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Review: Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples by Tuhiwai Smith

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Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples by Tuhiwai Smith, L. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1999. 199 pp. ISBN 978-1-85649-624-7.

Twenty-seven percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native families live in poverty. Their communities have the highest rate of infant and child mortality in the country. Twenty-three percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native youth drop out of high school (NCES, 2005). These statistics are numbingly familiar. Also familiar is the West's role in decimating the communities of indigenous peoples; lesser known is how Western research was a part of the imperialist project. Linda Tuhiwai Smith illuminates this history with a book that explores how colonialist research is still impacting indigenous communities.

Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples is divided into two sections. Tuhiwai Smith begins with a discussion of imperialism, looks at the formation of Western research within imperialism, and gives examples of how research colonized the Maori people of New Zealand. In the second section, Tuhiwai Smith discusses contemporary indigenous movements to protect their communities, and how research has become a part of that agenda. She ends with suggestions for how indigenous researchers could do research within their own communities.

Beginning with a sweeping review of how colonization contained and positioned history, writing, land, space and time, Tuhiwai Smith frames her analysis in critical theory and examines the power and knowledge inherent in the binaries of *West/ other*, *colonizer/ colonized* and *oppressor/ oppressed* (Fanon, 1961/2004; Foucault, 1975/1995; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1957/1991; Said, 1978). Western research's role within this framework was to collect, represent and categorize the social, cultural, linguistic, and natural systems of indigenous communities. Around the world, researchers came as explorers and photographers and left with pictures, artifacts, and even people. Thus, communities' belongings were stolen and exhibited in huge world (European) fairs as primitive, curious objects for audiences' shock and delight under the guise of research. That established systems of order and knowing were already present in indigenous nations was completely dismissed by those in the throes of exploration; centuries and decades later, indigenous peoples remember research as a process of subjugation, dehumanization, and pain.

Next, Tuhiwai Smith telescopes her argument onto the Maori people of New Zealand and contextualizes the broader issues brought up by colonialist research within the specific concerns of this community. She compares past colonialist actions to the contemporary imperialism of technological and scientific "advances" like the Human Genome Diversity Project and the commodification of

indigenous spiritual practices. Her argument maintains that there is a fundamental schism between Western and indigenous ways of being and leads Tuhiwai Smith to her central thesis: an international indigenous peoples movement must protect and restore indigenous traditions and reject the West. Tuhiwai Smith discusses her use of the term “indigenous peoples,” and charts their survival of disease, dislocation, language and cultural loss through 500 years of colonialism, and their eventual politicization on “a much wider platform of concerns” in the 1960s (p. 107). The indigenous social movement started with the frustrations of localized communities, tribes and reserves, and grew into unified international activism by Aborigine, Maori and American Indian communities in Canada and the United States. Their agenda, now shifted from survival to restoration and revitalization, is concerned with issues of sovereignty, education, health and justice systems development, land titles and other politics of self-determination. She writes, “within indigenous discourses the term ‘peoples’ has become an important linguistic symbol of our identification as self-determining peoples... we are united by common territories, cultures, traditions, histories, languages, institutions and beliefs” (p. 115). For some activist indigenous groups, alliances with non-indigenous groups (like feminists, socialists, and labor unions) are contested and uneasy (p. 111).

In the second part of the book, Tuhiwai Smith’s confident writing becomes even more compelling. She describes her work as a guide for graduate students and young researchers working within indigenous communities and outlines how indigenous researchers can design projects of dignity and equity. Building on the helpful charts and subheadings she employs throughout the text, Tuhiwai Smith maps her conception of the indigenous research agenda with an illustration that utilizes a “metaphor of ocean tides” (p. 116). Moving concentrically towards self-determination, the agenda names healing, mobilization, decolonization, and transformation as processes that “connect, inform and clarify” tensions and that can be incorporated as methodology (p. 116). Tuhiwai Smith concludes this section of her book with a description of 25 research projects pursued by indigenous communities at the time of writing. In essence, each project is concerned with the ethics of research and advocates ways a researcher could approach her fieldwork; the project “Connecting,” for example, positions “individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment” (p. 148). As a social justice project, it connects members of families with each other, working to restore a social fabric fractured by racialized government policies that supported the forcible adoption of black Maori children by Western families.

Reading Tuhiwai Smith today raises difficult questions about how a researcher’s positionality effects his involvement with participants. A decade since the publication of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, many young researchers

find it challenging to 'speak for' a single community. Whereas singular identities (like the national orientation of Fanon or the dichotomous 'other' of Said) were a critical part of the independence politics of the sixties and beyond, many of today's young researchers exist within multiple spaces simultaneously: insider/outsider, racially pluralistic, and bi- or trans-national. Tuhiwai Smith partially touches on these issues. She candidly discloses how her upbringing and work in 'the West' gives her an uneasy status, yet she ultimately positions herself as Maori. For us, a difficult question remains: how do Tuhiwai Smith's projects guide researchers in an era of layered and shifting identities? What does it mean to revitalize and protect our communities in a globalizing world of hybridization, borderlands, and multiculturalism?

Decolonizing Methodologies is a wonderful achievement. Tuhiwai Smith excavates global issues faced by social justice researchers by dissecting how far apart the worlds of academia and the lives of those with whom academics work can be. Furthermore, she reframes research to be concretely useful in peoples' everyday lives, a task explored by current models of research and writing like counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and critical ethnography (McCarty, 2005). A series of questions Smith poses in her introduction provide clear directions for study designs. She details how "good" researchers ask questions like: "Whose research is it? Whose interests does it serve? Who benefits...?" And further, how "good" researchers need to answer the questions of their participants; the Maori ask, "Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? Can they fix up our generator?" (p. 10).

Tuhiwai Smith, an educational researcher and teacher at the University of Auckland, is the co-editor of *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* that will be released this spring by Sage Press. It is advertised as a history of critical methodology and includes examples of South African, Maori, and Islamic research. If *Decolonizing Methodologies* is any indication, her newest work will be required reading for both emerging and experienced researchers. Her scholarship—polished, refreshing and emotionally prescient—is important and healing. As Tuhiwai Smith writes about the alliances between indigenous communities,

Sharing is a good thing to do, it is a very human quality. To be able to share, to have something worth sharing, gives dignity to the giver. To accept a gift and to reciprocate gives dignity to the receiver. To create something new through that process of sharing is to recreate the old, to reconnect relationships and to recreate our humanness. (p. 105)

Thus the concept of sharing, as a basis for research and a point of reflection about a protocol or research tool, begins to navigate tough issues about

the West's harmful legacy, continually changing identity politics and alliances, and the ultimate purpose of research.

Notes

¹ The history of museums and their relationship with research and colonialism is briefly touched on by Tuhiwai Smith. Picturing, collecting and categorizing happened throughout India, the Orient, the Americas, and other parts of the so-called 'new world' and are increasingly written about in anthropology and other disciplines. However, museums and universities worldwide have yet to acknowledge publicly the depth of their participation in colonialization.

² Repositioning the terms "West" and "indigenous" as linguistic markers that could shift along a continuum, or act as tensions instead of contradictions, would open up discourse about indigenous populations negotiating identity within the global, regional and local. This kind of rereading would allow for the borderlands, slippages and gaps described by Chicana feminist author Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) in her brilliant discussion of identity, reclamation and resistance on the Mexico-U.S. border.

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Reviewer

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