

## Intersecting Indigeneity, colonialisation and disability

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### Introduction

There is growing global recognition of the operation and structure of the intersection of disability and colonization in shaping the lives of Indigenous peoples. Recent statistics suggest that there are around 370 million Indigenous peoples across world (UNDESA, 2009). Yet, there exists limited reliable data on the prevalence of disability among Indigenous communities on a global level. The United Nations (UN) has helped to drive the public policy environment, focusing on the intersecting features of Indigenous cultural identity with the lived experience of disability. In 2016, UN Rapporteurs on the rights of persons with disabilities and the rights of Indigenous Persons combined efforts to examine the impact of disability on the lives of Indigenous peoples including their ongoing ability to engage and perform customary practices, language, cultures, and traditions (UNOHCHR, 2016). There are many internationally mandated UN meetings expanding the remit of specialist Committees to incorporate the disability experience within global interventions, strategies, and responses to Indigenous global policy and research. These global debates are driven by Indigenous and non-Indigenous disability human rights activists beyond the dominating debates that foreground the social determinants of Indigenous health and wellbeing and access to social and community services. The debates and discussions are focused on including Indigenous people's representations in the traditional Eurocentric nature of the global disability rights movement.

In support of this growing international recognition of the intersectional rights of Indigenous persons living with disabilities across global institutions, there has been a growing body of disability scholarship examining this interstice (see Connell, 2011; Grech, 2015; Gilroy et al., 2016; Gilroy and Emerson, 2016; Gilroy and Donnelly, 2016; King et al., 2014; Meekosha, 2011; Soldatic, 2018). Few accounts, however, have focused on broader epistemological debates around potential areas of contention in the framing of disability and the significance of ontological debates when *being* disabled from an Indigenous standpoint (see Hollingsworth, 2013 for discussions on this point). Traditionally, the limited research available has largely focused on service provision and the cultural competence of disability specialist service availability and provisioning, such as housing, support and equipment. The historical foundation of this research is primarily centered on the production of individual impairments and limitations in human functioning which has benefited the socio-economic

interests of the elite- 'White' European classes including capitalist and Catholic.

This special issue sought to open a space for critical debates and reflections on the issues and challenges of bringing together Indigeneity and disability as an intersecting identity. The overall aim was to question and challenge existing approaches to modern Western understandings of disability, how it is regulated, governed and experienced once the cultural identity of *being* Indigenous is positioned at the fore. As editors of this special edition, we were conscious of our own cultural identities, Karen being first generation Australian of Southern European descent, and John being of the Yuin Nation of Australia's Aboriginal peoples. We engaged our own sense of the possibilities of examining the critical importance of alliances between non-Indigenous and Indigenous researchers working together as a partnership at a time when Australia's political environment had largely ignored Indigenous and non-Indigenous efforts to further Indigenous claims for national constitutional recognition. Unlike other white settler societies such as Canada, USA and New Zealand, Australia has never had a formal Treaty explicitly recognizing Indigenous Australia as the original owners, nor are Indigenous peoples recognized within our main constitutional instrument, despite more recent combined advocacy for this very realization. Thus, the struggles for Indigenous recognition and rights to culture, kin, and country remain highly contested within the white settler colonial nation of Australia.

This political backdrop spurred our interest to bring together researchers, practitioners, and activists who work at the edges of disability and Indigenous practice. We wanted researchers who understand the politics of reconciliation but also the longstanding issues that underpin such politics. This is reflected in the gamut of theoretical positioning and empirical explications that engage with situated local knowledges, spaces and places, alongside the intensive structural political and institutional negotiations of sovereignty, settler colonial nation-state power and its everyday embodied negotiations for First Peoples living with disability. This broad scoping of the special edition henceforth, hopes to reconcile the divergent global representations that are occurring within specific historical, political and geographic contexts, without the privileging or dominance of a particular standpoint.

### **Selection of papers**

With this intent in mind, the papers in this special issue bring together a complex array of multi-dimensional approaches engaged across the globe in the lived experience of disability among Indigenous peoples. In response, the issue traverses a range of axes including: applied policy interventions; Indigenous-disability relations of sovereign power; gendered practices in colonial imaginings of the Indigenous subject; the role of practitioners in harnessing disability to maintain colonial practices of settler power; the reproduction of disability as the epistemic site of post-colonial imagination; and methodological concerns that arise with broad scale population analyses increasingly drawn upon by global governance institutions to

intervene in and/or advance the rights of Indigenous peoples living with disability.

Cutting across personal narratives, historiographies and everyday practices, the selection of papers contained herein, are illustrative of the differing epistemological, ontological, and methodological politics that emerge when engaging as researchers, practitioners and activists to illustrate the situated relations of Indigenous-disability. This is also reflected in the divergent geo-political landscapes encompassing Indigenous-disability experiences and representations from Burkina Faso, Southern Africa, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, US, Norway and Sweden.

In opening the special issue, Indigenous researchers, John Gilroy (Australia), Margaretha Uttjek (Sweden), Chontel Gibson (Australia) and Kirsten Smiler (New Zealand) reflect upon their own positionalities and situated knowledge practices as Indigenous researchers undertaking extensive research within their own as well as other Indigenous communities in relation to disability. The paper draws out the critical tensions and possibilities of working at the interstices of disability and Indigeneity as First People researchers, and the efforts that are involved in engaging research methodological processes aimed at decolonizing disability from the western academy. This paper is a comparative analysis of each author's personal reflection of being an Indigenous scholar and human rights advocate working in the academic environment in their respective countries.

The next paper by Mershen Pillay and Harsha Kathard, examines the colonizing practices of professional audiologists and speech pathologists within the South African context. Pillay and Kathard highlight the embedded ways in which the professional expertise of disability health practitioners has become a dominating strategy to pathologise indigeneity through normalizing western able-bodied ways of being through the training of Indigenous persons living with disabilities within the governance of the clinic. Their critique is grounded in their clinic observations as Indigenous practitioners and educators within the audiology and speech pathology disciplines. Drawing upon the work of Fanon (1952), Pillay and Kathard, map via ideological critique, the role of western trained local and international specialist practitioners in (often unconsciously) relegating the Indigenous disabled subject to the 'zone of non-being'. Engaging with methodological processes of ideological critique, combined with their own experiences as Indigenous clinical educators, they elucidate the continuance of colonization through the denial of Indigenous subjectivity and decolonised embodiment.

The theme of colonization and Indigenous persons' practices of decolonization is a central concern of the papers presented in these earlier sections. As Pillay and Kathard illustrated within the Southern African landscape, disability can be a category harnessed by the dominant settler narrative to delegitimize Indigenous subjectivities that resist colonization, even its more recent forms, through process of state categorisation. This is something that Deborah Stienstra, Gail Baikie and Susan Manning explore in detail with the Indigenous women of Labrador, Northern Canada. As the authors illustrate, the complex histories of

colonization, involving militarization, gendered violence, and dispossession of culture and country, have spurred on complex, localized strategies to resist settler-colonizer practices of Indigenous subjugation. Disability is a core site of localized gendered strategies of resistance to continual processes of colonization and colonialism. Long standing European invasions coupled with western medicalization as strategies of colonizer population management, have had profound consequences in the (re)production of impairment among the Indigenous woman population of Labrador. Therefore, in curtailing the ongoing colonial management of their own bodies and those of their children and grandchildren, disability is challenged as a site of embodiment, as defined in western discourses. The women of Labrador are finding spaces of inclusion and belonging that dispel western mythologies of Indigenous dysfunction strongly associated with colonizer discourses to dispel the coloniser's powerful delegitimizing 'gaze'.

Laura Jaffee and Kelsey John address the coloniser's destruction of Indigenous lands and the subsequent implications for Indigenous bodies-and-minds by examining Indigenous positionalities on the protection of Mother Earth. This structural move aims to illustrate how Indigenous ontological ways of being in the world are deeply associated with connections to land and country. This positionality directly challenges Eurocentric theories of disability with the bifurcation of the *body-and-mind* and the spatial, the environmental. Importantly, this paper challenges the Eurocentric value of separating the human from nature. By examining Indigenous struggles for Mother Nature within the context of the global power, Jaffee and John demonstrate three colonial narratives that emerge under the settler-colonial enterprise that have led to the destruction of Indigenous lands and the practices of disablement that have ensued. Their tripartite framework of elimination, sovereignty and futurity, aims to challenge the ongoing disablement of Indigenous lands and the subsequent production of impairment for Indigenous peoples, as a direct confrontation to settler-colonial politics. Sewing together Indigenous justice campaigns, Jaffee and John go on to offer an alternative narrative to the standardization of disability rights narratives that dominant western disability claims.

Minerva Rivas Velarde, Patricia O'Brien and Trevor Parmenter take the ongoing reproduction of Indigenous health and disability inequalities within the white settler colonial space through a deep comparative analysis across three nation-states – Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand. While the process of colonization is differentiated through temporal timelines and geographical locations, the contributors illustrate the importance of global rights regimes to identify the ongoing embodied realities for Indigenous peoples living with disabilities with the continual denial to equitable, accessible and responsive health systems in settler-colonial states. Critically, their in-depth methodologies and multiple spheres of analyses, disclose the significance of differing health systems for Indigenous persons with disabilities. Importantly, this paper illustrates that wealthy Global North nations alongside Australia and New Zealand, fail Indigenous persons living with disabilities in ensuring their right to health is realized as articulated within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

(UNCRPD). The authors offer a potential Indigenous-disability-health model of response that can be adapted and applied structurally.

This brings us to our next comparative paper, exploring the methodological challenges of developing comparative methodological approaches of First Nations peoples. Karen Soldatic, Line Melboe, Patrick Kermit and Kelly Somers, examine the comparative possibilities in relation to Indigenous persons living within two of the world's leading countries according to the United Nations Human Development Index (2016). This global index brings together education, health, economic and a host of other social indicators and then undertakes a complex ranking system, positioning each nation in a league table. Norway is generally first, and Australia shifts between second and third. Yet, the aggregation of these data sets is not illustrative of the internal inequalities experienced by the Sami peoples of Norway, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Moreover, as the authors highlight, the interstice of Indigenous-disability inequality, is not explicated to reveal the deep historical processes that in fact, raise numerous challenges to directly comparing national datasets in relation to the intersections between indigeneity and disability.

The next comparative paper examines representations of Albinism within the post-colonial African novel. Through using literary methodologies and situating their analysis within postcolonial literary scholarship, Ken Junior Lipenga and Emmanuel Ngwira, examine the contestation and perpetuation of mythologies of 'Albinism' within selected postcolonial novels. Their literary analysis seeks to not only problematize postcolonial representations of Albinism, but also to unravel the ongoing dominance of 'Albinism' as cultural mystique that is resulting in the dismemberment and death of persons with albinism. As Lipenga and Ngwira discuss, the daily forms of brutality have resulted in global interventions, with the UN releasing a formal communiqué raising the very real possibility of people with Albinism's extinction in Malawi. Each of the novels explicitly engage with African indigenous discourses on albinism through crafting the central characters as persons with albinism, elaborating on their agency, subjectivity and embodiment within the African post-colonial context. Such narratives allow a deeper understanding of existing cultural practices towards persons with albinism through an intertwining window and divergent framings.

Lara Bezzina's paper explores the lived experiences of disability within Burkina Faso. Her article builds upon methodological strategies that incorporate creative techniques of participant reflexive visualization through the use of photography, video recordings and reflective narratives. Bezzina opens up with a historical exposition of colonization and the coloniser's positionality of disability as a strategy of population management, and then positions the narratives of the research participants who reflect on the influences of these historically grounded disability representations within their day to day negotiations of postcolonial Burkina Faso. Through close engagement with the research participants over an extended period of time, Bezzina is able to frame visual narratives as central to the paper's

positioning. Moreover, the co-production of the research with the participants provides an avenue for the participants to utilize this research project to navigate and resist colonizing discourses on disability from their own indigenous standpoint.

Population management strategies, as Louise St Guillaume and Cate Thill demonstrate, remain an enduring feature of the white settler state of Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their expressions of sovereignty, rights and justice, are faced with severe constraint under the Australian's ongoing reconfiguration of the social security policy and its realignment with the global mobility of neoliberal welfare-to-work policies. As the contributors clearly outline, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living with disability are caught in the ongoing confines of a colonizing order that has normalized welfare-to-work policy as a means to directly intervene in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relations of family, kin, and country. St Guillaume and Thill co-jointly harness disability theorizing emerging from the global south with Indigenous standpoint theory to illustrate the continuance of colonial population management in Australia. Most significantly, St Guillaume and Thill illustrate the particular nuance within Australia's welfare to work policy for Australia's First Peoples, and strategies that ensure to contain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's claims for rights, justice and sovereignty, through harnessing disability discourses of dysfunctionality and pathologisation.

The final paper seeks to examine the efficacy of emergent Australian policy within the realm of individualized funding and personalized support. Clearly, individualized funding has dominated global trends in disability policy, reflecting a particular form of political normative ideal for many disability advocates and activists. Yet, this appears as a contentious strategy to address the ongoing exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the disability service system. As Stienstra and colleagues have noted in the case of Canada, Indigenous cultures are relational and communal in their practices of care and social solidarity. Therefore, individualized funding models, as espoused by the western disability rights movement, may represent a new form of colonial governance and the settler's intent of dispossessing indigenous peoples from their relational cultural practices of health, wellbeing and care. Claire Townsend and colleagues explore in nuanced detail and rigor, the journeys of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons living with disabilities and their engagement with the new individualized funding system. Working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the Australian state of Queensland, they open the iterative dialogue of the role of mainstream disability policy in the inclusion and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living with disability. Importantly, they illustrate the significance of disability policy to redress past injustices of mainstream policy exclusion and the potential benefits of expanding the boundaries of mainstream disability policy to facilitate practices of cultural engagement and inclusion within participants' kinship and community networks.

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