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Spirit-Based Research: A Tactic for Surviving Trauma in Decolonizing Research

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Spirit-Based Research: A Tactic for Surviving Trauma in Decolonizing Research

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge the Wiyot Nation, on whose territories I resided as a guest while writing this article. I would also like to thank Deondre Smiles and Lauren White for their support and encouragement in publishing this article.

I have been serving as the caretaker of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Database for 4 years. In that time, I have learned the spiritual, physical, and mental health tolls of doing intense, trauma-heavy work. Work that is trauma-heavy not only because it is saturated with stories of mass death, disappearance, rape, graphic violence, and grief, but because the process of doing the work and mobilizing it requires constant navigation of and attempts to heal my trauma, the trauma of families and communities, and the impacts of ongoing colonial genocide. Even when done with the utmost care and responsibility, it is exhausting. Gray hair, hair loss, sleepless nights, night terrors, flashbacks, anger, depression, nausea, chronic stress, I have seen and experienced it all. When I am not doing justice by myself or the work, the stress makes me so sick that it triggers PTSD and body memories of sexual assault, I feel as if bugs are crawling on my skin, and my pelvis tightens up to the point where the pain is so intense I cannot walk. This pain became so pervasive that multiple doctors could not understand where it was coming from, and I had two surgeries and over 30 different prescriptions in one year, until a pelvic floor physiotherapist explained that it was the way my body was carrying trauma. Perhaps worst of all, the culture of silence on mental health and women's reproductive health within academia is so strong, that I felt I needed to suffer through those struggles in isolation, all while navigating doctoral coursework.

This article is my attempt to break that silence. I am not alone in any of these experiences. I know this because private conversations with mentors, colleagues, and peers in support groups for graduate students consistently raise the following question: how do we survive research and academic work that has the potential to break us, in a system that does not value mental health? Especially the mental health of marginalized researchers? I do not pretend to have all the answers to these questions, but I would like to offer one perspective, namely the importance of shifting from trauma-based research to spirit-based research.

I came to spirit-based research as a matter of survival. In many ways, it is the research method I wish I had learned in any of the number of graduate-level methodologies classes I took, and perhaps may have learned if those curricula had been designed with students from marginalized communities in mind. For me, spirit-based research began as a need for something more useful than the series of disjointed coping mechanisms that is currently offered to most graduate students—neoliberal self-care culture, unhealthy drinking, and weekly therapy appointments with university counselors that know nothing about my community or experiences. I first developed spirit-based research as a set of practices for doing research on colonial violence in intensely colonized spaces, and as an attempt to imagine other ways of surviving academia; I did not see it as a research method in itself, rather an informal and institutionally unappreciated life-vest in a sea of isolating curricula and toxic levels of expectation. Now, however, I argue that it should be recognized and taught as a method in its own right.

We are at a time of regeneration and world-making. Communities of color, Indigenous communities, poor communities, and queer communities have survived centuries of mass death and calculated, well-organized attempts to silence, abuse, torture, and erase their existences. The systems of oppression that remain responsible for this violence also remain deeply entrenched in academia and in research circles, and the burden of doing research to dismantle this oppression and (re)generate healthy ways of being without adequate support is literally making us sick. I propose spirit-based research as one way of conducting decolonizing, regenerative work, that not only guides us in ending violence in our communities, but can help us physically, mentally, and spiritually survive as we take these efforts on.

Spirit-based research is work that is rooted in the researcher's spiritual practices and beliefs, the spirits impacted by and involved in the work, and the researcher's spirit itself. For those reasons, it is difficult to concretely define or explain, particularly in a language recognizable by mainstream academia. In discussing database-related work with an Indigenous research assistant, I recently explained it as the feeling we get when we pray, sing, or dance for our people; there is a rhythm to it, a clearing of the mind, a fullness of the heart, a concentration on the task at hand, and a general feeling of the flow of our medicine radiating out around us. How we reach that state of mind is different for each person—there is no one way to do spirit-based research. Generally speaking, however, it is heart-work, or work that is centered on and guided by compassion, empathy, prayer, and love, rather than the clinical disconnect colonial academia espouses. Many cultures have ceremonies to honor death, and stories and protocols to help us understand the passage of one state of being to the next; spirit-based research asks us to consider how we may mobilize our inquiry towards new imaginings or articulations of these ceremonies and protocols in our work. In this way, spirit-based research works from an understanding of research as capable of making sense of the physical and social death caused by colonial oppression, and as committed to creating space for new futures. In that sense, spirit-based research helps things—spirits, trauma, oppression, (de)colonization, and radical futurities—move to where they need to go.

This is not entirely uncharted territory. Indigenous scholars, for example, have grappled with these concepts for decades. In a reflective piece sharing his experience of visiting a massacre site in Northern California, Yurok, Hupa, and Cherokee historian Jack Norton writes at length on the physical, emotional, and spiritual impact of interruptions of cosmologies of death due to colonial violence. He argues, “Death is not arbitrary but purposeful; it completes the cycle of creation and dissolution;” and colonialism fundamentally altered this cycle by redefining Indigenous deaths at massacres as unmourned, and so quick that the fundamental right to come to terms with their own mortality was stolen. This violence, Norton argues, creates an unhealed residue in the community, on the land, and in the hearts of researchers who attempt to do justice by this unjust history. He concludes by writing, “Do many spirits of the dead wander sorrowfully, trapped in the earthly dimension? Can there be meaningful acts that move them gracefully beyond? For me the essential and fundamental answer has come to be yes.” I posit spirit-based research as one method of such meaningful acts.

Like Norton, Ojibwe scholar Roxanne Struthers and Cree scholar Shawn Wilson have both also written self-reflexive work exploring how ceremony, protocol, and cultural cosmologies can be integrated into research. Struthers, for example, shared that in her research with Ojibwe and Cree women healers, she “included the daily offering of sacred tobacco to the Creator...burned sage, sweet grass, and cedar to assist her body, mind, emotions, and spirit to remain attuned within her, the environment, and the woman healers...[and] prayed, dreamed, meditated, and listened to the spirits who provided guidance and direction.” Moreover, in his text *Research is Ceremony*, Wilson argues that it is not just our methods that must be grounded in cultural understandings of ceremony, but our methodologies; this translates to not only an integration of ceremonial practices, but an articulation of research itself as a ceremonial practice. Like the work of these scholars, spirit-based research allows spiritual work to be the foundation of scholastic inquiry. Working from such an understanding has the power to shift the questions we ask, how we try to answer them, the way we write those answers once we have determined we have found them, and what we do with them.

Lastly, Athabascan scholar Dian Million's concept of felt theory also teaches us that academic work on colonial violence (in Million's case, Canadian First Nations women's experiences) is stronger when it is felt. Indeed, she argues, "academia repetitively produces gatekeepers to our entry into important social discourses because we *feel* our histories as well as think them...to 'decolonize' means to understand as fully as possible the forms colonialism takes in our own times." How might our narratives, scholarship, and research shift if we were to value how feelings can guide the work, and how they can help readers have a fuller understanding of the subject? Norton's piece on the massacre site, though written decades prior to Million's article, is a moving example of how we feel our histories, and how that feeling enhances the work; his mixed yet intense emotions during his initial experience visiting the site not only inspired the piece, but provided a much richer foundation for understanding the purpose of such research altogether.

Though none of these four Indigenous scholars explicitly frame their work in this way, their interventions each also demonstrate how we take care of ourselves and each other throughout the research process. Norton thoughtfully reminds us that in doing work addressing colonial violence, we must be mindful that we are working with unresolved trauma, loss, and death, and we will be more emotionally prepared for that experience when we are able to see our work as meaningfully helping those forms of pain move on. Struthers and Wilson offer concrete examples of steps we may take to integrate cultural and spiritual practices into the research process, which can promote emotional and mental health. Million's concept of felt theory helps us to be present in, make space for, and value emotions in academic work, rather than suppress, compartmentalize, and ignore them as colonial academia models. All of these tactics are skills that comprise spirit-based research, which should nourish, sustain, heal, strengthen, and empower the spirits of the researcher, and of generations of research subjects past, present, and future.

I want to close with questions that I hope are useful to researchers wishing to engage in spirit-based research. As aforementioned, it is difficult to offer a simple "how to guide" or umbrella definition of a concept that, by its nature, is fluid. Instead, I offer these questions as a starting point for introspection, research project design and assessment, ethics review boards (how ethical can a project be if we do not ask how the researcher's mental health will be maintained during the project?), peer reviewers and journal editors (imagine if we did not hold our peers accountable to the culture of emotional silence enforced upon academia as we read their work!), and all those who are reflecting on how we might survive decolonizing research.

- Do I have a plan in place that helps me process the emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical toll that this work may have? What resources are available to me, and what do I need to find?
- How can I ensure this work on violence is being done in a way that the victims, even those who are deceased, would feel a sense of healing from? What does it mean to do research that heals? Who am I trying to offer healing to through my work?
- If I were to treat this research as a ceremony, what would the appropriate protocols be, and why?
- What am I trying to move, and where am I trying to move it to?

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