

Rethinking academic approaches to embrace Indigenous geographies

- Geography as an academic discipline is largely conducted from a 'Westernised' perspective.
- This perspective is at odds with Indigenous epistemologies.
- At the University of Victoria, Canada, Professor Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles aims to produce scholarship that highlights Indigenous perspectives for a broad range of geographies.
- This multifaceted, multidisciplinary approach covers topics ranging from water geographies to air quality, Indigenous histories, and Indigenous geographies of Outer Space.

Popular discourse with regard to Indigenous peoples and cultures tends to follow a well-worn path: social issues, the politics of reservations and, on occasion, culture and history (usually through the lens of colonial history). However, in reality, Indigenous geographies are as varied and as complex as those of any other group, and the multifaceted perspectives require multidisciplinary approaches to construct comprehensive narratives.

At the University of Victoria in Canada, Professor Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles, a citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, aims to produce outward-facing scholarship that highlights Indigenous perspectives for a broad range of geographies, ranging from death investigations and the ways in which Indigenous bodies become a contested space, to urban air pollution and its role in racial violence, the teaching of Indigenous histories, and even Indigenous relationships with outer space.

Re-framing the question

Geography is traditionally seen as the study of people and places. As an academic discipline, it is largely practised from a 'modern' or 'Westernised' perspective, which emphasises the importance of

quantitative techniques.

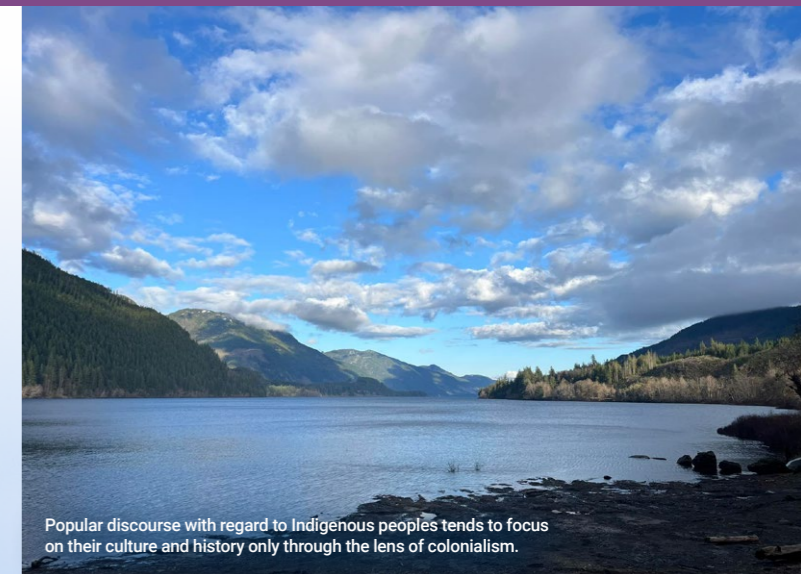
However, pursuing this form of empiricism runs the risk of side-lining less tangible areas of knowledge.

This is particularly true of Indigenous communities, where perspectives over space and time are not necessarily linear, and boundaries between this world and the next are permeable. For example, the relationships of a community with its environment cannot simply be seen through the lens of 'the here and now'; instead, it also encompasses the relationship with ancestors, spirits, and the natural environment.

Moreover, after being failed by generations of 'geographers' who have dismissed Indigenous histories and perspectives, effective academic engagement with Indigenous communities requires bridge-building and clear tools to protect vulnerable and marginalised groups. Critically, researchers must learn to work with research subjects via collaboration and reciprocity, and turn their backs on colonial approaches that seek only one-directional extraction of information. Smiles aims to explore the breadth and depth of multifaceted Indigenous geographies by discarding old approaches and embracing the decolonisation of geographical techniques.

Water geographies

The dispossession of Indigenous lands has been widely discussed while the theft of water from Indigenous communities is less widely recognised, despite the two being intimately intertwined. Around the world, modern water management and laws are firmly grounded in a Western-centric neoliberal-capitalist model. This is in stark contrast to the worldviews, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions of Indigenous communities, which emphasise respect for the natural world and the balanced and sustainable use of resources. In Indigenous communities, water plays important roles not only in



Popular discourse with regard to Indigenous peoples tends to focus on their culture and history only through the lens of colonialism.

sustaining human life and livelihoods, but also in identity, landscape, creation stories, and the spiritual world.

To address this issue, Smiles promotes the Water Back framework, in which Indigenous epistemologies provide a foundation for Indigenous communities to reclaim research sovereignty over water. Central to this framework is returning agency to Indigenous communities by placing control of water research in the hands of Indigenous academics rather than in those of external actors with a 'settler-colonial' gaze. This is not to exclude non-Indigenous actors, but instead, it offers them a role born of collaboration, not control. The framework also gives a voice and authority to Indigenous communities in decision-making and water management, for example, Indigenous communities taking ownership of all data relating to water on their lands. A review of the literature related to the Water Back framework reveals critical themes that dominate the discourse: (1) water cosmology and governance, (2) water

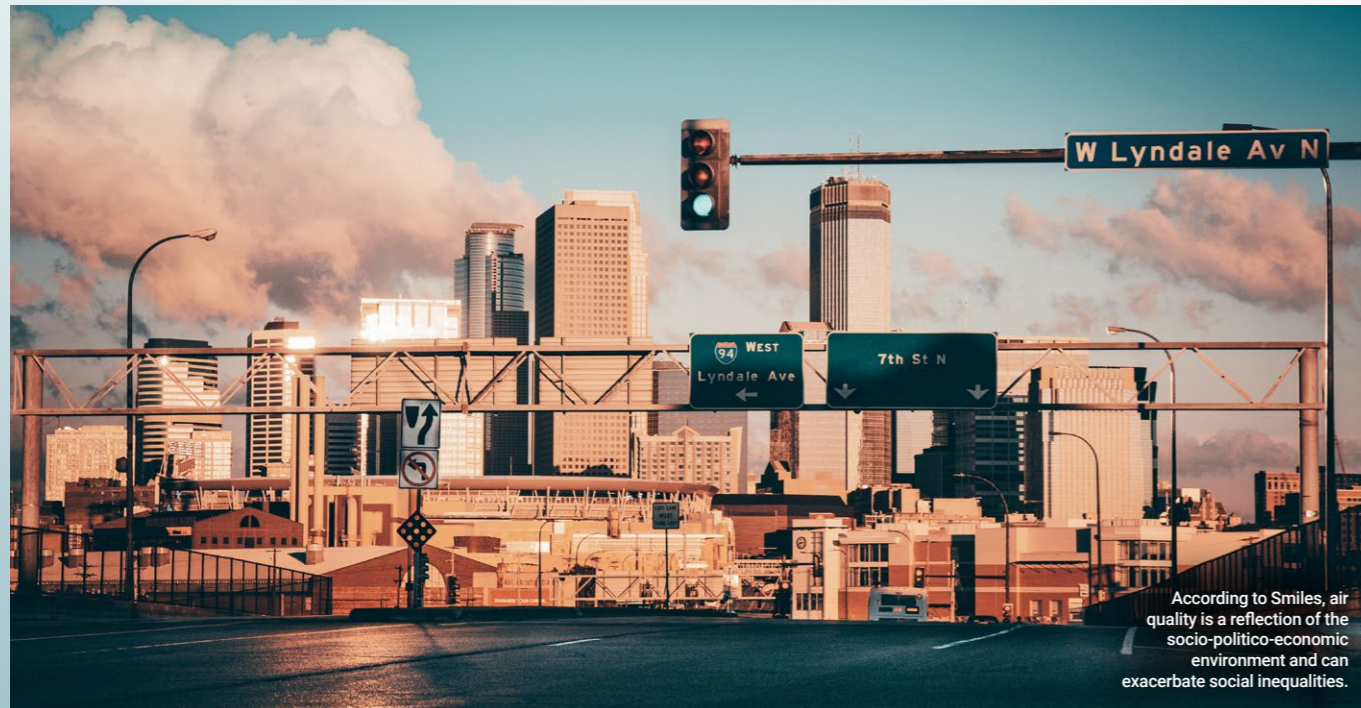
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colonialism, (3) water justice, (4) water responsibilities and rights, (5) water health, and (6) water and climate change. Together, these themes provide a comprehensive foundation for reclaiming control over water resources and addressing the very serious pressures arising from increasing water demand, reduced water security, and climate change around the world.

Slow violence and air pollution

The right to breathe has been at the forefront of global discourse in recent years, from the #ICantBreathe movement that swept social media following the death of George Floyd to the shockwaves of fear that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. However, air quality, or the lack thereof, was an issue of concern for Indigenous communities long before it became a *cause célèbre*.

Smiles highlighted the example of Minneapolis–St. Paul, where air pollution varies greatly across neighbourhoods, resulting in slow violence perpetrated largely against communities of colour. They argue that air quality cannot be seen simply in terms of physical metrics, as is the 'hard science' approach of modern geography;



According to Smiles, air quality is a reflection of the socio-politico-economic environment and can exacerbate social inequalities.

rather, air quality is also a reflection of the socio-politico-economic environment. As such, Smiles shifts the research focus to consider public discourse around air quality as reflected in print and social media, in addition to traditional data streams such as daily average concentrations of atmospheric pollutants.

Indigenous geographies of outer space

Smiles also considers the role and perspectives of Indigenous communities in space exploration, highlighting the colonial rhetoric still used to describe our incursions into the heavens. Terms such as 'Wild West', 'pioneers', and 'frontier', once used to describe the colonial

theft of Indigenous lands, are now widely applied to extraterrestrial bodies. Having learnt little from the past, we are once again embarking on a programme of settler colonialism, with the needs of 'science' brushing aside Indigenous epistemologies. Land in space

Land in space is seen as 'empty' and 'unowned' much like the American West or Australian Outback once were, with terrible consequences.

is seen as 'empty' and 'unowned' much like the American West or Australian Outback once were, with terrible consequences. The controversy also rages closer to home – for example, the construction of a new telescope on the summit of Mauna Kea, against the wishes of Native Hawaiians. While the astronomers see their science as benign – the development of knowledge through peaceful observation – they ignore the spiritual, cultural, and historical importance of mountaintop sites to Indigenous communities.

These examples of Indigenous scholarship are simply the tip of the iceberg. Indigenous geography as a discipline is growing, and with it the recognition of the need to change the way we approach academic research.

The construction of telescopes at the summit of Mauna Kea sparked opposition and protests from Native Hawaiians, who believe the site was sacred.

Personal response

What inspired you to conduct this research?

There are a couple of moments that inspired me to do Indigenous geographies. The first moment came during a service trip to the Northern Cheyenne Nation that was organised through the American Indian Center at my undergraduate institution (Saint Cloud State University). During the trip, which focused on volunteer activities on the nation's territory, we listened to local elders and knowledge holders tell us the story of how the Northern Cheyenne were forcibly relocated from their homelands, and how they braved colonial violence to return to these lands. As a young geography major, this was a perfect example of the ways that people related to space and place, and inspired me to want to bring Indigenous perspectives and geography together. Up until that point, I did not realise that Indigenous perspectives had a place in geography, but since then, I've always brought Indigenous perspectives into any geographical work that I do.

The second moment came during my dissertation research, when I was working with an official from a tribal nation in Northern Minnesota. While I initially came to the community to do work on burial ground disturbances and protection – they demonstrated to me the ways in which methods of cultural resource preservation can be applied to aspects of the living environment – from this moment, my interests became focused on the ways that Indigenous nations use cultural practices as forms of climate adaptation and mitigation, and I've centred that work in my research agenda ever since.

The expansion of Indigenous geography as a discipline will rely on the recruitment of young academics from Indigenous communities. To date, how successful have universities been in encouraging applications, and what measures could be put in place to help facilitate this?

To me, the success of bringing Indigenous voices into geography, and geography departments, has often hinged on individual faculty within these departments (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) and the relationships they have with local Indigenous communities. This represents a barrier, as when the individual moves on to another institution, leaves academia, or retires, that recruitment avenue quickly closes. Other barriers include a relative slowness to embrace Indigenous ways of knowing and being in non-extractive ways, as well as placing European/Western thought at the centre of disciplinary canons and conversations. Geography,

unfortunately, has a colonial legacy and history to it, including recent missteps by geographers in Indigenous communities in areas surrounding data sovereignty and transparency of funding from government/military sources.

This can make academic spaces within geography uncomfortable for Indigenous students at best, and at worst, can cause them to look elsewhere to gain spatially based knowledge. I think that if universities and geography departments want to increase the number of Indigenous students in their programmes, there are a few ways to do this. One would be to engage communities in what they would view as important for their young members to learn about space, place, and the environment, and work to implement these concepts in curriculum. The second way would be to do meaningful, community engaged work that centres the needs of communities and upholds their data and knowledge sovereignty. The third way would be to create both figurative and physical spaces within universities and departments for Indigenous students to gather and share in fellowship and community – if these spaces already exist, they should be emphasised in recruitment materials. I cannot understate the importance of Indigenous spaces during my time as an undergraduate and graduate student – they were safe spaces for me where I could speak openly about my experiences as an Indigenous student, and a way for me to try to stay connected to my culture.

Has Indigenous geography embraced collaborations between different Indigenous groups around the world?

Yes! I think that has been a very strong component of our subfield for many years. For example, I am currently in a leadership role in the Indigenous Peoples' Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) – in my time in the leadership, which dates back to 2016, I have come into contact and conversation with Indigenous geographers from across the globe, from the United States, Canada, and Mexico, to Cameroon, to Aotearoa, to Norway and Sweden. I think there has been a recognition that Indigeneity (the state of being Indigenous) is a global concept, and that although each community, nation, and people will have their unique cultural and political qualities, we have a shared experience of being Indigenous, of grappling with colonial struggles, and of striving for the resurgence of our relationships with space, place, land, and environment – all key components of geography.

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Bio

Niiyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles is an assistant professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, Canada. They are an Indigenous geographer whose research focuses on the ways in which Indigenous nations use cultural practices and traditions to help combat the effects of climate change.

Further reading

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