

INDIGENIZING PHILOSOPHY**Shay Welch**

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Abstract:

Recently, there has been a political movement by Indigenous peoples and their allies to decolonize and Indigenize the academy. But often times, so-called allies can do more harm in their attempts to achieve justice and equality for others because they lack the appropriate knowledge and understandings of those whom they aim to aid. One key question that people who are interested in justice for Indigenous peoples should ask is what it means to "Indigenize" something. My goal here is to explore what it means to 'Indigenize' Philosophy by questioning who can do so, to what extent, and what is required.

Resumé:

Il est apparu récemment, parmi les peuples autochtones et leurs alliés, un mouvement politique visant à décoloniser et promouvoir l'indigénisation du milieu universitaire. Trop souvent, cependant, de soi-disant alliés peuvent faire plus de mal que de bien en cherchant à faire triompher la justice et l'égalité pour autrui parce qu'il leur manque le savoir approprié et les connaissances liées à ceux auxquels ils offrent leur aide. Une question-clé que devraient se poser les gens désireux que justice soit rendue aux peuples autochtones devrait être la suivante: Que signifie provoquer l'"indigénisation" de quelque chose? Mon but ici est d'explorer ce que veut dire cette "indigénisation" de la philosophie en demandant: qui le peut, dans quelle mesure, et ce qu'on exige.

Recently, there has been a political movement by Indigenous peoples and their allies to decolonize and Indigenize the academy. This is because the academy has a longstanding violent relationship to Indigenous peoples and traditional forms of knowledge. But often times, so-called allies can do more harm in their attempts to achieve justice and equality for others because they lack the appropriate knowledge and understandings of those whom they aim to aid. Thus, one key question that people who are interested in justice for Indigenous peoples should ask is what it even mean to "Indigenize" something.

I have been doing Native American Philosophy for many years and I had not really considered what sorts of distinctive questions this trend presented for my own discipline until I began to see numerous

conference themes and conference sessions spontaneously sprout and then quickly proliferate. This development in Philosophy, which follows other disciplines, also raises interesting questions for reflection for those of us who do Indigenous Philosophy, specifically because Philosophy stands as one of the last bastions to refuse to recognize even the existence of Indigenous Philosophy within the academy. For this reason, my goal here is to briefly explore what it would mean to 'Indigenize' Philosophy by questioning who can do so, to what extent, and what is required. I hope to motivate those who do, or work alongside, Indigenous Philosophy to think, and rethink, our relationship to our work and whether and how we may want to either reinforce or redirect our intellectual and practical priorities.

Indigenizing and decolonizing often appear to be used, incorrectly, interchangeably. This is because decolonizing theory is intended for the purposes of Indigenous and diasporic folks and issues. There seems to be at least three interrelated distinctions between decolonizing and indigenizing. First, decolonial theory is much broader and applies to all colonized people; it applies to issues related to coloniality. However, Indigenizing methodologies seem to be specific to Indigenous peoples; not all colonized people are or were Indigenous peoples. Thus, second, decolonial theory and methodologies require freedom from the colonizers according to visions of futurity deemed as liberating. Indigenizing methodologies and approaches are about reclaiming, restoring, and reinstating the traditional knowledges, languages, land, and cultural practices that were colonized. Angela Wilson (2004) explains that the needs of colonized Indigenous peoples are unique from others in their desire to "embrace and return to the past" (70). Wilson also explains that Indigenizing strategies for decolonizing are distinct because of the differing fundamental ways of knowing within traditional knowledge. Thus, all Indigenized theory will be a form of decolonizing but not all decolonial theory will be Indigenized. And third, I would suggest that decolonizing methodologies can be done by everyone but that Indigenizing methodologies can only be done by Indigenous peoples. It seems that there is more value for non-indigenous people to do the work of decolonizing. Both terms are verbs, which indicates that someone is doing some kind of political work. But decolonizing approaches seem to be something that is done to Western models whereas Indigenizing seems to be inherent in the work itself. One cannot Indigenize a Western model; for the product to have been Indigenized, it must emerge from a process that is inherently Indigenized from the ground up. However, that does not mean that all Indigenous work is Indigenized or that all work done by Indigenous people is Indigenized.

There are a number of conditions required for an institution or academy to be Indigenized and given the nature of the academy, it is unlikely that it will ever be fully Indigenized. In fact, Taiaiake

Alfred argues that we cannot actually Indigenize the academy because it's the academy (2012); every facet of the academy is built on and reproductive of colonizing forces and so are, by their very nature, "intolerant of and resistant to any meaningful 'Indigenizing'" (2004). But it is imperative for both Indigenous scholars and institutions to take the steps necessary to doing so. Indigenous scholars, or as Alfred terms them – Warrior Scholars, should decolonize awareness and fight cognitive imperialism (Battiste 2016a) and make the institutions responsible for and responsive to First Nations goals of self-determination and sovereignty (Justice 2004). They should resist the status quo of traditional academic research methodologies as well as the gatekeeping practices of traditional tenure and promotion. Marie Battiste states explicitly that Indigenous scholars must become healers in a wounded space (2016b). On the other hand, institutions must bring Indigenous groups into the university community and make the campus and resources accessible to Indigenous peoples. Campus practices and policies must reflect the needs and practices of Indigenous groups, specifically those upon whose land they are built, and include them in relevant institution decision-making in order to shape the community. The schools must participate with Indigenous organizations in order to benefit those communities as a means of satisfying practices of reconciliation. And most importantly, universities need to bring in and serve Indigenous students through practices and curriculum that is reflective of traditional knowledge and culture and hire elders who are knowledge-keepers as faculty (Robinson 2018).

From this we can see that it is not the content itself of the work or the institution that makes it Indigenized; it is the practices aimed at improving the lives and situations of Indigenous peoples both within and outside of the academy. The most important aspect of Indigenizing is engaging in practices that have literal, material benefit for Indigenous peoples. A. Wilson argues that Aboriginal intellectuals are best able to do this by recovering traditional knowledges, and through doing so appropriately, help to restore dignity and create a positive future for Indigenous communities.

There is also a set of conditions for one's methodology to be Indigenized – these criteria exist beyond being faithful to the conditions and foundations of Indigenous worldviews. First and foremost, the obligation of the scholar is not to the academy but to the community; research must always be used for political ends (Wilson 2004, 74). Second, as much as possible, research must be tied to the language and the land of the group(s) about which the research is done. Third, all research must be a form of holistic synthesis, rather than deconstructive analysis, that aims to build relationships between ideas, practices, and peoples (Wilson 2008, 101). Scholars must aim for methodological criteria of credibility and authenticity through practices of collaborative

hermeneutics based on both relationality and relational accountability with community members (102). Wilson lists a set of conditions articulated by Judy Atkinson that helps scholars ensure they meet these conditions: Indigenous people must approve the research and methods, there must be knowledge and consideration of diversity in the community, interaction guided by the three Rs (respect, reciprocity, relationality), participants must feel safe and have confidentiality, non-intrusive watching, deep listening with more than one's ears, reflective non-judgmental of observation, the action done is informed by learning, wisdom, and acquired knowledge, responsible to act with fidelity, awareness of the logic of mind and feelings of heart, self-observation, and full acknowledgment of what the researcher brings to research (2008, 59).

There are two ways in which we can translate the term "Indigenizing Philosophy". We can conceive of it as referring to individual work or as referring to the discipline itself. I think that, with respect to the discipline, we're in pretty much the same general boat as when people discuss Indigenizing the academy. It becomes a moral obligation of the discipline to make room for and recognize Indigenous people, Indigenous philosophy, and Indigenous methodologies. Philosophy runs up against the same obstacles as the academy because, well, Philosophy is the foundation of the academy; and if colonialism is the foundation of the academy then we are for sure aware — through the words of the philosophers past and present — that colonialism is the foundation of Western, canonical, traditional, professional Philosophy. The difference lies in the sheer depth and explicitness of the colonialism of Philosophy, which itself was used, and continues to justify, practices of colonization, genocide, and imperialism.

What is more interesting, then, is the notion of Indigenizing one's own Philosophy. It's interesting because it's complex. There are a few related necessary conditions for one to Indigenize their philosophy. The first requirement is that the work must emanate from, and be grounded in, an Indigenous worldview — specifically the metaphysics, epistemology, and logic. Work done on Indigenous issues via Western frameworks, as many well-intentioned philosophers — including feminist philosophers — have done, is both misguided and somewhat bastardized. These projects are not even decolonial projects; they are assimilationist, which is entirely antithetical to Indigenizing philosophy. Indigenizing one's philosophy means that one has embraced and returned to the traditional knowledge for the purpose of expanding that knowledge in the world. Certainly, Indigenized philosophy does not have to use all and only Indigenous sources. There are numerous philosophies that are compatible with it. While most Western philosophy is not, there are many strains of feminist, Latina, and African-American frameworks that can complement Indigenous worldviews. Moreover, there are some Asian and Indian philosophies that also work alongside Indigenous

worldviews. Additionally, not all philosophical issues must be uniquely Indigenous to be Indigenized; in fact, there are likely many philosophical questions that can be better addressed from Indigenous worldviews. And interestingly, when looking at some philosophical qualms through Indigenous worldviews, some of them may dissolve or no longer extant.

The second related requirement is that the philosophy be tied to, as much as possible, both the language and the land. Burkhart defines locality as being-from-the-land and knowing-from-the-land. He explains that locality is a part of each of us, and speaks through us, regardless of whether we recognize it as being constitutive of our identity. There are two means through which philosophy can be Indigenized through the land, as Burkhart phrases it; and both attend to the inherently spiritual aspect of the Indigenous worldview. The first is that the philosophizing is quite literally of and from place. One of the most significant relationships in the Indigenous worldview is the one that the people have with place. Kovach argues that "What we know flows through us from the 'echo of generation,' and our knowledges cannot be universalized because they arise from our experience with our places. This is why name-place stories matter: they are repositories of science, they tell of relationships, they reveal history, and they hold our identity" (2009, 61). Epistemic locality, which is central to Indigenous philosophy, is about recognizing your material relationships with others and seeing that they are of place. As Burkhart says, "it's rooted right in the dirt in front of you". Locality is foundational to Indigenous metaphysics and is neither abstract nor metaphorical. Whether it is demonstrative of the land or of relationships, locality highlights the processual nature of metaphysics.

Third, as S. Wilson's friend Lewis argues, another way to account for the inherent spirituality of Indigenous worldviews, the work must be done as a ceremony. He explains:

That's the spiritual part of it. If you talk about research as a ceremony, that's the climax of the ceremony, when it all comes together and all those connections are made; that's what ceremony is about, is strengthening those connections. So maybe when research as a ceremony comes together, when the ceremony is reaching its climax, is when those ideas all come together (2008, 69).

But more importantly, and relating to locality, the work of ceremony, Lewis tells us, is done before the ceremony through the spiritual activity of relationship building. This requirement is both truer yet easier for Philosophy, I'd surmise, than any other discipline given the nature of our discipline. Indigenous peoples have always regarded Philosophy as an activity. Because Indigenous philosophy is inherently processual, its ceremonial nature is actualized.

The fourth requirement is that of motivation, as it ties directly

back to the conditions of locality and ceremony. Wilson cites his friend Cora, who provides the most apt description of where our hearts need to be before, during, and after our philosophizing. She explains:

A 'good heart' guarantees a good motive, and good motives benefit everyone involved...The foundation of Indigenous research lies within the reality of the lived experience...We as Indigenous scholars who wish to participate in the creation of knowledge within our own ways of being must begin with an active and scholarly recognition of who our philosophers and prophets are in our own communities...Indigenous scholarship reflects inherited Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies and it is the responsibility of Indigenous researchers associated with a university to maintain and continuously renew the connections with our ancestors and our communities through embodiment, adherence and practice these (Cora Weber-Pillwax 2003, 49-59/ Wilson 2008, 60).

This brings us to the fifth, and most difficult condition for Indigenizing one's philosophy: its application. Work in environmental ethics, food sovereignty, and nationhood clearly satisfy the requisite condition for relevance to Indigenous communities. And Indigenous philosophy that is not applied, that is, philosophy that answers internal questions regarding being and knowing and walking the right path can still potentially satisfy the condition for contributing to the community, through indirectly, especially if it is regarded as an act of resistance against cognitive imperialism and self-alienation. Many Indigenous scholars have exclaimed that Indigenous scholars are best situated and best suited to recovering and developing traditional ways of knowing. Alfred espouses that Indigenous academics are most useful as teachers of empowerment and the truthful sense of the past given that we are positioned to "counter the ongoing production of imperial attitudes" (2004, 97); he believes that "...to be a real Indigenous intellectual, one must be a warrior of the truth" (95). Similarly, Justice argues that "Turtle Island is more than an ancient land to which we have ancient ties; it's also an idea, a worldscape of contested meanings. Understanding art for life's sake aids all Indigenous peoples...to decolonize our world in mind as well as body, to dismantle the ideas and forces that tear us into pieces" (2004, 118). Work done in Indigenous philosophy that aims to further develop, flesh out, synthesize, and connect disparate questions, such as those between science and ethical lived experience, can do just that.

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