

Haque, Eve – Abstract for conference: *Language and Migration: Experience and Memory*

Paper title: **Official and Non-Official Language Rights in Canada**

Abstract:

2019 was declared by the UN to be the International Year of Indigenous Languages and it was also the year the Canada passed the Indigenous Languages Act, which although extending recognition for the approximately 70 Indigenous languages in Canada, bestowed no official status on these languages. Currently, aside for a few Indigenous languages, at least two thirds of Canadian Indigenous languages are considered endangered, and almost all the rest are classified as vulnerable to loss. In short, this an ongoing devastating loss of linguistic and cultural resources; resources which are central to community and cultural continuity as well as essential – as identified in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) – for community survival and decolonization.

In this presentation, I want to discuss how white settler logics give rise to linguistic and community hierarchies that continue to underlie state relations with Indigenous communities and the fate of their languages in Canada. These hierarchies, although in place since contact with European settlers, are explicitly articulated in linguistic terms through the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (RCBB) (1963-1970), through discourses of pathologization, problematization and fossilization in order to justify the exclusion of linguistic rights for Indigenous communities, even as English and French are recommended and enshrined (through the Official Languages Act in 1969) as the official ‘founding’ languages of Canada. In the wake of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, almost 20 years later, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1991-1996) and then the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008-2015) pave the way to the Indigenous Languages Act, which, first promised in 2016, is proposed as bill (C-19) in early 2019 and then passed into law in June 2019. This legislation, although finally providing recognition for Indigenous languages, is revealed to be significantly inadequate when compared with the Official Languages Act. Specifically, I compare the linguistic rights accorded to Indigenous languages against English and French through their respective language acts and also as rights enshrined in the Canadian constitution. As well, the asymmetrical distribution of linguistic rights is paralleled in the huge disparity in implementation and resourcing between these language groups. In short, these disparities underscore the continuity of Canada’s white settler coloniality that underpins the place of Indigenous languages into the present.