# The Power of Creativity: Systemic Harms and Indigenous Reclamation

**Swann Tsai**

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## Introduction

Systemic harms, like racism, economic oppression, and cis-heteropatriarchy, are systems of power that are deeply rooted in societal structures. One impact of these harms is that society centres blame upon the individual for trauma, stereotyping, stigmatizing, and dehumanizing Indigenous peoples' identities, cultures, and histories instead of the system itself. Many of these stereotypes revolve around the preconception that Indigenous people are irresponsible, violent, drunks and addicts, or mentally ill. Indigenous peoples continue to be subjected to these systemic harms because of the implementation of settler colonialism when the territories currently referred to as Canada were invaded by British colonizers.

Settler colonialism is a form of colonization that seeks to permanently establish a new political order through the elimination of Indigenous rights (Wolfe). This ongoing process began with administering the Indian Act and residential schools and banning Indigenous ceremonies, which led to the displacement of Indigenous peoples and made room for power structures and systemic harms to become ingrained into society. Despite the deconstruction of some legislations made during the initial colonization of Indigenous peoples, the effects of settler colonialism still impact Indigenous peoples. These systemic harms seek to displace, destroy, and dehumanize Indigenous peoples to the point that the violence they are subjected to has become cyclical and almost unnoticeable.

Indigenous peoples continue to be subjected to this violence daily.

However, while stereotypes and stigmatization justify these systemic harms, Indigenous peoples resist these cycles of abuse and reclaim their identities. They recognize and criticize systemic harms that force Indigenous peoples into dehumanized positions that centre around justifying unjust treatment. Through creative expression, Indigenous peoples break through colonial barriers by employing passion, humour, and sexual exploration in poetry and performative art despite those barriers.

**The Context of Systemic Harms**

Systemic harms are systems of power embedded into society. Understanding these harms requires the consideration of Indigenous peoples' identities having multiple intersections that cross with their other identities. A common example of intersectionality may be seen when considering a white woman's position in society versus a black man's, and the struggles these identities have with sexism and racism, both individually and comparatively. Since society has been built on these systemic harms, like with how capitalism equates employment and needing a wage with living, deviating from these structures becomes incredibly difficult for individuals harmed by these cycles of abuse. Moreover, Indigenous people, victims of racism and economic oppression, are stereotyped and stigmatized by the trauma they endure.

A "lack of awareness of histories" and "context" of the implementation of settler colonial "policies" which result in systemic harms, "fuels stigma and misunderstandings" of Indigenous trauma (Hardwick, "Lecture 13" slide 8). While "solutions and support" are "offered for trauma, mental illness, addiction, [and] disability," solutions "often focus on the individual" with "socially [un]acceptable" behaviour, rather than the system which put them in harm's way ("Lecture 6" slide 8).

Instead of considering complex histories and intersectional identities that explain systemic harms, individuals are dehumanized and their trauma is stigmatized because of their behaviour being viewed as unacceptable. Through these stigmas and stereotypes of trauma, victims are blamed solely for their behaviour and misfortunes, trapping them in dangerous circumstances and resulting in a cycle of abuse that justifies itself.

**My Cousin, Devlin**

Devlin died in February 2024 at the age of 32 because of an overdose. She was half-Indigenous and, during her life, had three children who were immediately placed into foster care under suspicion of her being an inadequate parent and never regained custody (Deptford). She abused substances, and her living mother, a full Indigenous woman, does as well. Devlin's full brother has never used substances, but also had his children apprehended by the system before later regaining custody of one out of two children. Since I only met Devlin twice, I do not know much about who she was. As long as she used substances, I was never allowed around her, but my uncle, her father, regarded her as a sweet, thoughtful, and reserved young woman who cared deeply about her family and younger siblings.

In Canada, there is an "overrepresentation of [Indigenous] children" in its foster system (Edward). Colonial policies, from historical and structural systems of residential schools, poverty, inadequate housing, and substance abuse, seek to displace Indigenous peoples (Edward). As a result, Indigenous children are "apprehended" (Edward) by the government and placed in foster care without regard for the parent or community involved. Despite Devlin fighting for her children, she was never permitted custody,

demonstrating how child apprehension has become a tool of colonial government systems.

Instead of considering her or her brother's history and well-being, both were immediately deemed unfit parents despite no initial evidence proving so. Comparatively, while Devlin used substances, her brother did not, yet both were treated the same. However, Devlin's abuse of substances was a result of her upbringing. This upbringing centred blame on both her and her mother for their socially unacceptable behaviour rather than the system that forced them into these stereotypes, leading to the dehumanization of their traumas and Devlin's children being apprehended.

Colonial government's solutions to Indigenous peoples' struggles revolve around the lack of awareness of complex histories, resulting in systemic harms that reinforce racist narratives. Support provided to Indigenous peoples lacks understanding of their identities and histories and, consequently, creates harmful stigmas that prevent them from overcoming systemic harms.

**"Up From the Pavement" by Richard Wagamese**

Richard Wagamese (see fig. 1) was taken by the government and "spent many years in foster care and on the streets" (Hardwick, "Lecture 6" slide 3). His story "Up from the Pavement" discusses economic oppression, like his time spent in poverty and being homeless, through colour imagery to show systemic harm's cyclical nature. He describes the colour grey in different ways throughout the piece, showing "a total lack of [possibility]" (Wagamese 3).

Fig. 1: Image of Richard Wagamese. https://www.epl.ca/blogs/post/remembering-richard-wagamese/.

His use of grey referencing the lack of colour, or "possibilit[ies]" (3), highlights the lack of opportunities given to Indigenous peoples, therefore, leading to feelings of entrapment within the cycle of systemic harm and continuation of mistreatment. Since "the toxic cycle [of] poverty and poor housing bec[ome] key drivers for children placed in care" (Edward), many Indigenous people, like Wagamese, later end up on the streets because of their harmful situations set up by systems of power.

The "immutable greys" of "longing, hurt, hunger and lack" stem from the feeling of a lack of "belonging" in society, making connection feel unachievable (Wagamese 3). Stigma and isolation support and deepen systemic harms, making stereotypes tools of economic oppression. Apprehending Indigenous children and placing them in care often leads to placing them in potentially dangerous situations, separate from their Indigenous cultures, that set them up for failure after they leave the foster system (Edward). Expecting Indigenous peoples to behave in certain, stereotyped ways because of these systemic failures gives them no opportunities to belong in a society that was not built for them.

Wagamese shows the first-person experience of victims of systemic harm in a way that is accessible to readers. His description of colour shows the discouraging nature of economic oppression, while his symbolism shows how his feeling of lack in society drains all colour from his life.

However, Wagamese also highlights how, despite the trauma he has experienced, he was able to break through barriers and begin to heal (Wagamese 4). As opposed to the colour symbolism referencing a lack in society during the beginning of the story, the use of grey shows the reclamation of his identity through his reclamation of the colour "grey" (1). Despite the cyclical nature of systemic harms, Indigenous peoples can break through countless colonial barriers and reclaim their identities, like Wagamese's reclamation of the colour grey. Indigenous peoples show that they are not strictly their trauma, but creative and complex identities despite systemic barriers.

**Creative Expression & Intersectionality**

Indigenous poetry and performative art criticize systemic harms and break away from cycles of abuse through their expression of creativity. Art acknowledges the intersectional identities of Indigenous people by considering "the impact of systemic oppression on individuals who hold intersectional identities; and recogni[izing]... the resilience, strengths, and support that often emerge with intersecting identities" (Hays). These specific forms of Indigenous art show the complexity of their identities, especially Indigenous women's, through expressing their passion and humour, specifically breaking away from the cis-heteropatriarchy through sexual expression.

Indigenous creatives avoid oversimplifying their identities in their art by "sharing [their] struggles with similar others" (Hays). They show their "pride in the history of one's culture or community… [finding] that 'racial uplifts' such as overcoming

race-related obstacles" often lead to a "reconceptualization of resilience," or reclamation, of "individual and communal" identity (Hays).

While acknowledging Indigenous traumas and histories remains important for breaking colonial barriers, understanding and recognizing their art shows the complexities of their intersecting identities. They create art that challenges systemic harms by reimaging and reinventing Indigenous creative spaces apart from colonial structures.

### ***nedi nezu* by Tenille K. Campbell**

Tenille K. Campbell is an Indigenous woman who explores sexuality, humour, and Indigenous identity. In her collection of poetry, *nedi nezu (Good Medicine)*, she explores sexuality and feminine identity within a society that sexualizes, stereotypes, and harms Indigenous women (see fig. 2). Through poetic erotica, she criticizes colonial barriers and gendered stereotypes, showing off Indigenous women's resistance and resurgence of their sexuality, femininity, and identity.

Fig. 2: Image of Tenille K. Campbell from *CBC*.
https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/author/tenille-k-campbell-

In one of her poems, “why indigenous erotica,” she provides an “official” and “unofficial” explanation of her creative exploration of Indigenous erotica (lines 4-12). These different explanations show her recognition and criticism of colonial views. Her official explanation “acknowledges the intersectional spaces / of political and social influences / external pressures / and internal dialogue / that occurs when indigenous people / engage in activities with sexual and sensual overtones” (lines 6-11). Ironically, the official explanation acknowledges colonial structures through their abidance to colonial scholarship. Simultaneously, it explains how Indigenous erotica criticizes colonial barriers and stereotypes through that abidance. Her official, or colonial, explanation removes creativity and Indigenous sexuality, showing her acknowledgement of colonial scholarship and structures ingrained into colonial society. Therefore, her recognition and abidance ironically demonstrate her defiance of stereotypes and colonial barriers.

Her official and unofficial explanation uses drastically different diction; while the former uses formal diction, the latter uses explicit language and nature imagery. She repeats “when we fuck” (line 13), emphasizing her body and self as someone sexual through explicit language, often perceived as stereotypically unfeminine. Her explicitness, both in diction and explanation, directly highlights how she has broken colonial barriers of gender-based stereotypes to show off her sexuality. She describes Indigenous intimacy as “the northern lights danc[ing]” (line 16), showing how the sensuality of Indigenous sexuality pushes past colonial spaces. Rather than discussing the “influence” and purpose of Indigenous erotica, she describes intimacy as beyond strictly an argument against “political and social” views. Instead, she describes Indigenous intimacy, sensuality, and sexuality as art embedded in nature imagery to express the raw complexities of Indigenous identities.

She describes "fuck[ing]" in a sensual way, separate from the influence of power systems, which challenges colonial structures. Through the contrasts of formal diction, explicit language, and nature imagery, Campbell acknowledges the influence of settler colonialism but passionately displays her feminine sexuality to highlight the complexity of Indigenous women's identities.

**Virago Nation**

Virago Nation is an Indigenous burlesque and drag performative art group (see fig. 3). They are a collective of Indigenous artists who explore gender, sexuality, and identity through performance. Their objective is to "reclaim Indigenous sexuality from the toxic effects of colonization. Through humour, seduction, pop culture and politics, Virago Nation shows that Indigenous… folk are thriving outside outdated colonial structures and designing dynamic multi-faceted sexual identities" ("Virago Nation: Media"). Despite colonial influences, the Virago Nation proudly use and display their bodies in ways that reclaim and redefine Indigenous sexuality.

In one of their 2017 performances at Movers, Shakers and Innovators Showcase, they use their bodies, music, and costumes to challenge stereotypes and express their sexuality despite cis-heteropatriarchal norms. During the intro of their piece (starting at 1:13 in the video referenced in fig. 4), the artists dress as different stereotypes associated with Indigenous peoples: the drunk and the appropriated Halloween costumes and sports logos, along with a few other harmful references. Their initial performance of these stereotypes, with the aid of the song, "What Made the Red Man Red," sets the tone for the rest of their performance as a critical one. Instead of starting their piece with burlesque, they create a tone of colonial society and what that society looks like for Indigenous peoples. By placing these stereotypes beside one another in

comparison, they call attention to the way Indigenous women and peoples are stereotyped and stigmatized for the harms that lead to their deaths. In an almost humorous performance, the barriers that have been set up for Indigenous peoples to fail become highlighted for their ridiculous nature.

The rest of the performance centres on the fight against those barriers and colonial society. They wear little to no clothing, displaying their bodies and sexuality

Fig. 3: Image of the Indigenous Burlesque and Drag group, Virago Nation. https://www.viragonation.ca/.

unapologetically, showing their raw selves despite systemic harms that criticize Indigenous women's bodies. They perform and move in aggressive and sensual ways to demonstrate their resistance and resurgence of Indigenous identities, challenging systemic harms. Thus, their movements and costumes, paired with the Indigenous music and audio clips speaking about violence done to Indigenous peoples, highlight their lack of adherence to colonial systems and structures.


Fig. 4: A video of the 2017 Movers, Shakers and Innovators Showcase performance by Virago Nation. https://vimeo.com/241108422.

As their performance comes to a concluding climax, a few of the audio snippets state, "hundreds of Indigenous women murdered or missing… with no solution in sight. / [Q:] How long has there been no water where you live? [A:] For years. / [In time] they have to kill us. They have to kill us. 'Cause they can't break our spirit." As they conclude, they clothe themselves in attire displaying Indigenous art while the audio addresses the violence embedded into countless societal structures. By being Indigenous burlesque performers, confronting colonial stereotypes, showing off their sexuality, and living and creating despite colonial society wanting to "kill [them]," their "spirit" cannot be broken. In actuality, by proudly showing off their humour, passion, and, overall, creativity, their spirit is remade, reinvented, and reclaimed despite those colonial barriers and cycles of abuse.

**Conclusion: The Importance of Understanding, Context, & Reclamation**

Decolonization is an incomplete and imperfect process. It requires unlearning and relearning frameworks and mindsets built on colonial structures embedded in society that create cycles of abuse incredibly difficult to escape. Without understanding the history or context of these cycles, this abuse becomes systemic, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and stigmas about Indigenous people's mental health, well-being, and standards of living who suffer from racism, economic oppression, and the norms of the cis-heteropatriarchy. These systemic harms centre societal blame on the dehumanization of the individual rather than the system.

However, knowing the different contexts of systemic harms, behaviours, and intergenerational traumas, as well as how Indigenous identities intersect with power structures, offer paths towards healing and re-imaging colonial society.

Indigenous art, much of which displays different intersectional identities, invites new paths toward understanding and reclaiming Indigenous identities outside of colonial spaces. Art and creativity invite understanding of the past. Being mindful of one another in creative and critical spaces becomes an essential part of decolonization and reclamation. Identities are complex and art becomes an ideal medium for those complex identities to express and criticize societal structures and reclaim themselves. Despite the difficulty of escaping and unlearning systemic structures, it is not impossible as long as space for understanding can become a focal point.

**Author's Note:** This piece has been adapted to fit within the form of *Alight*'s media restrictions. This piece was originally made as a multimedia essay/learning resource. Here is the link: https://swanntsai03.wixsite.com/indiglit.

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