

Acknowledging Indigenous Knowledge Within My Settler Feminism

The process of academic writing is often one where objective persuasion and citational perfection are the criteria of a successful essay. Essays offer students the opportunity to show ‘neutral’ knowledge through the Western university’s standards of listening to professor’s lectures, individual research of academically-approved resources, and proof through means of examples from theoretical or empirical schools of thought already established. Situating oneself, the ‘I,’ within this process is often penalized and deemed an insufficient way to express knowledge acquisition, despite the inherent subjectivity within the writing practice. Considering these expectations, I am about to disrupt this tradition and use the knowledge I have gained by offering a different structure and philosophical approach than usually expected of me within this colonial institution. Although Barthes’ rejection of ownership in production may wish me dead, I, as the author of this piece, choose to situate my multidimensional self with my knowledge, community, social institutions, and the land for which I live.

I am a white, settler, cis woman, and a student on the Unceded Territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. Naming and understanding the complexities of my identities are at the heart of the project in which I wish to endeavour within this written space. My tumultuous experiences as a woman have encouraged me to socially and academically engage in conversations around feminism and create inclusive spaces within public and private life as well as the grey space that exists in between. I have experienced the sexual subjugation, looming potentials of violence, discriminatory behaviour, and fear that accompanies my position as a woman within the patriarchal, colonial society in which I have been raised. The intersection of my womanhood and settler identity creates interesting conversations within grassroots and academic activism. Indigenous modes of being based on ontological practices of relationality have completely

shifted how I approach my feminism while still recognizing the complicated position my active identity as a settler carries. By learning through James Young-Blood Henderson's work on traditional knowledge, Rachel Flowers' critique in "Refusal To Forgive: Indigenous Women's Love and Rage," and Rita Wong's eloquent recognition of her settler identity, I hope to position myself appropriately within colonial hierarchies. Once I establish the 'I' within this work, I am able to analyze modes of Indigenous relationality in Indigenous authorship and settler and Indigenous women's collaboration that have impacted how I hope to use my feminism in a more inclusive manner with awareness of my relationships. The purpose of this project is a personal one that I am making public; I hope to initiate a messy discussion on how the knowledge I have gained from particular scholars and activists can help articulate a productive way forward within my own lived experience in feminism and how I picture my future role as a settler on this land currently called Canada.

The potential uncomfortableness in this endeavour lies within the juxtaposition of traditional academic and grassroots feminism and Indigenous knowledge systems. As Cheryl Suzack brings attention to, like "other women of colour, both scholars and activists, have long contended, feminism as a political movement and academic practice originating as a means to address the social problems of the white middle classes" (2). When I identify as a feminist, I am aware of the colonial and privileged baggage this term and its history carries. Moon and Holling in "'White supremacy in heels': (white) feminism, white supremacy, and discursive violence" help me understand that "[a]s white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* [*sic*] in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color [*sic*] become 'other,' the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend" (254). It is important that I express that I am not attempting to erase these realities within the feminist settler

discourse, but rather acknowledge how my personal feminist experience has been influenced by works within relational practices that exist outside of the traditional colonial discourse. This critique of the discipline is comprehensive and I am able to reframe how I see myself as a feminist through one specific question shared by James Young-Blood Henderson. He describes how when a member of his community goes to a Cheyenne elder with an inquiry they are first faced with a question back to them before they receive the information they are seeking. Their rituals of knowledge require the learner to answer the question: “why do you want to know this?” (0:2:45). When I first heard this interrogation it produced a catastrophic earthquake in how I viewed the teachings and wisdom I have received throughout my University courses and also invited me into utilizing the relational practices I have learned in a productive way forward into how I can make my own feminist values more inclusive. When studying literature and theoretical schools of thought in the classroom it can often be overwhelming as well as discouraging trying to appropriately apply this knowledge in my everyday ways of being that is productive in decolonizing myself and the world around me. By forcing myself to examine the goal of my academic endeavors, I reconnect with the relational practices of knowledge and it creates stronger accountability within my work. I want to know and learn from knowledge sharers such as Rachel Flowers and Jeanette Armstrong so that I can be a better neighbor on the land and in the fight against colonial systems in an appropriate way that recognizes my compliance within these oppressive social and political structures. I believe this work invites me to be effectively affective, through feelings of vulnerability, uncomfortableness, anger, and guilt.

In the process of properly situating myself, I must better recognize the weight the word ‘settler’ carries. Often “settler is used without a critical understanding of its meaning and the relationships embedded within it, rendering it an empty signifier” and therefore avoids the

privileges it holds within politics, education, judicial systems, and everyday life (Flowers 33). As I utilize Flowers' articulation of the settler and Indigenous experience, I am choosing to do the opposite of the 'desubjectification' work she recommends. I believe this is important because I want to exhibit how I do not wish to appropriate her knowledge but rather use it appropriately in relation to my positionality. She shares how Indigenous feminisms "offer new and reclaimed ways of thinking through not only how settler colonialism has impacted Indigenous and settler communities, but also how feminist theories can imagine and realize different modes of nationalism and alliances in the future" (34). Flowers helps avoid obscurity in how settlers can act in productive ways within Indigenous relationships. I am in no way imposing the title of feminism onto Flowers' theorizations, however feel I can incorporate her suggestions of "co-existence means co-resistance, which productively identifies the role of the settlers in dismantling their own systems of exploitation and extraction" into my modes of feminism (36). Similar to Tuck and Yang's work in "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor", Flowers expresses how "solidarity is not a temporal event but a 'long-term commitment to structural change'" (35). My feminism can transform by better recognizing the weight my position as a settler carries. I acknowledge that this identity is not an objective signifier but rather a reflection of years of domination and violence against Indigenous peoples, and even more particularly women.

One way I have begun to better position myself or at least improve the articulation of my settler position within colonial systems has been to look to other settler scholars who have spent time within this struggle for guidance. Rita Wong, a settler professor at Emily Carr University frames her relationship with the Coast Salish by stating: "I have inherited a colonial history I did not choose, but what I can choose is how to respond to that history, by proposing an open space of respect" (528). I find paradoxical productive comfort and unease between personal choice and

inherited realities. I often fear complying to cognitive dissonance that aims to secure my activism far from disrupting my benefit within oppressive systems. In *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, the authors acknowledge how “[w]e have to ask ourselves what knowledge counts and in what ways” (Asch et. al 178). Similar to current political policies implemented in colonial governments, such as the Canadian federal government, moves towards recognition and reconciliation do not always involve a re-valuing of Indigenous perspectives within established white supremacist institutions.

In terms of feminism and my approach to being involved in female empowerment movements, I believe I can still be grateful for and involved in traditional modes of feminism while seeking new perspectives and initiatives by women who were originally excluded from the traditional framework. An example of this lies within my work on an editorial board of UBCO’s Gender and Women’s Studies student journal, “That’s What [We] Said.” My administrative and editing role affords me the ability to choose work deemed fit for a journal representing the desires, passions, and activism of women and gender diverse individuals within the UBCO community. In terms of subjective panels choosing diverse perspectives, Moon and Holling note: “white feminists seem to find ignoring those politics more palatable, which means that they must also minimize and/or ignore the realities of women of color” (255). Being aware of these historical and contemporary realities within feminist academia, I realize how my ‘gatekeeping’ power within publishing has the ability to either perpetuate white supremacist ideologies and structures within literature or be a small act of resistance and collaboration within feminist spaces. By valuing and featuring alternative stories, art, and literature I reduce my compliance within relational betrayal and embody what Flowers refers to as “solidarity mean[ing] de-centering ourselves, in order to engage productively in the unknown and ‘in-between’ spaces

of resistance, and confronting the impulse to claim to know or have authority over a struggle.” (36). Despite university spaces holding complex histories of exclusions based on race, the Gender and Women’s Studies journal has the opportunity to re-write these narratives within the walls of a traditionally oppressive institution. This is an active way in which I intend to use the knowledge I have gained from learning and listening with Indigenous women, their stories, love, and rage.

In Nickel’s novel *In Good Relation* spends time acknowledging different approaches towards relationality between Indigenous women (some who may identify as feminists) and “[e]thical love, being in a good way with all Creation, is something that is learned by feeling, doing, being, building, and even destroying- by enacting relations with one’s self and the surrounding world” (195). The action based approaches that Nickel articulates use verb based strategies that expose how productive settler-Indigenous relations rely on collaborative work that is just that, work and active participation between both groups. I hope to pursue an academic career within problematic colonial institutions such as law and public policy and therefore finding appropriate ground on which to collaborate and share knowledge between Indigenous communities and academic and legal frameworks is an important practice that I wish to develop. One way I can gain this skill is by accumulating positive examples, including the work done by Georgeson and Hallenback in their collaboration: “We Have Stories: Five Generations of Indigenous Women In Water.” This is a research partnership between Jessica Hallenback, a white, settler filmmaker, and “Rosemary Gorgeson [...] a Sahtu Dene and Coast Salish outreach coordinator in the arts [and] in her life she was a commercial fisherman, truck driver, and chef” (20). This project joins BC government archives and Rosemary’s personal storytelling to share a holistic relationship and awareness of colonial effects between the land, water, and people in

Coast Salish territory. The connection between government archival work and Gorgeson's storytelling is preceded by acknowledgments of both the women's standings on the scale of colonial positionality. The structure of the article also "reflects[s] the dialogical nature of [their] research and in response to critical issues of knowledge ownership, each section of this paper begins with Rosemary's voice followed by Jessica's voice" (21). The restructuring of the colonial academic framework to centralize the Indigenous voice and place precedence on alternative knowledge systems, such as storytelling, is a collaborative relational framework that I have added to my decolonial toolbox of skills in creating a more contemporary feminism.

The examples provided by Hallenback and Gorgeson are important elements in this endeavor, however so is the recognition of the emotional work required to make connections and decentralize colonial narratives. Emotional connection and placing importance on the work of affect can be extracted explicitly from Armstrong and Flowers. As Armstrong articulates, "[t]he emotional self is differentiated from the physical self, the thinking-intellectual self, and the spiritual self [...] the emotional self is that which connects to the other parts of our larger selves around us" (463). The emphasis of balance on all aspects of one's being in the creation of how an individual interacts with the world around them was not something I was exposed to until I was introduced to ontologies outside of Western knowledge institutions whose processes tend to value objective truths free from personal connection. Flowers' spends much of her article identifying with the emotional labor required of individuals asked to validate their existence in a world built upon the detriment of their being. Love acts as a motivation for decisions and resistance within her work against colonial patriarchy. Flowers notes that "[o]ften our love and positions we hold in the community make us targets of colonial violence; ultimately, our resentment and anger are in response to the modes of gendered colonial violence that exploit our

love” (40). The expenditure of love being reserved for Indigenous women and their kin is something that makes complete sense to me and I am in no way expecting recognition or praise from Indigenous women. Acknowledging this duality and reciprocity of love and anger within one’s community also exists within my relationship to this knowledge, white feminism, and my ancestral past. I found the project and interrogation of the world and belief systems I have been raised in one of pain and anger for the destruction committed by my ancestral settler relatives in the name of love for white colonial systems. I understand that Flowers’ recognition of pain is directed towards the feminine Indigenous experience, however it also humanizes and continues to make my project personal. To be frank, this project may be too convoluted and disjointed if it were not rooted in my emotional commitment to diversifying my feminism in response to the horror that I continue to face while learning the truths behind the colonial institutions in which I exist.

The conception of this paper resides within the concrete manifestation of an inner-dialogue that has resided and grown within my heart, mind, and soul over the past few years. In my first Indigenous literature class, I was presented with Thomas King’s “The Truth About Stories” and his calls for accountability within knowledge acquisition. After telling Sky Woman’s Creation story he states: “[i]t’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. [...] Forget it. But don’t say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29). Similar to Henderson’s question, both of these Indigenous scholars are encouraging me to engage in an oath of responsibility of living in respect to the knowledge shared and the vulnerability that this practice can often require within oppressive systems of power. Through mentorship from settler allies such as Rita Wong and

Jessica Hallenback and Indigenous women such as Rachel Flowers and Jeanette Armstrong, I feel my stumbling steps towards proper settlers'hip supported and held with grace.

By embracing the identity of “‘settler’ as a set of responsibilities and action” I am re-emphasizing my role within colonial systems, while creating the opportunity of co-resistance alongside Indigenous women towards colonial patriarchal institutions (Flowers 33). While articulating and summarizing some of the knowledge I have gained may be essential, what is paramount is how I use the information, like King and Henderson remind me to do. As I interrogate the spaces I exist in now, such as my editing position on the Gender and Women’s Studies student journal, I find creative ways in which my settler positionality can incorporate protocols I have learned from particular Indigenous scholars. These practices such as situating myself and my complex relational identities, seeking alternative knowledges, looking for collaborative strategies within activism, and validating emotion are all components I believe enrich my feminist journey. The chaotic nature of this venture is unnerving within the confines of written Western prose, but that is what makes it authentic to my lived experience and exemplifies just the start of a life long undertaking I am proud to participate in. The emotional turmoil and exhaustion of my work is beautifully articulated by Flowers when she says: “[t]his discomfort productively forces each of us to engage in projection: to imagine other ways of being in relation[...] and our relationships with one another, and to transition toward a future ethos” (47). I look forward to the metamorphic journey I am just beginning within the perfectly convoluted reality of settler- Indigenous relations, especially among women kin.

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