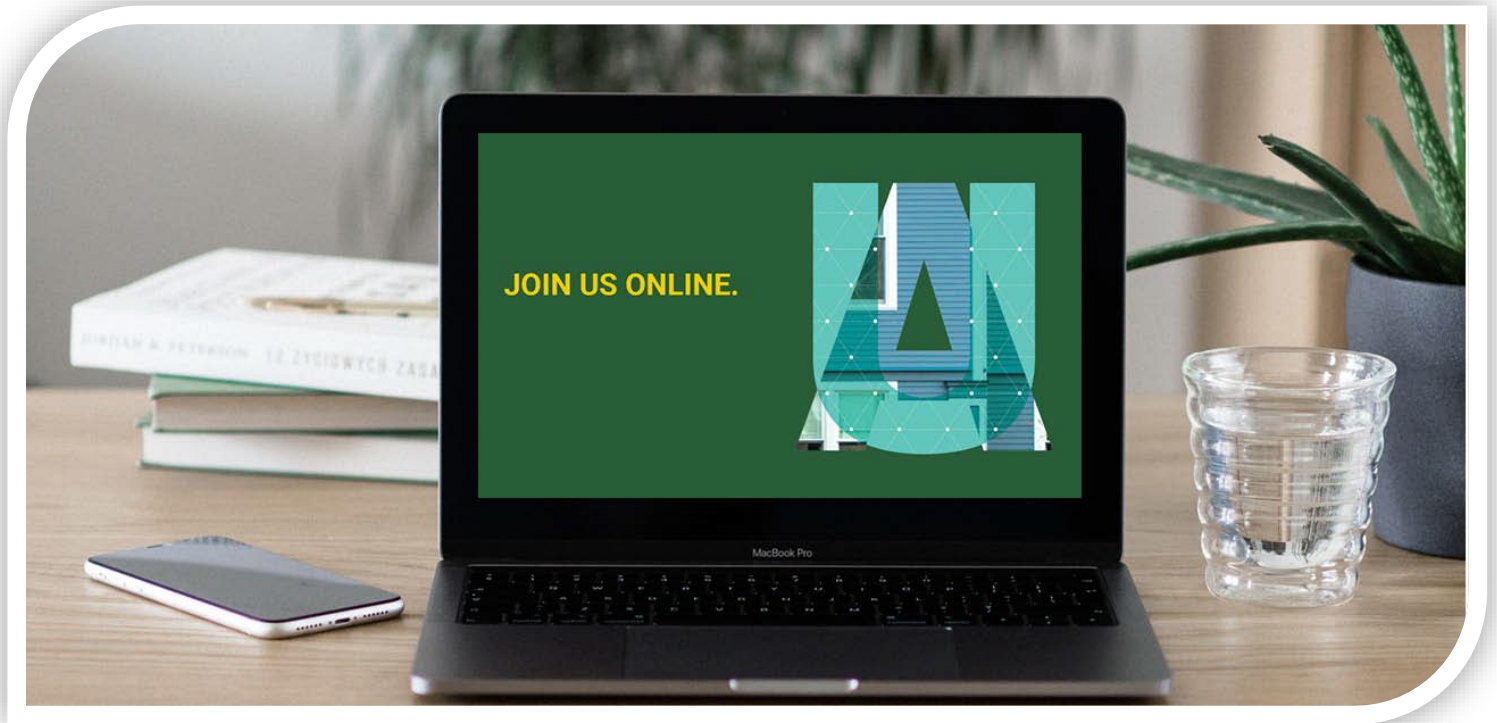




Chester Ronning Centre  
for the Study of Religion and Public Life



Prepared by:  
Ian D. Wilson, Director and  
Kim Wiebe, Program Coordinator/Administrative Assistant



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## Note from the Director

I arrived at Augustana in the Fall of 2015, a specialist on the Hebrew Bible and its history, to teach a slate of religious studies courses on a per-session contract. The Chester Ronning Centre was certainly on my radar; I was aware of the work of its founding Director, David Goa, and as a PhD student I had served as a research assistant for David's good friend and academic collaborator, the late Ibrahim Abu-Rabi. But at the time I did not anticipate any opportunities to be directly involved with the Centre or its administration. That year, I attended several Centre events, got to know the Augustana campus and community, and kept busy with my courses and students. Back then, I had no idea how long I would remain at Augustana, or even whether there was a future for me in academia (the academic job market was and is, to say the least, not great).



*Ian Wilson, Director*

The situation changed in 2016, however, when David Goa announced his retirement. That summer, Augustana's Dean, Allen Berger, approached me about stepping into an interim Associate Director role at the Centre, specifically to administer the Centre's public programming for the 2016-17 academic year, while the faculty conducted its search for the next Director. This was an exciting opportunity, one that I took on without hesitation. It afforded me a chance to continue teaching at Augustana, a faculty and campus that had welcomed me and where I fit in well; and it offered the possibility to interact with the best and brightest thinkers on the topic of religion in our society, to the benefit of our faculty and larger community. That year, while managing the Centre's programming and continuing to teach religious studies courses as a sessional instructor, I applied for the Director position. I was hired into that role in the summer of 2017. These were opportunities I did not expect to greet me in my academic career, and I am exceedingly grateful for them. They have shaped my life indelibly, forging new connections with a diverse group of scholarly colleagues around the world, and bringing to my attention issues and questions that otherwise would have gone unnoticed in my sometimes narrowly focused work as a scholar of the Bible.

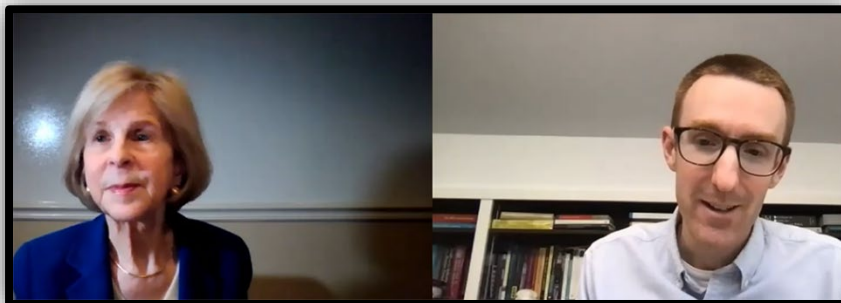
This year, 2022, marked my final year as Director, after serving a five-year term in the role. During this time, we have seen the Centre grow, building upon the good work of its founders and expanding its academic programming and reach. All the while, we have kept our sights on the passion of the Centre's namesake, Chester Alvin Ronning, who possessed a great zeal for education—especially for education that embraces and seeks to understand many sides to a story; that is, education that facilitates social equity and ultimately equality.

Supporting research that shares Ronning's educational zeal has remained the goal of our work, whether that work is hosting an internationally famous intellectual or funding an Augustana student's local academic initiative. I am particularly proud of our International Fellows Postdoctoral Scholar program, which supports the research of emerging scholars while also bringing together established thinkers and leaders in their fields, to engage pressing questions of

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religion in our day. The program, I think, captures what Ronning was all about. I also look back fondly on the many Distinguished Visiting Fellows we have hosted during my term—scholars such as Molly Worthen, Chris Hedges, and Darren Dochuk. Each brought a unique perspective and an invaluable wealth of knowledge to our community. They provided insights and viewpoints that Ronning, I imagine, would have revelled in, that he would have learned from and that would have inspired him to share insights of his own with our guests. Some of my favourite events with our Distinguished Visitors were actually held virtually, online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted our lives and work, and it has had an outsized effect on the final years of my directorship. Not being able to host visitors like Sarah Hurwitz or Elaine Pagels, for example, unable to interact with them in-person on our campus, was disappointing, to be sure; but it meant that their events reached much larger audiences than usual, and the events created space for intellectual exchange around the globe in real-time, thanks to live-streaming technology. These virtual visits during the pandemic were bright spots for our community in otherwise difficult times, and they were noteworthy highlights of the past five years.

During my tenure as Director, I have had the good fortune of working with many outstanding individuals who have contributed to the Centre's successes. Everything the Centre has done has been a group effort. Before signing off, I would like to



*Professor Elaine Pagels with Director Wilson, on Zoom*

thank a few persons by name, first and foremost the Centre's administrative staff during my term: Diane McGall and Kim Wiebe. They were essential to everything the Centre has accomplished in the past five years. I would also like to mention everyone who served on the Centre's advisory committee since 2017: Brandon Alakas, Paul Gareau, Josie Hendrickson, Kliel Rose, Daniel Sims, Gail Stolee, Nakita Valerio, Joe Wiebe, and Markus Wilhelm. Thank you for your dedication, patience, and wisdom in your service to the Centre and its work. And finally, a heartfelt thank you to the entire Augustana community, for your ongoing commitment to the Centre, and for your keen interest in the study of religion and public life generally. Again, I am so grateful to be a part of this community and for the opportunity to direct the Centre. I look forward to seeing its work and impact continue to grow in the years ahead.

Ian D. Wilson

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## Advisory Committee

The Chester Ronning Centre operates with the support of an active advisory committee. The committee's mandate is to support the work of the Centre and its Director, provide advice and community feedback, and assist in fundraising. Appointments are for a three-year term, renewable. Members are invited by the Dean of the Faculty in consultation with the Director of the Centre.

### Current Advisory Committee Members:



**Brandon Alakas, PhD** – Augustana Faculty (English) – Dr. Alakas teaches courses on classical and medieval literature. His long-standing interest in Latin literature in particular is fueled by his research on monastic culture. He has published on Latin historiography, but his current work examines devotional literature written immediately before the English Reformation. When not reading or writing about monks, Brandon tries to make time for his excessive number of hobbies, which include language learning, cooking,

and running.



**Paul L. Gareau, PhD** – Faculty of Native Studies – Dr. Gareau is Métis and French-Canadian from Bellevue near Batoche Saskatchewan, Canada. He is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Native Studies and past Research Fellow for the Rupertsland Centre for Métis Research at the University of Alberta. His research is grounded in critical theory and methodology relating to the social, political, and cultural impacts of religion on identity formation. His academic publications and community research projects explore the

Métis experiences of religion and Métis peoplehood, the influence of Catholicism on early and late modern identity, the legacy of colonial discourses on Indigenous and ethnocultural minorities, and the experiences of rural spaces. His research focuses on the Métis, Indigenous religiosity, youth, gender, la Francophonie, and rural Canada.



**Gail Stolee** is a graduate of the University of Alberta in Arts, Education and Library Science. She worked for the Edmonton Public School Board, Camrose Lutheran College where she was also a member of the Board of Regents, and Augustana University College. Her community involvements include Rotary, Sahakarini (a local international development NGO), the Nordlys Film and Arts Festival, and Messiah Lutheran Church. Gail has been an active participant in the programs of the Chester Ronning Centre since its

inception. She has a strong commitment to lifelong learning and service, and to making the

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best research and thinking accessible to the general public. She also especially loves being a grandma, travelling, and reading.



**Nakita Valerio** is an award-winning writer, researcher, and Muslim community organizer based on Treaty 6 territory, Amiskwacîwâskahikan (Edmonton, Canada). Nakita is honoured to be the Research Director for the Institute for Religious and Socio-Political Studies (I-RSS), serving both Muslim and research communities across Canada. She is a graduate in history and Islamic-Jewish studies from the University of Alberta and has been a research fellow with the Tessellate Institute, I-RSS, the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities (ECMC) and Mercy Mission Canada (MMC). Nakita also acts as an academic strategist/mentor for graduate students in the disciplines of history, religious studies, sociology, and social work. She has worked as an academic copy-editor in the social sciences and humanities since 2014. Nakita serves as an advisor to the Chester Ronning Center for the Study of Religion and Public Life at the University of Alberta Augustana Campus.



**Joseph Wiebe, PhD** – Augustana Faculty (Religious Studies) – Dr. Wiebe teaches Religion and Ecology with an interest in ethics, imagination, and community. His ongoing research interest is on the influence of settler colonialism on environmental imagination and religious identity. His first book, *The Place of Imagination* was published by Baylor University Press (2017).



**Rev. Markus Wilhelm** – Glory Lutheran Church, Sherwood Park – Rev. Wilhelm attended Camrose Lutheran College, has studied in Germany and served Lutheran congregations in British Columbia and in Calgary, Edmonton, and Sherwood Park, Alberta.

## University of Alberta Partnerships

This year, the Centre partnered with faculty and staff from many departments across the University, to bring a variety of engaging public programming to audiences in Camrose and beyond. It was our pleasure to work with the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Native Studies, Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology, Jeanne & Peter Lougheed Performing Arts Centre, Kule

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Institute for Advanced Study, Office of Advancement, and Office of Alumni Relations, among others.

## Distinguished Visiting Fellows

Afua Cooper, PhD (Winter 2022)



*Afua Cooper, PhD*

In February, it was our honour to host Dr. Afua Cooper, Professor in the Departments of History, and Sociology and Social Anthropology, at Dalhousie University. Dr. Cooper's virtual visit to the University was part of the Augustana's celebration of Black History Month.

To mark Dr. Cooper's visit, Augustana Dean Demetres Tryphonopoulos contributed to the "Second Thought" column in the *Camrose Booster* (February 8, 2022). Here is the text of Dean Tryphonopoulos's column, in case you missed it:

*February is Black History Month and the University of Alberta is preparing to welcome up to eleven tenure-track Black scholars hired into eleven different faculties, spanning a range of academic disciplines. This is the University's Black academic excellence cohort hire, which will help to make an immediate and substantive contribution to advancing Black academic excellence at the U of A.*

*On February 16th, in partnership with Augustana Campus and the Faculty of Arts, presented an online event, "The Power of the Pen: The Petitions of Thomas Peters and the Quest for Black Rights in Canada and the Atlantic World" with Distinguished Visiting Scholar, Dr. Afua Cooper.*

*Dr. Cooper's presentation addressed the use of the petition as an advocacy tool for social, racial and political change, the early Black Power activism of Peters, colonial duplicity and racism, and the unending quest for dignity by Black people. The presentation also touched on the formation of a Black Atlantic identity through literacy.*

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*Dr. Cooper is a multidisciplinary scholar, author, and artist. Her 13 books range across such genres as history, poetry, fiction, and children’s literature. Her indomitable research on slavery, and Black history has made her one of the leading figures in African Canadian studies, and the authority on Canadian slavery. Her book on Canadian slavery, The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Slavery in Canada and the Burning of Old Montreal broke new ground in the study of Canadian and Atlantic slavery.*

*Dr. Cooper led the “Universities Studying Slavery” initiative at Dalhousie University, and was the lead author of the subsequent report Lord Dalhousie’s History on Slavery and Race. These initiatives revealed the connections between the Canadian academy and the Atlantic slaving systems. In 2021, Prof. Cooper was appointed as the Canadian representative for UNESCO’s International Scientific Committee Slave Route Project, whose main objectives is to conduct research on the Transatlantic slavery system and its legacies. A celebrated poet, in 2020 Dr. Cooper was Awarded the Portia White Prize, Nova Scotia’s highest recognition for the arts. She is also the winner of the J.M. Abraham Atlantic Poetry Award for her poetry book Black Matters. She currently teaches in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University, where she holds a Killam Research Chair.*

## Elaine Pagels, PhD (Winter 2022)

We were delighted to host Dr. Elaine Pagels for two lectures in March. Dr. Pagels, who serves as the Harrington Spear Paine Foundation Professor of Religion at Princeton University, has had a monumental impact on our understanding of the earliest Christian communities and texts in the ancient world. At Harvard, during her doctoral studies, she began working with a collection of ancient Christian texts that were discovered in Egypt in 1945, but which were still largely unknown at the time of her studies. After earning her PhD, she would go on to work with an international team of scholars to translate and publish these texts—work which has fundamentally changed how scholars think and talk about Christian history. But the impact of her work has reached well beyond the academy, which is what makes her a truly outstanding academic and a fitting guest for the Ronning Centre.



*Elaine Pagels, PhD*

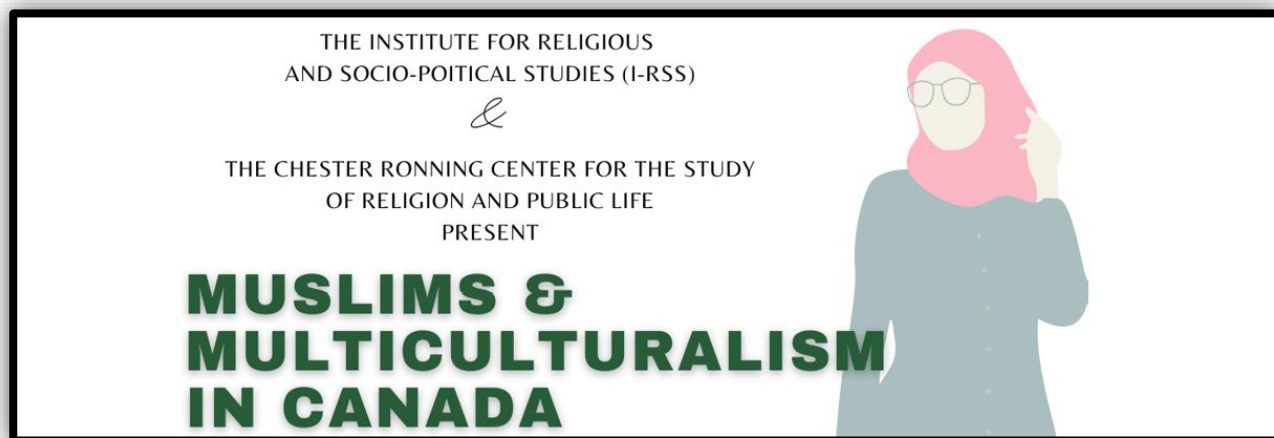


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Her New York Times bestselling book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) introduced these texts and their import to the general public. In it, she argues that the teachings of Jesus, as portrayed in the texts, mirror mystical Jewish traditions that would have been familiar to a first-century rabbi, and that it was only later Christian bishops who denounced and destroyed these teachings as “heresy.” The book went on to win a National Book Award, a National Book Critics Circle Award, and—in 1999—the Modern Library named it as one of the 100-best nonfiction books published in English in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A lesser scholar would probably be content, at that point, to rest on one’s laurels. But Dr. Pagels has continued to write and publish influential articles and bestselling books throughout her career. Her research has ranged from sex and politics in early Christianity, to how the figure of Satan has functioned in Christian prejudice and antisemitism, to apocalyptic visions and the book of Revelation. On each of these topics she has furthered our academic knowledge and our public understanding. In recognition of these significant contributions, in 2013 she received an honorary doctorate from Harvard, and in 2016 she received the National Medal for the Humanities from U.S. President Barack Obama. Her most recent work, *Why Religion?* was published in 2018 and went on to become yet another bestseller. In that book, she asks why religion persists, and she gives an account of her life as a scholar of religion. On March 30, “Why Religion?” was the title and subject of her first talk at the Centre. She joined us again the next day, to focus more specifically on her area of research in her second talk, “Discovering Ancient Secret Gospels: How They’re Changing What We Know about Christianity and its Origins.”

## Additional Programming Highlights

### Muslims & Multiculturalism in Canada (Fall 2021)



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In light of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada’s adoption of multiculturalism, the Centre partnered with the I-RSS to host a virtual roundtable discussion with Canadian Muslim scholars and activists. The panel brought together different perspectives on the politics of multiculturalism and pluralism in Canadian society as they relate to religion, race/ethnicity, gender, and indigeneity amidst a climate of Islamophobia.

Among the panel contributors was Dr. Evelyn Hamdon, Senior Advisor, Equity and Human Rights, in the Office of the Provost. Dr. Hamdon provides advice to senior leadership on a range of issues relating to equity, diversity, and inclusion at the University of Alberta. She has three years of experience in the Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights, and over 20 years as an anti-racism and EDI educational and strategic consultant working across a number of sectors. Her research and practice are grounded in anti-oppression and de-colonial theories, including the examination of social exclusion at the nexus of gendered and racialized identities. Dr. Hamdon has a PhD in Educational Policy Studies from the University of Alberta and is the author of *Islamophobia and the Question of Muslim Identity* (Fernwood Publishing).



*Evelyn Hamdon, PhD*



*Sabreena Ghaffar-Siddiqui, PhD*

We also heard from Dr. Sabreena Ghaffar-Siddiqui, an award-winning public speaker, media pundit, researcher, and human rights advocate. She is currently a professor of sociology and criminology at Sheridan College and a diversity-equity-inclusion policy consultant. Focusing in the areas of migration, race/ethnicity and ethno-religio diasporic identity, Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui’s research has explored how Muslim communities in the West navigate their social worlds in a post-9/11 climate, amidst rising Islamophobia. Dr. Ghaffar-Siddiqui’s expertise is sought in academic, public, and political forums worldwide and she is regularly interviewed by major media outlets,

including the New York Times, CBC News, CTV News and others. Her contributions as an academic continue to make an impact on policies relating to the equity of immigrants and racialized minorities in Canada. She has served on the boards of The Pluralist Foundation, The Canadian Council of Muslim Women Toronto, Monitor Magazine, the Institute of Religious and Socio-Political Studies, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, and the Canadian Muslim Vote.

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The event was co-organized and moderated by Nakita Valerio, an award-winning writer, researcher, and Muslim community organizer based on Treaty 6 territory, Amiskwacîwâskahikan (Edmonton, Canada). She is honoured to serve as the Research Director for the Institute for Religious and Socio-Political Studies (I-RSS), as well as the Editor-in-Chief for the RSS Journal. She is a graduate in history and Islamic-Jewish studies from the University of Alberta and has been a research fellow with the Tessellate Institute, I-RSS, the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities (ECMC) and Mercy Mission Canada (MMC). Nakita also acts as an academic strategist/mentor for graduate students in the disciplines of history, religious studies, sociology, and social work; and she serves on the Centre's advisory committee.



*Nakita Valerio*



*Sharmin Sadequee, PhD*

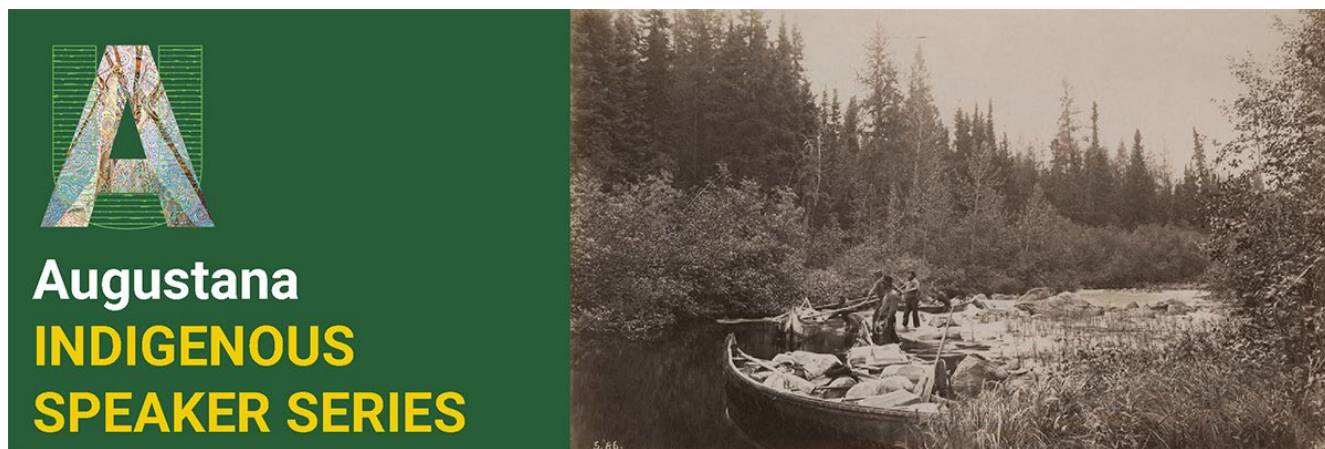
Also organizing and moderating the event was Dr. Sharmin Sadequee, the Centre's International Fellows Postdoctoral Scholar. Dr. Sadequee is a cultural anthropologist who focuses on religion. Her research seeks to understand Islam and Muslim communities in relation to modernity and modern states, specifically in relation to race, religion, social movements, secularism, science, and law in North America. You can read more about Dr. Sadequee's research and the International Fellows program at the [Centre's website](#).

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## Augustana Indigenous Speaker Series

This year the Centre continued its partnership with the Jeanne and Peter Lougheed Performing Arts Centre to present the Augustana Indigenous Speaker Series. The series is offered to Augustana students, staff, faculty, and alumni, as well as to community members in Camrose and the surrounding area. It provides opportunities for participants to engage with educators and experts, films, music, and art performances that share perspectives from the Indigenous peoples, culture, and traditions of Canada.

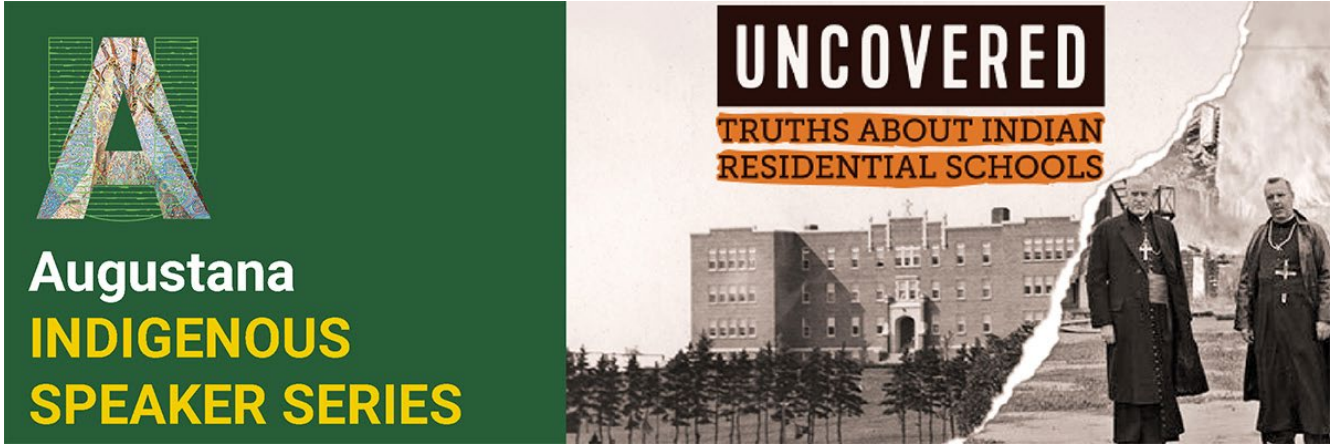
### Mercantile Fur Trade, with Frank Tough, PhD (Fall 2021)



Dr. Frank Tough is Professor of Native Studies at the University of Alberta and an historical geographer with an interest in economic history. In the Fall he shared his work on the history of the fur trade, at the Jeanne and Peter Lougheed Performing Arts Centre. His lecture demonstrated the historical importance of the mercantile fur trade to both Canada and Indigenous peoples—in particular, the Métis of the Northern Department of the Hudson’s Bay Company. In northern communities, “HBC” signified “Here Before Christ”, an irony that captures the fact that exchange value, irreversible connections to a globalizing economy, and commodification of nature all preceded the Bible, treaty cash, school enrollment, reserve surveys, North-West Mounted Police patrols, and the modern social safety net.

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Reflections on “Uncovered: Truths About Residential Schools” (Fall 2021)



In light of the renewed focus on Indian Residential Schools, the Institute of Prairie and Indigenous Archaeology and the Kule Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Alberta developed a four-part web series entitled “[Uncovered](#),” on the history of residential schools. The film series explores the current work being done to locate missing children, how the impacts and trauma of residential schools continue to this day, and how we move forward for resurgent Indigenous futures in the lands known as Canada. In a virtual gathering hosted by the Centre, the experts featured in the film series came together to discuss their work.

Music from an Indigenous Perspective, with Diyet and the Love Soldiers (Winter 2022)



Hailing from the ancestral lands of the Kluane First Nation people in Canada’s Yukon Territory, Diyet is a singer and songwriter who—along with her band, The Love Soldiers—has performed across Canada and in Europe. She has released three acclaimed albums, won numerous

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awards and has appeared frequently on TV including at the CBC New Year's Eve 2020 National Broadcast. Drawing from Diyet's personal and learned experience as a contemporary and traditional musician, this online presentation focused on Southern Tutchone music—Diyet's music of land and community—presented in her tradition of storytelling. Diyet guided attendees through a musical encounter of Indigenous identity and understanding. Using a combination of traditional stories and songs, anecdotes from personal experiences and interactive songs and movement, Diyet sought to build an appreciation of Indigenous music, dispel myths, promote personal resilience, and encourage interest in acts of reconciliation.

*Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies*, with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson  
(Winter 2022)



Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist, who has been widely recognized as one of the most compelling Indigenous voices of her generation. Her work breaks open the intersections between politics, story, and song—bringing audiences into a rich and layered world of sound, light, and sovereign creativity. At this event, held online, Simpson took part in a discussion of her recent novel *Noopiming* and a related constellation of short films, records, and artists. The event was presented in partnership with the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, the International Indigenous Studies Program, and the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Calgary.

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## Programming Details and Statistics

Total Events: 10

Total Attendance: 10,850

Video recordings of Centre events can be viewed on our [YouTube channel](#).

### Distinguished Visiting Fellows Events

(Supported by the Distinguished Visiting Fellows Endowment)

The Power of the Pen: The Petitions of Thomas Peters and the Quest for Black Rights in Canada and the Atlantic World, with Afua Cooper

February 16 – Zoom Webinar

Attendees: 80

Why Religion? with Elaine Pagels

March 30 – Zoom Webinar

Attendees: 105

Discovering Ancient Secret Gospels: How They're Changing What We Know about Christianity and Its Origins, with Elaine Pagels

March 31 – Zoom Webinar

Attendees: 125

### International Fellows Events

(Supported by the Wendy Cassady Foundation)

Muslims & Multiculturalism in Canada

October 28 – Zoom Webinar

Attendees: 60

2nd International Fellows Conference: Islamophobia and/in Post-Secular States

November 12 & 13 – Zoom Webinar

Attendees: 80

### Augustana Indigenous Speaker Series

Mercantile Fur Trade, with Frank Tough

October 27 – Blended Event, In-Person and on Zoom

In-Person Attendees: 25

Virtual Attendees: 205

Reflections on "Uncovered: Truths About Indian Residential Schools"

November 23 – Zoom WebinarAttendees: 160

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Music from an Indigenous Perspective, with Diyet and the Love Soldiers  
January 27 – Zoom Webinar  
Attendees: 50

Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies, with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson  
March 10 – Zoom Webinar  
Attendees: 80

National Indigenous Peoples Day with Richard Van Camp  
June 21 – Hybrid  
In-Person Attendees: 524  
Virtual Attendees: 9,436

## Finances (as of 2022 Fiscal Year-End)

<b>Current Funds</b>	
<i>Centre Annual Fund</i>	\$45,142
<i>Spirit of the Land Program Funds</i>	\$11,889
<i>International Fellows Fund (supported by the Wendy Cassady Memorial Foundation)</i>	\$197,680
<b>Endowment Balances (Market Values)</b>	
<i>Distinguished Visiting Fellows Endowment</i>	\$1,024,265
<i>Hendrickson Memorial Endowment</i>	\$154,466
<i>Yang Endowment</i>	\$22,421

## Publications, Presentations, and Ongoing Projects

Over the years, the Centre has published a number of its visiting scholars' lectures and essays. Those publications are accessible, free of charge and in PDF format, [online at the Centre's website](#).