

Historical Primer

(Source: <https://native-land.ca/resources/teachers-guide/>)

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In Canada and the United States, there is a long, dire history of colonization that has impacted Indigenous peoples in many ways. While history books highlight famous white explorers and celebrated major events such as the discovery of “New Lands”, keep in mind that narratives told in the textbooks tell one side of the story: the story that the Europeans, as the all “superior humans” chose to put in the history books (King, 2012).

When we talk about history, we talk about stories of the past. These stories have been organized into agreed-upon events and interpretations that tell how “we” got from here to there. The problem with this is that those who held the most power, chose the stories that were to become a part of history. History is a tool to tell stories about how they became powerful and how the powerful use that power to remain in power. So when it comes to the oral histories of Indigenous peoples, many of the narratives were discounted, ignored, and erased from history by altering or not acknowledging the accounts of Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012) (King, 2012).

One reason behind this may originate back to the Papal Bulls of discovery, a doctrine in the 15th century that granted Catholic explorers full authority to convert, subjugate, remediate, and forcefully remove Indigenous peoples from their land. If they refused, they were authorized to enslave and kill them as a way to save their souls (Miller et al, 2010). It was the belief that those who embraced Christianity were more human or superior beings than those who didn't, and thus incapable of having their own legal, economic, or political institutions to govern themselves. In short, Indigenous peoples were lesser humans, and therefore had inferior relationships/rights to land. This belief provided a foundation in which imperial laws were established, rationalizing and legitimizing and imperial assumption of power over Indigenous lands and resources. Indigenous (as well as other systems of knowledge) were dismissed. Instead, western systems of knowledge were positioned as being superior and trumping all others (Smith, 2012).

Conceptualization of space is only one tool that was used to create three basic entities on paper to help shape and redefine the Indigenous perspective of space: the line, centre, and the outside. The line was used to create boundaries, map territories, to survey land and create properties, and to mark the limit of colonial powers. The centre was always focused on the colonial power, with everything else being oriented in relation to it. Everything outside the limits of power was considered irrelevant or non-existent (Smith, 2012).

The concept of mapping has had a tremendous impact upon Indigenous peoples for centuries. Since it was first developed, the Indigenous ways of orienting themselves on their lands were redefined. As soon as lines were drawn on maps by European hands,

Indigenous place names, which are intricately connected with Indigenous history, stories, and teachings, were replaced with English names, erasing Indigenous presence from the lands. Traditional homelands were divided and classified into different geographic features, properties and imperial nations states, dividing and separating Indigenous families. Languages and cultural teachings were lost, as children were forced to attend residential schools and learn western ways of knowing.

References:

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Miller, Robert J., Jacinta Ruru, Larissa Behrendt, and Tracey Lindberg (2010). Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies. Oxford: University of Oxford Press. Ch. 4.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai (2012). Decolonizing Indigenous Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. London: Zed Books.