

Disrupting Colonial Amnesia via Land-Based Sensory Fieldwork

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Abstract

We offer a sensory land-based fieldwork assignment as a pedagogical strategy for embodied learning in relationship to the land, seeking to destabilize colonial futurity regarding the land. We share a short film containing spoken word instructions for the assignment followed by five sensory land-based stories.

Keywords: Decolonization, Settler Colonialism, Sensory Filmmaking, Land-Based Pedagogy, Arts-Based Pedagogy

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Introduction and Summary

In this contribution, we offer sensory land-based fieldwork as a pedagogical strategy for embodied learning in relationship to the land. In doing so, we seek to disrupt settler colonial “moves to innocence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9) that “deflect a settler identity, while continuing to enjoy settler privilege and occupying stolen land” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 11). A hallmark of the European, settler colonial, nation-state, is ignorance and denial that settler colonialism exists as a present and ongoing process (Veracini, 2011). Essentially, settler colonialism is an institutional system that invades and territorializes land and life.

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The deliberate amnesia that infiltrates everyday life is evidenced in the shock and surprise echoed across Canada, in summer 2021, upon archeologists finding hundreds (likely to be thousands) of the remains of Indigenous children at former residential school sites (Quinn, 2021). Only settler groups express surprise and consternation, the lost lives have always been known by members of Indigenous communities (TRC, 2015). The brutal residential school system is only one of many violent systemic operations of the settler colonial nation-state in which settlers, until recently, have been encouraged to know nothing, in other words to remain ignorant, unquestioning, and naive.

The fieldwork shared in *Disrupting Settler Amnesia* provoked students to sensorily experience, recognize, and reflect on “settler emplacement” (Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy, 2014, p. 15) within their bodies, senses, and histories; pursuing Morgensen’s (2009) call for settlers to “un-settle their senses of self and relationship to place” (p. 158). Centering the settlement of land and Indigenous history within this fieldwork, recognizes that decolonization is a process that troubles settler private ownership and extractive land development, and accordingly, seeks to redress Indigenous land sovereignty (Tuck & Yang, 2012). We locate this fieldwork within land-based education that provokes recognition of the land as Indigenous, as well as situating settler colonialism as an ongoing process of land territorialization (Calderon, 2014).

The fieldwork looks to evoke embodied knowledge among learners that colonization occurs in the present, that indeed our lives, homes, and communities are located on stolen land. As settlers in Turtle Island, the territory now known as Canada, we are intimately entangled in a continuing occupation. It is our here and now, our everyday lives. Sensory fieldwork utilizes “dynamic interactions among sounds, tastes, odors, touches, senses of place and of belonging and exclusion” (Culhane, 2016, p. 11); an embodied and holistic sensory system (Pink, 2015). Sensory fieldwork within the context of land-based pedagogy induces colonization to be deeply felt, embodied, and experienced through the senses. It seeks to counter settler amnesia; recognizing that liberation and oppression, including settler colonialism, are “not just mentally generated; [they are] particular and felt” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 20).

Our short film is composed of sensory land-based fieldwork created in March 2021, by five Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students, as part of their coursework for SOWK 397: Practice and Evaluation with Communities, in the Faculty of Social Work, at the University of Calgary. The film begins with the spoken word, the instructions for the assignment, shared with the students as a guide for their own sensory land-based fieldwork. It is followed by five stories: Stolen Circles, Civilization is not Civil, Concealed Skies, Journey to Graffiti Rock, and Protection and Healing.

These sensory stories reflect and respond relationally to the land in mediums the students chose for themselves; combining spoken word poetry, photography, soundscapes, narration, watercolour painting, and beading (a traditional Indigenous art form). The students possess settler and Métis identities. All fieldwork was undertaken in the Treaty 7 region, on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut’ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, and the Métis Nation (Region 3).

In creating and sharing these stories and fieldwork, we understand that decolonization is not about centring settler voices or bodies. We hope to provide possible avenues for fellow settlers, educators, allies, advocates, and accomplices to engage in reflexive pedagogical inquiry that destabilize assumptions and futurity regarding the land, and as importantly, to question and trouble: the roles we inhabit, as well as all our interactions within settler colonial states.

Link to Film:

<https://vimeo.com/571091552>



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