

3 Indigenous knowledge, anticolonialism and empowerment

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Indigenous knowledge recovery is an anti-colonial project.²² It is a project that gains its momentum from the anguish of loss of what was and the determined hope for what will be. It springs from the disaster resulting from the centuries of colonialism's efforts to methodically eradicate our ways of seeing, being and interacting with the world. At the dawn of the 21st century, the recovery of Indigenous knowledge²³ is a conscious and systematic effort to revalue that which has been denigrated and revive that which has been destroyed. It is about regaining the ways of being which allowed our peoples to live a spiritually-balanced, sustainable existence within our ancient homelands for thousands of years.

In privileging writings about current work in Indigenous knowledge recovery²⁴, we are challenging the powerful institutions of colonization which have routinely dismissed alternative knowledges and ways of being as irrelevant to the modern world. As Indigenous Peoples and other advocates of Indigenous knowledge have typically been denied access to the academic power structures which legitimize knowledge production, those of us with access to those structures must work to support Indigenous knowledge recovery efforts for our own purposes.

Rather than engaging this issue simply as an “intellectual property” exploit, the goal of Indigenous scholars working in this area is to discuss Indigenous knowledge in the broader context of Indigenous empowerment. Indigenous knowledge is meaningless and actually harmful if its holders and practitioners are not simultaneously empowered and supported in efforts to not only survive – but also thrive.²⁵

The process of colonization required the complete subjugation of our minds and spirits, in addition to our physical subjugation, so that our lands and resources could be robbed from

²² Wilson, Angela C. (2004). Introduction: Indigenous Knowledge Recovery Is Indigenous Empowerment. *The American Indian Quarterly*, 28 (3&4). Retrieved from http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/american_indian_quarterly/v028/28.3wilson.html

²³ UNESCO. (n.d.). Best Practices on Indigenous Knowledge. In *Management of Social Transformations* (MOST). Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/most/bpindi.htm>

²⁴ Wilson, Angela C. (2004). Introduction: Indigenous Knowledge Recovery Is Indigenous Empowerment. *The American Indian Quarterly*, 28 (3&4). Retrieved from http://journals2.scholarsportal.info/details.xqy?uri=/15341828/v28i0003/359_iikriie.xml

²⁵ Waziyatawin Healing the Earth Radio. (2010, March 28). Defenders of the Land: Indigenous Survival and Liberation in Times of Collapse. *Rabble.ca*. Podcast retrieved from <http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/healing-earth/2010/03/defenders-land-indigenous-survival-and-liberation-times-collaps>

underneath our bodies. Ngugi wa Thiong'o describes the largest weapon of imperialism as the cultural bomb: "The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves."²⁶ Indeed, through the combined efforts of government institutions and Christian workers, Indigenous Peoples in the United States and Canada faced severe persecution for practicing our spirituality, for speaking our languages, and for attempting to live the way our ancestors before us had lived. The federal boarding and residential schools²⁷ continued this tradition, aiming their most concerted and brutal assaults on our most vulnerable and precious populations: the children. While the devastation wrought from these assaults was not totally complete, it has been sufficiently thorough to severely disrupt our ways of living and to cause us to question the usefulness and importance of the ways of life given to us.

We were taught that the conquest and "civilizing" of our people was inevitable; that we too must give way to "progress." It was hammered into our heads that our Indigenous cultural traditions were inferior to those of Euro-Americans and Euro-Canadians, that there was nothing of value in our old ways, and that those ways were incompatible with modernity and civilization. But they really meant something different.

In order for the colonizers to complete their colonizing mission, they were required to not only make themselves believe these ideas, they were also required to make us – the colonized²⁸ – believe them.²⁹

In one way they were correct; within the confines of colonialism our ways were irrelevant and incompatible. Indigenous traditions are of little value in a world based on the oppression of whole nations of people and the destructive exploitation of natural resources. Our values and lifeways are inconsistent with the materialism and militarism characteristic of today's world powers. In this world that colonialism has created, there is no place for Indigenous knowledge.

When Indigenous peoples were taught the worthlessness of our traditions and knowledge, it was designed to perpetuate the colonial machine. If Indigenous cultural traditions were deemed to be on equal ground with the colonizer's traditions, colonialist practices would be impossible to rationally sustain. Unless they were willing to complete a project of complete extermination, their sense of peace required the muting of Indigenous voices, the blinding of Indigenous worldview, and the repression of Indigenous resistance.

²⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o. (2009, December 11). Introduction: Towards the Universal Struggle of Language. Excerpt, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group. Retrieved from <http://www.langaa-rpcig.net/+Decolonizing-the-Mind-by-Ngugi-wa+.html>

²⁷ Assembly of First Nations. (n.d.). Indian Residential Schools Unit. Retrieved from <http://www.afn.ca/index.php/en/policy-areas/indian-residential-schools-unit>

²⁸ Memmi, Albert. (1965). *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

²⁹ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson. (2007, October 12). Talking Decolonization with Waziyatawin, Part 1. Healing the Earth Radio. *Rabble.ca*. Podcast retrieved from <http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/healing-earth/talking-decolonization-waziyatawin-part-1>

However, within a broader context, we know these ideas about Indigenous ways of life to be false. At any point in history, we could have worked jointly towards conditions that would facilitate the return of Indigenous ways of being while appreciating the knowledge that supported those ways. Even now this is not an impossible task. The same human beings who created the conditions of this world also have the capacity to change it. In telling us we must change and adapt, they really meant that the old ways must end because they were unwilling to change their colonizing ways. They were unwilling to end their occupation of our homelands; they were unwilling to foster the restoration of the plants and animals indigenous to our homelands; they were unwilling to discontinue their exploitation and destruction of all that we cherished; and they were unwilling to let us retain the knowledge of alternative ways of being. Because the colonizers wanted to continue colonizing, we had to change and our way of life had to be destroyed. So goes the nasty business of empire building.

The legacy of this colonizing objective is frequently parroted by Indigenous peoples – even by some academics – who have obediently learned to restrict their own vision according to the parameters set for us by our colonizers. Fortunately there have always been those among us who understood the political motivations behind their thinking, who held fast to the original directions given specifically to our ancestors, and who resisted colonization by carrying that knowledge into the present. There is a growing number of Indigenous people and non-Indigenous allies who have seen the fallacy of Euro-American and Euro-Canadian self-purported superiority and who have complete faith in the ways of life that sustained us for thousands of years. In fact, many of us even go so far as to suggest that eventually these ways may resolve some of the global crises facing all populations today.

Before knowledge of these ways of being and interacting with the world can be shared, however, as Indigenous Peoples we must first work on recovering these traditions among our own populations. While decolonization³⁰ ultimately requires the overturning of the colonial structure, that must be initiated by the colonized. As I have argued elsewhere, “The recovery of Indigenous knowledge is deeply intertwined with the process of decolonization because for many of us it is only through a consciously critical assessment of how the historical process of colonization has systematically devalued our Indigenous ways that we can begin to reverse the damage wrought from those assaults.”³¹

The revaluing of our traditional knowledge has to begin in our own communities among our own people, not only because we are the major holders of the knowledge and the major impetus for decolonization begins there, but also so that we can prevent that knowledge from being appropriated by the colonial system.

³⁰ Waziyatawin Healing the Earth Radio. (2007, October 12). Talking Decolonization with Waziyatawin, Part 1. *Rabble.ca*. Podcast retrieved from <http://rabble.ca/podcasts/shows/healing-earth/talking-decolonization-waziyatawin-part-1>

³¹ Waziyatawin, Angela. (2006). *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press; and

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