# A Look at Ien Ang's theorizing of intellectual work versus academic work: The Power of Decolonial Love as seen in *Our People Will Be Healed*

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## Inception

This essay was originally written for Dr. Peter Melville's "Critical Theory" course during the 2020-2021 academic year. Students were to apply one or more of the critical theories examined in the course and apply it to a cultural text or practice.


### *Abstract*

The essay examines the decolonial pedagogy of the Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Resource Centre seen in Alanis Obomsawains' 2017 documentary, Our People Will Be Healed. The film is a work of decolonial love as it illustrates how a school operates within a colonial system to strengthen Indigenous cultural connections in their students. Decolonial love is conceptualized by Clelia O. Rodríguez, but is not easily defined. She links decolonial love to the academy and the important intellectual work that happens within the ivory tower to facilitate cultural change.


*"His guidance embodied what some speak of these days: decolonial love." – Rodríguez, 2018*

Against the backdrop of a cloudy prairie morning, the sun's rays break through the veil and reflect off the roof of the Helen Betty Osborne *Ininiw* Educational Resource Centre ("the HBOIERC"). Pictographs of wolves and moose adorn the exterior walls of the school as evidence of their community's long-standing ties to the land and nature. The inside halls are illuminated by natural light through the sunroof and shines brightly on the students' artwork and achievements which proudly decorate the school.

Alanis Obomsawin's documentary, *Our People Will Be Healed,* focuses on The Helen Betty Osborne Ininiw Education Resource Centre;[1] a nursery to a high school in Norway House First Nation designed with Cree teachings to support their students' cultural needs. Obomsawin interviews former classmates of Helen Betty Osborne, a 19-year-old Cree woman and aspiring teacher from Norway House First Nation who moved to The Pas in 1971 to attend residential school (2017). Osborne was raped, mutilated, and murdered by four young white men later that year. The dangerous colonial act of removing Cree children from their communities and assimilating them into Canadian (Eurocentric) society is one of countless schemes the Canadian Government enacted to separate Indigenous peoples from their lands, culture, and health in order to erase them from Canadian history.

The HBOIERC successfully practices intellectual work through an academic endeavour to produce what cultural theorist Stuart Hall would describe as a meaningful political project. In her 2016 article, "Stuart Hall and the Tension between Academic and Intellectual

[1] In 2004, the HBOIERC replaced Rossville school in Norway House First Nation, Manitoba. Rossville school taught Cree students up to grade eight (Obomsawin 00:46:26-00:46:48). Students wishing to continue their education and training had to leave their homes and family to study in residential schools, and only returned home for the summer and winter breaks.

Work," Ien Ang discusses Hall's disenchantment with practicable academic work and his preference for political engagement. In the article, Ang challenges Hall's notion that intellectual and academic work are mutually exclusive, suggesting academia facilitates the important intellectual and political work necessary for Cultural Studies. In this paper, I draw on Ang's interpretation as I examine the accomplishments of the HBOIERC to demonstrate the intersection of academia and education regarding political work, and the importance of scholar and writer Clelia O. Rodríguez's notion of decolonial love (2018) in healing the colonial wounds inflicted on Norway House First Nation's Cree community[2].

Academic work as expressed by Hall was limited to the ivory tower of university research. Producing theory for academic renown or the "pursuit of theory for theory's sake" was at the centre of Hall's apprehension for its usefulness (Ang 31). Ang draws on the example of the American university system where its capacity to absorb and produce intellectual trends "could go on and on feeding on itself indefinitely, without ever having to be grounded with, or connect to,

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[2] Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall was a black British scholar who spent most of his adult life in England. He once said, "I'm only British in a hyphenated way" (Jaggi, 2000), insinuating that although England claims him for his academic excellence, he couldn't "disappear into Englishness" and was a forever foreigner (Ang 2016). Ien Ang, an Indonesian scholar, obtained her credentials in the Netherlands and now works as a Professor of Cultural Studies in Australia. Clelia O. Rodríguez is a Latine global scholar and civil war survivor from El Salvador. She obtained her MA and PhD from the University of Toronto. Applying these racially, culturally, and geographically diverse scholarly perspectives to Obomsawin's documentary on a Cree school in Manitoba underscores the need for global decolonialization. Wherein the effects of colonialism presents itself in different forms, but intellectuals continue to work towards healing and abolition: Cultural Studies for Hall and Ang. Education through academia for Rodríguez. Didactic storytelling for Obomsawin; and cultural education and connectivity for the HBOIERC.

actual practices outside the walls of academia" (31). In this regard, the usefulness of academia is limited to further thought within and exclusively for its consumption and extrapolation. There is no application of academia outside of this private sphere. This is where Hall's preference for intellectual and political work is important. Intellectual projects, then, engage with the public outside of academia to produce works which would influence some sort of cultural difference or change. For example, Hall's contributions to Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies considers intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, and other modes of social distinctions when theorizing.

Similar to Hall, Rodríguez is disenchanted with the usefulness of academia. In "Decolonizing Academia: Poverty, Oppression, and Pain," she provides anecdotes centering her decolonial pedagogy in response to several examples of harm within the academy. She writes,

> 'Professionalization,' as it is commonly referred to in graduate school, tried to teach me to trust a system that is not thought or designed to liberate me. One of the gurus in the department told my new cohort of aspiring scholars to focus only on research, as teaching was not important at the university that had carefully selected us. We had been chosen to excel academically and to engage in boundless knowledge. I felt scolded. My throat was dried and my thirst for inquisitorial questions only magnified under the colonial telescope of the ivory tower. (Rodríguez 1)

Rodríguez recognises and addresses the capitalist and individualistic penchant of academia where producing academic research for renown is the primary goal of the institution, rather than teaching the students attending their lectures and training the next generation of scholars, that is, participating in political work. In this section, aptly titled "Unlearning," Rodríguez refers back to her home in El Salvador, being a civil war survivor, and the decolonial teachings from her late grandfather (22). Rodríguez says her

"grandfather and his elders used to speak of a strange love after contemplating the cadavers of innocent people outside of their homes or whenever we attended funerals of assassinated peasants. His guidance embodied what some speak of these days: decolonial love." (22). Rodríguez does not attempt to define decolonial love in confined terms. Rather, she conceptualizes the physicality of decolonial love practiced in the everyday:

> [I]t's like the first smile on my mother's face when she hears her favourite *bolero* after waking up from a recurring nightmare caused by trauma…it's the memory of my fingers tapping my legs as I imagine happy drums making their way from a nearby beach; it's the possibility of forgiving those who uprooted us from our homes after being censored from saying goodbye…it's caressing religious markers gently without wanting to break them; it's finding joy in anger; it's breathing hope when others see danger in my skin colour; it's pollinating forgiveness as a remedy to heal colonial wounds…it's crawling backwards to empower other women. (Rodríguez 22-23)

Rodríguez's anecdotes poetically illustrate the intellectual work at the centre of her decolonial pedagogy. Her intellectual work in decolonial love, in the words of Ang, exemplify "a practice ... always [thinking] about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have some effect" (Ang 33).

Rodríguez's affinity for intellectual work and her dissatisfaction with academic work aligns with Ang's depiction of Hall's disposition with academic work as "merely the necessary means by which the pursuit of intellectual work was made possible: it was what allowed you to make a living and provided you with an income, but was not worth pursuing in and of itself" (31). However, Ang contends that the relationship between intellectual work and academic work is complex in that the two are in a fixed state of friction; that is, "it constantly allows the one to irritate, bother, and disturb the other, without insisting on some final theoretical closure" (32). For

example, Ang discusses her work creating the Centre for Cultural Research (now named the Institute for Culture and Society) at the University of Western Sydney where she holds the position of Professor of Cultural Studies (36). Ang's academic status as Professor of Cultural Studies and her academic reputation validified by her PhD—Ang's "passport to the academic ranks" (32)—enables her to conduct intellectual work and academic work at the ICS, a feat not possible if not for the institutionalizing of intellectual work. Hall says institutionalization presents "a moment of profound danger" (Ang 32). In Cultural Studies, Hall is referring to theorizing for the purpose of producing achievement in an academic environment. However, he stresses that "dangers are not places you run away from but places that you go towards" (32). For both Ang and Rodríguez this means participating in academia to facilitate their meaningful intellectual work.

## *Decolonial Love through Alanis Obomsawin: Our People Will Be Healed*

Alanis Obomsawin documents the intellectual work (decolonial love) being done in Norway House First Nation. Obomsawin puts great care and reverence into a sovereign representation of the community as evident in the stylistic choices and editing of her documentary. The 97-minute film begins with the sound of rustling water, then a dark fade-in and close-up shot of a pine tree with morning dew. Bird whistles and caws can be heard in the background as a slow drum begins to play. The shot pans over a misty river to show a yellow canoe with Cree youth paddling into view. A low vibrato wind flute plays and an Elder speaks Cree over the different shots of the river, nature, Cree youth, and modern infrastructures as the scene continues. Obomsawin establishes the community's connection to nature and being people of the 21st century.

Obomsawin is not seen in the film and is seldom heard. She focuses her interviews on the interviewee's answers, rather than her questions. One set of interviews is on the residential school survivors and former classmates of Helen Betty Osborne. The interviews are conducted outside against various backdrops of water and nature. Black and white images of the women are shown from their youth from before and during their time in residential schools. Sounds of gentle flowing water, chirping birds, and barking dogs accompany the images of the community. The sounds change to ringing bells, idle chatter, and calm water when images of the residential school are shown (00:45:57-00:47:22).

Another set of interviews is conducted with HBOIERC school administrators, teachers, and students against the backdrop of the music rooms, fully-equipped science labs, and offices within the school. Grade twelve student, Chadwin Scatch, discusses the opportunity he had to visit the University of Manitoba for The Verna J. Kirkness Science and Engineering Education program. Obomsawin shows photos of him in the University's science labs conducting experiments, learning how to operate the equipment, and short clips of his graduation from HBOIERC (00:11:45- 00:12:10). Principal Agnes Mowat says their school has 84 teachers with around half of them being Indigenous and from Norway House First Nation (00:04:41-00:04:50). The school is part of the provincial Frontier School Division and receives funding and benefits comparable to other schools in the province. Mowat says their school receives funding per student enrolled and because Norway House First Nation has a "high population" she is happy with their level of funding (00:03:54-00:04:39). However, for many years the school would average around 200 grade nine students and have an average of fifteen graduating grade twelve students (00:09:45). To address this issue and encourage students to attend classes regularly, the school considered contributing factors which would hinder high school attendance. For example, Mowat says their research showed "that high school students like to sleep in the

morning" and are not ready to begin classes at 8:30 a.m. To remedy this, they adjusted the high school schedule to begin at 9:30 a.m. instead of 8:30 a.m. to allow teenagers the extra time in the morning. Buses began running at 8:00 a.m. to pick up the younger students and ran again at 9:00 a.m. to pick up the older students (00:9:45-00:10:38). As well, if the younger students miss the first bus the school encourages them to take the later bus and arrive while classes are in session. Mowat states they prefer to have the students arrive to their classes late than not at all (00:10:39). This strategy, an example of one of many initiatives done by the school, proves effective as the anticipated graduating class would be between 60 to 70 students (00:10:54-00:11:00).

A graduating requirement for Frontier School Division is for students to complete a Native Studies course. The documentary shows a scene inside an early-years elementary classroom where students were learning a simplifiedthe history of Indigenous peoples and early colonizers. Another example shows high school students learning practical applications of nature and how to survive in the wilderness (00:13:56-00:15:11). Mowat says it is important for the students to "know their history and their treaties." However, teacher Dennis Day spends 40 to 60 minutes a week teaching nursery to grade one students the Cree language and says it is not enough time. The school is not Cree immersion so they cannot dedicate more time to teaching the language (00:25:10-00:25:25). Ten to fifteen years ago, students would enter the school understanding Cree. However, that no longer happens and students only communicate in English. Day agrees with Mowat and says their language and culture must be present in their students' lives. otherwise "they [won't] know [when] something is being taken away." (00:25:50-00:26:04). Gordan Walker who is a Cree Language and Culture Advisor at the HBOIERC, says there are few people in their community who speak Cree. The language is "very descriptive" and heavily focused on "how we relate to the land and everything" (00:16:50-00:17:07). For nine years Walker has been going on two-week canoe trips with

community youth with the aim of instilling pride and confidence in their Cree culture (00:17:40-00:18:00). He says, “when my grandfather used to tell me stories, even the sun talked. Even the trees talked and everything else. So, in that way I respected life as I was growing up” (00:18:10-00:18:24). Another set of interviews Obomsawin conducts is with the youth who are canoeing with Walker. The interviews are conducted at dusk with sounds of crackling fire and insects buzzing in the background. The youth are visibly downcast, but willing to share their experiences and speak openly with Obomsawin. Darcy Balfour briefly discusses how Walker became a father figure to him after his grandfather passed away. His voice quivers and Obomsawin shows a shot of Balfour during the day gathering branches for a fire. His proud and capable demeanour contrast with the vulnerability in his voice (00:56:55-00:57:18). Walker acknowledges the difficulties young people have living on the reserve and he chooses to show them kindness and respect amidst their troubles. In return, the youth trust and discuss their problems with him (00:18:30-00:19:00). Walker’s decolonial love seen through his political work has demonstrated a positive change in the youths’ lives.

HBOIERC student Marshall Mowatt anecdotally shares how community and familial connections have affected how he wishes to care for his family. Before his nephew was born Mowatt was the youngest in his family and received an abundance of care and love. Becoming an uncle and godfather to his brother’s son shifted his perspective in that he wants to be a person who provides care and love for his family: “I’m a very proud uncle…my life before, without him…it was quiet, like nothing really happened. Then my nephew came into the picture and he just made everything fun. I always know I’m going to come home and hear him go: Hi Uncle!” (00:26:45-00:27:50). Obomsawin shows photos of his family from both older developed colour film and newer digital pictures (00:26:53-00:27:50). Mowatt’s family does not argue in front of his nephew nor does his brother consume alcohol at home (00:27:50-00:28:10).

Mowatt wants to be a positive influence for his nephew and so he prides himself on this sobriety.

Through visual representation of the HBOIERC, Obomsawin's didactic storytelling shares how a decolonial pedagogy stemming from radical love can heal a community. The opening scene expressed in untranslated Cree infers the intended audience of *Our People Will Be Healed* are Cree communities. Although the sequence alienates non-Cree speaking community members, the film repeatedly expresses the notion that their community will be healed and there will be opportunity to revive the language and cultural traditions. For non-Cree viewers whose lives continue to be affected by colonialism, this film opens a pathway for political change and encourages individuals to do intellectual work, imagine infrastructures free of colonial influence, and implement change. Norway House First Nation Chief Ron Evans believes "children should be provided with as much supports as we can provide them" (00:02:15). He acknowledges their community has more infrastructure than most other Indigenous communities, "but the infrastructure will only take you so far," he states, "you need social development where the people are given the encouragement and support they need to be able to better themselves…so that they can develop in a way that will help sharpen their gifts and have confidence" (00:02:42-00:03:16). Evans understands the role institutions have in promoting decolonial love. His views on social development and infrastructure align with Ang's views on institution-building:

> Ultimately, the politics of institution-building revolves around the creation of a sustainable organized environment where valuable intellectual work can be done; where collective critical agendas can be pursued and collaborative networks and communities are formed in relative autonomy from the academic institution. (Ang 36)

Decolonial love, then, "is the act of loving radically the spirit of the person whose ruling continue to colonize me, while still resisting

their violence" (Rodríguez 23). Frontier School Division, apart of a colonial provincial institution with education and attendance requirements to continue operations, provides a culturally safe education centre where students of the HBOIERC have the opportunity to radically love themselves and their Cree community.

## *Works Cited*

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