

Decolonize, then Indigenize: Critical insights on decolonizing education and Indigenous resurgence in Canada

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Introduction to My Research Journey

The politics and processes of settler colonialism ultimately disrupted the core of Indigenous life, the family unit. It has been difficult to present my research at conferences and explain my reasons for pursuing academic research without delving into personal details of my life. My mother decided to move back to her home community of Ugpi'ganjig (Eel River Bar), a Mi'kmaq community on the north shore of New Brunswick, in the summer of 1991. To get a feel for our future home, I spent the summer of 1990 there, the summer of the Oka crisis - a standoff between Indigenous rights activists and state authorities near Montreal that led to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996). Until then I lived all my life in a predominantly 'white,' rural community in Massachusetts that was very accepting of my mother's heritage, and we never experienced any of the racism that she had encountered growing up in New Brunswick. The Oka crisis was viewed differently in Ugpi'ganjig than it was in town (Dalhousie, NB). I was only a teenager then, and this event made me realize I would be moving into an entirely different social reality than I had been living all my life.

Collectively, my research interests are focused on exploring and understanding the quality of life notions and indicators, and the

conceptualization of wellbeing experienced by Indigenous people in Canada. My research lens focuses on the impact of settler colonialism in Wabanaki territory, a confederacy of five Indigenous nations - Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqey, Penobscot, Abenaki and Passamaquoddy - which spans Atlantic Canada and the New England states. I chose to critically analyze the social institution of education because I have been an educator all of my life, and I see knowledge exchange and healing through education as critical parts of Indigenous resurgence. I felt to better understand the concept of decolonizing education I should start by exploring how Indigenous knowledges came to be colonized in the first place.

Decolonizing the Indigenized Academy

All of the Indigenous people I have met during my research journey share one thing in common - we all agree that decolonizing the academy is the necessary first step in a broader intergenerational healing journey towards Indigenizing the academy. In my four years as Director of the Wabanaki Resource Center at St. Thomas (2010-2014), I experienced first-hand the contentious debate of Indigenizing the academy without an extensive examination of the neo-colonialism at play within academia. To some, Indigenizing the academy re-affirms the social hierarchy within neo-colonial settler societies and is seen as another attempt to impose control mechanisms on Indigenous peoples which in turn negatively impact the future growth and development of Indigenous peoples and maintain the illegal dispossession of Indigenous lands and waterways. More of the same old paternalism, but with a multicultural, neo-liberal spin. Exploring Indigenous perspectives on reconciliation and decolonization often leaves me wondering if post-secondary institutions in Canada are willing and capable to

effectively decolonize their own institutions because it means sacrificing privilege, power, and control.

Cognitive Assimilation

European imperialism into North America is described as settler colonialism – a unique form of imperialism that re-settled large populations of European settlers onto Indigenous territories to help facilitate the dispossession of Indigenous lands and waterways and gain access to the financial wealth of natural resource extraction (Manuel & Derrickson, 2016). For Indigenous peoples, this totally disrupted cultural identities, languages, and ceremonial practices, which are all critical components of a cultural worldview. This struggle today is conceptualized as cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2013):

Cognitive imperialism is a form of manipulation used in Eurocentric educational systems built on damaging assumptions and imperialist knowledge, educational curricula and pedagogy are built on a monocultural foundation of knowledge, and privileges it through public education...as a result of cognitive imperialism in education, cultural minorities in Canada have been led to believe that their poverty and powerlessness are the result of their cultural and racial origins rather than the power relations that create inequality in a capitalistic economy. (Battiste, 2013, p.161)

Modern countries that are formed out of settler colonialism regenerate their cultural imperatives and social norms through state-controlled assimilative education (Simpson, 2011). At the end of the day, this expects all Indigenous peoples to conform and assimilate towards a Eurocentric cultural and linguistic worldview. Cognitive

imperialism is a strategic process of assimilating Indigenous ancestral earth-based ideologies with the long-term goal of undermining Indigenous treaty rights to traditional lands and waterways (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Simpson, 2014). Tuck & Yang (2012) view decolonization as not being accountable to settler perspectives and settler expectations, rather, ‘decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity’ (Tuck & Yang, 2012 p.36).

The intergenerational impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous peoples has become all-encompassing as it is infused within social, economic, and political institutions in Canada (Corntassel, 2012; Manuel & Derrickson, 2016). The most repressive policy that enables and empowers the regeneration of cognitive assimilation is the Indian Act (1876). This has created its own neo-colonial discourse around Indigenous people – first nations, on-reserve, off-reserve, status, non-status etc. – which we are all supposed to accept and live within. Reconciliation for many Indigenous peoples is an opportunity to move beyond those old-world ideologies propped up by Indian Act policies, framed around conforming and assimilating into a corporatist, state-controlled political economy. Thus, the challenge of reconciliation is shifting the nature of Indigenous-Settler relations on every level from Indian Act attitudes, behaviours, and policies towards equal partners, within a nation-to-nation framework.

In Wabanaki territory, settler colonialism manifested in different locations, at different times, and in different ways, but overall the British mode of imperialism was oligarchic, regimented and militaristically violent, with a strict class-based, gendered, and racialized social order. British imperialism in Wabanaki territory was intent on reaping any and all natural resources from which profit

could be made. State control of Indigenous education in Canada today is predicated on old-world colonial economic, political, and social policies that regenerate cognitive imperialism in subtle hardly noticed ways.

The systemic nature of state control over Indigenous futurity in Canada and its assimilative demands resulted in cultural genocide; including the death and near extinction of some Indigenous peoples, Indigenous languages, and a total dispossession of Indigenous traditional lands and waterways, which in turn continues to have a devastating impact on Indigenous holistic growth and development (Anaya 2014; TRC 2015; RCAP 1996). Indigenous academics (and other marginalized peoples) have been using their research to explore potential pathways to disrupt the regeneration of neo-colonial trauma for Indigenous learners. Tuck & Yang (2012) identify two distinct but overlapping tasks of decolonizing processes:

First, how the ‘invisibilized’ dynamics of settler colonialism mark the organization, governance, curricula, and assessment of compulsory learning, the other concerned with how settler perspectives and worldviews get to count as knowledge and research and how these perspectives - repackaged as data and findings - are activated in order to rationalize and maintain unfair social structures. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2)

The Indian Act (1876) is a gross manifestation of settler colonialism, which shapes ideological attitudes and policies regarding Indigenous peoples in many ways. The paternalistic relationship between Indigenous and settler societies is a lasting legacy of settler colonialism and continues to be regenerated on

every level in Canada. State control of Indigenous education is linked to regenerating trauma for Indigenous families, not ending it (Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2013; TRC, 2015). Kovach (2015) argues on a micro scale, social inequalities experienced daily by Indigenous peoples are being challenged one community at a time; the greatest ally of Indigenous resurgence within the academy will be those non-Indigenous researchers that do not hide from, but embrace the political nature of the research (Kovach, 2015).

Decolonizing Education by Rebuilding the Longhouse

Colonization created a fragmentary worldview among [Indigenous] peoples. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the [Indigenous] worldview – but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among [Indigenous] peoples. (Little-Bear, 2000 p.84)

The legacy of these “jagged worldviews” created by assimilative education policies today means Indigenous people have to challenge their own people who occupy high-level places within state controlled education. These pockets of lateral violence within Indigenous communities keep us fighting amongst ourselves, instead of putting that critical energy into recovering and revitalizing our languages. Indian Act policies support Indigenous representational institutions who are not mandated to adhere to the wants and needs of Indigenous people who view decolonizing education differently than their neo-colonial, state-controlled organizations.

Those of us who view reconciliation as a chance to ‘opt-out’ of a hyper-capitalistic society have to challenge not only non-

Indigenous state agencies but also their own Indian Act representational institutions at a local, institutional level. Unfortunately, some Indigenous people identify with neo-colonial, corporatist values, predicated on economic development, quantitative analysis and unregulated state-controlled capitalism. In most cases, those ideologies staff Indigenous representational institutions and don't necessarily speak 'for' all Indigenous people, mostly just 'at' them. Thus, the question of reconciliation today should be framed as: how do we move beyond entrenched, paternalistic Indian Act approaches to Indigenous education, when those in positions of power are unwilling (and not mandated) to change their attitudes, behaviours, and practices with every sector of Indigenous peoples?

My first foray into decolonizing education came when I was hired to create an Indigenous student service department at St. Thomas University (2010-2014), out of which the Wabanaki Resource Center and the position of Elder-in-Residence first developed. Having a home away from home was critical; I felt building an Indigenous community within a neo-colonial setting should have a grandmother at its foundation. According to the Mi'kmaq creation story, Nogami, Glooscap's grandmother, came to life so that she could teach him how to 'live in this world.' For most Indigenous learners, coming to university is a lot like coming to a 'new world' of sorts, and I felt having a grandmother present would make the transition to university life a little less stressful for the students. Miigam'agan was that grandmother - clan mother in fact - and as I write this article, she continues to be the backbone of the Wabanaki Resource Center at STU in her role as Elder in Residence.

Historically, Wabanaki societies were matrifocal – rooted in maternal values – that over time developed communal ways of living, based on a symbiotic connection with the Earth that is regenerated through Wabanaki languages, cultural traditions and ceremonial practices. Family remains the core of Wabanaki societies. The longhouse, which is situated as a maternal system of governance, is based on the elevation of matrilineal notions and family clans. As the clan grew, the longhouse grew to accommodate new family members. It was this knowledge system that welcomed Acadian settlers and enabled a peaceful co-existence with them.

Battiste (2013) writes:

Eurocentric knowledge is no more than a Western philosophy invested in history and identity to serve a particular interest. When it approaches Indigenous issues or peoples, its research methodology is contaminated with multiple forms of cognitive imperialism. This is why postcolonial, Indigenist, and Indigenous frameworks cannot be constructed unless Indigenous people accept that their own worldviews, environments, languages, and forms of communication have value for their present and future, and understand how they can help to reclaim and restore them or to benefit from them through supporting others who still have their languages.

Longhouse teachings can guide decolonizing and Indigenizing processes along a regenerative path towards rebuilding Indigenous academies that regenerate matrifocal Indigenous knowledges in locally controlled ways. Wabanaki knowledge keepers, fluent speakers, and ceremonial elders are passing on, and we risk losing the ability to revitalize these critical knowledges if we do not recover and preserve them immediately. The re-organization

of the Wabanaki Confederacy and its ancestral-ceremonial form of governance has been gaining momentum, and non-Indigenous peoples are welcomed to be a part of that movement as treaty partners and settler allies¹. Recovering and revitalizing Wabanaki longhouse teachings is one strategy to resist the regeneration of state-controlled intergenerational trauma for Indigenous families. There is an urgent need for Indigenous institutional sovereignty to be protected by decolonizing policies that determine the form and function of social, political, and economic institutions.

Resisting Cognitive Assimilation

Indigenous controlled oversight of research involving Indigenous peoples has been an effective strategy to disrupt the regeneration of cognitive assimilation. OCAP is commonly known as an established set of principles that set standards for how research with Indigenous communities should be conducted that include four components: Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (FNIGC, 2014). Chapter 9 of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* supports a similar framework of ethical conduct and relationships with Indigenous people in line with a treaty relationship. Both documents are in response to the unethical and inhumane ways non-Indigenous researchers have historically exploited Indigenous peoples. These documents support those of us who choose to work within local Indigenous cultural protocols; who view Indigenous ceremonial, linguistic, and cultural knowledge keepers equal to tenured professors; and respect the unique, qualitative nature of Indigenous

¹ <http://halifax.mediacoop.ca/story/rebuilding-wabanaki-confederacy/12494>

oral and land-based methodologies. Research counter to the spirit of both documents still happens.

There are many different interpretations of ‘ethical research’ with Indigenous peoples, and I see a need for policies that require evidence-based research on Indigenous people, or their traditional lands and waterways, adhere to OCAP principles. The primary focus of any decolonizing or Indigenizing process should enable and empower Indigenous peoples to resist further cognitive assimilation. The research I choose to be a part of views Indian Act attitudes, behaviours and policies as a symptom of a more dynamic problem. At the core of all the socio-economic indicators used to describe the current plight of Indigenous people in Canada face, lie deep seeded issues that impact Indigenous peoples lives beyond the classroom. Resisting further cognitive assimilation in mainstream education within neo-colonial societies begins with critical questions like: who has the last word in determining the depth and scope of decolonizing and Indigenizing processes? How closely does evidenced-based educational research directed at Indigenous people include authentic relationships with Indigenous people that adhere to OCAP principles? And most importantly, do representative institutions governing Indigenous education genuinely represent the future hopes of all Indigenous peoples?

The biggest threat to Indigenous knowledge exchange processes is that of land dispossession (Simpson, 2014), and most post-secondary institutions in Canada are partnered with corporations that have a vested interest in maintaining the

dispossession of Indigenous territories and the continual denial of treaty rights²³.

[Indigenous people] must stop looking for legitimacy within the colonizer's education system and return to valuing and recognizing our individual and collective intelligence on its own merits and our own terms. Withdrawing our considerable collective efforts to "Indigenize the academy," in favour of a resurgence of Indigenous intellectual systems and a reclamation of the context within which those systems operate, goes much further to propelling our nationhood and reestablishing Indigenous political systems because it places people back on the land in a context that is conducive to resurgence and mobilization. If the academy is concerned about not only protecting and maintaining Indigenous intelligence, but revitalizing it on Indigenous terms as a form of restitution for its historic and contemporary role as a colonizing force, then the academy must make a conscious decision to become a decolonizing force in the intellectual lives of Indigenous peoples by joining us in dismantling settler colonialism and actively protecting the source of our knowledge - Indigenous land. (Simpson, 2014 p. 22

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Principles of Reconciliation (2014) has offered Canadians a

² <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/enbridge-university-calgary-inquiry-1.3289259>

³ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/corporate-redwashing-1.4030443>

blueprint for effective and restorative reconciliation process that post-secondary institutions can, and should, adopt as guiding principles to transform (decolonize) their own academies:

1. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the framework for reconciliation at all levels and across all sectors of Canadian society.
2. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, as the original peoples of this country and as self-determining peoples, have Treaty, constitutional, and human rights that must be recognized and respected.
3. Reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms.
4. Reconciliation requires constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism that have had destructive impacts on Aboriginal peoples' education, cultures and languages, health, child welfare, the administration of justice, and economic opportunities and prosperity.
5. Reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health, and economic outcomes that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.
6. All Canadians, as Treaty peoples, share responsibility for establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships.
7. The perspectives and understandings of Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers of the

ethics, concepts, and practices of reconciliation are vital to long-term reconciliation.

8. Supporting Aboriginal peoples' cultural revitalization and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, laws, protocols, and connections to the land into the reconciliation process are essential.
9. Reconciliation requires political will, collective leadership, trust building, accountability, and transparency, as well as a substantial investment of resources.
10. Reconciliation requires sustained public education and dialogue, including youth engagement, about the history and legacy of residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal rights, as well as the historical and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society. (TRC, 2015)

For most Canadians, the educational system has been a liberating experience, but for many Indigenous peoples, it continues to be the most effective assimilative tool in suppressing Indigenous knowledges, languages and worldviews (Alfred & Corntassel 2005; Battiste 2013; Simpson 2011, 2014). Cognitive assimilation is yet another colonial assault Wabanaki peoples are forced to navigate, at conferences I have heard many Indigenous researchers compare the trauma of colonialism similar to post-traumatic stress disorder except that the trauma is still regenerating.

Concluding Thoughts

The ancestral social, political, and economic framework of Wabanaki nations was much different than it has been made to be

today. The Indian Act has defined who our representational institutions shall be, which is in actuality an extension of the federal and provincial government, under state control and tend to share common ideologies with their colonizers. For Indigenous people who want to detach from that colonial framework, we need a representational institution that advocates for our sovereignty and right to self-determination unfettered by state control. In my experience, state-controlled approaches to reconciliation only reaffirm Indigenous dependence on the state, maintain the cycle of regenerative oppression, and create even more problems for future generations. Indigenous parents in Canada who do not want their children to be further indoctrinated and assimilated into a hyper-capitalistic system have no real voice within the structure and process of government at their local community level, and not within the provincial system of New Brunswick.

Canada inherited the British colonial agenda and took deliberate actions to advance it at the expense of Indigenous nations; as a political, economic and social entity Canada was founded – and remains dependent – on state control of dispossessed Indigenous lands and waterways. (Manuel & Derrickson, 2016; 2017; Palmater, 2015; Alfred, 2005). This is especially true in the province of New Brunswick, which exists on sovereign Wabanaki territory that was never ceded. This province was founded by a settler society composed of a small minority of British-Loyalists who used their wealth and positions of power to create educational institutions that would regenerate their privileged access to state control:

These men were the visionaries of their day. In the midst of war, privation and exile, they drew up a plan for the future education of their sons in the wilderness. Recognizing that the new American nation would provide instruction only in

revolutionary "Principles contrary to the British Constitution" and that the cost of an overseas education would be prohibitive, they urged the representatives of the British government to consider the "founding of a College... where Youth may receive a virtuous Education" in such things as "Religion, Literature, Loyalty, & good Morals..."⁴

To be effective, decolonizing processes must dig deep beneath the surface of the neo-liberal, corporatist illusion of democracy that mostly favours private, economic profits over the holistic growth and development of the land, water and the majority of its own citizens. A more revealing insight from my research comes from the *Founder's Petition of 1785*⁵ that led to the creation of UNB, where my own decolonizing research career began and captures the single-mindedness that went into the founding of the province that we all love so much:

Your memorialists whose names are hereunto subscribed, beg leave to represent, and state to your consideration the Necessity and expediency of an early attention to the Establishment in this Infant Province of an Academy, or School of Liberal Arts and Sciences...Your Memorialists do therefore most earnestly request your Excellency will be pleased to grant a Charter for the establishing, and founding such an Academy - That proper Persons be appointed Trustees, and duly authorized in a corporate Capacity to superintend the Establishment.

However, we all came to be in this moment in history; all Canadians have to deal with the legacy of colonialism: a paternalistic,

⁴ <http://www.unb.ca/aboutunb/history/index.html>

⁵ <https://lib.unb.ca/225/petition.html>

hyper-capitalistic, system of governance that operates at times more like an oligarchy. This social framework worked for a small minority of the population, and some Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians strive to be a part of that small segment of society. However, more and more Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are coming to know that dream is predicated on regenerating systems of oppression, and strive for a more egalitarian social, economic, and political framework for Canada.

And I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice. I don't want any greatness for it, particularly a greatness born of blood and falsehood. I want to keep it alive by keeping justice alive. (Camus, 1995, p.5)

Peeling back the layers of history reveals such convoluted, multi-layered systemic obstacles for an effective and meaningful decolonization of the academy. My research journey has revealed to me why many Indigenous people feel that Canadian institutions are not digging deep into their colonial foundations and merely painting them over with Indigenous art⁶. Obviously, the founding superintendents of the school where I am doing my decolonizing research were not considering Indigenous peoples sovereignty or futurity, and our ancestors were fully aware of that. These founding fathers saw their province in its infancy in 1784, by this time Wabanaki nations were much more aged and wise and found ways to make their language and culture survive until now. Our ancestors were able to develop knowledge exchange processes - through language, ceremony, and land-based cultural traditions - that have existed since time immemorial, and are in desperate need of recovery and revitalization.

⁶ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/indigenous-artists-canada-150-1.3968556>

My research journey has revealed to me that any talk of reconciliation in Canada has to include a bottom-up approach that values qualitative, action-based, critical, postcolonial methodologies outside the purview of state control. It is the only way outside of civil (and uncivil) disobedience for marginalized voices to impact social policy. Decolonizing is not just for Indigenous peoples. Many non-Indigenous people in Canada are beginning to recognize this in their own communities and have allied with Indigenous land-protectors and social activists in the struggle for citizens' rights over the profit margins of corporations⁷.

State control over Indigenous futurity, most blatantly in education, has its roots deeply embedded in old-world colonial attitudes, behaviours, and policies. Ultimately decolonizing education comes down to issues of social justice, civil rights, and finding holistic ways of confronting state-control and Eurocentric ideologies that negatively impact our Indigenous children. We can tear down statues honouring colonizers and remove their names from buildings, but the power structures they created remain, and continue to regenerate intergenerational trauma. For me, decolonizing is about detaching from colonial attitudes, behaviours, and policies first, and then revitalizing and re-contextualizing the Indigenous earth-based ways our ancestors regenerated their cultural and linguistic identities. I am also acutely aware there are many Indigenous parents and educators opposed to this restorative approach to reconciliation, and that's fine, fill your boots. Decolonizing is healing work, we shouldn't have to fight to take part in it.

⁷ <https://canadians.org/blog/peace-and-friendship-alliance-formed-nb>

I am quite confident many Indigenous researchers feel that Indigenizing any academy without decolonizing the power structures that prop it up allows for ‘profiteers’ to engage in unethical, oppressive educational research on Indigenous people, rather than with them⁸. Indigenous peoples no longer have to put up with those old world, colonial attitudes. All of the Indigenous perspectives I shared throughout this paper state that decolonization means moving away from tokenistic consultative processes; and, many Indigenous researchers in my collaborative circles do not see that happening in New Brunswick or elsewhere in Canada. So, we are left feeling that if Indigenizing processes do not include an effective and meaningful decolonizing of institutional governance, and create policies to support Indigenous institutional sovereignty within the academy, then all our efforts attached to our the institutions we are a part of are really only helping it (and its strategic corporate partners) to be more effective, and ‘Indigenized’, colonizing entities for future generations to deal with. At my core, I am a parent, and my prime directive is to protect my children from harm, now and into their future lives. I have met so many other Indigenous researchers, education workers, students, elders, and traditional knowledge keepers who are exploring ways outside oppressive neo-colonial structures to empower resurgence in their communities.

I feel it is fair to point out the institution I am a part of, the University of New Brunswick recognizes the critical importance of the 94 Calls to Action set out by the Truth and Reconciliation

⁸ <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/decolonizing-the-classroom-is-there-space-for-indigenous-knowledge-in-academia-1.4544984>

Commission⁹, and have taken action on developing a strategic plan to Indigenize their academy. A hopeful start. I chose to attend UNB because it is centrally located within Wabanaki territory and can be a healing place for Indigenous language recovery and become a champion of Indigenous resurgence. I know many Indigenous and settler allies who realize at the core of decolonizing education and Indigenous resurgence are questions about our collective humanity as Canadians; and see the evolution of neo-colonial, corporatist ethics of ‘profits before people’ affecting non-Indigenous families in New Brunswick¹⁰¹¹ (Ashton, 2011, 2016; Howe, 2015). In a broader sense, decolonization offers all Canadians a chance to think critically about our country, our collective society, and how we want to structure our society for future growth and development for all of society, not just the elite.

If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution - Emma Goldman

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⁹ <http://blogs.unb.ca/newsroom/2016/10/12/leveraging-the-power-of-education-in-reaching-reconciliation/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nationalobserver.com/special-reports/house-irving>

¹¹ <http://nbmediacoop.org/2012/08/21/wabanaki-people-invite-solidarity-in-the-face-of-threats-to-their-territory/>

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