A Settler's Journey of Decolonization: Unlearning and Listening

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Inception

This paper is an excerpt from my undergraduate thesis in my Conflict Resolution Studies Senior Seminar with Neil Funk-Unrau in the winter of 2015.

I am sitting in Larry Morrissette's "Colonization of Aboriginal Peoples" class, and the reality is hitting me hard. Professor Morrissette is explaining how we are all a part of the colonial relationship—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. He shares stories of his own family, emphasizing how many Indigenous people in Canada are facing a long journey of healing due to the past traumas inflicted upon them through residential schools, the banning of ceremony, and the oppressive role of Indian agents. He shares his own pain, reflecting on how colonialism has played a significant role in his life, and then challenges us to do the same. I first begin to realize that as a non-Indigenous Canadian, colonialism is part of my story too. I have the responsibility to face the atrocities of our nation's history from a different perspective, one that inevitably makes me feel uneasy and guilty. Key parts of my own identity and family's history begin to turn over in my mind, and I am faced with the first of many uncomfortable opportunities to reassess my role within the colonial relationship and what, if anything, I am going to do about it.

One memory that sticks out is when I think of my family's light-hearted tradition of claiming to be in Canada right from the start: "We practically

came off the boat with Cornwallis!" the adults would exclaim when I was younger and asked questions about our family's origins. Who was Governor Cornwallis, anyways? For a while I thought he was simply a courageous military man with whom my British ancestors had possibly traveled, bringing them to a new land of settlement. I decided to look further and discovered a different story: a quick search on the Internet showed that upon arriving in Canada Corwallis, in fact, had issued a "scalping proclamation" in 1749 that paid settlers to kill any Mi'kmaq adult or child in an attempt to rid them from the land he was inhabiting, which was becoming known as Halifax. Although my family might have never been directly involved in this, it was still a part of history that I had never heard before—not in school and not from my family—and it represented only a fraction of the wrongs committed against Indigenous peoples in Canada throughout history that I was now having to come to grips with.

I hated the heavy feeling that came with learning more and more about colonialism in university classrooms and from Indigenous peers who were sharing their lived experiences. I hated hearing details of residential schools and of mental health and substance abuse struggles following such experiences; I hated hearing these stories because I had never had to confront them before. Up until that point, I had been able to exist not feeling the effects of colonialism, I did not have to see the ramifications of oppressive policy manifest in my family today, and I never once questioned the value in my identity as a settler. As discomforting as it was to acknowledge my lack of struggle and privilege within the colonial relationship, it quickly became evident that my journey to decolonization must begin immediately.

As it has been revealed clearly to me, decolonization is a complicated and oftentimes difficult journey for settlers to begin, for if meaningfully engaged with, it will completely restructure many basic ways of being for non-Indigenous inhabitants of Canada. Decolonization involves resisting, dismantling, and reimagining systems of power—be they legal, economic, social, or political—that seek to perpetuate

colonialism. With this comes difficult self-reflection and transformation for those who benefit from such systems. Decolonization for settlers is a necessarily discomforting process because, as Regan (2010) argues, without unsettling, little will change (p. 19). In addition to the initial personal disturbance that occurs, this paper explores two main concepts as necessary steps to take to engage meaningfully in decolonization: unlearning and listening. From these, I argue that it is possible to work toward dismantling the colonial relationship that is based on domination and exploitation, and, in the end, this dismantling allows us to find new meaning through a respectful understanding of community and humanity.

To begin, decolonization cannot be understood simply as a rejection of colonialism, for it in fact seeks to do more by critiquing the powers of colonialism and imagining new ways of being in relationship with all life. As Sium, Desai, and Ritskes (2012) argue, "…the decolonizing project seeks to reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies" (p. iii). This reimagining and rearticulating, especially when performed by settlers, is a difficult task to take on due to the nature of the dominant culture that forces many into colonizing mentalities (hooks, 2010, p. 26); yet, it is a pivotal part of decolonization and is completed through the use of diverse and intersecting narratives. Decolonization is the active resistance to the powerfully divisive forces of colonialism, paired with the transformation of previously held norms. It reorients the mainstream worldviews to those based on Indigenous ways of being (Sium, Desai, & Ritskes, 2012; Walia & Institute for Anarchist Studies [IAS], 2013; Henderson, 2000). Understanding decolonization as a dynamic process of resistance and restructuring that is centered on Indigenous values and beliefs begins the journey for non-Indigenous individuals to engage with and work towards decolonizing.

Ultimately, decolonization reveals to both the colonizer and the colonized the humanity in the other by destabilizing the colonial relationship, and by abandoning the beliefs regarding power and

oppression that had previously maintained colonialism. As Friere (1970) states, “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people” (p. 49). Decolonization requires settlers to embark on a journey that challenges their whole environment, relinquish their privilege, and acknowledge the liberation and healing that comes from relationships based on respect, balance, and healthy mutual dependency, rather than domination.

The process of unlearning suggested by several contributors to decolonizing theory (Hussan, as cited in Walia & IAS, 2013; Haig-Brown & Nock, as cited in Regan, 2010) is an essential part of moving forward in terms of deconstructing the current systems that perpetuate colonialism, distinguishing one’s identity as a colonizer, and shifting the norms and expectations that are held by these systems. Unlearning is the process of identifying these norms and expectations, which were thought to be true and absolute, and coming to see them no longer as such. In the decolonizing context, unlearning involves a critical deconstruction of Eurocentric worldviews that characterize Canada’s dominant systems; it implicates disassembling and then broadening the types of systems and values that settler Canadians allow to hold as meaningful in society. Unlearning can occur on several levels; this paper first analyzes the broader, systemic unlearning that occurs through decolonization, including challenging the worldviews, power dynamics, and ways of learning that have developed and been maintained in our society. Secondly, this paper explores micro level unlearning which concerns one’s own sense of identity and place in society, arguing that it is necessary to shift one’s understanding of personal identity in order to engage effectively with decolonization.

The tedious journey of unlearning requires altering one’s worldview from a solely Eurocentric angle to one that acknowledges and incorporates the vast value in Indigenous perspectives in a meaningful way. Indigenous worldviews need not only be acknowledged: they also

need to be completely re-centered for the decolonization process to be effective (Henderson, 2000, p. 267; Walia & IAS, 2013, p. 251). Paulette Regan articulates this in her book *Unsettling the Settler Within* as she states:

> Decolonization is not 'integration' of the token inclusion of Indigenous ceremony. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of denial to the making of space for Indigenous political philosophies and knowledge systems as they resurge, thereby shifting cultural perceptions and power relations in real ways. (2010, p. 189)

It is through this complete re-inclusion of values that Canadians will be able to begin to unlearn the mainstream, colonial values that have governed the nation for so long, and the Indigenous perspective will finally occupy legitimate space within society.

Once the necessary re-centering of Indigenous values occurs and settlers begin to critically unlearn the hegemonic nature of colonial, Eurocentric perspectives, systemic ways of unlearning must proceed. A significant part of this is the unlearning and reimagining of who holds legitimate power and how this power and influence is distributed. It is evident that within the colonial relationship, the colonizer maintains the overwhelming amount of power and control, yet Friere (1970) argues that the only force strong enough for both the colonizer and the colonized to become freed from the restraints of the colonial relationships is that which springs from the colonized (p. 44). To engage in decolonization, one must unlearn the power dynamics of colonialism, effectively reversing the "triangle of power" that Robert Yazzie (2000) imagines as colonialism, with the people at the top having the right to control the people at the bottom (p. 43). No longer is the power and control coming top-down from the colonizer; for as their journey of decolonization takes shape, their own world and understanding of it must be reversed and reconsidered.

Exploring and forming new understandings of power means that the norms and social standards that have been developed must be

constantly questioned and deconstructed. bell hooks (2010) argues this when she states that "…we must be constantly engaging new ways of thinking and being. We must be critically vigilant" (p. 26). One integral way in which this vigilance must be effectively applied is to the ways in which theory and academic discourse is viewed. As Dian Million (2014) claims, Indigenous voices have been problematically excluded from this realm for a long time, and their current inclusion in academia promises to change theory itself:

> Academia is always a site of contestation, of struggle, a place where Native scholars have only been invited very recently, disciplined in the fields that we are supposed to use to examine our own lives and the lives of our families and communities. We occupy a place of unwritten rules, old implacable cultures, and high stakes. (p. 35)

By excluding Indigenous scholars from academic discourse, mainstream scholarship has effectively silenced their stories and, more recently, categorized the ways in which they are allowed to engage within it. This has resulted in Indigenous stories and voices being labeled as non-academic and invalid when it comes to scholarship. In order to effectively embody hooks' "critical vigilance," it is necessary to unlearn the ways in which learning occurs. Questions such as "Whose story is being told?", "How is this story contributing to popular thought?" and "Why is this perspective and/or method viewed as (il)legitimate?" are essential to breaking down the ways in which learning takes place. Million imagines academic knowledge differently, stating that "Theory, *theorizing* is…a verb, an action" (p. 32), emphasizing the ways in which Indigenous worldviews contrast with the traditional Western ways of learning in the academic world.

In addition to the broad, systematic unlearning that must take place, unlearning also includes the process of critically analyzing one's individual position of power and privilege within society, which will likely include a difficult phase of anxiety. As Ian Hingley (2000) explains, this is due to the fact that "…one's secure position in the world may have to be revaluated and reconstructed to reflect a newly developed

perspective" (p. 47). As I was challenged to first do in my university class with Professor Morrissette, I had to confront my own privilege, my sense of entitlement to this land, and my responsibility in perpetuating oppressive frameworks. It is here that individuals who have never considered themselves active forces in colonialism are challenged to reconsider their positions, effectively unlearning what they thought they previously knew about their identity within the colonial relationship. Regan (2010) discusses the importance of this by saying that "peeling back the layers of myth reveals that we must confront our own repressed and unscrutinized past as a necessary part of our own truth telling" (p. 67). By unlearning the myths constructed by settler ideology that many have been taught since birth, settlers are better able to truly engage in a process of healing and transformation.

This initial phase of discomfort and critical self-reflection is only the first step in a personal process of unlearning, and to move beyond it takes an honest commitment to decolonization. As Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox (2012) argues: "even the most supportive settlers have a privilege line they refuse to cross" (para. 6). The process of unlearning requires settlers not only to experience discomfort and critical self-reflection momentarily, but also to engage in meaningful solidarity and decolonization through long-term personal transformation. Friere (1970) contributes to this, arguing that "discovering [oneself] to be an oppressor may cause considerable anguish, but it does not necessarily lead to solidarity with the oppressed" (p. 49). Unlearning is a critical piece of decolonization, especially for settlers. It allows for a re-examining of mainstream perspectives, power relations, and ways of learning within academia, and yet it is not decolonization in its entirety. Settlers must commit to taking their unlearned and newly learned truths and applying them to practice in order to move beyond their place of privilege to a place of solidarity, thus allowing them to engage meaninfully in decolonization.

November, 2015: Two major post-secondary institutions in Winnipeg have big announcements to make. First, the University of Manitoba

announces the opening of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at its Fort Garry campus. All curated materials that had been collected related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) will be permanently archived here, in addition to supporting ongoing research related to truth and reconciliation. The stories that were shared and their importance in understanding Canada's colonial past and present are invaluable pieces of the decolonization puzzle, presenting an opportunity for many to listen and truly transform.

Later in the month, the University of Winnipeg becomes one of the first universities in Canada to require students to learn about Indigenous peoples. An announcement is released, stating that the Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR) was unanimously approved by the University of Winnipeg Senate, and will be required for all new students, starting in the fall of 2016. Many friends and acquaintances had been working tirelessly on making this a reality, maintaining momentum after it was first approved in principle months prior, and this announcement is a clear reminder of the importance of remaining persistent when it comes to creating change.

As my social media outlets fill up with the exciting news, #decolonization tagged beside many of the statuses and updates, the simple hashtag reminds me of the significance of this action. Through this bold move to decolonize the oftentimes elite and untouched academy, the University of Winnipeg is acknowledging the need to listen to voices that have for so long been excluded from academic discourse. Students at the University of Winnipeg will now have the opportunity to engage in the transformative process of listening as a strategic step of decolonization.

Both of these announcements hit Winnipeg almost a year after Maclean's magazine reported that our city was the most racist in the whole country. This news story offered an opportunity for honest debate and dialogue on issues of colonialism and reconciliation. As Winnipeg wrestled with the Maclean's article, I was reminded of my responsibility

as a settler to demonstrate decolonization throughout more aspects of my life than just a select university requirement or a national centre encasing stories of residential school survivors.

Listening is a necessary step to take both tangibly and symbolically, for it is through interrupting and speaking over instead of listening that settlers have effectively silenced Indigenous peoples throughout all levels of decision-making in Canada. Listening ensures that Indigenous peoples are the ones telling the story and determining the future direction of Canada as a nation. Such listening is an integral part of correcting the power imbalance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and adjusting worldviews and policies accordingly.

When considering the TRC Report and its 94 calls to action, listening holds special significance for Canada today. It was through this process that many residential school survivors had the opportunity to tell their story in a way that had never previously been heard in the public arena. Acknowledging those who experienced the Canadian Residential School System as survivors of attempted genocide emphasizes the horrific role that the Canadian government actively played in this attack against Indigenous peoples and provides a narrative surrounding Canada's past that is not frequently discussed in the mainstream.

Although important, listening solely to the stories that have been shared through the TRC is not enough, for listening to the stories must be supplemented by critical reflection. Coulthard (2014) provides some criticism of the TRC, arguing that if we simply attend to the individual stories of past trauma that portray survivors as broken individuals, then we will fail to engage in a meaningful healing and reconciliation process: "The TRC temporally situates the harms of settler-colonialism in the past. … Indigenous subjects are the primary object of repair, not the colonial relationship" (p. 127). If Canadians allow the results of the TRC to be reduced to nothing more than stories of survivors of a past atrocity, then the core issue of colonialism as a current form of

oppression will fail to be addressed. In *Unsettling the Settler Within,* Regan takes the critique further, arguing that settlers who are witness to the TRC have a very personal responsibility in their own reactions and in how to move forward: “Rather than adopting the stance of the colonizer-perpetrator who listens to survivors testimonies with the empathy of a spectator, thereby simply reinscribing colonial relations, we must attend to our unsettling responses to testimonies as important clues to our own decolonization” (2010, p. 230). Listening demands more than merely providing a sounding board for marginalized voices—no matter how empathic this might be.

The “unsettling responses” that Regan speaks of include the questions and personal analyses that result when faced with the testimonies and recommendations provided in the TRC. She argues that “for settlers, coming to grips with the [Indian Residential School] experience involves thinking about and working through the difficult emotions associated with the various ways in which we are implicated” (2010, p. 176). The kind of intentional listening that we are called to do as we engage with the TRC is one that involves significant personal reflection and transformation. This listening requires those who hear the stories of survivors not simply to sit with the words that are offered but to engage as active participants in moving forward in decolonization. The next step of decolonization already has a framework laid out for it by Indigenous peoples themselves; this is found in the TRC’s calls to action. As settlers engaging in listening as means to decolonize, we are required to move forward in action guided by the words that have been spoken.

In addition to the TRC, the Indigenous Credit Requirement (ICR) now mandatory at several institutions across Canada provides a second way in which settlers can effectively participate in decolonization. This can take shape in very different ways, depending on an institution’s specific capacity, student body, and administrative pressure. At the University of Winnipeg, the ICR was recently officially implemented in the fall of 2016. This means that it is mandatory for University of

Winnipeg students to take a three credit-hour course that focuses on the rights, traditions, history, governance, and some other facets of Indigenous culture in order to complete their undergraduate degree (CBC News, 2015).

The ICR at the University of Winnipeg was spearheaded by The University of Winnipeg Students' Association, as well as the Aboriginal Students' Council (CBC News, 2015). Several community consultation events occurred, which allowed for dialogue, much of which was Indigenous-led (The University of Winnipeg Students' Association, n.d.). By ensuring that this process was guided by Indigenous leaders within the community, The University of Winnipeg set the stage for an effective form of decolonization to begin within the education system. The ICR was a good example of enacting the TRC's recommendation to better integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into post-secondary classrooms (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 11), thus underscoring the importance of responding to Indigenous guidance and suggestions for change within academic institutions.

An integral part of the ICR is the opportunity for non-Indigenous students to listen to Indigenous people share their story and theory, and to counter what is typically thought of Indigenous peoples, especially within the university. Million (2014) states that "We are always part of someone else's theory or our own, depending on how we feel/vision it. In Canada and the United States a theory that has started to prevail is that we have an illness, trauma, and that we must heal" (p. 39). By only imagining Indigenous peoples as victims of colonialism, the opportunity to see a more complete picture of traditions, resistance and resurgence is lost. As Alfred and Corntassel (2005) argue, "there is a danger in allowing *colonization* to be the only story of Indigenous lives" (p. 601). A part of listening is the importance of listening to the whole story of an individual, their community, or their nation. Providing the opportunity for students to hear the perspectives of Indigenous peoples surrounding their traditions, history, and identities, allows for a more comprehensive

and resilient story to exist in the mainstream regarding Indigenous peoples in contrast to a narrative of a demographic simply plagued by colonialism.

Listening is not a one-time action; it is a change in practice, an overhaul of power dynamics that will ultimately guide the ways in which settlers participate in an Indigenous-led decolonization process. By shifting from one who is conducting others to one who is approaching with humility the importance of others' experience and knowledge, the entire intent changes. Listening also holds special potential when one engages with it despite initial feelings of resistance, for as Paulette Regan (2010) states, "learning to listen involves engaging our whole being, using silence not to deny but to welcome and recognize the transformative possibilities of the stories we do not want to hear" (p. 191-192). For settlers, this is a very important task to undertake—to place oneself intentionally in a place, which may be uncomfortable, and to learn that often silence and humility are the most appropriate responses.

Settler decolonization is an active choice by privileged individuals within the colonial relationship to resist and restructure the systems that have perpetuated power and cultural imbalances for generations. Leanne Simpson (2012) emphasizes this idea of choice, arguing that colonialism attempts to make Canadians believe that the colonial atrocities that occurred in the past were inevitable and tragic, and that things are better now. She refutes this as she argues: "we don't have to uphold this system any longer. We can collectively make different choices." In order to decolonize, settlers must make the choice to confront through unlearning and listening to the realities of Indigenous peoples and the colonial influence. Settler decolonization is an ongoing process that inevitably requires discomfort and critical self-reflection in order for effective change to take place.

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