

Unit 1: Video 2 Transcript

Q6: Describe your current research on the history of racism in Victoria.

A: So my interest in Indigenous–settler relationships has expanded out into the history of race more generally in our area. I’m focusing—I’ve got a research project that focuses on Victoria. But I think we’re learning things about British Columbia and Canada more generally, about the history of race.

And so we’re doing two things. One is we’re using the new technology of geographic information systems, GIS. And GIS allows you to attach data to a map and then start to do some of your—test your hypothesis by asking the questions of the map, if you like. So what we’ve done is taken data about all the people who lived in Victoria in 1871, ’81, ’91, 1901, and 1911, from the Canada Census. Every ten years the government would go out and, as they still do, ask people for information about their, oh, birth place, their parents’ birth place, their religion, their income, all kinds of things. And so we’re able to map everybody to where they lived in Victoria in these five decades. And then we’re able to say, okay, where did all the Chinese live? Where did all the First Nations live? Where did the Europeans live? Where did all the Scots live? Or where did all the Presbyterians live? We’re able to kind of—and then because this is all embedded in a map, the map will turn that red if we ask it to. So, wow, we’re able to see new patterns that we couldn’t see before.

So one of the things we’re most interested in is, well, Indigenous people and the Chinese immigrants. And so one of the thoughts that people had about racism in the period—this was a racist period. This was a period where whites were—when Europeans arrived here, they established a British colony in 1849, and they established—British Columbia joined Canada in 1871. The only people who had the vote in 1871 were white males, who constituted about 10 percent of the population. So all the First Nations, who constituted about 80 percent of the population, couldn’t vote. Women couldn’t vote. Asians couldn’t vote.

And so they established, by decree if you like; and I think this is one of the interesting questions in my field is, how did they pull that off? They established by decree this hierarchical structure where they were in control. So one of the theories that people have is Chinatown was kind of a place of refuge for the Chinese. Victoria has the oldest Chinatown in Canada, and it was—some of my colleagues have written about it as a “forbidden city.” Whites couldn’t go in there. Chinese were protective. So GIS kind of opens up the forbidden city for us to have a peek inside, and it allows us to see that in

fact about a third of the people who lived in Chinatown weren't Chinese. And about a third or a quarter of the Chinese didn't live in Chinatown.

And so it—and so we're coupling this with an investigation of how race was talked about in the newspapers. And again, we expected when we went to the newspapers to find this heavily racist language against the Chinese, for example. And sure there are some racist language, some denigrating language. But way more often we find the Chinese are using the newspaper to advertise their—"Come to Chinatown. Buy my rice," or "Buy my china that I'm selling, my crockery." "Come down and gamble." They don't advertise that, but this is gambling—that the whites are, ah—they come down. They advertise to "Come down and see our Chinese theatre."

And so the research has kind of changed my vision of what—how racism operated anyway. It wasn't this kind of harsh, brutal form of segregation. But rather a kind of—I think more paternalistic, interactions—daily interactions between Chinese and the white community, lots—if you were rich, you would have a Chinese cook who lived in your house and cooked all your food. You might have some Chinese cleaning staff. You would probably have Chinese gardeners. So clearly, in a sense that was a status symbol, to have these servants working for you. But if you thought so—that the Chinese were so beyond-the-pale or so contaminated, you clearly wouldn't have them so close to your living space.

So between doing some text analysis of how race was talked about and doing this analysis of how race was lived spatially, I think we're coming to new ideas about how race operated. And I think today we're still concerned about racism in British Columbia and Canada. Racism's still here. But it operates at a much different level. And I would say much less obvious and much less—has less effect on people's lives than it did then. So what we're trying to understand in a way is how racism goes away. Like, how do you undo racism? And so that's partly what this project is about.