

***Kindred Practice: Experiences of a Research Group Working Towards  
Decolonization and Indigenization in the Everyday***

***cîhkâhtaw peyakwan ka-isi-wâpahtamihk:  
tânisi e-isi-mâmawi-nanitonâhkik ôma kâkwe-kweskipimâtisihk ekwa ka-  
kîwe-totamihk iyiniwewin tâhto-kîsikaw***

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**Abstract**

This paper engages the question of *kindred practice* as contemplated by three members of a research group working toward decolonization and Indigenization. The focus on kindred practice is informed by the title and description of the *wâhkôhtowin: Indigenizing practice, linking kindred spirits* conference held in September 2014, at the University of Saskatchewan. Being each positioned uniquely in relation to social power hierarchies, for the authors, the notion of what it means to be kindred in advocacy carries nuanced dynamics and inflections. As the piece unfolds, the authors elaborate key attributes of practice believed to both underlie our kindred relationship, and to align with our commitment to work towards decolonization and Indigenization.

**ôta kâ-masinahikâtek**

ôma masinahikan ôta e-kî-nistokamâtocik e-nanitonâhkik tânisi cîhkâhtaw peyakwan e-kî-isi-wâpahtamihk ôma kâkwe-kweskipimâtisihk ekwa ka-kîwe-totamihk iyiniwewin. e-kî-mâmiskohtamihk esa wâhkôhtowin: iyiniwewin, kâkî-mâmawi-api nôcihtowipîsim 2014, kihci-kiskinwamâtohwikamikohk U of S. ôma mîna kîtapicik ekwa ka-isi-atoskâtahkik, wâpahtamok mitoni cîhkâhtaw peykwan e-isi-nayâhtakik ôma kâkwe-kweskipitâhkik kihci-kiskinwamâtohwikamikohk ekwa ka-mâmawi-kamâtocik.

**I**n this paper, three uniquely positioned researchers combine voices to share a vision of kindred practice developed by collaborating as a research group. Our aim was to work towards decolonizing and Indigenizing our practices as educators and researchers. Our discussion in the paper grows from a conscious practice of identifying individual subject positions, and naming the unequal power relations that govern them. We envision kindred practice as a collective process of becoming that is grounded in reciprocity, relationality, and a shared commitment to praxis (Cajete, 2000).

We worked as a research group with the Canadian Prevention Science Cluster for Children & Youth (CPSC) from September 2013-April 2014. The CPSC research project is a 7-year SSHRC partnership grant with hubs located at the University of Saskatchewan, the University of British Columbia, Dalhousie University, and Western University. The goal of the research cluster is to unite researchers and practitioners across Canada with a common purpose in violence prevention. Each hub conducts projects in the area of violence prevention differently that suit the context they are working in, and merges these projects through unique and collaborative practices. The U of S hub is housed within the Aboriginal Education Research Centre (AERC).

Informed by anti-colonial and anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001; Kumashiro, 2000), and Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste, 2013; Ermine, 2000; Hart, 2002; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008), the members of our research team participated in various projects and initiatives to build relationships with community allies to address youth violence prevention. Projects included: implementation of the *Fourth R* violence prevention program in schools, the development of a violence prevention workbook for “youth-at-risk”, and participation in the *wâhkôhtowin: Indigenizing Practice in Post-Secondary Education* conference.

We begin this paper by situating ourselves as socially constructed individuals, and name ways our experiences have brought us to this work, which we believe is foundational to fostering a kindred practice. We then outline key attributes of our collaboration we see as cultivating kindred practice in our work toward decolonization and Indigenization. The attributes are discussed under the following headings: *power and positionality*, *Indigenization and kindred practice*, and *actualizing kindred practice*. We believe the themes were brought up for each of us in different ways and are part of our collective and individual journey towards a kindred practice. Our vision of this practice is to advance productive work that has a meaningful impact on the lives of individuals, and to work towards, and contribute to, institutional and interpersonal processes of decolonization and Indigenization in any way we can. We share our experiences as a collaborative research group with the intention to further dialogue on how effective learning and advocacy can take place towards decolonization and Indigenization.

### **Self-location**

The notion of kindred practice will be grounded initially in the self-location of each author. This is important in recognizing how our subject positions inform and shape how we conceive this process of becoming. Indigenous researcher Wilson (2008) notes that at the foundation of a research project is the heart and mind of the researcher, and “checking your heart” is necessary

when identifying one's motives for doing research (pg.60). In the spirit of Wilson's precept, we recognize that our unique subject positions shape and inform how we conceive of our kindred practice, and we therefore begin by locating ourselves.

### **Ryan**

Self-locating oneself in research is foundational to an Indigenous research framework: it is preparatory work that helps the researcher become self aware, accountable, and helps others locate the researcher's perspectives (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2010). I have chosen to situate myself within an Indigenous research methodology because it acknowledges ways of thinking and being that respect relationality (Kovach, 2010). I conduct this writing through the lens of a First Nations person, who also identifies as a gay male, raised in a First Nations community in Saskatchewan. My identity as a Cree person informs how I aim at centering Indigenous knowledge within my research by focusing on relationality as a central practice. My sexual identity, as a gay male, has helped me critique and illuminate ways that oppression becomes hidden. Both of these aspects of my identity shapes how I do research and informs my research interests.

As I reflect on my experiences as a member of the research group, I draw upon Ermine's (2000) notion of *ethics* who suggests that the intersection of different knowledges and worldviews are an *ethical space* in which there are opportunities for meaningful dialogue, negotiation of knowledge, and fluidity in knowledge production that allow researchers to investigate their own self-actualization. When I use the word *ethics* in my reflection, I'm not suggesting that there are finite rules one must follow for developing a kindred practice; rather, for me, the word *ethics* is way to remind myself that knowledge is created in a variety of ways. I must be aware of my actions and how they create space for fellow members of the research group to share their knowledge and contributions as they also inform my own growth as a researcher.

### **Willow**

I am a woman of "white settler" Irish and Ashkenazi Jewish descent. There are many formative experiences, which have shaped my perception of what kindred practice means to me. Two experiences that distinctly resonate with me are my involvement in a Jewish Youth Movement, in which Jewish youth engaged in issues of social and environmental justice, and my work in First Nations education and health in the province of British Columbia. In the latter case, I gained insight into how the politics of neo-colonialism continue to operate. I repeatedly witnessed the reproduction of neocolonial dynamics, not only through federal legislation and policies, but also through relational processes, which value Western bureaucratic knowledge

systems, while subjugating forms of Indigenous knowledge and community-based practices (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; de Leeuw, Maurice, Holyk, Greenwood & Adam, 2012; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo & Rowan, 2014). I also witnessed many unsuccessful attempts by individuals, including myself, to transform these dynamics. This led me to believe that transformative change must be fundamentally disruptive, and that in order to imagine such change, we must work towards decolonization within both micro-relational and macro-structural processes (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001).

Such work can begin in multiple contexts. At a personal level, part of this process as a white settler Canadian woman, has been to name the ways in which whiteness, as a social construct and as a social practice, informs my movements, and my interactions with those around me (Frankenberg, 1993). This has involved interrogating the relationship between whiteness, communication, and power, learning to communicate in new ways (e.g., when to be silent and when to pause), and embracing discomfort as part of relating and navigating complex power dynamics (Butler, 2005; Li Li, 2004; Nakayama & Martin, 1999). At the institutional level, academia is a key site where a collaborative research group such as ours can be afforded the intellectual and relational space to explore and organically develop what we understand as a *kindred practice*. I have been honoured to work with the research centre, and to be part of this collaborative research group.

### **Vince**

As a white, settler, middle-class, heterosexual, researcher, I have experienced the contours of oppression as one benefitting from ever-present and nuanced iterations of unequal power arrangements. As a personal directive, I am compelled to ask what it means for me to be kindred in the struggle to confront and transform colonialism and racism. Through the exploration of my learning and practice in the field of education, I have been drawn to theory and analysis that uncovers and names ways oppression works below the surface as mediator of everyday social reality (Butler, 1990; Haymes, 1995; LaRocque, 2010; Leonardo, 2009). Guided by literature, and through analyzing experiences of routine life, I have come to understand social practice as layered with concurrent power imbalances, foreclosing for some and making room for others to negotiate and pursue desired ends.

A key concern of anti-oppressive theorizing, I have witnessed both within others and myself, is the resistance of individuals in dominant positions to acknowledge the ubiquity of social power imbalances. I try to carry this understanding with me in my daily life as a learning guide. However, I must be honest that any insight I may cling to is developed within the same

subjectivity that has internalized dominance through the course of my life (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2013).

My experience working with the research group has provided me with a practice-based resource from which to generate a more substantive basis for illuminating my role in anti-colonial/anti-oppressive work. During the initial convening of our research group, this shared endeavor began at the level of dialogue, but quickly translated into instances of emotional investment, encouragement, shared laughter, and shared sadness. This personal, embodied engagement has served to fortify the connection among group members, which has informed our advocacy and has been a source of personal growth. This connection itself suggests a quality in the order of *kindred*; one that is galvanized by a shared emphasis of the importance of the work, and a regard for the scale and severity of the problem.

### **Foundations of a Kindred Practice**

#### **Power and Positionality**

In our collaboration, both in preparation for the *Wahkohtowin* conference and during ongoing conversations in the development of this paper, we have come to see that part of what makes us kindred is a common vision. In general, it is a vision that coalesces around a sense that things could be improved, oppression can be confronted, and all life enriched by dismantling colonialism and revitalizing Indigenous ways of knowing. But these ideals cannot be realized without the hard work of illuminating ways settler colonialism, with its concomitant racism, has saturated every facet of our structures and psyches (Battiste, 2013; Tuck, 2013). These elements are already embedded in our practices, and therefore are not something that can be avoided, but must be excavated and transformed. Thus, a kindred approach to working against colonialism and racism needs to be deliberate and proactive.

While members of our research group are variously positioned across multiple forms of difference and power, and situated within ongoing colonialism in Canada (Lawrence & Dua, 2005; St. Denis, 2011), we have begun to create an intellectual and emotional space in which the construction of difference can be critically examined. When the construction of difference is acknowledged and named with respect to power and privilege, it has the ability to deepen our knowledge and understanding of others, and the world around us. This process is informed by Jeanette Armstrong's (2004) discussion of the Okanagan concept of *Enowkin*; the literal translation of which is something akin to, "a drop that permeates through the top of the head and suffuses the rest of the body" (p.31). In this conception, each individual in a community has a

unique perspective to share with the collective; we need to value these differences, build on these differences, and allow them to enrich us.

The cultivation of a kindred practice requires us to remain cognizant of how power dynamics operate. We must maintain our awareness that research itself "...is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (Smith, 1999, p.5). The institution of academic research has largely been a colonial artifact and vehicle for advancing colonial ends (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 1999). It is within such considerations and conditions that we as a research group examine how colonialism shapes all our lives, and the ways we are each implicated within colonial structures and discourses.

Practicing this accountability involves a willingness to lay bare our experiences with oppression, including ways in which we are marginalized and also ways we benefit. Our shared space has nurtured an environment that allows us to be vulnerable if we choose. Each of us is able to unveil experiences with oppression, knowing that it is not about being a victim or blaming, but rather it is about interrupting colonial systems by telling counter narratives. The emphasis on transparency and vulnerability produces a sense of communicating in "good faith." This is contrasted with a tendency to avoid discussing colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, etc. as there is often resistance to naming the role power plays in social interactions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; St. Denis, 2011). The goal of such communication is not consensus or comfort; rather, it is a deliberate and de-familiarizing disposition of being (and being for) (Boler, 1999). Nonetheless, a measure of comfort has been achieved within our group, which is grounded not in homogeneity (of subjectivities and ideas), but in the uncertainty and becoming of what we see as kindred practice.

In our collaboration, we have navigated in and out of individual positions and experiences, in an effort to illuminate the nature of the problem we wish to confront and the outcomes we strive to empower. Together, we have experienced colonialism and racism from varied sides, and wish to lay bare views and values in order to engage the complex and diverse contexts in which advocacy is necessary. In these ways we are *kindred*, and our practice will continue to evolve through dedication to personal learning and growth; dedication to decolonization, Indigenization, and anti-oppression; and dedication to one another.

### **Indigenization and Kindred Practice**

Indigenization within academia is about challenging ethnocentrism through processes of decolonization, and recentering Indigenous knowledge at the institutional level and within our

own practice as academics and researchers. Alfred (2004) warns that there are responsibilities when resisting colonialism and affirming Indigenous knowledges within academia. We must ask ourselves if we are part of the process of destruction of Indigenous cultures and nations, or are we upholding our responsibility to contend with it? The questions Alfred poses illuminate a commonality amongst us that centers our motives and guides our actions. Although the members of the research team are not all Indigenous, our differences are highlighted as a place to draw learning from as we develop relationships with each other. As a collective, we identified three key concepts in how we engaged in Indigenization through our practice: relationality, respecting difference, and accountability.

The heart of Indigenous knowledge and thought includes relationships, being mindful of how one lives, asking oneself if actions are good, and living in a good way. Indigenous scholars call this relationality (Ermine 2000; Kovach 2010; Wilson 2008). Reflecting on our past hub meetings, it was not just one person imparting knowledge, but rather we all did in our own ways. What becomes important are our interactions with each other: Are we assisting the other team members to feel safe and valued? For us, relationality becomes more than just about co-creating knowledge; it is about being committed to developing relationships with each other, our ideas, and ourselves.

We recognize that by sharing space, knowledge is created from our conversations, imaginations, and sharing of ideas. We learn and grow in relationship to each other. For instance, our knowledge around Indigenous youth violence has been enhanced by learning to listen to the other researcher's analysis and critiques of ethnocentrism and the impact it has in the lives of Indigenous youth.

There are two Indigenous ethics that need to be put into practice in order to contest Eurocentrism in the academy. The first deals with a commitment to respecting, valuing, and honoring differences, and the second is to organize one's mind and attitudes around the idea of sharing space (Alfred, 2004). Concepts of "respecting differences" and "sharing space" (relationality) illustrate an Indigenous worldview of interdependency, where everything is interrelated, and thus, functions and breathes as a whole, but embodies its own roles and gifts (Cajete, 2000). It is our individual and unique experiences that come together to create a learning atmosphere that builds upon our strengths.

From an Indigenous perspective, accountability is described as a set of ethics that guides how one develops respectful relationships with ideas, participants, collaborators, and communities (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2010). Part of practicing accountability and giving back consists of looking for ways that our actions can help open up spaces for these stories to be told.

This involves acknowledging our privilege within the group and working towards allowing others to speak when and if they choose to.

Individually, each person in our research team has taken up the notion of accountability towards other members by ensuring that their actions are respectful and foster growth in other team members. Such growth comes from actions that encourage risks, extend support, and raise our level of spiritual investment in our work. We feel that when we are able to engage in this type of learning and share knowledge in this way, we cultivate an ethic of giving back. Giving back involves a readiness to draw upon each other's stories, which might feel risky and uncomfortable, but are necessary in order to interject oppressive forms of knowledge (Thomas, 2005).

Indigenous researcher Robina Thomas (2005) asserts that some Indigenous stories act as "counter" stories; stories that resist oppression and help Indigenous Peoples reclaim their identities. Counter stories represent strength and are an opportunity to teach others about experiences that are systematically hidden. Sharing counter stories with our communities is important; it is equally important to take those stories to places/spaces that need to hear them. When we are able to tell our counter stories within institutions that are unsafe, we transform these spaces into ones that affirm and validate Indigenous knowledge (Monture, 2010). Such disclosure and vulnerability can be discomfoting, but it is a necessary part of giving back to Indigenous people and contributes to decolonization.

As a research team, our time together revealed many teachings, some of which will become clear later on in our lives. What is clear now is that by practicing relationality, using our knowledge in ways that confront colonialism, and nurturing indigenous knowledge, we have engaged in work that is accountable to each other and to Indigenous people. By continuously *checking our hearts* (Wilson, 2008), we unearth motivations and envision new possibilities for what decolonization and Indigenization looks like.

### **Actualization of Kindred Practice**

As we engage in various research projects, we have participated in numerous initial and ongoing dialogues to problematize what key concepts – such as, anti-oppressive education, decolonization, and indigenization – mean from our distinct subject positions, and how these notions may be taken up in our practice. To do this, we ask critical questions of ourselves and of one another, for instance, how do we Indigenize our practice together and in our collaborative work with schools and community organizations? And how do we actively decolonize the spaces and relationships in which we exist? The responses to such questions are unique to each of us



and must be understood within specific contexts. These kinds of questions appear over and over again as we engage in new projects and as we participate in new social interactions; as they do, we share in a process of collaborative and ongoing learning.

In this process, our work has not been about achieving consensus, but about achieving collaboration. It is this premise that has enabled trust and safety to build between us, as each person may feel supported and respected in their assertions, while acknowledging that there are limits to our knowing, and we may only ever hold partial knowledge of one another's experiences in the social world (Berlak, 2004; Kumashiro, 2000). The notion that there are limits to our knowledge of others' experiences is an essential premise on which to base our communication practices. This directly involves a vulnerability and implication of the self in our relationships with one another and with our research partners. In our research work, we seek to learn from one another through an interactive and ongoing process of co-constructing knowledge through dialogue, in recognition that we each hold experiential and embodied ways of knowing.

By privileging and making space for personal storytelling and narrative, we bring ourselves into our practice. We recognize that issues of social justice, oppression, and colonization are part of the very ways in which we navigate our worlds every day. By acknowledging this, we thereby disrupt the false disconnect between our personal and professional selves. Moreover, we cultivate a relational space in which an emotional investment, as well as an intellectual engagement, may be actualized and allows us to grow and learn. We do this in part by moving towards and not away from discomfort or the resistance of unknowing. This is premised on the contention that it is during moments of discomfort, when we allow ourselves to be emotionally and intellectually open, that our *un*learning can take place (Felman & Laub, 1992; Kumashiro, 2000), and that possibilities for decolonization can exist.

Cultivating a kindred practice requires working in the tough and seemingly ambiguous spaces between theory and practice. For us, the process required recognizing both basic and complex challenges and barriers, such as: funding issues, time constraints, external commitments, and interpersonal misunderstandings. These places between theory and practice often hold many more questions than answers. Yet, working within these spaces moves us away from academic isolation and forces us to directly address the complexity and trauma of the psychological, physical, and spiritual implications that oppressive conditions have on people's lives (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004); in particular the lives of Aboriginal youth, with whom and for whom we work. As we collaborate directly with students, educators, and community professionals in projects such as, *The Fourth R* or the Healing Workbook initiative with STR8 UP (a gang prevention organization in Saskatoon, SK), we bear witness to the

narratives of marginalized youth. These narratives serve as testament to the sheer horror of what colonization, cultural genocide (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Chrisjohn & Wasacase, 2009; McDonald & Hudson, 2012; Woolford, 2009, 2013), forced assimilation, and cycles of abuse can do to individual lives. Most importantly, as we connect individual stories of oppression and marginalization to larger systemic conditions, we must understand that these stories cannot be conceived of as isolated trajectories of singular individuals, but rather they must be witnessed as part of a collective story; a story of ongoing colonization (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Totten, 2009).

It is easy to feel overwhelmed and paralyzed by these conditions as we wonder how decolonization can be actualized. It is through the creation of a shared safe space that we have been able to unpack our ideas and experiences. We have been required to build practices that allow us to bear witness, to feel, to work through these realities. Most importantly, we worked to find what agency we do possess and utilize it in meaningful ways, while bearing in mind, the present realities and the potential barriers we may face.

Anti-racism scholars Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) write that we need a redefinition of the colonial to account for "...all forms of dominating and oppressive relationships that emerge from structures of power and privilege inherent and embedded in our contemporary social relations" (p.308). If our relationships, with one another and ourselves, can be sites of colonial reproduction, may they also be sites of decolonization? While we tend to focus on how decolonization and Indigenizing practice can take place at the institutional level, our kindred practice allows us to imagine how decolonizing and Indigenizing practice can take place at the interpersonal level. Thus, kindred practice, in part, is about understanding how colonial discourses manifest in between people and within the self in everyday life. The interpersonal can be a site of decolonization and Indigenization if we cultivate a safe space in which to name inevitable tensions, and to imagine, as we have begun to do, a new practice.

### **Conclusion**

This paper gave us an opportunity to reflect on the time that we shared together as a research team and our process of developing a kindred practice. Drawing from our unique social positions, we have collaborated in a shared vision that oppression can, and should, be confronted on multiple levels, including our interpersonal relationships. We have each conveyed that, for us, a kindred practice starts with disrupting how we have internalized and reproduced colonial dynamics in our lives and practice. In doing this, we are healing ourselves, and then healing each other by fostering a kindred practice. We hope that the insights we have shared with you offer

you inspiration to cultivate your own kindred practice and nurture the strength needed to endeavour in decolonization and Indigenization.

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