Braiding Indigenous and Western Knowledge through Traditional Cultural Camps: Decolonial Learning Conversation between Indigenous Land-based and Settler-of-Color Scholars

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Indigenous communities often encounter formidable obstacles when engaging with Western knowledge systems. The prevalence of Western knowledge, rooted in colonial history and Eurocentric perspectives, tends to marginalize and diminish Indigenous knowledge and ways of comprehension (Datta, 2020; Kurtz, 2013). Indigenous scholar Battiste (2013) notes that these challenges perpetuate a “colonial hangover,” hindering the full acknowledgment and integration of Indigenous knowledge into Western systems, thus sustaining historical injustices and marginalization. Confronting these issues necessitates decolonizing Western knowledge systems (Datta, 2018; 2019, 2023). This transformation calls for a paradigm shift that values Indigenous knowledge equally with Western knowledge.

Consequently, bridging Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to foster mutual respect, advance social justice, and address pressing global challenges is crucial. Indigenous scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) underscores the importance of a meaningful bridge between these two knowledge systems, emphasizing the wisdom and teachings inherent in Indigenous ecological knowledge. Through respectful engagement with traditional cultural camps, we embarked on a critical discourse to construct a meaningful bridge between Indigenous and Western worldviews. Within the framework of Indigenous research methods, an Indigenous cultural camp is a holistic and experiential approach to understanding and preserving traditional knowledge (Gone & Calf Looking, 2015; Ross, 2016). Through active community Elders and Knowledge-keepers engagement, storytelling, and cultural-based activities, we focused on a deep connection to Indigenous land-based knowledge and facilitated the transmission of intergenerational practice. By integrating cultural camps into research methodologies, we learned how Indigenous communities reclaim agency in shaping research narratives, ensuring their perspectives and practices are meaningfully represented and respected.
Our learning approach, rooted in decolonial learning from Indigenous cultural camps, deliberately diverged from Western data analysis practices. In alignment with Indigenous principles and a profound respect for land-based stories, we refrained from subjecting them to Western forms of data analysis. Instead, we honoured the inherent meanings of these stories by preserving them in their original narratives. Our choice reflects a commitment to acknowledging the agency of these stories and recognizing their transformative power beyond the confines of traditional research data. By reframing these narratives not as data but as stories with intrinsic agency, we aim to foster a more inclusive and culturally sensitive research paradigm that respects and preserves Indigenous knowledge within its authentic context.

Within land-based learning, no individual can assert themselves as an expert; instead, everyone adopts the role of relational and responsible learners, emphasizing a shared and collective approach to knowledge acquisition. This land-based learning approach emphasizes the importance of narrative integrity and the capacity of Indigenous stories to convey knowledge and insights that transcend the limitations of conventional research methodologies. Our decolonial exploration helped us to learn how traditional cultural camps can facilitate meaningful bridges between Indigenous and Western perspectives, fostering reciprocal learning and mutual benefit.

**Researcher Positionality and Theoretical Framework**

The first author is a Tsuut’ina scholar and educator from the Tsuut’ina First Nation. Tsuut’ina is her Indigenous language. As a land-based educator, she is dedicated to revitalizing Indigenous languages and sharing the importance of traditional cultural knowledge as part of her decolonial responsibility. The second author is a non-Indigenous settler of colour scholar who has resided in Indigenous lands, particularly Canada. As a land-based and decolonial researcher, he acknowledges the historical and ongoing colonization experienced by Indigenous
communities and recognizes his social location and power dynamics in research relationships. He views research as a lifelong learning ceremony to decolonize his relationship with Indigenous land and to fulfill his responsibility in respecting Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and the rights of Indigenous peoples.

This paper employed decolonial and land-based theoretical frameworks, integral in confronting colonial legacies and prioritizing Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and connections with the land. The decolonial research framework empowered us to challenge and reshape the conventional research paradigm, which often reinforces colonial power dynamics and marginalizes diverse knowledge systems. Simultaneously, the land-based theoretical framework approached from an Indigenous perspective guided us in foregrounding Indigenous knowledge, culture, and identities. By embracing both research frameworks, we gleaned insights from traditional cultural camps as a vital expression of self-determination and sustainability. These insights illuminated how such camps present opportunities for non-Indigenous scholars to reshape their perspectives and actions into responsibilities.

As an Indigenous land-based scholar, the second author emphasized the importance of Indigenous land-based camps as a critical source for constructing a meaningful bridge between Indigenous and Western worldviews. The second author, a racialized scholar, used deep listening as an opportunity to learn and respect Indigenous traditional land-based knowledge and practice. Deep listening, as a decolonial method, created numerous opportunities to learn about the land’s pre-colonial, colonial, and ongoing colonial history.

Indigenous and racialized scholars cultivated enduring relationships throughout our research, engaging in numerous decolonial discussions centered around traditional cultural camps. Both authors utilized traditional cultural camps as research methods in multiple studies.
In our decolonial learning journey, we emphasized narrative stories significantly. We refrained from subjecting these narratives to any analysis to honour and respect land-based stories. We intentionally preserved our decolonial conversations in their raw form to ensure that the essence of these stories remained untouched by colonial analysis. Readers can glean insights into our discussions and the process of creating a meaningful bridge between Indigenous and Western knowledge systems through this narrative approach. Our conversations unfolded in various settings from June 16 to 25, 2023, encompassing landwalks, coffee talks, and healing conversations.

Figure 1 shows braiding Indigenous and Western Knowledge through Traditional Cultural Camps. The act of braiding is a time for nurturing the spirit with love and care as each strand is weaved. Women teach, comfort, and support family members as she is braiding. Braiding hair is a time to connect and nurture the relationship between braided and braider. Braiding teachings from Tsuut’ina women have been passed down to me (First author). I am responsible for
nurturing my family and teaching my children and grandchildren about braiding hair and sweetgrass. The figure represents the blending and weaving of each strand, the strand of Indigenous knowledge, Western knowledge, and culture camps that come together to create new ways of knowing for children, students, and allies moving forward.

Decolonial Learning Conversations

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar:** Would you help me learn some of the meanings of traditional cultural camps and their importance to you and your community as a land-based researcher?

  **Indigenous Land-based Educator:** Traditional cultural camps are collective ways of knowing and doing; they bring a community together. It also brings back a traditional way of educating youth. We have Elders and children in the same room and in the same way, bringing back that traditional communal way of learning. In traditional cultural camps, we are on the land. So, a lot of the learning is on the land. When on the land, you must follow protocols: be clear of your wishes, intentions, and time in this space. Once you are in cultural camps, you must be respectful, true to your heart, and have a full-hearted learning spirit, and then knowledge will come to you.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar:** Why they (land-based knowledge through traditional cultural camps) are essential to you and your community?

  **Indigenous Land-based Educator:** Many Elders in my community are getting older, and we are rapidly losing our fluent Tsuut’ina speakers. They are getting older, our languages are becoming extinct, and our elders are becoming old. Elders cannot be outside as much as they used to, so it is essential to get them on land so that they can share their stories and experiences before they are gone. Their land-based knowledge is our way of life; they know where our stories come from...
as they have been living on land and revitalizing relationships with the land. They remember the language that goes with the land. Through cultural camps, they [Elders and Knowledge-keepers] have been contributing to the community and the children to relearn, heal, revitalize, and reclaim.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar:** What are the critical components of a traditional cultural camp as a research methodology for studying Indigenous communities?

  *Indigenous Land-based Educator:* Being in a cultural camp makes you think outside of the box. You are putting your colonial ways of knowing away. Because you are listening to Elders, you need to ensure that you are always following their protocols. You do not just get up and walk out. You are expected to sit respectfully and participate in deep listening. Furthermore, when they are speaking, they will watch you. They can tell if you are present in that place if you are paying attention to their stories.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar:** How does a traditional cultural camp as a research methodology contribute to the self-determination of Indigenous communities?

  *Indigenous Land-based Educator:* So, it [traditional cultural camp] creates an environment of a different way of thinking in research. It also honours traditional practices as a research methodology. The emotions and hard work you put into the work that you will walk out of your study together. You are not always thinking and staying in theory; you are putting your heart and mind together because you have embraced it into practice. This process makes the research practices that you do differently. It is not just on paper and not just colonial; it transforms research into emotional and spiritual. Because learning comes from the heart, you relate to emotions and spirituality together; it changes how you need to move forward.
Moreover, our traditional cultural camps get you to think for yourself to make sense of your environment and situation. However, it also brings you to think collectively on behalf of your people so that you always think about your family and community in what you are doing or representing. That is how you get that self-determination in your research because you are not just in yourself. It is not only about one person or one thing. So it is a sense collective; you are thinking about your community in your allyship, about all Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across the Nations because there are many Indigenous people across North America and internationally.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar**: As a land-based educator and community researcher, how do you think traditional cultural camps as research methodology can build a trustful bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews?

*Indigenous Land-based Educator*: When non-indigenous people come into cultural camps, they are also expected to throw away their colonial ways of being and thinking. You should come with an open heart and an open mind. If you do so, you can take away a lot of positive learning. If you do so, you can feel the power of learning from your heart. Your learning can make you a proper human.

Thus, when non-Indigenous people walk away from the experience, Elders will know whether they are being truthful. If you are honest, there will be a meaningful connection and long-term relationships. Deep listening and trust help non-Indigenous people build relationships. If you are not truthful and respectful, then they [Indigenous Elders] can feel it. They will know if you just came to exploit or take what we have.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar**: What examples of successful research projects have used traditional cultural camps as a methodology for studying Indigenous cultures?
Indigenous Land-based Educator: Much of my work has been done as a land-based educator. From my practices and working with the Elders in my community, talking about land-based learning, I take my students to the land with our Elders. The land is essential for teaching for us. Elders are our guides; they have the knowledge we need to learn; this is an important concept to understand. Our land-based learning helps our self-determination. Our land-based teachings include fire, Tipi, ceremonial bundle, Buffalo, and beaver teachings, and many more. Our land-based teachings are essential to our people; our songs come from our land. Our land-based stories are imperative to know who we are and where we come from. Why did we end up in this place? What kind of relationships did we make? What historical relationships?

Furthermore, how did we maintain those relationships with other Indigenous tribes as a Nation? Our land-based learning is our surviving story. Our land-based stories can help us know the stories of when we signed treaties and our thoughts at that time. What were the fears? How did we overcome them? What are our strengths? In land-based learning, we have a perspective. I use our land-based stories to know our relationships and to overcome challenges.

Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar: What ethical considerations should researchers consider when implementing a traditional cultural camp research methodology with Indigenous communities?

Indigenous Land-based Educator: Again, non-indigenous people are good at exploiting or misunderstanding and misinterpreting historically, right? These are significant ethical

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1 While the term 'Tipi' encompasses various land-based interpretations, in this context, it denotes an Indigenous traditional multigenerational teaching ground rooted in the land. The tipi, intricately suited to the Indigenous traditional lifestyle, symbolizes adaptation to their mobile way of life.
considerations if you are true to yourself and honest about your intentions. Again, the Elders will know if you are ready or not. So, respect and honour and being part of the land-based learning journey are significant ethical considerations.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar: How can learning from traditional cultural camps as a research methodology help non-Indigenous scholars fulfill their responsibility towards Indigenous communities?**

  *Indigenous Land-based Educator:* Traditional cultural camps teach us our stories, how to behave, be safe, and interact with our environment. Our ways of being are through our traditional cultural camps in land-based learning. Once you learn with respect, you give them [Indigenous communities] that strength to move forward. Again, your intention is a huge part of it. As you know, because of the Western education system, we lost our identity. And so many of us have that colonial education; it forces us to forget about the common sense of our lived realities and our traditions and customs. So, our traditional cultural camps help put us on the land. Our traditional cultural camps honour our knowledge systems, language, ancestors, and land to think and act differently. Traditional cultural camps can help us to learn the necessities of our lives. When you pull down your colonial thoughts, you will be in a relationship, and you can erase your tensions and find ways to help more meaningfully.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar: How can non-Indigenous scholars such as me, a settler of colour scholar, demonstrate cultural sensitivity and respect while incorporating a traditional cultural camp research methodology?**

  *Indigenous Land-based Educator:* First, non-Indigenous scholars cannot assume that we are all the same; they need to build a relationship with our land and with Indigenous Nations, learn our stories, respect our Elders and Knowledge-keepers, and be part of our solidarity to protect land...
and water as part of the responsibility. Protecting land and water and Indigenous land-based knowledge is all of our responsibility, not only Indigenous people’s responsibility. Once you understand your responsibility, you become our relative, you become part of our family, you become part of our community.

- **Settler of Color Immigrant Scholar:** What steps can non-Indigenous scholars take to ensure that their involvement in a traditional cultural camp respects the self-determination and agency of Indigenous communities?

**Indigenous Land-based Educator:** I am going to say representation and relevance. So again, please do not put us all in the same; we are not all the same, and our protocols are different. So, when it is relevant, you need to think about what those people are about. What are their experiences? What are their challenges? What is it that they want, not what you want?

Moreover, how can I support or appreciate it? It must be relevant, and it must be meaningful. Significant relationships are essential. Once we have relationships, I will be beside you, and you will be beside me, and we will be together. I speak on behalf of my people. So, when you sit beside them, it is not in front or behind; we sit beside each other, at the table and in discussions and meetings. Then, that representation is unified and collective, and people are more willing to hear or make space for everyone.

**Learning Reflections**

Our decolonial conversation critically discusses why bridging Indigenous and Western knowledge systems is essential to foster mutual respect, promote social justice, and address pressing global challenges. Through traditional cultural camps, we centred Indigenous land-based knowledge as a wealth of traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable resource
management practices, and cultural wisdom that can contribute to addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and other environmental crises.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that incorporating Indigenous perspectives and practices can lead to more effective and culturally appropriate solutions. For instance, Moller et al. (2004) research highlighted the significance of incorporating Indigenous knowledge in natural resource management. We learned that traditional cultural camps could create a meaningful bridge between Indigenous traditional knowledge and Western scientific approaches, which can enhance the understanding of ecosystem dynamics and improve conservation strategies. This meaningful and trustful bridge can lead to better outcomes for the environment and the local communities.

Our decolonial conversation showcased how bridging Indigenous and Western knowledge systems can contribute to revitalizing and preserving Indigenous cultures and languages. The transmission of Indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next has often been disrupted due to historical injustices and cultural assimilation. Recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge empowers Indigenous communities and strengthens cultural diversity, which is crucial for social cohesion and resilience.

Our conversation provided examples from the traditional cultural camps that can bridge Indigenous and Western knowledge. The traditional cultural camps can bring together Indigenous communities, scientists, and policymakers to collaboratively address environmental issues in many Indigenous communities in Canada and beyond. Through this partnership, traditional knowledge holders contribute their deep understanding of the land, climate, and wildlife, while scientists provide technical expertise. The traditional cultural camps can be at the center of providing examples of Indigenous and Western knowledge that can work towards
sustainable development and conservation, considering both scientific data and Indigenous perspectives.

Through our decolonial conversation, we have seen that the traditional cultural camps as research methodology, bridging Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, are crucial for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the world. Recognizing and respecting Indigenous knowledge systems’ wisdom and contributions, we can foster environmental sustainability, promote cultural diversity, and address social and ecological challenges more effectively.
Reference


