



Angela Code and Heather Nakehk'oring all the water out of a moose hide in preparation for traditional tanning.

KYLA KAPRIN/SCOTT

WHAT I LEARNED AT BUSH

It was time to weave the floor. The canvas wall tent was up, the wooden poles tied down and the spruce branches gathered in a heap. I watched as Judy and Mary started at the corners on their hand and knees, pushing fragrant boughs into the dirt and slapping them flat. Each branch slipped partway beneath the one before it to make a spruce carpet. With a glance, Judy prompted me to join. I grabbed a handful of branches and got down on the ground. The needles pricked at my soft hands, and I tried not to grimace. Before long, we had transformed the waist high mound of spruce boughs, called *ourì* in all Dene dialects, into a deep green cushion stretching to all four corners of the large tent. We dragged in a tarp, some wooden saw horses and fleshing boards, and someone lit a few mosquito coils. The air smelled sharp. We were ready for the hides.

It was June 2010, and we – a group of 30-odd students, instructors, elders, volunteers and children – were entering the second week of a three week pilot semester at the North's brand new university: the Dechinta Bush University Centre for Research and Learning. This isn't any old campus. The school is located at Blachford Lake Lodge, 25 minutes east of Yellowknife by float plane on the traditional territory of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. The

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When Jennifer Kingsley was asked to teach at Dechinta, the North's new land-based university, she thought having two Arctic canoe trips under her belt would gain her credibility with the Northern and indigenous students and faculty. Little did she know, they'd be the ones schooling her.

area is called Denendeh, meaning "land of the people." Some would simply call it the bush. The off-grid eco-lodge perches above the lake shore, surrounded by log cabins and tent frames that drape across the pink granite. Other than the distant hum of the generator, the occasional drone of an outboard motor or the roar of the float planes that brought us in and out, all we heard was the wind, the birds and each other.

The school teaches university accredited courses developed in the North, led by Northern experts and focused on the land as the primary teacher. Dechinta combines theory and academia with land-based cultural activities – like tanning moose hides – and indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, in a declaration composed by its students this summer, "Dechinta provides an educational setting committed to decolonization and Indigenous self-determination. At Dechinta, one doesn't just learn about decolonization, Dechinta is a practice of decolonization." Decolonization is more than a political theory. It has a deeply personal interpretation that may differ for each of us: reclaiming indigenous identity, deconstructing prejudices or deepening a connection to the land. Self-determination, I came to learn, is not limited to treaty negotiations, sovereignty and aboriginal rights and title; it includes the building and reinforcement of things like community, pride, cultural values and choice. »

In the first week, Dr. Glen Coulthard, a member of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation and professor of First Nations Studies and Political Science at the University of British Columbia gave everyone a crash course in Dene history and colonization. Coulthard led the students through an intellectual and emotionally charged exploration of their own, sometimes painful, family and personal histories. I sat in the back feeling both awed and awkward. As the only non-Northern, non-Indigenous person among the students and faculty (many of the lodge staff were of European extraction), I had a lot of catching up to do. I was fresh out of grad school where I had been working on a book about my Northern canoeing expeditions. Dechinta invited me to co-facilitate a creative writing course, and I was officially listed as faculty. But everyone at Dechinta is a student, and I clearly had plenty of my own homework to do.

After the first week, elders Judy Lafferty and her mother, 76-year-old Mary Barnaby, arrived with a stack of gear and a bundle of moose hides for tanning. They also brought a safe place for me to be myself while I submitted to the Dechinta experience and let my worldview swirl around me, but I hadn't realized that yet.

Judy and Mary were Dene from Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, far north up the Deh Cho – or Mackenzie – River. They were among the best, I was told, when it came to tanning and beading moose hides, a process that transforms flesh into a fabric of jeweled gold.

Judy is a strong and impressive woman with dark hair pulled into a disorderly ponytail. Someone who knew Judy from previous encounters confided that she was terrified of her, but I found Judy funny and refreshingly direct. I could trust her to tell me if I was doing something wrong, and that was an enormous relief. I needed that kind of direction.

Mary mostly worked alone. She had smooth skin, a round face and wore a pair of thick, black-rimmed glasses perched halfway down her nose. A deep red kerchief that reminded me of a table napkin covered most of her long grey hair and formed a knot underneath her chin. Mary seemed quiet at first. She spoke some English – and understood most things – but usually spoke North Slavey with her daughter who translated when need be. If you wanted to learn from her, you simply had to watch. And maybe follow her when she slipped off into the woods.

Our first task was to slice the hair from the raw hide – something that Judy did with wide, deft strokes of her foot-long hickory knife. Some students, like Melaw Nakehk'o from Fort Simpson, NWT, had grown up working on moose hides with their elders and could also offer some help. The rest of us bent over in concentration, petrified to cut through the skin – a classic rookie move – or to cleanly slice off one of our own fingers.

The next job was to scrape the hair side of the hide down to the proper thickness, and this was done by draping the heavy flesh over upstanding half logs called fleshing boards. Sitting on the spruce



MICHAEL ERICSSON

boughs in front of the hide, with the tarp gathered on our laps to catch the scrapings, we held knives out in front of us, parallel to the floor and at the correct angle with respect to the flesh. We pulled the knives straight down, shaving the remaining hair and small curls of skin onto the tarp. Roving the class, peering down her nose, Judy would give the occasional correction. She would stand over us to adjust the angle of the knife or say, simply, "Push harder."

Moose-hide tanning is a complex procedure. Over days and weeks, the hides are scraped, stretched, soaked, wrung out, re-scraped, soaked again and subjected to different types of smoking. Each of the dozens of steps is steeped in thousands of years of practice. There are no short cuts. It would take years of apprenticeship, or growing up with it, to be able to duplicate the process on your own. But that's part of what we were about to learn: you can't do it on your own. The multi-week community routine involves hunting, knife-sharpening, wood-gathering, fire-building and so on. You need someone to sharpen the knives to a scalpel edge. Others must be able to recognize the special rotted wood, called *dahshaa*, that gives the hide its golden colour during the final smoking. Not to mention skill in chemistry and physics to balance soap, grease,

brain, water, smoke, time and hard work to turn the hide, by degrees, from white flesh into brown leather.

Students and helpers like me – I pitched in between writing sessions – balanced their time between half days in the classroom, reading assignments, socializing and other cultural activities like drying fish and meat. Judy and Mary worked tirelessly on the hides all day, and at night, they switched to beading.

Dechinta is the brain-child of 29-year-old Yellowknifer Erin Freeland Ballantyne, who is no stranger to academia. Born and raised between Yellowknife and Blachford Lake Lodge (which is owned by her father, Mike Freeland), Freeland Ballantyne's education took her from Yellowknife to Lakefield College in Ontario, to McGill and finally to Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship, where she became a geographer. Despite far-flung travels and an international



MICHAEL ERICSSON

education, her heart has always been close to home. Mid-PhD, Erin teamed up with her childhood friend Kyla Kakfwi Scott, daughter of former NWT premier Stephen Kakfwi and current Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Marie Wilson. With Freeland Ballantyne's vision and strong roots in academia and Kakfwi Scott's cultural and political savvy and pragmatism, they make a formidable team. "People have been talking about a Northern university for 35 years," says Wilson, "After so many years of it seeming impossible ... a couple of young women on their own have said, 'Let's not talk about it, let's do something, let's figure out a way.'"

Early in the writing course, during a discussion around the campfire, I decided to mention my experiences on long Northern canoe trips. They were the reason I went North in the first place, and I hoped they might give me a dusting of credibility on the land. It was only then that I learned how resentful, ambivalent or bored some of the students were of people coming North for summer adventures.

I began with a self-conscious reading from my own manuscript about canoeing. "I realize you are sharing your stories and your writing, and I wanted to start today by sharing some of mine." I read a scene about dumping my canoe in a frigid Arctic river. There was silence and a smattering of awkward applause that the lake and forest instantly absorbed.

I paused and then asked, "What's it like for you to have a teacher from the south?"

"We're pretty used to it," a student replied.

Then, one of the students, the one the others call the Gwich'in Oprah, looked up and asked: "What's it like for you when we talk about colonialism?"

I didn't have an answer. >

KYLA KAKFWI SCOTT



Top left: Dechinta student Moses Hernandez sports the bush-university look with his gumboots and Mac laptop. Top right: Students prepare for class in the main hall at Blachford Lake Lodge. Bottom right: Student Siku Allooloo looks on while moose hide tanning pro, Judy Lafferty, demonstrates good flesh-scraping technique.

The students filed away for lunch and I headed back to the moosehide tent. Silence fell, except for the scraping of the hides and the occasional banter between mother and daughter that I couldn't understand. After about half an hour, Mary reached for her handbag and said something to me, but I didn't understand that either. She looked at me and repeated, "Have a candy."

I crawled over to the plastic bag she pulled out and looked inside. Fuzzy Peaches, MacIntosh's Toffee, licorice and penny candies all mixed together. I couldn't help laughing.

"So this is how you work so hard all day," I ventured.

We all laughed.

"Have some tea," Judy offered. "Come and see my pictures."

I held Judy's digital camera and flipped through photos of her house, her fish camp and her grandchildren. Then she asked me to take some pictures. I tried to capture her at work with Mary, framing Mary's face or capturing her sharpening a knife. Finally, Mary said something to Judy who translated for me, "She says why are you taking pictures of her face? You should take pictures of the hide."

One of Coulthard's many memorable lessons particularly stands out for me. "Decolonization is the reversing of an internalized process," he says. "When I learned that, it blew my mind." When I think of decolonization this way – as people creating new stories about themselves and others – I begin to see it all around me. Young teachers set a fish net out by the island. Students stretch a hide onto its frame for the first time. A man picks up a knife to cut his first fish for drying. A young woman finds her Dene language flooding back to her. Alumni member Mason Mantla tells me, "Dechinta is a living example of what my people say 'To be strong like two people.' To be strong in a modern sense – be educated, have a good job – but also to be strong in your culture and your traditions and to bring that forward with you as you evolve in the world. Dechinta has reconnected us in such a way that hasn't been seen before," Mantla continues. "We've learned how to relate to each other, to reconnect to the land. We've met people who are indigenous, and we've met people who aren't indigenous but care about us, and so, you know, they are Dene on the inside."

This July, I attend Dechinta again. It is the school's third semester, and I am there this time to make a documentary for CBC Radio. On June 28, I find out through messages on Facebook that Mary has died, just five days before the semester begins.

Mary's passing is one of many changes and developments facing Dechinta: McGill will join the University of Alberta to accredit courses, funding options are widening, and recognition of the school has grown. Freeland Ballantyne and Kakfwi Scott have invited the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to visit during their honeymoon Royal Tour of Canada, and they have accepted.

In Mary's absence, Dechinta alumni Melaw Nakehk'o, only 32 years old, an artist and mother of two young boys, has stepped in to lead the students in moose-hide tanning and readying the work area for William and Catherine. In the hours before their

arrival, while float planes buzz across the sky and snipers and sniffer dogs patrol the grounds, Nakehk'o leads us in the preparations. We refresh the *ouri* carpets, lay out the tools, tidy the tent and continue rounds of stretching and scraping. A raw hide, pulled tight on a frame to be scraped in the Deh Cho style of tanning must be, in Nakehk'o's words, "de-stinkified." She rubs it with natural body wash and fabric softener. When I walk by she says, "Wait. Can you smell it from there?"

I stop to take in the mix of lakeside air, wood smoke, spruce sap and the smallest whiff of smelly moose. "Barely," I reply.

We take our places around the fire, where the Royals will eventually join us. I have abandoned my tape recorder to sit with the students and instructors as a member of the Dechinta community. I am still a newcomer and a southerner, but this year I feel less defined by labels and more like a person that others are coming to know.

When William and Catherine arrive, I am surprised to recognize the awkwardness. It brings me back to my first semester here last summer, and I catch a hint of myself in them: wanting to understand and having a long way to go. These two carry the peculiar juxtaposition of new celebrity and established colonial power. How should we all treat each other? The land itself disarms the group enough that we can almost meet them as our peers, but the cameras and the past aren't quite far enough away for that.



OP-MAKERS



Bottom left: Erin Freeland Ballantyne gives Prince William a tour of the Dechinta campus. Top right: Kyla Kakfwi Scott, Sam Mantla Jr. and Tania Larsson sort moose hair for use in tufting, a traditional artform. Bottom right: Elder Mary Barnaby rests after weaving and laying out the spruce-bough flooring.

AMOS SCOTT



JENNIFER KINGSLEY

The exchanges go something like this:
Welcome to the traditional and unceded territory of the Yellowknives Dene. We love the wilderness.
The current colonial-imposed model of governance is oppressive and it oversees the exploitation of marginalized people.
We should have a school like this in the U.K.
The land is our life.
You sound just like my dad.
 It is both heart warming and heart wrenching. The gulf is wide. But at least, in this moment, we are all standing at the edge of it.

One morning, during my first summer at Dechinta while all of the students were working away on the hides, I noticed Mary slip out of the tent. I darted out the door to follow her. She headed out across the meadow to the fire pit where she had been smoking one of her hides. It had grown stiff and white, and she was preparing it for the final process that would make it soft and brown: smoking it with that special rotting spruce, *dahshaa*.

I watched her spray herself from head to toe with Muskol and then stepped forward to carry her bag. She grabbed an axe, and we moved down the trail. The sun was not yet bright enough to burn away the mosquitoes, and they followed us in a thick fog.

Mary's bowed legs stepped steadily through the brush, and she whacked each old log we came to with the butt of her axe. If she heard what she was looking for – a sound I couldn't distinguish – she flipped the axe head around and sliced the blade deep into the stump. One twist and the crumbling, golden wood spilled out. A calf-thick willow grew out of one stump she liked. With six precise strokes, she felled the offending tree and bent down to gather the *dahshaa*. Whenever she found the right wood, I would stoop to help her gather it. Sometimes she left me there to keep filling the bag, and she walked on.

"So much mosquitoes," she said every once in a while.

After a few minutes, I began to recognize the wood and moved off to investigate my own stumps. Every now and then I would bring a handful over to Mary, and she always had the same answer, "No. No. No. No."

I guess it will take a little longer than I thought. [UP](#)