

What is Active History?

Victoria Freeman – University of Toronto

So I started thinking about the conference/book idea. I was thinking that I'd like to find a name that conveys the thought that history is alive. The best I could come up with so far was "active history," because it has a double sense – the history practice of activist historians who acknowledge the political and practice history for social ends and also the sense of the history itself being active, sort of the way chemicals can be active or yeast can be active, so there is also the sense of change bubbling up through processes that go beyond human action (ties in with Indigenous knowledge!). Well, and there's even a third sense – the action and activity of history, the sense of motion and movement and change. —Email message sent to lisa helps, March 9, 2007

There are many ways to think about history or define one's historical practice, but in 2007-8 "active history" was a useful shorthand I came up with to articulate the kind of historical practice a number of graduate students and historians were interested in exploring. The term emerged over the course of discussions with lisa helps, a Trudeau scholar and fellow graduate student in the History Department of the University of Toronto, who was working on comparative histories of homelessness in Victoria, B.C, and San Francisco. I was researching the historical memory of the Indigenous and colonial past of Toronto. Before entering graduate school I published *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America*, which explores my own family's involvement in North American colonialism from the 1630s to the present.¹ For many years I was also an activist and I entered the PhD program convinced through my own experience as a feminist and non-Indigenous anti-colonial activist of the powerful ways that historical research could contribute to social change.

The day before I sent the above email, I participated in a panel discussion on Indigenous Knowledges, Research Methodologies, and Indigenous History at a "Methodology Lab" that lisa had organized in our department. The speakers were Six Nations historical researcher and curator Keith Jamieson, Heidi Bohaker, professor of Aboriginal History in our department, and myself. The thrust of my paper was an argument for a socially engaged practice of history and a call for academic historians to critically examine the Canadian history profession's entanglement with colonialism. I quoted American historian Devon Mehusueh, who wrote:

Considering that this is a country founded by colonizers whose policies and behaviors disrupted and almost destroyed Indigenous cultures, historians of the Indigenous past have a responsibility to examine critically

the effects of their historical narratives on the well-being of Natives and to also examine their stories' influence on the retention and maintenance of the colonial power structure.²

I also cited the assertions of Edward Said and Vine Deloria Jr. that not only historians' sources but our basic categories and assumptions have been shaped by colonial rule. I noted that while I was answerable to my supervisor and my department and the university, I was only minimally answerable to the people I was writing about through the evolving ethics review process. I was (and still am) uncomfortable with the academy's control over who defines knowledge, who has access to knowledge, and who produces knowledge, especially because the graduate students in my department (the next generation of academic historians) were certainly not representative of Canadian society as a whole and did not then include any Indigenous students, nor were there any Indigenous faculty members; in fact, the discipline of Canadian history had often seemed to consist mainly of white people talking to each other.

Echoing critiques by Indigenous scholars and the discussions on ethical research with Indigenous peoples then being discussed by funding agencies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, I called for historians to conceptualize and conduct research in partnership with Indigenous groups, to consult members of the group who had relevant expertise, and to make research results accessible to Indigenous communities. I said that not to engage seriously and deeply with Indigenous knowledge and scholarship—including Indigenous conceptual categories, theoretical constructs, historiography, and articulations of experience—was to perpetuate the hegemony of Western thinking. One such concept stressed by many Indigenous elders and scholars was expressed through the Anishinaabe word *pimaatisiimin*, living well, and I noted the related idea that the goal of scholarship should be to enhance the wellbeing of the community.

In making these remarks, I was not saying anything terribly original, but trying to respond to Indigenous critiques of the academic practice of history and struggling to find my own ethical and methodological footing as a non-Indigenous researcher of Indigenous-settler relations. I was all too aware that many Indigenous scholars spoke of an “emerging concept of sovereignty that has as much to do with the reclaiming and retelling of various histories – of peoples, cultures, and institutions – as it does with control over territories and resources.”³ I asserted that history is never just “what happened;” it is always also the story of the historian's relation to the material and the community he or she writes about.

In the synergy that took place in the discussion after the Methodology Lab, Lisa helps and I discussed the possibility of doing a book together or organizing a conference that had a more activist slant than most history conferences, and that included community researchers like Keith who were not necessarily academically trained historians.

The next day I emailed Lisa with the message printed at the beginning of this arti-

cle, and the phrase “active history” took wing. Meanwhile, lisa had also been having discussions about history and activism with several graduate students at York and had the idea of bringing us together. In April, 2007, Jim Clifford, Tom Peace, lisa and I met for the first time and quickly focused on a conference to be jointly sponsored by the history departments of York and University of Toronto, which in itself marked the beginning of our efforts to build community, as the two departments rarely collaborated. The conference was held in September 2008 at Glendon College, York University.

Although we were all committed social activists, the four of us varied in the degree to which our activism and historical research coincided. It’s easier to combine the two in some fields, such as Indigenous history, than others. But all of us were asking questions about power, community, responsibility, and the importance of making history accessible beyond the academy. As activists, we were aware of the need for a better grounding in history within activist movements and shared a sense of the usefulness of historical scholarship beyond getting published in the next academic journal. History then, was not just knowledge about the past for its own sake, but critically important for the present and future.

This orientation was reflected in the subtitle we gave the conference, which was taken from Jocelyn Letourneau, “Active History: History for the Future” In our call for papers, we defined active history variously as

[H]istory that listens, that is responsive; history that will make a tangible difference in people’s lives; history that makes an intervention and is transformative to both practitioners and communities. We see a practice of history that emphasizes collegiality, builds community among active historians and other members of communities, and recognizes the public responsibilities of the historian.

The desire for a conference was also born out of our experiences of isolation, a sense that we practiced or wanted to practice history in a different way than many of our colleagues, some of whom disapproved of politically engaged historical research. We needed to articulate and explore this different orientation to historical scholarship for ourselves and with each other, to identify and learn from our colleagues, and to investigate and locate ourselves within a largely unacknowledged and unexamined history of activist historical practice.

While academic history tends to privilege and reward the perspectives of the individual professional historian acting in isolation, conducting “original” research, we were interested in history as a collective enterprise, involving a range of people who conduct historical research. We wanted to inspire, invigorate, support and sustain people interested in this form of history, whether or not they were professional historians, and help people find ways to connect to history on a personal level through doing historical research themselves. We rejected the elit-

ism that regarded community historians and genealogists as inferior or ersatz historians rather than colleagues playing valuable roles in a continuum of historical inquiry. Our conception of “active history” also came out of a certain frustration with some aspects of public history, which often reflected institutional or national, rather than more grassroots priorities.

I will leave it to others to discuss the Active History conference itself and its legacy. But I will say that it helped consolidate my own orientation to a historical practice that is anchored in community and my belief that such a practice can benefit the academy as well. As Sami scholar Rauna Kuokkanen, following Spivak argues in *Reshaping the Academy, Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift*, responsibility towards the “other” is a crucial premise of a reimagined academy. She characterizes the “externalization” of responsibility to community in academia as a neoliberal perspective similar to the exclusion of the environment in conventional free market economics.⁴

As I wrote in my dissertation, “Toronto Has No History!?: Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism and Historical Memory in Canada’s Largest City,”⁵ my own historical practice has been deeply informed by my personal engagement with and participation in contemporary Indigenous epistemes, and especially the logic of reciprocity or giftgiving as a central ethic in Indigenous cultures. The gift logic, according to Kuokkanen, “is grounded in an understanding of the world that is rooted in intricate relationships and responsibilities that extend to everyone and everything.”⁶ This gift logic grounds many Indigenous peoples’ understandings of their history; it also underlies their conceptions of the role and purpose of storytelling.

For many Indigenous cultures, learning is a dialogic process of participatory reciprocity. Within the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, Cree, Syilx, Secwepemc, Inuit, Sto:lo, Pueblo, and other Indigenous epistemes that I have been exposed to, “engagement and participation are more than conditions of being: they are also knowledge” and knowledge is active and alive.⁷ Anishinabek philosophy, for example, rejects the western premise that the mind is distinct from the world. For Anishinaabek,

[T]he mind subsists in the very involvement of the person in the world, caught up in an ongoing set of relationships with components of the lived in environment. And the meanings that are found in the world, instead of being superimposed by the mind, are drawn from the contexts of personal involvement.⁸

In writing about history, then, historians are participating in what they describe and are changed in the process. I knew this to be true in my own case, but it is rarely reflected in our critical theories or methodologies.

For me, the practice of active history also validates an alternative to the traditional historian’s stance of “critical distance,” though it took me a few more

years to be able to articulate the concept of “critical intimacy” (borrowing from Kuokkanen and Spivak).⁹ Over the course of my research, I would become increasingly involved with the Indigenous community of Toronto, through attendance at teachings and ceremonies, involvement in the Toronto Native Community History Project at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, and then through the (still continuing) process of the collective creation of a theatrical production about the Indigenous history of Toronto. The latter has involved an Indigenous director and actors and draws on both EuroCanadian and Indigenous sources of historical knowledge, including my dissertation and other archival research, oral tradition, ceremony, and the historical knowledge or intergenerational memory in the body that actors tap through improvisation. All of these involvements deepened my understanding of the Indigenous history of Toronto and its memory and also returned something to the community, both the Indigenous one and the larger community of Toronto.

What I like about the image of historical knowledge as active and alive is the sense that, like yeast, it can create air pockets, new spaces for growth and learning; it can alter the chemical composition of an issue. Active history, in my view, is not change *directed* by a historian, but an acknowledgement of the power of knowledge to be an active agent, a force on its own, and to enable other people to become active agents. These changes are multi-directional, move throughout society, and are not just the preserve of an intellectual or political elite. Historical knowledge can be “medicine” in the Anishinaabek sense, something that can actively work in the mind of the reader or listener to promote positive change. Indigenous historian Donald Fixico speaks of telling a story as “reviving the experience of the past so that it becomes alive again,”¹⁰ a process I witnessed firsthand when my book *Distant Relations* was used as a springboard for community dialogues about the past, present, and future of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In these community events, I saw how my own story helped close the gap between genealogy and history, enabling other people to find their own connection to the larger history of colonialism in North America.

In my understanding of “active history,” then, history is not merely the preserve of professional historians. It is a communal enterprise and it belongs to everyone.

NOTES

¹ Victoria Freeman, *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000).

² Devon Abbott Mehusueh, “Should American Indian History Remain A Field of Study?” in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, eds. Devon Abbott

36 Freeman

Mehusueh and Angela Cavendar Wilson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004): 157.

³ Introduction to Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton and Will Sanders, eds. *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

⁴ Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistememes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 105.

⁵ Victoria Freeman, “Toronto Has No History! Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism and Historical Memory in Canada’s Largest City,” (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2010).

⁶ Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸ Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 101, quoted in Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, 60.

⁹ Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, xiv, 149; Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 425.

¹⁰ Donald Fixico, *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5.