

The Power of Language: Breaking Away from the Oppressive Dichotomy of “Othering” in the Classroom

Hailey Glennon

Language does not exist in isolation; its meaning unfolds through the contexts in which it is used. In the classroom—particularly in the study of literature—language serves as both a bridge and a barrier: it can enable connection and critical thinking, or it can reinforce exclusion and colonial ideologies. The words we choose shape how we understand history, identity, and power. As scholars McGloin and Carlson assert in “Indigenous Studies and the Politics of Language”, “language is never neutral or fixed, but inflected with meanings that shift across contexts... [and it] shapes reality [by] mak[ing] meaning according to cultural consensus” (1). In Canadian post-secondary institutions, this becomes especially important when engaging with Indigenous texts, perspectives, and terminologies. When used carelessly, language can quietly reinscribe colonial assumptions; yet when chosen with care and precision, it holds the power to cultivate understanding, respect, and inclusion. To recognize the intricate role of language in shaping identity, power, and historical memory is not only essential—it is foundational to the ongoing project of decolonizing academic discourse. This process empowers students to critically engage with the past and present while fostering a more accurate, respectful, and inclusive approach to knowledge production, one that acknowledges the cultural integrity of Indigenous peoples and the harm that imprecise or colonial language can perpetuate. This challenge is compounded by “the equally long history of the abandonment of language and

the resulting resort to violence by men [and communities] who govern” (Bleich 32), revealing how the misuse—or neglect—of language continues to produce harm.

From the impacts of history, “[s]ettler colonialism destroys to replace” (Wolfe 388). As Patrick Wolfe argues in “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native”, settler colonialism is not a singular historical event but an ongoing structure, a logic of elimination built into every facet of Canadian society, including education. It operates through the systemic elimination of Indigenous presence with settler systems of governance, language, and knowledge. This imposition in which “[s]ettler colonialism is inherently eliminatory” (Wolfe 387) reshapes both land and life, resulting in a variety of impacts such as cultural alienation, territorial dispossession, intergenerational trauma, and socio-economic marginalization. Within post-secondary institutions, the effects of this structure persist in curriculum design, disciplinary frameworks, and classroom discourse. Even as decolonization efforts gain visibility, they must contend with the fact that colonial systems remain deeply embedded. There is this immediate need to examine the complexities that emerge in effort of decolonization, especially in pedagogical contexts where students and educators must confront lingering violences. These contradictions become especially visible through language. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains in “Decolonizing Methodologies”, colonialism has shaped not only what knowledge is produced in academic institutions, but *how* it is gathered, interpreted, and circulated. The “collective memory of [colonialism] has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge [is] collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West” (Smith 1). This has led to the dominance of Western epistemologies in classrooms, epistemologies that often disregard Indigenous knowledge systems and

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reinforce academic hierarchies. These hierarchies manifest in everything from student-teacher dynamics to the authority of published texts, and continue to favor “institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, [and] doctrines of colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (Smith 2). Language becomes one of the most visible battlegrounds in this process. As McGloin and Carlson argue, “colonial representations of ‘others’ are not merely harmful in terms of language [but in] the construction of otherness through language [that] continues to have devastating effects through policies that regulate and dictate the daily lives of... [Indigenous] people” (2). We see this within academic settings, where these constructed meanings often go unchallenged, cloaked in the authority of scholarly tradition. If students are not taught to critically assess the terminology and frameworks they encounter, language itself becomes a silent agent of exclusion. Words may appear neutral, but in reality, they can reinscribe harmful narratives and power imbalances. In this way, language is not just a vehicle for learning—it is a political tool that can either uphold or disrupt colonial logics. Without critical engagement, it becomes a barrier to meaningful classroom discourse, particularly when students remain uncritical of the material or unaware of its colonial underpinnings. Decolonizing education, therefore, begins with interrogating the very words we use to describe knowledge, identity, and experience.

However, despite this intention, a reluctance among educators and students to use certain terms or phrases—often driven by the fear of misuse or causing offense—can ironically lead to the use of alternative language that is problematic or imprecise. As McGloin and Carlson observe, “many students are often befuddled by terminology, keen to ‘get it right’, and embarrassed or ashamed when they don’t” (2). When academic leaders fail to openly address this uncertainty, students may inadvertently adopt flawed or

uncritical language from classroom discussions and texts, using it as a foundation for their research. This perpetuates arguments that reinforce discriminatory perspectives and colonial assumptions. Higher education encourages students to think independently through research, writing, and discussion, fostering the development of individual perspectives and critical arguments. However, many students assume that because a text is published, every word within it is credible and beyond critique. This assumption overlooks how scholars' backgrounds, lived experiences, and the historical context of their work shape their language and viewpoints. Satire, dated terminology, or dominant ideologies embedded in older texts often reflect norms that no longer align with contemporary understandings, particularly regarding Indigenous experiences. Failing to recognize these nuances can hinder efforts to dismantle colonial legacies and impede the evolution of discourse in academic spaces. Emphasis on the real-world impact of language such as “terms used to describe Indigenous experience have the power to harm, offend and insult, to affect policy and to affect identity formation . . . [showing how] language use can, and does, reinforce colonial discourses” (McGloin and Carlson 3). The terms “settler” and “settlement” provide a clear example. While common in academic and historical discourse, “[f]or many Indigenous people, ‘settlement’ implies a passive act and does not adequately describe the violent dispossession of land and culture and the ongoing effects of colonial policies and practices” (McGloin and Carlson 3). Using such terms without critical examination perpetuates a distorted understanding of history, neglecting the trauma and resistance central to Indigenous experiences. To move beyond this, educators and students must acknowledge the colonial origins of these terms and actively work to unpack their implications. This involves critically reflecting on language, encouraging dialogues that

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challenge “Othering,” and rewriting academic narratives to better represent the lived realities of Indigenous peoples. Such efforts can transform classroom discourse from a site of replication to one of decolonization and genuine understanding.

According to the Greg Younging’s “Elements of Indigenous Style”, “Indigenous Literatures are their own canon and not a subgroup of CanLit. Contemporary Indigenous authors’ works are an extension of Traditional Knowledge systems, Indigenous histories, histories of colonization, and contemporary realities” (99), meaning terminology, particularly as it relates to Indigenous peoples, can be tricky to navigate. A term that might be acceptable to some might be offensive to others, and fear of using these words at risk of offending is often a guiding hand in research done in post-secondary education. As a result of this fear, students frequently avoid certain terms and subjects, even when they find them intriguing. They may isolate themselves from valuable classroom discourses due to uncertainty about how to ask questions, or resort to using terms without fully understanding them. This can lead to offensive usage and continue “assimilat[ing] [these terms] into mainstream Canadian society, [by having] their national and cultural paradigms . . . altered . . . through colonization” (Younging 100), fundamentally altering and undermining the impacts of colonialism and hinders efforts of decolonizing educational spaces. Smith further notes this hesitation of vocabulary due to how the usage of the “[t]he term[s] [like] ‘Indigenous’ [are] problematic in that it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (Smith 6).

Understanding colonial histories is a vital first step for anyone unfamiliar with cultures outside their own. The relationship between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples is complex and deeply marked by colonial violence and power imbalances. As

explained in the “Indigenous Foundations” article from UBC, “[t]erminology can be critical for Indigenous populations, as the term for a group may not have been selected by the population themselves but instead imposed on them by colonizers. . . a term can be a loaded word, used as a powerful method to divide peoples, misrepresent them, and control their identity.” This control over identity is clearly seen in terms like “status” and “non-status Indians,” as defined by the Indian Act, a piece of legislation “authorizing the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities” (“Indigenous Foundations” UBC). Through political control, including the imposition of band councils, the Indian Act uses language as a tool to restrict Indigenous autonomy and maintain oppression. Those labeled “status Indians” receive legal recognition and rights, while “non-status Indians” are excluded from many benefits and protections, despite shared histories of displacement and disconnection from their lands and traditions. This arbitrary division entrenches separation and limits Indigenous peoples’ ability to define their own identities. This example mirrors how academic language often replicates colonial “othering,” using terminology that reinforces power imbalances and marginalizes Indigenous perspectives.

Younging stresses in his text that Indigenous literary styles must “reflect Indigenous realities as they are perceived by Indigenous people . . . respect[ing] . . . the cultural integrity [and experience] of Indigenous Peoples” (Younging 99). Yet this respect is often overlooked in academic contexts, where Indigenous narratives and terminology are extracted without sufficient recognition of their significance. As a result, colonial language continues to shape identity and knowledge production, perpetuating exclusionary structures within educational spaces.

While the politics of language, as demonstrated throughout this essay, can reinforce colonial influence in society and education, language can also be a powerful tool for empowerment. Like any skill rooted in critical thinking or close reading, understanding and using language with intention must be taught. In Indigenous studies, the power of language lies in equipping students with the knowledge to engage with specific terms accurately and respectfully. As Younging emphasizes, the most respectful way to refer to Indigenous communities is by using the most specific term available, acknowledging the “diverse [and] distinct cultures” that exist within Indigenous populations (Younging 100). It is important to recognize that terms such as “Native” and “Indian” are now considered outdated and offensive, yet they continue to appear in many scholarly texts. When encountering these terms, students must learn to consider their historical and cultural contexts—the background of the author, the time of writing, and the intended message—rather than taking the language at face value. This approach promotes more informed and sensitive engagement with academic material. A compelling example of how language can be used to empower rather than harm is the term “Two-Spirit”. As Fox explains, this term “promot[es] the inclusion of Indigenous worldviews” and is “inclusive of Indigenous gender and sexuality diverse groups by exploring the beliefs, values, and attitudes of specific Indigenous communities.” What makes “Two-Spirit” particularly powerful is that it honors the culturally-specific, historical, and ongoing roles of gender-diverse individuals in many Indigenous nations—roles that are embedded in spiritual, social, and ceremonial responsibilities. These roles contrast sharply with Western frameworks of LGBTQ+ identity, which often prioritize individual expression over community connection. In contrast, the concept of Two-Spirit is inherently relational and interconnected. Using this

term respectfully resists colonial erasure and reaffirms the right of Indigenous communities to define gender and sexuality in their own cultural terms. This example also demonstrates how identity cannot be reduced to broad categories. Even terms like “Aboriginal people,” “Indigenous people,” or more localized identifiers like “Métis” and “Inuit” may seem respectful but can be experienced as homogenizing. As McGloin and Carlson point out, such terms can be “inclusive” for some while “homogenising” for others (9). Developing awareness of this tension is essential for students—especially those hesitant to participate in discussions out of fear of being offensive. Only by engaging with these complexities can we begin to use language in more meaningful, inclusive ways.

Ultimately, recognizing the complex role of language in shaping identity, power, and history is essential to the decolonization of academic discourse. It empowers students to critically examine the past and present, fostering a more thoughtful, respectful, and inclusive approach to knowledge. As McGloin and Carlson assert, “terms used to describe Indigenous experience have the power to harm, offend and insult, to affect policy and to affect identity formation” (3). Language is inherently political; it creates an “‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy” that can shut down vital conversations and make educators and students alike afraid to confront the problems embedded in our discourse (McGloin and Carlson 1). This fear furthers division in spaces meant for learning and growth. It is important to understand these terms, not only for significant discourses in and out of the classroom, but for confidence of proper conversations. Through asking difficult questions, expressing genuine interest, and engaging with complex histories, we can use language not as a tool of erasure, but as a pathway toward respectful connection and decolonized education.

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