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Indigeneity, Indigenous feminisms and Indigenization

Lori Campbell (2-Spirit nēhiyaw āpihtākosisān)

Introduction

Indigenization has become a popular trend within academic settings in the place currently known as Canada (but which my people know as Turtle Island). Few post-secondary institutions developed Indigenization strategies – or rather, Indigenous-centered learning – before the turn of this century. Some initiatives, however, have been Indigenous-led, such as Manitou Community College in Manitoba, 1973, and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College in Regina, 1976 (now First Nations University of Canada).

A sense of urgency for the more mainstream institutions to jump aboard was motivated by the release of the nation-state-led Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) report in 2015. Even so, many institutions struggled to understand just what Indigenization was, and in the process of defining it, they came up with sometimes similar and sometimes widely divergent definitions.

At my own post-secondary institution, amid committee discussions and consternations, I came face to face with trying to find out what Indigenization meant for me on a personal level. In that moment, I realized that Indigenization had something to do with Indigenous identity and, therefore, what was important for me was to define Indigeneity. This understanding made me critically confront and problematize the notion of Indigenization and determined that I center Indigeneity within all aspects of my life, including my work within the academy.

I propose, then, that applying Indigenization from a settler-scholar or settler-administrator experience is an attempt to recolonize Indigenous Peoples. The process of Indigenization thus becomes the colonized idea of what Indigenization

is. And like the ceremonies, traditions and regalia of our ancestors, the Indigenous-centered concept of Indigenization now has also been stolen, interpreted, translated and repurposed into a colonized idea of what Indigenization should be. The colonized version is spat back out at us and, in a condescending, paternalistic act, we are told to believe that the colonized version of Indigenization is our own version. And so we are expected to implement Indigenization from the colonized perspective.

The premise that Indigenous People must Indigenize from the colonizer-centered perspective is a repeat of history and it is how I have come to see Indigenization as a recolonization project. My aim in this essay is to explore the concept of Indigenization within colonial structures that “Indigenize”, generally without inclusion of Indigenous Peoples (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill 2013; Flowers 2015; Waterman 2018) and to determine how an Indigenous person might navigate the process successfully.

Situating myself

Because this search has become a personal quest, I begin by situating myself to contextualize my relationship to this work of Indigenization. I am a child of the 60s scoop, taken from my mother at the age of two, to be placed in a foster home until adoptive parents could be found for me. I have always known that I was adopted and known that I was Indigenous. But I didn't always know who I was or where I belonged. My ancestral line was broken because I had been forcibly and intentionally severed from it.

The 60s scoop was a government assimilation project that removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them in white homes with the hope that we could learn to be and behave “white”. My mother, a *nēhiyaw iskwew* (Cree woman) who was 16 at the time, thought I was coming back. I never did. And later I was to spend many years looking for her and my siblings. Eventually, after 25 years of searching, I located all five brothers and a sister as well as my mother.

During the search for my birth family, I learned firsthand the far-reaching effects of the residential school legacy. I found that my siblings had not had the same opportunities that I did. They did not all end up in happy or safe situations and several did not complete high school. I, however, made my way into university, and, along the way, found many Indigenous scholars who would

become my mentors. My life experiences have contributed not only to my understanding of Indigenous culture and issues, but also to my passion for education. I find strength in these experiences as I navigate the academy. They were important sources of knowledge that resonated for me when I began to do my academic research and helped to guide me to philosophies that have had significant influence on me. The first among them is feminism.

Looking at feminism

Without realizing the connections between political activism and feminist research methodologies, I was drawn to both early on. During my initial university years, as I was finding my identity, I became an activist because I was queer, I was a woman and I was Indigenous. I was raised in a non-Indigenous family and immersed in an education system where I was led to believe that all knowledge of value was borne of whiteness. In my youth, this notion contributed to my feelings of being unintelligent, incapable and “less than”, as compared to my non-Indigenous peers. It never occurred to me, like too many other Indigenous feminists before me (Green 2007; Maracle 1996; Ross 2009; Tohe 2000), to name myself an Indigenous feminist.

I soon learned that feminism was something that belonged to white women. I became painfully aware that I was trying to take on a philosophy or way of knowing that did not belong to me. I tried many times to look through the eyes of the white woman to take up feminism for the good of all women, but I felt out of place in a feminism that ignored and erased my Indigeneity.

I concluded that feminism, as liberating as it sounded, was not for Indigenous women and it was not for me. As time passed, my connection to and understanding of my own intersecting identities as a 2-Spirit *iskwew* deepened, but it would not be until years later that I was exposed to Indigenous feminism and learned of its inherent connection to Indigeneity.

As a note of explanation, 2-Spirit (or Two-Spirit) is the term preferred by many of us. It better captures the Indigenous concept of gender fluidity than the word *gay* to denote that some people are born with an understanding and spirituality of multiple genders, rather than just one, and are in that way gifted people. *Iskwew* is the Cree word for woman, which was historically taken over by white colonialists and renamed *squaw*, to be used with a pejorative connotation. I am reclaiming that word proudly.

Discovering Indigenous feminism

During my master's program I read about Black feminism through Patricia Collins (2000) and bell hooks (1984) and found many corollaries of oppressions and cultural differences that rang true for me. And then, of course, I learned about intersectionality through Kimberlé Crenshaw's work (1991). I read biographies of Indigenous women's experiences: Maria Campbell (1973), Morningstar Mercredi (2006), Patricia Monture-Angus (1995) and Mary Young (2005). I also discovered Indigenous research methodologies through Cora Weber-Pillwax (2004), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Shawn Wilson (2008) and Margaret Kovach (2009).

It was not until I started my PhD studies that I was introduced to Indigenous feminism. I had not realized there was such a thing. But at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education in 2017 I found myself attending a session with Stephanie Waterman that focused on the ways in which Indigenous scholars were engaging with Indigenous research methodologies while centering Indigenous knowledge systems, and voices, from a female perspective.

Waterman (2017) made explicit reference to the notion that feminism is predominately whitestream – oftentimes focused on equality of the sexes and discomfited with lesbianism. Conversely, Indigenous feminism engages foundational principles of inclusivity, responsibility and relationships. Waterman proposed that Indigenous feminism could be used as a tool to reinforce Indigenous sovereignty in research; but without the Indigenous existence there could be no Indigeneity and, therefore, we would only see through white-colored glasses.

That conference motivated me to explore the notion of Indigenous feminism in Indigenous scholarly work. Arvin et al (2013) state clearly that Indigenous feminisms are foundational to Indigeneity. From an Indigenous feminist theory perspective, they explore the problematization of settler-colonialism and the structures that uphold it as well as the explicit erasure and dispossession of Indigenous women, Indigenous feminist theories, and Indigenous ways of knowing in academia.

Flowers (2015) further problematizes conceptions of allyship in relation to those who purport to act in solidarity alongside Indigenous Peoples. In doing so, she unpacks the term 'settler' and clearly outlines that it is a relational term that signifies the settler's relationship to colonialism rather than an equivalent to the term 'non-Indigenous'. Recognizing that Indigenous Peoples have no desire to build a future that is fundamentally borne of a colonial relationship, she identifies

solidarity as not a temporal event but rather a long-term commitment that supports and creates structural change. Flowers (2015) explains that co-existence through co-resistance is the responsibility of all settlers, and that for settlers to participate, they must be committed to dismantling their own systems of exploitation and extraction. She poses the question of whether motivation of allyship for some settlers, as colonial subjects, is the desire to receive recognition of the colonized. I have observed that settlers receive personal benefit for feeling good about feeling bad about the experiences of Indigenous Peoples. This self-gratifying emotional acting is about the 'witnessing' by the colonized of the colonizer feeling bad. That is, that by 'experiencing' the pain and suffering as they hear the testimony, they have in fact suffered too; if they did not experience pleasure, then they are absolved of guilt. This act, akin to charitable feelings and thus self-gratification, is not allyship. The colonizer takes no concrete action, nor even recognizes the relationships and of the concomitant responsibilities involved.

Flowers (2015) reflects upon the deep love that Indigenous women hold to one another as a shared rage that drives our resistance. It is this rage that settlers are not comfortable with because it forces them to look at their role in power and oppression. Flowers (2015, p. 33) develops strong arguments through critically examining and defining the terms "settler" and "ally". She clarifies that rather than simply denoting "non-Indigenous", the word "settler" carries with it a set of privileges and enjoyment of standing assumed by the colonizer, and that "ally" should contain the set of responsibilities that accompany such a standing, but often do not (Flowers 2015, p. 33). These terms effectively set up a binary of identities, establishing an "Other" of exclusivity on the part of the settler, encompassing an inclusivity and desire of recognition by the Indigenous. With the terminology made explicit, she explores the relationship between the terminology and the motivation of and benefit to settlers who choose to engage in allyship relationships. Indigenous philosophy teaches us that not all knowledge is for all people; and as Waterman (2018) highlights, knowledge is not power, it is a responsibility. Flowers (2015) suggests that not all settlers need to be allies in order to engage in good relations with Indigenous women. Further, they cannot claim Indigeneity through association.

Through the work of these authors, and many other strong Indigenous women, I have since come to understand Indigenous feminism as inherent to my Indigeneity. It is this learning that challenged me to consider how Indigenizing a post-secondary colonial system centered from Indigenous feminist theories might add to the discourse of Indigenization of the institution.

Defining Indigenization

Words carry power. Before I go any further, I need to talk about definitions. I first heard the term *Indigenization* some 10 years ago at the Aboriginal Caucus of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) conference. I had just completed a second undergraduate degree and was working at a polytechnical institute where I was providing support services for Indigenous students.

This conference played an integral role in situating me where I am today because it exposed me to two things: it was the first time I found myself in a room with dozens of Indigenous scholars who held graduate degrees and were working within post-secondary institutions, and second, it was simply hearing this new word: Indigenization.

As an Indigenous woman, something about the idea resonated within me, and over the next few years I sought out as much scholarly work as I could to understand the concept behind the word. It all made sense at the time. And I came to the realization that I, too, could go to graduate school. The outcome for me, brought about by my exposure to that conference, was the completion of a master's degree and a great deal of research into the topic.

Simultaneously, I researched and participated in the development and implementation of an Indigenization strategy at the polytechnic where I worked. This activity is also what led me to where I am today. I continue working in the strategic area of Indigenization in post-secondary and I am now a doctoral student in the Social Justice Education program at the University of Toronto (UT).

Since that initial conference I have had opportunities to attend many more Indigenous education conferences, have had conversations with remarkable scholars, discovered several different Indigenization strategies, and advanced my career, my education, and my critical thinking skills. But as an additional outcome of these pursuits, I began to question whether an Indigenization strategy might achieve its intended goals, or rather, if it would or could achieve the goals that I now believe are critical.

A general definition of the concept of Indigenization, provided by Castellano (2014, n.p.), reads as follows: "Indigenizing education means that every subject at every level is examined to consider how and to what extent current content and pedagogy reflect the presence of Indigenous Peoples and the valid contribution of Indigenous knowledge." In my experience, this has not necessarily been the definition that was adopted at the onset of implementing, or even exploring, Indigenization within institutions, but it is more or less one that has persisted or grown to be accepted within the Canadian context as described below.

Indigenization has been adopted for implementation at several postsecondary institutions in Canada. Each has approached the strategy from their own perspective for their own needs. Jimmy, Allen and Anderson (2015, pp. 6, 9) “recognize that issues of social justice, oppression, and colonization are part of the very ways in which we navigate our worlds every day” and thus state that “Indigenization within academia is about challenging ethnocentrism through processes of decolonization and (re)centering Indigenous knowledge at the institutional level and within our own practice as academics and researchers.”

The University of Regina has defined Indigenization as the:

transformation of the existing academy by including Indigenous knowledges, voices, critiques, scholars, students, and materials as well as the establishment of physical and epistemic spaces that facilitate the ethical stewardship of a plurality of Indigenous knowledges and practices so thoroughly as to constitute an essential element of the university. It is not limited to Indigenous People, but encompasses all students and faculty, for the benefit of our academic integrity and our social viability.

Pete 2016, p. 81

Ontario universities have chosen different paths; for example, the University of Toronto and Western University (WU) developed strategies that both name and include recommended actions that contribute to Indigenization, but they have both shied away from centralizing the focus of the plans in their entirety with the term Indigenization.

The problem is in viewing Indigenization as an end stage once the strategic actions are completed. Without specifically “Indigenizing”, many related attempts have been made under well-meaning efforts such as *diversity*, *inclusivity*, *equity*, *culturalism* and *multiculturalism* – strategies that are all too familiar by now. Newer attempts have been made with *reconciliation* and even *decolonization*; however, these are yet to be understood, let alone achieved.

Problematizing Indigenization

The various strategies mentioned above have been applied in post-secondary institutions to work with and include “the Other”. However, none of them have succeeded in infusing Indigenous knowledge and perspectives throughout the university’s curriculum and daily operations – that is, considering Indigeneity on an equal basis as being white.

Sherene Razack (2015, p. 207) suggests that “universities are happy to promote courses on Indigenous knowledge, and individual students enthusiastically participate in smudging ceremonies” but they are less willing “to examine their complicity in ongoing colonialism”. These actions have simply been layered over the colonial structure to appease Indigenous members, commonly with a “recommendation for cultural sensitivity training for white [people]” (Razack 2015, p. 207). This form of Indigenization merely replicates the surface work of culturalism (Jeffery & Nelson 2009), further upholding the structure of the dominant society by creating the idea that those with culture are designated as “Other”.

An Indigenization strategy must consider how it will engage in reconciliation. Martin Canon (2018, p. 165) asks us to think about reconciliation and poses the question, “How might we restore right relations?” And in response to this, he stresses that “before reconciliation is possible, it is necessary to think about land” (Canon 2018, p. 171).

Many universities have taken steps through land acknowledgements at public events to recognize Indigenous Peoples whose traditional territory their campuses sit upon. Although this address may feel like an empty exercise, the potential is for those listening to become accustomed to the names of the traditional territories, the original inhabitants, and the Indigenous existence prior to colonization as common knowledge.

Nevertheless, Glen Coulthard (2007) expresses a concern that when we seek to be made visible through the acceptance of colonial institutions, we reinscribe the colonial as arbiter and validator, and recognize its authority to regulate and dictate Indigenous life. It is apparent that an Indigenization strategy must be understood and accepted by all those who make up the colonial institution, on the same terms as it is by Indigenous members. Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 19) warn us that too often, among academics, decolonization becomes reduced to efforts of “decolonizing the mind”, ignoring the physical effects that colonization has on Peoples. In other words, we cannot leave this process as a merely intellectual exercise. It requires a will to do more than just talk about it or apply simple strategies such as mentioned earlier. It is, however, a first step leading to awareness, a precondition before action becomes meaningful.

Recognizing race and place in Indigenization

I suggest that implementing Indigenization from a settler-scholar or settler-administrator experience is a racist act of violence towards Indigenous Peoples.

My experience is that those who apply Indigenization as an add-on do not see their “work” as causing harm to Indigenous Peoples. In fact, they see their “leadership” as practical, relevant and appropriate. More important, they are being “benevolent”, and do not see the irony in this approach, which merely perpetuates the dominance of their position.

Without confronting the racism of settler-led Indigenization, the institution is supporting a recolonization project, tokenizing Indigenous leaders in the position of modern-day Indian agents whose job it is to move forward the settler-centered institutional agenda and calm the “Indians”.

The only solution that I see, is for me to “be” who I am and to create my own space within the academy. What I have experienced is that to be and think Indigenous, in whatever way that looks, in Indigenous student centers is generally acceptable. To be invited out of that space by the white people into the white spaces of the academy, for the purposes of being or “performing” Indigenous, is also okay. Therefore, a typical act of Indigenization commonly involves inviting an Indigenous person to provide a token contribution, such as the territorial acknowledgement at a campus event, in which the person has otherwise had no direct engagement in the planning, delivery or content.

Yet witness what happens when that Indigenous person thinks Indigenous when not invited to do so, especially at a senior administrative table. This was just the case recently at the University of Manitoba, where two very well-respected Indigenous leaders chose to walk away from their positions.

Vice-Provost of Indigenous Engagement Dr Lynn Lavallee (2019, n.p.) shared these words after her resignation:

At the University of Manitoba, I found what I experienced as, deeply imbedded, systemic racism. I told myself on starting at the U of M that I was here to walk through doors and get things done, not break down doors. Given the open commitment to Indigenous achievement in the strategic plan, I believed I would not have to rationalize *why* Indigenous specific initiatives and responses were needed but work on *how* to implement.

When Dr Barry Lavallee (Kusch 2019, n.p.) (unrelated to Dr Lynn Lavallee) was asked why he resigned a few weeks later, he responded, “Because it is hopeless.” Dr Barry Lavallee, by the way, is known internationally for his work in Indigenizing the curriculum in medical schools and had worked at the Winnipeg-based university for nine years.

These are clear acts of refusal – clear acts where Indigenous leaders are choosing not to become the modern-day Indian agent of Indigenous Peoples. If

Indigenous Peoples are not following the “rules” of the ivory tower, the ivory tower often concludes we are not doing our jobs correctly. There are people in those ivory towers, and although they may be inviting Indigenous Peoples in, they will only let you stay if the Indigenous People choose to think “ivory”. These are the white naturalized spaces. It is imperative that I think about the ways in which racism is driving this behavior. Institutions are not racist. The people in the institutions make rules, policies, procedures that can allow racism to flourish. In this way, the people are explicitly given the rights to be racist because the institutional foundation allows it. Western education was built on it (literally on the lands).

I often choose, for several reasons, to not use the word racism in many of the white spaces that exist in the academy. One reason being that I have been socialized to exist “comfortably” in “uncomfortable” spaces. If I were to name racism each and every time I witness it or am the recipient of it, it would make others uncomfortable and then we would all be uncomfortable. I think sometimes I like to be around comfortable people and imagine myself as comfortable too. It does depend on the setting sometimes and it also depends on my energy level at times. Is it enough to just name something as racist when it occurs, but not take on having to explain the why? If it is named, can the conversation, the meeting, the social gathering continue? We are programmed to avoid discomfort.

But what is harmful to me, as an Indigenous person, the Indigenous community on campuses and those who will attend the campus in the future, is not paying attention to the violence of racism that comes when settler-centered people are leading, naming and directing “acts” of Indigenization. Over the last decade I have read most of the Indigenization strategies developed in post-secondary institutions. And I have concluded that it is an impossibility to center Indigenization from a colonial institutional place since “settler societies are designed to not consider place – [because] to do so would require consideration of genocide” (Grande, cited in Tuck & McKenzie 2015, p. 154). In the case of the academy, to do so would also require a looking inward to recognize and disrupt the foundational colonialism that is at the base of their roots and has grown them into the imposing structures they are today – ones that attempt to stamp out the Indigenous print that lays beneath their concrete foundations. Yet Indigenous People have created some cracks in that foundation and we are creeping in.

When I speak to those Indigenous student services leaders who made it through the cracks *kayás* (*long ago*) they talk about how they finally had a small

broom closet space in a far corner of the basement that became the Indigenous Student office. They had a place within the naturalized colonized space of the institution and the place was out of sight. Over the last 25 years we have seen these spaces make it up to ground level floors, spaces with light, into visible spaces. The cracks are spreading in the institutions and Indigenous People are permeating the structure. We are taking faculty positions and administrative positions and we are sending out new roots. Our strength from within Mother Earth is increasing and we are in the process of germinating through those cracks.

More and more it seems that Indigenization has become a recolonization tool. It would be smart for the settler-academies to target Indigenous Peoples to become their own Indian agents. There may have been a time when the notion of Indigenization meant something to, and was a good vision for, Indigenous Peoples in the academy but now that the academy has started to take it over it has become a weapon to be used against Indigenous Peoples. It has become the colonizer's tool to further acts of racism and displacement: a tool to assimilate and recolonize.

What I have seen is that Indigenization has come to be accepted by the academy as getting Indigenous Peoples to behave in an approved way within the settler space. And if we do not or cannot conform, we become the “unsettled native, left to unsettle the settled spaces” (Watson 2007, p. 15).

I aim to take up that role proudly. If we consider that Indigenization is an education process, then the university is an appropriate forum for developing an Indigenization strategy. Pete (2016, p. 81) asserts that Indigenization is possible but requires an “institutional reform [that] must be undertaken on multiple levels”. Everyone within the institution plays a role and will experience pushback from colleagues who feel that naming our work “Indigenizing” is a political act, if decolonization is part of the process. Yet how can it not be?

According to Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), Indigenization implies adding something in, whereas decolonizing requires the process of taking something away. And that is what creates the resistance and fear. Indigenization is a process that requires learning and unlearning. It is perhaps not even the end goal. And it requires me to remain firmly centered within my own Indigeneity.

Bringing home Indigenization

In the academy I am bombarded constantly by non-Indigenous-centered requests to Indigenize, with expectations of something convenient, colonized

and quite different from the Indigenous understandings of Indigenization. Indigenous Peoples, worldviews and knowledge systems are complex, and the complexities were established long before whiteness arrived on this country known by our Peoples as Turtle Island (Maracle 1996). Indigeneity, including Indigenous feminisms and Indigenous research methodologies, has its own identity outside of whiteness. It existed long before Indigenization became “a thing” (Barker 2015; Green 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2002).

Despite my indoctrination into the settler establishment, I have found my way home, peeling back layers of colonization and taking my place among my sisters within the lodge of my ancestors. I have searched for and centered my Indigeneity. I have found the only learning space I know that is “Indigenized” and it is the land where our lodge is. I believe it is from there my research begins. It is not from within the academy. My Indigeneity is the source of my strength.

I conclude with a story about a personal experience: I received word late one winter that my Auntie was gathering us home to her lodge for fasting ceremony. I started preparation almost immediately. Most of those preparations were from within my own mental, physical, emotional and spiritual self, but all were in relation to those around me – my family and community.

I now live hundreds of miles from the territory of my ancestors and have only been away for a few years, but I still miss home tremendously. When I say “home”, I realize that in my mind’s eye it is the land my people are from and the stories that are borne from it. The Crossing is home. It is the place just on the other side of the South Saskatchewan River before the turn up to where the Battle of Batoche, the Métis last stand, took place. It is the place also known as Gabriel’s Crossing, named after one of our Indigenous leaders, the place where the ferry used to cross the river before the bridge was even thought of.

I arrived at The Crossing several days before ceremony was to start. In fact, that first night I was the only one there. In the black of the night I laid on the ground, cradled by Mother Earth, and I greeted the stars, I spoke to the coyotes that were singing in the distance, and I sang to the bears. Over the next couple of days, I connected my spirit to my land and to my ancestors.

Fasters and helpers began arriving, many of whom were women. We all began preparing, individually, but in relation to one another. Sitting on the front porch of my Auntie’s summerhouse at the Crossing sipping tea the night before fast, my Auntie stood up, raised her fist in the air and told us, “the most political act of resistance you will ever do is know your ceremonies”. And we fasted.

At my Auntie’s lodge, many of us are scholars, medical doctors and lawyers, representing six different universities. Many teachings were shared among us

over those 10 days. We were our own eco-system. We were our own tribe. We were sovereign. We were not separate from our land, families, communities or scholarly work. I did not have to think about re-centering Indigeneity. We did not need to fight for our place because it surrounded us constantly. There was no resistance at Auntie's.

We nurtured each other for as many days afterwards as we could before we all had to go our separate ways, before we all had to head out into the colonized spaces. I know that I have much more to learn, but what I have learned so far is that I do not need to convince the colonizer of my validity as a way for me to prove my existence.

The biggest threat for the colonizer is the remembering of the colonized. I center my Indigeneity as a 2-Spirit *nēhiyaw āpihtākosisān iskwew* from *mōniyawī-sākahikanihk*, Treaty 6 territory, not as an act of decentering whiteness or colonialism but as an act of refusing whiteness and colonialism as the normative default from which all else is borne.

Ekosi – that is all. *Kinanâskomitinawaw*.