Gender in Decolonial Indigenous Perspective

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Introduction

In recent years decolonization has quickly turned into a word frequently and widely buzzed through public media, the political realm, and the academic world.[1] The discourse surrounding decolonization has the potential to make a critical change as well as educate and raise public awareness across all sectors of society and academia. However, the narratives, and more particularly who is narrating, sometimes threaten to turn a long-overdue process into yet another form of tokenism, especially when decolonization turns into the latest academic fad that usufructs and depoliticizes the struggle of the colonized people against colonial injustices and neocolonial policies that actively block the access of Indigenous communities to their ancestral lands and sovereignty. Tokenism makes the contours of the decolonization agenda blurry and its objectives less pressing, but, most importantly, it insidiously hijacks attention away from its core issues while suppressing highly needed voices of the subaltern.

Decolonization is a complex process that requires an organized effort – political, methodological, ethical, ontological, epistemological, theoretical, infrastructural, and social – against colonization. This process necessitates a space for a critical thought production not only by professional academics but also by Indigenous feminists and queer activists whose voices, personal responsibility, commitment, and continual questioning of colonial and neocolonial processes are pivotal for advancing the entire project. To a certain extent, this resonates with a decolonizing intervention strategy offered by Ranjan Datta in his discussion of the decolonization of a research training process. I find his emphasis on decolonization as a "continuous process of anti-colonial struggle that honors indigenous approaches to

[1] See Battiste 2001; Denzin et al. 2008; Kovach 2010; Lavallée 2009; Smith 2010; Wilson 2008.

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knowing the world, recognizing indigenous land, indigenous peoples, and indigenous sovereignty – including sovereignty over the decolonization process" (Datta 2017: 2) apt but in need of further, more nuanced unpacking. Decolonial thinking indeed relies on perspectives and voices of Indigenous thinkers, leaders, and scholars who are at the forefront of decolonization efforts; however, this should not prevent synergistic, cross-sector dialogues that can potentially generate unexpected returns. The works by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous decolonial thinkers will guide my discussion in an attempt to elucidate what theoretical and conceptual insights are offered by the studies that aim to trace gender conflicts and tensions and to ascertain their implications for the contemporary constructions of gender, sex, and indigeneity.

This discussion of decolonization aims to probe critically the constructs of decolonization, gender, and indigeneity stemming from Indigenous contexts around the world and to pose new queries in addition to the set of already existing conceptually complex questions that revolve around the task of better understanding and articulating the main components and caveats in decolonizing relational processes. Indigenous articulations of gender have not been given due attention until quite recently with the emergence of a new spate of publications by Indigenous scholars, whose works I shall discuss in detail. Moreover, an engagement between gender studies and Indigenous studies and attempts to advance understanding of Indigenous gender relations and gender-based ideologies shaped in response to historical conflicts and socioeconomic upheavals associated with heteropatriarchal colonialism have been initiated by Indigenous scholars quite recently.

My angle combines both perspectives, that is, of an Indigenous scholar – I am a Siberian Eveny who grew up in a community of Eveny reindeer herders and hunters, a small Indigenous group in the Russian Arctic – and of a social anthropologist by training. I share this combination and experience of working inside and outside academia with several Indigenous scholars whose works inform this discussion. This builds on recent publications authored by Native American, Canadian First Nation, Australian Aboriginal, Maori, and Greenlandic scholars, particularly, Kim TallBear (2013, 2016, 2018), Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013, 2015, 2016), Brendan Hokowitu (2015, 2016), Robert Innes and Kim Anderson (2015), Karla Williamson (2011), Larissa Behrendt (2019), Candis Callison (2014), Jennifer Nez Denetdale (2006), and Zoe Todd (2016, 2020), and my own research.[2] My discussion with its regional focus on the circumpolar North also includes

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works by feminist anthropologists and researchers of gender in the Inuit Arctic, namely, Barbara Bodenhorn (1990, 2006), Ann Fienup-Riordan (1986), and Phyllis Morrow (2002). My inclusion of feminist anthropologists in the discussion of decolonial perspectives on gender is not accidental as their works have been pivotal for shattering the stereotype of the male-dominated Inuit cultures pervasive in early Arctic explorers' accounts written exclusively through the lens of white men from Euro-Western patriarchal societies (see also Rasmus and Ulturgasheva 2017).

In this regard I concur with Kim TallBear, an anthropologist and a member of Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, who rightfully highlights that Indigenous studies needs to "embrace a more complex set of knowledge politics" and work to undo the "foundational binaries that undermine Indigenous practices and knowledges" (TallBear 2016: 79–82). I also view engagement with critical insights produced by scholars and activists across other disciplines and nonacademic sectors as a crucial step for releasing knowledge stranded in ideological and disciplinary silos imposed by colonial modernity. Given the current geopolitics of academic prestige evaluations and university rankings, knowledge is more often than not trapped inside power hierarchies and specialist departments located in imperial centers. This applies to anthropology particularly, due to a widespread disciplinary premise stemming from colonial roots that a perspective of an outsider from a colonial metropolis is more objective than and superior to the experience and knowledge of an Indigenous insider from a colonized periphery. Current structures of exclusion propagate a highly territorial "silo effect" that, effectively, prevents much-needed perspectives and voices from being included and causes decolonization to be significantly delayed. In this sense, pushing back against colonial frameworks should also imply symmetric exchange of knowledge that empowers and provides space for Indigenous expertise.

Directions, Hindrances, and Entrapments of Decolonization

Indigenous gender studies, whether focused on Indigenous feminism, masculinities, or queer theory, is a relatively new field of inquiry that continues to grapple with ideological and epistemological traps set by the logic of coloniality and colonialism, as a method of decolonization. My contention is that it is still bound to its starting point, that is, colonization (Woons and Weier 2017). The questions around such a complex political, scholarly, and civil project as decolonization never provide straightforward and right answers, as one question always raises myriad further questions waiting for methodological clarification, conceptual unpacking, and nuanced contextualization. One of the goals of the decolonization process is to make visible the impact colonization has had on Indigenous communities, starting from violent and treacherous dispossession of lands to

genocidal processes of dehumanization and homogenization masked as a civilizing mission and, more recently, as a development project (Harvey 2005; Wolfe 1984). Therefore, this discussion is also an attempt not only to articulate what constitutes decolonization, where the process of decolonization starts and what ends it serves, but also to provide some form of guidance for emerging scholars engaged in Indigenous gender studies to think critically together, and advance further through decolonizing discourses of Indigenous intellectual freedoms of thought, speech, and language. In this regard, lived experiences and the intellectual labor of Indigenous scholars are essential for challenging patriarchal colonialism – that is, a gender hierarchy ruled and dominated by white men – and mobilizing decolonization efforts.

Unlike "post-colonialism," decolonization implies a more action-oriented call for mobilization and change (Johnson and Pihama 1995: 84; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Smith 2010: 1). Decolonization-driven discussions and research share with postcolonial studies an effort to detect the agency of colonized peoples. Postcolonial or subaltern studies examines historical and current oppressions of subaltern populations while also highlighting the inconsistencies and patchiness of colonial power (see, e.g., Asad 1973; Bhabha 1984; Spivak 1988; among many others). In decolonial thinking, patchiness and unevenness of post-/neocolonial forces are recognized as identifying the ways hegemonic imaginations of nations, states, and Western academia selectively incorporate *and* exclude Indigenous peoples.

The works of several prominent Indigenous scholars, especially the ones by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Goenpul/Nunukul scholar from Quandamooka First Nation (Moreton Bay) in Queensland, have shown that decolonization ought to start with critically reviewing and problematizing a regime of colonial epistemological domination geared by racialized knowledge and white supremacy. This is the point where an Indigenous scholar motivated and engaged in critical decolonization efforts gets confronted with the currently insurmountable task of deassembling or deconstructing the matrix of coloniality, that is, an insidious maze of colonial constructs where the subaltern is arrested and chained by the locks of Western taxonomy and intellectual imperialism with its inherent binary of the colonizer and the colonized (Alatas 2000). These chains and locks are not solely metaphorical; they are material, concrete, and pervasive. So, the question that I find the most pertinent to the task is: How can one remove, unlock, and escape these confines using the same systemic and infrastructural tools that are used to build and maintain the colonial structures? Can you decolonize with the neocolonial tools? To what extent do empowerment, voice, and self-determination have a capacity to unchain and release the subaltern from coloniality?

The colonial taxonomy of empowerment has been ingrained in a treacherous logic of subjugation masked as a gift of empowerment, that is, when someone in a position of power allows "empowerment" to happen. The

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powerful one is usually a colonial authority letting a disempowered Indigenous subject have a voice and a place at the table of colonial power. The place around the table may have been given and concerns are allowed to be voiced, but the latter is done within the hierarchical structures of colonial power – the structures where one would find oneself constantly looking at reflections in the mirrors of neocoloniality. The question now is how to leave this house of mirrors that constantly distorts the truth of what Indigenous power looks like in the face of colonial empowerment. The colonial hierarchy is omnipresent – you cannot break free from a colonial master narrative as your voice and knowledge are being incessantly muted, misappropriated, and erased by a neocolonial domination. How does one escape or divorce oneself from a colonial matrix of power embedded in the ideologies of the states, corporations, banks, academic establishments, institutions, and languages that control knowledge? Are there any alternatives offered by emerging Indigenous studies pertaining to decolonizing tools, methodologies, and decolonial forms of knowing? How far or to what extent is one able to or can one afford to opt for separatism from an all-pervasive coloniality?

The space meant for Indigenous voices and perspectives is structurally arranged under and by the colonial auspices of homogenization and inclusivity. The workings of homogenization can be traced through institutional pigeon-holing when one term, "Indigenous," is used to refer to all marginalized and colonized minorities from the fourth world. Within academia "Indigenous" has turned into an automatically *racialized subject* (Ladson-Billings 2000), that is, a subject exposed to frequent acts of racism normalized by colonial domination, a product and outcome of the colonial project. The latter involved hegemonic assertion of Eurocentric epistemology aimed at the dismantling of interconnected onto-epistemology[3] based on "mind/body/spirit metaphysics and alterity" (see Hokowitu 2016: 94–8). The desire for assimilation through residential schooling of Indigenous children centered on the violent elimination of the Indigenous onto-epistemologies (Adams 1995). The racialized enterprise of turning Indigenous "brown kids" into "white men" of the lowest class was driven by Enlightenment agendas. The project of Enlightenment partly succeeded in normalization of exclusion, dehumanization, and invalidation of the Indigenous embodied knowledge, diminishing it to the exoticness inherent to a "noble savage slot" (Trouillot 1991). This is not meant to minimize gains made over recent decades wherein academia has been a critical site for rehumanizing the Indigenous body, understanding Indigenous lives through the lens of multidisciplinary studies including anthropology and native, Aboriginal, and Indigenous studies. Rather, it is meant to keep those of us within academia

[3] The term "onto-epistemology" is preferred here as it enables co-constitutive engagement of modes of knowing and being (Barad 2003) that neither reduce ontology to a worldview nor construe epistemology as some form of derealization and discursive construction (Boellstorff 2016).

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and educational systems vigilant about the persistence of processes in the decolonizing enterprise that simultaneously control, classify, and categorize Indigenous ways of knowing into Western epistemological directories or erasing and dismissing them as nonexistent.

The field of Indigenous studies that is being taught and learned in and through decolonizing epistemological productions often resonates with a liberal, inclusive social justice framework. However, the task of "reasserting content, practices and processes that culturally affirm Indigenous people, students, community and perspective" (Nakata 2007: 9) that it undertakes is often entrapped in a politics of indigenization, Indigenous inclusion, and, by implication, an endogenous approach to knowledge production (see also Moreton-Robinson 2016: 106–9; Nakata 2002). Indigeneity's fixation with identity gets reductive and self-defeating as the identity politics based on a rhetoric of cultural difference does not engage with the issues of race and whiteness critically. What is missing is a critical inquiry into racialized discourses that are embedded and central to colonial power/knowledge and racial power hierarchies to which Indigenous populations were brought and subjected. In this regard I agree with the point highlighted by Moreton-Robinson that:

> From the seventeenth century onward, race and gender were matters that divided humans into three categories: being property, owning property and being made propertyless. These three proprietary categories are tied to a particular racialized logic of possession that emerged during the Enlightenment but developed exponentially with the advent of capitalism and modernity.. . . There is an inextricable link between racial knowledge and the founding of white patriarchal settler nation-states, and these relationships continue to structure the life chances of Indigenous peoples.
>
> *(2016: 114)*

Indeed, lives of Indigenous women and men cannot be considered without consideration of the logic of possession as they are treated as beings in and of nature with no proprietary rights. In the United States, New Zealand, and Canada there are colonial powers that have all recognized to some form and degree Indigenous proprietary rights; however, this recognition continues to be circumscribed and circumvented as these nation-states actively work to reduce, impede, and disavow Indigenous rights and sovereignty. As Moreton-Robinson notes, "in Australia patriarchal white sovereignty, through its tautological function as the law, becomes the final arbiter of indigenous claims. Indigenous lands can be 'given' and 'taken' at the discretion of the nation-state" (114). The rights of Native Americans, Australian Aboriginals, and Siberian Indigenous minorities are undermined and contested through various state-enacted controlling mechanisms, from crude assimilation policies to territorialization of lands for the sake of rapacious resource extraction. In the United States, race and ethnicity have been geneticized to the extent that biological ancestry has become the only

strategic tool validated by the state that determines who is and who is not an Indigenous person (TallBear 2013). But as Kim TallBear has shown, "indigeneity is much more complex than biological relations alone" (2013: 510). It is a prerogative of the colonial state to stay more amenable to the particular historical truths articulated by genome science than to Indigenous historical truths. Genomic articulations of indigeneity work in the interest of colonial power, seamlessly strengthening colonial conceptions and potentially weakening Indigenous articulations (516). This is how racialized knowledge and white possession are geared to operate in partnership. Heavily invested in maintaining control and domination, white possessory acts manifest in various forms of racism – systemic, institutionalized, direct, indirect, implicit, or overt – that the power structures mastered to invalidate and dehumanize Indigenous populations.

In his discussion of decolonization of Indigenous studies, the Maori scholar Brendan Hokowitu comes up with a concept of Indigenous "body-logic." According to him, "body-logic refers to those critical bodily practices that unravel dominant taxonomies which continue to superimpose and subjugate Indigenous knowledges" (2016: 99). This "body-logic" is indeed indexical to power relations between gender and decolonization as it aims to unpack and problematize the sex/gender binary that essentialized Indigenous persons in heteropatriarchal ways that are currently being reinforced by externally imposed constructs of tradition and authenticity. Moreton-Robertson's point on the importance of an intellectual effort of dissecting the current workings and consequences of coloniality drawing from critical poststructural and postcolonial thinkers is particularly apposite in this regard. However, decolonization scholars need to direct their intellectual endeavors toward the search for new modes of inquiry that would create a space informed and stimulated by Indigenous onto-epistemologies without housing them in tokenisms of recognition, rights, and reconciliations. That is to say, alongside the attempts to expose the technologies of subordination and oppression ingrained in hegemonic masculinities and femininities, I find it important to draw from Indigenous onto-epistemological genealogies incorporating insurrections of Indigenous intelligence to disrupt the physical/metaphysical binary and mind/body dichotomy ingrained in heteronormativity, which defined opposite-sex relations and a heteropatriarchal, nuclear family as the only standard type of marriage and family pattern accepted by the imperial state. The latter represent the normative standard against which Indigenous gender relations and sexuality continue to be measured (see TallBear 2018).

Indigenous Intersectionalities

Recently, a number of studies in the fields of the social sciences and humanities have been looking at the impact of the imposition of a white

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supremacist heteronormative patriarchy on Indigenous gender formations (Arvin et al. 2013). The impact documented by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars manifests in a long-lasting and negative legacy for Indigenous women, children, elders, and men and their communities as a whole. It has been noted by Innes and Anderson (2015: 3–17) that the multiple and diverse ways in which gender was understood and embodied across Indigenous worlds are still being subject to coercive acts of unification and homogenization that impose a rigid distinction between two genders, female and male, on all experiences. The implications of colonially imposed heteronormativity are multiple and amplified by experiences of Indigenous women and men at the intersections of distinct positions and identities.

The discourse on intersectionality lately became prominent as it offered a linguistically new way of speaking about personally and politically significant experiences of oppression and discrimination. The attention to intersectional experiences rightly highlighted that Indigenous gendered and racialized bodies occupy more than one position and perspective. There are indeed several ways of being a man, of being Indigenous, of being an Indigenous man or woman. The positions can coincide with, as well as challenge, one another. One of the notable contributions to the analytics of intersectionality has been made by Black feminist scholarship pioneered by Kimberley Crenshaw, who coined the term in order to put the multiple ways minority categories intersect at the center of a social justice agenda. That agenda takes up the theoretical, political, and doctrinal work of doing justice to forms of violence that operate in raced and gendered ways in minority women's lives (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Nash 2019). The intersectional approach to discrimination calls for a nuanced and encompassing approach to power and identity, one that acknowledges how "race, class, gender, and sexuality are co-dependent variables that cannot be separated or ranked in scholarship, political practice or in lived experience" (Simien 2004: 84). Therefore, the implications of intersectionality theory are wide-reaching as it affirms complexity and inclusivity of all aspects of human identity, not only at the intersection of gender and race but also at the intersections of sexuality, class, size, religion, disability, immigration status, and nationality.

Intersectionality constitutes productive analytics for interrogating multiple oppressions and accounting for differences between women and between men, not only between women and men. In this regard Indigenous intersectionalities that are emerging from multiple-identity vantage points encourage us to take into account the ways neocolonial violence works on systemic individual, community, and societal levels. Social categories such as indigeneity, race, gender, and class are engrained in multiplicities and complexities of identities that may politicize, accentuate, de-accentuate, intensify, subvert, and challenge each other. For example, one Indigenous voice can deny the existence of another, as some

queer Indigenous persons experience. One Indigenous voice can downplay the meaning and position of another, as Indigenous feminists have experienced. In other words, decolonizing strategies should entail recognition of internal differences, not only for gender and Indigenous identity; they are also relevant for sexual identity, age, class, and other aspects of social identity. Indigenous intersectionality and intersubjectivity need to be considered in the context of colonial histories that have in some cases reproduced, laterally among Indigenous groups, the violence inflicted hierarchically onto Indigenous groups (Bombay 2014).

The intersectionality approach continues to be an important intellectual and politically significant milestone that has emphasized the differences of Indigenous identities determined by the aforementioned social dimensions. However, with all its scope for inclusivity and justice it remains to be conceived within the conceptual space rooted within a colonial matrix of domination, with special focus on oppressive forces and multiple and inseparable power structures. The latter inadvertently serve to reduce Indigenous gender formations and overlook sexualities grounded in spiritual concepts of gender, which I discuss in the section that follows. In the political and public domain, dominant representation of heteronormative sexualities and its oppressing character has been called into question and actively resisted by Indigenous queer activists defending LGBTQ rights and exposing colonial, racist, gendered, and sexual violence. Two-spirit political activism has been challenging white settler colonialism within the United States. LGBTQ politics for generations and lately has been vital in shaping contemporary social movements in the broader LGBTQ communities, increasing recognition of nonbinary genders and challenging colonialism, which threatens to overrun LGBTQ movement by co-opting it to the imperial state (Morgensen 2015; Robinson 2020).

Indigenous Gender Formations

The agenda of questioning monolithic, heteropatriarchal norms sustained by Indigenous feminist and queer scholars enabled the return to the aspects of metaphysical alterity, fluidity, and multiplicity in the studies of Indigenous gender relations (Innes and Anderson 2015). Several studies of Indigenous gender relations demonstrated that for an individual person, as well as for an Indigenous community, there are numerous subject positions that, together, form a complex and multifaceted picture of indigeneity on both a local and a global level. With regard to gender, this creates a premise for understanding Indigenous communities wherein there are numerous subject positions an Indigenous (or non-Indigenous) person can inhabit. Such a view is often being challenged by continual reproduction of heteronormative practices that are part and parcel of neocolonial gender hierarchies.

There are several accounts offered by Indigenous scholars that show how neocolonial heteronormativity limits Indigenous understanding of leadership. For example, in her discussion of leadership, the Navajo historian Jennifer Nez Denetdale questioned Navajo leaders' understanding of tradition and governance, noting that they are overly influenced by colonial models that limit women's access and participation. Denetdale claims that Navajo men have assimilated colonial ideologies that they then claim to be "traditional" (2006: 9–28). This has eloquently shown how Navajo men unwittingly perpetuate oppression of themselves and their people in their uptake of colonial masculinities. A key challenge of contemporary Indigenous politics is the attempts to restore or ascribe "traditional" roles, rights, and responsibilities of women and men that might be embedded in colonial stereotypes that demonstrate ongoing disintegration of Indigenous male and female roles. Therefore, one of the agendas of Indigenous gender studies is an effort of "tracing gender conflicts, creating an awareness of the patterns of change, setting precedents and helping to determine how change and potential ideological traps are or can be handled and healed in the present and the future" (Sneider 2015: 72).

I view Indigenous gender formations with their nonbinary, ungendered, or genderless foundations as critical in their infinite capacity to question the deep-seated heteropatriarchal divisions between male and female spheres. Inuit gender case studies that defy and challenge heteronormative hegemony are offered by anthropological accounts of Alaskan Yup'ik and Inupiaq gender relations (see Bodenhorn 2006; Fienup-Riordan 1986; Morrow 2002).

For example, Morrow's study of gender among Yup'ik Alaska native people insightfully highlighted that gender can be expressed in an action, a "vapor," or essence (2002). Gender is not something that individuals "possess" in a Western colonial sense, but rather is inhabited by a person following a prescribed set of rules and teachings. Who follows which sets of gender-encoded roles and rules is not compulsory in Yup'ik society. As Morrow (2002: 340) states in her research with Yup'ik communities, there is a "strong emphasis on voluntary action and self-regulation, and a corresponding de-emphasis on compulsion and regulating others." Thus, while there are clearly gendered actions, such as boys and men being more involved in hunting activities while girls and women tend to be the ones who sew and prepare food, these and many other actions in Yup'ik society were not prohibited and were frequently by both choice and necessity intersectionally engaged by members of the group.

Bodenhorn, who conducted extensive ethnographic research among Alaskan Inupiaq whalers, documented and described the egalitarianism and equanimity of Inupiaq gender relations encapsulated in the titular quote, "I'm not the great hunter, my wife is" (1990: 55). This is where Bodenhorn provides an insightful account of the critically important role that women, and specifically wives, play in Inupiaq whale hunting. By

highlighting that wives are hunting partners in a very real sense for their husbands, Bodenhorn emphasizes symmetric interdependence and inseparability of Inupiat women and men in subsistence hunting. In an Inupiaq worldview, it is not that men go hunting and women wait for them; women go with men on the hunt by stilling their bodies and sending out their "mind" to protect the whaling crew and to help secure the catch.

Zoe Todd, a Métis anthropologist and Indigenous studies scholar, who carried out ethnographic research among Inuvialuit in Canadian Northwest Territories, relevantly points at a long-standing anthropological tradition to focus on the predominantly male activity of hunting; therefore, detailed information about the role of Inuvialuit women as harvesters is lacking. Such lack of attention continually obscures "the breadth and depth of women's roles in the social, cultural, economic, and environmental relationships that characterize life in Arctic communities" (2016: 208). Todd also pinpoints that "insufficient attention has been given to women's place in the narration of culture – how they contribute to the discursive traditions through which cultural knowledge is both shaped and preserved. There is room, in this setting, to explore women's hunting and fishing in greater depth at the community level" (200; see also Todd 2020).

Karla Jessen Williamson is a native Greenlander and an anthropologist who has contributed to date the most important advancement in our knowledge of Inuit gender relations. In her study of the Kalaallit of Greenland, which is a region historically controlled by Denmark, Williamson draws from a profound well of knowledge with regard to Inuktitut language and Kalaallit ways of living, knowing, and being. Williamson's central thesis positions Inuit gender relations as egalitarian and Inuit epistemologies as essentially genderless (2011: 8–9). In her research monograph *Inherit My Heaven* Williamson considers Greenlandic gender relations, drawing from the Inuit notion of genderlessness that lies at the basis of all creation and conception. The latter includes a conceptualization of women and men who could be understood as manifestations of three types of genderless forces, namely, intellect (*sila*), names (*aqqi*), and the process of becoming (*pinngortitaq*). All three are spiritual life-obtaining forces that conceive and shape human and nonhuman lives. Importantly, the concept of *pinngortitaq* captures not only the emergent, fluid, and processual nature of life creation but also the gender equality that downplays gender to highlight more valued human characteristics of *sila* and *aqqi* (43–8). *Sila* points toward the "genderless" association among Inuit, positing that each individual's humanity, their *sila* or life force, is seen as most significant to their being and becoming a "real person" (Inuk, pl. Inuit).

While looking at the current dynamic of gender relations in Greenland, Williamson also demonstrates how colonial imposition of heteronormative ideology enacted through the gender-role separation undermined and deteriorated the status of men in Greenlandic communities. The institutionalized separation of gender roles divided the roles into two spheres, where a

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domestic domain of actions with its child-minding responsibilities is attributed mainly to women, whereas men became assigned exclusively to a sphere of patriarchal-type labor roles centered on subsistence and provision. Such rigidity accompanied an entire process of "Danification" in state-controlled attribution of gender roles and homogenization. As a result, "Danification" enforced by institutional policies on gender equality instead induced inequitable power relations while compromising the status of both Greenlandic men and women and contributing to a high rate of domestic violence and suicide (162–3). In this case, it is possible to observe how the moral notion of gender equality rooted in Enlightenment has shown its heteronormative patriarchal face that subjugated a more nuanced, subtle, and neutral form of gender equality.

Genderlessness and Fluidity

I view the concept of genderlessness offered by Greenlandic onto-epistemology as highly generative for understanding gender in terms of fluidity and mutability. The framing of genderlessness and equanimity includes precolonial androgynous naming practices where sex does not factor into the name choice for infants but is rather bestowed based on relational and metaphysical attributes that connect the *sila* of the newborn to the *sila* of another living or nonliving thing, as all things possess *sila* (Williamson 2011). The genderlessness of Inuit names and the naming system had profound implications for understanding gender relations and Inuit kinship that places a newly born person into various networks, with different kinship and gender roles in each. The metaphysical aspects of Inuit names connected through the spiritual life-ordaining force of *sila* prompt us to consider the dynamic of inclusivity without imposition or installment of rigid gender roles.

Another eloquent indication of *sila* as a way of relating comes from the Inuktitut language, which lacks genderization. Evidence of this trait can still be seen in contemporary Inuit-speaking cultures, such as among monolingual or first-language-speaking Yup'ik elders in Alaska who will often misgender people when speaking in English and variously apply "she/he" or "hers/his" in conversations. It is explained that there is no need to indicate someone's gender in speech as the context of what is being talked about will imply all the information that needs to be known about the person. This is consistent with the work of Ann Fienup-Riordan, who writes:

> For Yupiit, the life of the individual only took on meaning in the context of a complex web of relationships between men and animals, both the living and the dead. For Western man, a person is a bound, unique, dynamic center of awareness. For Yupiit however, society began in an

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> original unity, and individual action was important only as it jeopardized or promoted that unity.
>
> *(1986: 262)*

It is most likely an artifact of the time that this writing was produced that it has the relationship "between men and animals" and "Western man" at the center, but it is also indicative of how cumbersome and disorienting it can be to translate Indigenous onto-epistemologies using a colonial language of the heteronormative patriarchy. Even when the intent is to enlighten and advance the Indigenous philosophies, one can fall quickly into the decolonization entrapments that continue to position the colonial (man) at the center of the discourse.

As Fienup-Riordan observed above, Yupiit, as well as Inuit more broadly, center themselves within a relational universe where all things are sentient, listening and responding to what the people are doing, saying, and thinking. Every actor in this universe has the potential to help or to harm the collective. Rules govern this universe and individuals are expected and encouraged to follow the rules so that everyone benefits and harm does not befall the people. The rules of the universe are not themselves gendered but the actions needed to follow the rules, to ensure safety of the community, are divided along socially sanctioned lines based on many centuries of trial, error, and success. The Yupiit ethics of ungendered sociability has been undermined by Christian missionization and colonial settlement in the Arctic. Women today are more likely to hold the few full-time jobs in the communities so that men are still able to go out hunting and have the fuel resources that are now necessary to make these trips. Girls and young women are also themselves going on these hunting trips and men are also more likely to work alongside their wives processing fish and game. There are also today, as there most likely were in the pre-Christian Inuit world, individuals in communities whose *sila* is going to be expressed in ways that their sex at birth may not have predicted. The fluid nature of the Inuit universe applies to these people and persists even with the rigid bonds that the neocolonial Christian nation-states continue to impose.

Conceptually, genderlessness allows us to challenge the issue of mobile performance of sexuality in considerations of female masculinities or masculine femininities in queer studies (see Halberstam 1998). Genderlessness exceeds the framework of queer, precisely because gender per se is not problematized, and constructs of femininity and masculinity do not require constant reorganization and deconstruction. Similar types of challenge posed by conceptual contours of genderlessness could be found in the existence of "third" and "fourth" genders in Indigenous cultures. The gender located outside a classic dyad always holds great potential for subverting Western gender binaries (see Driskill et al. 2011; Finley 2011; Jacobs et al. 2010; Saladin D'Anglure 1994). Native American poetry, essays, short stories, novels, and film, of fiction and nonfiction, are particularly rich in

providing an illuminating vision of such genders, especially the accounts of two-spirit people and the stories of the strong female and male characters who do not comply with and do not meet the accepted requirements of dominant gender performances (see Tatonetti 2015). Two-spirit people have been the ones with "both a female and male spirit" acting within them. For example, the anthropologist Sabine Lang, who conducted research among the Navajo and Shoshoni, illustrated that a two-spirit female or male is seen as neither a man nor a woman but a *nádleehi*. While discussing *nádleehi* Lang refutes a widespread idea that two-spirit sexuality centers solely on a same-gender relationship. In fact, "a relationship between a male two-spirit and a man, or between a female two-spirit and a woman, may be seen as homosexual on the physical level but not on the level of gender" (1997: 105).

Siberian ethnographic material provides an eloquent example of an extra-dyadic take on gender that manifests in cross-gender mobility. The latter could be defined as "a necessitated fluidity." This is the type of fluidity that is necessitated and urged by interactive alterity and relational accountability. Among Siberian Eveny, physically strong, prominent women were urged to take the role and position of a husband for a nuclear family at times of extreme necessity, especially in times of famine and starvation when the main male provider and married partner had been accidentally killed or had gone absent. I documented accounts of female husbands in conversations with Eveny elderly women of Tompo[4] in 2017 and 2018 (see Ulturgasheva 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). According to my interlocutors, such times of necessity were experienced in the past during World War II when men were mobilized as soldiers and then killed in battles; during Stalin's political repressions when they were arrested, imprisoned, and disappeared in the Soviet Gulag camps; or during epidemics of smallpox and measles that enormously reduced the Indigenous population. These were the most demanding times when women performed as men in a marriage. These women became husbands and performed multiple masculine roles, including the roles of fathers, uncles, and grandads providing care for all generations of family members. Eveny female husbands were treated with awe, reverence, and gratitude for their excellent hunting and reindeer herding skills, leadership, wisdom, protection, and care. Hence, fluidity should not only be understood as a flexible interchangeability of gender identities and roles; it is necessitated and socially activated to mobilize and utilize properties and qualities of parental (maternal and paternal) nurturance inherent to all individuals regardless of gender.

A number of ethnographic studies of Siberian shamanism documented cross-gender mobility as a crucial part of a shamanic initiation. For example, in his classic ethnography of Siberian Chukchi, Vladimir Bogoras writes about a Chukchi woman, Tulyvia, who was born and grew up as a boy.

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After reaching the stage of puberty and experiencing the shamanic call he had to change gender during a shamanic initiation ritual, which inaugurated and turned him into a powerful female shaman (1987] [1899]: 471–527). Then, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, an American anthropologist of shamanism who conducted research on the shamanic revival in post-Soviet Siberia for several decades, recorded an account of a Sakha man who in a time of starvation was left with his bawling baby after his wife died in childbirth. Mandelstam Balzer writes: "Far from any human, he prayed desperately to the spirits to be given milk in his poor male body. Suddenly, milk appeared in his breasts and the child was saved" (2011: 45). Although gender ambiguity and hermaphroditic symbolism have been significant components of shamanic traditions across the Siberian Arctic, Siberian female husbands and breast-feeding fathers show how lay people could tune in and tap into the fundamental life forces of the opposite sex, as shamans would do.

The recorded cases of Siberian cross-gender fluidity question the implications of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian heteronormativity associated with the state gender policies imposed and instilled by the state in the Soviet era (Kwon 1997; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001). The Soviet state policies toward Indigenous minorities included sedentarization or denomadization aimed at eradicating the problematic "otherness," uncontrollability, and mobility of Indigenous groups. This also included imposition of heteronormative norms and expectations in all state-run institutions, especially in boarding schools for children from Indigenous families. The state policies pursued the aim of drawing Siberian reindeer herders and hunters into the project of industrialization that happened primarily with resource exploitation in mind. Here, the needs of the state had absolute priority. For the state, Indigenous populations were often an inconvenience that had to be either tightly controlled and measured against heteronormative standards as happened in the Soviet period or ignored and treated as an economic burden in post-Soviet times.

Many Soviet state-focused anthropologists continually read Indigenous gender relations through the heteronormative, biopolitical lens that does not provide any space for Indigenous articulations. The top-down state analytics views the state as the only explanatory Foucauldian framework for gender relations in Indigenous Siberia. This view categorizes all Indigenous gender formations as an outcome of the biopolitical interventions of the state (Bloch 2005; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). In this biocolonial take on gender, any articulations of gender relations coming from Indigenous people themselves are judged and essentialized as part and parcel of "constructed tradition." In this regard Kim TallBear rightfully asks, while pointing out the context of highly unequal power relations in which indigeneity is being defined: "Who has power to get others to buy into their representations and definitions? Who has the institutional, legal, and intellectual authority to determine who or what counts as 'indigenous'?" (2013: 513). In addition, if gender relations can be understood as only a product of

wider biopolitical forces, would this imply that there is no place for anything other than "constructed indigeneity" in the webs of colonial power relations? Such dichotomies as "realist versus constructivist," "authentic versus artificial," "before and after" that structure public and scholarly views of what and who they are undermine and challenge their struggle for sovereignty and decolonizing initiatives. Hence, the task of decolonization in the field of Indigenous gender relations requires a labor of de-essentializing and deconstructing the discursive formations that simplify and arrest complex figurations of gender in one master narrative imposed in a colonial fashion.

Questioning Neocolonial Discourses on Indigeneity

Any analytical angle on indigeneity should resist being treated from within the perspective given by a singular, monolithic lens. To have a more complex understanding of indigeneity it is critical to situate it at the intersections of various power relations, regimes of dispossession, and new imaginaries of social justice (see Coombe 2011). Indigeneity as a political category is also in need of a more nuanced de-essentialization, especially given that it is frequently being dismissed and diminished by its critics down to an expression of "nativism" defined by political scientists focusing on radical right-wing populist parties in Europe and the United States "as an intense hostility to anything deemed alien and threatening to national cohesion" (Betz 2017: 335; see also Harris 2020; Morton 2017). Different experiences and trajectories of indigeneity of various racial minorities from around the globe have lately been homogenized and categorized according to uncritically applied "one size fits all" optics of nativism. Since the rhetoric of nativism is often utilized by radical right-wing, neonationalist political parties that have gained popularity among dominant colonial and ethnic majorities across the world, the comparison of the political struggle of Indigenous minorities with dominant neocolonial political forces is at best ill-judged and erroneous and at worst intentionally reproductive of the colonial, racist regime of dispossession and subjugation of Indigenous sovereignties as well as blocking decolonizing initiatives on the ground.

In academic non-Indigenous discourses, the indigenous voice when it comes to any form of collective representation is judged as essentialist (see Nyamnjoh 2010). This type of treatment of indigeneity often originates from considerations of the contexts with highly territorialized configurations of identity politics and in the cases when indigeneity is invoked and is being used in demands for social and environmental justice. At certain moments strategic essentialism is unavoidable, especially when it comes to seeking justice and defending lives. Since the terms of negotiation are set by colonial actors, new generations of Indigenous leaders are obliged to balance different forms of expertise and knowledge: those passed on by their families and

those required for interaction with encroaching national society. As a result of the efforts of the Indigenous leaders involved in drafting the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2006 it takes the issues of extractive industries and environmental security of Indigenous lands to the highest legal and political arena. Some anthropologists have interpreted simplistic characterizations of indigeneity represented in the UN Declaration as essentialist and dangerous while threatening the non-Indigenous inhabitants of the Indigenous lands (see Kuper 2003). The years since the Declaration was taken have shown that "United Nations should not be naively taken as the highest authority in the production of truth; it is instead a political theatre, in which different interest groups compete to serve their interests, often using highly distorting rhetorical strategies to further their aims" (Brightman et al. 2006: 7).

For racial minorities or people of color who identify themselves, their families, and their communities as Indigenous, indigeneity signifies recognition of continuities such as their intimate relations to ancestral lands, language, heritage, colonial history of dispossession, and genocide as well as recognition of their rights and sovereignties. Candis Callison, an anthropologist and member of the Tahltan Nation, an Indigenous group located in the subarctic region of Canada, relevantly highlights that the need for political representation of Indigenous populations in the global political arena has been shaped in response to colonial extraction of natural resources and industrial destruction of their traditional lands (see 2014: 47–52). In her book *How Climate Change Comes to Matter*, Callison raises important issues of representation in the epistemological dimension of media reports on climate change. One of the points stressed by her discussion is that in the era of dramatic climate change and environmental catastrophe, lobbying by Indigenous public organizations has been critical in forming a political response to industrialization and militarization of the Arctic. For example, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) became a vital political platform representing Inuit needs and priorities in global and domestic political regimes. Their political interventions aim to ensure that governments and their policies are held accountable for the decisions they make that affect Inuit people across the Arctic (48). Inuit concerns are as much about their embodied connection to the ancestral lands as they are about environmental sustainability and security in the region.

Highlighting similar issues of representation and political discourse in Aboriginal Australia, Moreton-Robinson argues that Indigenous women's ontology originates from relations to country, occurring through the "inter-substantiation of ancestral creator beings, humans and country; it is a form of embodiment based on blood line to country" (2013: 341). This stands in contrast with Euro-American/Western legal framework sovereignty, which is narrowly defined as the authority to self-govern. Thus, if Indigenous people comprehend their sovereignties as constituted of and embodied in kinship to country and ancestors, the bodies of Indigenous

women are corporeal proof of their right to govern. Larissa Behrendt, a Eualeyai and Gamillaroi scholar in the field of Indigenous studies, echoes Moreton-Robinson by stating that such symbiotic relationship between land and Australian Aboriginal identity underlies a definition of Indigenous sovereignty as equally "an identity, nationhood, culture, and worldview" (2019: 176). Both Moreton-Robinson and Behrendt offer firsthand Indigenous perspectives on how country and sovereignty are interwoven with Aboriginal kinship and Indigenous storytelling, that is, the counternarrative of colonization. However, in contemporary Australia Indigenous sovereignty is not recognized and Aboriginal definitions have been the subjects of analytical discussions and literary works only by Aboriginal writers.

What becomes obvious is how allegations of essentialism by certain scholars reveal a profound lack of sensitivity to the stakes at issue for Indigenous people and the political economies in which they are situated. Moreover, there are a number of anthropological studies that show how Indigenous people are compelled to articulate their concerns using the legal and political vocabulary of colonizers mobilized in their struggle to achieve recognition of their rights and citizenship (see, e.g., Cruikshank 1998; Morrow and Hensel 1992). In this regard, anthropologist of Amazonia Cecilia McCallum rightfully highlights that:

> Indigenous peoples in the Amazon countries, like other so-called "traditional people" in Brazil, suffer an extreme degree of mis- or non-recognition as humans and citizens. In the inter-indigenous and pro-indigenous ecumenes, whether Brazilian, transnational or "cosmopolitan," much of the creative work of the participants is to challenge and reframe negative values attributed to "Indians" and then to develop counter-discourses intelligible to non-Indians. The discourses created in national and transnational political worlds are full of allusions to the authenticity and legitimacy of each "culture," an example of a classical political maneuver whereby one borrows aspects of the other's discourse to make one's own claims and challenge imposed meanings.
>
> *(2020: 15)*

This observation is highly relevant for all Indigenous contexts, from Australia to the Arctic, where the stakes for many Indigenous groups are often articulated and situated from within the political economies and postcolonial structurations of the legal and public policy fields. When Indigenous articulations are too quickly reduced to figurations of colonial discourses, this flippantly dismisses the colonial regulations of political economies that always demand certain essentialist positionalities. What follows is that: (1) it is important not to deny the pertinence of a collective or individual effort to highlight and pinpoint the ongoing processes of essentialization, paying attention to strategic reactions to ongoing subjugation, and (2) given that the power asymmetries and colonial domination are

constantly at work there is a persistent need to ensure that the political objectives of Indigenous minorities are not undermined and diminished by neocolonial takes on indigeneity. Therefore, this should also include the task of shedding light on neocolonial ideologies and exposing advertent and inadvertent reproductions of the settler colonial practices of elimination and silencing.

Conclusion

This discussion has shown that decolonization is an ongoing political, academic, onto-epistemological project and an intellectual space required for development of Indigenous scholarly, political, economic, legal, and social potentialities, that is, a space that creates hope in an otherwise hopeless and relentlessly disempowering terrain of all-pervasive coloniality. The aims and groundings of decolonization highlighted here speak to my desire to make a difference by documenting the process and attempts to decolonize by decolonial thinkers. In Indigenous gender studies the latter involves an intellectual effort of challenging colonial heteronormativity that undermined Indigenous gender formations and put under existential jeopardy forms of relatedness that, as the account demonstrated, would not comply with normative standards of heteropatriarchy imposed by a homonormative imperial state. In this sense I view decolonization in the field of Indigenous gender relations as a method for de-essentializing and deconstructing the discursive formations that reduce and detain complex figurations of gender within one form or one type of human sociality and reproduction. This effort implies that one should not reject all Western methods and theories (including postcolonialism and poststructuralism, which are very effective in revealing and exposing the destructive legacy of colonialism), but rather explore a bridge between mainstream and Indigenous to benefit further formation of relevant gender-focused public policies and development of Indigenous gender studies. Echoing Kim TallBear's call for cross-disciplinary engagement, my discussion emphasized the need to undo the silo-thinking of academic disciplines engaged in decolonization debates. This should be done while addressing and disentangling power imbalances within the academic power/knowledge cycle, which often institutes anthropology, that is, the "white public space" (Brodkin et al. 2011), as the only objective knower of Indigenous cultures and societies.

Moreover, I have highlighted that any study of Indigenous gender relations requires particular attention to intersectional experiences, that is, understanding of the premise that Indigenous gendered and racialized bodies occupy more than one position and perspective. Each experience needs to be located within multiple intersections of social and political categories including race, class, religion, immigration status, nationality,

disability, age, and indigeneity. While Indigenous intersectionalities are useful to dissect and expose neocolonial reproductions and influences on Indigenous lives, the focus on genderless and fluid formations as highlighted in my consideration of nonbinary Indigenous sexuality is analytically productive and transformative in its potential to offer an opportunity of advancing decolonialization efforts through liberation of decolonization discourse from the tyranny of gender binarism and biological determinism.

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