

# Returning What Settlers Have Hidden: The Application of Traditional Indigenous Cultural Practices to Contemporary Education

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“The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.”

- N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*

At a moment, when the university is having to consider its part in the colonial practices of education, and is looking to acknowledge the role disciplinary conventions have played in excluding and marginalizing a wide range of global traditional forms of knowledge, the field of Indigenous pedagogy is stepping in to support a revivification of traditional practices, rituals, and conditions of insight, not only across Indian country and within Indigenous networks and communities internationally, but within diverse university communities that have a broad range of students and educators working across the disciplinary spectrum. Indigenous thought and practices offer ways of seeing, making, and sharing that are informed in many cases by close observations of the natural world and are developed with an eye to sustainability and reciprocal dynamics. They encourage the participation of community members in ways that break down hierarchies, involve a broad range of learning activities and opportunities, and put the student at the center of the educational experience. As education moves to address historical wrongs, looks to curb the destruction of our natural world, and searches for new forms of expression and conditions of community in an age of global digital interconnectedness and AI collaborations,

traditional practices of many kinds offer a way to link social and ecological objectives, technological capabilities, and human capacity in ever more meaningful ways.

The current special issue on Indigenous pedagogy was conceived by the editorial board after Liberal Studies at New York University (NYU) hosted an online gathering of Indigenous artists and thinkers on February 24, 2022. *Reimagining Traditions: A Colloquium on Indigenous Art and Advocacy* brought together indigenous creative practitioners from Yakutia, Uzbekistan, Bolivia, Brazil, and across Indian Country in the US to share strategies for making Indigenous thought more visible. The event was made possible through the generous support of *Contingencies: A Journal of Global Pedagogy*, Animated Ecologies (AE), a non-profit in the service of socially and ecologically engaged filmmaking and sustainable photography, and the Liberal Studies Dean's Office at NYU. There are many people to thank, but in particular, I'd like to acknowledge the support and vision of Edd Carr, who worked tirelessly with me throughout 2021 to make AE a space for transformative, alternative, visual technologies, and Ida Chavoshan, the Managing Editor of *Contingencies* at that time, who recognized from the start the importance of bringing Indigenous media transformers from around the world together world to give students at NYU and creatives far beyond the university access to the insights, resiliencies, and tactics that inform Indigenous work.

In Part I of the special issue on Indigenous pedagogy, three essays give voice to a broad range of native and non-native perspectives on Indigenous pedagogies and their potential impacts on students, educators, and the institutions we operate within. What is contained in the following pages are not just ideas and ideals we might want to apply in our own lives, but concrete steps

through which we can build a safer space for the next generation, aligned to the needs of students, in sympathy with the larger social and ecological frameworks we call home, and structured to uplift the future, even as these practices and insights help prepare us to withstand what will be asked us of tomorrow. These pedagogies have been developed out of a range of traditional community practices, and so, they look back to take us forward. As a white immigrant, raised among settlers and educated to see through their eyes, I am deeply grateful to be introduced to communities of vision that feel more in keeping with a world I recognize, and offer a means to physically and emotionally locate a broad set of connections we have to our world and to one another than often go unrecognized.

The first of these articles, “Pedagogies of Inheriting: Kitchen Table Conversations” by Lynne David, Jan Hare, Chris Hiller, Lindsay Morcom, and Lisa Karen Taylor, focuses on building spaces for “decolonisation, indigenization, and reconciliation” (2) through what this Canadian Indigenous and settler collective describes as “the ‘doing’ of inheriting” (6). The common space they create together as they do this work is referred to as their “kitchen table,” a metaphor used in a number of publications and reconciliation contexts they cite: “We have brought diverse ideas into a common space that we refer to as our kitchen table, a relational space that hosts and holds the resonances, tensions and incommensurabilities between traditions of thought and accountabilities within which we each situate ourselves as educators” (1). Initially, in-person and over the next five years, frequently via Zoom, this group of educator scholars met to discuss their pedagogic work decolonizing “hearts, minds, relations, and structures” (2). These conversations, and the practices and insights that developed out of them, became a methodology of sorts, one that is explained in general terms as it relates to Indigenous ideas about time and place, but is

also shared with us through individual testimonies from each of the collective's members. An exploration of the value of collective and individual reflection, as well as ongoing cultural and personal reevaluation undertaken alongside individuals from a variety of backgrounds, this work is a testament to the impacts of purposeful community, and shares the journey taken by each individual as they wrestle with the legacies of the past, challenges of the present, and the opportunities afforded by reimagining the past and future together.

The second article, "Reclaiming Higher Education as Indigenous Space: Indigenizing Pedagogy Institute" by Robin Zape-tah-tol-ah Minthorn, takes us step by step through the process of creating and implementing the year-long Indigenizing Pedagogy Institute at University of Washington Tacoma. In response to a lack of Indigenous university faculty and students both locally and nationally, leading to attrition and alienation problems, this project was designed "...to cultivate safer spaces for Indigenous students in the classroom" through "...reframing classrooms into decolonial spaces that center community and indigenous approaches that will have a ripple effect in student retention, faculty consciousness and community building" (3). Drawing on a range of Indigenous precedents including: *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* by Vine Deloria and Daniel Wildcat; *Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire* by Gregory Cajate, and *Land Education: Rethinking Pedagogies of Place from Indigenous, Postcolonial, and Decolonizing Perspectives* by Kate McCoy et al., Minthorn shares how she devised faculty training opportunities that gathered an initial contingent of 15 Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty along with local tribal community members to "share their evolutions in decolonizing classroom space and curriculum" (3). The article is rich with anecdotes, concrete activities, and is framed by the theoretical articulations of the many

Indigenous authors Minton cites. While decolonizing the classroom remains a long-term goal or abstract ideal in many educational contexts, Robin Zape-tah-toi-ah Minton, in this bold initiative, shows us first-hand, through her narrative and through quotes by faculty and students, how decolonizing can be realized through the implementation of existing Indigenous educational ideas and practices.

The third article, “Intercultural Education with the Indigenous Kainga’ng Peoples of Sub-Amazonian Brazil: Creating Vector of Learning, Understanding, and Empathy in Higher Education and Beyond using Triadic Contact Zones,” by Darren R. Reid, Leonel Piovezana, Adroaldo Antonio Fidelis, Ariany Sales Dallabrida, Claudia Battestin, Alexander Engelmann, and Abigayle Darwin looks at both the profound pedagogical potential of linking students from the Global North with Indigenous peoples and the need for triadic contact zones to be established during these interactions so that ideas can be “deconstructed and rebuilt in real time to ensure that fundamental comprehension, relatability and key learning outcomes can be achieved across cultural boundaries” (1). Such triadic contact assumes the presence of an intermediary, and relies on that individual having access to discursive tools that can help manage these translational complexities. Within indigenous contexts, this role is performed by the storyteller, whose practices are vital if “people from the Global North are to learn from and not about-their indigenous Cousins” (3). This “intercultural broker,” or “education – facilitator,” is able to help overcome an ‘empathy gap’ between the groups communicating here, and “translate language, ideas, concepts, and lived experience” but must be mindful to avoid replicating “colonialist power imbalances” (6). Drawing on the oral traditions of Kainga’ng people, who are the Indigenous group in this case study, the authors share the story of Kamé and Kairu, their two

creator spirits, and how during an eclipse Kamé would temporarily devour Kairu, only to find as day turned to night, that until Kairu re-emerged there would be no resumption of the daylight needed to keep the world spinning. This absence is analogous to Indigenous perspectives we lost due to the hegemony of certain systems of thought—a domination the authors are looking to reconfigure into a transformative dialogue. For anyone contemplating an intercultural exchange project like this, whether primarily focused on ecological understanding as this one was, or more directed towards creative collaboration, this study provides many useful cautions, practical considerations, and protocols that can be put in place to help overcome the legacies of mis-assumption and disempowerment that accompany even our most earnest attempts at enacting change. It also includes testimonies for many of the participants, helping bring us as close as possible to the conversations themselves.

As we look to identify technologies and ways of being that address contemporary and historical inequities and that can help us slow or even stop the destruction of our natural home, Indigenous traditions of community formation, informational organizing, and educational engagement offer us a broad range of powerful and well tested, if underrecognized, tools and ideas for how to move forward. If the hubris of the settler and the scientist has in the past often led us to disregard these gifts, even hide them from view, our contemporary needs can hopefully help us overcome the prejudices and ignorance that have too often informed our transcultural and transnational conversations. It's about time we reintroduced Indigenous practices to their rightful place in our collective consciousness. As Micheal Marker, a Lummi scholar quoted in one the articles in this collection, reminds us, we need "... to examine the ways Indigenous people understood - and understand- the universe through advanced knowledge systems and deep ecological

consciousness”... “to show the light of Indigenous wisdom that was devastated by the catastrophes of colonization”(Davis et al. 22-23). History doesn’t just demand this as a function of social justice; our embrace of certain epistemologies and our dependence on the technologies has led us to a place where embracing Indigenous forms of insight is essential if we are to meaningfully remake our compact with one another and our world. Part I of the *Contingencies*’ special issue is a small step in that direction. It will hopefully encourage others to go further in acknowledging the transformative potential Indigenous pedagogies offer, if we will only listen.

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**Sean Eve** is a Gay, Welsh-born writer and producer, who teaches at NYU—where he co-founded Global Media Lab. He is the Director of Animated Ecologies, a non-profit supporting socially and ecologically conscious filmmaking worldwide. As a playwright, works including *By Land*, *American Heart* and in January of this year, *Bedside Manners*, have been produced in London and New York. Recent film credits include *Shiva Baby*, which won a Cassavetes at the Independent Spirit Awards in 2022. He is currently producing *Just Justice*, by Katie Schiller, chronicling the life and activism of Justice Roe Williams, and *24/2*, by Anna Filonenko, which introduces us to four female Russian artists whose lives and work has been impacted by the invasion of Ukraine. As well as *Aunties*, a 15-part film and performance series being produced in conjunction with Indigenous Performance Productions, other current projects include *Nowhere*, a trio of short films focused on gay and trans undocumented young people, and *Anger and Dust*, a film on the disconnect between youth culture and ecological crisis in Bangladesh, being directed by Tanjimul Islam.