

Igniting the Fire: A Path to Miskasowin

Kelly Baptiste

University of Saskatchewan

In the age of reconciliation, research in Indigenous education and best practices have been keenly focused on what it means to decolonize. Generally, when Indigenous people say decolonize, we refer to shedding the colonial ways to which we have become accustomed. However, this continues to centre colonization in our stories. The truth is, Indigenous scholars are getting tired of “decolonizing” and are rather looking to centre our Indigeneity as we authentically return to ourselves, working to learn and improve the education system. My personal journey as a Cree woman and educator focuses on miskasowin, a Nehiyaw word that means to go to the center of yourself to find your own belonging. This journey of returning to self is deeply mirrored in the book *Inherit My Heaven: Kalaallit Gender Relations* by Karla Jessen Williamson (2011), an Inuk woman who experienced the process of colonization firsthand. In her book, Jessen Williamson outlines her own process of miskasowin as she abandons the colonial ontologies she was indoctrinated into and returns to her traditional Inuk roots and ways of being. Moving beyond decolonization and igniting the fire within, Jessen Williamson’s story is a model to all Indigenous scholars who seek to return to their traditional roots as they navigate the world of education and academia.

It is with both admiration and critical reflection that I take on the task of reviewing the work of an academically accomplished Indigenous

woman. Works such as these that play pivotal roles in reshaping the discourse surrounding decolonization, pedagogy, Indigenous research, and reclamation of self. This book review seeks to offer critical insights into how Jessen Williamson's narrative and methodologies can inform our practices as Indigenous scholars and educators.

I am writing this book review on Treaty 6 territory, the traditional meeting place and home of the Indigenous peoples, including the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Stoney, and the Métis. I acknowledge that these beautiful lands offer bountiful nourishment in many ways. These lands have offered many gifts to me and others who inhabit the area. I acknowledge that this land, which was home to and sustained generations before me, has continued to balance me in many ways and continues to ground me through my journey in this life. I acknowledge that this land has helped nourish my body physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. I acknowledge that these lands have offered sustenance to my ancestors who came before me and will continue to give to my children and future generations who will come after me. Kinanâkamôn, thank you, hiy hiy.

Jessen Williamson, an Inuk woman from Maniitsoq, Greenland, was immersed in colonial Danish society from an early age. Learning to speak and write the colonial language fluently, Williamson had to learn to navigate the complexities of the colonial systems to succeed. A gifted academic, Jessen Williamson attended school both in her hometown as well as in Denmark, successfully completing both undergraduate and graduate work. Moving into a PhD program, Jessen Williamson chose to return to her homeland to conduct her new research on gender relations. This research would culminate in the creation of her book, *Inherit My Heaven: Kalaallit Gender Relations* (2011).

By focusing on the unique perspective on gender relations in the circumpolar arctic, Jessen Williamson offers her readers a glimpse into her life in her home community of Maniitsoq, Greenland. She undertakes

the exploration of the concept of gender, both from traditional Inuk and contemporary perspectives. Her narrative explores life in Greenland prior to Danish colonization and identifies the gradual encroachment of colonizers on the traditional way of life and land. Jessen Williamson offers vast imagery that allows the reader to create a mental picture of what Greenland looks like and gives the reader the opportunity to appreciate the landscape in their own way. Central to Jessen Williamson's work is the egalitarian framework, which provides a unique insight into Inuk people as individuals rather than adhering to gender categorization. Through her research, Jessen Williamson identifies a cultural shift that occurred as society transitioned from a pre-colonial to a colonial state.

Through her work, Jessen Williamson offers readers the Indigenous way of thinking that goes against linear colonial agendas. Jessen Williamson has noted that in the Western way of thinking, there is an inequality between men and women. She allows her readers to shift from a positivist mindset and allows them to experience *timikkut*, *tarnikkut* and *anersaakkullu* which is a framework for Indigenous scholars and educators who seek to learn from their communities, within Indigenous-run schools, and to break free from the colonial perspectives in which they were raised. Despite her academic journey through a colonized system, Jessen Williamson acknowledges that her research in her home community cannot be conducted through the Western, Eurocentric framework. Her research embodies *miskasowin* as she returns to herself and her traditional roots to learn from the members of her home community. The use of traditional relational approaches allows Jessen Williamson to sit down and have conversations with the participants making the conversations more informal and allowing participants to feel more comfortable in sharing.

In true Indigenous methodology fashion, Jessen Williamson allows her participants to overlook the data that they submitted before

publication. Jessen Williamson's traditional way of thinking and working within her community is shown to her readers by offering the Indigenous way of thinking that goes against linear colonial agendas. It is important to note that Jessen Williamson's focus is not on the decolonization of systems at play; instead, she directs her research through a dedication to return to traditional ways, guided by her Inuk framework. In moving away from the term "decolonization" and toward miskasowin, her traditional roots, Jessen Williamson does ground-breaking work toward reclamation of her Inuk heritage as she examines gender relations. A woman of various intersectionalities, Jessen Williamson seamlessly integrates her conscious adherence to her framework throughout her work.

Inherit My Heaven: Kalaallit Gender Relations offers so much to Indigenous scholars, teachers, and researchers working within Indigenous communities. This book is a critical examination of Inuk culture in light of a colonial framework but is also a tale of one's intentional journey back to cultural roots. Jessen-Williamson offers readers fresh insight into the contrast between traditional and contemporary epistemologies and provides a vital framework of how a return to your roots is the best framework by which to learn. Simultaneously, her approach and methodologies require one to deeply examine our approaches to cultural reclamation in the light of the "decolonization" era.

Considering works of similar content, written by Indigenous female scholars, I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Indigenous studies, gender relations, and a return to traditional roots, often referred to as "decolonization". Karla Jessen Williamson's work is an accessible read with thorough research that provides a vital contribution to the ongoing discourse on Indigenous identity and reclamation. Her work challenges our understanding of contemporary approaches to gender and offers valuable insights into ways in which traditional approaches can be incorporated into ways of being. Further, she offers insight into the Inuk culture, allowing

the reader to understand the diversity of Indigenous cultures and their intricate relationships with the world. *Inherit My Heaven* is a valuable addition to the literature, offering a powerful voice in the ongoing journey of self-discovery and cultural reclamation.

Reference

Jessen Williamson, K. (2011) *Inherit My Heaven: Kalaallit Gender Relations*.
Department of Education, Church, Culture and Gender Equality.