



Interview with Zainab Amadahy

Zainab Amadahy in conversation with Feral Feminisms' Guest Editors

ZA: Before answering the questions I want to be clear about who I am and where I come from. These days I identify as someone with Cherokee heritage. I do not have status or band membership and have never lived in a Cherokee community. My knowledge of my African and Cherokee roots go as far back as the Reynolds tobacco plantation where both sets of ancestors were enslaved. My father was raised by his half-Cherokee grandmother. Both of his parents were mixed “Black Indians.” I am mixed race and the mix is far too vast to explain here—but, growing up, my primary ethnic identity was African American (though I always acknowledged and honoured my Cherokee ancestry). Since coming to Toronto, I have learned from and worked with the urban Native community around cultural revival and other struggles. I have been very kindly accepted into this community. So that is my social location, and it will certainly impact how I respond to these questions. Thank you.

FF: You have facilitated conversations between Indigenous and other racialized people on fostering solidarity relations. What are some of the things you would like those people of colour who understand ourselves to be in solidarity with Indigenous peoples to keep in mind?

ZA: First is a reminder that we all have a lot of healing to do and to be kind and patient with each other. There are so many ways that we can support and help each other based on our different yet similar experiences with racism, colonialism, and imperialism. I really like what Andrea Smith has to say on this topic, as she reminds us with “[Heteropatriarchy and the] Three Pillars of White Supremacy” not to assume that we face the same problems and that solutions to our problems are transferrable across communities. Also, that we need to be mindful that “solutions” that might work for one community can present difficulties to other communities. I would further ask people to interrogate how they relate to land as individuals and communities. It is this relationship that is foundational to the decolonization process.

My last thought has to do with how people of colour sometimes centre Eurocentric knowledge and affiliate with groups in which Eurocentric ideologies prevail. I’m not one to believe that there is nothing to learn from white folks’ stories, mythologies, and philosophies. I’m just more concerned about what it does to our sense of self, our understanding of history, and our relationships if we continue to reference and give priority to Eurocentric knowledges in our work. If we take Marxism as an example, I can certainly respect that knowledge (and there are scholars who have made a case that Marx was heavily influenced by Haundenosaunee and other Indigenous worldviews). I can respect those racialized theorists and activists who have critiqued and expanded Marxist, socialist, and anarchist theory as well as action. Even within my lifetime I’ve seen Indigenous and African American activists positively influence the development of Marxism. All knowledge is definitely valuable.

Still, I feel there is often great value in centering our own wisdom traditions and cultural knowledges. It helps us break out of colonized thinking, which is infused with notions of white supremacy. That’s not to say that any knowledge is above critique or inherently makes folks less likely to exploit and abuse others, but it is to recognize that there is some amazing



wisdom and knowledge in our own cultures—in many cases older than Marxism—that has been devalued, ignored, ridiculed, and denigrated for centuries, and racism and colonialism are the reasons why.

The more I work with other racialized folks who are in touch with their cultural wisdom traditions, the more I realize the depths of those teachings. You don't need Marxism to teach you about equity, social justice, and right relationship with the land when you have Patanjali or Yoruba masters or ubuntu or Laozi or Kemetic wisdom or Tich Nhat Hanh or Indigenous Elders from across the Americas, et cetera. When you defer to Marxism and other Eurocentric knowledges, you are appendixing your struggles and knowledge ways to "The Struggle," something I discuss in my controversial article, "Why indigenous and racialized struggles will always be appendixed by the left."

All racialized folks know what it feels like to be dismissed, underestimated, ignored, or worse. So why do it to ourselves? There are amazing philosophers, political scientists, and wise people from our own cultures who can inform our personal growth as well as our movements and relationships.

FF: What would you like those who consider ourselves to be allies of Indigenous peoples to know and understand about decolonization?

ZA: Firstly, to understand and appreciate how many opinions there are on this question. Since you ask, here's mine.

I prefer to think of decolonization as indigenization and I like the thinking of folks like Jeanette Armstrong and Bob Lovelace on this issue. As I understand their teachings, land is core to the question of indigenization—not bloodlines, skin colour, or cultural heritage. To be indigenous is to take direction on how to live from a specific place (a bio-region) where all of life-forms model sustainability, interdependence, and "good mind" in relation to how to live well in that area. To people like Bob and Jeanette, anyone can become indigenous to a place. In our context on Turtle Island, taking direction from the First Peoples who have the longest standing relationships with these lands is a first step.

When you ultimately tease out the teachings and implications of understanding indigeneity in this way, it has implications for all the affairs of two-leggeds: governance, economy, education, health care, forming and maintaining community, land tenure, food production, equity issues, et cetera. Fundamentally, it would involve a huge shift of mindset because if you can't understand and imagine an alternative to the current dysfunctionality of colonial society, then you can't transform it.

This doesn't mean, by the way, that everyone has to "become Indian." You keep your stories and identities but everyone's culture is modified to fit what is sustainable on this land. I think that is healthier and more desirable—in fact, it's more survivable than modifying culture to fit the colonial Canadian or U.S. mythologies. First Nations oral historians that I've heard recount numerous stories of how people, communities, and whole nations made cultural adaptations in line with the dictates of The Land and Our Relations in order to survive, thrive, and grow spiritually. The Anishinabe migrations, the Great Law of Peace—these are stories that talk of cultural adaptations to realities that existed in that time. Adaptation isn't anything to worry about. Mother Earth's laws are very kind and generous until you try to control Her or make Our Relations subservient to humans, the weakest of all species. That's when you get into trouble and fundamentally why the world is in such a mess today.



This understanding of indigeneity also doesn't suggest that old treaties and the spirit of those treaties made with the First Peoples do not need to be upheld by all parties until other types of agreements are fairly negotiated and a comprehensive restructuring of the global political economy takes place. However, I know that there is some concern that even if the treaties were upheld, particularly the modern ones, our ecosystems and the survival of our species would still be in jeopardy.

The bottom line is that we need to start looking at a different way of relating to land and resources if we, as a species, are to survive. To me that's the core of decolonization and, from what I understand, Indigenous Natural Laws prioritize right relationships with land, resources, and communities. Under these laws, ecosystems are valued for their intrinsic existence rather than what we can consume from them; sustainability is valued. And, while I don't want to idealize, Indigenous ways of building relationships across two-legged communities appear to me to value and respect peace like nothing we've seen under colonialism and imperialism. The feminine/female is also highly valued, as is cooperation and equity.

This is an unfortunately long-winded answer to the question. I suspect it just raises others but I can only offer so much in this format.

FF. You wrote an article with Bonita Lawrence (to add to the conversations between Indigenous peoples and Black people in Canada) about relationships to land and fostering solidarity relations. How do you think that article was taken up? What sort of conversations or spaces have been facilitated since the article was published?

ZA: While I've heard that some people disagree with the article to greater or lesser extents, no one has ever taken the time to write or discuss with me their specific concerns, so I don't know what they are. I'm not an academic and don't feel pressured to keep up with the latest publications on the issue. I have seen it referenced from time to time, in positive and useful ways.

I've been told that some noted African American scholars are concerned that the struggles of African-descended folks will lose their position of centrality in anti-racist work and that, for them, an analysis of North American colonialism needs to be centred around the enslavement and subjugation of African bodies—as does all social justice work—otherwise it's not valid.

I disagree about the centralization of African enslavement in social justice analyses and work, as my writings indicate, but completely understand the fear that drives this kind of thinking. In fact, I wrote about it in that paper. Anti-Black racism in Native American communities, particularly those that have expelled their African-descended or mixed-race members, is a reality. Though I think there's been some excellent work done at the community level by Native American and mixed-race activists on this issue in the last several years (if not longer) and my impression is that it's less intense than it once was. I could be very wrong about that, but since I don't function in those circles, I wouldn't know for sure.

Bottom line for me is that indigenization, as I've referred to it above, is a comprehensive struggle where land issues (to which we are all connected) are centralized. I have come to look at the ideal of solidarity as akin to the process of homeostasis in the body. We used to think the brain was directing what went on in the body, but new and emerging science tells us that there is more equity among organs and cells than previously believed. Our individual cells display a level of consciousness. They communicate with each other bio-chemically and through the nervous system, responding directly to each other's needs, often



bypassing the brain. The heart sends more directive signals to the brain than that organ sends back. All parts of the body, from the subatomic to the level of organs, cooperate in the interest of physical and mental wellbeing. The point is that right relationship among communities and individuals requires constant multi-way communication and adjustment. And the key adjustments are made in response to the land. Land is life.

So all of our stories are part of the larger narrative, for better or worse. Struggling to centralize our community's narrative over others just polarizes. This may sound like it contradicts what I say above, but the difference is that I advocate centralizing your story for you, not for everyone. To dictate that your story has to be central to everyone's is kind of... hmm, what's the word... colonial? It's like the difference between saying "your story is interesting but mine matters most," rather than saying "my story is most important to me, yours is most important to you but all stories matter and we can benefit from sharing those stories to come to a deeper understanding of each other as we work together to co-create a better world."

If we don't strive for right relationship with each other and the land that sustains us, we're just engaged in a power struggle. And that never ends well.

In terms of spaces, I've been part of efforts to create opportunities for the sharing of stories across communities and building relationships in the interest of sustainable living. My writings, fiction and non-fiction, certainly deal with this. I know that there are many artistic projects doing the same. Space doesn't permit me to get into specifics but I'm excited about the work going on and how it will impact the future. They're mostly small, off-the-grid projects, many of which are not known to "activists," but they are modeling the change we seek.

Generally, the vast majority of people who have contacted me about the essay I wrote with Bonita are very supportive and often thank me for co-writing it. I know it can't be the final word on the issue, but nothing ever should be. Relationships across communities are dynamic and as changeable as everything else in nature. So there will always be a need for discussion, analysis, and new ideas. I'm honoured to have been able to contribute to the ongoing discussion.

FF: Would you like to share any critiques on how Indigenous solidarity work is done by people of colour in movement-based activism?

ZA: I haven't been an active activist for some time due to family issues, my need to pay rent, and my own spiritual transformation, which has led me to prioritize work that isn't always recognized as activism. Consequently, I may not be on top of what's going on anymore, though I read a lot and participate in online activist networks. I get the sense that, in some ways, a lot has changed for some activists and they are working at building relationships with Indigenous communities in order to find ways of decolonizing together. For other activists, that is less true and they lack a cohesive analysis of how struggles, histories, and oppressions interact and fortify each other. In sum, I think there will always be tension in our relationships, but if we consider that to be healthy and to be a catalyst for working to keep the peace, then it's all good.

FF: How (or does) coalition-building help with the work of healing from pain passed down (and still presently emanating) from colonialism and racialization? We ask this question in relation to Indigenous peoples and other people of colour.

ZA: It doesn't always provide healing, as the above discussion suggests. That being said, I'm not sure that the way activists have gone about coalition-building in the past is appropriate or effective in these times. At the same time, I celebrate efforts around the tar sands, pipelines,



mining, et cetera which involve complex relationships across borders (geographic and otherwise) and have many clear victories to celebrate. To be perfectly honest, I'm a huge believer in storytelling and story-sharing. I think that quote from Louis Riel, "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back," pretty much says it all for me.

Changing the narrative is crucial to changing our relationships. Artists are key in changing the narrative. Some of the best activists I know are artists, particularly storytellers. They speak the language of the heart and, to reference emerging science again (though I could just as easily reference many Elders I know), emotions play a huge role in how we think. The human brain cannot make a decision, hold an opinion, or construct a rational argument without being informed by feelings. Feeling-informed thoughts impact action—for better or worse.

My personal experience with coalition-building is that it is most effective over the short term for accomplishing specific, focused goals. That's great. But decolonization/indigenization is not a short-term or a focused endeavor. It's a huge shift in consciousness that will inform new ways of living on this planet. Coalition-building will have a role to play but the pivotal roles will be around land-informed community building.

Even more pivotal will be cosmic, spiritual, and Earth-based forces that are acting upon us now, raising our level of consciousness. But I don't think this is the place for a discussion on that.

Back to the question around healing—we have to think of the concept as a process and not a static outcome. Furthermore, healing doesn't happen in isolation. We heal and grow in relationships. We know ourselves only in relationship. So if establishing and maintaining right relationship across communities (including the non-human ones) is the goal, then the process takes care of itself.

FF: What are you working on now? What can we look forward to reading or seeing?

ZA: Thanks for asking. I penned and acted in a sci-fi short that should be out soon. My fiction and non-fiction books are available for sale and there are tonnes of free resources on my site—many discussing these issues. I'm currently facilitating professional development trainings for community organizations as well as self- and collective-empowerment workshops for activists, artists, students, et cetera. Finally, I blog twice a month for Muskrat Magazine. In the meantime, I continue to do research on the implications of emerging science for decolonization/indigenization and there will be more publications coming. For more information on my activities, visit swallowsongs.com.

ZAINAB AMADAHY is an author, researcher, and educator. Among her publications is *Wielding the Force: The Science of Social Justice*, which explores how emerging science has relevance for spiritual development, social justice, and community organizing. Zainab is a frequent contributor to *Muskrat Magazine*. She has also worked for a variety of community organizations in the areas of Aboriginal services, Indigenous knowledge reclamation, women's services, immigrant settlement, and community arts. Zainab has written extensively on questions of solidarity and decolonization of Turtle Island. In 2008, she co-authored an important and widely read book chapter, "Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada: Settlers or Allies?" with Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence.