

**Unlearning Erasure: Decolonizing Music Education and Revitalizing Indigenous
Community Music in Settler-Colonial Contexts**

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For generations, Indigenous musics in contemporary settler-colonial states like Canada and Australia have been actively suppressed through colonial policies, including residential schools (Laurila & Willingham, 2017; Ostashewski et al., 2020; Prest et al., 2021; Zwicker, 2024), church missions (Bracknell & Barwick, 2020; Green, 2003; Radic, 2002), and the systematic exclusion of Indigenous traditions from formal music education (Radic, 2002; Assie-Lumumba, 2012; Green, 2003; Zwicker, 2024, pp. 40-41). While these systems sought to erase Indigenous cultural expression, the resilience of Indigenous musicians and communities has led to the reclamation of musical traditions through community-led revitalization efforts (Ostashewski et al., 2020).

As an educator of settler heritage, I acknowledge that I am writing about decolonization from an outsider's perspective. I do not claim to speak for Indigenous peoples but rather seek to examine how settler-controlled institutions, such as schools and universities, must shift their approach to music education. While the revitalization of Indigenous cultures and song must happen on Indigenous terms, settler educators have a responsibility to listen, learn, and integrate Indigenous perspectives into traditionally colonial education systems. This paper will explore how institutions of music education like universities and public schools (particularly in Canada and Australia) can move beyond tokenistic inclusion to genuinely support Indigenous community music and ways of knowing.

Education has been one of the most powerful tools of colonial oppression and has been used to suppress Indigenous languages, cultures, and musical traditions across colonial contexts. Music education, in particular, with its ability to construct and perpetuate ideologies about musical value (Green, 2003, p. 208), has demonstrated its ability to push for Western musical dominance and, through colonial education systems, actively discouraged and often outright

prohibited Indigenous musical and linguistic expression. Because many Indigenous cultures are rooted in oral traditions, the destruction of language directly impacts the transmission of song, dance, and historical narratives. Schools, universities and so-called "higher learning institutions" have historically neglected Indigenous oral arts like music and song (Bracknell & Barwick, 2020; Green, 2003; Radic, 2002), reinforcing the perception that these traditions are unworthy of study, preservation, or respect.

This erasure has contributed to widespread misrepresentation and appropriation of Indigenous musics. Composers like Stravinsky (e.g., *The Rite of Spring*), Dvořák (e.g., *New World Symphony*), and Percy Grainger (e.g., his transcriptions of Polynesian songs, like *Fierce Rarotonga I*) often misrepresented Indigenous cultures by extracting melodies from their traditional contexts and reinterpreting them through a Western lens without acknowledgment or understanding. As far back as the original settlers and explorers “discovering” Australia, there are examples of settlers and explorers attempting to notate Indigenous songs using Western methods of notation (Radic, 2002). Radic (2002) adds that even if the settlers did have the musical knowledge to properly notate what they were hearing, the system of staves and notes is “incapable of registering the complexities of Aboriginal song” as “the mode of notation used was already separated out from other cultural streams where Aboriginal music was embedded and inseparable from living itself” (p. 10). These notations were often “improved” to conform to Western music as trivialized choral exercises and other novel entertaining sounds. When a song or music is stripped of its traditional context and “from the very methods by which the music has always been created,” it bears “little resemblance to its existence in the outside world” (Green, 2003, pp. 211–212). The music or song is no longer tied to an identity, culture, history, or way of being but instead is reduced to a simple form of entertainment.

This pattern of cultural appropriation has shaped broader societal misconceptions about Indigenous musics, reinforcing settler-colonial narratives rather than genuine Indigenous culture and Indigenous self-representation. This kind of phenomenon has been observed in the film industry as well, in which the documentary *Reel Injun* critiques the ways North American Indigenous identities have been caricatured and distorted in Western media (Diamond et al., 2009). The gradual inclusion of Indigeneity in the arts has evolved from showy exoticism to othering. Over time, Indigenous communities have lost, and continue to lose, elements of their cultural identity when Indigenous musics and cultures are erased or misrepresented, while settler audiences receive an inaccurate and often harmful version of Indigenous traditions. *Reel Injun*'s ending brings hope to the stories of Indigenous voices finally being represented and allowed to speak on their own and tell their own stories. I would also argue that this shift is slowly occurring in the music industry with more recognition of Indigenous musicians, though there is still a long way to go.

The shift towards more inclusive practices in education has been slow and often more reactive than proactive. This process was not initiated independently and will continue to require continuous advocacy from Indigenous educators and allies. As Chief Winton Littlechild, a lawyer, residential school survivor, and member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, states, a quote often attributed to the late Honourable Murray Sinclair: "Education got us into this mess, and education will get us out of it" (Langtry, 2013, p. 44). The process of Truth and Reconciliation (important both in Canada and Australia) starts with the truth. A thorough understanding of the truths of our colonial history is necessary for educators and all citizens, including those beyond the field of education, who seek to advocate for and contribute to the decolonizing and systemic overhaul of education systems. Recognizing the harmful colonial role

that music education has played in the past and continues to play today heightens the sense of urgency required in transforming music education to be truly inclusive and representative.

When non-Indigenous/settler educators are seeking ways to get involved in Indigenous musics outside of the classroom, they need to be careful not to overstep and let their colonial teacher instincts take over. Avoiding these patterns of overstepping requires a fundamental shift in recognizing Indigenous voices as not just additions but as leaders and teachers in music education in their own right. Mullen (2002) critiques this tendency for music educators to assert control over community music groups and reinforce these kinds of education-like structures or imbalances. In community music, this co-opting of musical spaces can interfere with the reciprocal collaboration inherent in community music; while participants may have much to learn from an educator, there is just as much, if not more, that the educator can and should learn from others in the community. This highlights the challenge of relinquishing control by educators; even if efforts to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into a music classroom are well-intentioned, it needs to be done outside of the colonial norms that govern contemporary education systems and often outside of the traditional teacher positions.

The revitalization of Indigenous musics must happen on Indigenous terms. This, however, requires institutions to critically examine their value systems to genuinely support Indigenous cultural revival and preservation. Some universities have already begun Indigenizing their education in two primary ways: through centering Indigenous musics and pedagogies in music education curricula (Prest et al., 2021) and through music teacher training programs (Bartleet & Carfoot, 2016; Bartleet et al., 2016; Heard et al., 2023; Heard & Bartleet, 2024; Sunderland et al., 2022). Meanwhile, public schools, while influenced by university teacher

education, must also establish independent commitments to Indigenous inclusion and decolonization.

Because Indigeneity encompasses vast and distinct cultures, the approaches to Indigenous music education must be tailored to suit the needs and context of local Indigenous groups. One commonality among many Indigenous cultures across what we now call “Canada” and “Australia” is the inseparable connection between people and land. This highlights the need for place-based/land-based learning – both learning from the land and an awareness and appreciation for the land from which the music is being made and created. Styres (2017) in Prest (2020) suggests that “land-centered approaches might work better as a concept for (re)centering, (re)membering, and (re)generating Indigenous thought. Land-centered approaches acknowledge colonial relations but do not centralize or place emphasis on those relationships.” (p. 153). In this way, land-centered approaches can help music education move beyond merely acknowledging colonial histories and instead focus on revitalizing Indigenous musical traditions in ways that are meaningful to Indigenous communities. Green (2003) similarly argues that merely including music from a culture while teaching it through Western pedagogy is not enough. Indigenous musics and song must be taught using Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and making music.

Reconceptualizing music itself is also essential. The labels of “music” imposed on non-Western song and culture can be problematic and non-inclusive toward intertwined activities and expressions that are not distinguished by many cultures. Kelly Laurila (2017), a scholar of Sámi and Irish descent whom the local Anishinaabe community has embraced, troubles the concept of *music*, resonating more strongly with *song*, *singing*, and *drum circle* (Laurila & Willingham, 2017, pp. 4–5). The authors note that in many non-Western cultures, the words translated as *music* often encompass dance, singing, and drumming, making it difficult to apply

Western labels and terminology (Laurila & Willingham, 2017, p. 4). Recognizing that "what constitutes music is societally understood" (Laurila & Willingham, 2017, p. 4) reinforces the need for localized, culturally responsive approaches to curriculum development.

One practical model for rethinking post-secondary music education in decolonizing ways is service learning, often utilized and promoted by Australian scholar Dr. Brydie-Leigh Bartleet. This approach involves relocating learning into Indigenous communities in mutually beneficial ways where students gain firsthand experience of Indigenous music-making and the communities benefit from collaboration and knowledge-sharing. One such partnership exists between the community of Tennant Creek and Griffith University in Brisbane, which brings university students into Indigenous-led community music initiatives (Bartleet et al., 2016). Student testimonials state that the students build "really strong rapport, [a] sense of mutual respect, and... life-long friendships" (Bartleet et al., 2016, p. 180) with the Tennant Creek community members. The students also discuss their experiences with the service learning and how music helped them to break down cultural barriers (p. 180), gain firsthand exposure to the realities of Indigenous life, and develop a greater awareness of societal biases and mistreatment toward Indigenous peoples (p. 183). Through the experience, students develop "a new sense of agency, confidence, and responsibility as they come to see themselves not as value-neutral performers or arts workers but as culturally situated political agents" (Bartleet et al., 2016, p. 183). Expanding these kinds of partnerships between institutions and communities more broadly across settler-colonial states could offer an ethical and impactful model for integrating Indigenous music education.

Despite promising initiatives like service learning, many music education programs lack these opportunities; without wider uptake in programs like those described by Bartleet et al. (2016), the barriers felt by settler educators to learning more decolonial practices persist. One of

the most significant barriers to Indigenous inclusion in music education is settler educators' fear and uncertainty about how to do so respectfully. Seeing examples in the news of educators purposely or accidentally making insensitive and inappropriate comments, lessons, or activities and facing the consequences has fueled this hesitation among teachers. From my experience in a university Teaching Indigenous Studies course, many of my peers expressed uncertainty about integrating Indigenous perspectives in a way that avoids tokenism. Despite the course's main takeaway being that fear should not be an excuse for inaction, the hesitation persists. These sentiments are echoed in interviews and data collected about working teachers by Joseph & Merrick (2023) and Prest et al. (2021). Many of the hesitant teachers do express a desire to incorporate Indigenous teaching and learning into their classrooms, but again, the fear of being tokenistic or unknowingly insensitive prevents action. This hesitance stems from systemic issues such as a lack of accessible Indigenous-led resources and inadequate or insufficient teacher training. This suggests that while awareness is increasing, deeper structural changes and institutional support are necessary if educators are to feel confident and comfortable incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and learning respectfully (Joseph & Merrick, 2023).

One of the most widely accepted and important ways for educators to ensure Indigenous inclusion in education is meaningful and community-led is to form relationships and partnerships with local Indigenous Elders or Knowledge Keepers (Prest et al., 2021). These relationships must be built on trust, mutual respect, and an acknowledgement of the value of Indigenous knowledge systems. Engaging with Elders and Knowledge Keepers is about more than bringing in a guest speaker; it takes an ongoing and reciprocal collaboration where educators listen, learn, and give back to the communities they work in and with (Bartleet & Carfoot, 2016). For non-Indigenous educators, this also means recognizing that Indigenous knowledge cannot always be extracted,

written down, or forced into a curriculum; rather, it must be experienced, lived, and respected within its own cultural context.

The idea of integrating multiple knowledge systems is not unique to Canada or Australia. In African postcolonial contexts, Assie-Lumumba (2012) notes that while colonial education systems harmed traditional knowledge systems, many Africans recognized the benefits of Western education, particularly in subjects like science and technology; the harm came from replacing traditional knowledge rather than integrating the two systems. Green (2003) critiques the Eurocentric focus of schools on classical and folk music of “prestigious composers” (p. 208) over that of local musical traditions worldwide. While learning about Western Classical music may indeed have value, it must be balanced with attention to localized musics and song.

Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall (2019) proposes an educational approach of "Two-Eyed Seeing," which values both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems and advocates incorporating the two systems, independent of one another but informing our actions and learning. To borrow Marshall's phrasing, a kind of "Two-Eared Listening" would, rather than disregarding Western music entirely, encourage music education institutions to balance representation and learning about Western and Indigenous musical/cultural traditions. Finding this balance will be an ongoing challenge, requiring continuous adaptation based on location and community needs, but it will be an important goal to strive toward.

In conclusion, it is clear that decolonizing music education is not about simply adding Indigenous music into existing structures but about fundamentally reshaping those structures to center Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and making music. Symbolic gestures and tokenistic actions are insufficient in pursuing meaningful Indigenization of music education. Decolonized music education demands systemic change. Universities and public schools must

take active responsibility for undoing colonial harm by fostering genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities, supporting Indigenous music educators with more resources and Indigenous methodology training, and incorporating Indigenous perspectives alongside Western learning throughout curricula. Without structural changes, music education will continue reinforcing colonial paradigms and norms rather than dismantling them (Vitale, 2024). Settler educators must move beyond fear and hesitation and recognize the complexity, yet necessity, of decolonization. Inaction is complicity.

By embracing models like service learning and Two-Eyed Seeing/Two-Eared Listening, institutions can begin the necessary work of restructuring music education to be more inclusive and responsive. This, however, is just the beginning. For these actions and practices to have a lasting impact, they must be rooted in the pedagogies and praxis of Indigenous community musics and cultural practices. Following the example of community music, music education should be responsive to the needs, knowledges, and traditions of the local community (Bowman, 2007; Vitale, 2024) and Indigenous cultures. Collaboration and equitable relationships with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers are essential to ensure responsiveness and sensitivity to community and Indigenous needs and values.

As a theoretical space for inclusion and music-making, community music provides an important space to break down colonial barriers and empower Indigenous and other culturally diverse voices. As Wayne Bowman (2009) argues, music education should not be understood as just the transmission of a fixed set of knowledge but rather as a practice that develops character, habits, and dispositions (p.11) and is responsive to human needs, intentions, and desires (p.10). In this way, community music exists inextricably from the institutionalized music education that permeates community music's participants (or potential participants). Outside the Western world,

the labels imposed on notions such as *music*, *community*, and *education* conflict with the lived-ness of these experiences and ideas, and can exclude related or inseparable experiences, such as the separation of *music* and *dance* for many non-Western cultures. Decolonizing institutionalized music education will mean expanding the field and repealing imposed labels that limit or constrain experiences to predetermined boxes, shifting the framing of music as a product/sound/process, to music as lived experience, opens more possibilities for responsive, community-centered decolonial music-making and experiencing.

Ultimately, the future of music education and community music must involve creating spaces for shared learning and collaboration where Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and making music are embraced, respected, and celebrated. Bowman's (2007) call to reimagine music education as a practice of community invites us to reimagine the structure of our classrooms and consider how we might center relationships, context, and participation in our teaching and leadership. By approaching music education in this way, as community music, we have the ability to turn the traditional top-down education process into one that is built with collaborative effort rooted in mutual respect and shared responsibility. It is in this spirit that we take steps toward a music education that is just, equitable, and supportive of Indigenous efforts to (re)connect with their culture.

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