

# “Reconciliation” in undergraduate education in Canada: the application of Indigenous knowledge in conservation

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## Abstract

Both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) explicitly emphasized the role of educators in “reconciliation.” Alongside this, conservation practitioners are increasingly interacting with Indigenous Peoples in various ways, such as in the creation and support of Indigenous protected areas and (or) guardian programs. This paper considers how faculty teaching aspiring conservation practitioners can respond appropriately to the TRC and MMIWG Inquiry while preparing students to engage with Indigenous Peoples in a way that affirms, rather than questions Indigenous knowledge and aspirations. Our argument is threefold: first, teaching Indigenous content requires an approach grounded in transformational change, not one focused on an “add Indigenous and stir” pedagogy. Second, we assert that students need to know how to ethically engage with Indigenous Peoples more than they need knowledge of discreet facts. Finally, efforts to “Indigenize” the academy requires an emphasis on anti-racism, humility, reciprocity, and a willingness to confront ongoing colonialism and white supremacy. This paper thus focuses on the broad change that must occur within universities to adequately prepare students to build and maintain reconciliatory relationships with Indigenous Peoples.

**Key words:** Indigenous, conservation, Canada, reconciliation, curriculum, education

## OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Littlechild DB, Finegan C, and McGregor D. 2021. “Reconciliation” in undergraduate education in Canada: the application of Indigenous knowledge in conservation. *FACETS* 6: 665–685. doi:[10.1139/facets-2020-0076](https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2020-0076)

Handling Editor: Karen Beazley

Received: September 1, 2020

Accepted: January 26, 2021

Published: May 13, 2021

Note: This paper is part of a collection titled “Conservation in Canada: identifying and overcoming barriers”.

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Published by: Canadian Science Publishing

## Introduction

Settler-colonialism is the broad, ongoing power structure, predicated in part on the Doctrine of Discovery, that underpins contemporary Canada. In settler states such as Canada, non-Indigenous persons seek the erasure, through land appropriation, assimilation, oppression, discrimination, or even outright killing, of Indigenous Peoples. These practices are deeply connected with Canadian natural resource extraction and conservation practice (Sandlos 2007; Miller et al. 2010; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) 2015b; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls 2019 (MMIWG)). Scholars in fields as diverse as history, rural politics and development, and Indigenous studies have written extensively about this (Nadasdy 2005; Mar 2010; Kelly 2011). The connection between settler power and conservation is slowly being questioned,

particularly through Indigenous guardian programs and Indigenous protected and conserved areas creation.

Alongside these changes, both the TRC and MMIWG Inquiry highlighted education's role in enabling just Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships. The TRC (2015a, p. 331) expects educators to "build student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect." The National MMIWG Inquiry (2019, p. 71) wrote that education must "must include historical and current truths about the genocide against Indigenous People... [and the] teaching [of] Indigenous history, law, and practices from Indigenous perspectives."

Given this, the academy is striving towards some semblance of "Indigenizing." Yet, as Marker (2019, p. 501) noted, universities "still exert a centrifugal force to marginalize and resist Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge systems." Gaudry and Lorenz (2018b) have written that most efforts to do so amount to Indigenous inclusion, which one can think of as an "add Indigenous and stir" approach. Simply adding in a module or two here and there on Indigenous Peoples and issues is not necessarily undesirable, insofar as it goes, but it is a limited approach and does little to disrupt the underlying "hidden curricula" (Henry and Tator 1994) that centres non-Indigenous peoples (i.e., "experts") at the university. Nor does such work respond to Tuck and Yang's (2012) call to avoid decolonization as a metaphor and related moves towards innocence. Generally, we note the evolving literature (e.g., Fellner 2018; Schmidt 2019; Walters et al. 2019; Martin et al. 2020) that comments on reconciliation in the academy; we encourage our readers to peruse it with particular attention given to the differences apparent between Indigenous-led and settler-led scholarship.

In spring 2019, *Academic Matters*, a journal of higher education, devoted an issue to "Decolonizing the university in an era of truth and reconciliation" (OCUFA 2019). In that issue, Indigenous legal scholar Ashley Courchene (2019, p. 23) observed relationships remain as poor between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples after the release of the TRC report as before. The point of reconciliation, she argues, is to focus the discussion on "conciliation of poor Indigenous-Canadian relations". Yet, most postsecondary reconciliation efforts seem to instead focus on incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, and relating into academic spaces.

It is against this backdrop that this paper considers undergraduate education in conservation and related fields. We, the co-authors, share a mutual interest in improving conservation practice in Canada as it relates to Indigenous Peoples. We believe postsecondary educators have an important role in any such improvement. Those who aspire to work in conservation need to be adequately prepared to engage with Indigenous Peoples, knowledge, laws, rights, culture, and visions for the future. This paper presents our thinking on how to ensure such preparation.

First, faculty should focus on developing students' broad knowledge and skill sets, not on delivering discreet facts. We are not claiming facts are unimportant, but that intercultural, interpersonal, and anti-racist skills and knowledge are a priority. Second, the widespread teaching of Indigenous content requires disruptive transformational change to the academy, valuing Indigenous expertise, and broadly developing faculty knowledge to support Indigenous thought and scholarship. Third, "Indigenizing" the academy entails humility, reciprocity, and a deep commitment to anti-racism. Thus, universities need more than new Indigenous-centered content.

One final introductory word: we are aware of the diverse educational paths towards a career in conservation. Degrees as diverse as botany, marine policy, and natural resources management might all enable one to work for and (or) take on a leadership role within an organization in environmental nongovernment organizations (ENGOS) such as CPAWS (the Canadian Parks and Wilderness

Society), governments (Parks Canada), or in Indigenous Nations and communities. Mindful of this, we have broadly crafted our comments.

## Conservation and Indigenous Peoples, briefly

Conservation in Canada has been a part of colonization, used to extend state authority into Indigenous territories (Sandlos 2007; Calverley 2018). Until recently, conservation has relied nearly exclusively on Western science. In the words of Reyes-García and Benyei (2019, p. 657), conservationists' understanding of Indigenous knowledge is "...in the best of cases, meagre...". When Indigenous knowledge is considered by practitioners, such inclusion can serve to simply re-inscribe non-Indigenous power (Nadasdy 1999). This is but one example of how non-Indigenous have dominated conservation; Indigenous dispossession for protected area creation is another (Brockington and Igoe 2006).

But conservation is changing. For example, Justin Trudeau's first government committed \$25 million over four years towards Indigenous guardian programs (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2020). Large environmental organizations, such as Nature United are similarly supporting Indigenous-led conservation efforts. In 2019, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council announced a \$2.5 million grant to the University of Guelph to lead a pan-Canadian, 30-organization-strong research partnership into "conservation through reconciliation" (Conservation Through Reconciliation Partnership 2019; University of Guelph News Service 2019).

Under the Pathway to Canada Target 1 initiative, the federal government in partnership with provinces and territories assembled an Indigenous Circle of Experts (ICE) to serve as an autonomous advisory body to the initiative. The Pathway to Target 1 initiative emerged from the 2020 biodiversity goals and targets for Canada, with Target 1 being to significantly increase conservation of lands and inland waters through protected areas and other effective area-based measures (Pathway to Canada Target 1 2020). ICE issued a comprehensive report entitled *We Rise Together* (Indigenous Circle of Experts 2018) on how to confront the dark histories of protected areas and Indigenous Peoples in Canada, as well as how the designation of Indigenous protected and conserved areas (IPCAs) could be developed and improve relationships among Indigenous Peoples, the Canadian government, and conservationists. These moves do not necessarily mean that Canadian conservation has fully turned a corner towards "reconciliation." What these moves do indicate is the presence of at least an interest to move towards reconciliation in conservation.

## Reconciliation

Reconciliation is both contested and contestable; it suggests disruption to existing power imbalances. Yet, it has never been pushed so far as to encompass dismantling of the most persistent vestiges of colonialism nor colonialism's systemic discrimination and exploitation. Reconciliation received some treatment in Canadian jurisprudence prior to the release of the TRC Final Report and Calls to Action (Stanton 2017). The TRC's Final Report described and structured reconciliation in a nonprescriptive and expansive manner, for example through a directive that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples serve as the framework for reconciliation in Canada (Call to Action 45ii; TRC 2015b).

Since the TRC, a diverse, complex reconciliation narrative has become increasingly evident. Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have many ideas about what reconciliation means, how it functions, what makes it unique in Canada, and how to operationalize it in relationship building and conservation practice. This has created confusion, leading some to demand guidance that permits users to engage in reconciliation through seemingly foolproof methodologies that protect them from

challenge or derision. In other words, there is “contestability” and “ambiguity” (Schaap 2004, p. 11) around reconciliation. Clark et al. (2016, p. 2) have observed that “... despite the huge political and economic capital being expended... there remains a broad inability to... understand reconciliation.”

As critics (e.g., Coulthard 2007) of state-sponsored “reconciliation” have noted, in the absence of critical thought, the term is an empty rhetorical flourish that disguises the ongoing continuities of settler power. For example, Potawatomi scholar Whyte (2018, p. 287) compared settler-colonial states (such as Canada) to parasites that dominate and extract wealth from Indigenous Peoples and territories. State structures of reconciliation, he wrote, are therefore “new forms of the same old system that portrays Indigenous peoples as parasites who clamor for aid and special accommodations from benevolent hosts [the settler state].” In Whyte’s (2018, p. 287) view (and similar to others, such as Coulthard (2014) and Alfred (2009)), “reconciliation processes must always be associated with Indigenous territorial reclamation”.

While not writing about reconciliation per se, Nêhiyaw scholar Tasha Hubbard (2016) observed that “Our systems of knowing and governing ourselves are irrevocably intertwined with our understanding of our relationship to those with whom we share the land” (p. 30). It follows from this if supporting Indigenous knowledges is one goal of reconciliation (as it should be), then reconciliation necessarily entails attention to both human/human and human/Creation relations (see also McGregor 2018).

Conservation as a field can draw upon the TRC’s Traditional Knowledge Keepers Forum’s understanding of reconciliation, as something goes beyond the human dimension and involves humanity’s reconciliation with the natural world. Elder Reg Crowshoe (TRC 2015c, p. 123) explained:

Reconciliation requires talking, but our conversations must be broader than Canada’s conventional approaches. Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete.

Ideas about reconciliation in conservation practice are just as fragmented as it is generally, with perspectives from the settler state, ENGOs, and Indigenous Peoples themselves (McGregor 2018). Parks Canada (2019, p. 5), for example, recognized that its “... approach to each relationship should be tailored to fit its unique context” and that “... listening to Indigenous partners is critical.” Yet, the agency implicitly places itself firmly at the centre of reconciliation within parks, by characterizing its units as “a system of national heritage places that recognizes and honours the contributions of Indigenous Peoples, their histories and cultures, as well as the integral relationships Indigenous Peoples have with their traditional lands and waters” (Parks Canada 2019, p. iii). The “recognition” of Indigenous Peoples is a fraught concept (Coulthard 2007). We disagree that reconciliation is merely an act of “recognition and honouring.”

The state’s approach contrasts with ENGOs’ and Indigenous Peoples’ views on reconciliation in conservation. Consider Nature United, which centres Indigenous sovereignty, “... Nature United believes that the increased authority and capacity of Indigenous Peoples to steward their lands and waters is critical... [and] results in effective and durable sustainable management over time” (Nature United 2020). Similarly, the *We Rise Together* Report (Indigenous Circle of Experts 2018) emphasizes Indigenous authority; the report centres IPCAs as means to advance reconciliation in a conservation context. *We Rise Together* describes Indigenous-led IPCAs as elevating Indigenous rights and responsibilities (i.e., relationships to land) and promoting respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, protocols, and ceremony. Reconciliation in conservation is thus about understanding

how to manage multiple jurisdictions, including Indigenous jurisdictions, in designations, governance, and planning of existing and future protected areas.

Yet, the uncertainty around reconciliation does not mean faculty who want to prepare their students to engage with Indigenous Peoples must blindly grope around for the means to do so. Rather, we assert the continuing debate around reconciliation reinforces the importance for non-Indigenous people to listen to and act on what Indigenous Peoples are telling them. We emphasize the diversity of Indigenous Peoples in this regard and encourage faculty to engage with those Peoples and territories in which they conduct their work. Moreover, the settler state's idea of reconciliation and Indigenous Peoples' views of it may not always be the same; distinguishing between these is key.

As authors, we would prioritize the following in reconciliation: recognizing and reinforcing Indigenous ties to land, culture, and knowledge; directly supporting Indigenous communities' aspirations; and rebalancing relationships not only among people but between the human and nonhuman worlds. This approach could support real progress versus incrementalism or aspirational rhetoric. When we use "progress" here, we do not mean movement towards an end state or goal, so much as a continuous process of moving forward in a new relationship with one another. Finally, we note that if Canada is to take seriously the limited guidance of the TRC Calls to Action, we need to ensure critical analysis of how a framework like that offered through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples can function in an empowering and uplifting way for Indigenous Peoples in the context of conservation.

## Methods

We met in June 2020 to consider how to improve undergraduate education in conservation. In Indigenous research, storytelling and conversation are appropriate and useful research methods (Kovach 2010). An important part of such a method is make clear for readers who we, the co-authors, are.

Danika Billie Littlechild (DL) is a member of Neyaskweyahk, also known as Ermineskin Cree Nation, located in Maskwacis, Treaty 6 territory in Alberta. I have ties to Kehewin Cree Nation also located in Treaty 6 territory, through my mother (née Dion). I grew up on reserve in Maskwacis, in a landscape that sharply shifted over the course of my life, from highly biodiverse to largely developed through extractives and agriculture. Politically and legally, I witnessed the legacy and continued centrality of colonialism, white supremacy, and the insidious ongoing efforts of estrangement and displacement of Indigenous Peoples from their lands and waters. I have practiced domestic and international law for a few decades, focusing my efforts to be of service to Indigenous Peoples in the fields of environment, water, stewardship, Indigenous legal orders, governance, and health. More recently I served as the Co-Chair of the Indigenous Circle of Experts under the Pathway to Canada Target 1. I have served as a facilitator or advisor for various Indigenous Nations, existing organizations, and protected areas. As of January 2020, I am an Assistant Professor of Law at Carleton University, and I am leading the Ethical Space research stream for the Conservation through Reconciliation Partnership.

Co-author Chance Finegan (CF) is a White American emigrant in Canada. My interest in relationships between parks and Indigenous Peoples stems from being a young adult in Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains and observing conflicts between the U.S. National Park Service and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. Why, for example, was the agency adamantly opposed to the Cherokee proposal to harvest ramps (wild onions) within the national park? Ramps are hardly endangered. One answer (of many), could be the lack of education about Indigenous Peoples in American postsecondary park management programs (Finegan 2020). Regarding the present article,

my role was to contribute to the formal writing, but as a non-Indigenous person, these are obviously not my stories, or life experiences. Rather, I am here to listen and reflect.

Aanii. Deborah McGregor ndizhnizkaaz (my name). Wiigwaakingaa n'doonjibaa (where I am from). I am Anishinabe from Whitefish River First Nation and currently I am Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Environmental Justice at York University. I have been teaching for three decades in areas relating to Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous environmental governance and resource management, sustainability, water and climate justice and Indigenous research methodologies. I have also worked as a senior policy advisor for Environment Canada and Climate Change for a decade and continue to work directly with Indigenous communities and organizations. I served as Director for Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto. My decades of experience in the field most of my life informs my perspectives and insights on the topic of reconciliation and conservation in undergraduate education.

We are presenting the crux of our June 2020 meeting here as a transcribed conversation amongst the co-authors. Before our meeting, we circulated several initial questions for discussion amongst ourselves. This provides some structure for our conversation. After we met, Finegan transcribed the meeting and roughly broke it apart into “key points,” which generally mirrored the natural breaks in our conversation and the different discussion questions. Within some portions, Finegan has added framing comments. These are indicated as CF\*.

We have deliberately chosen to present this article as a conversation because stories are an important, useful method in Indigenous research. As [Smith \(2012\)](#) wrote, stories contribute to a broad, collective store of knowledge. Beyond this, we are mindful of [Koukkanen's \(2011, p. 7\)](#) observation that, “the current academy has embraced discourses and practices that sanction ignorance toward other ways of perceiving the world and constructing knowledge.” Koukkanen's writing resonates with us; to discuss “Indigenizing” the academy, as essentializing as that phrase can be, but not within an explicitly Indigenous framework would seem to shy away from the very work in which we call the academy to engage. With this in mind, we turn now to our conversation.

### Key point #1: Prioritize developing students' knowledge and skills for respectful engagement with Indigenous Peoples

CF\*: One reaction to the increasing interest among practitioners in Indigenous issues may be to itemize a list of new, discreet topics for the curricula. While understandable, a list of conservation's “Indigenous dimensions” is premature, as Danika and Deborah explain.

DM: I was asked to teach an undergraduate course on environmental change while I was at the University of Toronto. I was cross-appointed in Aboriginal/Indigenous studies and the Department of Geography and generally taught Indigenous-themed courses. The Chair of the department said to me, “We don't want you teaching any of that Indigenous stuff either.” So of course, I taught Indigenous “stuff” right at the onset of the course...

Faculty and students need to position themselves in the territory that they're teaching and studying on... they need to know where they are; it doesn't matter whether they're a settler, immigrant, newcomer... they need to know they're benefiting from whoever's territory it is that they're studying on... I start off with “What are the stories here? Where did the people come from?” “Where are the people now?” “What are your responsibilities?”

I am a firm believer, having taught for 30 years, in not approaching Indigenous Peoples or subject matter like the Other. I do not say, “We're going to learn about these “other” people that are in the



past,” but to understand that the students are the frame of reference from which we’re going to examine big questions in the course. For example, instead of studying Indigenous worldviews, I say, “We’re actually going to study your worldview,” and how it relates to Indigenous worldviews. I try to get students to try to articulate their own worldview and values. Reflecting on and articulating one’s own beliefs and understanding of the world freaks them out because it’s easier to read some articles, listen to a lecture, and then say “I know about the Indigenous worldview,” without realizing what they understand/perceive is from their own standpoint (frame of reference). They need to know how their own worldview is coming into play and influences how they experience and understand the world.

DL: I think it’s about having people come out of the program with a really good understanding and respect for the existence of other knowledge systems, and with the ability to apply a critical analysis in the work that they do—to be able to first of all, as Deb mentioned, identify who are the Indigenous Peoples that they are working with, now or in the future, and in whose territory they are working or studying. And then, secondly, to have the capacity to be able to engage with those Peoples in a substantive and appropriate way... that is a core competency that I think students should have, and very few students actually get.

I think part of the challenge is what we have seen in the past, which is an approach of, “Let’s try to cram as many facts about history into a course as we can...”. I do not think that that is an ideal approach. What I would rather do is to have students at the end of one course not necessarily have a handle on a lot of facts, which of course are disputable in and of themselves due to settler colonial narratives. Students should... become critical thinkers and seek out that information in an appropriate way... it is teaching them the process of getting to where they can interact in an appropriate, competent way with Indigenous Peoples...

DM: Danika, you are right... one thing that would be important for students to know is to not look at knowledge systems in a binary way. It is multiple ways, multi-dimensional, and complicated. It can be messy sometimes and changes over time. It is easy to just create this Indigenous/non-Indigenous [binary] when in reality, it is way more complicated than that. So, I think, really trying to change and challenge the mode and the way that students think and are taught, which is very linear, very hierarchical, and very binary is also important. In summary, in undergraduate education, engaging students in reflection and reflexive learning to better understand themselves and their own biases is critical before Indigenous topics can be broached.

## Key point #2: Teaching Indigenous content requires disruptive transformational change, valuing Indigenous expertise, and broadly developing faculty knowledge

CF: I think it’s a real challenge to cover this sort of content when there are students in the classroom, or faculty in the department who are tasked with teaching it, who just reject the whole thing out of hand, either, “Oh, we don’t need to talk about this in first or second year because it’s an upper level thing,” or “It’s an elective issue, because not everybody will deal with these things,” or people whose objections are just simply racist... I just don’t know—can we walk and chew gum at the same time? Can we be teaching this content in a good way?

DM: I think that most institutions have got that issue right now—existing capacity is lacking... I think this is where the institution has to step up to support the faculty/instructors when they don’t have the required expertise or experience. Without support faculty/instructors just assign some readings and never discuss it in class. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students raise this issue with me on a regular basis. The inclusion of Indigenous content/curriculum often appears as a “a case study”, where Indigenous Peoples and their issues are in a “text box,” set aside and separate in the

textbook, and easy to overlook. Some faculty will invite an Indigenous guest speaker as a one-off, and then they are done with the Indigenous content. I have done a gazillion lectures like that. I am the “one-off,” the “add-on,” the case study in the text box. I am pretty sure Danika has done the same thing. That is it—it is now done, and the instructors have checked off the Indigenous content.

The added dimension to the one-off, add-on, or case study scenario is that while faculty/instructors are inviting you into the classroom to do the talk, they basically expect me to teach the whole course in one class. As if all that is Indigenous can be covered off in one lecture or talk. This happened to me on a regular basis in the Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto, while I was a student there and after I obtained a faculty position.

Another problem with this one-off approach is that students are not exposed the multiple perspectives and diversity of Indigenous Peoples on any given subject. It is going to take a while for current faculty to gain the expertise and experience to teach Indigenous content on their own. At this point, there just does not seem to be the commitment to do so. In my view, students need to get different perspectives, as in any subject area, you need to have a full course, and it is going to take a while to get faculty who can actually teach this.

Even if a faculty, department, or program decided to hire or bring in Indigenous faculty to come in, the “Indigenous hire” then bears the whole burden of Indigenous anything and the current faculty thinks they need not bother anymore. It is often the case that the Indigenous hire must not only educate the students, they also must educate administration and other faculty.

When I taught Introduction to Indigenous Studies, I would deliberately try to seek materials where Indigenous People can speak for themselves through guest lectures, videos, or podcasts et cetera. I feel strongly that Indigenous Peoples need to have their own voice. At this point, I do not think there is any excuse for lack of resources or materials for Indigenous Peoples to represent their own perspectives through their own voice. There is a lot of material available right now. Indigenous Peoples are producing multimedia products and knowledge every day, and the TRC and MMIWG have publicly accessible reports and multi-media (videos) as part of public education.

DL: I think part of the challenge is that a lot of the faculty who are the most influential... are themselves approaching it with an uninformed lens. These are people who are not specializing in Indigenous issues, who need to be incorporating some content into the curriculum, but they themselves do not have the background. So, they are going to rely on textbooks, scholarly literature that they consider relevant, other non-Indigenous faculty, TAs [teaching assistants], maybe even students, to give them some information. They need to reach out to fellow Indigenous faculty... perhaps that’s why universities feel like they must develop “resources” that are more neutrally accessed...

People seem to tiptoe around each other in the academy, and there is not a lot of forthright conversations happening. That has been my experience, and coming at it as a practitioner, I am forthright and to the point. I think that’s part of the transformation that must happen... we cannot allow an incremental approach to bringing additional Indigenous content into departments. Unfortunately, I think that is the approach that existing faculty are most comfortable with. They do not want to be disrupted. They do not want their worldviews to be impinged on. They have their beliefs of what the important theory is or what the important perspectives are... but they have big blinders on when it comes to people of colour and Indigenous Peoples...

I also think the other biggest challenge... is that a lot of people have a very hard time seeing Indigenous Peoples as experts of their own knowledge. They really, really are so convinced, so committed to the idea that Indigenous knowledge must be translated through experts in their



department to be legitimate and to be teachable. That, to me is the second biggest hurdle. The first is the incrementalism. The second is that they are totally unwilling to see Indigenous Peoples as experts of themselves, as having voices that are just as legitimate as established mainstream theorists.

If they bring a guest speaker in, it might be someone in their network, who they're comfortable with, who perhaps is a specialist on Indigenous Peoples as a subject area, maybe even does all this work with Indigenous Peoples but who is not Indigenous themselves. This perpetuates... an understanding that Indigenous Peoples are subjects and beneficiaries and topics, but they are not partners. They are not real People. They are not experts. Because they must be translated through several screens before their existence becomes recognizable, to the professor, [and] cognizable to the structure that professor teaches within...

Another aspect to all of this is the flip side of "Indigenous thinkers are not as legitimate as non-Indigenous thinkers." I have seen a strange level of complacency amongst existing faculty. I have also witnessed reliance on whomever happens to be Indigenous at the university to do a lot of heavy lifting regarding pedagogy, curriculum, and "Indigenizing." It is one thing to be told "you as an Indigenous professor are not out there on your own." But when very few reach out to you, support you, or ask how they can support you, the message is clear. There are serious constraints on capacity of Indigenous faculty when they are so in demand... because they are considered to be the authentic voice and the university thinks it is doing the right thing by relying on them. But there are moments where what is actually happening is a shift of "burden" from the university's broad responsibility onto one or two people... I'm really hoping for a moment where existing faculty can understand that they are going to have to make a transformative shift in the way they integrate elements of Indigenous perspectives and voices into their syllabus into their curriculum...

It's about recognizing Indigenous Peoples as experts, even if they don't have a PhD, and understanding that their knowledge systems have levels of authenticity and legitimacy that are that are internally recognized and that the external world has to honour and just simply accept. I'm pinning my hopes on existing faculty who are willing to listen, to try to understand how to make that shift, and to be humble about it. There are still going to be faculty who will just [say], "Nope, not going to happen. Not for me. This is what I do. I have tenure. I'm right." I don't know what we do about those people... how do we take away the power to make this unilateral decision that students will not get any kind of substantive exposure to emerging Indigenous thought and Indigenous scholars?... Indigenous academics have not, in my experience, been granted this same power, in the sense that they must always be ready to qualify their curriculum or teaching methodology decisions in mainstream terms. I think this is an important issue to address.

CF\*: Danika's comments have reminded me of [Todd's \(2016, p. 11\)](#) observation that, "... to be seen as credible in the European academy, Indigenous thought must be filtered through white intermediaries. Trusty interpreters, usually male, usually middle class, can birth Indigenous thinking into the mainstream. In other words: the revolution will be mediated". [Hitomi and Loring \(2018, p. 840\)](#) echoed this sentiment, writing that "the very notion of the "expert" could unintentionally serve as an instrument of power and exclusion."

Beyond this, I also find myself thinking of [Gaudry and Lorenz's \(2018a, p. 168\)](#) recent work about Indigenous course requirements (ICRs). "For many respondents, it was not just a lack of knowledge that could derail ICRs but deeply held settler colonial beliefs in need of disruption," they observed. This precisely what Danika and Deborah have been describing. Universities' ingrained anti-Indigenous racism must be challenged. Put another way by [Marker \(2019, p. 510\)](#), "It is the responsibility of faculty to research the limits of their own epistemic biases and seek out Indigenous scholars and Indigenous critiques of the Western modernist hegemonies".

### Key point #3: “Indigenizing” the university requires humility, reciprocity, hiring Indigenous faculty, and a deep commitment to anti-racism

CF\*: I was struck by the degree to which our conversation paralleled comments in [Gaudry and Lorenz \(2018b\)](#), p. 169) where respondents emphasized feeling that “their concerns were not considered part of their program’s core curriculum, and Indigenous knowledge and experience remained something Other—less legitimate, less important, and possessing less explanatory power in their respective disciplines.” While addressing blatant anti-Indigenous racism is absolutely key—notice the experiences with racism both Deborah and Danika describe—“Indigenization” also requires cluster hires of Indigenous faculty and a campus climate that inculcates a sense of relational accountability between the university and partner communities, rather than a view of communities as a pool of knowledge to extract, as Deborah alludes to here and will discuss in more detail later.

DM: Turning to positionality, there are not enough Indigenous faculty in the academy. There has to be a critical mass, so the burden does not fall on a few. It is hard to get the unions and faculty associations on board . . . when a hire goes to faculty councils, there can some very inane criticisms and concerns raised by people who know nothing about Indigenous studies or scholarship. Administrators and faculty continue to struggle with the idea that Indigenous scholars are experts in actual Indigenous studies/content in whatever discipline. This relates to what Danika pointed out—Indigenous Peoples and scholars are not allowed to be experts in their own knowledges, experiences, laws, perspectives, et cetera.

The other phenomena that frequently happens to Indigenous scholars—this just happened with a student applying for academic positions—is that university administration, hiring committees, et cetera believe the only place Indigenous Peoples are suitable to teach is in Indigenous studies or topics. I said to the student “You can teach in science. You can teach in geography. You can teach in all these other disciplines. You don’t need to be pigeonholed [by others] into one area of study.”

One of the reasons we are not allowed to be experts in our knowledge and experience is that we are supposedly biased. “You’re biased,” is what I was always told when I was doing my PhD in forestry. When I presented my Indigenous-related research proposal, I was told, “You can’t do Indigenous research because you’re too biased.” In response, I said, “Well, you (to the White scholar who said this to me) shouldn’t be doing white research because you are White and are too biased to do White research.” But it did not work that way; it only works one way. Needless to say, my comments were not well received. Indigenous scholars can teach wherever and whatever they want; it does not have to be “Indigenous”. They should have the academic freedom that others take for granted.

CF\*: I am reminded of [Todd’s \(2016\)](#), p. 11) description of a time when she experienced “an earnest, clear dismissal of my work because, ostensibly, Indigenous thinkers cannot maintain objectivity when working with our own political, legal and intellectual concerns”. I also find myself thinking of [Walters et al.’s \(2019\)](#), p. 612) observation that, “to reconcile settler anxiety, frequently non-AIAnS [American Indian/Alaska Native] employ cognitive and behavioral strategies to diminish AIAn identity, [to] render them invisible . . .”

DM: Regarding the positionality of non-Indigenous faculty who teach Indigenous content, in my experience some do it better than others. There are people who I find are genuine, thoughtful, and take time to learn—people willing to feel uncomfortable and out of their element. In all my courses, I deliberately teach students to thoughtfully develop their own positionality. I assign articles in my class where the authors (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are clearly stating their positionality so students learn to do it from different perspectives and styles.

With some authors, it's clearly someone who has really been thoughtful and they really are trying to understand who they are and what kind of benefits that they get from their position, fellowship, or the research they are engaged in. They also clearly understand the limits to what they can do/know, versus the ones who, as Danika pointed out, start to become racial ventriloquists—they start to believe they are experts in Indigenous experience, to the point where it actually diminishes and excludes Indigenous People from the conversation.

DL: It is complicated. There has not been a lot of diversity in hiring. In years past, it means that people who have tenure are not highly diverse in the universities. There is not a huge number of Indigenous Peoples who are tenured now, but it is growing.

CF: This all seems to point towards how much unlearning needs to occur. I'm thinking about the role of humbleness in all of this—how institutions need to be humble in being told that there needs to be transformative change and that the way they've done things in the past has not always been good, but also the existing faculty... need to have a sense of humbleness. I think academia in many ways inculcates a strong sense of ego—like I, the PhD, am the expert and the fountain of all knowledge. Particularly for non-Indigenous faculty who are going to be approaching Indigenous issues in their classes, you must set your ego aside and develop that that sense of humbleness, of not being the fountain of all knowledge...

DL: It is good to talk about this because I think this concept of... humility [is important]. When I attend department meetings, I am very careful to say what the boundaries of my knowledge are... I do not presume to know everything. What has been hurting me is a lack of reciprocity in that approach of humility.

DM: I think Danika raises a good point. Humility is an important attribute—the limits to what you can know, which I deliberately teach students. It is strange, since most students expect you to come in and unload a bunch of content and substance, which I do, but I try to get them to understand, we're just scratching the surface here...

DL: Yeah, just the reciprocity of recognition even within faculty... there's a sense that I have that coming into my job, that I do not have a strong sense of being accepted or seeing myself reflected, because I'm not coming at it from the academy. I am coming at it from a practitioner background. I have very much felt myself to be on "the outside" due to my background.

It's also clear to me that, like any sort of career or field in the world, things can get really insular really fast... this allows people to live within a bubble where they don't have to challenge themselves to stretch their boundaries or to engage in reciprocity, because it's never been required of them before, and they don't understand why it would be required now. I think reciprocity is a huge element...

DM: You are right [Chance] academics are all about "me," because that is what is rewarded, right? That is how progress through the ranks works, merit assessments, that is how metrics for productivity works. That is how tenure works. It is all because of what you do as an individual, so everything is geared towards that.

But the reciprocity part of it seems elusive... even for non-Indigenous scholars who say they do all this research with Indigenous communities, I do not see a lot of the reciprocity with them. If reciprocity does exist, it is not extended beyond these highly structured, funded research relationships. Because such faculty, as Danika pointed out, see their relationships and allyship with communities as advancing their careers. And, there is a reluctance to respect the existing Indigenous faculty that are in the university as colleagues. I have come to believe, based on my experience, that Indigenous faculty seem to pose some sort of the threat to these "experts" and "allies." I feel and experience this

as a type of exclusion, where I am seen as a threat to their place in the hierarchy, their place as the “expert.”

I have had some very peculiar experiences in this regard, where colleagues behave oddly. It is an uncomfortable space and engagement. There is also a deliberate exclusion, that I find out about after the fact. It is a problem; I think a way to make sure I know that I do not really belong. I am just tolerated. Fortunately for the most part, I am terribly busy with my own work, and I can choose to ignore it. But I am aware of it and try to make it a point not to be that way in my own interactions with others. These situations are not true of all non-Indigenous scholars, but enough to recognize there is problem that requires dialogue and discussion to truly advance reconciliation. Humility is not in a lot people’s vocabulary, and certainly reciprocity has not occurred to people or they have bizarre ideas about what that is.

Related to this is that Indigenous students do not sign up for a class so they can educate everybody else, including the instructor in many cases. In my own experience as a student, when Indigenous issues were raised, everybody turns to look at you (including the instructor), like you somehow must account for all Indigenous People on the planet. It is an unfair burden to put on Indigenous students, yet it happens all the time. Some Indigenous students are comfortable doing that, but instructors should not be putting the education of the class on a student. Even as an Indigenous instructor, I have to be careful about the fine line between recognizing lived, personal experience and how important that is in the classroom, to not putting undue pressure on an Indigenous student that other students do not experience. Even though I know there are Indigenous students in the class, I am not going to put them on the spot; their contributions will be on their terms. It is important to share experiences, but it must be in safe environment.

In my undergraduate experience, decades ago, there were hardly any students of colour and not much diversity of any description. In some classes, if the subject matter in class related to poor people, brown people—I do not think Indigenous Peoples or topics even made into the conversation—everyone in the class would turn to look at me, expecting me to account for all people of colour on the planet. I recall thinking, “Why am I on the spot? I didn’t sign up for this.”

I have found over the decades of teaching, that even if students are ignorant of Indigenous Peoples, where they have not learned anything in terms of content in the curriculum, what they have learned through erasure is that Indigenous Peoples are invisible, not even worth mentioning. I have students tell me, “Oh, we never learned this in class or school”. It is because Indigenous Peoples are not worthy of even being part of conversation or being part of a part of the curriculum. Even in those situations, there is still an implicit message: the topic is not worth teaching. You are never starting from a neutral position, which is why when I teach, I always start from the position of where the student is. What is your worldview? What is your ontology? Who are you? These are difficult questions.

CF\*: Deborah’s discussion of both her and her students’ experiences as Indigenous People in the classroom brings to mind the work of Kerry Bailey. “The available literature demonstrates that ethnic and racial discrimination are chronic and inescapable problems on post-secondary campuses, creating learning environments riddled with exclusion, isolation, and marginality.” Bailey (2020, p. 1033). Bailey’s work suggests that not only are Indigenous faculty confronted with discrimination, but so too are students. The “theme most widely shared” in Bailey’s (2016) interviews is that Indigenous students face significant levels of in-class racism, perpetrated by both faculty and other students. Other strategies noted by Deborah and Danika include unsettling students in the classroom by requiring positionality and pointing out the totality of Indigenous existence cannot be covered in one course as would be the case with any other society. Institutional and systemic racism are more

challenging to address as part of teaching; explicit strategies need to be employed (for example, anti-racism and anti-oppression training for all faculty must be encouraged and, ideally, required).

### Key point #4: Universities need more than new content and (or) faculty

DM: The initial reaction [to a desire to improve students' understanding of Indigeneity] is: let us just add some courses, some content, on Indigenous stuff. I say, "that approach doesn't fundamentally change or transform the institutions. Or not the way that you think."

There must be transformative change and more support for faculty than that. Faculty need cultural competency training because students will notice the attitudes of the faculty member, good or bad. In terms of hiring Indigenous faculty, well, scholars can join the academy, have a miserable time, and perhaps leave (and some do), and that will transform the institution at all. That is the "add on" approach. Let's just add on people, content, curriculum, programs, et cetera. onto the status quo and call it a day. It is important, but not transformative.

DL: One of the things that I am faced with at my new institution is sort of precisely what Deb was outlining – which is that the initial response is to, in fact, create add on curriculum. Carleton has created . . . "collaborative Indigenous learning bundles," which in itself felt somewhat inappropriate to me when I first heard of them, because for me as a Cree person, the concept of "bundles" can have connotations for sacred Indigenous knowledge that is not to be shared or disseminated . . . it does sound really nice and deeply Indigenous, but I think in some ways, it also felt a little bit exploitive of Indigenous sacred knowledge terminologies (even while the substantive content of the "bundles" is in fact transformative in the luniversity) . . .

DM: I have seen the appropriation of Indigenous concepts, language, and culture in efforts to decolonize or Indigenize. The prevailing thinking seems to be "Let's just add on some Indigenous stuff to the current thing that is problematic." I refer to this scenario as, "Let's just do more of the same and hope for the best . . ." Not transformative.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission states that all law students should obtain education in relation to Indigenous Peoples to achieve justice. Call to Action #28 ([TRC 2015a](#), p. 323) outlines this as:

We call upon law schools in Canada to require all law students to take a course in Aboriginal People and the law, which includes the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and antiracism.

The substance of CTA #28 is enormous; it cannot adequately be delivered in one course. How can one person deliver on all that in one course? It is a huge ask. And, further, what knowledge and skill set will faculty members have to deliver on this CTA? If you do not have faculty who can do it, then it is not possible to deliver on this CTA.

CF: Do you think there is value in developing new degree tracks within conservation that explicitly prepare students to engage with Indigenous dimensions of conservation? For example, the University of Minnesota Duluth has a new master's program in tribal resources management because the Tribes in Minnesota went to the university and they said, "we want a program for students to be able to come back and work for the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission . . ."

DL: On the one hand, I think it is great to have an Indigenous-focused stream. What I worry about though, is just more of that segmentation... I know it's done with good intentions, and [sometimes] even on the request of the Tribes or the [First] Nations but, structurally, my fear is that it bolsters the peripheralization and silencing of Indigenous issues and voice from the mainstream content. I do not think that is constructive towards [either] helping to strengthen relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks [or] supporting reciprocity and humility in our relations.

What is fundamentally at play is that it is incredibly difficult to bring diverse Indigenous knowledge systems into a structure which is predicated on their exclusion. People struggle with how to bring other knowledge systems in... how do we move into making a space and a place for Indigenous knowledge systems themselves? To me that is what we should be shooting for, and that is what I mean about not taking an incremental approach. I feel like it's such a mistake to say, "Well, let's come up with another program that's going to be basically a band-aid solution that reaches very few people and ultimately has very little long term impact and hope for the best, and hope that this really changes the conservation movement." Well, it is not going to...

When people are students, they are very open and humble because they are there to learn. And that is their role... they come to it with an element of humility.

DM: I would agree with Danika. I think there is merit in the development of Indigenous-specific programs, but they are not going to transform the institution. I was at U of T [University of Toronto] when they created the Indigenous Studies program, and that was the big concern was that it was going to be marginalized [and] underfunded compared to [other programs], which did happen.

The success of "marginalized" programs depends on leadership in the university. There are senior administrators with metrics that determine success (e.g., enrollment numbers). Those metrics can put Indigenous programs in jeopardy because they are often new, emerging, and not established. There is pressure all the time to legitimize yourself, even if the program is strong academically and serving the distinct needs of learners.

There has also been a brain drain from Indigenous communities. This can happen with Indigenous-focused programs. For example, in two universities I have been associated with, when introducing Indigenous languages (which is important), the academy just has not produced scholars who can teach Indigenous languages in the way actual Indigenous communities want it taught (to speak, not just study it). So, in response, there was a brain drain. Universities poached good language teachers who were working in Indigenous schools and institutes to teach at the university (to usually primarily non-Indigenous students). Because Indigenous organizations are chronically underfunded, a secure position in a university is very tempting for Indigenous language instructors. However, this means Indigenous communities just lost an incredibly precious teacher.

But there is a way to make this work. I am aware of another university that permits an Indigenous faculty member to count his teaching in the community toward his university teaching load. This is a creative way to respond to the brain drain scenario. Ideally, more universities would follow suit, so that the community has not lost an invaluable language teacher and the instructor has a steady position and can continue to serve their community. There are ways to make it work, but I rarely see any attempt to do so.

If any institution wishes to deliver an Indigenous conservation program, it would be great if it were delivered in the community. In that way, the institution is supporting those instructors who teach it to avoid the brain drain from the community. We must be careful about that; I see it happen all the time.



CF\*: In our email correspondence outside of this conversation, Deborah and Danika have emphasized that other elements of undergraduate teaching (e.g., positionality) that must be addressed to truly decolonize and move toward reconciliation. As Deborah said, this avoids the “little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing” scenario. It is critical to teach students to “teach themselves” (so they can be lifelong learners) and to provide with the necessary resources to (so they can continue learning with credible materials once they graduate).

## Synthesis

Indigenous Peoples’ territories contain 80% of the world’s remaining forest biodiversity ([Indigenous Peoples’ Major Group 2019](#)). Vertebrate biodiversity on Indigenous territories is at least equal to that in protected areas, and in some cases may even outperform parks ([Corrigan et al. 2018](#); [Schuster et al. 2019](#)). There is, clearly, much for conservation as a field to learn from Indigenous Peoples. Ignoring or minimizing Indigenous perspectives is bad for biodiversity conservation.

Thus, the increasing interest amongst conservation practitioners in building new, reconciliatory relationships with Indigenous Peoples is to be commended. Similarly, efforts to improve postsecondary education about Indigenous dimensions of conservation should be praised. Yet, we believe faculty need to be aware that preparing aspiring conservation professionals to engage with Indigenous Peoples goes far beyond developing new content or instituting a new course requirement (albeit important). Rather, these efforts must be coupled with transformational change that builds an anti-racist, anti-oppressive campus culture in which students are expected to learn (and faculty expected to teach) how to build strong, affirming relationships with Indigenous Peoples.

As the experiences of Danika and Deborah make clear, the academy remains a White and colonial space. The stories shared here echo the work of others like [Ahmed \(2014\)](#) and [Todd \(2016\)](#), who underscored that even the most basic scholarly act—writing a citation—is political, and can either reinforce the academy’s whiteness or work against it. “... the academy itself prevent[s] the re-imagining of disciplines,” wrote [Todd \(2016, p. 18\)](#). The academy is home to “invisible colleges” that “circumscribe who and what are legible” in research, noted [Hitomi and Loring \(2018, p. 841\)](#). These in-group, self-reinforcing networks “inflate citations of college members relative to non-college members, and in so doing influence research patterns” ([2018, p. 841](#)). Deborah and Danika’s stories reiterate the salience of these comments.

We are not naïve about the scale of the task confronting our profession; as [Hofstra et al. \(2020, p. 9284\)](#) noted, “underrepresented groups’ ... contributions are devalued and discounted.” Put another way, [Walters et al. \(2019, p. 621\)](#) wrote, Indigenous “... faculty are seen as issues/objects to be managed or assimilated into the normative, White culture.” Indigenous faculty and knowledge face the intersecting challenges of racialization and settler-colonialism. Truly welcoming them as peers will require the difficult work of undermining both the academy’s resistance to racialized scholars and the manifestations of White, settler power within universities.

Yet, our conversation has suggested some immediate actions for faculty. First, the academy needs more Indigenous faculty members, and universities must be attentive to the over-burdening of Indigenous faculty. “Repeatedly fielding requests to address racism is emotionally and physically exhausting,” wrote [Tseng et al. \(2020\)](#). Similarly, requests to vet content, to serve on ethics panels, and (or) to speak to colleagues’ classes, while individually useful and well-intentioned, are cumulatively a significant amount of additional labour. Chelsea [Gabel \(2019, pp. 88, 94–95\)](#) observed that:

As universities and institutions work toward Indigenization ... much of this work falls on Indigenous faculty, staff, and students ... I have watched many of my Indigenous colleagues

across the country endure similar challenges: becoming academic directors of programs and research centres prior to completing their PhDs and taking on roles and responsibilities that would otherwise be filled by more senior scholars. We do all of this while trying to maintain active programs of research and fulfill our teaching duties.

The over-work of Indigenous faculty must end. We want to reiterate, however, Deborah's earlier caution that hiring more racialized employees (of any rank) without attending to campus culture would be misguided. This is not a novel observation (Tseng et al. 2020). Cluster hires of more than one Indigenous faculty member may address these concerns. Reconciliation can only "work" if Indigenous Peoples benefit from it; the burden of doing the work should not fall solely on Indigenous Peoples.

Regarding pedagogy, first, faculty need to center Indigenous Peoples as experts about themselves. This means assigning texts, podcasts, and (or) documentaries written or produced by Indigenous creators. It may also mean land-based, Elder-led learning, a pedagogical approach that we have not discussed in detail here, but critical nonetheless. Indigenous perspectives and knowledge should not be filtered through non-Indigenous "experts" except where absolutely necessary; "decolonizing" a course inherently requires the centering of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge keepers. To borrow a phrase from Marker (2019, p. 511), "...institutions must do more than perfunctorily tolerate Indigenous intellectual expression." Instead, universities should enable and celebrate Indigenous knowledge and knowledge keepers. Simply put, students should be taught by, rather than about, Indigenous Peoples. This may require that faculty relinquish their role as the central authority figure in the classroom. In a word, this requires humility. For example, the Wisaktowinowak garden and manomin project at Guelph University "starts with relationships and it involves labour—both of which are critical to Indigenous pedagogy" (Tait Neufelt et al. 2019, p. 26). Land can also be the teacher. The Wisaktowinowak project represents a pedagogy "that teaches relationship-based ways of knowing about the natural world and food systems" (p. 28).

Second, students must be taught more than discreet facts. Universities should equip students to both build relationships with Indigenous Peoples, and to "know stuff about" them. Facts are secondary to an understanding of reconciliation, of settler-colonialism, of what it means to affirm rather than question or denigrate Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and futurity. Students need to understand how they implicated on ongoing settler colonialism. A useful first step is for students to consider who they are and to describe their worldviews. Developing students' information literacy—that is, the ability to discern trustworthy, anti-racist, ethical information about Indigenous Peoples from the unreliable and anti-Indigenous—is also key. While basic background knowledge is clearly useful, hammering home dates of treaties or descriptions of the Indian Act should not be done to the exclusion of honing students' self-reflection and critical thinking skills. These types of critical analysis skills build the capacity of the students to engage in learning on their own, long after completion of a course or program.

As we reflect on our conversation, the words of Eve Tuck (Smith et al. 2018, p. 15) come to mind:

I recently ... saw a social media post by a white settler colleague asking for recommendations of "more practical" readings by Indigenous scholars, which would provide more detail about what decolonization looks like "in reality." ... the tacit (and sometimes arrogantly explicit) request for more (details, explanation, assurance) is actually a form of dismissal ... It is a deferral of responsibility through asking, "Isn't there something less theoretical ... something more practical? Something less radical? Can't you describe something that seems more likely or possible?" These insistences upon Indigenous writings contradict themselves while also putting all the onus of responsibility on Indigenous People to make the future more coherent and palatable to white settler readers.

This resonates with us. We are not offering a tidy package of “this is what students need to know about Indigenous Peoples and conservation.” Rather, we are asserting that it is only through transformational change in the academy—an effort that goes beyond discreet, fact-based learning outcomes or course objectives, but instead is focused on overturning the systematic, ongoing marginalizing of Indigenous scholars, knowledge, and voices—that conservation practitioners can be prepared to engage in a just relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the two anonymous reviewers for their time and thoughtful comments. CF’s involvement was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Centre Urban Environments and the Department of Political Science, University of Toronto Mississauga. Publication of this article was made possible by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection Grant and the Canada Research Chair Program.

## Author contributions

DBL, CF, and DM conceived and designed the study. DBL, CF, and DM performed the experiments/collected the data. DBL, CF, and DM analyzed and interpreted the data. DBL, CF, and DM contributed resources. DBL, CF, and DM drafted or revised the manuscript.

## Data availability statement

All relevant data are within the paper.

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