



INDIGENIZATION THROUGH DECOLONIZATION

THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA CASE
STUDY



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Decolonizing our institutional spaces requires us to recognize their historical links to colonialism. This piece will present you with a brief portrait of the University of Ottawa's colonial past, present, and unavoidable future if attempts to indigenize its institutional framework continue to be met with resistance. On the side of resisting the status quo, it will pull from discussions held at this year's Conflict-Con on the importance of decolonizing our existing academia in order to ethically reconstruct our academic discourse.

In 1843, the University of Ottawa was founded by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Less than 50 years later, this same religious congregation took charge of an infamous residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia, where the bodies of 215 Indigenous children were recently discovered, buried on the school's premises (National Post, 2021).

Like most by-products of settler-colonial expansion, the objective of residential schools was to apply a divide and conquer tactic in order to sedentarize this traditionally nomadic people. This was done by segregating and assimilating Indigenous peoples into the Christian way of life by forcing them to adopt subsistence agriculture. More importantly, as the unacceptable and unceremonious death of 215 children at Kamloops Residential School suggests, this colonial undertaking constituted a genocide. It systematically disseminated entire populations and deliberately destroyed entire cultures on Turtle Island.

This short history lesson reveals the colonial past of our academic institution but, in many ways, this extinction process is ongoing. It is present in our governance

structures, our modes of teaching, our representation of Indigenous peoples' history in our curricula, and sometimes simply the lack thereof. Fortunately, the legacy of colonialism has not gone unnoticed and in recent years the University of Ottawa has felt the pressure to address what many deem as an ethnocentric, covertly discriminatory, and historically assimilatory administration.

At a panel presentation hosted by the Conflict Studies and Human Rights Student Association, Karine Vanthune, Co-Chair of the Indigenization and Decolonization Committee of the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Social Sciences highlighted hers and her colleagues' efforts to advocate for the need to undertake "Indigenization as decolonization" as opposed to "inclusion through assimilation" (Vanthune, 2021).

Assimilation by way of **acculturation** aims to integrate a minority group into the dominant culture. This practice is implicitly upheld by surface level inclusionary policies that ignore the harmful effects and potential erasure this could cause a minority culture. This is, was and continues to be the case for Indigenous peoples of Canada whose invaluable knowledge and cultural practices have gradually faded away from the national discourse.

Indigenization through decolonization refers to the dismantling of the colonial structures that create obstacles to development through exclusion, underrepresentation and/or the overt, and in some cases covert, discrimination against a people or culture. For example, some students may experience trauma in courses where the discourse or the narrative is a direct reminder of

institutional abuse of their ancestral past, their family history. Eventually, the symptoms of this abuse transform into intergenerational emotional trauma (Vanthune, 2021). As such **Indigenization** would require a reconfiguration of the system formerly put in place by the dominant, and therefore oppressive powers that be. This means hiring Indigenous faculty members and administrators rather than simply consulting them; offering courses centered on Indigenous perspectives on a variety of subjects rather than marginally inserting them into a dominant discourse; and, most importantly, changing the rigid ways in which academia validates 'expertise' by valuing non-Western forms of knowledge-sharing.

"ADDRESSING ANY FORM OF DISCRIMINATION REQUIRES US TO FACE THE IMPACTS OF COLONIALISM"

In response to this ongoing crisis, in 2019, the University of Ottawa launched an "Indigenous Action Plan" formulated with consultation from local Indigenous communities and Indigenous organizations in Ottawa and Gatineau (Vanthune, 2021). Yet, Professor Vanthune argues that this action plan lacked any concrete action taking, that it fell short on implementing structural changes to support the Indigenization process, and that it instead focused on offering loose with few clarifications (2021).

Moreover, Vanthune notes that one of the key barriers to Indigenization is many university administrators and faculty members' unwillingness to surrender their outdated curriculums and non-inclusive teaching methods (2021).

Addressing any form of discrimination requires us to face the impact of colonialism, yet many figures at the top of the pyramid of power fear the disposal of the status quo. They deem the introduction of Indigenization through decolonization to be destructive to their way of life, which is ironic considering the immeasurable damage that colonialism has and continues to cause Indigenous populations in Canada. In short, Indigenization through decolonization unsettles the settler-colonial structure.

At another panel presentation, uOttawa's Director of the Indigenous Teacher Education Program, Dr. Keri Cheechoo contested the 'vulnerability' associated with Indigenous people, and racialized people in general. "We're not vulnerable, we're targeted, those are huge camps of difference", Cheechoo clarifies (2021). She then goes on to explain that the systemic discrimination within many Canadian institutions that target Indigenous people is what creates their insecurity. As a result, their mere existence with the university space, or any institutional setting for that matter, is viewed as a threat.

A few years ago, when Professor Vanthune taught a course that dealt with a subject matter related to Indigenous history, she too was uninterested by the demeaning portrayal of Indigenous peoples' passivity towards the violation of their human rights, an image often perpetuated by our curriculum-approved history books. Instead, she sought to paint a portrait of agency and resilience. Yet despite her best intentions, as she reframed another people's narrative and skimmed through their struggles, she was confronted by the reality of her own privilege: during a lecture, an Indigenous

student voiced her discontent towards Professor Vanthune's omission of the odious past she and her people had to endure. She felt that her professor minimized Indigenous peoples' suffering which in itself contributed to the erasure of their history (Vanthune, 2021).

Coming face to face with a lived experience that differed from her own imagination, Professor Vanthune realized that in order to engage in genuine discussions that lead to equitable learning experiences, one had to be exposed to the complete truth. Above all, she understood that the veritable integration of Indigenous knowledge required the input of Indigenous peoples.

Since then, Professor Vanthune, and the rest of uOttawa's Indigenization and Decolonization Committee has made efforts to hire Indigenous social science professors to answer the lacuna in faculty representation which only counts two professors to date (Vanthune, 2021). The Committee is also developing a faculty-wide Indigenous course, primarily reserved for Indigenous students, that would provide experiential learning on Indigenous pedagogy (Vanthune, 2021).

This represents a step in the right direction, but leaves plenty of room for future improvements.

To the professors who remain unreluctantly to the change, Vanthune says "Our strategy is to make these [facul members] uncomfortable", admitting that she, herself, had been socialized not to recognize covert racism and that all efforts to combat its symptoms require a thorough "unlearning" process (2021). To bridge the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems Dr. Cheecho suggests using "ethical relationality" (2021)

. This is practiced through ethical spaces where different worldviews can be expressed and understood on a deeper level, an attribute she associates with her poetry work which she says eliminates the hierarchy between the "writer and the receiver", validating both points of view (2021).

In order to banish implicit exploitation, reciprocity is key. The combination of these steps might spell out progress, but only if structural changes are administered and dialogue between university administrators and Indigenous people is held in a consistent, equitable and long-lasting manner.



I am fascinated by processes of political transformation, cultural history and the intersection between individual self-understanding and collective development, whether it be on local or international scale. I am an undergraduate International Development student with experience in field research work on grassroots activism in Brazil, and in qualitative data collection in Senegal where I interviewed local NGOs directors to evaluate international volunteer contributions to local development. I am currently working on a report on women's political participation, activism and advocacy to promote gender equality in 11 countries. I am also a freelance contributor for The Fulcrum, a writer and podcast host for Trad Magazine, and a Politics and Activism staff writer for Parachute Media.

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