

communication +1

Volume 9
Issue 2 *A Decade of Futures (of
Communication)*

Article 6

December 2022

Indigenizing Communication: Questioning Responsibility in the Progressive Academy

Cindy Tekobbe
University of Illinois Chicago, ctek@uic.edu

Introduction

I ask you to consider for a moment your knowledge of Indigenous lifeways—not what you were taught in high school by your colonial institution, but rather what you know based on accounts offered by Indigenous folx. I know I have asked a difficult question because our institutional pathways to knowledge are colonized, and settlers largely control and construct Indigenous narratives. I also suspect that the last thing anyone wants right now is another hot take on campus diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) initiatives. I am writing a hot take on decolonization anyway because I have stories to tell about the structural barriers historically erased students and faculty face on our campuses that I think you should know. I want to specifically speak to the Communications field because given the centrality of human engagement in our field, and the theoretical and pedagogical tools we have developed, we are able to do better than we have in the past or are doing now. But before I get to those stories, I want to first weave together some Indigenous rhetorical and identity practices for you that I am employing here so that you might see examples of what I am writing about while you are reading my writing.

Halito, beloved relations. Greetings to anyone reading this—you are my relations; we are all related. This is a common Indigenous framework, that we are all related and interdependent. I write to you in this piece with a good heart and good and right relations. This means that I bring to this project good intent and good will. I value my audience, my colleagues, and my elders, and I convey this value by being authentic, sincere, and collaborative, intent on not misrepresenting either my audience or those who walk before me. I write today to co-construct shared meaning with you, so that together we may move forward in the field and in our teaching with intent and understanding. I write today about decolonial practices and frameworks to disrupt settler knowledges and hierarchies and confront the inherent inequities in these institutional knowledges and hierarchies. The first part of this essay is a critique of widespread settler-colonial academic institutional practices through storytelling. The second is a brief discussion of how instead of proposing more or expanding DEI initiatives, we look to other indigenizing approaches, like supporting land back from land-grab institutions, like fully embracing environmental initiatives, not in an entrepreneurial sense, but in a sense of moral and spiritual commitment, like indigenizing spaces and discourses to expand access for Indigenous peoples, like reconsidering our processes for how they work for historically erased groups. I ask you to sit with the discomfort of Indigenous critique. I have already written words here that cause discomfort in white scholarly spaces—when I write about disrupting dominant knowledge practices that are central to dominant academic scholarship, when I invoke themes of morality and spirituality that are beyond Western

epistemologies that center a specific kind of proof, and when I challenge the widespread DEI practice of “adding more voices to the institution.” This is my attempt to unsettle you, and I invite you to stay with the discomfort while you read this because as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang remind us, “decolonization is not a metaphor.”¹ Decolonization is both dismantling and rebuilding. The first part of this essay is the dismantling, and the second is my proposal for rebuilding.

Storytelling

This is my first story. An academic unit within a primarily white institution (PWI) initiates the process of hiring a new tenure-track colleague. Given the DEI charge of their administration, the program elects to position this new colleague as a “diversity hire.” Everyone in the program knows their new colleague will be a diversity hire because new hires are widely and thoroughly discussed. Everyone knows except perhaps the new colleague herself, although given the whiteness of the institution, she might have an idea. This initial framing of the position as a diversity hire, rhetorically and practically, already marginalizes the new colleague. Their scholarship and teaching exist parallel to the core faculty, not as part of it. This is tokenism, and if you collect enough tokens, you appear diverse. Because appearances are important in the academy, from the images on the website right down through recruitment and on to the ever-important rankings of the university. These appearances attract students, donors, and dollars, and profitable growth is at the heart of the neoliberal university. To truly represent diversity in a good and right way is to crack open the curriculum and research models so that the new colleague is an equal member of the core faculty with their work equally valued and fully integrated into the program. However, as a token for diversity, the new hire will always be evaluated as different, and their work will be thought of as niche or boutique rather than integral.

This is my next story. An academic institution decides it must decolonize as part of a broader decolonial initiative in their region or nation. The surface invocation of decolonialism leads to the cluster hiring of new colleagues, including a tenure-track Communications position. A cluster hire, where several new tenure-track faculty members from similar backgrounds or similar areas of research are brought in together as a cohort, is thought to improve retention of scholars from historically erased groups because it allows for community and avoids the isolation of diversity hiring. The cluster, usually initiated at the Dean or Provost level, is conceived of as a

¹ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

kind of beachhead for these new, diverse knowledge and scholarly practices. Originating a hire at or above the college level is thought to access a stronger supply of fairness and institutional power for the hiring process. The hiring process, however, is onerous. It requires multiple documents of verification of, in this case, Indigeneity, as well as a large application package, multiple single-authored scholarly publications, multiple letters of recommendation from tenured faculty, and an arduous interview process, all moving along at the senior administration's glacial pace. All of this in the name of rigor and authenticity. In other words, recruitment of Indigenous folx who would bring their practices and scholarship to the institution is filtered through, authenticated within, and selected by employing lenses of dominant scholarly practice and colonial institutional hierarchies. If you want to decolonize your institution, you need to dismantle your settler-colonial practices and instead consider Indigenous notions of knowing and knowledge practices and how those are realized, reciprocity and what you offer your potential hires, the centrality of land and identification with the land including, but not limited to, acknowledgement of displacement and efforts to hold space for Indigenous recruits. How will you achieve a decolonial result while employing the same settler-colonial processes you always have?

This is my last story. An Indigenous faculty member wants to start a student organization at an institution occupying traditional Indigenous lands. The faculty member is told that there is no current student organization here because there are no Indigenous students to organize. The faculty member knows this is not true because many Indigenous folx resisted removal from their ancestral lands, and there is an Indigenous nation within a couple of hours of the institution. Those descendants are still there. And the Indigenous faculty member was arguing against intractable settler paradigms and a stubborn sense of ignorance that grows out of a settler-colonial-centric view of the world. Of course, if white folx see no Indians, then there must be no Indians, which of course triggers all the white supremacist nonsense of phenotypes and who looks like an Indian according to a white audience. The Indigenous faculty member decided to go ahead with the organization without the support of their colleagues. They looked to the institutional organizational process to promote the new group and were told that groups could not be promoted through the system if they did not yet exist. That the faculty member must recruit and form a group before they could advertise through the established systems and processes to grow that group. The entire system assumes large groups of like students who can self-organize within a large, flagship institution. The system does not imagine a handful of folx trying to find each other in tens of thousands of peers. The whole system erases already marginalized groups within the institution.

Indigenization as Reciprocity

My three stories speak from the visible bureaucratic frustrations of being Indigenous in a PWI to the incommensurability of Indigenous to Western epistemologies. A simple explanation of my story choices is to demonstrate that settler colonialism works across all levels of our institutions. Too often the story ends as the dust settles on the scenes of trauma or violence. Here I want to instead pivot to modes of indigenization and ways to centralize indigeneity in the decolonial project. Within this limited space, I hope to open this conversation.

I want to share here that the concept of reciprocity is central to many North American Indigenous epistemologies. We are all relations, and we exist in reciprocal relationships. The institutional hiring process is designed to replicate the existing scholars and their knowledge practices at the institution. Academic hiring is labor-intensive and asks a great deal from applicants. This extraction from applicants is situated as necessary and correct due to the scarcity of academic jobs. Institutions can require dense application packages from applicants because applicants have no choice but to conform to the process if they hope for an appointment at that institution. There is nothing reciprocal in the academic hiring process except the prospect of a job which is seen as “awarded” to the “best” applicant. When thinking about decolonizing the hiring process or decolonizing retention practices, how are we reciprocating those contributions of the Indigenous candidates or hires? What does an Indigenous candidate want or need from the institution—a question that as far as I know was not considered in any of my stories. Of course, I cannot speak for everyone on Turtle Island, but as Indigenous lifeways originate in community, and Indigenous knowledge making is collaborative, then acceptance of scholarship and knowledge production in community is a reciprocity. There are many other possibilities for reciprocity, but to find them, the relationship between the candidate and the institution must be reconfigured—decolonized. The colonizer sees the value in their institution as intrinsic. Instead, they need to ask: what value is an Indigenized model of the institution?

Indigenization as Land Back

Indigenous folk want their stolen land back. The land is stolen, and acknowledging that it is stolen in a ritual land acknowledgement does not give back the land. Rather, it distances the current settlers from the original crime in a move signaling innocence—as in, we didn’t do this, but we acknowledge someone did. Land-grant institutions are land-grab institutions. Give the land back.

Indigenization as centering the moral and spiritual

Indigenous priorities for living in community with the environment are not a mere slogan, “water is life.” So many settlers agree with the notion of water is life, and they have adopted this as a mantra. Allies, however, know that “water is life” is a lifeway—a way of being in the world. Bodies of water are entities to be lived with in reciprocal community. The water provides, and we protect. We are in relation with the water in an Indigenous paradigm. Settler-colonial priorities are imbued with Manifest Destiny and the endless desire to conquer, possess, “tame,” literally bottle up, and in the capitalist model, create a profit center. When I say water is life, I know that I am dependent on the entity and it is dependent on me, that I have a spiritual relationship with the water, and that it is a moral imperative to respect and sustain that water for the sake of itself and for future generations. I often find my settler colleagues uncomfortable when I invoke morality or spirituality, knowing that these are not “rational” in Western epistemologies. With the rational and what is provable (in a specific Western system of evidence and knowledge), and with the driving forces being generations of Western scholars, the idea that knowing might include the irrational serves to invalidate that knowledge altogether. This is how supremacy works—it validates itself and invalidates the Others. If we are to decolonize the institution, we must break settler-colonial priorities and paradigms and replace them with broad acceptance to lifeways and knowings. Yes, we have so-called green initiatives on campus, but do we have a moral and spiritual relationship with the environment that we depend upon as part of these initiatives? We cannot simply let the earth burn and her people die because it is not profitable to do otherwise. We must intervene because it is right, and our reverent protection is our spiritual life, our sacred ceremony, central to our very being.

Indigenizing the institution

As many Indigenous scholars have said, decolonial initiatives within a colonial institution are largely tokenism. They’re representation for the sake of the all-important appearance of the institution. I can form an Indigenized writing group that works collaboratively, as equals, engaged with the local Indigenous communities, researching and producing art and writing about the significance of water to Turtle Island. This is a thing I can do. What I cannot do is make that art and collaborative writing count for tenure in a settler institution that reifies individualism as the cornerstone of intellectual work. The colonial machines must be dismantled, or we are not doing decolonial work. We are throwing our bodies on the altar of neoliberal capitalism.

Bibliography

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.