

DECOLONISING THE SPACES INTENDED TO DECOLONISE

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, I argue that while Indigenous requirements and readings are necessary for academic decolonisation, progress requires white bodies in the academe to stop replacing marginalised ones (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). In doing so, I reflect and recognise my positionality as a colonial project and settler-Métis woman alongside my ongoing efforts to decolonise my perspective, research, and teaching. Yet even in this decolonisation, I am privileged as a white settler-Métis woman. My reflection highlights the ways in which Indigenization efforts have changed who students read in social theory, but rarely in who teaches that theory. In considering this, I grapple with my own position as a white settler-Métis woman who grew up apart from my Métis culture. Further, by framing the work through an Indigenous relational understanding of home, I demonstrate that Indigenous people remain foreigners in postsecondary institutions thanks to ongoing colonial policies that coopt, colonise, and limit Indigenous work. Lastly, in considering Fanon's (1986) work on engaging with Indigenous culture, I grapple with how Indigenous studies and decolonization must be reimagined within the academy.

Keywords. Decolonisation, Indigenization, Colonial structures in academia, Indigenous relationality.

1. POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

I am settler-Métis and spent most of my childhood in Calgary, Alberta. My mom comes from a long line of European and Panamanian settlers, and I am Métis on my dad's side. Both of my parents grew up in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. My Métis names include Desjarlais, Ouelette, Ross, and Lavallee. I grew up without much (if any) acknowledgement of my Métis roots. It was only in my adult life that I began to really question and recognise what it meant to be Métis, and found a desire to belong to a Métis community. The struggle to belong, for me, was also rooted in my own very obvious whiteness. My paternal grandfather was Métis (although never spoke of it), but the rest of my grandparents were settlers. Consequently I am, by all accounts, racially white. For a time, this made me uncomfortable with my Métis side, like I was a poseur incapable of belonging with my Métis kin. The idea and concept of home means that finding a sense of place and self through these connections.

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2. INTRODUCTION

I drafted the first version of this work many years ago while I was working at a Canadian postsecondary institution that I believed did not value or amplify Indigenous voices. Indigenous presence, in this environment, did not seem important, and our perspectives were not valued on a managerial or administrative level. There was no Office of Indigenous Engagement, no resources for BIPOC let alone Indigenous faculty and staff to develop a sense of belonging, and little to no cultural programming for students. Over the time I worked in that environment, government priorities shifted, and I witnessed the dangers and fumbles of institutions ill-equipped to adapt or make sense of Indigenous worldviews try to coopt, and ultimately colonise, these perspectives. Indigenous student services existed but were vastly overworked and unacknowledged, and only had capacity to engage in advocacy work to ensure Indigenous students could graduate. As a Métis woman, the alarming absence of Indigenous supports struck me early on, and I was encouraged by one of the few Indigenous women on that campus to find belonging in my local friendship centre—advice that I am still grateful for nearly a decade later. It became my home while I worked at an institution that I did not feel like I belonged in or at. I have since worked at several other institutions that have recognized, at least on a pedantic or philosophical level, the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives, but the dismantling of colonial systems remains a barrier to yielding space and power to Indigenous voices, and providing a sense of home within these spaces.

I am not an education scholar, I study homelessness and housing and my work is rooted in an Indigenous understanding of home and place—that is, that home is about connection (to kin, culture, and land) and Indigenous homelessness about disconnection and dispossession (Thistle, 2018). It is possible then for Indigenous peoples to experience home while being unhoused and housed while homeless. This concept is one that I carry throughout this essay, and one that demonstrates the importance of belonging. Home is relational, consistent, and a process wherein individuals' feelings in space shift and change depending on their relationships in (and to) that space. It's of note that these shifts produce different ideas and connections. In other words, what I argue here isn't representative of the feelings or thoughts of all Indigenous or Métis folk in (or outside of) the academy.

In this essay I argue that postsecondary institutions have not empowered Indigenous people to develop a sense of home within their boundaries. Colonial policies that co-opted Indigenous worldviews become muddied within hallowed walls. Indigenous studies represents a site of resistance within postsecondary institutions; a space to be and feel at home within these institutions. However, Indigenous studies cannot be the sole Indigenous presence on any campus, yet finding a sense of home or belonging remains elusive thanks to colonial policies built on patriarchal white European ideas, ideals, and comforts.

Power resides in who makes the laws, tells history, and shapes the ways in which institutions operate. More than that, however, power lays in the taken-for-granted oft-hidden narratives through which all of social life is constructed. White bodies—including my own white-passing one—benefit from evaluation of whiteness through systems designed for white collectives. Assumptions about who belongs means some people are treated as welcome in spaces while others are received as strangers. Yet even if welcomed on the surface, only some ways of occupying space are welcomed while others are not. Feminist killjoys, BIPOC and 2SLGBTQIA+ people are received only when they adhere to their prescribed roles in the pre-created power structure; a structure that assumes some people should not—nor will not—ever find institutions as home, including postsecondary institutions. Still, education represents freedom (bell hooks, 1994). Staying in the enduring colonial frames of reality, history, and power continue oppressive and repressive forces that push against marginalised peoples.

I am settler-Métis and spent most of my childhood in Calgary, Alberta. My mom comes from a long line of European and Panamanian settlers, and I am Métis on my dad's side. Both of my parents grew up in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. My Métis names include Desjarlais, Ouelette, Ross, and Lavallee. I grew up without much (if any) acknowledgement of my Métis roots. It was only in my adult life that I began to really question and recognise what it meant to be Métis, and found a desire to belong to a Métis community. The struggle to belong, for me, was also rooted in my own very obvious whiteness. My paternal grandfather was Métis (although never spoke of it), but the rest of my grandparents were settlers. Consequently I am, by all accounts, racially white. For a time, this made me uncomfortable with my Métis side, like I was a poseur incapable of belonging with my Métis kin. The idea and concept of home means that finding a sense of place and self through these connections.

To be Métis is to both be connected to a current Métis community and have ancestors connected to traditional Métis communities—criteria for Métis citizenship with Métis nations (Manitoba Métis Federation, 2026; Métis Nation of Alberta, 2026; Métis Nation of Saskatchewan)—with a shared culture and language; to have a home within Métis communities and find a sense of self, purpose, and connection. These communities all tie back to the Red River and multiple Métis resistances (Teillet, 2019). Because of settler school systems, most Canadians believe my Métis ancestors to have been rebels, people fighting against a pre-established system, yet our stories and histories highlight the importance of what came before Western settler expansion. When the Government of Canada purchased the Red River territory from the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), both had (wrongly) assumed that HBC “owned” the land (and the people) that was transferred. That ownership then, was believed to transfer to the Government of Canada. My Métis ancestors, however, argued they were Otipemisiwak, “the people who own themselves,” and thus the Métis resistances began. The history speaks to colonial conquest, brazenness, and violence while simultaneously highlighting the importance of resistance to unchecked power (Teillet, 2019).

While this history is likely understood by most readers through a settler education, the outcomes of both Métis resistances is far clearer: Louis Riel, the leader of the Métis, was murdered by the Government of Canada after his surrender (Teillet, 2019), and Métis people were vilified as state enemies, incendiaries, and rebels. Consequently, my family — like many families — tried (albeit sometimes unsuccessfully in the case of my grandfather) to pass as white for at least two generations. I wanted to know my Métis culture, but I also found myself concerned with appropriating a community to which I believed I might not deserve access. Yet I desired to know all pieces of my background, and I began spending time with my Alberta-based Friendship Centre. I finally applied for my Métis citizenship in 2019, after the birth of my son. This was an important step for me, and once I received my citizenship a year later, I leaned heavily into learning my Métis culture, what it means to be Métis, and cultural practices that I'd been denied—both by myself and others. These spaces provided a sense of connection that I feel I had been missing for long periods of time, and became particularly important to me during the peak of the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. Our friendship centre—like many—hosted online circles which felt like a lifeline amidst the disconnection lockdowns created. It was in these relationships that I began shifting my understanding of Michif-ness and Métis spaces.

Perhaps ironically, after feeling like I belonged in my Métis community, multiple cases of pretendians, occupying Métis space, became public (Leroux, 2019). In common parlance, pretendians are people who claim Indigenous identities but have no Indigenous kinship, connections, or ancestry; in other words, they are settlers claiming Indigenous identities. While Indigenous identity remains complex and relational, pretendians gain from equity and justice positions by colonizing and occupying Indigenous status. People were using the nation I'd become connected to as a means to claim rights, lands, and privileges that they were not entitled to. And, like me, most of them were fair-skinned, and could easily pass as white. It was unsettling and had me returning to my own verified family tree, once again questioning my own sense of belonging. It was only while I was in circle lamenting my prior disconnection when one of my kin told me that she claimed me: that my current relationships mattered as much as my ancestral roots. Essentially, she argued, I belong with my Métis kin. That belonging, while sometimes intangible, exists in other “family” traditions that I'd grown up to believe were singular to our family, but I have learned are inherently Métis.

Identity has been often studied and I will not rehash it here, but its complications for Indigenous people relates to the ways in which we decolonise ourselves and lean into our Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and living. As an academic, much of my life has been framed, shaped, and lived through colonised worldviews—on purpose. Universities centre on white Eurocentric knowledge and white Eurocentric ways of knowing; thereby training scholars, even Indigenous scholars, in particular ways of engaging and thinking about the world and their places in it (Battiste, 2013). These ways of thinking are rooted in long relationships of power and marginality, in which eurocentric thinking aims to reproduce itself. The very language of science, and especially social science, is embedded in

this notion of impartiality and separateness from the projects with which we engage. Yet science, math, arts, and philosophy all happened outside Europe; they just looked different than their colonised counterparts. Robin Wall-Kimmerer (2013), in her best-selling book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, entwines colonised and Indigenous botanics, and the ways in which she makes sense of both as an Indigenous botanist scholar. Scholars who engage in this kind of work that empowers and emphasises the importance of two-eyed seeing—*Etuaptmumk*—acts as a site of resistance to blend epistemologies, and create a home in science.

As a sociologist trained in the early 2000s (I graduated in 2006 with a BA, 2009 with an MA, and 2016 with a PhD—all in sociology) I am familiar with many critical theorists and justice scholars. As a discipline, sociology considers itself forward-thinking: over the last fifteen years, it has shifted focus to include more marginalised voices within its own fields. Undergraduates in sociology read both “classical” (i.e. specifically the three white dead men: Marx, Weber, Durkheim) alongside modern theorists (e.g. Foucault, Smith, De Bois, and Fanon). The shift was much needed, and theory is increasingly aware of the limitations of perspectives and contexts. Writing as a Métis woman in 2026, my perspective (or viewpoint) is (likely) different than those of my male colleagues. Additionally, even with the inclusion of modern theorists, very few are women, and few are people of colour. Understanding of science as impartial suggests that this should not matter, yet how a story is told depends largely on the storyteller. Vantage point shifts understanding of social life. Similarly, other Indigenous academics—whether men or women—may make sense of the same circumstances differently.

The acknowledgement of varying perspectives, and the need to elevate marginalised voices in the discipline is important. It’s a shift necessary to critique current powers and structures that shape and perpetuate current social reality, particularly as most people take “reality” for granted—as the way it is apart from humans. Yet humans create the systems, cultures, and knowledges with which we live and exercise. For the purposes of this essay, importantly, universities have expanded Indigenous-related offerings over the last decade. Many disciplines include courses that explicitly embrace and teach Indigenous knowledges and perspectives to students thanks to institutional policies of Indigenization (Pedri-Spade & Pitawanakwa, 2022). Even core courses embrace diversity of perspectives and readings within their teachings. Yet the data suggest that these same increasingly “diversified” post-secondary institutions have not yet diversified their faculty. Furthermore, these faculty are frequently situated in departments explicitly built for them (like Indigenous or Black studies). While these disciplines are important and have made important contributions and perspectives to universities, they also frequently lack power, prestige, and influence within campuses (Brunette-Debassige, 2023; Henry et al., 2017). That is, the capacity and ability to make *institutional* change remains limited, and colonial policies entrenched in university systems make carving out *home* outside of specialized studies (such as Indigenous or Black studies) challenging for many. Still, their

perspectives, and requirements to take courses that offer these perspectives, are important steps towards decolonisation and reconciliation. Even with increasing valuation of racialized and Indigenous perspectives, these faculty are underrepresented in universities across Canada (Henry et al., 2017). While Tuck and Yang, Fanon, and De Bois are all taught in social theory courses across Canada, rarely are they taught by visible minorities.

Furthermore, Indigenous specific courses (not just in sociology) are frequently taught by non-Indigenous people. In some ways, logically, based on the underrepresentation of Indigenous faculty across university this might make some sense as there simply are not enough Indigenous faculty across Canada to teach these courses; consequently, white settler professors teach Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. This, however, presents two problems: (1) if these courses continue to be absorbed by white settler faculty, no space is made for racialized and Indigenous faculty within these institutions and (2) many settler scholars teaching this content have little or no interactions with Indigenous people, meaning their understanding of Indigenous readings will be limited by the absence of interaction. First, often well-intentioned white faculty members colonise these spaces, albeit inadvertently. With no one else “qualified” (by institutional standards) to teach these courses, settlers either step up or course offerings are made unavailable to students. Despite this dilemma created by colonising institutional policies, I believe most scholars navigating and teaching Indigenous courses are well-intentioned. Even in courses not explicitly focused on Indigenous scholarship, many settler scholars have Indigenousized their courses across the academy over the last ten years. When I started my first undergraduate degree in 2006, it was unusual to see even one Indigenous scholar on any reading list. I am pleased that many racialized and Indigenous scholars are finally receiving the acknowledgement they deserve. That said, as Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) observe, when white settler scholars engage with subjects such as race and Indigeneity, the danger of replacement—that is of allowing white settlers to occupy spaces that should be reserved for non-white bodies—is imminent, and requires consideration, even when the TRC Calls to Action have increased demand for Indigenous scholars in postsecondary institutions (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Ward et al., 2021). Second, as Fanon (1967; 1968) argues, decolonisation requires interaction with Indigenous people, meaning that Indigenous readings do not necessarily translate to understanding of Indigenous knowledge. Without interactions, readings may be misconstrued or read through individuals’ self texts: their own understandings based on their relationships with land and others. Foundational understanding of worldviews may be missed when read through the context of other knowledge systems.

Over the course of writing this paper, my views about postsecondary education as a settler colonial project have shifted. When I started, I’d naively believed that change could come if enough scholars called for it, and if we acknowledged alternate knowledges as many profess to. My perspective, however, has shifted, and I now argue that postsecondary institutions are inherently colonial, and while they can be Indigenousized on a pedantic level I am not convinced

under the current university model that decolonisation is achievable without significant shifts in power. That is not to say that individuals within the university cannot decolonise their practice—whether that practice is teaching, research, or service—and powerfully transform the communities in which they live. Instead, I suggest that colonialism is purposively entrenched in the structures and systems of postsecondary education, and any efforts to change this entrenchment are met with vehement resistance (Brunette-Debassige, 2023; Ward et al., 2021). As Brunette-Debassige (2023) observes, change itself is embedded in the white possessive logics of sovereignty, whereby sovereignty is interpreted, controlled, and reformed by and through white logics of independence, interdependence, and ownership. Essentially, decolonizing policies becomes subsumed by white settler systems that reduce the impact and influence of any potential change (Brunette-Debassige, 2023).

Universities themselves are “an infrastructure of empire, an institution and actor through which the totalising logic of domination could be extended,” (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nisancioglu, 2018, p.5). The purpose of the university is to spread European knowledge, thinking, and logic, thereby colonising the very minds of those who attend them. And, truthfully, even with shifts in university offerings, it continues to do so, albeit through increasingly invisible ways. In the past, colonial efforts taught students to draw on the scientific method, to be “objective”, and to consider white settler perspectives instead of marginalised voices. The very process of becoming faculty at a postsecondary institution is colonial in nature—aiming to reproduce particular orientations towards research, thinking, and social life. This is, in part, why Fanon (1958) argues that decolonization of knowledge is an important first step in processes of decolonization. The colonial reproduction of faculty exists under the guise of consistently relearning and reestablishing the same lines of thinking as senior faculty evaluate junior members. That said, I’m happy to say many anti-racist, and post-colonial scholars and activists have emerged despite institutions’ best efforts, and feminist killjoys abound (Ahmed, 2023), yet the university itself is “unshakeably colonial,” (Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nisancioglu, 2018: 6), and the notion of earning one’s stripes to be able to even teach, suggests a unifying colonial purpose.

I begin this essay by defining and explaining the similarities and differences between Indigenization, diversity, and decolonization alongside the implications at the University level. I build on the scholarship of Gebrial (2018) and Holmwood (2018) who have framed this work through a social justice lens. Both have argued that the university’s calls for diversity have not been met with meaningful systematic change, an argument I further by highlighting calls for Indigenization rather than decolonization. This sets the stage for exploring the problem of white academe occupying racialized and Indigenous spaces, even when well-intentioned (which, I argue, it often is). I move on to recognise current barriers to decolonising these courses en masse, while arguing that these efforts, in fact, may sustain colonial structures in universities. I finish by suggesting, that universities either need to change the structures sustaining them (including redefining professor

qualifications) or new education systems based on relationality need to emerge, creating something new.

3. INDIGENIZATION

About a decade ago I remember first hearing about nationwide efforts to Indigenize post secondaries, particularly following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pedri-Spade & Pitawanakwat, 2022). I know now that some universities began these efforts long before the Calls to Action, but the TRC mobilized post secondaries in a way I hadn't seen or experienced prior. Efforts to Indigenize became tied to funding models that rewarded institutions for including Indigenous voices in their offerings, courses, and administrations. Indigenization, at its root, aims to add Indigenous voices to already established corners of scholarship and study. As a practice, Indigenization is about adding Indigenous voices into colonial establishments that have marginalised, and, at times, silenced them. At its best, Indigenization is, "a transformative process that depends on the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and their respective knowledges and the creation of various spaces where Indigenous peoples may enact their ways of knowing, axiologies, and ethics," (Thorborn Pitawanakawat & Pedri-Spade, 2022: 15). At its worst, Indigenization can be a tokenistic tool that appears to include Indigenous perspectives without providing the structures to give these voices credence, a process Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) refer to as "Indigenous inclusion." This is particularly prevalent when Indigenous positions are added to current disciplines without forming any structures to support and sustain individuals in these spaces.

Early in my career I worked at an institution that sought to Indigenize without the presence or voices of Indigenous peoples in this process. While this seems wholly laughable today, the institution had a government mandate to Indigenize without clear boundaries or definition of what Indigenizing should or would look like. Consequently, the administration sought to shift settler faculty perspectives and practices to adopt this unwieldy mandate. Instead of hiring Indigenous people into positions, they hired settler scholars and staff who analysed Indigenous works and practices but had little or no contact with Indigenous communities. Indigenous knowledge, however, must be understood and carried in and through relationships with Indigenous peoples. While reading Indigenous works is important to shift perspectives, it is not a substitute for relationships with Indigenous peoples. In short, this version of Indigenization did not even meet the basic criteria of "Indigenous inclusion" (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018), and aimed to encourage settler faculty to adopt Indigenous teaching methods, ideas, and practices without any interaction or input from Indigenous peoples. Consequently, when some settler faculty were called to do this work, they did so based on stereotypes rather than interaction and understanding of Indigenous peoples, epistemologies, and cosmologies.

Let me be clear: Indigenization is important. Much education hinges on the notion that people "don't know what they don't know," and consequently, when

students read and reflect on voices they wouldn't hear otherwise is central to the ways in which they think and engage with both scholarship and society itself. As an Arts trained sociologist, despite policies that have promoted neoliberalism and a focus on human capital (Shelliam, 2018) I see postsecondary education not as a personal responsibility and bridge to employment for young adults, but rather as a social right—an imminently important vessel to establish and root society itself. While university educated citizens contribute to workplaces in important ways, critical thinking provided by Arts programs is necessary to sustain democracy and caring societies, and access to such critical thinking is a social right that must be available to all bodies (Shelliam, 2018). Clearly reading alternate epistemologies, ontologies, and perspectives allows for more robust engagement, particularly with marginalised people with whom many students wouldn't otherwise interact. Further, Indigenization, when more than tokenism, combats epistemic ignorance—a systematic form of not knowing—which powerfully reshapes how cultures and peoples come to know and understand each other (Kuokkanen, 2007). Combating epistemic ignorance means confronting settler taken-for-granted knowledge with Indigenous epistemologies, an important shift in decolonizing efforts.

In many respects, particularly from institutional vantage points, Indigenization is “easy,” particularly as there are so many Indigenous voices emerging in scholarship and elsewhere. If you're reading this paper, I suspect you're keenly aware that Indigenous people have not magically disappeared across Turtle Island. Since I started postsecondary in 2006 as an undergraduate student, Indigenous voices have become amplified across numerous venues and places. While most of the TRC calls to action still require attention at the writing of this piece, responses to some have drawn attention to Indigenous voices. Providing credence and space for this Indigenization, however, is much more complex—which I will discuss later in this essay. The systems of verification, expertise, and validation created by Eurocentric postsecondary systems mean that not all knowledge is given the same weight, and not all voices have the presumed authority to be heard. Ultimately, these systems work to invalidate those that oppose them. Readily, this prompted a rising number of marginalised peoples—including Indigenous peoples—through the Eurocentric system to reach expertise, but the powers within the systems remain, and the structural permanence of colonial power hard to shift.

I suspect some of this attention has sewn seeds for Indigenous resurgence (George, 2019). While many Indigenous people in Canada celebrated and practiced their culture and teachings in the dark, embracement has allowed more practices to come to the forefront. There's still much work to be done, but cultural celebration and pride in Indigeneity have emerged, even as colonial Canada confronts its past and makes (many still yet to be realized) reparations for genocidal practices. In many ways, Indigenization is an important step in establishing and empowering Indigenous voices in Canada's universities. It's increased job postings for Indigenous faculty (across disciplines) to enhance Indigenous voices in different spaces and allowed for Indigenous perspectives to be more readily available to students and scholars alike (Holwood, 2018). It's created purposeful

Indigenous student recruitment efforts and purposively worked to remove barriers to attending postsecondary for Indigenous students. It's also, unfortunately, prompted a rise in Indigenous pretendians—individuals who have claimed Indigeneity without any connections to any Indigenous community (Leroux, 2019).

Canada's practices of genocide against Indigenous people—including both the 60s scoop as well as the residential school system—mean that many Indigenous folks spent their childhoods without their culture (Kingston, 2015). Some were physically separated, others were mentally or emotionally traumatized and disconnected. The disconnection and trauma experienced by many Indigenous people has left gaps in kinship ties—some because kin didn't come home and others because kin were unknown through adoption. Such gaps in knowledge and ties made it easy for non-Indigenous folks to “pass” as Indigenous despite having no Indigenous ancestry, and with institutional efforts to amplify Indigenous voices and work, many pretendians saw (and many received) rewards for “passing” as Indigenous (Pedri-Spade & Pitawanakwat, 2022). This is further complicated by complex definitions of Indigeneity that hinge on self-identification as the mechanism for determining Indigeneity.

As I write this piece, pretendians have been outed in academia, the courts, and the arts communities, and many had received accolades in the past for their work (Leo, 2022). In many respects, these accolades shouldn't surprise any of us. pretendians' work has been promoted, but they did not have the same barriers or traumas experienced by many Indigenous folks as they didn't experience disconnection and hostile dispossession from their land, culture, and kin. Indigenous strength resides in culture and epistemologies that are often not valued by institutions. In the case of pretendians, many made up stories about their families and their connections to their Indigenous ancestry that were not verifiable, and, perhaps more importantly, no Indigenous communities have claimed these pretendians (Miller, 2021; Leo, 2022). Further, pretendians also capitalize on Indigenous histories of trauma that make disconnection from culture and kin possible. In other words, its these places that often empower pretendians to colonize identities. While pretendians themselves are responsible for their fraudulent claims to Indigenous identities, institutions are complicit for not adequately verifying Indigenous identities prior to affording rewards (Pedri-Spade & Pitawanakwat, 2022).

I've written elsewhere (Desjarlais-deKlerk, 2023) about how uncomfortable pretendians make me. As a settler-Métis woman who grew up embroiled in settler culture amid my settler kin, I often feel the need to keep my genealogy close at hand should I need to prove my authenticity and the veracity of those that have claimed me. The fact remains, pretendians have caused harm to Indigenous communities, and continue to do so. This harm, however, isn't singular. It's complex, unwieldy, and indeterminant: their discovery has created internal debate within Indigenous communities about authenticity. As I said elsewhere, authenticity must rest with Indigenous communities themselves, but I don't claim to know which authorities should and shouldn't be given attention in such cases.

Indigenization, however, has given rise to these claims and rewarded Indigenous-claimers who have achieved some measure of colonial professional accolades. Essentially, the motivation to pass as Indigenous has greatly increased, particularly as Indigenous voices become amplified.

Further, the damage caused by pretendians isn't singular (Henry & Tait, 2023; Kolopenuk, 2023; Stolz & Toscano, 2025). pretendians' exposure puts entire communities at risk, particularly as questions arise about the validity of Indigenous work, efforts, and students, (Henry & Tait, 2023). Suspicions often arise across and within communities about who did or didn't know about the pretendians' origins, and leaves space for lateral violence. This violence extends to trainees, and whether their training "counts." The emotional labour and toll the pretendian phenomenon has on communities remains sweeping.

It also extends to Indigenous people who are not pretendians, but now combat being called out as such, particularly as Indigenous experiences are not singular. The pretendian problem is not just one of unwarranted accolades, but one of community suspicion that sews discomfort and defensiveness of who we are at every table we sit at. This becomes further muddled in webs of complicated nation to nation politics and contested identities.

In short, the identity politics of Indigeneity make Indigenization efforts complex, yet they also exist as the reason that such efforts are necessary in the first place (Shelliam, 2018). Racialized people have long contributed to critical thought, but many have not been provided adequate resources to amplify their perspectives beyond and outside their communities, including access to University audiences and journals promoted and curated by the white academe. Consequently, diversification efforts are needed to create a more just society, particularly to "repair the racialized divisions of intellectual labour imposed by colonial rule in terms of who can think adequately for whom," (Shelliam, 2018: 60)

Increasing marginalised voices, however, does not mean that marginalised bodies feel inherently welcome in spaces that once shuttered them out (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022). The ways in which epistemologies are (or are not) valued and engagements with marginalised communities happen demonstrates whether non-white bodies are welcome within these spaces. Relationships in and between marginalised peoples and institutions that silence, support, or ignore them ultimately paint these experiences as reconciliatory or tokenistic. Home, in colonial institutions then, ultimately happens in and through sites of resistance wherein people carve and create spaces where marginalised bodies find and create places of belonging (Carrillo Rowe & Tuck, 2017).

4. DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Importantly, Indigenization as a practice of institutional inclusion has often been subsumed within diversity projects, a concept that isn't new to universities (Gebrial, 2018). Diversity and refers to including a range of people from different racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual backgrounds. At the postsecondary level,

diversity focuses on increasing student enrollments of BIPOC (black, Indigenous, people of colour) people and promotion of marginalised scholarship across multiple fields. It seeks to increase numbers of each of these groups to create a more just society by welcoming minority members into the university community (Shelliam, 2018) and into spaces that could be transformative through educational practice. Diversity, however, doesn't necessarily represent justice. Neoliberal philosophies argue that university is an individual and familial responsibility to achieve particular types of training and employment (Shelliam, 2018). In this way, some programs, particularly those that result in the highest earnings post-graduation, engage in more gatekeeping than those that produce lower earning differentials. University-level policies that create tuition differentials to reflect these future earnings mean that despite policies around diversity, some programs are inaccessible to some bodies.

Diversity isn't synonymous with equity. Equity, at its root, is about fairness and ensuring all bodies have equal opportunities and access to particular resources. Ensuring equal access despite barriers (financial or otherwise) means that everyone has the opportunity to participate. Still, from an institutional perspective, this often becomes about numbers and reserving a percentage of seats for particular types of bodies within desirable, competitive programs. Diversification initiatives, then, have the danger of becoming institutional vanity projects that are self-serving and self-promoting to universities, particularly when utilized for funding models and comparisons (Gebrial, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, Vizcaino, Wallace, & We, 2018). Government funding tied to diversity motivates institutions to act. Yet when marginalised bodies access spaces they're not accepted, structures amplify the white academe (Maldonado et al, 2018). That is, presumably diverse perspectives get cannibalized into white academic dominant structures of colonial reproduction. This is not to say that the scholars change their voices, but that the institutions do not bend or change to accommodate these perspectives. The entrenchment of white colonial policies of possessiveness framed around punitive systems make change nearly impossible without major shifts in the very structures of the colonial university project.

Further, Treaty rights exercised and afforded to Indigenous peoples, cannot be minimised to diversity. While university administrations may be tempted to shift Indigenous inclusion into diversity offices, Indigenous rights and justice exist apart from other diversity issues. Those that apply to First Peoples must be seen through a lens of broken colonial promises and problematic practices.

5. DECOLONISATION

Decolonisation has become diluted conceptually. Its meaning has been coopted, adopted, and reimagined by white scholars in ways that limit its impact and full scope. Tuck and Yang (2012) explicitly state that decolonisation "is not a metaphor," and, in fact, requires return of land and settling away from Indigenous lands and spaces. In occupying and disrupting Indigenous relationships to land, settlers engage in "profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence,"

that is “reasserted each day of occupation” (Tuck Yang, 2012: 5). In this way, settler colonialism happens daily through structures and processes whereby land is considered property and human-land relationships occur only through ownership (Wolfe, 1999). Yet alongside the idea of such violence, and need for changes in human-land relationships, settler colonialism is driven by “access to territory” (Wolf, 2006: 338) and ultimately, settler colonialism involves settlers claiming permanent ownership of land and property.

While colonisation involves moving and occupying lands formerly connected to other people; decolonisation involves leaving those lands and returning them to those that once had free access. Postcolonial subjects under imperial rule can, theoretically seize land back. However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) observe, in settler colonial situations, this becomes incredibly complicated as settler colonialism itself don’t happen once. Colonisation is an ongoing process rather than a singular event. The scope of land back activism has expanded substantially in the last ten years, with increased calls and demands to return lands to Indigenous people. To Tuck and Yang (2012), decolonisation is only truly achieved when settlers physically leave the spaces which they’ve colonised—such as the evacuation of British rule from India.

While most scholars argue that decolonisation involves the return of lands and land-control to Indigenous people, they also suggest that it involves more than return of land; it also involves mental shifts and adaptation. Fanon (1968) argued that mental liberation was the first step in decolonisation; being set free from colonised thinking, beliefs, and values is essential to revolution. If colonisation isn’t singular, logically, neither is decolonisation. Acts of resistance are, to me, the first efforts to decolonise, and, in many respects, are the prelude to land back efforts. Mental liberation (Fanon, 1968), then, is part of decolonisation; it’s a means of decolonising self and uprooting current colonial ways of engaging with and relying on land.

For the purposes of this essay, I define decolonisation as a process whereby colonisers recede power, influence, knowledge, and land. It’s not singular; it’s ongoing. While it could happen overnight physically (e.g. as in India where colonisers left occupied lands), decolonisation of culture, self, and identity is ongoing. I also humbly recognise that I am an ongoing project of decolonisation, and the training that bolstered me to consider my own thoughts in a frame of binary, logic, and truthiness. I suspect this will be a long-term lifelong project of sitting, being, and learning in community through elders and knowledge keepers.

Decolonisation within the university then means altering “systems and processes rooted in colonial ideologies and white supremacy that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples and their knowledges,” (Pedri-Spade & Pitawanakwat, 2022: 25). While Indigenization is imminently important in responding to the TRC calls to action, decolonisation ensures that Indigenous voices aren’t tokenized, and are instead given full acknowledgement and value amongst Western ones. Where Indigenization, if understood in its most basic colonial form as embeddedness of Indigenous peoples into university systems seems “easy,” doing so without

decolonisation threatens to merely advance the colonial project further. That is, it could introduce Indigenous knowledge without understanding it through an Indigenous worldview; some of which has happened in past scholarship on (rather than with) Indigenous peoples. This same logic of taking knowledge rather than situating, understanding, and reflecting on it, further alienates Indigenous people from the settler white academe.

Decolonisation requires dismantling of the structures that have mobilized Western Eurocentric positions in the academy and kept some bodies from receiving full acknowledgement in the university (Battiste, 2013). While Indigenization incorporates Indigenous voices, decolonisation grants them the ability to be fully heard, understood, and embedded in the university's very functions.

The university itself is imbued with colonial structures. Many are rooted within the very function of the university, including democratizing governance features intended to maintain rigour and academic independence within a university's walls (Pedri-Spade & Pitawanakwat, 2022). Even Faculty Association agreements act as colonising forces. I want to believe that most scholars want to recognise the troubles of Eurocentric knowledge, yet paradoxically, they were trained in the white academy, myself included. With a few notable exceptions, having a doctorate means ascribing to a particular way of thinking and organising information, and, at the very least, the ability to convince others that one belongs. Completing a doctorate, one of the mandatory qualifications in most faculty postings, is a benchmark for achievement in Eurocentric colonial university structure.

That is not to say Indigenous people never meet that bar; quite the opposite. But the barriers that they experience to complete doctoral studies are far greater than those experienced by settler scholars. Indigenous scholars grew up in families gripped by dispossession—of land, kin, and ways of life—that continues to create family disruption (Barker et al., 2019; Burnette, 2016). Indigenous communities continue to be disproportionately impacted by poverty, intergenerational trauma (including invisibility when it felt unsafe to identify as Indigenous), and child welfare (Baker et al., 2019; Burnette, 2016). Ultimately, equity means offering greater support for students who have experienced the impacts of ongoing intergenerational trauma. Indigenous students need supports that extend beyond normal university services, and non-Indigenous scholars need training to understand the complexities of Indigenous lives. Understanding that these are the lives of our students, and that the impacts on Indigenous communities happen to real Indigenous peoples is a key step in reconciliation and true decolonization.

In the classroom, in an effort to establish rigour and uniformity, particular types of assessment have been heralded as the “gold standard,” yet the question remains: the gold standard for who? The reproduction of a particular understanding of rigour must be divorced from Eurocentric understandings of knowledge production. Essay writing, consideration of particular types of knowledge over others, and engagement in particular ways are, essentially colonising agents. Instead rigour can be understood in a relational context that understands and

recognizes impacts to communities and environments. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) argue that initiatives to incorporate Indigenous voices are often subject to replacement, that is, for white bodies to occupy spaces which they have little direct expertise.

In addition, university systems often require that individuals leave their communities to become faculty. Consequently, Indigenous folks who acquire doctorates are often required to leave the lands they're Indigenous to in order to work as faculty. While there may be good institutional reasons for this requirement, I believe it's worth remembering that Indigenous people are Indigenous to a particular land or region.

6. WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

It's clear that universities have work to do to encourage and expand Indigenous inclusion at multiple levels. I'm skeptical that all of the changes necessary to completely decolonise postsecondary will happen in my lifetime, but I believe change is possible, albeit incremental and slow-moving. That said, at the micro-level a lot of work can be accomplished fairly quickly. At the macro-level, greater advocacy and work is needed on the part of all faculty and administration if we are ever to create more just and equitable learning spaces for all students and a sense of home for all scholars.

First, within classrooms assessments can be altered to encompass different types of epistemologies. I know many of my colleagues—both Indigenous and settler alike—are making moves in this direction. There are major shifts within sociology (and other disciplines) to ensure that BIPOC students are empowered to engage in their courses in different and exciting ways. It's challenging to imagine something different, but many are doing this important work, I commend those at the forefront of these efforts. This includes models of ungrading (Gorichanaz, 2024), contract grading (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001), and shifting assessment away from knowledges that require on-the-spot consideration rather than slow, thoughtful engagement.

Second, Indigenous voices and perspectives must be added to all courses. I recognise that settlers continue to teach and hold the majority of tenured and tenure-track positions across Canada. That said, work must be continue to increase the number of Indigenous works students encounter throughout their studies. Further, when possible, settler scholars who teach Indigenous courses must connect with local Indigenous communities. Chris Andersen (2021), in a talk given through the University of Alberta speakers series, argued that settler scholars who are embeded in Indigenous communities may be better positioned to teach Indigenous perspectives than Indigenous scholars who are disconnected. In my experience, this is the crux of understanding Indigenous perspectives: relationships. Without relationality between cultures and communities, this work becomes colonised, even when combining important voices into scholarly canon—much of which Fanon (1958) warned about in his work about conscious

liberation. Settler scholars who teach Indigenous content must be willing to connect and build ongoing relationships of trust with Indigenous communities to fully situate the work they include. Furthermore, Indigenous scholars must connect with their local communities to adequately recognize the impact and influence of local Indigenous perspectives and thoughts alongside content being shared. While there are similarities between Indigenous cultures, each has its own local traditions, customs, stories, and nuances. Understanding local is imminently important to real decolonisation and reconciliation. I think it is also worth considering that this kind of Indigenization, in all disciplines, is just good pedagogy. While including Indigenous voices is an important step towards reconciliation, ensuring students have understandings of multiple epistemologies makes them better scholars and ultimately better graduates. Decolonised disciplines mean disciplines that have epistemologies and theories that give and have relational space for each other. A decolonised discipline is one that ensures that different perspectives are given understanding in relational ways.

Third, Indigenous faculty must be hired in every discipline (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). While the problem of pretendians continues, hiring Indigenous faculty remains an important component in decolonising universities. Shifting the composition of departments will have impact on their long-term goals and functions. The more we expand the composition of departments, even in non-Indigenous and non-racialized disciplines, the more likely we are to experience Indigenization. Still, we need to recognize that there are limitations in how academics are trained, particularly if doctorates persist under current university structures. More than this, however, these faculty cannot be seen as the solution to all colonial problems on campuses. While many Indigenous people take up this work, others' efforts centre around including our communities and reaching them in important ways. Indigenous epistemologies and policies will be blocked by colonial ones unless the entire colonial project is reimagined (Brunette-Debassige, 2023). Further, the combat the pretendian problem, postsecondary administrations need to form long-term ongoing relationships with local Indigenous communities. These relationships would not only further the mission of decolonisation and the ways in which we work on campuses they would also shift understandings of decolonial work into ones of ongoing, consistent relationality.

Simultaneously, universities must create policies that ensure Indigenous identity is verified at the university level at the time of hiring and hiring committees must be trained in these policies. Pretendians create real harm to Indigenous communities that cannot be overstated. The fraud, disruption, and suspicion they create hurt students (both real and imagined), communities (both Indigenous and settler), and Indigenous community members working to eliminate pretendianism.

Fourth, to fully decolonise, faculty association agreements and university structures need to shift to allow for other types of credentials and accreditations. While I am not an expert in the important training elders and knowledge keepers undergo before being given such designations by their communities, these epistemologies are important. A truly decolonised university acknowledges the value

and expertise of those roles and properly compensates them. True decolonization and Indigenization require shifts in how this kind of expertise is recognized and rewarded. This, however, is also where I wonder if perhaps a reimagining is in order. I remain uncertain that this will happen thanks to the homogenising forces of academic training. I suppose only time will tell.

Fifth, creating a sense of home in any environment means engaging in meaningful long-term relationships that shift to share power and influence. These shifts will only be fully accepted after relationship building and trust. Time, attention, and repeated discussion with authentic engagement are needed to do this in ways that garner trust. Often Indigenous consultation happens at planned intervals when institutions require Indigenous voices, but this does not reflect an ongoing relationship of reciprocity and respect. Postsecondary institutions need to work to adapt, adjust, and acknowledge Indigenous peoples. Further, dismantling punitive systems and trading them for systems of care—that ensure everyone in the university community feels welcome.

Resource scarcity and competition built into neoliberal systems (including postsecondary education) perpetuate racial inequity and colonial disparity. Dismantling systems of competition and replacing them with ones that prioritize care and ensure everyone has access to education, regardless of their background, would shift the understandings and narratives of these spaces. Reconciliation could be greatly furthered if access to postsecondary education were available and welcome to all, regardless of class, race, gender, ability status, or sexuality. Systems that welcome difference would be open to all people, regardless of their economic achievement.

Lastly, Indigenous peoples need to continue to establish their own systems and homes—both inside and outside postsecondary institutions—and need to be well-resourced to do this work. Reconciliation will not happen in one generation, but it will require major shifts in how we do and engage in “everyday” practices and work, including that at postsecondary institutions.

7. CONCLUSION

The colonising nature of postsecondary in Canada remains irrefutable (Battiste, 2013). It changes how citizens think, act, and engage in society, and consequently continues to require interrogation and consideration. While this paper has been far from exhaustive on this topic, I have argued that universities need to move towards decolonisation rather than simply adopting policies of Indigenization. Other scholars—Métis or other Indigenous ones included—may strongly disagree with my central definitions or understandings of institutional policies, particularly as none are singular or completely agreed upon. Much like Indigenous identities, these are contested, and conversations about all and what can be done to move towards reconciliation are ongoing.

Like other scholars before me, I don't claim to know the destination of decolonisation. Instead, I argue that as institutions engage in decolonising processes, we make space for other epistemologies and ontologies, thereby upsetting Eurocentric ways of knowing. I imagine that should decolonisation really occur, we could enter a place of true multiculturalism where all culture and content is given equal value and credence; a place of true social justice, where education is a social right, not an individual responsibility.

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