

Santa: I'm Santa Ono, the president and vice chancellor of UBC. On this season of *The Blue and Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses.

Santa: Dr. Tina Loo is a professor in UBC's department of history. Her work has explored a range of topics. From criminal justice to environmental history. Dr. Loo's analysis of state power and power relations in these contexts has earned her international recognition as a scholar. Earlier this year she was named a University Killam Professor, the highest honor that UBC can confer on a faculty member. Dr. Loo welcome to the *Blue and Goldcast*. Thanks so much for coming on the show.

Dr. Loo: It's a pleasure to be here and to talk to you about about my work.

Santa: I just wanted to ask you a couple questions about your scholarship. It's fascinating to a lot of people, but before we get into your scholarship I wanted to learn a little bit more of you as a person. About your history prior to coming to UBC. How you got to UBC, first just a little bit about yourself if that's okay.

Dr. Loo: Sure. Well I am originally from small town Ontario, Eastern Ontario, right on the Ottawa river just downstream from our national capital. I'm going to skip way ahead. I did my undergraduate degree here at UBC but on the other side of campus I have a science degree in genetics. As my friends like to tease me, I went from DNA to BNA the British North America act. I had the opportunity to take elective courses and some of those elective courses were history and I had some fantastic instructors who piqued my interest.

One thing led to another. I think it's one of those things about following your passion so I decided, "Oh." I finished my undergraduate degree and I thought, "Oh, I could go to medical school like all my friends were, but I could do a one year MA," and that was it. I did the one year MA at the University of Toronto. That was just so much fun and I went on to do a PhD in history. It was just happenstance and the good fortune of running into some very inspiring teachers.

Santa: How did you actually come to do your current research? Is that what you did at Toronto? Is what you're doing right now quite different from your MA?

Dr. Loo: It's different. If you looked at my CV, you would see that I've actually as a historian studied a variety of different things. My MA was based on parish records from- this is really interesting because this is in the news now. From the mission school that was the Roman Catholic mission school St. Anne's that was outside Duncan British Columbia, where the couching nation had to send their kids and just did a social history of that community looking at these Roman Catholic parish records.

It touched on residential schools and then I went on to do legal history. I went on to do environmental history. Then I got to this most latest research which I spoke to the board of governors about a couple of months ago which is about forced relocations in Canada. That would seem to be a bunch of things that have nothing in common but in my head at least there's been a thread that I think runs through out and that's

my interest in government or in state power. Why the state enacts certain policies that it does and what the effects of those policies are.

Whether it's hydroelectricity, whether it's imposing British criminal law in colonial British Columbia, or whether it's through a whole bunch of policies that involve the relocation of people to improve their economic circumstances. It's really about state policy and its effects on people in a variety of context.

Santa: That's very interesting because these policies and these actions by the government of the time can be viewed in very different ways at the time and also decades or half a century later, you can see that with statues being taken down, you can see people who were celebrated becoming vilified, the common thread of your projects is something that resonates with people right now tremendously. Can you tell me a little bit about your deep focus on these areas?

Dr. Loo: I'm looking at forced relocation as one of the strategies that the federal government along with cooperating provincial governments pursued in the 1940s, but '50s, '60s and '70s as a way of fighting poverty. You would move people out of their allegedly poor circumstances to new places where better opportunities and social services were thought to lie. Then you would engage in a process of rebuilding community through Community Development Initiatives. This was thought to be a way of lifting people out of poverty.

I look really at a number of groups, so it's a case study approach. I look at diversity of groups Inuit in the central Arctic, fishing families in Newfoundland, Quebec in the Gas Bay, in the lower St Lawrence region of the province. Then I have a couple of urban case studies. I look at African-Canadians in Halifax, and then I look at Chinese-Canadians in the Strathcona area of Vancouver. Bringing it back back to home, to home for both of us.

I think that's one of the contributions that each of these groups and each of these relocations has been looked at separately. My take on it is to bring them all together. To put groups who aren't really placed in the same analytical framework together to see the commonalities and to see the strategies that the government pursued to fight poverty. That's the second way it's different, is that I'm looking at the people who planned and then implemented and oversaw all these relocations because the focus in so far as there has been one on these forest relocations is, and has been rightly on the victims of relocations.

I'm looking at different relocations together, and I'm looking at the people who planned implemented and oversaw them. I'm really doing that to try to answer a basic question. That's, how do people who think of themselves as having good intentions, who were viewed as having good intentions? How do they do bad things? How do they rationalize taking people from their homes for their own good? How do they see that as an ethical thing to do?

Really the book is in its broadest sense an exploration of the violence that can come from good intentions. That's what I would say the book is about generally. If we were to take my dissertation research which was a legal history of colonial BC. What happens when the British come and establish a colony here, a colony on the mainland of British Columbia on Vancouver Island and in the process of doing so

establish government and impose British law, this set of practices and regulations that come from centuries of development in a very different place.

What are the effects of doing that? How does that set of law change? How does it in response to local circumstances and how do the people on whom it's imposed respond to that? Why would they even obey? This is a set of foreign regulations. Of course at the time those who were in the colonial government thought that they were bringing civilization to this benighted place, which they saw as empty, as populated by people who were less than human. They came with this notion of bringing civility and with an agenda of uplifting people by giving them the benefit of these British law.

Of course, people who at the time who lived here had different ideas. They had their own sets of laws and looked askance at these efforts and so had very different views, but of course the British saw this as these are our good intentions and you see this replicated with the churches and all areas of European endeavor on this part of the coast.

It's through those conflicts between those who would impose their customs upon those who already had well-developed ways of living and being in the world, that things changed. That tension between government in position and the response of those who would be governed is a dynamic that runs through a lot of my research. We fast forward to hydroelectric development which was a live issue in the province now.

The people who live in the Peace Valley in Northern BC have very clear understanding of the kinds of lives that they want to live and what's good for them and what's good for the environment, the government of British Columbia from the 1960s till now would say that hydroelectric development benefits the entire province, it's green, and yes, there will be environmental change, but this is a small price to pay for the benefits that will accrue to all. That raises the question about what's the public interest and who bears the burden of bringing benefit to the public?

Those are the kinds of tensions that I am interested in exploring. I'm interested in exploring particularly the people who actually developed these policies and implemented them because so often we treat bureaucrats, people with power as a monolithic entity. We talk about the state, we talk about the government, but the state and the government are made up of people. How did those people see what they were doing? Were they changed? How do they justify what they did? Did they ever push back?

That's a bit different than the normal emphasis. The normal emphasis in history has been with good reason on people who were the victims of these policies to improve their lives. I was curious about the people who did the imposing, I'm interested in how power is exercised at a middle level. We could focus on politicians, prime ministers, high level figures, but really it's who is in the bureaucracy, who are the social workers, who are the teachers, who are the lawyers, who are the planners and what's their story. That's what I really wanted to understand.

Santa: It's fascinating. I have to tell you that as a university president, as someone who is leading a provincial institution, that ultimately is a product of colonialism and it's a university that's built in the Germanic or the British model as you know. I'm a

person and all of these people that you're talking about at different levels are people. If you look into their biographies and the struggles that they experienced in making decisions, and second guessing the decisions that they have made and this continues to occur today.

I would venture to say that perhaps if you talk to these people who are vilified or viewed as part of the state and part of the monolith, as you say, that they would say that perhaps it's about time that people really look into the challenges and vulnerabilities of being in that position and the importance of education in broadening their perspective so that they can understand the needs of those that they serve. What do you think about that?

Dr. Loo: I think that's true. I think that what I try to bring to my research, but also to my work as a teacher is empathy. I'd like to cultivate a kind of historical empathy, in this case, for those who exercise power. Empathy does not mean that I'm withholding criticism, it means trying to understand from there why they did what they did and in particular, what the limits of enacting change are. These people were in positions of power. Many of them came to their jobs in government, or at the universities who are also involved in some of these relocations, out of a deep sense that something wasn't right with the world. In this case, there were a lot of people in poverty, how could they contribute to improving the condition of poor people? They were activists in their day. They had good intentions, sometimes based on very particular attitudes, whether that was about race, or class, or gender, or some combination of the above.

I try to locate those attitudes in a particular time and place. I also try to understand the structures that enable them to do what they wanted to do, but also limited how much they could actually do to change things. I think focusing on individuals is important, but we also have to understand the structural basis of power. It's that tension.

We both work in a large structure, a university. We're a bunch of individuals, and there are certain structural constraints to what we can do at any given moment, similar to the case of the government bureaucrats, and the university faculty members and students who were involved in these projects of improvement that I write about.

I'm empathetic to them, but I don't hesitate, I don't think we should hesitate to criticize what harm those good intentions did. In the end, intentions are one thing and effects are another, and we can't ever lose sight of the effects, no matter what the intentions are.

Santa: I agree 100%. In your student body, at the institution, in your classes, and every now and then, I'm sure, because UBC students are amazing, they might challenge your perspective or how you're teaching. How has your scholarship affected how you teach and how you interact with those students?

Dr. Loo: I think my teaching has affected my scholarship. Particularly, as you say, UBC students are wonderful, and they're wonderful in their diversity. Simply the fact of their diversity, has made me rethink my teaching. I think about who my audience is. I have a lot of indigenous students. I also have lots of international students,

because they come and they're on exchange, and they think, "I should take Canadian history, because I want to find out about this place I'm spending the term or the year in."

That keeps me on my toes, but the one thing that I would say that shaped my research more than anything, is the fact that with, of course, some exceptions, UBC students are privileged. We, as faculty, are privileged. I teach things, like the forced relocation of Black Haligonians from their neighborhoods in Halifax, for example, or urban renewal in Vancouver in Strathcona, and students will automatically empathize with the people who got removed.

Really relate to Chinese-Canadians, who tried to stop and were successful in stopping urban renewal. Really relate to the Black Haligonians, who lost their homes and their refuge in a city divided by racism. That's good. I want them to make those connections. What they don't automatically do is bring that same empathy to the people who enacted those policies. They don't have to like them. I want them to understand why those people did what they did, because those people are not so different from the people my students are in the process of becoming.

Santa, as you know, we are teaching the future social workers, we're teaching the future public policy analysts, the lawyers, the teachers, the government bureaucrats. Our students are going to be people who exercise power, so I want them to think about the power that they have. They often don't think they have any, and that's for good reason, but they do have power, the power that they will exercise in the future. It's through that teaching and that sort of realization that I came to my focus in my most recent work on forced relocation. It's hard. It's a hard thing to grapple with your own power. So often we think, "Ugh, I can't do what I want to do. There's so many constraints." If you're a teacher in a classroom or you're social worker with a caseload of clients, you are in the position of affecting their lives. How do you navigate all of that? What are the ethics that guide you? What were the ethics that guided the people in the past in doing so? Through the past, and through my work on those people, I hope that it provoke some reflection on how we exercise power in our own professional lives.

Santa: Let me ask you this about getting back to the privileged thing, you said, Santa, let's face it, many UBC students are privileged, not all of them, but many of them are. Do you ever confront them or maybe at the beginning of the class and say, "Let's face it, you're privileged."?

Dr. Loo: Maybe not that directly, but I try to get them to do that indirectly. Sometimes we will set up debates over controversial policies. They'll read a bunch of stuff, they'll have to take on different roles and no one ever wants to be the government, no one, because they don't want to be the bad person, or what they think of. That's the occasion to get them to think about why that is. Why is it that everybody wants to be, let's say, be one of the Mohawk warriors during the Oka crisis, and the spokesperson for the Mohawk. Nobody wants to be the premier of Quebec or the mayor of Oka.

The thing is that some of them will go on to be municipal politicians or members of the legislative assembly. Just an occasion to get them to think about those people as people, one, who were put in these incredible situations and why is it that they, can you come to understand why, even if you don't agree why it is they did what they did.

Santa: I think it's wonderful because I was going to ask you the question, it's one thing to study history from primary texts or from dissertations, but how do you bring it to life? The fact that you actually have them role play in these situations, I think is probably very impactful and emotional. Let me ask you this question. Not everyone gets to take a Tina Loo course.

Dr. Loo: They should.

Santa: Not everyone does. There are too many students for you to teach. Are we doing enough as an institution to embed regardless of what faculty you're in as a student, these fundamental educational principles that will ensure that they become good leaders. You said we have a responsibility to students that we're teaching will become prime ministers and judges and professors and decision makers. Do we do enough? Do you think we can do better for them?

Dr. Loo: I'm sure in this, as in all the things we can always do better. I don't know that I have a global enough view. What I would say is that there are many contexts in which what I'm talking about can be taught, doesn't have to happen in the classroom.

One of the things I think UBC does particularly well, at least from the students that I've talked to who've participated in it, is to give students work experience. Through co-op, they are being put in non-university situations, they are in jobs where they are confronted with having to make decisions in many cases, and decisions in which they are constrained by time, by resources, by their own knowledge, that they don't have forever to work up a business plan for this particular project.

I think the more we can give students experiences where they come up against a bunch of structural limits, as well as the limits of their own energy and knowledge, and then give them a chance to reflect on that, because I think it's the reflection that's crucial, the more they will become aware of how power gets exercised and how they exercise power. Co-op is one circumstance in which I think that gets taught. I don't know about the reflection part, but I certainly know that many of my students through the people who run co-op have that opportunity to debrief through at various points in their co-op experience.

I think that's a good way to do it and community-based learning opportunities also provide that. Some of my colleagues have worked with CityLab at the municipal level on particular projects and it's the same constraints. They work on a project together. That the city is looking for guidance on, I don't know, about improving the amenities at a municipal park or something. They've got to do it in this amount of time, with this amount of dollars, with these stakeholders who have these needs. Go.

You may have ideas but how do you work in a team? How do you work with the various political and financial and other kinds of pressures to do that? I think the more we can give students these diverse opportunities in which the theoretical, which is what I'm talking about because when you talk about the past and what people in the past did, there's a distancing to that. They can learn about what people in the past did and why they made the decisions they did and why the mistake, why those individuals made these mistakes that they did but to actually confront them with doing it themselves is another layer I think would be useful.

Santa: You have a common thread, as you discussed, about your scholarship over the years. Where do you see your work taking you in the future?

Dr. Loo: That's interesting. I would say that the pandemic actually has shaped my thinking. That my previous two books were national in their scope. Case studies across Canada. As the pandemic deepened and I was thinking, what am I actually able to do next and what would be a new challenge for me, I've landed on doing something intensely local. A micro historical study, which is something that I have never done about the place in which I live.

I'm starting to do some research on False Creek. We all love False Creek. We go to Granville Island. It's a place where a lot of experiments with housing, with greenspace, with sustainability, came to play. It's the site of Expo 86. It's in the city of glass. It's the site of a lot of migrant capital being invested in real estate. It's most recently the site of an incredibly exciting Squamish initiative with Sanokw. The large rental development that the Squamish nation is undertaking.

I'm thinking that I will do something focused on False Creek from the time before it was False Creek that we know today to the present, looking at the various forces that have shaped that place and what we think about it. Those forces include government forces, of course, but also other forces like immigration, like the migration of capital, the new planning ideas, all those sorts of things. We'll see what comes of it. I'm just at the beginning stages and it feels like it has lots of potential. It connects to big themes. Big themes in a small place is what I'm after doing next.

Santa: Well, it's going to be fascinating. I can't wait to hear about your research and your scholarship and what you find. Dr. Tina Loo, thanks so much for being part of *Blue and Goldcast* today.

Dr. Loo: Thank you very much for having me.

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Santa: Dr. Tina Loo, thanks so much for being on *Blue and Goldcast* today. Tina Loo is a professor in the UBC Department of History. That does it for this month's episode. You can find links to our guest's work, as well as previous editions of the show at blueandgoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app like Apple Podcasts or Spotify. You can tweet at me @ubcprez. That's prez with a z. I'm Santa Ono. Thanks for listening.