

Exploring Wabanaki Concepts of Holism and Longhouse Knowledges

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A Note on Settler Colonialism

As I become more informed about Wabanaki ancestral knowledges, I do my best to incorporate them into my community-based, action-oriented research endeavours. This has made it clear to me that Wabanaki concepts of health and wellness are directly linked to land and water. Thus, it is vitally important to me that my research includes a critical examination of the many levels of Indigenous and settler relationships to land and water. Raising my own critical awareness of classic colonialism and settler colonialism as two separate but interrelated time periods greatly informs my research lens in this area. Veracini (2010) explains a fundamental difference between the two:

Imperial, national, and colonising (including internally colonising) states frequently promote ‘settlement’ with the aim of permanently securing their hold on specific locals. On the contrary, the political traditions settler colonialism focuses on concentrate on autonomous collectives that claim both a special sovereign charge and a regenerative capacity. (p. 2)

The foundations of Canada’s social, political and economic structures were shaped during the classic colonial period (i.e., Acadia, New England, Nova Scotia, etc.) and provided settler peoples with the right tools to advance their own form of empire: title to land, a centralized, oligarchic government, and military superiority. Across Canada there are calls to remove the names of

colonizers from government buildings; however, the political, economic, and social structures those colonizers built to “regenerate” their “special sovereign charge” remain.

As I see it, the settler colonial period in Wabanaki territories began in part when Loyalist aristocracy annexed a portion of Nova Scotia colony to establish New Brunswick in 1784. This should have been a time for truth and reconciliation regarding Wabanaki treaty rights and settler treaty responsibilities within the context of this newly created social reality. Instead, as Fingard (1972) highlights, Loyalist interests regarding Indigenous peoples were “more political and economic than humanitarian in character” (p. 40).

British colonial ventures into Wabanaki territories ultimately resulted in the creation of settler colonial nation-states that took advantage of illegally seized Indigenous territories to build and nurture the holistic growth and development of their settler societies while irrevocably damaging and disrupting the transference of ancestral Wabanaki knowledges (George, 2017). Fingard (1972) explains that when New Brunswick (NB) was first established it lacked a moralistic, middle-class bureaucracy, and thus local governance was

confined entirely to the merchants, ambitious individuals aspiring to commercial predominance through colonial exploitation. They least of all had the time or the piety for voluntary benevolent pursuits; nor had they yet the vested interest in social improvement for mercantile ends (p. 41).

Glynn (2018), Livesey (2016), and O'Donnell (2018) highlight how the wealth of NB continues to be predicated on the control of Indigenous lands and waterways, while at the same time Indigenous peoples living in those territories deal with the intergenerational trauma and regeneration of settler colonialism.

Palmater (2017) suggests, “Canada works very hard to get in the way of real decolonization, as that would mean a substantive shift

in power and wealth back to Indigenous peoples” and “like all things Indigenous, decolonization should be a balance of both resistance and resurgence” wherein, “we withdraw from harmful government processes and relationships and reconnect with the land, the water, our people, and our cultures” (p. 77). For Wabanaki nations whose traditional lands and waterways span across provincial, federal, international and united states neo-colonial borders, reconnecting with land within a treaty-based, nation to nation relationship should be a long-term and comprehensive process, instead of the fast track processes taking place currently.

In my early twenties, an Elder explained two ways of understanding settler colonialism—a view from the shore and a view from the boat. He was one of the first people to explain the difference between earth-conscious worldviews that see land and water as foundational elements of life, and exploitative worldviews that see a profit to be made through resource extraction. Beaver pelts, fish, and timber were staples of classical colonial interests, oil and gas are the more contemporary focus of settler colonialism; all those industries are predicated on control of Indigenous lands and waterways. I approach the study of settler colonialism by looking at the historical and contemporary, multi-leveled relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples through a “view from the shore” perspective.

Background

The comprehensive examinations for the Interdisciplinary PhD program are intended to ensure that students are prepared in at least two areas relevant to their research topic prior to engaging in doctoral research. This phase of the program has been an opportunity to explore a conceptual and methodological framework for my dissertation. I chose to explore two paths that I felt would best prepare me for the PhD dissertation proposal:

- Become more critically aware of how Indigenous holistic growth and development within Canada is impacted by political and economic factors; this also includes the future health and wellness of Indigenous lands and waterways.
- Connect with community groups and Indigenous rights activists who strive to transcend settler colonial ideologies and infuse anti-colonial, earth-conscious ethics and values into their professional lives.

I initially enrolled in graduate studies at UNB in 2013, which I viewed as a form of professional development to ‘decolonize’ my own educational lens. I was inspired to enroll in graduate studies and ‘decolonize my educational lens’ mostly by the Idle No More movement (www.idlenomore.ca). This Indigenous-led social movement began in 2012 as a series of teach-ins throughout Saskatchewan to raise awareness of impending parliamentary bills that would erode Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections of Indigenous lands and waterways. In the beginning of my research journey, I felt exploring collaborative, community-based, action-oriented research praxis could be a way to apply my skills and knowledge that would support grassroots actions aimed at advancing Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. I chose to explore the two areas listed above during this phase of research in order to connect with people who are actively involved in those areas.

Connecting with and raising up the voices of marginalized peoples and the issues they confront every day is a crucial part of my research and life goals. Much of my knowledge about the impact of settler colonialism on wellbeing and holistic growth and development is informed through stories of marginalization and government control shared by my mother. She is a Mi’kmaq woman whose parents needed a day-pass issued by an Indian Agent to leave their communities (although, I should say my mother doesn’t refer

to that time in her life as traumatic; to her they are stories of her childhood). Her stories of social control and marginalization continue to propel me towards understanding the systemic, intergenerational, and regenerative nature of settler colonialism.

Wilson (2008) highlights the holistic use and transmission of Indigenous wisdom and ways of knowing within oral traditions: “stories enable and empower like-minded people to build community and kinship” (p. 32). Storytelling and conversational methods display key elements of an Indigenous research paradigm—reciprocal relationship, reflexivity, and culturally-based research methods (Wilson, 2008). *Indigenous Storywork* (Archibald, 2008) conceptualizes a methodological framework based on Indigenous oral traditions using conversational, storytelling methods which has greatly informed my research lens and my ability to connect with research participants in culturally respectful ways. Archibald (2008) says,

As I reflect on my meetings with the Elders, many years later, I feel positive about the story-research process that we shared because it exemplifies what research should do: enable people to sit together and talk meaningfully about how their Indigenous knowledge could be effectively used for education and for living a good life and to think about possibilities for overcoming problems experienced in their communities. (p. 81)

This initial phase of my PhD research mostly involves listening to the stories of others via research apprenticeships and networking at conferences. Experiential learning, as I understand it, has been an effective method for connecting with Indigenous people and settler allies who advocate for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Wabanaki scholar Sherri Mitchell, of the Penobscot nation, is one of those voices; she explains that Wabanaki ancestors developed their ways of life in balance with all of creation and the

reason our ancestors nurtured an oral tradition is, “not because we lacked the ability to translate our words into written form, but because we have always realized that our words have an alchemy that is capable of creating form” (Mitchell, 2018, p. 5).

Envisioning Beyond the Academy

In 2010 I began working at St. Thomas University (STU) in Fredericton, NB to lead a collaborative effort to build a student service department for Indigenous post-secondary learners. This experience really highlighted that the struggle for self-determination will require professional training and education in many diverse social, economic, and political fields. Self-determination requires a blend of immediate direct actions and long-term strategic planning with multiple levels of collaboration at local, regional, and federal levels.

Looking back at that time in my life, I was quite naïve about settler colonialism’s impact on Indigenous society today, and especially within academia. My main priority at STU was to explore the obstacles and challenges behind the low-retention and graduation rates attributed to Indigenous learners and create services that would help bridge those gaps. I came to realize those obstacles are deeply rooted in colonization, imperialism, cultural genocide, land-dispossession, and the intergenerational impact of assimilative education—issues which, in my experience, do not always fall under the scope of Indigenizing the academy, if ever. Todd (2018) asserts,

Universities want to be seen to be taking action, but we still live in a society deeply shaped by white supremacist settler colonial hetero-patriarchal history and ideology; decolonization of Canadian academe calls for a total dismantling of the structures of oppression in the academy.

It requires an intense commitment to actually transforming the structures themselves. (para. 2)

My aim through research has been to explore pathways toward radical, transformative Indigenization programs conceptualized by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) as “Decolonial Indigenization” (p. 223). Their study of Indigenization efforts at 25 Canadian post-secondary institutions found that “despite the academy’s deeply colonial history, respondents identified the university as an important site of resurgence, and one that will become more important if Indigenization took a more decolonial path” (p. 224). These Indigenization efforts “envision the wholesale overhaul of the academy to fundamentally reorient knowledge production based on balanced power relations between Indigenous peoples and Canadians, transforming the academy into something dynamic and new” (p. 226). The challenge that I and many within my research network encounter is finding an academic institution open to such radical, structural changes.

Becoming critically aware of the modern ways that old-world, racialized, colonial attitudes, behaviours and practices still operate in society can be a jarring experience for some people, it continues to be for me. Cote-Meek (2014) highlights “resistance strategies” involving building critical consciousness coupled with cultural and ceremonial supports aimed at confronting the on-going, daily manifestations of blatant and subtle racialized, colonial trauma taking place in academic institutions; such strategies have shown to be an effective way to empower and enable Indigenous learners to be successful at the post-secondary level. Decolonizing processes need to support institutional initiatives that empower and enable ideological self-determination and sovereignty within academic institutions for Wabanaki linguistic, cultural, and ceremonial knowledges to be meaningfully and effectively revitalized.

Actualizing Wabanaki Longhouse Knowledges

Like many other Indigenous societies, land and water are vital to the holistic growth and healing of Wabanaki nations. Mitchell (2018) provides some insight on this connection by sharing a fundamental value within Wabanaki longhouse knowledge systems:

Every living thing has its own creation song, its own language, and its own story. In order to live harmoniously with the rest of creation, we must be willing to listen to and respect all of the harmonies that are moving around us. (p. 6)

The Mi'kmaq phrase *m'set no'gma* (all my relations), used to close ceremony, honors this teaching.

Wabanaki longhouse knowledge systems informed peaceful co-existence between settler and Indigenous peoples long before the 18th century Peace and Friendship treaties with British colonial agencies. The original terms of co-existence in our territories are based on the spirit of non-interference, two distinct cultural groups living side by side in harmonious relationship with all of creation. The decolonizing discourse within the academy usually begins with territorial acknowledgements and honoring Indigenous treaties, but very little action is taken to support ideological sovereignty or defend Indigenous efforts to reclaim and re-occupy traditional lands and waterways. Mitchell (2018) suggests,

If we truly hope to create change, we must stop forgetting that we have the power to make change happen; When we work together, we have the collective power to direct our economic and political systems away from the practices of domination and destruction and back toward a more humane and restorative path. When we balance our demand for rights with an acceptance of our responsibility toward one another and all other living beings, we take back our power; When we do so, we build a foundation for a

rights-based society that is balanced, just, and harmonious. This work won't be fast, and it won't be easy. And it will never be completed if we don't take responsibility for making it happen. (pp. 90-91)

Alfred and Cornassel (2005) suggest one way to resist settler colonialism and regenerate our ancestral ideologies is to nurture our relationships with, “land, family, languages, and ceremonies” (p. 605). My master's thesis (George, 2017) argued for a restorative approach to reconciliation—one that strives to contemporize and revitalize Wabanaki-longhouse cultural, linguistic, and ceremonial modes of learning as a pathway towards collectively transforming (decolonizing) ourselves and our communities. At the PhD level, I hope to build on the critical insights I gained during this experience in collaboration with community partners.

Alfred and Cornassel state:

As Indigenous peoples, the way to recovering freedom and power and happiness is clear: it is time for each one of us to make the commitment to transcend colonialism as people, and for us to work together as peoples to become forces of Indigenous truth against the lie of colonialism. We do not need to wait for the colonizer to provide us with money or to validate our vision of a free future; we only need to start to use our Indigenous languages to frame our thoughts, the ethical framework of our philosophies to make decisions and to use our laws and institutions to govern ourselves. (p. 614)

Coulthard (2017) suggests that any meaningful attempt at decolonization within education must account for the violent separation of Indigenous peoples from their land; and, the most effective way is through land-based educational programs that promote true self-determination and decolonization. His experiences within mainstream academic institutions limited his

aspirations to reconnect with ceremony, Elders, and his traditional lands. This led to the development of Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, an Indigenous controlled, place-based educational program offered on the traditional territories of the Yellowknives Dene people that delivers Indigenous knowledges through Indigenous knowledge keepers.

Closing Thoughts

My goal for the comprehensive examination phase was to explore how my PhD research could support community-based efforts to exercise Wabanaki treaty rights to re-occupy Indigenous lands and waterways and protect them from further destruction. Critical to my aspiration is connecting with and fostering a relationship with community-based peoples in this field. This community is comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies from many different walks of life who all share values that resonate with the “view from the shore” perspective.

My efforts at research praxis are inspired by the Wabanaki supervisory team currently guiding me on my research journey, who are grassroots activists and community leaders. They are also ceremonial leaders whose efforts to revitalize our languages, ceremonies, and cultural traditions have resulted in a revival of our mid-winter ceremony and other longhouse gatherings. These events exposed me to Wabanaki perspectives I would never have experienced within a mainstream classroom and have greatly informed my research thus far.

In contrast to Western concepts of gender, Mitchell (2018) describes the foundational principles of Wabanaki longhouse worldview as a symbiotic blend of masculine and feminine spiritual energies. All persons contain within them two spirits: a feminine spirit which represents the inner world of thought and introspection which is intuitive, creative, and life-affirming and the masculine spirit

representing the outer world and the energy of action and doing (p. 15); Wabanaki governance structures are matrifocal, based on the synergy of masculine and feminine energies; all external (masculine) action was guided by internal (feminine) heart-based wisdom that was life-creating, life-sustaining, and life-protecting (p. 16).

I strive to approach research praxis in ways that honor this teaching of balancing both inward and outward collective, thought-based actions—a longhouse approach to praxis. This initial phase of research is thought-based, an opportunity to parallel my decolonizing research strategies with Wabanaki wisdom and ways of knowing, so that my future research actions are predicated on Wabanaki linguistic, cultural, and ceremonial protocols. My research in this area is also informed by Russ Diabo (www.russdiabo.com), a political activist and Indigenous rights advocate; the Yellowhead Institute (www.yellowheadinstitute.org), an Indigenous rights and policy advocacy group based at Ryerson University in Toronto, ON; and, Honor the Earth, an environmental action resource hub (www.honortheearth.org) co-created in part by Winona LaDuke.

m'set no'gma

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