Indigenous women's worldview in food-related research: Rematriating food, bodies and lands¹

Celeste Ferreira, Janice Cindy Gaudet, and Keira A. Loukes

Abstract: Western discourses around food (in)security and nutrition often focus on food access primarily through male-driven efforts. In turn, the gendered dimension is missing. Yet Indigenous food systems cannot be fully understood without Indigenous women's worldview, challenges, and labour. Our critique points to the importance of centring Indigenous women's embodied knowledge systems in our food related research.

Novelty:

- Rematriating food research regenerates the complexities of kinship wellbeing, sustainable economies, and body sovereignty.

Key words: Indigenous food systems, Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous women, health, food studies.

Résumé : Les discours occidentaux sur la (in)sécurité alimentaire et la nutrition se concentrent souvent sur l'accès à la nourriture principalement par le biais d'efforts menés par les hommes. En conséquence, la dimension genrée est absente. Pourtant, les systèmes alimentaires autochtones ne peuvent être pleinement compris sans la vision du monde, les défis et le travail des femmes autochtones. Notre critique souligne l'importance de centrer les systèmes de connaissances incarnés des femmes autochtones dans nos recherches liées à l'alimentation. [Traduit par la Rédaction]

Les nouveautés :

- Le ramatriement de la recherche alimentaire régénère les complexités du bien-être de la parenté, des économies durables et de la souveraineté du corps.

Mots-clés : systèmes alimentaires autochtones, systèmes de connaissances autochtones, femmes autochtones, santé, études alimentaires.

Introduction

"She is the only doorway into this world" (Simpson 2013, p. 113)

Indigenous women are central to Indigenous food, family, kinship, governance, and knowledge systems yet their knowing is often missing from food and health-related research (Anderson 2008; Gaudet 2017; Settee and Shukla 2020; Todd et al. 2016). We argue Indigenous food and health research cannot be fully understood without Indigenous women's worldview. Post-colonial, decolonial, and Indigenous feminist theorists have critiqued the ways in which colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist discourses and ideologies have excluded Indigenous women in knowledge production across disciplines (Altamirano-Jiménez and Kermoal 2016; Nelson 2017; Smith 1999). Our critique highlights the integral role of Indigenous women in food systems to reflect critically on the ways *our own research* can be at a deficit for maintaining this exclusion. In doing so, we explore the ways in which traditional governance is built upon principles of relationality upheld by generations of women. From here, we argue that the systemic erasure of Indigenous women from food-related research leaves the research incomplete. We ask *ourselves* (as decolonial, able-bodied, cis-gendered women scholars belonging to Black mixed-race, Metis and German-

Scottish-Anishinaabe peoples) to privilege Indigenous women's worldview in our food-related research. The concept of rematriation guides our work to challenge to the "heteropatriarchal dominance" of land and people implied in the term repatriation (Tuck 2011; p. 35). By "rematriating foods, bodies, and land", we come to respectfully centre what Indigenous women give careful attention to. An Indigenous rematriation approach to food-related research affirms the relatedness among Indigenous food, bodies, and land. It is a "reclamation of germination instead of semination" (Muthien n.d.) to move towards reciprocal, responsible, and respectful relationships.

Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) cover a broad range of complex, diverse, and dynamic social, cultural, and spiritual philosophies, theories, epistemologies, methodologies, and methods that govern Indigenous peoples' ongoing relationships (Anderson 2011; Castellano 2004; McAdam 2015; Moreton-Robinson 2017; Richard 2018; Simpson 2014; Smith 2012). Knowledge is created, governed, and reciprocated within global, local, and cultural contexts and communities and informed by life practices, laws, and language. Traditional governance is inspired by the kinship worldview of these ongoing relationships, often described in nehiyew worldview as wahkotowin (Anderson 2011; Campbell 2007; MacDougall 2010;

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C. Ferreira* and K.A. Loukes.* Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa.

J.C. Gaudet.* Campus Saint-Jean, University of Alberta.

Corresponding author: Janice Cindy Gaudet (email: cgaudet@ualberta.ca).

*Equal authorship in alphabetical order.

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McAdam 2015). IKS informs and is informed by a set of values passed on from generation to generation, adapted to serve the context of place, people, and life cycles. Indigenous food systems are intrinsically bound to Indigenous knowledge systems (Kimmerer 2013; Longboat 2013; Settee and Shukla 2020). They cooperate, inform, and adapt to one another as a natural part of kinship interactions with pimachiwin (life). The principles of kinship as Métis Knowledge Keeper, Maria Campbell (2007) explains, has to do with all our relations and the reciprocal laws that humans and non-humans have with the land and with ourselves in relation to one another.

Increasingly, research has shown that “Indigenous women have been at the forefront of movements to restore healing connections to land which include asserting the right to be custodians of the land” (Dudgeon and Bray 2019; p. 2). Horn-Miller (2016) describes this imperative as a counterbalance of responsibilities and the diverse ways in which Haudenosaunee women uphold balance. We draw inspiration from the re-emergence of global Indigenous kinship in research as it correlates to the regeneration of Indigenous food systems (Settee and Shukla 2020). With the increase of Indigenous scholarship, we learn that gendered obligations are held within the complexity of these global Indigenous food systems (Anderson 2011; Campbell 2007; Child 2013; Dudgeon and Bray 2019; Longboat 2013), as well as Indigenous ways of knowing. These knowings are part of the traditional principles and relation laws embedded in the wahkotowin way of life (Campbell 2007). Sâkiyîtok (the act of loving) was most often taught by women, specifically most often the Elder females (Ahenakew and Wolfart 1998; Anderson 2008, 2010, 2011, 2016; Childs 2013; Dudgeon and Bray 2019). Hunting and teaching the skills of hunting was not performed solely by men (Kuokkanen 2011; Todd 2016) as we learn from Maria Campbell:

Campbell remembers that it was the grandmothers who were the first teachers of hunting and trapping. Children as young as three or four would go out with their grandmothers to set snares because it was the grannies’ job to teach children to be thankful, respectful, and gentle with the animals at this time and in this context. Old ladies were deemed to be the most appropriate first teachers of hunting because of their experience and wisdom as life-givers. Notokwew maciwin was the name given to the careful practice of taking life, as learned by young children and taught by senior life-givers (Anderson 2008, p. 82).

The recognition of “Old lady hunting”, Anderson (2008) offers insight to the diverse ways in which Indigenous women participate and translate knowledge within traditional food systems. We ask ourselves, what changes when we understand food-related issues from the perspective of regenerative love that stewards generations of connection to the land?

Indigenous understandings of relationality call “attention to the process of connection” (Dudgeon and Bray 2019, p. 3). Relationality is the foundation of an Indigenous kinship worldview as it “is recognized as the life force, and that which supports and nourishes life” (Dudgeon and Bray 2019, p.4). Emerging gendered research emphasizes the ways in which women reciprocate within a kinship worldview. MacDougall (2018) offers a Métis interpretative framework of kinship relationships and laws linked to family and community wellbeing through the cultural story entitled *Woman Who Married a Beaver*. Nelson (2017) draws on the Anishinaabeg version of this story, which describes a woman who married and had four children with a beaver. Her beaver husband and children would leave the lodge for hours at a time, returning with knives, metal, and other goods. Nelson (2017) conceptualizes this as an example of the way that beavers would “trade” their fur for human goods, as a way to emphasize “the importance of maintaining loving and respectful relations with the Beaver nation” (Nelson 2017, p. 243). The significance of the human woman maintaining

this relationship emphasizes to Nelson that women have long been conceptualized as “fluid boundary crossers who can enter and maintain erotic intimacy and economic trade with non-humans” (Nelson 2017, p. 244). Horn-Miller (2016) refers to Haudenosaunee Peoplehood as a woman-centered culture whereby the power of women was respected and their roles and responsibilities reflected their intimate connection to the natural world. Haudenosaunee Jan Longboat’s (1992) teaching of traditional gardening practice includes the strategic planting of corn, beans, and squash, known as the Three Sisters (Longboat 1992, 2013). The meticulous nature in which the three species were planted had a greater purpose of sustaining life in general. They support each other by sustaining the soil that holds them as well as the humans who consume them (Longboat 1992, 2013). Longboat (1992, 2013) speaks of the cosmological connection between women and land that comes from their Haudenosaunee spiritual understanding of identity informed by their Creation story. We cannot separate food relations from land relations, and Indigenous women are at the forefront of maintaining, educating, and advocating a kinship worldview.

Women ensured the proper functioning of the economy and labour relations by upholding a kinship-centered belief system. Child (2013) recalls that Ojibwe women in her family played a vital role in manoomin (wild rice) camps. “Manoomin harvesting was an important economic activity for women – women had the rights to the manoomin because they held the rights to water, which was a gendered space” (Child 2013; p. 25). Mindimooyeh, the term in Ojibwe for female Elder, refers to “the one who holds things together” and is a category of distinction that honours the pivotal role occupied by fully mature women in the social order (Child 2013, p. 63).

Dudgeon and Bray (2019) speak of the multiple ways in which Indigenous women are guided by Grandmothers’ Laws/Lodges/Bundles, which Métis researcher Kim Anderson calls Old Lady Knowing (Anderson 2010). For example, from the perspective of the Indigenous Grandmothers interviewed in Anderson’s research, water as inherent to woman’s roles is considered a living relative that sustained the whole of life beginning with the womb. Women’s traditional roles is based on cultural values understood within life stage practices, household care, food harvesting, gardening, water collection, economic distribution, ceremonial, and spiritual cleansing practices (Anderson 2008, 2010, 2011, 2016). Women’s relationship and responsibility to water is unique to what Anderson (2010) refers to as “grandmother kinship” (p. 27). The grandmothers teach the ways in which all creation, human and non-human, are interconnected, sustain each other, and are directly linked to the spiritual life force of water (Anderson 2010; Longboat 2013; McGregor 2015). Their relational ethics have a direct correlation to Indigenous food systems.

Given the integral role of Indigenous women within a kinship worldview, a critical analysis of the gendered complexity, reflexive allyship, and community-engaged research ethics and practices (McGuire-Adams 2021; Willows 2013, 2019) is required to address the gendered gap in food-related research. The analysis must equally address the colonial policies that interrupted Indigenous ways of carrying out kinship responsibilities directly impacting Indigenous food systems (Altamirano-Jiménez and Kermaol 2016; Settee and Shukla 2020). The under-representation of women in food-related research points to the systemic ways of rendering women’s knowledge, bodies, and roles in food systems invisible and/or erased. The aim of this erasure was part of the intent to rupture the structure of kinship governance and replace it with colonial governance so as to exploit land and resources for profit. The implications of this erasure have led to devastating health outcomes; food insecurity; disconnection to land, kin, language, and life; systemic violence and racism; relational tensions; and state dependency.

The invisibility [of Indigenous women's knowledge] is not an accident but is rather an expression of the power relations that flow into the social, political and historical structures that shape Indigenous women's lives and the challenges they confront in the present (Altamirano-Jiménez and Kermoal 2016, p. 12).

Patriarchal and colonial ways of thinking have strategically disconnected Indigenous women from their bodies, lands, and traditional economic systems – spaces where they hold both spiritual and political authority (Anderson 2016; Hall 2019; Kuokkanen 2011; Todd 2016).

Increasingly, research is challenging systematic patterns of erasure by centring questions of race, gender, and peoplehood in food-related systems (Baker 2017; Kermoal and Altamirano-Jiménez 2016; Kuokkanen 2011; Settee and Shukla 2020; Todd 2016). Our critique builds on the emerging research that recognizes the ways in which Indigenous women play a “multifaceted role [...] not merely in household food security, but in the ongoing transmission of knowledge” (Todd 2016, p. 192). Food in its broadest sense is a power that is connected to everything: land, health, culture, oppression, ceremony, economy, diplomacy, survival, and social practices. Philosophically, its most potent connection is through our efforts to practice reciprocal engagement with pimachiwin itself, given pimachiwin too has agency. “Ceremony” as Kimmerer describes, “is the vehicle for belonging – to a family, to a people and to the land” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 37). As such, we turn to Old Lady Knowing and Skywoman to help guide a rematriating approach to our research.

Skywoman is a Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabee origin creation story. Skywoman fell from the skyworld with a handful of seeds eventually co-creating with kin a garden on the back of a turtle for “the well being of all” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 7). This co-creation informs pimachiwin; a sovereignty fueled by the process of connecting generations before and after like many of the women we learn from in our homes and our research. Their labour includes imagining, strategizing, engaging, sharing, and creating the space of sâkiyítok and for sâkiyítowin (Roussel 2018) or zaagidowin (all-encompassing spirit of love) expressed among generations (McGregor 2015). bell hooks (2000) explains “[...] love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust” (p. 88). The reciprocal nature embedded in traditional foodways is intentional, intimate, strategic, laborious, and intelligent. Rematriating food research centres the foundational contribution of Indigenous women in traditional food systems. Old Lady Knowing and Skywoman offer a new point of reference affirming Indigenous rematriation as the critical encounter with pimachiwin to sustain continuity, kinship love, agency, and sovereignty for those to come.

In a rematriating approach, we become better equipped to critique and to re-imagine power structures by listening and learning from an Indigenous women's worldview. As part of this, we are invited to critically examine and reject/unlearn the colonial legacy of epistemic violence that results in ongoing relational fractures to land. Kimmerer (2013) explains, “the land shows the bruises of an abusive relationship. It's not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land. . .” (p. 9). A relationship that has become increasingly absent of sâkiyítok, and wahkotowin as reflected in health and wellbeing inequities. These bruises are overt in staggering discrepancies of Indigenous peoples' ill-health and even more devastating is the ongoing loss of our missing and murdered sisters (MMIW 2019). Centring Indigenous women's regenerative practices, embodied knowledge, wellness, and stories gives attention to the land, and thus, bodies, women, love, and food.

Indigenous food systems cannot be fully understood without the inclusion of women. We invite readers to join us in our critical reflection of the colonial roots linked to Indigenous women's

erasure and the ways in which this manifests in our own research. Indigenous women's worldview in food and health research restores balance and renewed trajectories to deepen an understanding of decolonial love, body sovereignty, sustainable economies, connection to land and environmental justice. Without this reflection and paradigm shift, food, nutrition, and health-related research risks being incomplete at best, and at worst, risks perpetuating the colonial legacy of erasing Indigenous women from the kin (including human and non-human) they intimately know and love.

Competing interests statement

The authors declare there are no competing interests.

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