

Disrupting the Settler Colonial University: Decolonial Praxis and Placed-Based Education in the Okanagan Valley (British Columbia)

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how decolonial Placed-Based Education (PBE) can disrupt a settler colonial academic status quo. We begin by situating our analysis in the unceded *Syilx* Territories of the Okanagan Valley (British Columbia, Canada) and proceed by illustrating how both taken-for-granted colonial epistemologies and banal exnominations of white supremacy remain orthodox within mainstream Canadian higher education. We next define “decolonial praxis” by drawing from insights offered by critical feminist, anti-racist, and Indigenous scholars and community organizers before moving into a summary of how we embraced theories and strategies of decolonization coupled with Place-Based Education in an introductory Gender and Women’s Studies course. We conclude with our response to the ongoing exclusions being reproduced by neoliberal universities that result from the primacy they grant to Western knowledges and rationales. The piece reveals how *decolonial* place-based methods can be leveraged against settler colonial institutions, discourses, and logics to *unsettle* their claims to legitimacy, land, and authority over learning.

Keywords: decolonization; settler colonialism; white supremacy; critical pedagogy; Place-Based Education

Canada’s education system has forever been rooted in attempts to coerce Aboriginal people to assimilate to a white supremacist status quo. Historically, these colonizing processes saw the Canadian government apprehend Aboriginal children and force them into residential schools to live in constant fear of physical, psychological, and emotional punishment, not to mention experimentation (Smith, Varcoe and Edwards 2005). The avowed purpose of this compulsory internment, branded “education” by white settler administrators, was to “kill the Indian in the child” (Mosby 2013). The genocidal shocks perpetrated by Canada’s residential school system, which remained in operation until 1996, were committed to instill shame, self-hatred, and a sense of inferiority within Aboriginal children. This violence, as well as the widespread state

repression of Indigenous people, penetrates to this day.¹ The Canadian government has only recently acknowledged, disingenuously, its abusive role in committing the atrocities that occurred in residential schools (Coulthard 2014; James 2008). Indeed, from its outset, the education system in Canada has always posed a threat to Aboriginal people, whether it be the ascendancy it affords to white settler histories, its attempted erasure of Indigenous worldviews, or the blunt force trauma it inflicted upon Indigenous children.

Contemporary higher education in Canada is not immune to these intrinsic and indelible penchants, which now primarily unfold via the peripheralization of Indigenous epistemologies as well as through quotidian exnominations and unwitting reassertions of white supremacy. Evidence of this can be found in state universities where administrations, faculties, curricula, research methods, metrics, algorithms, building names, eponymous awards, languages spoken (e.g. English and French, Canada's "official" languages), and knowledge production in general (e.g. author names, reading lists, syllabi, citations etc.) remain predominantly "white" (McKittrick 2017). Notably, efforts to allay the embedded nature of white supremacy in settler state-sanctioned higher education have since emerged from the ranks of radical/feminist geographers, Indigenous scholars, critical race theorists, and practitioners of critical pedagogy (Cohen 2010; Hay 2001; Hunt and Holmes 2015; Kobayashi 2006; Mahtani 2014; Pulido 2002). Despite this, immaterial liberal notions of decolonization have had little transformative influence in terms of prompting university officials and faculty members to earnestly struggle *for/with* Indigenous communities (on their terms) towards producing more tangible equity and institutional representation.

The incompetence exhibited by Canadian universities regarding their ineffectual efforts in advancing social justice is partially a result of the role that well-intentioned professors, administrators, and even self-ordained scholar-activists have in "metaphorizing" decolonization in lieu of engaging in practical and pragmatic efforts that concretely promote Indigenous sovereignty, land rights, and self-determination (Tuck and Yang 2012). In light of such toxic liberalism, any discussion of Canada's education system must take into account the country's enduring legacy of settler colonialism, white supremacy, prejudicial nationalism, land dispossession, and territorial occupation, as well as the impotence its universities display in failing to foster healthy, fair, and safe socio-cultural relations and politico-economic conditions. It is with these ongoing colonial oppressions in mind that our article advances, with the aim being twofold: 1) To highlight the transformative capabilities that decolonial praxis and place-based methods have when foregrounded in teaching and learning; and 2) To expand upon the already rich yet still nascent critical discussions being initiated by *Capitalism Nature Socialism* in regard to amplifying Indigenous perspectives, with the

¹ State repression Indigenous communities face in Canada is meted out in numerous interlocking ways. The fact that settler colonial practices of domination and logics of elimination are not a thing of the past is demonstrated through Aboriginal peoples' experiences of intergenerational trauma, land confiscation, the reserve system, RCMP "starlight tours," state dismissals of missing, murdered, and trafficked Aboriginal women, and the regulation of Indigenous identities (e.g. The Indian Act, Bill C31, enfranchisement policies, etc.), to name a few.

explicit hope of “building mutually nurturing and supportive relations in the struggle for worldwide decolonization” (Engel-Di Mauro 2013, 1). We attempt to accomplish these goals by providing an overview of the dynamics and complexities we experienced when employing *decolonial* Place-Based Education (PBE) in an introductory Gender and Women’s Studies course taught in the unceded *Syilx* Territories of Turtle Island.

From the outset we consider it imperative to explicitly name and expose white supremacy, land dispossession, and ongoing settler colonialism as key concepts and processes that must be grappled with in any Canadian/white settler classroom.² Accordingly, it is our firm conviction, à la Fanon (1961), that all (neo)colonial institutions, logics, and social relations be dismantled, abandoned, and abolished—and that land, water, respect, recognition, authority, territory, and sovereignty be returned to the Indigenous communities from which they were stolen, coerced, manipulated, and ripped via colonizer terror and deceit. Given that we, the authors (and our collaborators on the course), knew we would in no way achieve these ends with a university course, the question of: “*What, then, is our response?*” guided our discernment and decisions for the class we developed. The relational politics and intentional efforts we put forward, which are addressed in the sections to come, were thereby our (limited and imperfect) response to the seemingly impossible circumstances we and many others were (and still are) facing.³ We make no claims of decolonizing minds, a classroom, a white settler institution, or anything else for that matter, but aim to provide an account of how to mindfully organize a classroom/course/syllabus against a white settler state institution with the ambition of unsettling a colonial situation. Hence, our work was simply one way of trying to reciprocally withstand the suffering of settler colonialism whilst simultaneously attempting to subvert its alienating logics, disrupt its banal impositions, and reveal its inequitable privilegings via the guidance and advice of Aboriginal community members themselves.

The Okanagan Valley: Unceded *Syilx* Territories

Contemporary Settings

Situated in the picturesque western Canadian province of British Columbia, the Okanagan Valley, blanketed by expansive and undulating evergreen-forested mountains, pristine glacial lakes, and rustling rivers, spans southward from the city of Vernon (BC) some 200 kilometers, where it transitions into a sagebrush-speckled,

2 For a more fulsome engagement with these terms see Pulido’s (2015) “White Supremacy vs White Privilege in Environmental Racism Research,” Wolfe’s (2016) *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*, Moreton-Robinson’s (2015) *The White Possessive*, Bond and Inwood’s (2016) “Beyond White Privilege,” and Byrd’s (2011) *Transit of Empire*, to name a few.

3 The degree of “impossible circumstances” (e.g. oppression, alienation, xenophobia, etc.) experienced by people living in what is now called Canada varies in magnitude and duration, and is mediated by a spectrum of differing social axes of identification/subject positions. We are not suggesting that everyone faces the same degree of repression under settler colonialism, given that many are privileged and/or subjugated in contrasting, sometimes simultaneous, ways.

semi-arid desert that dips down below the US-Canadian border into Washington state. Amidst its seemingly fertile agricultural landscape lays a patterned mélange of meticulously manicured orchards, vineyards, wineries, golf courses, and ski resorts. Due to its recreation-friendly climate, sunny weather, and scenic vistas the region has become an “ecotopian” tourist magnet and retirement destination that is marketed as a family-friendly playground for the polite, posh, and well-to-do (Aguilar, Tomic, and Trumper 2005). Underpinning its charming veneer, however, is the fact that the Okanagan Valley remains a settler colonial geography marred by the enclosure and quarantining of Aboriginal people, hyper-exploitation of a racialized (disposable) migrant labour force, and shortsighted overconsumption of water/nature. Maiming the region more surreptitiously are Eurocentric models of governance that cater to a white settler-citizen upper class.

The settler narrative currently whitewashing the Okanagan Valley is one that romanticizes pioneer occupation and cultural genocide, particularly through how it conveniently fails to account for the societal alienation and ecological devastation that settler colonialism has wrought. Myriad stories of the historical path that the valley has followed casts it as *terra nullius* (“land belonging to no one”) prior to European contact, effectively rendering white settler expropriations of First Nations territories innocuous, apolitical, and prosaic (Perry 2001, 7). And despite the Okanagan being branded as a safe, sustainable, and trendy site of winter skiing and summer fun, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss continue to be exacerbated at alarming rates throughout the region (Wagner 2008). This stems from a host of settler indiscretions and reckless entitlements, ranging from decades of grossly mismanaged fire suppression and timber removal, to more recent intensifications in residential sprawl and ongoing expansions to the region’s manufacturing, service, and agricultural industries.

Nature in the valley has, with impunity, been co-opted into a monetized resource, parceled off as private property, and is being sold to the highest bidder all in the name of economic growth, development, and entrepreneurship. The impositions of neoliberal logic onto the stolen territories of the *Syilx* people have resulted in the commodification of, and extractivist shocks to, Indigenous lands and cultures. The effects are borne out in the form of an urban to peri-urban, dendritic unfurling of billboards, commercial strip malls, big box department stores, densely packed car dealerships, elitist gated communities, bourgeois yuppie restaurants, scenist hipster pubs, pulsating dance clubs, and heavily frequented “ripper” bars (strip clubs). Rural areas have also been physically rearranged and socially reordered. This can be seen across the entire Okanagan countryside, which has been converted into a carceral plantation-archipelago where precarious racialized (“foreign”) migrant workers from Central American and the Caribbean toil endlessly, often unnoticeably, in fields and under the sun where they are subjected to the punitive surveillance of landowning bosses and occasional viewings by classist packs of carbon-fiber-bike-mounted cyclists. The rural is also where federally repressed and provincially neglected, yet oft-culturally vibrant, Aboriginal reserves remain interspersed and anchored in survival. Indeed, it is

undeniable that settler colonial assertions of power over the Okanagan Valley's history, as well as geography, remain alive and well.⁴

Historical Trajectories

During the initial “settlement” of the Okanagan in the mid-1800s, European occupiers engaged Indigenous *Syilx* peoples by denying them basic human needs/rights, restricting access to key resources, and implementing strategies of confinement against them (Harris 2002). These processes allowed white settlers to appropriate land that was central to their livestock and agricultural operations, which also coincided with policies refuting and denying Aboriginal title on behalf of the newly formed Colony of British Columbia. Historical settler economies of accumulation by dispossession in the Okanagan Valley were thereby racially motivated, as well as distinctively gendered, as they were rooted in a supremacist mindset that designated white men as the only people who were deserving of the “exclusive right to use land” (Thomson 1985).

Consequently, the reserves that Indigenous communities were forcibly corralled into were systematically diminished in size through state coercions and legal manipulations, resulting in the *Syilx* peoples being prevented from claiming ancestral territories, carrying out their roles as “stewards of the land,” and maintaining their traditional planting/harvesting practices (Thomson 1985, 122). These discriminatory processes extended to other racialized arrivant groups as well, including Chinese migrant workers who were coming to British Columbia as early as the 1850s, Japanese people who were arriving in the 1870s, and later to South Asian populations who began reaching the province near the turn of the century (Barman 2013). The common thread tying these peripheralized histories together is a shared experience of colonial exclusion, discipline, and control.

By the 1880s, the Okanagan was being marketed by European land developers to wealthy British settlers as “the land of fruit and sunshine” (Wagner 2008, 26). Brochures of the time boasted about the pleasant climate, nostalgic familiarity, and ever-decreasing/non-threatening Aboriginal population (Perry 2001). According to Wagner (2008, 30), the commoditization of the Okanagan Valley relied on ethnocentric aesthetics that “provided settlers with a ready-made European perspective, but also with a charter for colonization and ecological transformation.” These modifications to the cultural and racial landscape of the Okanagan Valley also resulted in restructurings of the physical environment. Newly arriving settlers sought to reassemble the entire region, both discursively and materially, so that it emulated that of their British upbringings. In this way, white settlers seized and (re)defined the local geography through their Eurocentric imaginations, simply so they could comfortably stay “firmly entrenched within a cultural diasporic bubble”—a reality that attempts to dominate to this day (Barman 2003).

4 We suggest the ways in which settler colonial socio-spatial relations are practiced/sustained in the Okanagan Valley, though uniquely situated, are not dissimilar from those operating in other places across “Canada,” as well as contrasting white settler societies.

The historical trajectory of settler colonial-capitalism in the Okanagan has created a contemporary moment in which the region has been refashioned into a symbolic “white space” that ostensibly embraces everyone from retiree to recreation-seeker, to the wholesome family-oriented and ambitiously business-minded (Aguiar, Tomic, and Trumper 2005, 137). Critical voices note that the Okanagan, in addition to maintaining a tediously groomed neoliberal facade, also remains unapologetic for its reputation as “a conservative place intolerant of difference ... in the middle of an area widely regarded as both the ‘bible belt’ and fertile ground for the spread of white supremacist ideology” (Aguiar, Tomic, and Trumper 2005). Whatever the discrepancy is between what the Okanagan purports to be, compared to what it actually is, remains subject to interpretation. What cannot be disputed about the valley, however, is that despite the specter of settler colonial violence and white supremacy that continues to haunt it, Indigenous communities have survived.

Indigenous Resilience(s)

Even though the impacts of settler colonialism reverberate across the Okanagan Valley, Aboriginal community members in the region continue working tirelessly to advance the project of decolonization. The En’owkin Centre in Penticton, established in 1979 by bands from the Okanagan Nation, has been a nucleus of decolonial praxis for nearly 30 years. Indigenous *Syilx* scholar Jeanette Armstrong, Executive Director, describes the objectives of the centre as a place “to record, perpetuate, and promote ‘Native’ in the cultural sense, in education, and in our lives and our communities” (Lutz 1991). In aspiring to these ends, the En’owkin Centre hosts Theytus Books Limited (the first publishing house in Canada that is owned/operated by First Nations people), the South Okanagan Restorative Justice Program, the ULLUS⁵ Collective (comprised of Indigenous artists), and ECommunitY Place, which is described as a “living classroom” providing land-based learning opportunities. Moreover, the En’owkin Centre offers culturally-focused, territorially-situated programs in applied Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK); Indigenous arts/culture/customs; early childhood education; and even language survival (through its Okanagan Language [*Nsyilxcn*] and Culture Certification).

Indigenous cultural resurgence also extends beyond the En’owkin Centre into several Aboriginal communities throughout the Okanagan. To promote the preservation and revitalization of the *Syilx* language, *Nsyilxcn*, the *Syilx* Language House offers an immersion program of intensive *Nsyilxcn* lessons. Furthermore, the Okanagan Nation Alliance “works collectively to advance and assert Okanagan Nation’s Title and Rights over the Okanagan Nation Territory” (ONA website), operating their own departments of Business, Administration, Fisheries and Aquatics, Natural Resources, and Wellness. Additionally, various other non-profit organizations such as the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society and Métis Community Services Society of British Columbia work to not only serve the needs of the local Aboriginal population, but also to engage in various decolonial efforts through community survival events, healing circles, support programs, and various public gatherings (e.g. the Annual Missing and

⁵ From *Syilx*, meaning: “A gathering of people for a common purpose.”

Murdered Indigenous Women's Vigil, the Sisters In Spirit Walk, annual Powwows, National Aboriginal Day, etc.). Additionally, many of these organizations have worked collaboratively with local school districts, colleges, and universities to engage educators, administrators, and students in various forms of Indigenous education, Aboriginal storytelling, and consciousness-raising.

It was in the spirit of these local efforts in decolonization that we set about charting our course, "Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Power: Everyday Life," towards a similar destination.⁶ As our aim with the class was to anchor learning experiences within local communities, as well as disrupt both settler colonial hegemony and the market-centric logics of neoliberal education, our teaching methods were openly guided by theories of decolonization, intersectional feminism, and ecosocialism. In this respect, we⁷ (Levi, a white settler/foreign national, part-time, sessional instructor on a temporary work permit, and Gabrielle, a Métis mother and graduate student with a part-time teaching assistantship) committed to pedagogical practices that iteratively promoted Indigenous theories, perspectives, and voices in all aspects of the course.

Decolonial Praxis and Place Based Education (PBE)

Defining "Decolonial Praxis"

We define "decolonial praxis" as the dynamic processes, reflexive methods, and interdependent practices of unsettling the structural apparatuses, systemic mechanisms, and everyday (yet power-laden) routines that reassert colonial social relations. In discussing decolonial praxis in the context of the Canadian state, we follow Hunt and Holmes' (2015) views on decolonization. Hunt and Holmes (157) note that decolonization needs to be "inherently connected to the lands, lives, histories, and futures of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island." We are also of the conviction, like many critical scholars, that it must be situated and relational, as well as discursively and materially practiced across-and-within varying spaces, places, times, temporalities, and geographies (Sium, Desai, and Ritskes 2012; Smith 1999). We also draw from Walia (2012), who suggests that those committed to decolonization:

...must be able to position themselves as active and integral participants in a decolonization movement for political liberation, social transformation, renewed cultural kinships, and the development of an economic system that serves rather than threatens our collective life on this planet. Decolonization is as much a process as a goal. It requires a profound recentering on Indigenous worldviews.

6 An introductory gender studies course with an enrolment of approximately 100 undergraduates. We offer our gratitude to Ilya Parkins for treating us (a grad student and a sessional) as equals, and for supporting our approach.

7 There is neither a pure place nor perfect form of resistance, decolonizing education, or solidarity, hence, it is likely we "stumbled" along the way and unintentionally reproduced those things which we are antagonistic towards. To wrestle with these complexities, at least one of the instructors held debriefing/reflection sessions at the beginning of classes with students, and met weekly, generally on Friday evenings over supper, with the Education Coordinator from KFS, Ronni, to discuss and reflect upon content, process, assignments, methods, and actions.

It was with a sentiment of continually foregrounding Indigenous ontologies and engaging in a conscientious *process* of accountability, then, that we made the decision to integrate decolonial praxis into our course. In stating this we acknowledge the incongruous nature of the assertion we are making in that, for all intents and purposes, signing on to work at a state university in Canada legitimizes the authority of a settler colonial government itself. Despite our aversive complicity, which we posit is largely the product of having to navigate colonial social conditions well beyond our respective personal control, we did want to ensure that the perspectives and presence of Indigenous people were promoted and amplified.

We also aspired to make certain our undertakings of decolonial, place-based praxis did not occur in isolation or disingenuous/tokenizing fashion, so we advanced with a cautious and concerted effort towards guaranteeing that Indigenous consultation and anti-colonial scholarship permeated the syllabus, lectures, and discussions. In addition, throughout the term we consistently stressed the effects that the Canadian Government's historical-ongoing practices of land dispossession have had on Aboriginal people and the environment, as well as the fact that the local geography we were residing in was-and-remains the unceded *Syilx* Territories of the Okanagan Nation. And while it is our conviction that colonial borders be wholly abolished, that autonomous education systems built by-and-for Indigenous communities be actualized, and that land be rightfully returned to the Aboriginal people from whom it was stolen, we realized, and were transparent in mentioning to students, that such goals would not be the result of a semester-long introductory course on race, class, gender, sexuality and power. Our effort in respect to decolonization and PBE, then, was much more modest. Teaching the course afforded us the opportunity to engage in one small process of decolonial praxis; one that stressed an enduring commitment to a politics of both recognition and accountability, and one that contested the machinations and material practices of white settler supremacy, as well as the repressive products of the Canadian state's racist and exclusionary discourses.

Constructing Place-Based Education

In teasing out the method of decolonial praxis we envisioned, we knew mindful attention to the institutionalized racism that Aboriginal people (and other people of colour) face within higher education was requisite (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012; Pulido 2002). Likewise, we realized that forefronting the deterritorializations that have occurred upon the lands where many universities are built was also a must (Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox, and Coulthard 2014). Therefore, as we developed our syllabus, we noted that promoting decolonial praxis would necessitate that Indigenous viewpoints, as well as people, be inside the classroom—and that they be invited via culturally safe protocols and offered respect.⁸ We also felt we needed to find ways to

⁸ It is not our contention that the occasional presence of Indigenous people in classrooms (which usually occurs at the behest of problematically well-intentioned and oft-oppressive professors and/or administrators) is radically transformational in the least. While these instances can be important/necessary, a far more cautious and revolutionary process/solution is needed, as such one-off events neither decolonize education nor substantively change the material conditions under which

foreground the Aboriginal histories, knowledges, practices, and *places* that existed within the region. We thereby maintained that we would, as Okanagan Nation scholar Jeanneatte Armstrong (2005, 13) has described, actively promote education in a way that took “a complex holistic view of interconnectedness that demands our responsibility to everything we are connected to.”

In adhering to these sentiments, we were guided by a commitment towards engaging with the local Indigenous community (primarily the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society) while also teaching students how to recognize, understand, and grapple with the uniquely situated and colonially-rooted interlocking oppressions (and privileges) that function in the Okanagan Valley. We stressed this throughout the course because we wanted to drive home the point that *place* matters, particularly in colonial geographies and white settler societies. Subsequently, the emphasis we put on place, and the relational assemblages that constitute and connect differing *places*, allowed us to consistently center Indigenous peoples’ rights to land, sovereignty, and self-determination. Discussing place also gave us the opportunity to examine dispossession, the local education system, the regional economy/ecologies, and the cultural politics of identity operating within the territories we found ourselves in. More succinctly, our pedagogy was place-based.

Place-Based Education (PBE) has been applied within multiple disciplines under a wide array of terms including “bioregional education,” “civic education,” “experiential learning,” “community-oriented education,” and “service-learning” (Gruenewald 2003; Smith 2007). Although this approach has recently become central within the disciplines of outdoor and ecological education, it is relevant within the context of teaching in settler colonial (e.g. Canadian) universities for a number of reasons. Not only does PBE focus on the spatial components of human experiences by focusing on local places, but the goals of PBE overlap considerably with many of those promoted amongst decolonial methods. For instance, Hatcher et al. (2009, 148) advocate for a holistic framework in which:

Self and community can be connected through a concentration of learning activities in communities outside the classroom. Self and Mother Earth can be connected by helping the learners re-establish themselves as part of nature rather than separate from it.

Similarly, a PBE approach encourages students to become conscientiously active co-creators of their communities as they learn about the multiple and interdependent factors that affect the social, environmental, political, and cultural assemblages comprising the *places* where they live. Moreover, place-centric instruction also overcomes the current teaching dilemmas of alienation, docility, and irrelevancy⁹ (i.e.,

Indigenous knowledge-holders share their perspectives. By this we mean that the “invitations” Indigenous Elders/knowledge-holders are offered by universities/faculty members sometimes constitute tokenization and often amount to a solicitation of free, or grossly devalued and under-compensated, labour.

9 While we use “irrelevancy” here, we acknowledge that mainstream education is completely relevant if using neoliberal logics and capitalist notions of production/growth (e.g. on-demand efficiency, 24-

byproducts of increasingly neoliberalizing university systems where learning is severed from the routines of daily life) by integrating students' presence into local socio-cultural and physical environments (Harrison and Greenfield 2011). In turn, PBE has successfully demonstrated that students learning about their own regional ecologies and social geographies experience an increasing sense of place-attachment, thereby motivating them to become more caring of, and invested in, their communities (Engel-Di Mauro and Carroll 2014). More readily, we sought to privilege place over (capitalist) time (i.e., speed, efficiency, growth, productivity).

In developing our decolonial approach, we remain aware of the criticisms that PBE has received in being labeled as non-replicable, anti-universalist, under-theorized, and overly problem-focused (Gruenewald 2005; McInerney, et al. 2011). We understand these critiques to be resultant from the neoliberal *modus operandi* of mainstream education that is dependent upon standardized high-stakes testing, competitive individualism, the clientelization/entrepreneurialization of students, and the wholesale corporatization of university life (Marks and Marston 2005). Thus, while PBE does not involve conventional marking schemes that result in statistical verifiability regarding "objective" evaluations, we contend that hierarchical ranking schemes and quantifiable measures of educational "achievement" are neither accurate nor appropriate, particularly with respect to ascertaining what it is that students are actually "learning" and retaining. And given PBE is sometimes taken to task for being problem-focused and provincial, this is precisely why we sought to utilize it as a decolonial teaching method—to address the *emplaced* problems occurring within the *local* community.

Applying Decolonial Place-Based Education

Situating Knowledge(s) and Place(s)

Our decolonial PBE methods took into account that the value of knowledge lies in its ability to be produced, applied, integrated, and remade in everyday life (Cohen 2010). We thus situated course content in relation to Indigenous *places* as much as possible, and did so by listening to Aboriginal community members and attending a plethora of (approved) Indigenous cultural practices. We also stressed, as many decolonial scholars have, that learning is not simply the compiling and recitation of "thing-like bits of information" (Nadasdy 2003, 95), but rather that "knowledge is a verb," not simply a noun (Hatcher et al. 2009, 146). As we were conscious of positioning ourselves as merely promoters of education, not as "experts" on the experiences/perspectives of Indigenous people, we teamed up with the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society's "Downtown Education Project" (KFS-DEP).¹⁰ This collaboration meant inviting the KFS' Education

hour/fashionable consumption, outsourcing, sustaining precarity, entrepreneurializing "global citizens"). Our appreciation to an anonymous reviewer on this point.

¹⁰ The KFS-DEP was a 2015 pilot project designed to increase urban Aboriginal people's access to university education. We are deeply grateful to the KFS Executive Director, Edna Terbasket and KFS-DEP coordinator, Veronica (Ronni) Roesler, for their support, comments, and guidance on both the course and this article.

Coordinator, Veronica (Ronni) Roesler (a *Dené* Nation single mother) and her class of 20 Aboriginal students to co-facilitate and participate in the course.

Of significant mention here is an early point Ronni unambiguously expressed to students, namely that the only reason she agreed to work on the joint venture, as well as bring the students from the KFS-DEP project into the classroom, was because of long-term social bonds and trust that had been developed over the span of a few years. She recollected having been asked to a host of university, secondary school, and even elementary school classes over the past decade, however, that over time she had learned it was best to decline invitations because of the fragmented, sometimes opportunistic nature of such gestures. She then articulated that convenient and readily disposable “acquaintance’ships” that take place within institutional settings (often at the behest of middle-to-upper class “professionals,” and which serve as good “photo-ops” for administrations and “lines on the CV” for professors) are part and parcel of the (neo)colonizing attitudes that she, as well as countless other Aboriginal people, are “still in recovery from.” She ended by earnestly sharing: “These classrooms are not safe for us [Aboriginal people].” The room went silent in this moment, several students donned expressions of stunned concern, and the point that Ronni was trying to make—that commitment matters and that ongoing colonialism operates in ethereal, insidious, and bourgeois-professional ways—was made.

In turn, the partnership with the KFS allowed the classroom to be transformed into a communal venue where open dialogue pertaining to issues of white privilege, land dispossession, and the historical trajectories of colonialism could take place. Emphasizing contemporary urban Indigenous lived experiences was also vital to the decolonial place-based approach, particularly given the presence of the KFS-DEP students. In this regard, we sought to disrupt settler colonial narratives that view urban spaces as devoid of Aboriginal people, especially in light of the fact that they are the fastest growing demographic in Canadian cities (Peters and Andersen 2013). And finally, in order to stress aspects of experiential learning and direct action, students were also responsible for engaging in “decolonial discourse analyses” and “praxis activities.”

(Decolonial) Discourse Analysis and Classroom Complexities

One particularly effective instance of troubling settler colonial hegemony emerged during introductory remarks when Levi (the primary instructor) displayed images of a Catholic church from his hometown in Southeast Kansas, United States (located in ancestral territories of the Osage Nation). The small rural community in question was settled by missionaries in the mid-1800s, at one point had a “Manual School of Labour for Osage Boys and Girls,” and currently has a population of approximately 600 people, 99% of whom are white settlers. In order to give students a sense of how places become problematically idealized through local symbols and structures (while leaving “Other” histories silenced), Levi demonstrated that the settler discourses of the area often saw residents being proud of their “pioneer history,” and referring to the community as “safe,” “tight-knit,” and (according to the town’s motto) “A Good Place to Call Home.”

After seeing and hearing the prevailing account of what exists in the region, Ronni, the KFS-DEP Education Coordinator, elaborated upon the photo and described

the ways in which an image of a church can often represent a “repressive” and “violent” history for Aboriginal people, particularly those of towering grandiose churches associated with residential or boarding schools. In responding, one student noted that he did not see the church as a “bad thing,” but rather, that Christians were trying to do something that was sincerely “good.” In replying, Ronni expanded upon the paradox of such situations by stating that some Indigenous people are also firm believers in Christianity, despite the atrocities that have been committed in its name, but nonetheless, religious structures do remain a “trigger” for many. What followed was a classroom dialogue suggesting that the most critical questions that could be posed in regard to both institutions (e.g. religions, the federal government, corporations, universities) and individuals (e.g. people-of-faith, elected officials, entrepreneurs, faculty members) was not whether they were “good” or “bad,” but rather: “What is it that they produce?” and “What ‘truths’ are they reasserting or imposing?”

For the example involving the Catholic Church, it was agreed upon by the class that Christianity did instill hope, kindness, and compassion in some people (with a handful of students adding that they thought “believers have been duped”), but also that the church was simultaneously guilty of producing intergenerational trauma and widespread suffering. This rare mutual exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and learners shed light on the complexities and contradictions that have surfaced as a result of colonization. And despite having days in which conversations proved fruitful and collegial, it is also important to clearly point out that the classroom was not free from tension, largely due to the fact that some students were being exposed to in-depth discussions of ongoing colonialism, structural violence, white supremacy, and settler/citizen privilege for the very first time. Specific instances in which (some) students rebuked radical perspectives regarding these things (as well as other topics including feminism, anti-capitalism, queer theories, etc.) were most often made manifest through eye-rolling, under-the-breath mutterings, and silent (yet oft-demonstrative) head-shakings.

We recognize here that these subtle and passive (in lieu of more direct and argumentative) acts of contestation were quite possibly a result of the authority we Gabrielle, Levi, and Ronni) all had as instructors of the course, which highlights that no matter how anti-hierarchical we aimed to be in our teaching practice, that relationships are always mediated by the institutional conditions, as well as politics of identity, in which we are placed and which we respectively engender. We also had to grapple with a few overt instances of abrupt (i.e., reactionary and abrasive) dissent, which were often handled by giving objectors the opportunity to further explain their points of view, as well as offer overviews of their rationales. Rather than simply giving what could have been a misinformed person a soapbox, though, we collectively agreed to an early consensus that we (i.e., both students and teachers) could not make broad, normative statements about any group(s) of people when explaining our perspectives. This was implemented as an attempt to ensure that the classroom remained intolerant of anything that was repressive, and because of the unwarranted oppressions that stereotypes and sweeping generalizations give rise to. One salient example of this is reflected upon by a former first year (white settler) student who, when interviewed nearly a year after the course, stated:

At first, hearing someone say aloud that we were on “stolen land” jolted me a bit. I got defensive and angry because it felt unfair to me. Kind of embarrassing to say that now. Then, the more I learned about things, the guiltier I felt. But as Ronni (the KFS Education Coordinator) explained, white guilt isn’t super productive either [laughs] Now, when I think about the valley, especially after having had Ronni and her class come in, as well as going to the MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women) vigil, recognizing that “natives” had their land stolen just seems like common sense ... actually seems absurd *not* to think of it that way.

Although focusing on land dispossession in a university course can be seen as merely a discursive tactic that carries little material impact, it does serve the purpose of destabilizing settler entitlement to land, and in some cases causes students to reflect about their presence in their local geography (be they white settler, arrivant settler, migrant, or Indigenous), thereby giving rise to thoughts of how to most effectively understand each other’s struggles and build solidarity in the face of such conditions.

Colonial Realities and Everyday Praxis

The praxis activities we utilized concentrated on confronting the everyday obstacles and enablements that have been generated by settler colonialism. This meant linking the readings on decolonization and indigeneity to the concepts of accumulation by dispossession, biopower, border imperialism, heteropatriarchy, white privilege, and transphobia, to name a few, as well as allowing students to propose decolonial responses through action. Meaningfully, in seeking advice from Ronni regarding what topics to use as common threads throughout the entirety of the course, we focused weekly discussions on issues pertaining to Aboriginal identities, ontologies, and lands.

One specific focus of the course was getting students to raise consciousness about gender justice, specifically MMIW awareness, through discussions of structural violence, Canada’s residential schools, “The 60s Scoop,” the Indian Act, and other state policies that have harmed, and continue to target, Indigenous women. These discussions were not conducted only in the distant abstract, but were soberingly situated in the community’s everyday reality given that early in the term a local Aboriginal woman named Roxanne Louie was reported missing and later found murdered (Gaffney and Van Emmerik 2015).¹¹ This instance highlighted that while conceptual and philosophical theories were course constituents, we would also be learning how they were applicable to the contextualized and unique everyday realities of differing families, communities, and societies. To cope with often emotionally taxing situations, we held detailed in-class debriefings and discussions regarding the ways in which we could talk about colonial violence, but also see examples of hope and celebrations of lives in the face of such anguish. These conversations spurred more in-depth dialogues as to how community members, and students, could channel collective pain and outrage into productive social action.

¹¹ Our intent in mentioning Roxanne Louie is not to reduce her life into an object of academic analysis, but to recognize and remember her. Sharing her name is an explicit move to note that she is deserving of dignity and respect.

In unison with these classroom reflections, our outside-the-class praxis activities encompassed several events that spanned much of the Okanagan Valley. Some of the opportunities we suggested to students included a university sponsored “Indigeneity Panel” (an annual forum exhibiting research from Indigenous faculty and graduate students), a student/community discussion panel titled “Racism in the Canadian Context” (which included a focus on Aboriginal people in Canada), and the African-Caribbean University Student Club’s “History of Black Consciousness” Symposium. The praxis activities of our gender justice module also extended beyond university settings, which saw many students take active roles in demonstrations and public fora. These included the annual vigil for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), a town hall meeting for International Women’s Day, and community gatherings where students were able to engage with local Aboriginal Elders, knowledge-keepers and storytellers, as well as one event that included a question-and-answer session with the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These varied encounters typically involved a great deal of listening, as well as students inquiring what could be done, locally, to unsettle the problems of ongoing settler colonialism.

And despite the fact that PBE has been criticized for being overly negative and producing a sense of hopelessness amongst students, we found the problem-focused nature of it to be both productive and necessary in mobilizing compassion and motivating culturally safe action on the part of class members (Gruenewald 2003; Smith, 2007). We also found that participating in community-centered praxis activities enabled students to move beyond their anger, frustration, and guilt about social inequalities and unearned privileges, because participating in a collective effort eased the anxieties many were feeling in regard to, as one student noted, “not being able to do anything about it.” With respect to whether foregrounding decolonial place-based praxis was “worth it” or not, one student aptly summed up the pros and cons many students felt about community engaged praxis when she stated:

Those assignments were kind of frustrating because they were time-consuming. I also felt a bit weird and out of place at moments, but I did make some new friends. I also felt like I was a part of something and ended up meeting some cool people I don’t think I would have on my own. I wish we could get credit for that!

Professors and administrators alike might be able to glean some useful insights from this student’s particular wish.

Reflections

To call back to the opening lines of this piece, higher education in Canada remains both an overt and obscured mode of settler colonization and white supremacy. In fact, white supremacy in Canada’s post-secondary curriculum has intensified to such a degree that it has been accused of being “cognitive imperialism, a form of mind control, manipulation, and propaganda that serves elites in the nation” (Battiste et al. 2002, 83). In paying heed to these critiques we chose to unambiguously emphasize land and Indigenous sovereignty in discussions, connect course content to the students’ social geographies, and incorporate Aboriginal worldviews and epistemologies into the course. For the context in the Okanagan Valley, then, our

move towards analyzing the embeddedness of settler colonialism effectively exposed and dislocated the normative whiteness that typically permeates Canadian university classrooms. This allowed discussion to bypass the all-too-common pratfalls of disaffiliation and racing-to-innocence that often occur when notions of Canada as a “liberal, multicultural mosaic” are contested and undermined. Decolonial PBE methods also enabled us to reiterate the point that neither should decolonization be an abstract concept, nor should claims to having “decolonized one’s mind” ever be enough.

Moving forward, we suggest the basis of actual decolonization in Canada, as well as decolonial praxis in university classrooms, involve destabilizing settler entitlements to land (as well as knowledge production/citations), centering Aboriginal ontologies, promoting the return of seized territories, recognizing Indigenous sovereignty, and envisioning ways in which the entire settler state might be abolished. Indeed, what is necessary in Canadian university classrooms is a dedicated, resolute, and ruthlessly critical investigation into what is produced by *settler colonialism*, *land dispossession*, and *white supremacy*, with a particular focus on local contexts, cultures, and ecologies. Moreover, we contend that varying aspects of Indigenous pedagogies must also be included in teaching practices and syllabi, and that Indigenous people lead and guide these decolonial processes, as well as occupy faculty positions in doing so.

We end by reiterating our recognition that Canadian universities are disciplinary apparatuses that reaffirm (neo)colonial social relations, often imperceptibly, as well as reproduce an illegitimate white supremacist settler state. Hence, we understand that our learning methods were partial in scope and do not constitute an arrival at the decolonization of pedagogy, but rather, merely provide one example of decolonial PBE as a mode of praxis. Despite the limitations of our efforts, we feel our cooperative work, particularly in how it included and was jointly guided by the Education Coordinator (Ronni) and Aboriginal students from the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society did unsettle a Canadian university classroom, if only for a term. Now the aim is to build upon these mutual efforts in order to emancipate education and land from the settler colonial suppressions that continue to smother and suffocate them, so that learning might be transformed into something more nourishing, harmonious, and new.

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