



Dispatch

From Knowledge Consumers to Knowledge Producers: A Project in Decolonizing Feminist Praxis

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Soon after *Idle No More* emerged in Canada in 2013, the faculty and students of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University in Montreal released and circulated a statement declaring our feminist solidarity with the movement.¹ The statement emphasised that we regard *Idle No More* as an extension of a long history of initiatives by inspiring women who have been on the frontlines of First Nations and Indigenous organizing in Canada. As members of a Canadian university built on Mohawk/Anishnaabeg territory, we felt compelled to address how educational systems and structures are complicit in the ongoing state violence against Indigenous people, by committing to supporting the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty through our curricula, teaching, and community involvement. I was proud of the commitment we made. I had been teaching an advanced undergraduate level “Post/de-colonial feminisms” course at this women’s studies institute for many years and was pleased that the subject matter would now be included in my colleagues’ syllabi as well. Our institute’s explicit solidarity with the *Idle No More* movement also motivated me to renew my course by using pedagogical approaches that would more actively support struggles for Indigenous sovereignty at the community level. After all, praxis, or turning theory into practice, is *the* cornerstone of feminist teaching and learning. To me this meant that a course on colonialism being offered in Canada would not only present students with a comprehensive understanding of the systemic violence that Indigenous women here face, it would also offer opportunities to engage with the issues in concrete ways.

¹ The statement was released on January 28, 2013, the “global day of action” with *Idle No More* (see http://wsdb.concordia.ca/about-us/official-position-on-issues/documents/Idle_no_more.pdf)

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ISSN: 1911-4788



This dispatch describes and reflects on a project that I developed to achieve this goal. Specifically, it describes a semester long campus-community partnership with a grassroots solidarity collective working to raise awareness on the “missing and murdered” Indigenous women in Canada. The project simultaneously sought to teach undergraduate students about (a) the violence facing Indigenous women in Canada and the disgraceful state indifference to it, and (b) feminist praxis, especially *vis-à-vis* the power relations embedded within knowledge production and solidarity practices. Drawing from students’ work and reflections on the campus-community partnership, as well as my perspective as the course instructor, I conclude that despite some significant challenges, the project succeeded at helping students understand the complexities of knowledge production within colonial relations of power.

Reconciling “Post”-Colonial Theory with “De”-Colonizing Practices

The overall objectives of the course are to offer students (a) an understanding of the historical and contemporary ways in which gendered and sexualized violence and dominance is enacted through colonialism; (b) the theoretical and methodological tools to critically apply post and decolonial theories; and (c) opportunities to learn about resistance to colonialism, and decolonizing activist strategies and movements. To meet these objectives, I frame the course through Derek Gregory’s (2004) notion of “the colonial present,” and explain that the course will be comprised of a series of discussions on what the legacies of colonialism have to do with present-day challenges. I also explain that a central aim of the course is to interrogate the “post” in the field of postcolonial studies *vis-à-vis* neo-colonial social, economic, and political relations.

When I introduce the course to students, I define postcolonialism as a set of perspectives and tools for examining knowledge, representations and power. Borrowing from Tuck and Yang (2012), I define decolonization as fundamentally concerned with land, space, sovereignty, reparations, and self-determination – that is, physical, economic and legal demands. The required readings that I assign correspond with these two conceptual orientations. One set of readings is comprised of seminal postcolonial theorists including Gayatri Spivak (2006), Frantz Fanon (2007), Edward Said (1978), Stuart Hall (2007), Lila Abu-Lughod (2007), and Sara Ahmed (2000). The second set addresses settler colonialism, especially in Canada. These readings include the works of Patricia Monture-Angus (1995), Linda Tuwahi Smith (2007), Winona Stevenson (1999), Kiera Ladner (2009), Glen Coulthard (2007), Eve Tuck (2013), Leanne Simpson (2011), and Margaret Kovach (2013). As a method of bringing postcolonial and decolonising perspectives together, the course is structured so that the readings move us back and forth between theories and practices, from the global to the local, and from the past to the present. Given the fraught politics of knowledge production *vis-à-vis*

colonialism, the course devotes a significant amount of time to discussing research ethics and policies that have been developed to restrict research, to ensure that research on Indigenous communities must be conducted by or with Indigenous peoples in Canada (Government of Canada, 2014; Schnarch, 2004). In sum, I have taken a critical feminist approach to teaching about colonial power relations in ways that make students aware of the complex ethics and politics of representation, solidarity, and knowledge production. To this end, I insist on an awareness of positionality, a critique of liberal helping and rescue narratives, and a heightened sense of the subtle ways in which racial and patriarchal dominance is re-enacted to continually favour settlers and disenfranchise Indigenous peoples.

The course has worked well over the years that I have taught it and course evaluations indicate that students find it rewarding. Nonetheless, I wanted to find a way to connect it more directly to the immediate and local reality of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Drawing on the long-standing activism and advocacy of Indigenous women who have fought to place this racialized gendered violence in the mainstream of Canadian public discourse, and who have worked tirelessly to document some of the underlying causes of this violence (i.e., widespread and entrenched racism and misogyny, ongoing settler colonialism, police neglect and violence, poverty and marginalization), my desire was to bridge the theories of this course with concrete efforts to end the systematic violence experienced by Indigenous women living in Quebec and Canada.² That is, as a feminist educator who is committed to community engagement and praxis, I was determined to find a way of teaching about this topic that would be both impactful at a community level while remaining rigorous in its scholarly and pedagogic approach. At the same time, I was concerned about reifying both rescuer and victim positionings, and with the problem of researching the situation of Indigenous women while attempting not to speak for them or turn them into spectacles.³

After consulting writings on “feminist-infused” participatory action research (Lykes & Herschberg, 2012), and social action curriculum (Schultz, Baricovich & McSurley, 2010), I decided to approach Missing Justice (MJ), a local feminist collective that works in accordance with the needs and initiatives expressed by Indigenous communities and organizations in Québec.⁴ Members of MJ work in solidarity with Indigenous women’s groups towards ending systemic violence against Indigenous women and their communities. The MJ collective focus much of their efforts on offering “teach-ins,” and therefore seemed especially appropriate for a university partnership. As they explain, “we recognize that the discrimination and

² See, e.g., Amnesty International (2004, 2009); Hunter (2005); Anderson, Kubik, Hampton, et al. (2010); Kubik, Bourassa, & Hampton (2009); McIvor (2004).

³ None of the students that year had self-identified as Indigenous.

⁴ In Montreal, there is a Community University Research Exchange program (CURE) that facilitates these types of partnerships with the local movements and activist organizations (www.qpirgconcordia.org/cure/).

violence that affects Indigenous people in Quebec has roots in the miseducation of our young people. We are interested in demanding changes in the education provided in the Quebec education system” (Missing Justice, n.d.). In conversation with some members of this collective,⁵ I proposed the idea of students in the course developing a collection of resources that can be used for the teach-ins that MJ offer.

As I needed students’ buy-in, on the first day of class I presented students with two options. Either we could follow the conventional syllabus I had been using in previous years, or we could embark on this campus-community partnership with MJ. I explained that the latter would involve a lot of uncertainties, because their work would be collaborative and produced collectively. I also cautioned that as the project strives toward reflecting ongoing and active processes of decolonization, the work undertaken would have to be approached with an awareness of each participant’s individual relationship to this systematic and many-layered violence. The students unanimously agreed to develop the social action curriculum partnership. They were especially enthusiastic about the idea that their coursework would have a practical application for the community partner.

Integrated learning and the creation of decolonial feminist knowledge

The semester-long project resulted in what has been described as “learning in the making” insofar as it allowed the students to determine what is most important and relevant to them (Ellsworth, 2005, in Schultz, Baricovich, & McSurley, 2010 p.370). In all, students produced five modules based on each of the pillars MJ uses in their teach-ins to raise awareness on violence against Indigenous women in Quebec and Canada: (1) The Federal and Provincial Governments, (2) The Police/RCMP (3) The Courts/Legal System, (4) Corporate/Mainstream Media, and, (5) The Education System. The modules were created so that they can be modified and presented in various formats depending on the facilitator and the audience.

Overall, this undertaking was tremendously successful and exemplary of feminist praxis. It harnessed the academic and creative forces of approximately 25 students who shared their work with an under-resourced grassroots organization. Indeed, it helped me to satisfy students’ strong desire to produce knowledge that contributes to community partners. However, pedagogically and practically it also presented some significant difficulties and challenges, not least of which was having to submit individual grades and evaluations for students, when all the work they did was in groups. Furthermore, in terms of process, the project was onerous insofar as it required that class time be devoted to creating student work groups and

⁵ I am especially grateful to Alisha Mascarenhas for taking on the role of intermediary between the class and Missing Justice.

coordinating various aspects of co-authorship, formatting, design, and editing of resources they created. As a collaborative effort, the project demanded ongoing discussion in order to avoid duplication, ensure relevance, rigour, and result in meaningful contributions. It also required conscientious communicative practices within and outside of the classroom, and between the students and our community partner.

Nevertheless, the resources that the students developed were remarkable and inspired. They incorporated visually rich images, stories of individual women, statistics and facts, and research histories of land dispossession and resource exploitation, and they showcased Indigenous-led initiatives. Most significantly, students integrated the postcolonial course readings with the decolonizing ones in the work they submitted. In other words, the project succeeded at helping students read postcolonial texts while engaging in decolonising praxis. While it is not possible to describe the richness of the work they produced in detail, the following summary of the education-focussed materials (i.e., the fifth module) produced by the group illustrates some of the integrated learning that was achieved through this project.

The group presented an analysis of a textbook entitled *Panorama: History and Citizenship Education* (Horguelin, Ladouceur, Lord & Rose, 2007), which is used for mandatory third and fourth level high school History and Citizenship Education courses in Québec.⁶ This particular textbook was chosen because it was approved for use in English Secondary schools by the Quebec Ministry of Education and is therefore the basis of what the majority of students in English Language schools in Quebec would be taught. Moreover, since it was written with the explicit intention of increasing content about Indigenous histories and cultures (MELS, 2007, pp. 11-28), the students were curious about how that information would be presented.

In keeping with the original goal of producing user-friendly materials that the MJ collective could use in their “teach-ins,” the students decided to create a colorful and engaging zine that captured their analysis of the textbook. Although the students did draw from theoretical course readings on discourse, ideology, power, and knowledge production for their analysis, creating a zine allowed them to present the information through images, illustrations and diagrams, thereby making it more accessible. The combination of complex analytical approaches and creativity led to an incisive and dynamic resource. Specifically, in addition to drawing attention to an overall decontextualizing of references to Indigenous peoples and stereotypical visual representations, the group conveyed six important points in the zine.

First, they noted that throughout the textbook, students are repeatedly brought back to the “official” timeline of Québec history and its omissions. They explain:

⁶ The textbook was developed as part of new Quebec History and Citizenship Education curriculum by the Ministry of Education in 2007 (See Di Mascio, 2014).

The textbook timeline states that women received the right to vote in 1918 federally and 1940 in Québec, but neglects to add to the timeline when Indigenous people received the right to vote. ...what does not appear on the timeline will not be considered an important part of history. By omitting information, the textbook neglects to reveal how Indigenous women were discriminated against twice - as women and as Indigenous.

Second, in their examination of the language used in the textbook, they observed that it is largely written in the passive tense (e.g., “these treaties were signed;” “assimilation was happening”). The effect of this, they propose, is that European settler economic and political interests in Canada are celebrated and Indigenous people appear as passive receptors of these exploits. Third, they noted that the textbook uses the past tense in its descriptions of the societies, and includes images of archaeological digs, or traditional hunting or village scenes instead of present-day imagery:

One of the only current representations of the textbook is found in a small section entitled socio-economic reality, with the heading that “the often-difficult economic conditions in Aboriginal communities have direct consequences on the quality of life”. This line is followed by poverty, suicide and education statistics in contemporary First Nation’s communities. These facts are de-historicized and there are no explanations given as to why these circumstances exist.

Fourth, focusing on a chapter-end exercise entitled “a colonization game,” which asks students to design a video game that follows the European timeline from contact in the 1500’s to present day, they commented on the book’s overall tendency to trivialize and downplay colonial violence. Moreover, they pointed out that this is one of the only uses of the word “colonial” or “colonization” in the entire chapter.

Fifth, examining a summary section titled “Aboriginal Peoples’ Demands and the State,” they noted that the textbook acknowledges the fact that Indigenous people have less access to official power because many were prohibited from voting until the 1960s. However, the students noted that this section of the textbook failed to elaborate on how Indigenous women were impacted by the *Indian Act* as well as other colonial policies and actions, which often rendered Indigenous women dependent on their fathers and husbands.⁷

Lastly, they discussed the limited availability of alternative textbooks. For example, the group showcased *Seven Generations* (Blanchard, 1980), a textbook currently in use in a high school in Kahnawake to teach Mohawk history through an Indigenous framework.⁸ The students explained that unlike the *Panorama* textbook, *Seven Generations* does not purport to represent an

⁷ The Indian Act refers to federal law that authorizes the Canadian government to regulate and the lives of registered Indians and reserve communities.

⁸ A First Nations reserve of the Mohawk nation on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River in Quebec.

all-encompassing overview of Canadian history. It is explicit in its objective to represent a solely Mohawk perspective. They also provided a list of additional alternative textbooks that can be used by high school history teachers.

The work this group prepared clearly demonstrated how colonial relations continue to be legitimized by the “scientific” knowledge presented in the textbook. They also persuasively illustrated the racialized basis of the representations in *Panorama*, by drawing attention to the authority granted to dominant Anglo/Franco European culture, law, and languages. Moreover, their analysis raised questions about how this history comes to be known, narrated, and by whom. Their work was especially effective at merging post- and de-colonizing theories to reveal that knowledge is always ordered and structured in particular way and that this ordering is not neutral or objective.

Reflections on “What it Means to Study and Learn”

Also evident in the students’ work was a second, perhaps more significant level of understanding. In addition to giving a careful analysis of the text book, the students also grappled mightily with, as one put it, “how to research and speak for Indigenous people as a non-Indigenous person.” Indeed, to ensure that the students did not lose sight of asymmetrical knowledge production relationships, they were asked to constantly reflect on their role as researchers based in an academic institution, in light of the larger systems of power between settler-allies and Indigenous groups in Quebec and Canada. At the end of the term, they were asked to submit an individual two-page reflection evaluating the partnership and their participation in it.⁹ Some of the reflections they wrote included the following:

When preparing the script for our presentation, careful and deliberate wording became paramount to avoid perpetuating stereotypes or including alienating assumptions about the teach-in audience or even relegating colonialism to part of the historical past. All of these issues surrounding the use of particular language in our project were central to our group discussions and made a lasting impression on me about the necessity for careful and deliberate wording that could empower, rather than disempower people. [Student F]

The project was an opportunity to struggle intensely with the challenges presented by the information presented in class – how to work in solidarity with Aboriginal women in a conscientious, responsible, and meaningful way. I felt, time and time again when trying to write my content, that I was challenged by trying to speak in a way that was clear, understandable, accessible to a multitude of audiences, and attempting to disrupt colonial projects that are continuously perpetuated through the language in representing the realities of indigenous people. [Student C]

⁹ These reflections were not shared with their peers and were marked as pass/fail as part of their course participation grade.

As I reflect back on this project, I see that this experiment in praxis facilitated my desire to teach in ways that deepen students' understandings of institutionalized colonial power as well as their commitments to disrupting them. Requiring students to produce materials that would be used in grassroots popular education efforts made the course more relatable and relevant for them, and the collaborative process made it easier for them to complexly examine colonial power relations. Indeed, this project helped to expose the struggles of knowledge production and solidarity, all the while making clear that they are symptomatic of larger political and historical structures. Moreover, it led the students to see how – as teachers and students – we are implicated in predetermined hierarchies of knowledge and power.

In sum, the careful negotiation of the roles of students as knowledge producers and the indigenous communities as subjects of the knowledge produced, helped them to understand what it means to foster a decolonizing approach to teaching and learning. One of the many successes of the *Idle No More* movement is that it shone a spotlight on how little the average Canadian settler knows about treaties, residential schools, and Indigenous histories. This community-campus partnership project is one small example of the rich opportunities university classrooms afford to push this learning – not just so that students learn, but also so they *unlearn* and question how their learning happens, and in turn, attempt to teach it differently.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the Missing Justice Collective for their collaboration with this project. I am also grateful to each of the following students for approaching this project with openness and respect: Sarah Aldridge, Irmak Bahar, Noah Cannon, Frances Enyedy, Charline Fallu, Jessica Glavina, Emilie Jacob, Molly Langill, Hepzibeth Lee, Nampande Londe, Alisha Mascarenhas, Maude Matton Tremblay, Sabrina Maxfield, Sarah Morris, Teeanna Munro, Charlene Nkondjock, E. Pietrangelo, Allysha Porter, Jael Roy, Miriam Sherwin, Alexandra Turski, Pamela Vrabel, Rebecca Way, and Tess Wilkens.

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