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Teaching Beings: Epistemicide and the Maintenance of Settler Colonialism in the Classroom

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Western academic institutions habitually teach Native history, culture, and art through objects of the past – such as moccasins, pottery, or historical tales – thereby perpetuating settler colonial violence and offering a narrative that ultimately works to mystify, objectify, and disappear Native existence. Native scholars, educators, and students seek to disrupt this violence by adjusting curricula on Natives, removing teachings of deficiency and adding contemporary Native voices to the lesson plan. I agree that it is important to change what we teach about Natives, but argue in this paper that it is as important to interrupt the settler colonial violence baked into how we teach about Natives. Historically, Western schools have operated within a Western mode of knowledge production, but Native existence has and continues to live outside of Western ways of knowing. I argue that the things we teach on Natives should be no different. Drawing from my own experience as a Native woman educated in Western schools, I articulate the psychological violence we as teachers do unto our students when we insist they operate and study Native peoples' art and stories within a Western structure of knowledge. I think alongside published Native scholars as well as my brilliant Native relatives to articulate the ways such psychological violence maintains the settler colonial structure, and draw from Native wisdom and bravery to insist that teachers make space in our classroom for a Native intellectual world, and that non-Native teachers accept that they will never fully access or know this world. I insist, here, that making room for a non-Western form of knowledge production and a non-Western understanding of Native existence will help heal our Native students, forge friendships, and ultimately work in radical ways to restructure our existence.

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Teaching Beings:
Epistemicide and the Maintenance of Settler Colonialism in the Classroom

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Abstract

Western academic institutions habitually teach Native history, culture, and art through objects of the past – such as moccasins, pottery, or historical tales – thereby perpetuating settler colonial violence and offering a narrative that ultimately works to mystify, objectify, and disappear Native existence. Native scholars, educators, and students seek to disrupt this violence by adjusting curricula on Natives, removing teachings of deficiency and adding contemporary Native voices to the lesson plan. I agree that it is important to change *what* we teach about Natives, but argue in this paper that it is as important to interrupt the settler colonial violence baked into *how* we teach about Natives. Historically, Western schools have operated within a Western mode of knowledge production, but Native existence has and continues to live outside of Western ways of knowing. I argue that the things we teach on Natives should be no different. Drawing from my own experience as a Native woman educated in Western schools, I articulate the psychological violence we as teachers do unto our students when we insist they operate and study Native peoples' art and stories within a Western structure of knowledge. I think alongside published Native scholars as well as my brilliant Native relatives to articulate the ways such psychological violence maintains the settler colonial structure, and draw from Native wisdom and bravery to insist that teachers make space in our classroom for a Native intellectual world, and that non-Native teachers accept that they will never fully access or know this world. I insist, here, that making room for a non-Western form of knowledge production and a non-Western understanding of Native existence will help heal our Native students, forge friendships, and ultimately work in radical ways to restructure our existence.

Dear Reader,

I am going to make the assumption that you care. I created this project on lands taken from the Algonquian-speaking peoples, including the Mohegan, Mashantucket Pequot, Eastern Pequot, Schaghticoke, Golden Hill Paugussett Niantic, and the Quinnipiac, as well lands belonging to the Acolapissa, Biloxi, Capinans, Chakchiuma, Choctaw, Choula, Grigra, Houma, Ibitoupa, Koasati, Koroa, Moctobi, Natchez, Ofogoula, Okelousa, Pascagula, Pensacola, Quapaw, Taposa, Tiou, Tunica, and Yazoo tribes, and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw peoples.

In order to build educators and allies who have the capacity to help Native groups dismantle the settler colonial structure, this project asks you to reflect. The kind of self-reflection I ask for is painful, unsettling, and uncomfortable. There is a very specific sensation I had when working on this project. I imagine that only those of you who have suffered from long-term exposure to a slow-working and ever-present trauma, those of you who have been sad enough to cry but haven't found the trigger for such catharsis, will understand the feeling I have every time I sit down to write this work.

I am a member of the Umatilla, Walla Walla, Cayuse, and Nez Perce peoples who have lived, travelled, and survived on the Columbia Plateau in the so-called-states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho since before anyone can remember. I am a white presenting woman. I benefit from white privilege.¹ By choice, I do not benefit from settler privilege.² This is a choice that I can, at any moment, retract, which is its own privilege. I will not, however, be able to retract it without ensuring severe mental, emotional, and spiritual damage unto myself. I am deep

¹ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," (1988).

² Dina Gilio-Whitaker, "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of Settler Privilege," (Beacon Broadside, 8 November 2018), accessed 19 November 2019, <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2018/11/unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack-of-settler-privilege.html>.

within the Native diaspora, displaced from my homelands first by a disconnecting tragedy in 2012, then by a journey to Yale University for my bachelor's degree in 2016.

I was raised and remain within Western educational institutions. I have forgotten what I was taught by my Native elders, and I have been taught things that I know are wrong and were not meant for me or, if they were meant for me, were meant to assimilate me into settler culture. I have a stake in the continuance of settler colonialism, both as a white presenting woman who benefits from the white privilege as well as a Yale University student whose intellectual achievements and goals fit into the hegemonic understanding of what it means to be “smart” and “successful.” When the settler colonial project falls, I will lose privileges conferred upon me according to these identities. I have a stake in the settler colonial project because many of the places I have occupied do not belong to me, and were “claimed” by settler colonialism.

I know, despite my diaspora, my stakes, and my forgotten culture, that I am Native. I am not assimilated, and I am not lacking. I have a way of knowing and a wisdom that is unique to my people. I have a stake in the decolonization of the Americas, and I have the power and privilege to participate in that process as an educator, as an educated woman, and as a member of the centralized social identity.

I have a habit of keeping a notepad and pencil by my bed. Wisdom visits in dreams, and hides from the awake – I write it down as quickly as possible. I have this recurring dream, where I am sitting in a circle with my grandma Smitty, with my grandma Linda, with Patrick Wolfe and Vine Deloria Jr. and James Baldwin. We all are talking, in this image, and I learn from them. But when I produce this work, I do it in isolation – I lock myself into study cubicles, dark corners of the library, and my bedroom. I produced this work in isolation, but I did it with the voices of

others circling in my head, through an interdependence of brilliance that makes me incredibly proud.

"I hear what the ground says. The ground says, it is the great spirit that placed me here. The great spirit tells me to take care of the Indians, to feed them alright... The great spirit, in placing men on the earth, desired them to take good care of the ground and to do each other no harm."

Cayuse Chief Tautau, Walla Walla Treaty Council 1855³

Awkú iwachá láy? The Creator put the Walsáycasma (Umatilla)⁴ (“Animal People”) on the land before the Natítayt came. Once, the Walsáycasma heard a great thundering coming from two nearby mountains, and saw that the brothers in the mountains were at war. They threw great fireballs and thunderbolts at one another, and the ground around them began to shake. The Walsáycasma became afraid. Then, Ispilyáy (“Coyote”) came and told them to flee. He warned them to walk away from the mountains, and to not look back, no matter what. So they all turned away from the warring brothers and walked. As they went along, a young elephant said to his mother, “I wonder what they’re doing back there?” She told him to do as he’d been told, and stay looking ahead. But the young elephant was obstinate, and continued to wonder aloud and ask his mother why he couldn’t look back. Finally, overcome with curiosity, the elephant turned around, and stopped speaking. His mother looked at him, and found that he had turned to stone. Later, Ispilyáy came and said, “this is what you get for not listening.” The elephant stayed where Ispilyáy left him. I’ve seen him.

Elephant did not understand Ispilyáy. He was childish in his desire to know more than he needed to, more than he had earned the right to. In times of crisis, that desire to know can paralyze us, leave us in danger, and hurt the people around us. When I was a child, my mother would drive me to the Longhouse, where I earned stories like this one, and where I heard the

³ CTUIR.org/history-culture/history-ctuir. Accessed 5 December 2019.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Sahaptin words are in the Umatilla dialect.

songs and prayers of the Natítayt, the same songs my ancestors heard and sang. I stood on the Wáaš as the clanging bell echoed into the quietest corners of my soul, and I prayed. I danced and cooked and gathered and circled around the ceremonies of the Natítayt, and learned the rules – rules on how to say thank you, and how to be a good granddaughter, daughter, sister, descendant, and friend.

I did not understand all of the rules, processes, ceremonies, and expectations when I was young. I asked questions whenever possible, but Native women are always teaching in their own time. You can ask a question, but they may decide not to answer. Maybe I wasn't ready, or maybe I hadn't earned it. Maybe I never will. But I could not and did not refuse participation because I did not *know*. Natives are, and have been, in a crisis, and it is the job of the people to do what needs to be done, even if knowability is absent. Confused and unknowing operation is part of the Native way of life.

I was educated in the public school system of Pendleton, Oregon, a town 10 miles from my reservation. Most of my peers were Native, but many of the teachers and administrators were not. Like almost every school on the continent, my school quarantined Native history and culture into the week of Thanksgiving. As children, we learned about pottery, tipis, and beadwork. As we got older, we were allowed to hear the more gruesome tales of Native massacres, and we sadly concluded our week on Natives by shaking our heads at the Tragedy of it all. In every lesson, Native history and culture was approached with a spirit of what was ultimately respect and a desire to know. In every lesson, however, the teachers, curricula, and school failed their

students, pushing a narrative of deficiency⁵ that painted us as lacking – lacking in culture, lacking in presence, lacking in survival, lacking in intellect.

Our culture could be distilled to an object in these lessons, because all we as a culture had to say (and it could be assumed we had nothing intellectually stimulating to say, no great Thoughts that could measure up to Western forms of knowledge) could be said through objects. Our history could be distilled to a massacre, because all we as a culture have to experience is death and trauma. Our identity could be delegated to a moment of recognition of some abstract and extinct existence in the past, and then cast aside to make space for Western culture, European knowledge structures, and white histories. In that limited time, and with those limited perspectives, we agreed that we had learned all there was to know about Natives.

The members of my school community, Native and non-Native alike, did not question these educational habits. We did not even articulate them, because they had existed in our community for so long that, having been exposed to nothing else, we did not see them as worthy of acknowledging. Pointing out the national habit of racial, cultural, and social marginalization in our education systems is like recognizing that the sky is blue; it is an unquestionable fact, something that has and will always be true. Even I bought into this narrative offered by my school – any evidence to the contrary that I discovered in the Longhouse stayed within the boundaries of my Reservation, perhaps because I am afraid of anger, and did not want to think that my teachers *chose* to ignore Native genius and lifeways or perhaps because I, like all children, wanted to avoid the pain of rejection.

⁵ Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 413.

Pay attention. Natives are not distillable to the pots, songs, and stories you may have studied in school, nor are we containable to a single unit in the history textbook. Natives are not extinct, are not disappearing, are not all separated from our lands, are not all assimilated, are not all lacking in money, in culture, in intelligence, in knowledge. Settler colonialism would like us to be, but we are not.

In 2017, the Department of Education in Oregon passed Senate Bill 13, a bill designed to interrupt this ongoing issue in Oregon classrooms, to punctuate the habit of incorrectly teaching or ignoring Native culture and history. This bill requires that the Department of Education create a curriculum “relating to the Native American experience,” a curriculum that concerns “tribal history, sovereignty issues, culture, treaty rights, government, socioeconomic experiences, and current events.”⁶ This bill and its operators recognize the harmful practices that have been allowed to survive until now in public schools. They understand the impulse to categorize Natives as either dead or assimilated, and want to offer a picture of Native culture that is very much alive and self-supported. I love this instinct, but offer a caveat that digs into something deeper than *what* we talk about.

Curricula that seeks to interrupt the settler colonial impulses baked into our educational habits, structures, and goals cannot do so without centering on structures of knowledge, pillars of culture, and chains of cultural memory that are *ontologically Native*. And we cannot center on these Native structures without de-centering ourselves, our classrooms, and our schools from the Western⁷ structures of knowing that currently monopolize our education. I do not deny that the

⁶ Oregon Legislative Assembly, Senate Bill 13, 79 (OR, 2017).

⁷ I use the term “Western” here to apply to the unique culture that has sprung from American re-workings of European habits, which is necessarily and inextricably wound up in settler colonial thought formations, histories, and goals. “Western” structures of knowing, therefore, are structures of knowing that include or are built upon one, two, or all of these orientations of culture.

What is important: I want my students to know about Native literature, Native governments and treaties, Native sovereignty and art. But in teaching these cultural objects, we *must* be wary of the framework through which we view and try to understand them.⁸ We must acknowledge the instinct to know, and recognize the dangers of such an instinct, the ways that attempts to know can cause damage and, when not carefully examined, fundamentally misunderstand the culture in front of us. We need to deconstruct the very patterns of thinking that organize our pedagogy, for these patterns interlace with settler colonial violence.

The process of de-centering and re-centering, the move to deconstruct and examine the ways that we experience and learn an object, history, or culture, is implicated in the shaking of the status-quo, the rattling of the tired, weak, and bloated structure that is settler colonialism.

What do you know about Native peoples? We have all heard the tragic story of the disappearing Native, the innocent and uncivilized people⁹ who were wiped out by murder,¹⁰ massacre,¹¹ rape,¹² starvation,¹³ enslavement,¹⁴ enforced sterilization,¹⁵ and mass execution.¹⁶

⁸ Angelina E Castagno, "Multicultural Education and the Protection of Whiteness," *American Journal of Education* 120, no. 1 (November 2013): 101.

⁹ John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 3. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd., 1999): 26-27.

¹⁰ Educate yourself on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

¹¹ Educate yourself on Sand Creek Massacre, Wounded Knee Massacre, Kalinago Genocide, Mystic Massacre, Pound Ridge Massacre, and Great Swamp Massacre. Then keep reading.

¹² Sarah Deer, *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

¹³ David W. Miller, *The Forced Removal of American Indians from the Northeast: A History of Territorial Cessions and Relocations, 1620-1854* (Jefferson, McFarland, 2011).

¹⁴ Educate yourself on California Missions. Start by reading Elias Castillo, *A Cross of Thorns: The Enslavement of California's Indians by the Spanish Missions* (Fresno, CA: Craven Street Books, 2017). Don't forget that Natives owned slaves too.

¹⁵ Jane Lawrence, "The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women," *American Indian Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 400-419.

¹⁶ Educate yourself on the Dakota 38. Start by reading Gary Clayton Anderson, *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988). Then ask yourself what else you don't know about your favorite presidents.

Those of us who were left were killed by Boarding Schools,¹⁷ suicide,¹⁸ and alcoholism.¹⁹ If there are any Natives left alive, then they are too broken by history, too assimilated by boarding schools, too confused by their addictions and poverty, to be authentically Native – they are drunk shells of a dead culture, a tragic gasp of a noble ancestry. The Natives, as we know them from history, the Natives who made such beautiful pots and lived in harmony with their environment, are dead (that’s why you need to learn how to replicate their art from a white woman). You likely know these things about Natives because settler colonial institutions have deemed such knowledge to be benign (at worst) and helpful (at best) to the settler colonial project – if Natives are all dead, it is someone else’s fault, someone who lived long ago and is too far away to be reprimanded, and since Natives are all dead, we can lay claim to their land without resistance.

Because the settler colonial project is about the accumulation and maintained possession of land.²⁰ Empires, after all, looking to expand territory and develop global power need land to plant their flag in and say “this, and everything here, is ours,” and the individual pilgrims looking to find liberty and success in the New World needed land to settle on, build their farms, and say “we live here as free men.” You and I, as entities within the settler colonial institution, need to

¹⁷ United States Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the Year 1886* (Washington D.C., MD: 1886): 217-221.

¹⁸ Sally C. Curtin and Holly Hedegaard, “Suicide Rates for Females and Males by Race and Ethnicity: United States, 1999 and 2017,” *National Center for Health Statistics: Health E-Stats* (June 2019), https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/suicide/rates_1999_2017.pdf, accessed 31 March 2020.

¹⁹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (2019), distributed by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2018-nsduh-detailed-tables>, accessed 31 March 2020. United States Office of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the Year 1886* (Washington D.C., MD: 1886): 220.

²⁰ Aloysha Goldstein, *Formations of United States Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Eva Mackey, “Unsettling Expectations: (Un)certainty, Settler States of Feeling, Law, and Decolonization,” *Canadian Journal of Law and Society / Revue Canadienne Droit et Société* 29, no. 2 (2014): 243. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 5. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Lorenzo Veracini, “Understanding Colonialism and Settler Colonialism as Distinct Formations,” *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 16, no. 5 (2014): 615-633). Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 388.

feel entitled to materials drawn out from stolen land in order to use our smart phones, eat our dinners, and wear our jewelry and clothes.

To maintain this entitlement, settler colonialism continues to operate on an understanding of the world, a framework of knowing, that is intrinsically Euro-American and Western. This way of knowing is baked into the legal discourse of our founding documents,²¹ and has existed and asserted its universal objectivity and superiority since settlers first arrived, sunburnt and starving, on this land. This way of knowing has been and continues to be superimposed onto any other way of knowing, objectified as the only Truth, and existed as a mechanism by which any other way of knowing, any other framework of understanding, any other cultural intellect, could be squashed.

This is called *epistemicide*. Epistemicide is the elimination of epistemologies. *Epistemologies* are ways of knowing. Epistemologies influence the way that we make sense of, judge, approach, evaluate, and answer to our experiences.²² It is the framework of knowledge with which we experience the world. Our epistemologies are informed by and made up of our *epistemic resources* – language, culture, experience, mindset and more²³ – and are therefore intrinsically tied to our culture.

Acknowledge these epistemologies: time is linear and steady, and can be tracked; questioning is essential to education and personal growth, and the desire to know and catalog is what creates the greatest minds and breakthroughs of our species;²⁴ a culture must learn to write

²¹ Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993). *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, 21 U.S., 543 (March 10, 1823).

²² Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of ‘Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance,’” *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 718.

²³ Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice,” 718.

²⁴ John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World*: 3.

to exist in history; science proves that we are objectively smarter than our non-human relatives, the birds in the sky and the moles in the little tunnels beneath our feet; objectivity is a standard, desirable truth necessary for academic and intellectual respectability.²⁵

Now acknowledge these epistemologies: time is not linear – it speeds up, it slows down, and it moves backwards; knowability is impossible, and questioning without the discipline needed to earn the answers is childish, entitled, and deadly; writing is less impressive and less effective in cultural preservation than oral histories; we cannot call ourselves “smarter” than our non-human relatives because we are only better at some things (I can’t even see all of the colors that a shrimp can); objectivity is impossible and brilliance cannot be found without friction, interdependence, and community.

All of these epistemologies are things that people and cultures *know*. The first group of epistemologies sounds familiar, feels unquestionable, because it is Western. You and I learned these things, know these things, because the education, social, political, and economic system in which we live demands that we internalize them. The second group of epistemologies is Native. These are things that my people know.

I’d like to acknowledge my own intuition, or at least the part of my intuition trained in Western public schools: it feels *far* more comfortable to categorize the Western epistemologies as things I know, and the Native epistemologies as things I believe. That is, part of me wants to argue that Native epistemologies are not empirical, do not hold up under pressure, are fine to believe in the space of my own internal world, but do not belong within the context of any

²⁵Richard Brookhiser, “The Way of the WASP,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997): 17. Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 69. John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World*: 26-27.

behavior or argument I submit to my relationship with others or my external environment. Those spaces belong to the empirically correct Western epistemologies, which are comparably stronger, sturdier, and truer. My Western academic training makes me hierarchize knowledge,²⁶ even within my own epistemology, and to internalize an idea of Native epistemology as somehow *indefensible* compared to Western epistemology.²⁷

This impulsive stratification of epistemologies, this insistence on the universal applicability, objectivity, and superiority of Western ways of knowing, contributes to the broader project of epistemicide. As teachers, we too contribute to that project, thoughtlessly eliminating epistemic diversity by positing a single True way of seeing and producing knowledge. When we tell a student that non-Western practices are “less effective” in fighting disease, in educating children, in learning about the world, we contribute to epistemicide. When we don’t take seriously the importance of a student’s cultural and linguistic context, we contribute to epistemicide. When we don’t teach about other ways of knowing, we contribute to epistemicide, maintaining the notion that Western ways of knowing are the only ways of knowing and insisting that no other epistemology is worth mentioning, if they exist at all. Even when we teach about Native sovereignty, therefore, or an accurate Native history, we maintain our damaging affect by refusing to take seriously the epistemologies that built that sovereignty and inform that history.

Near Tollgate, Oregon, there is a place called Peléyniwees (“Lost Place”). It is called Peléyniwees because of the stories attached to it. Once, Cayuse and Nez Perce warriors were fighting with the tiwélqe (“enemy”). During a battle on the Grande Ronde, the Cayuse led the

²⁶ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 31.

²⁷ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 87.

tiwélqe towards Peléyniwees. When they got there, they hid from tiwélqe, who became lost. The enemy, like all things at Peléyniwees, couldn't orient themselves – they went in circles, around and around, trying to get out. They kept going in circles until the earth finally swallowed them. Others have gotten lost there, too, and many have died. Only a few manage to escape.

This is not a fable, or a folk-tale. The Natives do not believe that people used to get lost at Peléyniwees – we know that we *still can* get lost there. This story is not a way of remembering where a dangerous part of the earth exists, because Natives did and do more than survive (did your school teach you to think that all we worried about was survival?). We think about what it means to be alive, to be human, to be a part of the world. Peléyniwees teaches us that, when you lose yourself, you lose your mind and, eventually, disappear. Loss of the self is mortally dangerous.

I heard a word, when I was young. The word describes the feeling that the youngest child gets when they are losing their status as the youngest, when a new baby is due to arrive. The word encompasses that feeling of pride, sadness, and jealousy we feel when we are now in a position of responsibility, yet losing our position of privilege and doting. When we get this feeling, we are to undergo a ritual action, standing in a cold river to wash away the negativity and make space for the love we are to feel for the new baby. When I have children, they will undergo this ritual.

I can't remember the word. It, along with most of my Native language, fell towards some corner of my mind when I entered into the English-speaking public school classroom. Because my Native culture, my Native knowledge networks, my Native identities, were not “relevant,” or “applicable” to the cold science and the hard facts that belong in a Western classroom, I set them aside. I spoke only English, and I operated with theories, bodies of literature, and facts of the

world discovered by the West. My mind created its own Peléyniwees, and I sent the words and things I knew to circle there until my mind swallowed them whole.

This damaging epistemicide perpetuated by my schools, this loss, is not a *symptom* of settler colonialism. It is not a byproduct of the history of land theft and disenfranchisement. It is the supporting pillar of that land theft, the validator of bodily harm, a resource of the settler colonial project that supports the entire institution.

When Western imperialist processes of violence, like colonialism and settler colonialism, began infecting the world, they did so alongside a Western desire to Know. The colonizers who explored other areas of the world systematically cataloged the Other – Other geographies, climates, and cultures – and synthesized an understanding of the Other within a Western epistemic framework. Like our own habit of hierarchizing knowledge, Imperial agents limped across the globe and categorized other cultures and places as inferior through an arrogance and certainty in their own epistemic superiority. As they cataloged, of course, they conquered. The measured skulls and observed cultural practices, concluded stupidity and savagery, and magnanimously inserted their civilizing hand, which killed millions.²⁸

We operate in the classroom with the same epistemological air of superiority, the same entitled “will to know” and the same assumption that we *will* know through Western methods of data-collection and analysis. Like our Imperial ancestors, we articulate our knowledge of Native culture, conclude Western superiority, and turn back to Western histories, cultures, and art. We participate in a dangerous and violent assumption of knowability, and therefore include ourselves

²⁸ John Willinsky, *Learning to Divide the World*, 26-27.

in the horrifying brutality of Imperialism that is responsible for the death and trauma of most of the global population. Of course your Native students are traumatized.

Epistemicide is complicit in the destruction of bodies, but also in the maintenance of the *systems* of such destruction. Settler colonialism, after all, destroys bodies only to make room for new, better, whiter ones.²⁹ Imperial conquest, here, is at its core about resources and land. Yet the conquest of this land follows rules. Settler colonial legal documents, the canon of constitutions, treaties, court-rulings, receipts of land-purchases, and declarations of independence, all bake into their language a right to Ultimate Dominion. In these documents, it is understood that settler colonial empires, with their Right to Manifest Destiny and their superior military, social, and intellectual power,³⁰ can claim any land they see fit to own.

Yet settler colonial legality also insists, in their magnanimous colonization, that agents of the project do not ignore the claims of other settler empires *or* the “Indian right of occupancy.”³¹ This means that European and American empires could “own” all land, but agents of those empires could only physically occupy and use that which was *not relied on by Native peoples*.³² Using this hierarchy of ownership, settler colonialism oozed across the land.

By the early summer of 1855, most of the Natítayt Seasonal Round had been taken, settled on, extracted from, and manipulated away from us by the United States government and their agents. Before this theft, we used our lands to pray, to travel across, to fish and hunt on, to dance on, to bury our dead on, to celebrate on, to gather and trade and teach on. We honor our

²⁹ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.”

³⁰ Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities,” 87.

³¹ Johnson v. M’Intosh (March 10, 1823).

³² Travis Ross, “Between Empires” (Class Lecture, *The American West* lecture at Yale University, New Haven, CT, 10 September 2019).

relationship to the land, our use of it and its use of us. We “owned” the land through this relational honoring, this use, as much as it owns and uses us.

For the United States government’s Euro-American epistemology, however, “using” land means farming on it, staying on it year-round, and building permanent structures on it.³³ To the settler powers, our relationship to the land is inhumane and incorrect, and is “something similar to the relation that animals bear to the areas in which they may be temporarily confined.”³⁴ This Native relationship with the land is not something to be protected or understood as “using” or “needing” our land. The United States government, at that point, decided to exert their definition of use, their epistemology of the land, as objective and True, and to eliminate and subjugate Native epistemologies that disagreed. Through epistemicide, the settler government found a way to take our lands while still following their own laws.³⁵

In eliminating our way of knowing ourselves and land, the settler colonial project forced us to cede the 12 million acres that we had lived on since time began in exchange for 800 square miles on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.³⁶ That was not enough, of course. The settler colonial desire to own land is and has always been bloated by greed. Settler colonizing forces don’t want land to live on – they want everything, including that which they know is not theirs. Like *Káykáyóchacwal* (Nez Perce) (“Raccoon Boy”)³⁷, the greedy child who ate all of the food, the

³³ Kakínaš (Thomas E. Morning Owl) and Sisaawipam (Roberta L. Conner), Pašúwaša Tímanina Tiičámna (They Are Cutting Up the Marked Land), in *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten): Sahptian Place Names Atlaas of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla*, by Eugene S. Hunn et. al. (ed.) (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015) 50.

³⁴ Lućá Łamtáx (Bruce J. Rigsby), anakpuušayšáykš (Caring for a Legacy), in *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten)*, 57.

³⁵ Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1722.

³⁶ Kakínaš (Thomas E. Morning Owl) and Sisaawipam (Roberta L. Conner), Pašúwaša Tímanina Tiičámna (They Are Cutting Up the Marked Land), in *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten)*, 49.

³⁷ Samuel M. Watters, “Raccoon Boy,” *Nez Perce Oral Narratives*, edited by Haruo Aoki and Deward E. Walker, Jr. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989): 407-414.

nuts and bear meat, and saved none for his grandmother, the settler colonial project gobbles up everything without thinking of its relatives. After a series of surveys and acts that skewed measurements and misread agreements, the reservation boundaries were further diminished. The Umatilla Indian Reservation exists now as arguably less than 300 square miles.

I take solace in remembering that *Káykayóchacwal*, eventually, received his gruesome punishment. I wouldn't be writing this paper if I didn't know that that was true.

Awkú iwačá láy? One day, Ispilyáy was walking when he saw three maidens across the river. He thought they were very beautiful, and he wanted to take one of them for his wife. So he started to swim across the river towards them. These women were wise, and knew that Ispilyáy was trying to play a trick, so they prayed for powerful medicine from the river. They prayed to send Ispilyáy deep under the water, and under the water he splashed. Ispilyáy spluttered and choked on the river. Then they prayed that the river would send Ispilyáy high into the air. The river did, and Ispilyáy felt afraid as he flew so high that the river turned into a piece of string on the earth.

Up and down Ispilyáy flew as the women continued to pray to the river and use their powerful medicine, until finally they managed to escape Ispilyáy. Wherever Ispilyáy's body fell, it left deep holes in the water, and wherever his body flew up, the water sped up.

The place where Ispilyáy was tormented is called Celilo Falls.

Celilo Falls is a place of intense spiritual, social, cultural, and ecological significance. Some say that it is the oldest settlement in North America.³⁸ People used to gather there to fish,

³⁸ William Dietrich, *Northwest Passage: The Great Columbia River* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1995): 52.

and to celebrate. They'd gather to trade – news, goods, and stories. My grandpa learned to fish there. He would go out on the piers, which stood strongly out over the roaring falls, and fish using nets and big hooks. He told me that the fishermen would tie a rope around their waists like belts, and tie the other end to boulders back on the land. They did this because the fish, back then, were big enough to drag a grown man into the water. Celilo Falls was towering and strong – the fall from the pier to the water could kill many men, and the few that survived would drown in the powerful current. The rope saved men's lives.

I laughed when he told me that the falls were too loud to be heard over – that any time a man fell off the pier, his yelling would be pointless, and he would simply have to hang there until someone came along. The image of my grandfather waiting for someone to come pull him up is hilarious. He'd get so bored.

In 1957, the United States Army Corps of Engineers completed The Dalles Dam downriver of Celilo. The dam stopped up the river – currents, fishing holes, trees, rabbit dens, and Celilo Falls all went underwater. The day Celilo disappeared, hundreds of Native people gathered to mourn and watch part of their world go under.

In the 1855 Treaty with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the United States acknowledged and agreed, even as they diminished the land that the tribes owned, that Native groups could continue using fishing and gathering sites outside of the reservation. The 1855 Treaty understood that settler colonial powers could not infringe on the right to continue practicing our fishing, hunting, gathering, and religious traditions. When Congress gave the Army Corps of Engineers permission to build The Dalles Dam, they insisted that its creation, and the subsequent submersion of Celilo, would not violate the Native fishing rights.

What do you think Congress understood to be our fishing rights when they agreed to drown Celilo? Do you think they understood “fishing” to exist as anything outside of extracting fish from water? We do more to the land than take from it – taking, alone, is emblematic of Western, settler colonial epistemologies. To us, Fishing means tying bodies to boulders; it means listening to the roar of the water and praying for good medicine and telling the story of the three maidens and Ispilyáy; it means gathering in the spray to trade belts for beads. Do you think that the United States Congress, when it applied a self-evidently universal definition of “fishing rights” in its consideration of the destruction of an ancient site, accepted Native epistemologies into its consideration? Or do you think that the United States government saw a Native understanding of fishing and ignored it, wrote it off as perfectly fine, but not as True or Objective as the one the United States government was capable of seeing and putting forth? This was less 63 years ago.

Epistemicide killed Celilo Falls. Epistemicide diminished Native lands. Epistemicide dehumanized Native peoples, and destroyed Native bodies. Epistemicide, in the Boarding Schools, beat young Native women out of their own language, and forced Native men to cut away parts of their bodies. When *we* participate in epistemicide in our own classrooms, we continue a tradition of violence that is detrimental to our Native students and their people. We become a willing participant in the dehumanizing and hegemonic efforts of the Eurocentric settler colonial project. We become enmeshed in the fabric of settler colonial violence; our peers become the massacres we mourn.

Awkú iwačá láy? One day, some hunters were walking through the woods. One of the younger men started bragging about how he could kill any animal that attacked him. He could kill an elk, or a mountain lion, or even a bear. The older men told him to be quiet. They said that

the bears would hear, and would punish him for his arrogance. The young hunter didn't believe them. He kept bragging as they walked. Eventually, Bear played a trick on him, and ate him.

It is important, in thinking about the ways that you extract yourself from the project of epistemicide, to understand what happens when you don't accept what doesn't, to you, make sense. I told you – we don't *believe* the animals can hear us. *We know* they can. Understand this not as an allegory, but a true story. Teach this not as an allegory, but as the truth. Tell your students to be humble when they walk through the woods, or they, too, will be killed by Bear. Did you think this process would be easy?

In 2012, my family moved from my reservation in Oregon to Magnolia, Mississippi. Population: 2,283. Half of the population is black, and half white. Its racial dynamics have been shaped by its plantation origins, its ties to slavery and the Jim Crow era, its proximity to New Orleans, and its high levels of poverty. I arrived in Magnolia displaced, confused, and, as my mother taught me, stubbornly optimistic. Because of the racial dynamics of the place in which I lived and spent my high school years, I was perceived as white. Because I am the kind of person who likes to avoid attention, I identified as white. It was simpler than explaining the complexity of racial presentation. It was more comfortable than answering questions – Did I still live in a tipi? Was this my first time wearing shoes? Was I “*Indian Indian*,” or could I just trace my ancestry? How much money did I get for being Indian? I once told a girl that my tribe only cuts our hair when something life-changing, like a death, occurs, and she commenced to run her fingers through it and murmur, “wow.” I stopped telling people things about Natives after that.

Epistemicide hurts me, as a Native individual and as a unit within Native culture. It also hurts me, however, as a person existing in relation to people who are not Native. The fetishizing, mystifying, and demanding language my non-Native peers used to know and to learn me is a

manifestation of the epistemicide within their education, embodied proof of the ways that non-Native classrooms insist on “knowing” Native peoples. Do you imagine that it is easy to make friends with people who touch your hair and insist that they already know everything about you, simply because they think they know everything about your culture?

When we participate in epistemicide, we heave a false and harmful narrative onto our non-Native students, and demand that they internalize it. These students leave the classroom confident in their knowledge of Native identity, a knowledge that is often incorrect or incomplete, and which is shaped by epistemicide, and incorporate their Knowledge into relationships with their Native peers. They touch a Native’s hair and they ask offensive questions about blood-quantum, and lose the chance for a friend and ally.³⁹ The non-Native students who enter into positions of power – who pass laws, or create curricula, or save lives – operate within those positions with the same harmful assumption and “knowledge” of Native peoples. It terrifies me to think too much about that, but ignoring the implications of non-Native assumptions is dangerous to me and my family.

Awkú iwačá láy? This was my grandma Smitty’s favorite story. One day, two Ispilyáy were walking on a hillside. In the valley below they saw a campsite, and all these people working and playing and talking there. The first Ispilyáy said to the second, “what do you think they call us down there?” The first one said, “I’ll go down and walk around and see what they call me.” So one of the Ispilyáy went down to the campsite.

As he walked around the people said, “look! There’s an Ispilyáy. He’s wise and beautiful.” Ispilyáy was flattered, and went back up to his mate. “They call me the wise and

³⁹ Becky Thompson, *A Promise and A Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012.

beautiful Ispilyáy,” he said. The other Ispilyáy said, “they’ll call me that, too!” So he went down to the campsite. As he pranced around and showed off, the people said, “look! Another one!” So he came back up to his mate, who asked, “What did they call you?”

He was annoyed. “Another one,” he said.

Difference is critical within Native epistemologies. We cannot be seen and named, nor can we see or name, if all we focus on are similarities. Agents behaving and forming relationships within Western epistemic contexts, I find and admit, habitually understand ourselves as existing within commonalities. We look for articles of identity that we all share, set aside any differences that go alongside those identities, and find empathy and compassion within that which we know and are familiar with. Thus, even if you are not Native, you may feel that you can relate to the struggles your Native students face because, as a woman, or a Jewish person, or a member of another historically disenfranchised identity group, you, too, have seen oppression.⁴⁰ That is the way that many people in Mississippi tried to become my friends. That is the way I have formed allyships in workspaces and classrooms.

Native epistemology rejects universalization, knowability, commonality – we seek, instead, to respect the differences between one another, and to find value in those differences. The antithesis of respectful relationality “is not difference but lack of engagement with difference.”⁴¹ To seek a commonality, to assume a knowability, despite our differences is to ignore what it means to exist with someone. It is to participate in the stuff of epistemicide.⁴²

⁴⁰ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” 36.

⁴¹ Katie Boudreau Morris, “Decolonizing Solidarity: Cultivating Relationships of Discomfort,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 7, no. 4 (2017): 465.

⁴² Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons,” introductory chapter in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013): 7.

A responsible relationship with Natives “builds dissent into its foundations.”⁴³ It finds energy within the space of disagreement and essential difference. Instead of claiming to *know* a person, Native kinship requires that we admit to the unknowability of one another, and respect one another’s right to exist as exactly who they are.⁴⁴ It demands that we talk to one another, challenge each other,⁴⁵ listen to one another, locate in conversations our own actions and words within the epistemology of the other, allow ourselves to be corrected.⁴⁶ We confront what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang call the “incommensurability” of one another, the fact that we sometimes will need to disagree and understand a kind of “uncommonality that un-coalesces coalition politics.”⁴⁷ We recognize that our epistemologies are fundamentally different, yet no more or less “valid,” than the people sitting next to us.

To make room for this type of relationship formation, you must de-center Western epistemology in your classroom. This work is difficult, because it will change the way that we do everything – the way we understand a successful relationship, and the way we quantify learning. It will restructure power, in many ways, and it will rearrange the classroom. It will require a constant internal check-in, where you must ask yourself if you feel entitled to the Native ways of knowing that you’ve made space for, and remind yourself that such entitlement is linked to historical Imperial violence. It will demand discomfort and dissent.

When non-Native students, or any student whose epistemology is centered within traditional curricula, is exposed to new ways of knowing, their worldview shifts. They begin to recognize the invalidity of Western epistemology’s claim to objectivity. They decentralize

⁴³ Jodi Dean, “Reflective Solidarity,” *Constellations* 2, no. 1 (1995): 123.

⁴⁴ Jodi Dean, “Reflective Solidarity,” 133.

⁴⁵ Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018): xxi.

⁴⁶ Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice,” 721.

⁴⁷ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” 35.

themselves and, through allowing for the expression of epistemic diversity, begin to work to recognize and respect differences between them and their classmates'.⁴⁸

On paper, this process seems simple. In action, however, it is painful. Just as whiteness is seen as neutral, and all other races as “different,” as measured against an unmarked whiteness,⁴⁹ so are settler colonialism and settler structures of knowledge understood as neutral, as transparent, and as certain by those who have never been exposed to epistemic diversity or pluralism.⁵⁰ Acknowledging the non-neutrality of settler colonial structures of thought, just like whiteness, comes with a lot of emotional baggage, a great deal of discomfort, and a natural tendency to attempt to return to the security of knowing that *you* are objective, neutral, guiltless, and safe.⁵¹

What do I do, now that I know that the knowledge structures I have been trained in, the ones that I have been largely “successful” in, are not only not objective, but are actively entwined with racism and colonialism? How do I decenter this knowledge system from myself, and force myself to realize in every interaction that I am operating with just *one* system of knowing? How do I move forward, having actively realized that I *saw* myself as superior, even if I didn't say it? If I am not objectively “smart,” because I succeeded in a system that trained and demanded of me responses guided by only *one possible* way of knowing and answering to the world, then what am I?

⁴⁸ Dustin William Louie, Yvonne Poitras Pratt, Aubrey Jean Hanson, and Jacqueline Ottmann, “Applying Indigenizing Principles of Decolonizing Methodologies in University Classrooms,” *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 47, no. 3 (2017): 23.

⁴⁹ Kim A. Case, “Discovering the Privilege of Whiteness: White Women’s Reflections on Anti-racist Identity and Ally Behavior,” *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 84-85.

⁵⁰ Eva Mackey, “Unsettling Expectations,” 237.

⁵¹ Robin Diangelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, June 2018).

It should unsettle you to realize that the mindset of your own objectivity, your own unquestioned superiority, your own neutral way of knowing, is incorrect. It should unsettle you to even name your epistemology as “superior,” because you should feel that you are “neutral” in your mindset. But that neutrality is a product of presumed superiority, and if you do not feel unsettled by that then you have not fully realized the historical, racial, and settler colonial context of your own epistemic privilege.

What I’m saying is that your world is wrong – your notions of “success” do not apply to me. Your notions of “aid” do not apply to those you are “helping.” Your notions of “happiness,” “space,” “time,” and “fulfillment” are not the same as mine, and if Indigenous epistemology ran the world with the same cruel hegemony as Western epistemology, “success,” “civilization,” and “relationality” would look drastically different.

If Native epistemology were centered and neutralized by dominant power structures, you may not be here, and by “here” I mean this continent. There would be no nursing homes. You would be expected to take care of your family, so you would probably remain in the same general space throughout your life. Staying in the area where you grew up would not mean “failure,” or “entrapment,” and leaving your childhood community would be a mark of failure, of something gone wrong. Veterans and mothers would be honored above almost anyone else. You would stand when your grandmother entered the room. There would be no central “leader,” because everyone would speak for themselves. We would dance every night, and talk to our ancestors throughout the day. Children would not sit in school.

Are you uncomfortable yet?

As educators, we can and should facilitate, perpetuate, and pause within the feelings of discomfort and confusion that naturally arise when we engage with a difference that we didn't know existed between us and the person in the desk next to us. These lilt invite self-reflection⁵² and a profound recognition of privilege.⁵³ They require recognition of difference. If you are feeling confused, why? Did you assume you would know Natives by reading about epistemic diversification? If you are angry, why? Do you feel that you are entitled to know what is happening in your classroom, that you have earned the right through hours of underpaid labor, to know your students?

I heard a recording of a story at the Tamástlikt Cultural Institute in Mission, Oregon. A woman was reflecting on her grandmother's experience in the boarding schools. She said that her grandmother talked about a time when she had been beaten and exhausted by the teachers. The teachers had made her feel dumb, and taken away her culture and her language. She was so angry with this teacher that she felt her hate turn into something physical inside of her body.

In class, as she sat hating the teacher, the teacher suddenly fell over, and something round rolled across the floor. The girl was terrified. She thought she'd killed her teacher with her hatred. It turns out that the teacher had fallen and knocked over a globe. But she had believed for a moment that her hate, her *rage*, could kill.

The gap between non-Native and Native students, their experiences, and their epistemologies, is massive. It was made by pain and anger, and as such it's too wide to calmly reach across. We need to be propelled by discomfort and confusion. We need to lean into the

⁵² Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1999): 22.

⁵³ Julie Prebel, "Engaging a 'Pedagogy of Discomfort': Emotion as Critical Inquiry in Community-Based Writing Courses," *Composition Forum* 34, 2016. Published by Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition.

challenging emotional work of recognizing and unsettling ourselves and our Western ways of knowing. We cannot forge connections and responsible relationships without it.⁵⁴

In high school, because I wasn't around my homelands or my people, and because I was subjected to an insistence, in every social space I entered, that I was white, and because I was tired of explaining white presentation, and because my identity had been glazed by the awestruck comments on my culture by those who had internalized a mystified understanding of Native existence, I stopped calling myself Native. I stopped smudging and stopped reading aloud to the birds. I stopped praying, and stopped calling my older sister, Nanát. I forgot my language, and my stories. I forgot how to earn knowledge, and who my teachers were.

I became individual; my success existed in my grades, in the income my career potential promised, in the track medals and college acceptances. I forgot how to see the networks of kinship I was raised to appreciate. On the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Department of Natural Resources organizes their preservation efforts around the sacred responsibilities outlined by the story of the First Foods, emphasizing the importance of species that are less valued by non-Native groups.⁵⁵ They do this to honor the ancient covenant between the *Natítayt* and the animal people, to continue being good relatives to the salmon and huckleberries, celery and water. On the reservation, and in Native epistemologies, elders should not be put in nursing homes – doing so demonstrates disrespect for our families as well as ourselves. On the reservation, you will not see many Natives shooting at a coyote. It is bad medicine, a poor demonstration of kinship, and reflects badly on the shooter and their family. On the reservation, being a good relative, being a good kin, being a good member of the world of Beings, is critical.

⁵⁴ Julie Prebel, “Engaging a ‘Pedagogy of Discomfort.’”

⁵⁵ Eric J. Quaempts, CTUIR Director of Department of Natural Resources, qtd. by Wišpúš (Eugene S. Hunn), Panáykukša Ánimay (They Are Gathering for Winter), in *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten I)*, 45.

Individuality is unquestionably impossible, because we are all connected. Thinking of yourself as an I is irresponsible and immoral. That is how I was raised.

I forgot these relational epistemologies when I was immersed in the non-Native world. I internalized the Western notion of individuality, of meritocracy, of gumption, and assumed a metric of success that got me into college. The process of my return to my Native identity is complicated, but the hardest part was confronting my bad kinship practices. The choices I made to “succeed,” when contextualized by Western epistemology’s notion of the individual, were contained within myself; when I had to see those choices through the radically expansive relational epistemology of the Native, I was terrified. My impact had already started on the world, and everything I do and don’t do has its effect.

Epistemology that focuses on relationality can be scary for those of us who have operated in a knowledge structure that privileges the individual, since we become more aware of our own actions and reactions through *others*. Relational epistemology is doubly scary for those of us with a stake in the continuance of the settler colonial system (and I argue that we all have some kind of stake in that system), because a kinship-focused existence refuses to recognize the authority of one person over another, or over land, plants, and non-human people, and disavows the entire practice of Othering and exploitation of the Other.⁵⁶ Morals guided by kinship practices cannot allow for settler colonialism to exist.

Like every other Native epistemology, Native kinship practices, in their survival, offer a view of the world and the settler colonial regime that threatens to expose the entire project for the hegemonic, exhausted, precariously founded structure that it is. To defend itself from this

⁵⁶ Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*: 90.

threat, settler colonialism has attempted to disappear, alongside every other aspect of Native epistemology, Native kinship practices, an attempt most evident in the Boarding School system.⁵⁷

My great Grandma Elizabeth could never put a pen directly to paper. According to her daughter, she'd hold the pen in her hand and riff over the paper, lightly drawing on the air, spiraling downward just until the pen touched the paper. She'd write as lightly as possible, her pen a breath away from drawing on the air again. Grandma Elizabeth also had notebooks filled with the same pattern: loops and zig-zags, all of the same size and shape, running across lines, filling pages and pages. Into her old age, she'd draw those patterns in her notebooks before bed.

Grandma Elizabeth learned how to write in the boarding schools. She was forced to draw those loops and zig-zags, over and over, in order to learn penmanship. The sisters told them to hold their pens lightly, and would make sure that they followed orders by coming up behind the girls and suddenly snatching the pens from their hands – if the sisters felt resistance or tension in the girls, they'd punish them by “popping” them with a ruler on the soft parts of their wrist. Grandma Elizabeth, like all girls in the boarding school, had to cut her hair, wear white clothes, and speak English. She had to stay clean like white people, behave like white people, and cross her legs like white people. She could not see her family, could not demonstrate “savagery” by practicing Native medicine or Native kinship. She was cut off from her relations in an attempt to eliminate the Native inside of her.

Even though boarding schools no longer operate (at least that way) today, settler colonialism continues to erase Native kinship practices, alongside all other modes of Native

⁵⁷ Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*: 589.

knowing. We contribute to this elimination when we insist on modes of relationality that are tied to Western epistemological notions of individuality, of universality, of harmony. We can resist this inclination, break free from our practices of epistemicide, by clinging to Native ways of being, finding bravery and discomfort, anger and love in Native kinship practices and ways of being, and in the uncomfortable and inevitable unknowable.

When I confronted my adoption of Western epistemology, my acceptance of Western individuality and rejection of Native kinship, I ran from the story of Grandma Elizabeth and the boarding school. I ran from it because it hurt to think about. What did she think of me? She wore wing dresses and spoke Sahaptin after she graduated from the boarding school – the beatings and starvation and psychological torture did not kill the Native in her. I gave up the Native in me, stopped practicing the things I was supposed to, without even realizing I had done it. Without putting up a fight. I had, according to my epistemology, my understanding of relationality and responsibility, failed my ancestors by giving up my Native identity. I remember when I realized as much. I was visiting my grandma Brenda, eating stew and frybread at her house in the projects. I excused myself, sat on her steps, watched a stray cat slink by, and cried.

I think I'm beginning to understand the ways that those in power are less holding themselves up than they are holding everyone else down. Power is understood through the powerless; superiority is contingent upon inferiority of others. In a rousing consideration on the education systems' failing of black students, James Baldwin articulated for non-black members of the audience the ways that they locate their understandings of themselves *through* their misunderstandings of black people: "If I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that

you're not what you thought you were *either*? And that's the crisis."⁵⁸ If my Indigenous epistemology is not "flakey," "irrational," or "inferior," then my Western epistemology is not "solid," "reasonable," or "superior." If my definition of "use," of "land," of "fishing" and of "intelligence" are as valid as yours, then the United States government has violated its own legal obligations, its own rules and the treaties it forged within those rules. If Native epistemology is recognized, then the settler colonial regime *is* in crisis.

I have a secret. It is a name that I hold to my chest. My grandmothers, my aunties, my parents, my brothers and sisters know my name. My community knows my name. I earned it in the Longhouse, on the Wááš, at my grandmother's feet. It connects me to my ancestors. It is mine but it is not mine; it is ours, but it is not yours. I don't tell people my name. You do not know me.

The project of settler colonialism has, from its inception, relied on knowing indigenous peoples, and on knowing and proving our objective inferiority. It *needs* to invalidate and forget Native ways of knowing, because to admit that those structures of knowledge are *as* legitimate as Western epistemologies is to recognize that settler claim to land is illegitimate. To acknowledge a Native definition of "use" is to be forced to give back 12 million acres of land in the so-called-territory of Oregon.

To maintain itself, therefore, settler colonialism must *continue* to center Western epistemology in classrooms, and to teach each student that Western ways of knowing are the *only* ways of knowing, at least in ways that are valid or correct. The process of interrupting this epistemicide, of cracking at its face until it reveals just how fragile it is, works to break apart one

⁵⁸ James Baldwin, "Chapter Eight: A Talk to Teachers," in *Black Sons to Mothers: Compliments, Critiques, and Challenges for Cultural Workers in Education, Counterpoints* 107 (2000): 127.

of the founding pillars of settler colonial existence, a pillar that is and has always been only pretending at security. In truth, the settler colonial institution is weak, its foundation shaky, its walls caving in on themselves – it’s coming apart every time we question the status quo.

The cessation of epistemic hegemony in the classroom is all I ask for. It’s not enough, of course. Action is required.⁵⁹ I won’t give you the prescription to the guilt you may be feeling, and you should not consider yourself an ally simply for reading this and agreeing to diversify the knowledge structures that you allow to exist in your classroom. There’s more to be done, and you won’t like some of it. Where are you sitting right now? “It is not enough to be self-reflexive while imagining oneself as existing nowhere.”⁶⁰ We need to realize that we have a claim, a part, and a stake in the very system we are working to dismantle.

Do not think, however, that in *my* Indigenized future, my settler relatives are completely removed. I will not send my father back to Europe any more than I would send my nephew to Honduras, or will send you to wherever your ancestors are from. Such a system would not only be impossible (is anyone *really* one “race” or “nationality?” I certainly am not), but also antithetical to the teachings of my people. You are my relative, and I will invite you into my home.

Please accept, however, that the world needs to look very different. If you want your students to become good relatives, good friends for one another, if you want your Native students to trust you and to associate you with something other than just more settler colonial trauma, if you want to truly honor the Native culture, history, and art you are trying to teach, then

⁵⁹ *Everyone Calls Themselves an Ally Until It Is Time to do Some Real Ally Shit*, Zine, Ancestral Pride: 2. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 20. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 3-4. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” 1-40. Kim A. Case, “Discovering the Privilege of Whiteness,” 91. Katie Boudreau Morris, “Decolonizing Solidarity,” 464.

⁶⁰ Katie Boudreau Morris, “Decolonizing Solidarity,” 464.

you need to make space for a Native way of knowing. You need to accept you won't know that knowing. You need to be prepared for the movement and degradation of your own epistemic privilege.

Did you imagine, when you became an educator, that your work could be so radical?
You are a part of the process – will you be part of the violence, or part of the undoing?

The last time I saw home, I took Interstate 84 to a lookout area above what I now know is called Wáapniš, on a ridge of the Blue Mountains. I went at the end of the day. I was in my grandmother's car. The lookout point features a structure, just columns and a roof, which juts out over the edge of the ridge. I stood in the structure and looked out at Wáapniš, towards Nixyáawii and the land my blood and spirit and people have existed on forever. My heart called out to the place, in that specific way your heart pulls towards your childhood home but also in that specific way that your blood pulls towards your homelands (I'm not sure if you've ever experienced that). I watched the sun stretch the shadows across my home, and whispered, "Goodbye. I'll be back. I promise."

I went back down the mountain, and said goodbye to the Nčí Wána rushing past my grandmother's home and the ɣáɣat resting on the shore, drying his wings. I promised to return. I said goodbye to the housing development that my grandma and grandpa live in, to their fat cat and the sign on their door supporting the Oregon State Beavers. I said goodbye to the proud and imposing náńk and the tawšá hugging the edge of the cracking highway. "I'll be back," I kept saying, and there was a longing ache somewhere behind my spirit that drew all of my tears inward, keeping them to itself.

I'll be back I'll be back I'll be back.

This work has been healing.

Additional Reading

The Red Nation is a council of activists, students, educators, organizers, writers, and community members working to support decolonizing movements beginning in Albuquerque and working to reach Indigenous struggles worldwide. Learn more about them at TheRedNation.org.

Unsettling America is an online sourcebook which publishes and advertises Indigenous and non-Indigenous informational articles, political zines, books, poems, and opinion articles on decolonizing, allyship, and Indigenization of politics, society, and education. Access the sourcebook at UnsettlingAmerica.wordpress.com

The *National Congress on American Indians* is an online forum that seeks to locate consensus that move to center Indigeneity, protect Indigenous treaty rights, advance Indigenous economies, health systems, and welfare, and educate non-Natives on Indigenous law, rights, and communities. Explore their website at NCAI.org.

Sandy Grande's book, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*, provides insights into potentials, problems, and demands of decolonized and Indigenized pedagogies and curricula, school designs and educational institutions, through the eyes of an Indigenous scholar and educator. The book grapples with the intersections of Indigeneity and children, trauma, gender, politics, and more, and has been critical to the inspiration for this paper.

Daniel Heath Justice also inspired this paper in his book, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. The book provides an overview on Indigenous knowledge structures within ancient and contemporary Indigenous literatures, and provides useful examples of recognizing and centering epistemology in literary studies.

To learn more about Indigenous knowledge structures and their complexities, read Daniel R. Wildcat's book, *Red Alert! Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge*, and Gregory A. Cajete's book, *Igniting the Sparkle: An Indigenous Science Education Model*. Both books deal with Indigenous knowledge systems as they apply to what Western epistemology has delineated as "science," and seek to integrate and recognize Indigenous sciences with science classrooms and conversations.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson wrote a beautifully brave book, called *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, which articulates Anishinaabe resistance to Canadian settler-colonial structures within Anishinaabe epistemology. Simpson will help you realize that Natives are not "gaining a voice" – we've always had it. You're just learning to listen.

A Thank You

When professor Zemach-Bersin and I started talking about the potential for this project, I admit to being frightened. Identity struggles have plagued me since I left the reservation, and this project forced me to confront those struggles. Some of that confrontation has been good – I like to know how and who I am. Others have been difficult – there are aspects of my life that are easier to understand as traumas within my family unit or individual history rather than manifestations of a centuries-old external force of violence. I admit that part of me, the part that suffers, hated that I am Native, hated that such an identifier and family legacy has loaded expectations and stereotypes and painful realities onto me. This project has been healing, because it has helped me see that I don't hate that I am Native, I hate the settler colonial project that made being Native being in pain. I want to emphatically thank Talya Zemach-Bersin for pushing me towards this healing process. She has changed a lot of things about me.

A difficult aspect of this project has been recalling. Like all children, I was unfocused – when my grandma shared her wisdom, or my grandma sang a song, or my auntie told a story, I didn't commit it to memory. I forgot almost everything. Remembering Native epistemology, and giving myself permission to recall it, has been challenging. I am grateful to Berkeley College and Berkeley Commonplace Society for their grant, which allowed me to travel to Oregon to recall and re-center my Native knowledge structures. While in Oregon, I spoke with and learned from Linda Jones, Brenda and Gail Shippentower, Ramona Yeager and N. Andrew Dumont. I am grateful for their teachings.

I read *wiyaxayxt / wiyaakaa'awn / As Days Go By: Our History, Our Land, and Our People – The Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla*,⁶¹ I read *Nez Perce Oral Narratives*,⁶² I read *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten): Sahptian Place Names Atlaas of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla*,⁶³ and I read *Native Arts of the Columbia Plateau: The Doris Swayze Bounds Collection*.⁶⁴ I visited the Tamástslíkt Cultural Institute on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. From these written and visual sources, I remembered stories and epistemologies.

Native people are rightfully suspicious of researchers. Any information or wisdom withheld from me was validly done so. The Academy has a legacy of violence and an inherent mistrust in Native communities. Until a few decades ago, Native peoples wouldn't even write their wisdom or stories down. I admit to my own mistrust of written Native knowledge – it did and does feel perilous to trust and use that which is written. My grandmother, Átway Yayáxwacańmay, helped me here: “We have several people that still say we shouldn't talk about our Indian ways and our Indian beliefs and our Indian places, because it's sacred. But how are we going to protect those if we don't share it? Share that information with somebody. There was a time in my life when I used to feel like I didn't want anything publicized. I did not want to tell anybody. I just feel this is the only way they'll learn is if I put it on tape and someday they'll go to where the tapes will be and they could see it there.”⁶⁵ My grandmother gave me permission,

⁶¹ *wiyaxayxt / wiyaakaa'awn / As Days Go By: Our History, Our Land, and Our People – The Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla*, Jennifer Karson (ed.) (Pendleton, OR: Tamástslíkt Cultural Institute, 2006).

⁶² *Nez Perce Oral Narratives*, dictated by Samuel M. Watters and Elizabeth Wilson, Haruo Aoiki and Deward E. Walker Jr. (ed.) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

⁶³ *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten): Sahptian Place Names Atlaas of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla*, Eugene S. Hunn, E. Thomas Morning Owl, Phillip E. Cash Cash, and Jennifer Karson Engum, Daniel B. Haug, Roberta L. Conner, Bruce J. Rigsby, John M. Chess, and Modesta Minthorn (ed.) (Pendleton, OR: Tamástslíkt Cultural Institute, 2015).

⁶⁴ *Native Arts of the Columbia Plateau: The Doris Swayze Bounds Collection*, Susan E. Harless (ed.) (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1998).

⁶⁵ Átway Yayáxwacańmay, Elizabeth Jones, qtd. by Wišpúš (Eugene S. Hunn) and Weyétmascańmay (Jennifer Karson Engum, Uytamá Kútkut (The First Work), in *Čáw Pawá Láakni (They Are Not Forgotten): Sahptian Place*

in these words, to trust these books and myself in the use of their wisdom. I don't know where I land on the use of writing as a means of preservation, but I do know that this project wouldn't have been possible without the Native people who preserved their voices in tapes and books. My grandma is right: I wouldn't have been able to learn any other way.

To these and all Native peoples suffering, fighting, loving, and dreaming in this world and the spirit world, I thank you.

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