

BOOK REVIEW

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADA

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Tamtik, M. (2025). *Indigenous knowledges and higher education in Canada*. University of Toronto Press. Pages: 272. Price: 32.95 CDN (paper), 32.95 CDN (eBook), 85.00 CDN (hardcover),

This new work by Merli Tamtik presents a rigorous examination of the challenges and possibilities surrounding the integration of Indigenous knowledges into Canadian higher education. The book demonstrates the author's commitment to deeply engaging with Indigenous epistemologies and their place in post-secondary institutions. Organized into a prologue and two main parts, the book consists of 225 pages of text plus a comprehensive bibliography and indices.

In the prologue, the author provides insight into how a research project evolved into this scholarly work, and reflects on the personal learning journey taken throughout. The author explicitly acknowledges their positionality as an uninvited white European settler and discusses the challenges involved in navigating epistemic spaces through Indigenous perspectives. A key ethical dilemma explored is whether it is appropriate for a non-Indigenous scholar to write about Indigenous knowledges—or whether such intellectual work should be undertaken exclusively by Indigenous or Indigenous-identifying individuals. Through careful reflection and engagement with relevant literature, the author highlights the “danger of employing Western theoretical methodological approaches to Indigenous knowledges” and instead adopts a decolonizing methodology centered on Indig-

enous-settler relations. This framing prepares readers for the epistemological lens the author brings to the study and invites non-Indigenous readers to consider their own identities and learning opportunities in relation to Indigenous knowledges.

Part One, titled “Empowering Quotes,” foregrounds the voices of Indigenous scholars who participated in the study. As introduced in this section, these voices highlight Indigenous perspectives and lived experiences, structured around four key themes: advancing decolonization, restoring authority, strengthening community capacity, and fostering cultural reconnection. This section stands out for its insistence on creating epistemic space for Indigenous perspectives within the academy. Educators, researchers, and community practitioners alike will benefit from critical reflections from these voices and from integrating them into their pedagogical, scholarly, and advocacy-based efforts.

Part two consists of nine sub-sections that delve into Indigenous knowledges and their place in Canadian higher education. In the sub-section titled “Colonialism and University,” the author begins by emphasizing the necessity of examining ongoing conditions of coloniality to understand the growing demands by Indigenous scholars for the radical transformation of

higher education. The narrative challenges Canada's self-image as a global peacekeeper, juxtaposing it against its colonial foundations and historical violence toward Indigenous peoples. She explores the evolving concept of the "settler," expanding its meaning beyond European colonizers to include contemporary immigrants to Canada. Particularly compelling is the discussion of subtle, enduring forms of colonialism—such as institutional silence—which contribute to the erasure of Indigenous presence and voice.

Tamtik critically examines the troubled relationship between schooling and Indigenous communities in Canada, detailing the historical harm inflicted through education; she also details the efforts of Indigenous advocates to promote healing and institutional reform. She also highlights the scarcity of data on Indigenous representation in leadership within Canadian postsecondary institutions, and draws attention to disciplinary blind spots within Eurocentric epistemologies that remain exclusionary.

Further, the author identifies persistent challenges such as microaggressions, marginalization, and the instrumentalization of Indigenous administrators within academia, which often reinforces colonial norms rather than disrupting them. As a remedy, the text advocates for a shift from deficit-based narratives to a recognition of Indigenous resilience and intellectual contributions. Informed by the contributions of higher education scholars such as Kuokkanen (2007) and Jones (1998), among others, the book advocates for the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems and a critical reimagining of the university's purpose and function within a decolonizing paradigm.

Tamtik offers a substantial contribution to Indigenous scholarship in higher education by developing a theoretical framework for decolonial institutional change. Grounded in a thorough review of the literature, the framework brings coherence to the book's central focus on the emergence of Indigenous knowledges in Canadian universities. It outlines core strategies for transformation, such as acknowledging colonial harms, challenging institutional whiteness, promoting Indigenous leadership, recruiting Indigenous faculty and staff, and integrating land-

based approaches into teaching and research. These elements are supported by narrative data, reinforcing their relevance and grounding the framework in Indigenous epistemological contexts.

In the subsection discussing "Governance and Policy," Tamtik emphasizes that Indigenous post-secondary education in Canada is not treated as an autonomous entity. Instead, it remains largely dependent on policies and programs shaped by mainstream universities operating within Western epistemological frameworks. The discussion addresses key governance-related challenges—including decision-making structures, board composition, senate representation, advisory councils, strategic planning, senior leadership roles, Indigenous recruitment, and admissions policies.

She supports these observations with empirical data that holds significant relevance for policymakers and institutional leaders committed to transformative change, decolonization, and the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in Canadian higher education. For instance, drawing on Universities Canada (2019), the researcher notes that Indigenous individuals make up only 2.9% of senior university leadership—markedly lower than the overall representation of Indigenous scholars in academia (5%). Furthermore, an analysis of the institutional plans and Indigenous strategies of Canada's 15 research-intensive universities reveals that only four—University of Manitoba, Queen's University, University of Saskatchewan, and University of Toronto—explicitly referenced decolonization as a strategic priority. This is despite decolonization being widely recognized as a central tenet in Indigenous-focused initiatives, as noted in the present volume. The author calls for transforming campus climates through intentional and strategic approaches for dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous campus members. This includes confronting colonial legacies, acknowledging the harm they inflicted and reconsidering colonial symbols—such as statues and building names—that reflect systemic oppression.

The book also references the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* report, which urg-

es educational institutions to critically examine their colonial foundations. This includes recognizing the traditional territories on which campuses are situated, acknowledging the presence and contributions of Indigenous peoples, integrating Indigenous Elders into campus life, and developing policies that support cultural practices—such as allowing smudging ceremonies—as part of creating more inclusive and respectful academic environments.

In the subsection titled “Teaching and Learning Approaches,” Tamtik discusses the ongoing challenge of integrating culturally relevant knowledge into university curricula that authentically reflect Indigenous experiences in Canadian higher education. To substantiate this, the author reiterates findings from earlier research indicating that some Indigenous students struggle to complete their studies due to academic experiences that feel traumatic and disconnected from their lived realities. In contrast, the author highlights the impactful contributions of Indigenous faculty, who incorporate holistic Indigenous philosophies into their teaching practices, thereby advancing the decolonization of classroom spaces. In line with this, she emphasizes the importance of establishing departments of Indigenous Studies as strong indicators of a university’s commitment to uplifting and incorporating Indigenous epistemologies within academia.

Similarly, in the subsection entitled “Research,” the author outlines the deficiencies and limitations of current research practices and protocols within universities, noting how these approaches often undermine Indigenous knowledges. Drawing from qualitative data shared by Indigenous academics, the author affirms the foundational role Indigenous knowledge plays in shaping theories across various disciplines, including social work. She underscores the urgent need to revisit research ethics guidelines, recognizing their critical role in driving institutional transformation. Tamtik emphasizes the need to support and promote Indigenous-led research initiatives, which offer vital opportunities for decolonial learning and knowledge creation.

Indigenous communities continue to shape academia through culturally rooted initiatives in programming, research, and leadership. Even though the author acknowledges the increasing recognition of Indigenous knowledges as an asset within Canadian higher education, she argues that a transformative decolonial shift remains an aspirational goal. Achieving such change, she argues, hinges on prioritizing decolonization and supporting Indigenous self-determination through reconnection with land and culture. The book offers practical guidance for institutional leaders, including addressing colonial structures, fostering anti-racist environments, and embedding structural change in policy and resource allocation.

In *All Our Relations* (2018), Canadian Indigenous author Tanya Talaga offers a powerful exploration of the global intersections of coloniality and Indigeneity, underscoring the shared experiences of Indigenous communities across geopolitical contexts. While Talaga (2018) adopts an investigative journalism and storytelling approach, Tamtik’s new work centers on Canadian academia, presenting a focused scholarly investigation into Indigenous knowledges within higher education in this country. The analysis could have been further strengthened by drawing connections to global patterns of epistemic exclusion and the marginalization of Indigenous worldviews within dominant Eurocentric paradigms.

This volume presents a critical and thoughtful engagement with the contested status of Indigenous epistemologies in Canadian universities. By exposing the epistemological dissonance between Indigenous knowledge systems and the Euro-centric academic canon, the author reveals the enduring colonial structures that constrain epistemic inclusion. The book offers an incisive contribution to decolonial discourse, encouraging institutions to reimagine higher education as a space grounded in epistemic justice. It will undoubtedly resonate with scholars, practitioners, and policymakers committed to transformative change in the academy. Strongly recommended!

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