e.g., Government of Canada, 2019; Government of British Columbia, n.d.; Scott, 2013). While approaches characterized by respect and good allyship or guest relations will, I hope, balance out some of these translation costs (Koleszar-Green, 2018), it is clear that state and corporate interests actively and cooperatively work against this solidarity movement to maintain Canada's current settler-colonial, capitalist order. However, it is also clear that failing to try to bring these insights to teaching and activism on migration or migration law will merely serve to replicate the structures of thinking that continue to underpin settler colonialism in Canada (Borrows, 1997l; Dehm, forthcoming). Either Indigenous nations and their laws and treaties underpin Canada's constitution and right to exist or they do not (Sákéj Henderson, 2002, p. 417). If they do, then they necessarily relate to past and present Canadian immigration and should speak with authority here, too. As critical race scholars, practitioners, teachers, and critics of Canadian migration and Canadian law, we should emphasize this relationship between treaties and migration for the sake of migrants, refugees, immigrants, the descendants of enslaved peoples, and ourselves, as much as for the sake of Indigenous peoples. Leaving these responsibilities to the point of an amended citizenship oath alone will remain both too little (as it excludes all long-time settlers and birthright citizens) and too late (as it only applies to those migrants who make it to the point of naturalization) (Government of Canada, 2019; Bill C-8, 2020; Bill C-6, 2020; Bill C-99, 2019).

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