

Alaska Native Studies Conference and Circumpolar History Education

Heather E. McGregor, PhD student at the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness (UBC), attended “Transforming the University: Alaska Native Studies in the 21st Century”, Alaska Native Studies Conference (<http://alaskanativestudies.org/>) at the University of Alaska, Anchorage from April 4-6, 2013. On a panel themed “Decolonization: Global Models” with panelists including Dr. Ray Barnhardt and Dr. Michael Marker, she presented a paper entitled “Extending the Circumpolar Dialogue on Indigenous Education: Nunavut and Alaska.”

Abstract: Indigenous education in the Arctic regions of Circumpolar nation-states can differ substantially from the context of Indigenous education farther south. Recently enhanced dialogue amongst Alaska, Nunavut, and Greenland is drawing attention to these points of difference and commonality. Using both educational history and examples from Nunavut’s new high school social studies curriculum, this presentation features the distinctive perspective offered from the only Canadian jurisdiction where the entire public education system is intended to be responsive to the Indigenous (Inuit) majority. Areas of common struggle that warrant further dialogue are proposed, with a particular focus on decolonizing history education in the Arctic.

The conference was the first of its kind, bringing together 150 scholars, students and community members from across Alaska as well as other parts of the world to discuss Alaska Native and Indigenous scholarship. Here is a brief description:

The Alaska Native Studies Council promotes a deeper and more sustained commitment to integrating Indigenous perspectives into a variety of educational settings. Our mission is to identify, develop, and implement Native-focused curricula, to promote and publish Alaska Native-related research and pedagogical strategies, and to develop a strategic plan to help us attain these goals.

Scholars and practitioners from all fields are invited to submit proposals that address a variety of issues including, but not limited to: Culturally Responsive Leadership and Education, Alaska Native Identities, Alaska Native Languages, Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), Self-Determination and Sovereignty, Documenting and Honoring Indigenous Knowledge Systems, History, Oral Traditions and Contemporary Texts, Indigenous Research Methodologies, Alaska Native Science and Math, Indigenous Pedagogies vs. Western Paradigms, Subsistence and Sustainability

There was a museum and arts practices pre-conference symposium entitled “The Things We Make: Alaska Native Art in the 21st Century” on April 4th at the Anchorage Museum. Heather has reported on a portion of this symposium in her report concerning Indigenous curation and the Alaska Native Heritage Centre.

This was followed by two days of presentations and many special events held during the main conference at UAA. The keynote speech was delivered by Graham Hingangoroa Smith (Maori) from New Zealand. The final banquet was held in honour of the late Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, at which the first Oscar Kawagley award was presented to Dr. Gordon L. Pullar, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Heather is grateful for the support from THEN/HiER to travel to Anchorage, particularly to see the efforts of Alaska Natives come to fruition in terms of successfully holding their first conference. It was announced that the conference will occur on an annual basis from now on, and a journal will be launched along with the ongoing Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley award for excellence in Indigenous knowledge dissemination. The experience allowed her to connect (and reconnect) with colleagues from around the circumpolar region including Greenland. She learned a great deal about Indigenous issues and initiatives – land claims, museums, distance learning, heritage education, university programs, and decolonization – in the context of Alaska, which in some cases provides exciting models that Arctic regions of Canada may learn from in pursuing our own comparable developments.