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## Indigenizing Approaches to Research

BY [EMMA BATTELL LOWMAN AND ADAM BARKER](#) ON [OCTOBER 28, 2010](#) · ( 5 )

What does it mean to see the world through Indigenous eyes, to come to understand the ontological worldview that Indigenous peoples assert as an essential component of their existences? These questions have more than just theoretical relevance; for Settler peoples, understanding Indigenous ways of knowing is necessary for understanding the nature and causes of Indigenous-Settler conflicts. Eminent Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. asserted from the 1960s through to his passing in 2005 that colonial conflicts are rooted in deep philosophical and ideological disjunctures between colonizing Settler peoples and Indigenous resisters (see for example: (Deloria, 2006, 2003, 1997, 1988). Maori scholar Makere Stewart Harawira (2005) has linked divergent ontological and epistemological production of knowledge to the creation of very real social and political conflicts between Indigenous and Settler peoples.

Global networks of power have and do support colonialism, and interconnected networks of state and capital have and continue to concentrate the profits of colonization into the hands of imperial elites while impoverishing and oppressing others. This situation is untenable, unjust and must change. As Settler academics the relevance of Indigenous ways of knowing and being has extended beyond the academic or the material; it has become a deeply personal project, necessary to critical engagement with our histories, our biases and unquestioned assumptions, and our privileges and responsibilities, both individually and as members of

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We call on

researchers in all disciplines to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in order to improve research practices, and to rebalance Indigenous-Settler relations worldwide.

### Setting the Terms

Many words are and have been used to discuss the groupings of people involved in the colonization of what are now settler states: Indian, Native, Aboriginal, First Nations, Euro-American, white, non-Aboriginal, non-Native. Today, the dynamic discussions and use of two terms has become central to both how and what is being described and interrogated: *Indigenous* and *Settler*. Both are at their most useful when used as positional political identities, deriving from culture, self-identification and community identification. Choosing to employ the term 'Indigenous,' in addition to being an attempt to move away from other collective terms now considered offensive, works to foreground historical and on-going contestation of colonialism. Scholars of Indigenous politics, Jeff Corntassel (Tsalagi) and Taiaiake Alfred (Kanienuk) argue this is central to contemporary Indigenous identities:

Indigeness is an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning facts of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005).

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Following Corntassel and Alfred's definition, and in this paper, the term 'Indigenous peoples' in the context of North America and comparable settler states refers to peoples whose societies predated European colonization, who exist in complex social and spiritual relationships to land, and who remain primary targets of colonialism. Continuing debate and discussion around the term 'Indigenous' helps to ensure that the concept remains flexible, responsive and useful.

The term 'Settler' is also helps to move beyond essentializing or imprecise terms. Often, the inversion 'non-indigenous' or 'non-native' is used to denote Euro-Western peoples in North America. Political theorist Adam Barker (Settler) has identified that such inversions tend towards ignoring the complexities of Settler societies and normalizing non-Indigenous society; both preclude important analysis and action. Engaging with the developing field of Settler colonialism (Veracini and Cavanagh, 2010), Barker defines Settler people as including: "most peoples who occupy lands previously stolen or in the process of being taken from their Indigenous inhabitants or who are otherwise members of the 'Settler society,' which is founded on co-opted lands and resources" (Barker, 2009). In this way, the term 'Settler' is not an ethical or moral judgment but rather a descriptive term intended to recognize "the historical and contemporary realities of imperialism that very clearly separate the lives of Indigenous peoples from the lives of later-comers" (Barker, 2009).

### **Indigenous Knowledge**

The rise of Indigenous knowledge within the academy in the North American context began in the 1960s. This decade marks the beginning of the American Indian and Red Power Movements, commonly associated with the New Social Movements of the middle-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Day, 2005). Inspired by international anti-colonial struggles, these groups brought Indigenous peoples together from diverse backgrounds to call for governments to honour treaties signed with Indigenous nations, and to challenge cruel treatment and oppression of Indigenous peoples across the continent. The occupation of Alcatraz Island and the town of Wounded Knee, and protests like the Trail of Broken Treaties and the Mohawk blockade of the St. Regis Bridge remain enduring emblems of these struggles. This period also saw the beginning of an 'Indian renaissance' in literature, led most notably by Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *Custer Died for your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1988 [1969]). Focused on the goal of sovereignty without political and social assimilation for Indigenous peoples, this

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work represents a strong assertion of Indigenous knowledge in the academy and concerted contestation of the intellectual paradigms perpetuating subordination of Indigenous peoples. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Indigenous intellectual leaders, including Deloria, Ward Churchill and Hawai'ian scholar and activist Hauani-Kay Trask, became well-known experts and commentators on Indigenous perspectives and struggles (Deloria, 1994, Deloria, 1997, Deloria et al., 1999, Churchill, 2002, Trask, 1999). Their groundbreaking work helped to create space in the academy for Indigenous students and scholars to begin studying and researching from explicitly Indigenous perspectives and paradigms. It is important to note, however, that this process has not been smooth; rather, it is the result of ongoing social, political, and intellectual engagement between Indigenous activists and academics on one hand, and institutions regarded as colonial but also potential sources of agency, on the other.

In the past twenty years, Indigenous scholars have built upon, challenged, deconstructed, and reconstructed earlier work, and have combined new points of view and types of analyses into a vibrant and diverse intellectual and cultural discourse. New concepts established through post-colonial studies, post-structural analyses, and the expansion of a "global" Indigenous consciousness (Niezen, 2003) have contributed to a growing academic and discursive field, that has also featured the mastering of 'traditional' academic disciplines in order to articulate and advance Indigenous knowledge within and outside the academy. Distinguished scholars such as Alfred and Cornassel in Political Science, Waziyatawin (Dakota) in History, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Maori) in Education put Indigenous knowledge, methodologies, priorities, and protocols at the core of their work (See: Smith, 1999, Alfred, 2006, Waziyatawin, 2008). As Smith describes,

*[t]he past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. It is from within these spaces that increasing numbers of indigenous academic and researchers have begun to address social issues within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization and social justice (1999).*

Alternatively considered too political, too subjective, too exclusive, or not intellectually rigorous, Indigenous knowledge is often still segregated from 'traditional' disciplines and contained in

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“Indigenous/Native/American/Indian Studies” programs. This has the effect of limiting the impact of the challenge of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies to the colonial knowledge production of the academy.[1] Although Indigenous knowledge and histories have been a place from which trenchant critiques of Western and Settler society have been developed (see for example: Stewart-Harawira, 2005, Smith 1999), they are most often employed as additions to dominating narratives or as a comparisons from which to investigate or denigrate aspects of Euro-American/Settler/capitalist/consumerist culture. Both involve using Indigenous knowledge, but not on its own terms and most often to support or re-centre non-Indigenous epistemologies and social structures. What follows is an effort to give a brief explanatory sketch of four key characteristics of Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous knowledge is place-based in that Indigenous ontologies are rooted in particular places that have spiritual significance and provide the ecological resource base of Indigenous societies. Deloria contrasts Indigenous and Western/Christian ways of knowing as the difference between spatial and temporal forms of knowledge (1994). Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear goes so far as to posit place as the source of all Blackfoot (and, he generalizes, other Indigenous peoples) identity (2000). This close relationship to land and the recursive functions of nature have established Indigenous knowledge as functioning on circular, integrated dynamics, rather than the linear, extrapolative dynamics of (Western) “scientific” knowledge (Jojola, 2003). As such, Indigenous knowledge is knowledge that arises in particular ways, from particular experiences, with particular places and non-human life. It should be no surprise, then, that colonization, especially in its settler colonial form, is a contest for control of space through the redefinition of social and cultural relationships to specific places. Colonial power that disconnects peoples from their lands not only serves the purpose of invalidating and disrupting the generation of Indigenous knowledge; it also frees places from the powerful, counter-definitional force of collective Indigenous understanding. Indigenous places can only be exploited by temporally-driven colonial understandings after the Indigenous-place relationship has been disrupted.

This relationship to place establishes the basis for the second characteristic: Indigenous knowledge is experiential. Indigenous ways of knowing were traditionally critiqued in the academy for a lack of “rigor” in that they did not follow the Western scientific method of hypothesizing and testing against a body of evidence (Deloria, 1997). This critique was based in ignorance of Indigenous

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methods of gathering, hypothesizing about and analyzing bodies of evidence. Rather than decontextualize pieces of evidence for easy analysis, Indigenous ways of knowing are based in the experiences of each individual on and with the rest of the world (Deloria and Wildcat, 2001, Jojola, 2003). This experiential process is the source of, among other things, the oft-noted depth of ecological and biological knowledge in most Indigenous traditions (Alfred, 2005). This experiential method of generating knowledge made knowledge production an individual responsibility and also a social necessity; one's own experiences were analyzed through comparison and synthesis with the experiences of others. Further, concerns, contradictions, or questions arising from this social analysis required further experience to address, setting up a cyclical system of knowledge that mirrors the cyclical dynamics of Indigenous sacred places (Deloria et al., 1999, Jojola, 2003). Stemming from colonial severing of relationships to land, Indigenous peoples in a literal sense lose the ability to experience the sources of Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous academics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have worked diligently to find ways to recreate these experiences in spite of and directly in opposition to colonial interference (Deloria and Wildcat, 2001, Smith, 1999).

The social necessity of Indigenous knowledge production leads to a discussion of its relational characteristic. As described above, individual experiences comprise the "evidence" in Indigenous knowledge production, while the analysis is both personally and collectively reflective; this collectivity is part of what generates Indigenous peoples cultural and social cohesion (Alfred, 2005). However, the relational characteristic of Indigenous knowledge implies far more than just relationships between humans. Indigenous ontology[2] is premised on the understanding that all life possess its own intelligence which can be learned from and interacted with; it is further premised on the understanding that all things in the natural world are alive or, more accurately, participate in the life energy of the universe. This includes "inanimate" objects from the smallest rocks to the earth as a whole (Stewart-Harawira, 2005). As such, dreams and visions are considered important sources of knowledge production as they are seen as a way of relating to the spirit/immaterial consciousness of places (Deloria et al., 1999). Long-standing relationships to place are seen as essential to the experiences that generate Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous peoples' objections to environmental destruction – or more accurately, environmental exploitation – are often misread due to the application of environmentalist ethics backwards through time, reading a contemporary, contested ideology onto peoples for whom the very concept of "environmentalism" as it is understood

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now would be incoherent (Cronon, White 1993). Rather, Indigenous peoples' relationships to place are more akin to relations between sentient beings worthy of equal respect, and dependent upon each other for survival. Little Bear describes Blackfoot "rituals of renewal" as essential for the continuation of both Blackfoot society and the ecological systems in which Blackfoot society is embedded (Little Bear, 2004). These rituals serve to continually reinforce relationships to place, and deepen ties of respect, understanding, and intimate knowledge.**[3]**

The specificity of Indigenous knowledge is a function of the other three characteristics. Because Indigenous peoples perceive knowledge as deriving from specific places, often through specific experiential actions (such as ceremony) which enact the relationships to specific beings – human and otherwise – all knowledge is considered valid only within the scope which created it (Little Bear, 2000, Jojola, 2003). Even a piece of knowledge that is vital to the identity of a people, such as Holm et al's conceptualization of "sacred history" as an intrinsic component of Indigenous "peoplehood" (Holm et al., 2003), would only be considered true for the Indigenous peoples of a particular place. In Indigenous knowledges, there are no contradictions, but there is almost always a proliferation of truths.

### From Knowledge to Praxis

Published in 1999, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* remains one of the most comprehensive works yet written on the uses and abuses of Indigenous knowledge in the academy. Smith establishes that viewing and researching Indigenous peoples and societies solely through the ontological and epistemological framework of "the academy" – the established, rationalist, positivist, Western-scholarship framework – is inherently racist and oppressive (1999). As such, research structures which rely solely on these concepts need to be understood as impacting negatively on Indigenous peoples, and also as structuring Indigenous and Settler peoples into oppositional, hierarchical identities founded on racist notions of "progress", and thus they must be rebuilt. In *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* editors Waziyatawin (aka Angela Cavender Wilson) and Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw) expand on Smith's work by undertaking specific analyses of the ways that Settler and other non-Indigenous academics have collaborated with deeply colonial projects, as well as suggesting necessary changes in the academy to challenge current oppressions and create space for Indigenous peoples,

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histories, and methodologies in the academy (2004). Waziyatawin states:

Many [scholars] have assisted in our colonization and the perpetuation of our oppression in myriad ways, including celebrating the myth of Manifest Destiny, making light of the genocide and terrorism experienced by our people, and holding firm to a progressive notion of history that forever locks our people's past and our "primitive" existence into a hierarchy where we occupy the bottom. More recently, many historians are guilty of... focusing solely on the resiliency of Indigenous people while refusing to offer an honest and critical indictment of state and federal governments, leaders, and all the citizens of America who have been complicit in our bodily extermination, cultural eradication, and assaults on our lands and resources. Most historians have been accomplices in a great conspiracy to ensure Indigenous subordination (2004).

To counter this, Smith calls for a reclamation of control over Indigenous ways of knowing and being through Indigenized research paradigms (1999).

It is important to note that the current discussions as to what an Indigenous research framework actually is and how it functions in practice remain vibrant, dynamic and contested. Given the relatively recent assertion of the validity of Indigenous knowledge these discussions are far from complete. The form of Indigenous research paradigms are fluid and flexible, and are based on the following principles:

- **Intent.** The motivation and intent of a project must be clearly articulated. As Smith notes, research is never neutral, it is always political (1999); the politics, aims, potential impacts (including representation, construction of authority, voice, social struggle) must be considered, and clearly discussed at every stage of the project. Drawing on the importance of relationality to Indigenous knowledge, researchers must identify the networks of accountability in which they operate. This awareness helps to ensure that work is ethical, consistent with the goals of self-determination and decolonization. Ethical research must take into account the impact of the study far beyond conventional considerations, including a need to assess the consequences for ancestors, future generations, and the non-human world.
- **Reciprocity.** Indigenous knowledge is relational and therefore demands a commitment to reciprocity within the basic theoretical framing of a research project; Indigenous peoples oppression and exploitation under colonialism and

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by Settler society demands an equally material and ethical commitment to reciprocity. The parallels between the physical reshaping of colonized space to extract wealth and the conceptual colonization of Indigenous knowledge to extract value in the forms of both exploitable techniques and methods for ensuring obedience are clear. Extraction models of research are inappropriate, and at all stages, researchers must be willing to share their work and results, and to engage in discussion with the groups/individuals involved in the project or who may be impacted by the work.

- **Respect.** Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies differ in source, process, and content to Euro-American epistemologies. Researchers must develop understanding of the specific cultural, spatial, and spiritual contexts of their work, and must consider sources of knowledge including stories, visions, oral histories, modes of speech, places, and non-human actors. It is the responsibility of the researcher to learn appropriate protocols, and to be aware that authority will change depending on context.
- **Decentring and denormalizing.** Indigenous knowledge, in so much that it is bounded and specific, rarely asserts claims of universality; Western academic knowledge has not extended the same respect. The greatest imposition upon Indigenous knowledge is Western assertions of universal and exclusive knowledge that render Indigenous understandings irrelevant or disempowered regardless of how they are generated or articulated. As an example, in our own researches, we focus on the tension between Indigenous and Settler societies, rather than researching an exotic Indigenous other, therefore attempting to situate Indigenous and Settler knowledges as mutually interacting and challenging perspectives.

An Indigenous research paradigm operates as a dynamic process (Jojola, 2003); it does not allow for universal statements or absolute truths. Part of the intent of Indigenous epistemologies is that knowledge production remains in tension between individual and social perceptions, meaning that the value of the knowledge generated is found in the further knowledge that can be generated through critique and consideration.

### **Indigenous to Indigenize**

The Indigenous scholars we have cited in this paper are working to support Indigenous students, researchers, academics, and communities, and they call explicitly on non-Indigenous and Settler

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academics to join in the project of decolonizing knowledge production in the academy (Mihesuah, 1998, Mihesuah and Wilson, 2004). If the issues raised in this paper seem far removed from your specific area of research, consider the following: colonial exploitation of Indigenous societies resulted in the resources and wealth, which drove the Industrial Revolution and empowered the neoliberal capitalist state to become the standard bearer of military, economic, political and juridical power. In a very real way, the present wealth and power of the United Kingdom and other G8 states, as well as the current material and social deprivation of Indigenous peoples in settler colonial states, are intimately connected through the primacy of a particular way of coming to know and understand the world, ourselves, and our perceived others (Niezen, 2003). Colonialism continues today, and so does colonial oppression, violence, dispossession, and the assertion of a narrow range of possibilities for human social action and interaction. As Settler scholars Adam Barker (2007) and Paulette Regan (2006) have both identified, ignorance – especially intentional ignorance – is necessary for continuing, contemporary colonialism. As Regan notes, “what we deny is our complicity” (2006). Shifting to an Indigenized method of knowledge production – that is, to take on the challenge and possibilities of engaging with Indigenous ways of knowing – has the potential to starkly reveal these ignored complicities; making room for Indigenous modes of inquiry within the academy ensures structural support for such an endeavour. Alfred cites “a framework of Euro-American arrogance” as fundamental to contemporary colonization (2005). Few actions could go as far, both symbolically and in reality, to dismantle this framework as understanding, acknowledging, and advancing Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing which can “move scholars toward a stronger sense of professional and ethical accountability” (Weber-Pillwax, 1999).

The importance of this two stage process – first revealing “ignored complicities” and then addressing them in part through the use of Indigenized research paradigms and methodologies – cannot be understated. Further, this type of “Indigenized” research does more than simply contrast hidden colonialism or tick boxes of professional and ethical accountability. Engaging with Indigenous knowledge can help to reveal a suite of possibilities for reconsidering our understanding of social and political life today. This method of conducting research is achievable and usable by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous (including Settler) peoples, and the very act of adopting this methodology and positionality is the first step in asserting the validity of Indigenous knowledges as contemporary,

vibrant, and even necessary to a nuanced understanding of how we can coexist as peoples, now and in the future.

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**[1]** The inclusion of some Indigenous material is happening in many areas in the academy, but is often limited to superficial consideration, such that it is not considered a serious critique or challenge to the ‘normal’ way of doing things. Wildcat and Deloria (2001) discuss this in detail.

**[2]** Of course, Indigenous ontologies are heterogeneous and multiple; however, as per Stewart-Harawira (2005), I am generalizing with respect to the common, basic elements of an Indigenous ontology which are generally accepted as shared.

**[3]** We differentiate “intimate knowledge” – the knowledge generated of, with, and by place through interaction – from the Western scientific ideal of “objective knowledge” – knowledge gained through impartial and dispassionate observation – for two reasons. First, intimate knowledge relies on a continuous and dynamic set of relationships; this implies that intimate knowledge is constantly changing as relational conditions change, rather than

concretized Western knowledge. Second, objectivity – as many commentators have noted – does not truly exist; objective knowledge often reflects the preconceived biases and expectations which humans carry over from their interactions within hierarchical human societies.

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**Darlene**

[December 18, 2011 • 7:05 am](#)

Interesting article!

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**Fred Turner**

[January 9, 2015 • 8:39 pm](#)

This article centres your own settler privelge. What makes you think you can talk about indigenous knowlege, ontologies or even begin to understand indigenous peoples. This comes off as though you are “indian experts” and if you really want to assist indigenous peoples quit “using” them to advance your own publications ( which is clearly the case here).

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## Sociological Imagination

**January 9, 2015 • 8:45 pm**

What an astonishing set of assumptions to make – what do you know about the authors?

[Reply ↓](#)



## Emma Battell Lowman

**March 10, 2015 • 10:14 am**

Hi Fred, it's good to hear such passion in a response. We (the authors) are experts in Settler studies – that is, non-indigenous peoples who live on Indigenous lands and benefit disproportionately from settler colonization. The only way to make sense of the settler colonial reality of places like Canada, the US, Aotearoa, Australia and many others, and to work to change our present situation, is to engage from the position of own grounded Settler identity with Indigenous peoples, histories, theory, and de/anti-colonial struggle. We frame our work through understandings of the Guswentha (Two-Row) Treaty, which directs us to deal with issues in our own communities always in relationship with Indigenous peoples. As you'll see from the bibliography of this piece, Indigenous scholarship is front and centre, and I'd encourage you to read further in this area. Indigenous scholars are leading the way, and our understandings are based on their work and learning with and from such experts as well as with decolonizing Settler and non-indigenous thinkers.

You may also really enjoy our upcoming book (out this autumn with Fernwood Press) *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada!*

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## Fred Turner

**March 24, 2015 • 3:13 pm**

At first, I was excited to see that an indigenous author has written about indigenizing approaches to research only to have my bubble burst when learning that non-indigenous academics have written it. Emma, you said it yourself that indigenous peoples are leading the way. Then why not let indigenous academics write about indigenizing research from their own lens and worldview? I think its fair to say that indigenous people are cabable of speaking for themselves, specially when it comes to research. The title and the article comes off as if you have done the work but it looks like once again you and the co-author are benefitting off of indigenous peoples hard work. I look forward to reading your book, I hope there is a chapter on privledge in it!

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