

## Present-Tense Indigenous Herbalism

Joshua Dunn

I had been looking forward to this herbal medicine class for weeks, but almost as soon as it started, the teacher said something that threw me for a loop. Introducing herself, she said she lived in “a city that was built where the Ute people used to live.”

I thought of my Ute friend who lives in that city. *Maybe it was a mistake*, I told myself and brought my attention back to the class.

We began discussing medicinal plants. She described how, a long time ago, the Cree people used to make medicine from a particular plant.

I thought back to six summers ago when I was following the powwow trail across Saskatchewan and Alberta. A Cree friend in Edmonton introduced me to that particular plant. I remembered the following winter, when another Cree friend crossed the border with that same medicine, carefully packaged in paper towels, as a gift when she visited me. I thought of the summer before the pandemic, harvesting this medicine

outside my teacher’s parents’ home on a Cree reserve in northern Manitoba, sending half to an elder out west who’d requested it. *Maybe she just doesn’t know that they still work with it?* I wondered.

When I brought my mind back to the class, she discussed a plant that she harvested every fall in the mountains near her home. When she described how the Southern Paiute once worked with this medicine, I couldn’t tell if she thought the Southern Paiute Nation no longer existed or just that they’d lost their relationship with their medicines. In either case, I knew firsthand that this wasn’t true.

“This plant is kind of rare,” she explained, “but, where I live, there aren’t many of us who still harvest it. So I can get enough each year to sustain my business.”

I imagined this teacher out harvesting. I wondered if she considered leaving enough behind for Indigenous harvesters or if she thought that she and a few other non-Indigenous herbalists



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were the only people harvesting this medicine, I recalled a story a California Indian friend once told me of arriving at a stand of medicinal plants that her family had been tending for at least 500 years, only to find that someone had picked almost every plant. I thought of medicine-grinding stones laying out in the woods, visited and used annually by her people, and how they sometimes disappear into the antique trade because the newcomers don't understand that they belong to somebody – that the Indians who work with them are still here.

As the teacher continued, I noticed that she presented herself as a steward of Indigenous herbal traditions that she believed were no longer being practiced by the Indigenous peoples to whom they belong. She seemed to think that it was up to people like her to carry

on these ways. Her belief that Indigenous peoples were no longer harvesting from the land where she lived meant that she was welcome to help herself to whatever she wanted without considering their needs. These false notions are tightly tied to 19th-century ideas of Manifest Destiny - that this land, and all within it, are the rightful inheritance of European settlers.

After class, I talked to three other Indigenous herbalists about my experience. We all agreed there wasn't much point in reaching out to the teacher. Too often, when we've tried to bring up issues like this in the past, people have responded

defensively, started to cry, or scrambled to justify their actions - regardless of how gently they were informed that they had caused harm. So instead of trying to engage with that teacher, I am inviting other herbalists, especially teachers of plant medicine, to consider this issue.

To state the obvious: centuries of settler-colonialism and genocide got us to the point where Indigenous peoples are often presumed dead.

The laws of the occupying colonial forces have harshly punished people who practice Indigenous medicine, forced our children to assimilate in boarding schools, and disconnected many people from their traditions of working with plants. However, non-Indigenous people often don't hear about the incredible resilience

within Indigenous communities and the cultural resurgence in recent decades.

As an Indigenous community herbalist and perpetual student, I often hear non-Indigenous teachers talk about Indigenous traditional uses of our medicine plants in the past tense.

“The Kiowa Tribe believed an infusion from this plant would treat a dry cough.”

“The Cree people chewed on these roots as a sore throat remedy.”

Some of these teachers don't seem to know that Indigenous peoples still exist. Others know we exist but don't seem aware that many of us still have relationships with our traditional medicine plants and are members of the various herbalist communities.

When teachers refer to Indigenous peoples and our plant relationships in the past tense, it can affect Indigenous students' ability to learn. At a minimum, it is distracting. At worst, students can feel like their culture, experience, and even existence are being erased. This can make a classroom feel so inhospitable to an Indigenous student that they cannot learn. In the experience I described above, the teacher's repeated erasure of Indigenous peoples and plant relationships was so distracting that I could not learn anything from the class.

For Indigenous clients seeking treatment, using language that portrays Indigenous communities or our relationships with plants as a thing of the past can also be harmful. Some Indigenous clients may be grieving the loss of traditional knowledge within their community or family lineage that has led them to seek the care of a non-Indigenous practitioner. Using this language can be salt in that wound. This is doubly so when non-Indigenous practitioners portray themselves as the sole keepers of our communities' traditional plant knowledge and appropriate aspects of our cultures. This isn't just about grammar; sometimes, the way we use language can prevent people from accessing care.

I realize that I probably have a much greater awareness of Indigenous herbalists and plant knowledge keepers than the average non-Indigenous person. If I weren't part of my particular web of relationships and communities, I probably wouldn't know that so many communities have continued working with their traditional plant medicines and even experienced a resurgence in recent years.

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Without this exposure, it would be easy for me to buy into a dominant settler-colonial narrative that Indigenous peoples, or our relationships with plants, no longer exists and to refer to us in the past tense.

I also understand teachers' concerns about accuracy. "If I don't have those relationships and connections, how can I be sure that it's

accurate to refer to a particular Indigenous Nation's plant use in the present tense?" My suggestion is to use present-tense language anyway, even if you aren't sure if it's accurate. It's less potentially damaging to make a mistake in the direction of presuming these relationships are alive than to mistakenly presume they're dead.

Any teacher who wants to be respectful and inclusive of Indigenous peoples should use present-tense language when

referring to Indigenous peoples. Talk about us in the present tense, as if we still live among you - because we probably do. When describing how Indigenous communities traditionally work with medicinal plants, describe those uses in the present tense - because we probably still work with them.

Even if you are reasonably certain that a particular community no longer works with a particular plant in a particular way, I would still encourage you to use present-tense language. Words have power. Using present-tense language creates space for the possibility of a future in which these relationships between Indigenous people and plants are once again thriving.

In recent years, I have seen an incredible cultural resurgence within Indigenous communities. So many Indigenous parents are raising their children with close ties to the land. These children are growing up knowing their cultures, hearing their songs, and going to ceremony. Young people are speaking their Indigenous languages and learning their traditional arts and plant medicines. When I hear these children speak, the way they understand the world around them reminds me of the Elders. Our Indigenous cultures and bodies of knowledge aren't fading away or being lost; they are coming back stronger with each generation.

As part of this cultural resurgence, there is a new generation of up-and-coming Indigenous herbalists currently in training. In addition to being part of their Indigenous cultures, they also belong to the herbalist communities. I invite all herbalists and herbal medicine teachers to support Indigenous resurgences by ensuring that we use language that makes Indigenous herbalists feel welcome. 🌿