**The decolonizing and the indigenizing discourse**

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**Introduction**

In Canada, we have been engaged in a discourse of “indigenizing”[[1]](#footnote-1) as a means of addressing some issues in our work and relations with Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples. In particular, many universities have taken up the discourse of indigenizing as a part of their mandate. In this paper, I describe the ways in which we have been examining the complexity of this discourse, and the ways in which a research team began to address some of the approaches to decolonization, and indigenization. At the core of the discussion are the ways individuals and groups emerge with different ways to talk about these as contested binary discourses.

Decolonization, as a concept, has been present in my work for several decades. These were most pronounced in the narratives during my doctoral studies, where I engaged with Indigenous women who worked as advisors and counselors in the university system, and their stories. These stories were a part of my research but they were also part of examining my own relationship with Indigeneity. The theme of colonization was a strand that wove through these narratives and signalled the complex and historical nature of the past, which was still a part of the present in the everyday workings of the women and in their positions in the university. Decolonization can be, in and of itself, a concept that is difficult for settlers to examine. I use the term settlers, as Canada is a settler nation. Moreover, the hegemony of colonization has given us a legacy of genocide and a host of economic, health, and social issues.

In recent years, there have been numerous initiatives with indigenization at the centre of change, and as a contrasting approach to the legacy of colonialism. Some of these discussions have begun to grapple with the ideals and notions of decolonization, and others have not. Decolonization requires an adherence to certain understandings of the impact of colonialism. Taiaiake Alfred describes colonialism as, “ best conceptualized as an irresistible outcome of a multigenerational and multifaceted process of forced dispossession and attempted acculturation—a disconnection from land, culture, and community—that has resulted in political chaos and social discord”. (2009, 52). From the age of Empire, we have been subject to colonialism, dispossession, and colonial legacies.

**Background**

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) was one of the pivotal documents that was broadly circulated to bring historical and contemporary issues to the attention of the Canadian public and the education system, and required some sectors to attend to the effects of colonialism. There were many levels of Canadian government, and requisite bureaucracies that had, to this point, been allowed to avoid, obfuscate, and ignore, – the need to address the impact of colonialism and bring forward a decolonization agenda.

**The Royal Commission (1996) began their work in 1991, and** held 178 days of public hearings, visited 96 communities, consulted many experts, commissioned multiple research studies, and reviewed numerous past inquiries and reports. The Commission stated that Canada is a country that stands for “peace, harmony, and justice”, and that the policy of assimilation had violated these central tenets. The Commission also asserted that we must continue to pursue justice to address the historical injustice and genocide. Aboriginal peoples had limited life chances; their lives were compromised by a history that continues to result in a lower life expectancy, more illness, human, health, and social issues are common (e.g. family dysfunction, alcohol abuse, water and sanitation systems, poverty). Aboriginal peoples have had a lower rate of high school completion, and a lower rate of adults attending colleges and universities. There was and continues to be an overrepresentation in the child welfare and prison systems of Aboriginal peoples.

The efforts of decolonization can only be significant if justice is a fundamental value to the work. Thus, the history of colonization and the work of decolonization are tied to the examination of the power of the colonizer and the legacy of that power, in which we are still entrenched. Park (2015, 21) argues that within “the context of settler colonialism, the goal of transitional justice must be decolonisation”. The history of settler colonialism is consistent assimilation and the ideals of elimination of Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples. Park further argues that transitional justice includes the grieving of the deaths of Indigenous peoples, and to do this means to mobilize politically. **Corntassel and Bryce (2012) make a case that decolonization and restitution are inextricably linked and therefore necessary for transformation. This requires recognition from the state and state systems that support national goals and policies.**

**The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015), was reported nineteen years after the Royal Commission. Similar to the Royal Commission work, the process of the TRC involved hosting** national events; gathering documents and statements about residential schools and their legacy; funding truth and reconciliation events at the community level; recommending commemoration initiatives to the federal government for funding; establishing a research centre for records and documents, and to provide report with recommendations. The Commission received over 6,750 statements from survivors of residential schools[[2]](#footnote-2), members of their families, and other individuals who shared their knowledge of the residential school system and its legacy (2015, 26). **The TRC made 94 recommendations as Calls to Action. These focused on numerous areas including: child welfare, education, language, health, justice, reconciliation, settlement agreements, and apologies. At the core of the TRC Report is the necessity to act in the name of justice and equity. While the TRC and the Royal Commission emphasize colonialism and decolonization, little reference is made to indigenization.**

Indigenization can be described as the process of infusing Aboriginal/Indigenous knowledge and perspective into the structural layers of an institution (Camosun College, nd). This means that Indigenous knowledge is not marginal; it is more central to the work of the institution. Indigenization may take a culturalist perspective, where the multiple cultures, languages, broader world views and practices can be the focus of the work. For some, indigenization is less political than decolonization. The work of indigenization has been established within a wider move to indigenizing the academy. Indigenizing the academy has engaged curriculum, courses, pedagogy, hiring practices, the physical spaces on campus, resources, research activity, the centring Indigenous practices more assertively in the university, and recruiting and sustaining Indigenous/ Aboriginal students for post-secondary education. University Affairs published an article on indigenizing the academy and noted: “some universities had already recognized a need to put indigenous cultures, histories, languages and knowledge on a new footing within the academy”, and “In the end, indigenization is not a series of tickable boxes, but a process moving at a different pace in each community that has taken it up” (MacDonald, 2016). Indigenization plans and strategies are taken up within an inclusive framework for the academy – a worthy approached, although not without contentious aspects.

While not universally agreed upon, indigenization generally seeks to create a culture within the academy that fosters understanding and promotes content that is based on history, heritage, and cultural pedagogy. There is recognition of the centrality of Indigenous curriculum and content for and with Indigenous peoples --- thereby suggesting that all Canadian students should engage in awareness of indigeneity. Indigenization in universities aspires to be more productive in supporting Indigenous students for success. To be successful, universities intend to create an academy that values and embraces our Indigenous peoples, and recognizes that many of us live and work on unceded territories of Indigenous peoples.

In my own work, the tension between decolonization and indigenization is relevant and pronounced. It has become essential to myself as a non-Indigenous person, and to those I work with, that we focus on both processes and examine both discourses. If we do not, we are at risk of only seeing one perspective that does not give us the fuller spectrum and contexts of how to succeed. I suggest that this is similar to the debates that surround multiculturalism and anti-racism. It is necessary to engage with the discourses of power and the hegemony that has created inequality, marginalization, and resistance (Chan, Dhamoon, & Moy, 2014). By examining power, and therefore the discourse of decolonization, we engage in the uses of power in the curriculum, the classroom, and in the institution. We all play a role in this power dynamic, whether it is acknowledged or not. Foucault (1980), as a reminder to us, asserts that power is circulating force that exists in all of the corridors of our mind, thought, and in our everyday interactions.

The relationship between decolonization and indigenization is complex. There are many principles that educators subscribe to, but are more difficult to adhere to. Siu, Desai, and Ritskes (2012, ii), for example suggest: “Decolonization does not exist without a framework that centers and privileges Indigenous life, community and epistemology”. In my own university, there are articulated goals for meaningful collaboration, dialogue, engagement; to increase capacity; to create a culturally safe environment, and develop responsive programs. (UFV, Indigenizing the Academy, 2012). While these goals are embraced, there is less discussion of decolonization within this framework. However, many of us will assert that decolonization is pivotal to the success of indigenization.

**The study**

The purpose of our research and our research team was to build resilience with Aboriginal youth as a means of suicide prevention, and engage in activities focused on land based and cultural identity. Building resilience was identified within the context of understanding the nature of strength and capacity, and connection to the land. A good deal of research has been done that indicates the community, the family and individual resiliency is a protective measure against suicide (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2010; Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Kahentonni, & Jessen Williamson, 2011). Thus, resiliency is something that we wanted to identify and build from.

The research objectives were: to develop an Indigenized research process; to create a knowledge library (sítel-basket) of First Nations[[3]](#footnote-3) land-based resiliency; and to develop and support a youth resilience strategy with Seabird Island Band[[4]](#footnote-4). The research objectives were developed through a lengthly consultative and collaborative process; the Band was engaged in the discussions from the time the team was conceiving designs for the project. The research team was committed to the research being community based and community driven.

The research was therefore developed in an organic way with the Band, the elders, and the band youth workers at the site of the community. We worked with the Band to guide us through a Guiding Group. This did meant that at any given point, our activities might change to ensure participation, understanding, and that the research would be community driven rather than driven by the researchers. In order to be true to the community and to the principles of Indigenous research, our team was comprised of two researchers who were Indigenous, and paired with two researchers who were not Indigenous. I was one of the latter. This gave us a strong working relationship with four principal investigators as researchers.

Our work is historicized by trauma and the weakened social fabric of Indigenous communities, resulting from colonial processes. This context has set the stage for suicide and related mental health challenges in our communities. Acknowledging trauma and the legacy of colonialism, our team worked with community partners with a focus on the prevention of harm. The cultural narratives of Indigenous peoples was and is paramount to the working with communities. We believe that the stories of the people were instrumental in reshaping lives and futures. Within many Aboriginal communities youth suicides were a regular occurrence. The idea of primary prevention was to engage in healthy work with the youth. The objective of healthy work meant that our objectives were focused on building (reconnection) identity, reclaiming culture, and engaging in activities and dialogue that promoted a healthy way of being.

The research objectives would be fulfilled by a number of activities: our work as a team; the processes, struggles, and discussions we had about decolonization and indigenizing; working with the Band; engaging in activities with youth. All of these activities would be documented through field notes, minutes, and recordings. The documentation with youth would mainly occur in stories that the youth could tell, but also documentation of the experiences on the land (e.g. video, audio). Focus groups, community consultations were a part of the data collection process, but we did not use these terms, as they are antithetical to Indigenous processes and research. The privileging of language, how we named things, and how we discussed them was all part of our learning and developing work.

At an early stage in the research, I became aware of the tension between decolonization and Indigenization. Indigenous research methods requires a commitment to decolonization, doing no further colonial harm, and strengthening Indigenous peoples ways of knowing. Our methodology was to be guided by Indigenous ways of knowing and principles. Indigenous research methods refer to principles that privilege a world view consistent with Indigenous knowledge and writings. One of our goals was to indigenize the team, and also to engage in indigenous research methods, as we understood this as necessary before taking the substantive work of the research. The research process therefore made us cognizant of not determining the objectives over the needs of the peoples we were working with. The premise was that while we were conducting research and had research goals, our work with people was paramount and took primacy over the research objectives. The process was key to our work in building relationships and understanding the nature of the complexities we were drawn to.

I became, with my team members, responsive and respectful to the project – never forgetting four Indigenous principles: friends working together; reciprocity; everything is connected - land, air, water, fire, spirit, creatures; and “looking back is looking forward”. We returned to the principles regularly to remind ourselves of the commitments we had made. Elders, youth, and youth workers were engaged as part of the research team. This was one small step to the decolonization and indigenization process. Central to the team was the issue of having voice at all levels of the research, including individuals who had been rendered voiceless by history. Our research team meetings were always evolving. Agendas for meetings had to change as issues arose, and we had to respect the developing nature of the work. The core research team members were consistently present, but some members evolved away from the team. The evolution of the team warranted us a reminder, in reflecting on our narratives and the narratives of the research. My own location as part of the academy, and as a non-Indigenous person was at tension in the research: I claim my race as Chinese, which I believe assists me in some understanding. I have my own experiences of colonialism and racism. Nonetheless, I was challenged many times to see myself through the eyes of others. This necessitated an understanding that being part of the academy meant being a part of the institutional problem of colonization. This issue would arise repeatedly during the course of the research.

**Centrality or things falling apart**

There are stories that represent themes of my work: decolonization methodology and Indigenous research methods; the warrior and the outsider; and attempts for a decolonized mind (wa Thiong’o, 1986). While focusing on Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples, this paper has implications for researchers working with other marginalized groups and communities.

**Learn ‘from’ rather than ‘about’: Decolonizing and Indigenous research methods**

In order to ground ourselves in decolonizing methodology and Indigenous research methods, we had an external facilitator work with us in working through these issues and challenging our assumptions. All of our meetings take place at Stó:lō Nation either in the Elders meeting room, or in the Gathering Place. We would sit in a circle, and we would begin with an acknowledgment of the land and territory. To acknowledge is to be grounded in knowing where we are, how we come to be on this land, and how we come to be engaged in this work, and in the gathering of partners and collaborators. On the first day we spent together in workshop, we began to unpack the notions of research and what we know. Researchers in our team, elders, students, and witnesses participated in the sessions. The days allowed us to continue our process of building trust and sharing our experiences. There were concerns that this process should not recolonize people; that self-determination, resilience, and healing are all part of the work we must be engaged in.

It was late in the morning of the first day discussions took place that acknowledged that Indigenizing could not take place without decolonization. An example of this was the notion of the knowledge basket (sítel-basket). We came into the research believing that we had to find and fill the knowledge basket. Yet as discussions moved forward, we were asked to consider that we already had the basket – some elements of the basket. In particular, Indigenous members of our team would have special knowledge, but certainly all of us had some knowledge. To me, this suggested that we had been unaware of our knowledge. This relates to the power-knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1980) and our epistemological beliefs. This aspect was particularly important for some Aboriginal participants in the workshop, who had historically been told that their knowledge did not count. In future meetings, we came to understand the role of the knowledge-keepers: the community members and elders.

It is the power-knowledge nexus that the friction lies between decolonization and indigenization. While decolonization and indigenization are not binary, they can be seen as separate. The idea of indigenizing ourselves as researchers requires us to examine our place in the colonialism spectrum. Corntassel and Bryce (2012) suggest that decolonization and restitution are elements of the transformation of our relationships with Indigenous peoples. This can only be done by acknowledging our actions, goals, and relationships. Our research had the potential to transform our relationships and play a significant role in decolonizing by virtue of acknowledging Indigenous knowledge. This was and is a personal journey, that must be taken with intention and with relationships. The process of building the research team required us to be reflective of what we know and what we think constitutes knowledge.

**The warrior and the outsider**

I am a non-Indigenous person, and as such may be seen as an outsider and part of the colonizing discourse. The notion of outsider was strongly felt in the decolonizing and Indigenous research methods workshop, where I was accused (I do not use this word lightly), of being part of the establishment of colonialism and therefore unable to participate in the work of decolonization as long as I worked in a university. The person who challenged me in this way was a self-proclaimed warrior. In the moments of blaming me as a colonizing agent, I understood a kind of pain that being isolated can mean. I could never know what the warrior thought or felt, I only heard the words. The sting of the weapon he yielded at me evoked a defensive position on my part. However, my commitment to a decolonizing discourse calmed me, and helped me consider that if I can work with Indigenous peoples as someone who is inside the university, I believe it is possible for me to be an ally, a collaborator, without being from the nation or race as the warrior.

In Indigenous terms, it is often said: “all my relations”. Wilson (2008) states that relationships do not merely shape reality, they are the reality of Indigenous life and Indigenous research. For Wilson, Indigenous epistemology is the formation of ideas through relations. In the moments I experienced with the warrior, however threatened I felt, he was telling me something about relations. After two days in the workshop, I felt that his position softened towards me, although it was never stated as such. Perhaps we had, in a microscopic way, begun to build relationship.

Being an ally is a possible strategy that engages decolonization to indigenization. However, this requires a fundamental belief that people who do not have the same experiences can support us and our work. In this way, it is possible that white people can be allies in working with people of colour in the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression. Similarly, I argue that there is room for non-Indigenous people can be allies with Indigenous peoples – but not always. Kowal (2015, 95) suggests that it is possible for white people who are anti-racists to work with Indigenous peoples and they can understand the generational trauma that is part of the legacy of colonization and racism.

The path to collaboration can be disturbing, just as the journey to decolonization has its difficulties. The research required me examine my role with the team. I offered to withdraw from the project if my co-researchers thought there was no place for me. The incident with the warrior will not be forgotten. I imagine I represented many things to him, and perhaps he did not even ‘see me’ for who I was. However, the ability to decolonize is a high ideal. In retrospect, I believe the warrior was true to his beliefs through his own work. I continue to work with the research team and they affirmed my participation.

**Decolonizing the mind**

“Language is tied to land through story. Strength [is there] when learning language and strength for ancestors too”. (Youth participant, N21L)

In his seminal work Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1996) on decolonizing the mind, a compelling argument is made about language and culture. Ngũgĩ contends that language as both an instrument for empire-building as well as a potential counter narrative and tool of resistance for those who have been colonized. As part of our research, we spent much time seeking the words and phrases in Halq’emeylem (i.e., the language of the Stó:lō peoples) in order to respect and acknowledge the powerful role of language. Language forms an important part of identity. As the research team meetings accelerated in time and influence, we now begin our meetings with a Halq’emeylem prayer that comes from the elders. Language is symbolic and only a beginning part of our work, but it is representative of what the colonizers stole from a generation of peoples through assimilation. The act of using Halq’emeylem words can indeed be an act of defiance, and respect. Language is perhaps one of the ways in which decolonizing and indigenizing are coherent in their goals.

The idea of place (i.e., the land) and belonging is considered key to identity (Neville, Oyama, Odunewu, & Huggins, 2014), as with language . The research was place-based and on the land, whereby we worked with the youth in their territory. There was never a question about where the meetings or the work would take place; it was always at a Stó:lō meeting place or on the territory of the Band. This can be interpreted as decolonizing because of the power based in the territory. It can also be interpreted as indigenizing by placing the Stó:lō peoples and their culture at the centre of the work.

The nature of academic work is often situated in the university, and the requirement to reach out to Indigenous peoples was fundamental to our success. We rarely asked elders to come to us. As much as possible, we went to their sites, and paid them the respect that was their due. However, there is a potential contradiction for the academy. The university acknowledges the land, and acknowledges that it is unceded territory. Nevertheless, the university is situated on that land. In the work of committees and curriculum, there is sometimes an expectation elders to come to the university. This remains an unresolved tension between the ideals of decolonization and indigenization.

**Concluding thoughts**

In this paper, I have put forward some arguments and contested thoughts that have been part of my epistemological evolution about decolonization and indigenizing. Acknowledging the colonial past is part of a step to creating a change for our work, and for Indigenous peoples. Decolonization must be agreed to by non-Indigenous people and a trajectory that we work towards, as allies. Research can create such alliances. I acknowledge that a good deal of our discourse in the research focused on decolonization rather than indigenization.

The power-knowledge nexus continues to be at the centre of the work. Orientalism (Said, 1978) made it possible to see and to treat peoples who were not Western as ‘other’. Decolonizing and indigenizing research means acknowledging the possibility of othering –preventing objectification of people and their knowledge. This principle is the place where researchers have the opportunity to build relations and act in respectful or reciprocal ways. The dimensions of power in the West made orientalism possible, and it is therefore important to recognize the role of power in domination and othering. As an academic, someone who is engaged in knowledge, I have learned from the relationships. I am responsible for acknowledging power and the place of power in the research. Indigenous research methods has attempted to address this responsibility, but indigenizing as a broad activity has not necessarily done so.

In examining and attempting to address colonialism and the legacy it has left, Corntassel and Bryce (2003) suggests that the discourse of indigenous rights has its limits. The struggle for recovery of the land and some form of justice is only part of the struggle. Park (2015) goes on to suggest that a structural justice must occur before we achieve have decolonization. Structural justice must therefore encompass addressing the systems, policies, and land claims. It also means fundamental shifts in ways of thinking: decolonizing thought.

Indigenous ways of knowing and decolonizing knowledge is central to the work of indigenizing. I continue to contend that indigenizing cannot take place without decolonization. Indigenizing research methods takes into account decolonization and the elements of power that exists in the research relationship. If those who work towards indigenization accept and understand the role of place and power, then it may not necessarily use the words decolonization. However, decolonization must be at the heart of indigenizing work. Indigenization in isolation is disadvantaged in its ability succeed.

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1. Acknowledging the historical effects of colonialization, residential schools and their devastation on Aboriginal children and their families is one part of the healing journey for Aboriginal peoples. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Truth and Reconciliation Report, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Residential schools were put into policy in 1876, whereby thousands of children were taken from their homes, separated from their parents and families for long periods of time. The schools were established for the purpose of eliminating culture and language, as a part of Canada’s policy of assimilation. Many students were abused physically, mentally, and sexually while in the schools. The last residential schools closed in the 1960s. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “First Nation” is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are neither Métis nor Inuit. First Nations has replaced the words Indian Band. "Aboriginal" refers to the first inhabitants of Canada, and includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples “Indigenous” is a term used to encompass a variety of Aboriginal groups. It is most frequently used in an international, transnational, or global context. In the UN, "Indigenous" is used to refer broadly to peoples of long settlement and connection to specific lands who have been adversely affected by incursions by industrial economies, displacement, and settlement of their traditional territories by others. Aboriginal and Indigenous are often used interchangeably. (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc, nd) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Seabird Island is located in Agassiz, British Columbia, Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)