[Re]Claiming my Indigenous knowledge: Challenges, resistance, and opportunities

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Abstract
How does one learn about and enact one’s Indigenous knowledge, particularly in the context of the Western academy? Is it possible to return to an Indigenous past in hopes of reclaiming and finding one’s Indigenous history and knowledge? This article is the personal exploration of my journey back to Embu, Kenya in 1994 as part of a project to research Embu women’s Indigenous understandings and knowledge production. In my struggle to ‘return’ the land of my birth, I was able to challenge and contest my colonial education and the frameworks that they had instilled in me. Instead of finding a static past, what I found was Indigenous knowledge production and resistance that was able to operationalize an Indigenous past in the face of current struggles against an ever encroaching colonial presence. This article is a personal reflection on the themes of Indigenous knowledges as resistance and Indigenous knowledge production in the hopes of illuminating broader themes around decolonization and Indigenous resistance within the Western academy. It asks more questions than it leaves answers, reflecting the decolonizing journey that I continue on today.

Keywords: knowledge production; Indigenous research; Indigenous women; Embu; resistance
Introduction

This article seeks to address the seemingly impossible. Is it possible to reclaim one’s lost culture, or is the cultural distancing inflicted by colonial education too vast to make up? What would it take to dismantle structures that have been in existence for more than five hundred years – and is this possible in the present moment? Can the master’s tools destroy the master’s house, as Audre Lorde speculated years ago? Through my research with Embu women in Kenya, I argue that cultural reclamation cannot be attained in totality; as many have argued, there is no pure, often romanticized past to return to. As Malidoma Some (2002) has eloquently stated in his many writings, once you are in association with a culture, a piece of it is left inside you, it becomes part of your sub-consciousness; it becomes part of your existence. Building on Some’s work, we can also begin to draw distinctions between the work of reclamation and the impossibility of complete return. Rather than returning to an African past frozen in time, the politics of reclamation is about taking something old and making it new again. It is about recognizing that culture shifts with time, location, and the social and political challenges that we face as communities. But, perhaps more than anything else, reclamation is about rediscovering the central tenants of our Indigenous cultures and applying them to our present context. Like any other cultural project, our decision to reclaim our Indigenous knowledges can begin with a single moment, a thought, or a particular social challenge.

One has to start somewhere. I choose to start with my research, with my history and the history of the Embu women that I worked with - to create space for dialogue and develop ways of engaging with overt and covert resistance. This article is a contribution to the study and ongoing contestation over Indigenous knowledges and decolonization within the Western academy. Admittedly, it is a text that poses more questions than answers, a text that hopefully provides entry points for readers to reflect on their own work and on their own journey as they make their contributions to Indigenous theories and realities that have always been in existence. This article is therefore an ongoing process, and as the reader will notice, this is the reason that there is no conclusion.

In this article I examines two key areas: a) Indigenous knowledge creation and conceptualization by rural Embu women from Kenya; and b) locating African Indigenous knowledges within the academy as a form of epistemic resistance. These two areas are informed by Indigenous knowledges as lived out practices and embodied in the people who live these knowledges and resistances out daily. I situate my analysis and understanding of this on and within African Indigenous knowledges, an epistemology that is ageless, and a birthright that was always waiting for me to embrace it. I conclude my discussion by exploring the following question: What does it mean to decolonize the self?
Background and methodological approach

I was born into a small village in Embu, a community of people who strived to ingrain, as deeply as possible into our subconscious, that nothing good could be found in Embu - a land so green and fertile, a land that many visitors envied because of its landscape, rivers, hills, and fertile soils, and a land that grows the best Arabica coffee in the world. If parents could afford the expense, they sent their children to boarding school from Grade Five onwards, an act that meant few came back to live and work on the land after their high school or college education. I was one of them. It is amazing; no matter how much we suppress the memories of our formative years, a simple trigger will bring these images, voices, sounds, and stories to the surface.

Malidom Some (2002) and Gregory Cajete (1994) remind us that we are born with a centre, loaded with maps of our ancestry. The clamour of the world, however, pushes us away from the centre, blurring our maps and making it difficult to decipher our life’s path. It obscures and seeks to sever where we have been from where we are heading. As I have mentioned elsewhere, the visit to my village in 1994 was one of many I had, but the 1994 visit was quite different. I had come to be re-educated, to be inculcated in African Indigenous ways of knowing. I was hungry for an African-centred theory, a conceptualization of knowledge production and dissemination that flowed from my centre. I was ready to rekindle those initial ways of learning that connect me to ancestral philosophical and pedagogical traditions. I sought to rediscover those Indigenous epistemological approaches to teaching youth through storytelling, proverbs, riddles, and myths that our mothers, fathers, and grandparents were so well versed in.

As I drove to the village in May 1994, I had no doubt that my teachers, guides, and instructors would welcome me with open arms. I was one of them, an Embu woman ready to be grounded in Indigenous ways. Instead, the women in the village were very sceptical and thought I was there to make a mockery of their ways of knowing. As Wabee, one of the women in the village, told me:

My daughter, what can I teach you, you have acquired mzungu (white) ways, you live like them, talk like them, dress like them – why do you want to come back and learn from us? We thought you preferred the Mzungu ways to our ways? Our ways are ancient but meets the needs of our community – how will my teachings assist you... you come from so far... you have a new community...

Wabee’s questions drove to the heart of what I valued and what I had become since leaving the village. The very premise of my visit and work was challenged, the assumptions that I arrived with were shaken, and what I had thought were answers were quickly replaced by questions. By engaging in critical, transformative research through dialogues with Embu women, I was encouraged to pursue definitions of Indigenous knowledges that spoke to me and to rework my understanding of Indigenous spiritual and cultural ways. My search for new definitions of Embu knowledges contributed to the disruption of dominant power and politics that perpetuated the
divide between ‘we’ and ‘them’, the ‘self’ and the ‘other’. The women’s voices stirred up memories and emotions, and brought new complexities and challenges to my work.

I remember, after this revelation, I made a commitment to the ground I was standing on (in Embu). It was my responsibility to unlearn and relearn, to start a decolonizing process that asserted African ways of knowing, learning, and teaching. I made a goal to reclaim my damaged cultural thinking and recreate an intellectual foundation that would speak to my situation as a scholar of African ancestry, a foundation that would sustain and empower me as an African woman residing and teaching in North America.

This article is one of the spaces where I reflect on important values, histories, and relationships that are essential for any intellectual seeking Indigenous ways of knowing. The Indigenous research in Kenya among the Embu women provided an avenue for me to challenge existing epistemologies and an opportunity to understand Embu women’s worldview. This research also made it possible for me to examine and imagine the possibilities of situating these alternative and transformative ways of knowing within the Western academy – a place that has had no space for African Indigenous knowledges and a space that has actively worked to marginalize and degrade these ways of knowing. By creating an awareness of the contributions that Indigenous knowledges could make to education, I wanted to ensure that other students like me would not experience the alienation and dislocation that I had been subjected to in the Western academy. By claiming this space within the Western academy, this is also a method of showing how African Indigenous worldviews are not static, were never static, and more than capable of engaging in theory and praxis in transformative and emancipatory ways.

**Learning from the Embu: Indigenous knowledge production**

From the moment I arrived in the village, I was constantly learning about Embu Indigenous knowledge – either by listening to elders, or by observing them put their theory into practice. During the full year that I spent with the women, the learning curve was steep and challenging. I found myself questioning my beliefs in the centrality of Western education and realizing how much it had distanced me from my centre. But as I stood on the land, the Western theories of education that had served as my framework and centre for so long, now seemed distant and worthless. This is the power of the land and the people who live on it. Gregory Cajete (1994) explains that within Indigenous epistemologies, land often provides our learning curriculum; it becomes the central reference point for how we relate to the earth, to each other, and to the very act of creation. Likewise, maybe more than anything else, the land is what connects me to my ancestors.

I was constantly reminded of the pillars of Indigenous ways of knowing: respect, deep listening, reciprocity, mutual stretching, and community collectivism. The knowledges that I learned demanded a relationship and a patience that I had to learn. Many times, an elder would be speaking and I wanted to respond. One of the mothers would look at me, and her gaze would
let me know that it was not appropriate to speak until I was invited to do so. One of the elders, Mumenyi, said to me:

You seem to be in a rush, you seem to want answers of everything in one sitting. My daughter, you have to learn to listen with all your ears [pointing to her heart]. Our Creator gave us a [pointing to her heart] ... to listen more and talk less... so that when you get a chance to talk, you will be prepared to speak from your heart, your spirit, your inner ear.

This went against everything my Western training had instilled in me; for almost twenty years, I had been taught to be assertive, to demand my right, and to be outspoken. Only later did I realize that the assertiveness encouraged in us as students, was connected to a broader capitalist ethos of competition and individualism that shapes the goals of Western education. When I interrupted those elders in Embu – and unknowingly challenged the very institution of eldership – a couple of them commented on our different approaches to education and discussion. One elder reiterated that such aggressiveness went against the traditions of social order and deep listening. Deep listening (Palmer, 2003), being engaged at all times (Chavez, 2001), listening with one’s heart, and knowing that we are all connected (Portman & Garret, 2006), while being written about in newer academic literature, are not new relationship-building processes among Indigenous peoples around the world. To fully embrace and implement these learning methods would be to awaken what Paul Wangoola (2002) describes as the ‘multiversity’; or the multicentric learning spaces/practices he advocates for in his writing. He explains that the universities in the west advocate one way of teaching and learning; meanwhile, centres of learning can be found in/through every space that people occupy on earth. The problem is that, we – Western scholars and knowledge practitioners – often feel too busy to sit still and learn from the multiversities offered by the world. Indigenous knowledges demand patience, commitment, and an understanding of the relational power dynamics that are intrinsically connected to these knowledge forms.

Much of what I learned during my time in Embu was theory and knowledge production in practice. During one of the interviewing sessions, I asked about Indigenous ways of organizing and different forms of resistance. Instead of providing me with an answer, the women invited me to participate in the uprooting of a coffee plantation. What I experienced the following day was profound and remains rooted in my memory. For many years, the Embu people planted coffee and harvested ripe berries for sale to various government agents, who then sold it to large corporations for distribution in global markets. Of course, by the time the coffee reached global markets, very little profit trickled down to coffee farmers in Embu. However, for quite some time, the coffee prices had plummeted with very little explanation from the government. Government agents kept insisting that the community simply needed to plant more coffee if they wanted higher yields and profits large enough to make a living. As a way of resisting the government’s directive, many families cut down the coffee plants and planted food
crops instead, such as beans or corn; others intercropped (planting crops among the coffee plants), a method that was not approved by the government agents.

That day, during the uprooting of what had once been a coffee field, both men and women did not hesitate to cut down the coffee trees in favour of growing food crops for their families. The work was carried out as a communal event or harambee (let us ‘pull together’) event. What this experience demonstrated for me was the amount of collaboration and collective organization necessary to accomplish such a task. Without requiring a textbook on, or an explanation of, collective resistance, I witnessed it in action. This community event was one of the many that I witnessed during the year I spent in Embu, where the women and men of the village confirmed to me that they lived a life informed by both ‘theory’ and ‘practice’, rather than ‘practice’ alone. The uprooting of the coffee plantation also demonstrated to me that education is necessarily subversive; and that it must entangle both learning and political goals to bring about social change. Further, the experience at the plantation helped me interrogate and move away from notions of ‘objective’ or ‘impartial’ education. Since, for the people of Embu, it was their subjective experiences as villagers under attack from corporate displacement that led them to uproot the plantation. Below is yet another example of theory and practice, in which I witnessed traditional healing.

Another event revealed the intersections of practices and theory, while destabilizing more of my Western instilled beliefs. I had agreed to participate in the harvesting of amaranth. I was busy plucking the dry amaranth and complaining under my breath of exhaustion when, all of a sudden, I heard one of the children scream. Everyone immediately stopped and looked to where the children were playing. The screaming child came running towards the women and I dropped everything I was doing to run and join them. The child had disturbed a bees’ nest and in defence the bees swarmed around the child, stinging him on the face. I was screaming at the top of my voice, telling the women to put the child in my car so that I could rush him to the hospital, some 20 kilometres away. I was anxious and wanted to move quickly before the child’s condition worsened. The following is an excerpt from my journal, documenting the women’s efficiency and mastery of Indigenous ways of healing, as well as their understanding of collective responsibility and the communal nature of traditional healing practices:

... everyone except me was calm. I saw women rushing to their houses and coming out with different fruits. Somehow, they all seemed to know what to do when one is stung by a bee. One woman brought a calabash of water, another had a bowl, while one of the men took the fruits and starting peeling them and passing the peels to a woman who was holding the child that was screaming. This elder started squeezing pineapple, orange, lemon juices on the spot that had been stung. Out of nowhere a woman emerges with a bowl of concoction she gave the child, who automatically calms down – I almost asked for the same concoction, but...there, under my own eyes, the community proceeded to provide what I thought was first aid to the child before we rush to hospital. What I did not realize then, was that, the child was being treated for both shock and sting. After the child goes quiet and start smiling, the lady says, the sting is out....- what, I remember
saying to myself, the swelling has disappeared, the only evidence that the child had been stung by a couple of bees was the redness on the spot where the stings were extracted by the concoction of juices. I want to know what herbs were given to the child.....

In the Western world, the healing process often ends when the doctor prescribes medication to the patient to remedy the sickness. With respect to traditional Indigenous healing practices, the process does not end when the person is given the herbs, or as in the case of the bee sting, with its removal. For instance, if a person goes to an herbalist for treatment of malaria, the process does not end when the patient is given the neem drink or enmeshed in a bathtub full of neem leaves. The herbalist will inquire about the community’s ecology, whether there are shrubs and bushes near the house or even stagnant water. In the case described above, while the women administered the herbs to the child, others had gone to check on the bees’ nest to ensure that no other child had been stung. Without disturbing the bees, the nest was moved to another location, far from where the children had been playing. I remember that the elders who moved the nest were chanting, but I cannot remember what they were saying. I understood, however, that ethnomedical practices take into consideration the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual realities of a person in distress (Battiste, 1998; Waterfall, 2002; Wane, 2005). Once the elder removed the bees’ nest, something rather interesting happened. The women turned to each other, asking why the bees had built their nest on the gutters of this house. What message were the bees delivering?

As for me, I was still mesmerized by the chemistry lesson I had just received. I was impressed that the lesson was informal, collective, and responded to the needs of daily life in Embu. What, then, is Indigenous knowledges? How do we define it in terms that capture its breadth, insights and ability to heal? I wondered if the women would make answering this question easy for me. If they would eventually sit me down and explain Indigenous knowledges in clear and definitive terms. On the other hand, I slowly moved away from the idea of making this process easy; of making it clean and definite. I began to question whether putting Indigenous ways of being in clean, definitive terms went against the very purpose of Indigenous education. Indigenous education challenges us to push and explore knowledge gaps, while speaking back to the West’s definitional power over what counts as valid knowledge.

The women of Embu instilled in me the foundations for how I came to understand Indigenous knowledges. They provided lessons that I continue to draw from and reflect on as I engage with Indigenous knowings in the Western academy. The basis of their Indigenous knowledges was their daily lives. In these lives, they walked and worked the land, learning from it and being sustained by it. In their lives, relationships formed the basis of how they understood themselves:

The way we prepare our family plots each season,... the way I preserve the foods... the herbs that I use for malaria or stomach ailments...all are teaching that are common to all people growing up in this village....learnt them early... I can still remember riddles or proverbs my grandmothers used to explain something or
make us think... I am sure your mother told you never to throw away the water in your container, just because you see signs of possible rain? (Mukuru)

Horsthemke (2008) states that Indigenous knowledges, as a discursive framework in the academy, are relatively new and have only gained currency in the last twenty years. Outside the academy, however, African Indigenous knowledges form the ancient and cumulative practices of African peoples. In 1994, an Embu sage named Mukuru explained to me in great detail the Indigenous ways of land preparation, food preservation, and traditional healing. These ancient knowledges are still very much alive, being used, and evolving in the context of modern challenges.

For almost an hour Mukuru talked about the land, the community, spirituality, healing, government, and education in ways that demonstrated how connected, immediate and very real they were. From my discussions with Mukuru and other elders on Indigenous knowledges, I have come to understand that this form of knowledge belongs to the people. As Owuor (2007) aptly states:

Indigenous knowledge is a process of learning and sharing social life, histories, identities, economic, and political practices unique to each cultural group... [it is a] complex set of activities, values, beliefs...that has evolved cumulatively over time and is active among communities and groups who are its practitioners” spoke to what many scholars (Owuor, 2007, p. 23).

Indigenous knowledges are often stated as alternative, informal ways of knowing. The ways in which women preserved their foods and prepared medicinal herbs to treat illness in their family was not an alternative practice, but an everyday reality. These cultural traditions were what they knew, and they drew upon them whenever they were needed. Such knowledge constitutes an Indigenous-centered and locally informed epistemology. This knowledge is crucial for the survival of society. From my interaction with the participants, it is clear that Indigenous knowledges are created and recreated with every moment of our lives. The multiplicity and complexity of this creation takes into account the uniqueness of each group, their histories, and their lived experiences. Its creation and dissemination recognises the multiple collectives, and affirms that the interpretation or analysis of social reality is subject to different and, sometimes, oppositional perspectives. Castellano (2000) affirms this notion when she argues that there are three broad aspects of Indigenous knowledges that resonate with most global Indigenous research contexts: a) Indigenous knowledges are intergenerational and are passed on by community elders; b) they are based on one’s careful observation of their surroundings; and finally, that c) they can be revealed through dreams, visions and intuition. Each of these aspects was affirmed by my participants.
Learning from the Embu: Indigenous resistance in the academy

One of the things that I struggled to reconcile during my visit was the community’s desire for Western education and learning, and the insidiousness of Western ways of thinking that were reproduced seemingly unchallenged within the community. Nwawa (1997) argues that, of all aspects of Western imperialism, the one that Africans found most seductive was Western education. Other scholars such as Said (1994) and Ngugi (1986) demonstrate how education is interwoven with politics and culture to create and sustain systems of colonialism and domination. Ngugi has written on what he calls the ‘cultural bomb’, or the intellectual and spiritual tension we feel when torn between Western and Indigenous education (Ngugi, 1986, p. 3). We become torn between pressures to take our place at the back of the line in Western knowledge hierarchies, and replacing knowledge hierarchies with more equitable power arrangements. The pervasiveness of the superiority and benefits of Western education run deep and, for those like me who grew up in this shadow, many of us do not recognize its hold on us or when this hypnotization first began.

What I came to realize was that, behind this fascination with the benefits and power of Western education, the women in the village had also always been challenging it. I had refused to see or even acknowledge how much they knew and how much their lives bore out their resistance. They held their sacred knowledges close to them and ensured their sustainability and continuity through their practice. As a child I was blind to the power of these forms of knowing and how preciously the women of my community held them, but during my return I saw this lived out, as well as articulated through conversation with the women. Enea, a woman who participated in the study, once said to me:

The eagerness in your eyes and the quivering of your voice tell me your soul is not at peace. You are like water in an arrowroot leave.... take a sit... and let your wondering mind settle... your thoughts are still far... my child if your spirit is not here how do you expect to hear the voice of your ancestors... your teachers,...the little machine (pointing to the tape recording machine) .... no. no. these machines drain your energy... no... no how will you learn...by listening to a voice in that little machine,... what do you learn in your schools ... be parrots... the school... school of life.. that I attended taught me the importance of presence..., sincerity; patience and attentiveness. What do they teach you in those faraway lands...

This research provided me with the opportunity to rediscover myself, to create my own forms of resistance, and to awaken the resiliency that was in me and that my ancestors had fortified and built through the ages during their encounters with colonizers. By focusing on the lives of Embu women, in this case particularly through Indigenous food-processing practices, I was able to see the daily lives of Indigenous women as an entry point to community politics, cultural understanding and Indigenous ways of knowing. I learned at the footstools of my mothers and grandmothers and, in the process, learned more than I had in graduate school about
relations of power, engagement with knowledge and African Indigenous education and ways of knowing.

To focus on one’s cultural identity and Indigenous ways of knowing is a political act. The knowledge possessed by women, rural Embu women in particular, has rarely been viewed as valuable or worth documenting and overlooking this valuable resource base means that important knowledge on healing, collective organizing, and grassroots survival strategies may be lost.

Reflections on Indigenous knowledges

Is there space for Indigenous knowledges in the academy? Based on my research and life experiences, I would say the answer is a definitive and uncompromising ‘yes’. A profound task is getting the academy to recognise and validate the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledges as a pedagogic, institutionally communicative tool for the delivery of education. But this project cannot only be one of seeking validation. It also includes everyday means of asserting the place of Indigeneity in the academy; and carving spaces for its safe practice and exploration within an otherwise hostile research environment. What is the implication of this inclusion? Integrating Indigenous knowledges into western academies is to recognize that different forms of knowledge can co-exist; more particularly, different knowledges can co-exist in conflict at the same time. Indigenous peoples must be allowed to produce and control knowledges about themselves and their societies. They must own their past, culture, and traditions. My research work among Embu women put the academy face-to-face with a subversive and imaginative analysis, not only for questions of epistemology but issues of multiple oppressions. It contributes to the body of knowledge and demonstrates that racism permeates our lives, dislocates us from our own people, and engages those scholars who wish to rupture the dominant structures.

Looking at my research today, it is clear that this work was not only a necessary step towards seeking out my identity, but it also provided me with material from which to develop theories of resistance. Shaped by lived experiences, my research among Embu women, African Canadian women, and herbalists in Kenya connected me to a community of sisters in resistance. These forms of resistance will vary from theorist to theorist based on their lived reality and their cultural milieu. The important thing to keep in mind is the commitment to name and honour resistance when you see it operating, or to go further in supporting efforts that work against the grain. The courses I teach today and the way I teach them formulate part of my resistance to the status quo. The type of research I am engaged in, as well as the way I conduct my research, is a form of resistance. In 2000 I attended a conference in which Patricia Hill Collins delivered the keynote address, and I can still remember what she said. She challenged our imaginations and the social-political implications of our work, in asking us, would you recognize resistance if you saw it? Many times theories of resistance are alive within us, but we do not even know how to tap into them. However, once one becomes conscious, you transform internal resistances from latent theory into practice, because as Joy James (1993) keeps reminding scholars of color, our theorizing is informed by our practice and our practice by our theory. One cannot operate
without the other. Driving to Embu in 1994, I had no idea what lay in store for me. I just knew I was ready to learn and to be schooled in Indigenous ways of knowing.

As I stood in front of the Embu women, experiencing rejection, I was tempted to tell them that in Canada I was marginalized and only half recognized as a ‘woman of colour’. This social position had marginalized my distinct voice as an African woman. I had been broadly placed in the category of the other, essentialized and granted a voice that would make me visible only on special occasions – multicultural events, Black History month etc. – and I did not have the privileges of a white, middle class woman. Could I tell them that in Canada, I was constantly validating my location and negotiating my identity? Could I tell them that shop attendants followed me when I entered a store, believing that I might shoplift (see The Everyday Racism by Phelomena Essed, 1991)? Could I tell these women about the multiple oppressions I had to deal with on a day-to-day basis, because of my skin colour, gender, and class intersections? How could I explain that I did not belong to the upper-middle class, a status that they thought accompanied my level of education? This way of thinking evokes a sense of duality: the justification that had become part of me as a colonized subject and the parallel need for acceptance. In this particular instance, the rejection was more painful than rejection in a North American context. I thought they would embrace me as one of their own. But they did not – until I proved to them that deep at heart I was Embu – a subject location that I cannot attain as a non-European person, even if, I mastered all that comes with the western cannon. The need for performance in order to be allowed into a space was my lived reality in North America. I did not want to be subjected to similar treatment – exclusions, omissions, fragmentation etc. – in my homeland, the place of my birth.

My visit to Embu was a very powerful experience that enabled me to think and re-think from new critical angles. For instance, being subjected to a new primary subject location made me realize that identity is not only fluid rather than static, but to a degree, must also be earned through relational duties rather than assumed entitlements. In my naivety, I had assumed the Embu women would be exactly where I left them. It did not occur to me that, by selecting to follow a colonial education, I had chose a different path from theirs, and that would be our colonial divide, until we figured out how to collapse it. The political and social circumstances from which I made these explorations were indeed unique and powerful. This is mainly because, as an outsider within, the exposure to critical analytical tools, along with the privilege to carry out my research, gave me that rare opportunity when you are in between spaces to think through episodes as they occur. Was I the exploitative researcher who wanted to advance her scholarship by writing about her people and past? The dilemmas of my location were accentuated in these objectifying circumstances, and made the process of self-understanding, and my struggle for a greater knowledge, more acute.

All these agonizing moments are reflected in the writing of Spivak (1988) when she asks, can the subaltern speak? She tells her story as a designated subaltern subject, moving with her passport through the boundaries and barriers of nation-states, often questioned about her professional status as a teacher, and as a person. Like Spivak and others, I am aware of the power
of colonialism, racism, and classism. Could I tell these women about my shifting subject – that when I left Kenya, I was a legitimate subject, well-educated and had acquired some status among the Kenyan elite? Since I had legitimated my position in Kenya I thought that I was a legitimate subject everywhere else. Could I tell them that by crossing the Atlantic Ocean, my subject position had changed? Could I tell them of the many times I had to verify my credentials, either to students whom I was supposed to teach, colleagues whom I was supposed to work with or, more recently, when I was crossing the border with my Canadian passport? How many times did the secretaries ask me what exactly I looking for when I visited different offices, either inside my campus or outside? What interpretation could I give all of these challenges—resistance or acceptance? Commenting on the work of Himani Banerji, one of the students in my class on Cultural Knowledges said that sometimes we get offended when we are not validated, or have our voices heard, by the dominant group. Could this be true? Banerji’s work has continued to show that dehumanization operates, primarily, through hegemonic ideologies and discourses meant to inflict pain on communities of colour. I agree. Racism, sexism or any form of ‘ism’ has both mental and physical impacts and no amount of justification can erase the scars incurred through such discriminatory practices.

Conclusion: Lessons learned from my decolonizing journey so far

In 1994, I was a researcher, student, and seeker of Indigenous knowledges. How has my research influenced my teaching and my current research projects? In 2012, though my decolonizing journey is far from complete, I am in a much better position. As a faculty member in one of the most prestigious universities in North America, I have managed to create a space for dialogue on Indigenous issues in my courses: Cultural Knowledges; Spirituality and School; and Alternative Health and Healing Practices. All three courses revisit history to celebrate the vast array of cultural diversity in the world, and interrogate how various cultures, spiritualities, and modes of healing have been presented to the world. The courses also celebrate various forms of resistance, encountered in the process of fragmentation of Indigenous peoples’ knowledges. I have come to the realization that I am not alone in this journey, evidenced by the popularity of these courses – many students who take the courses are seekers. I always let them know that I am a facilitator, and in the course of their journey through the academy, they will find their Indigenous roots from which they can interrogate their worldview as they know it or, rather, as they have learnt it.

What contributions can my research project, among rural Embu, make to academia? Why do we need personal involvement in educational change? How must we change? To what extent are we willing to struggle? What may be the personal and professional implications and consequences of such actions? Re/claiming multiple ways of knowing is to help an individual cultivate the capacity to exercise creative potential, to develop oneself and to become part of the transformative force for social change. My teaching pedagogy has been influenced greatly by my research. Many times in my classes, I seize every opportunity to talk of challenges, resistance
and multiversities. I employ Indigenous teaching methods such as proverbs, or storytelling, because, at the back of my mind, I am constantly reminded by the many voices from my research to never forget my roots. This lesson is eloquently captured by Baldwin (1984) who stated in his “Notes of a Native Son”:

I know… that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of a bastard of the west; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe, but in Africa… this meant in some subtle way… I bought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the cathedral at Chartres, and to the Empire State building, a special attitude. These are not my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. (pp. 6-7)

This quotation grounds me and, at the same time, helps me to problematize our education system, its exclusive nature, as well as its gaps and negation of Indigenous ways of knowing. It reminds me that informed, educated people could internalize assumptions that reinforce structures of inequality and exclusion (hooks, 1984). It is our collective responsibility, to ourselves, our ancestors and our future generations, to take an active role in re/claiming our cultural heritage and epistemic centre, while at the same time resisting and challenging exclusionary education as it exists today.

What is most important for me is to ensure a progressive growth towards the decolonization of my mind, and to develop a deeper appreciation of my Indigenous ways of knowing. I want to reclaim the centre that I have been walking away from in my pursuit of western academia. By recreating and reclaiming that centre, I am anchoring my lived experience in my cultural roots, and grounding myself in an authenticity that speaks to my reality. What has been very difficult in the past is linking the everyday lived experiences to the structural constraints of institutional and political economy. The challenge here is to explicate the interplay between agency and social structure. I would like to emphasize that my challenge is to explain the interrelationship between my life and the social structures that I find myself in. However, I cannot dwell on the impossibilities, but instead, devote my time to developing a theoretical conception rooted in the historical struggles of our fore parents. From liberation wars in the colonies to grassroots forms of contemporary resistance, Embu women have held on to their Indigenous ways of knowing?
References


