Speaking truth to power: Indigenous storytelling as an act of living resistance

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Abstract
In our preparation for this issue, we had particular expectations and beliefs about what it meant to theorize and map out decolonization. We saw decolonization as under theorized and needing more attention. What the authors of this issue reminded us of is that decolonization does not fit the demands and expectations of the Western Euroversity – it is alive and vibrant, being theorized and enacted in Indigenous communities around the globe through practices such as story telling. In this editorial we examine the role that Indigenous storytelling plays as resurgence and insurgence, as Indigenous knowledge production, and as disruptive of Eurocentric, colonial norms of ‘objectivity’ and knowledge. As the authors in this issue explore the specific and located knowledges that work to decolonization, we finish by asking what the role of the reader is in bearing witness to these profound, powerful, and complex articulations of decolonization and Indigenous being.

Keywords: decolonization; Indigenous knowledges; storytelling; Indigenous resurgence

Introduction
This wasn’t what we had anticipated. When we published what would be our first call for papers, we anticipated and imagined an issue that took up and explored the theoretical underpinnings and the possible ways forward for decolonization, envisioned quite broadly. We saw decolonization as under-theorized and needing to be mapped into the future. The issue you have before you is
not only a subversion of our anticipation, but also of what we initially imagined as theoretical – in truth, this issue is far more subversive than we could have anticipated. What we realized is that decolonization, despite its relatively new entry into academic vocabulary, has been practiced and engaged and theorized in Indigenous communities in ways that have already yielded rich, complex layers of thought.

In short, this issue is a testament to what it means to value the personal as political, to value Indigenous communities as the loci of decolonization theory. Each article succeeds (in its own way) to disrupt Western imaginations of ‘theory’ through Indigenous knowledge production and storytelling. Our call for papers sought to examine what decolonization meant and what our contributors crafted is an issue that drag the vague notions of decolonization back to the immediate, relational, and spiritual underpinnings of Indigenous thought. Decolonization demands this specificity, demands this personal and relational understanding, and demands the richness and creative vitality that storytelling brings.

At its core, much of this issue is about storytelling in some form but that word - ‘story’ - is far too simple for the complex and rich understandings that each of our contributors bring to the page. Stories in Indigenous epistemologies are disruptive, sustaining, knowledge producing, and theory-in-action. Stories are decolonization theory in its most natural form.

**Storytelling as resistance and resurgence**

This issue begins with Mendoza’s examination of neoliberalism and nativist longing and, as she demarcates and explores the problem, it is the rest of the issue that sets out to explore the possible answers to globalized neoliberalism and its reliance on multicultural difference. While some have spoken to the infinite substitutability of neoliberal globalization, Arif Dirlik (2006) argues that “Rather than erase difference by converting all to Euro/American norms of modernity, capitalist modernity, as it has gone global, has empowered societies once theoretically condemned to premodernity or tradition to make their own claims on modernity on the bases of those very traditions, as filtered through experiences of colonialism...” (p. 3). These articulations of Indigenous theory through story speak against colonial claims of ‘premodernity’ but not through a claim to neoliberal modernity, but a rejection of the ‘Truth’ that this modernity has constructed under the guise of postmodern fragmentation of truth. While Njoki Wane (this issue) reminds us that colonial imposition leaves Indigenous societies changed and unable to recraft a ‘pure’ pre-colonial reality, Indigenous truth rests on the empowerment of Indigenous land and sovereignty, not needing any legitimation from colonial states or modernity. These claims to Indigenous epistemologies and truths rest on Indigenous peoples and lands as carriers and sustainers of knowledge production.

At the same time, within this limiting framework of multicultural difference, there is also a process of homogenization at work that this issue writes against. Alfred (2006) writes that “Imperialism is inherently a process of homogenization, culturally and politically” (p. 248), and Kapoor (2009) speaks to how decolonization works in opposition to this: “Anticolonial positions
and the prospects for decolonization are embedded in specific and multiple histories and cannot be collapsed into some pure monolithic and homogenized oppositional essence” (p. 4). This is the danger of working with such broad and unifying categories such as ‘Indigenous’ or ‘decolonization’, as we’ve chosen to do with this journal. Yet, each of these articles speak to difference as something beyond simple and reductive deviances from a Eurocentric norm; they are articulations of the rootedness of Indigenous thought, of the differences that fortify and maintain a strong resistance to colonial power. These stories are resurgent moments, which reclaim epistemic ground that was erased by colonialism and, in the process, these stories also lay a framework and foundation for the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty and the reclamation of material ground.

Each of the articles can also be seen as ‘insurgent moments’ (Mendoza, 2006). Frantz Fanon (1963), the well-known Martinican scholar and activist, promised, “decolonization never takes place unnoticed” (p. 36). It makes a spectacle of colonial violence and Indigenous peoples’ resistance to it. In the same vein, the contributors to this important issue write about decolonization in ways that command our attention; and in ways that begin from familiar sites of personal pain and dislocation, land struggle, historical erasure, and the many other violences inflicted by global coloniality. These papers don’t simply ask but demand that we conceptualize decolonization in terms that take on both material and discursive definitions. Honor Ford-Smith (1987) asserts that, “The tale-telling tradition contains what is most poetically true about our struggles. The tales are one place where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged...” (p. 3). While dominant scholarship might push aside methods such as autoethnography or traditional storytelling as not rigorous enough or as ‘identity politics’, the experiences of those who live out decolonization are integral to the integrity of the movement, grounding it to the material realities of the people whose lives bear the scars of colonialism and the long histories of resistance and triumph. There is a reason that many of the insurgent Indigenous movements around the globe have been sustained by poets, musicians, and artists.

This insurrection extends into the academy where we, as authors and where many of our readers, engage; Indigenous knowledges subvert and re-create what the Western academy puts forward as valid ways of knowing. Smith, Burke & Ward (2000) state, “Indigenous societies before Contact were both dynamic and flexible, possessing a creative strand that both then and now repeatedly generates new variants of cultural practices and...transforms the cultural structure itself” (p. 9). In this way, stories as Indigenous knowledge work to not only regenerate Indigenous traditions and knowledge production, but also work against the colonial epistemic frame to subvert and recreate possibilities and spaces for resistance. Zavala (in this issue) examines the field of participatory action research (PAR) and calls for an Indigenous, grassroots reclamation of that field. His call recognizes both the challenges that Indigenous research brings to the ‘Euroversity’ (a similar challenge that Wane exerts in her call for an Indigenous ‘multiversity’), but also that these spaces of creative and dynamic resistance must be sustained by the communities they arise from if they are to be sustainable and revolutionary. These community spaces and the cacophony of voices that rise from them challenge the colonial
epistemic frame, which is propped up by Eurocentric claims to ‘objectivity’, or the emptying of our bodies and experiences from our scholarship. In the colonial order of things, Indigenous stories are always threatening. They’re threatening because they position the teller outside the realm of ‘objective’ commentary, and inside one of subjective action. Indigenous stories affirm that the subjectivity of Indigenous peoples is both politically and intellectually valid. Indigenous stories also proclaim that Indigenous peoples still exist, that the colonial project has been ultimately unsuccessful in erasing Indigenous existence - Indigenous peoples who tell their creation stories disrupt the settler mythology and their arrival stories of terra nullius (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Indigenous stories place Indigenous peoples at the center of our/their research and its consequences. This is something denied by so-called ‘objectivity’. In fact Indigenous peoples have come to be suspicious of all claims to objectivity, since, “for the native, objectivity is always directed against him” (Fanon, 1963, p. 77). By telling our stories we’re at the same time disrupting dominant notions of intellectual rigor and legitimacy, while also redefining scholarship as a process that begins with the self. Zavala challenges the ideology of social science as politically neutral and as something that disassociates the self. In place of so-called intellectual neutrality, he calls for “the transformation from mainstream, colonizing social science to a transformative, anti-colonial project” (p. 58) that takes its direction from grassroots communities and activism.

Of course who does the storytelling, remains an important question in decolonization work. While Indigenous peoples have been the subjects of ‘objectivity’, it has been White settlers who have been in the position of power to wield it with impunity. How can we contest and break down these settler positions to further a decolonization agenda that includes solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples? In her exploration of the psychiatrization of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, LeFrancois speaks from the tenuous position of a settler scholar. First, describing her article as a “storytelling approach to research” (p. 87) that seeks to disrupt and implicate, she continues to explain the fragility of ‘telling’ from the position of an outsider: “There are no short phrases or words to signify whether I should be given access, whether I fit the definition, whether I am really a privileged intruder or not, whether I am a pretender or not; I cannot be authenticated easily” (p. 88). In many ways, LeFrancois speaks to the sometimes contested nature of storytelling, both who speaks and from what perspective they enter the story. Although it’s not an easy task, this article pushes us to think about how Indigenous peoples, settlers, and arrivants can ethically produce knowledges about the others. In truth, Kaomea (2003) demands of settlers and Indigenous alike, “We need to tell more uncomfortable stories” (p. 23). But if storytelling is inherently personal, then how do we do it without appropriating the voices of those we speak of/to? Howard (2006), in his exploration of White bodies in antiracist classrooms, speaks to what LeFrancois is trying to accomplish when he states, “Detached, rational discussions of an unembodied whiteness cannot serve antiracist ends” (p. 59). Settler narratives must speak stories of embodying colonial violences and complicity in the ongoing settler violence(s) against Indigenous peoples.
Particularly evident in knowledge production as personal is the fact that storytelling is agentic and participatory. Storytellers have never been silent in the face of colonial violence that subverted and neutralized various other forms of resistance; the storytellers and griots have never been idle, working through participatory mediums to maintain and sustain Indigenous ways of being and living. Here, the role of the storyteller is central to the exercise of agency and renewal. In Indigenous traditions around the world, storytellers are sacred knowledge keepers, they are the elders and medicine people, and they shape communities through the spoken and written word. Stories are not only agentic and individual but they are communal sharings that bind communities together spiritually and relationally. As Leanne Simpson (2013) tells us: “Spiritual and social practices such as storytelling, the oral tradition, ceremonies, feasting, and gift-giving are designed to bond people together toward a common understanding.”

Stories become mediums for Indigenous peoples to both analogize colonial violence and resist it in real ways. A kind of embodied reciprocity exists between a people and their stories. African novelist Ben Okri says that “people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves. Sick storytellers can make their nations sick. And sick nations make for sick storytellers” (Okri in Parkinson, 2009, p. 31). Contrary to liberal notions of stories as depoliticized acts of sharing, we must recognize stories as acts of creative rebellion. Decolonizing the very act of storytelling means breaking from liberal notions of stories as a kind of multicultural ‘show and tell’. It means closing the false gap that often exists between speaking and acting. Lastly, it means calling upon Indigenous concepts like Ankh Mdw - Kemetic beliefs in the “Living Word” - and others that recognize words as alive inside us, what Somerville (2010) describes as the home fire burning within each person. It’s fitting to paraphrase a question asked by Watts (this issue): What does it mean to think of words as living acts? Or as creative acts? Finally, in answering these questions in the affirmative, how will this be reflected in our scholarship? If stories are archives of collective pain, suffering and resistance, then to speak them is to heal; to believe in them is to reimagine the world.

Iseke explores the institution of eldership in the process of storytelling. In her own words, “Indigenous Elders are the educators, storytellers, historians, language keepers, and healers of our communities” (p. 36). Through the trans-generational memory transmitted by their stories, Elders ensure the survival and continuance of Indigenous epistemic traditions. For many communities under siege by the triangular threats of (settler) colonialism, patriarchy and capitalist-modernity, storytelling becomes a site and tool for survival. Trask (1999) reminds us that “surviving as an Indigenous person in any colonial situation is a strange mix of refusal, creation, and assertion” (p. 89) and that is what these articles and stories are, part of that same strange mix.

Stories have been taken up in recent literature as a form of oral history, but what Watts demonstrates is that these stories also carry Indigenous philosophies, epistemologies, and theories within their narratives; as she states, “It is more than a lesson, a teaching, or even an historical account. Their conscious and knowing agreement directly extends to our philosophies, thoughts and actions as Haudenosaunee peoples” (p. 26). Stories and storytelling are political,
always more than personal narratives. In the face of colonial extermination, the articulation of Indigenous stories, epistemologies, and cultural groundings, are inherently resistant and threatening. In stories, we can see the embracing of what Graveline (1998) calls “the politicization of love as a powerful force that challenges and resists domination” (p. 45). Whiteduck (this issue) speaks of how love motivates her grandfather’s stories and, in Indigenous conceptions of love, connects all beings. These connections extend generationally - to the ancestors and to generations yet to come - as well as to the Earth and other beings.

This connectivity that is embodied in storytelling is a continuation of Indigenous existence. Somerville (2010) shows how poetry and stories are the continuing fire that keeps Indigenous being alive and dynamic; stories are negotiable and ever being transformed, stories are carried by their tellers and communities, who themselves are bearers and reminders of Indigenous ‘forever stories’. Graveline (1998) extends this, “The story is a living thing, an organic process, a way of life” (p. 66). In this way, Indigenous peoples resist colonial erasure and violence, living out the stories of the ancestors in ways that sustain, resist, and create anew. Njoki Wane (this issue) tells a powerful story of learning Indigenous resistance on the land, in practice, as communities banded together to resist corporate and colonial intrusion on their decision-making processes and livelihood. The story is both a challenge to ways of learning, but also a literal ‘grounding’ of theory in the Earth that sustains. Iseke (this issue) also speaks to the Earth as a spiritual force that is connected to ceremony and storytelling, as does Whiteduck (this issue). Tuck and Yang (2012) have reminded us of the immediacy of decolonization, not only of our minds and actions, but also of land. Storytelling and Indigenous land are both part of the sustaining and resurgence of Indigenous life and are not easily separable.

Colonial mappings divide land into three categories: the border, the center (metropole), and the outside (wa Thion’o, 1986, 55). Through our forced membership into one of these categories, we either receive the privileges associated with the center, or the genocidal policies and erasures associated with its periphery. In colonial metanarratives, the colonial holds full narrative power. The colonial controls the national story, which characters are introduced, and how they are constructed. Thus, Indigenous storytelling must also be a remapping project, one that challenges the sacrosanct claims of colonial borders and the hierarchies imposed on either side of the dividing line. Stories become mediums to unmake colonial borders. They help us restore the Indigenous names and relationships rooted in land. As Whiteduck (this issue) explains, Indigenous storytelling must begin and end with “writing from home(land)”. More than anything else, “oral histories are told in relationship to the land, the water, and the sky” (p. 79). Land is not simply the backdrop against which stories are told; it’s the premise of why and how we tell them and the promise of reclamation. Through subversive and imaginative storytelling, “we disrupt the assumptions that land is a possession, and can be owned, and that it is merely a place to make history” (Iseke, this issue, p. 47). For Indigenous peoples around the world, and for the authors of this issue, land is how we/they come to know our/themselves. And as Whiteduck summarizes, “knowing ourselves means knowing our home, our ancestors, and where
we came from; accomplishing such a feat is both the first and the final step toward decolonization” (p. 81).

The land is more than a backdrop, space, or a location; it is a sustainer, speaker, and archive for Indigenous stories. Wheeler tells us that land is “mnemonic, it has its own set of memories” that are given voice through Indigenous peoples (cited in Byrd, 2011, p. 118). The land remembers and constructs relationships with those who live on it. Trask (1999) argues that this means, “Our [Indigenous] story remains unwritten. It rests within the culture, which is inseparable from the land. To know this is to know our history. To write this is to write of the land and the people who are born from her” (p. 121). Watts (this issue) begins her exploration of decolonization with the question of land. Her article situates the Anishnaabe homeland as a living body of creation stories, knowledges, spirit, and agency: “If we begin from the premise that land is female and further, that she thinks, then she is alive” (p. 25). Thus, in that context, decolonization must begin with acknowledgement of Anishnaabe peoples’ inherent sovereignty over the land they occupy, but also the defense of traditional ways of relating to, caring for, and learning from the land. Indigenous peoples’ relationships to land work to interrupt and reimagine settler colonialism’s attempt to sever the earth through borders, ownership rights, and extractive industry. Contrary to the notion of land being humanity’s Garden of Eden, or something to harness and consume for capitalist production, Watts succeeds in surveying the ways in which human/land relationships remain reciprocal and mutually protective.

Conclusion

Indigenous stories and ways of storytelling are as varied as the locations and peoples they emanate from, as varied as the forms of oppression they speak against, and as varied as the methods of resistance they contain and speak to. We do not take up an idealistic or naive view of personal narratives and stories; because of the relationality and locatedness that they emanate from, they are fraught with tensions and contestations. But these contestations, rather than disabling resistance and political action because of a tepid relativistic framework, strengthen and build a mobile, diverse, and amphibious movement built on the diverse Indigenous nations at work against colonial power. As we have argued previously (2012), “We cannot ignore these intersections because it is this complexity, this layer upon layer, which colonialism acts through and upon. If we are serious about decolonizing, we must be able to untangle the knots and respond to colonial oppression at all levels” (p. x). When Mohanty (2003) asks us to theorize difference as “genuinely complex and contradictory rather than as commodified variations of Eurocentric themes” (p. 185), this is what the articles in this issue do through storytelling, drawing on powerful examples of Indigenous story-as-theory to complicate and contextualize difference and decolonization. As Lefrancois adds (in this issue), “Stories like these tell more than the labels associated with identity politics. The contradictions, complicity, complexities of lived experiences cannot be grasped in the mere claiming of identities” (p. 118).
Indigenous stories are a reclamation of Indigenous voice, Indigenous land, and Indigenous sovereignty. They are vital to decolonization. Indigenous storytelling works to both deconstruct colonial ways of coming to know, as well as construct alternatives - recognizing that these two processes do not happen in a linear trajectory; if we are waiting for the dismantling of colonial structures before we focus on rebuilding Indigenous and decolonial alternatives, we will always be too late. Indigenous stories are a creative force, grounded in rootedness and relationality. Said (1993) argues that “Decolonization is a very complex battle over the course of different political destinies, different histories and geographies, and it is replete with works of the imagination, scholarship, and counter-scholarship (p. 219). In this issue, we see the authors bridge these divisions and reveal storytelling as knowledge production, engaged in creative scholarship that works counter to colonial ways of knowing.

We want to conclude by asking, what is the role of the reader/audience in bearing witness to these stories? How might we read these stories as instructional, or as informing our own decolonizing practices? In this case, the ‘we’ is a differentiated and layered community of scholars, educators, and activists, Indigenous peoples and our/their allies. Nonetheless, the question of how responsibility enters the frame of storytelling is an important one; accountability is an important aspect of Indigenous storytelling and the authors of this issue name trust and responsibility as key ingredients to storytelling. They demonstrate that in order for their work to be transformative, the storyteller must feel a sense of intellectual and often spiritual responsibility to the audience they speak to. What kinds of responsibilities might we have as witnesses to these stories of pain, healing, and transformation? These questions are only a starting point and but one point of entry but we can suggest that, as an audience of various peoples and experiences, you engage these stories from the same place of honesty and openness that they flow from. Let them soak in, take time to process the words, maybe sit with that cup of tea that Mallory Whiteduck suggests. Because, for Indigenous peoples, stories are open-ended processes for speaking reclamation and resurgence, dialogue and contestation, they are part of a cycle of renewal and recreation. Finally, storytelling is an act of ceremony that seeks to undo and re-imagine: “This undoing of the colonial by the act of ceremony is a decolonizing act” (Iseke, this issue, p. 48). We hope that these articles go beyond the moment of reading, that they go beyond the intellectualization and mental response to challenge your heart and feet to action.
Decolonization and the Indigenous future

References


