

Traveling with a World of Complexity:
Critical Pedagogy of Place and My Decolonizing Encounters

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*“In the **World** through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.”*
- Frantz Fanon

*“You are not Atlas carrying the world on your shoulder. It is good to remember that the **planet** is carrying you.”*
- Vandana Shiva

Introduction

On November 6, 2015, two tailings dams built to control an open-pit mine’s chemical waste and residue ruptured, sending a torrent of toxic wastewater down into the nearby village in Brazil. The village was submerged—houses swept away, more than a dozen human lives extinguished and the ecosystem destroyed. The toxic sludge continued its way into the river and has entered the ocean. The river, once vibrant and vital for the livelihood of myriad beings, is now a stream of death filled with the corpses of fish and the tears of the villagers. The mine, located in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais, is run by Samarco, a joint project between the world’s biggest mining company BHP Billiton and the Brazilian company Vale, the largest iron ore producer. This was not the first massive dam rupture in Brazil. As dams and mining fields continue to be authorized by the government¹, the devastating impact overwhelmingly affects Indigenous peoples, working class communities and the natural world.

Such a tragedy is telling of the inseparable connection between environmental and social justice issues and our broken dependence on a dominant culture manifest in the colonizing and exploitive global capitalist system. In my personal journey², I have seen people from lower-economic strata have decreasing access to clean water and safe housing. Toxic chemicals are being dumped into the rivers that many people depend on for daily use. Indigenous peoples are losing their lands to national or international corporations. The increase in global temperatures causing the melting of the polar ice caps has led to changes in weather and the deaths of many species. We need to acknowledge that we are in an ecological crisis and the ecological crisis is fundamentally a cultural crisis, “that is a crisis in the way people have learned to think and behave in relation to larger life system and toward each other” (Martusewicz, Edmundson & Lupinacci, 2011, p. 8). Given this reality, it is alarming that our educational system continues to ignore the cultural roots of environmental and social injustice and treats

¹ As an example, the Brazilian environmental authority has granted operating license to Belo Monte Dam ignoring the rights of the affected populations. See more information: <http://www.aida-americas.org/brazil-authorizes-operation-of-the-belo-monte-dam-disregarding-rights-of-affected-communities>

² I grew up in two different countries, Taiwan and Belize, where I witnessed devastation on livelihood of people and the natural world in connection to a dominant global capitalist culture of consumerism and mass production. My father and I used to go fishing and swimming in a creek in Southern Taiwan called Six Turtles. Six Turtles is connected with one of the major river in Southern Taiwan and many depended on it for water. Whenever I was there, I would see Indigenous people of the region fishing, bathing or washing their clothes. One day, my father told me we would not return to Six Turtles because the river is polluted by the pig farms upstream. As a seven year old, I felt the pain, anger and disappointment although I was unable to make sense of the situation at that time.

knowledge as disconnected fragments perpetuating oppressive hierarchies such as: anthropocentrism, racism, classism and sexism. One of the dangers of formal schooling is “it will imprint a disciplinary template onto impressionable minds and with it the belief that the world really is as disconnected as the divisions, disciplines, and subdisciplines of the typical curriculum” (Orr, p.23).

In the field of environmental education, regardless of the recent rise of critical, feminist and indigenous perspectives (Barron, 1995; Cajete, 1999; Greenwood, 2003; Kahn, 2010; Mies & Shiva, 1993), the mainstream approach tends to neglect socio-cultural factors and fails to recognize the interconnectedness between environmental degradation and social injustice (Martusewicz, Edmundson & Lupinacci, 2010; Bower, 2001; Russell & Fawcett, 2013). By adopting the same tools used by the mainstream, environmental education runs the danger of contributing to the homogenization of curriculum and learning. Nevertheless, within the diverse approaches that all claim to be environmental education, I see place-based education as having the potential to address both social and ecological justice. It seeks to enhance human connection with others and with the natural world, cultivating a responsibility to address the ecology of which we are a part (Greenwood, 2003). To do this, one must confront the ways in which the dominant culture works to constrain the potentialities of human’s connection to place.

My experience with place-based education began when I joined the Environmental School Project (MRES) in Maple Ridge, British Columbia. The MRES was initiated with the aim of cultivating the potential for cultural change vis-à-vis a pedagogy deeply rooted in place. Since its inauguration in 2011, however, this outdoor public school has experienced many struggles in challenging dominant ways of thinking. In the first part of this paper, I hope to draw out a couple of examples from my experience³ working at the MRES as a researcher to explore how place-based education can address social and ecological issues; or to be more specific, I hope to present the complexity in carefully intertwining what David Greenwood calls “decolonization” and “reinhabitation.” I will explore these concepts and their implications by looking at the history, debates and conversations surrounding the meanings, extensions, contestations and complexity of decolonization, reinhabitation and place. In the second part of the paper, I hope to present my own journey of decolonization thus far through a few particular encounters. These encounters have taken me further down the path of epistemological and ontological examination and shifts—shifts that have made who I am today, shifts that continue to “create myself”⁴.

Critical Pedagogy of Place

It’s another typical day in the boreal rain forests of the northwest coast—massive grey clouds hover over the sky sending droplets of liquid onto the soil while eerie ghost-like mists cover the ground giving everything the mystique of a Chinese calligraphy painting. All of a sudden, a chorus of excited children’s sound and noise

³ The experiences that will be drawn here are mainly my own observation participating in the school. In the second part of the paper, I will delve deeper into my own encounter with place and the natural world and how that led to my own decolonization process.

⁴ Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks*. P.179. Grove press.

break through the air, drawing nearer and louder until there appears an array of children in brightly colored rain gears sawing, dragging wood pieces of different shapes and hammering away. It's 'fort time'. Children have been working on their forts for a while now that it is more than just a project. This fort area has become their village...but like any village they know in their little minds, to ensure the livelihood of their village a system needs to be established. Shops were set up and sticks became the most valuable commodity. Also, to ensure the peacefulness of the village, a punitive system must be in place, and what's a well-functioning punitive system without a prison. Several boys start working away...

David Greenwood (2003) has attempted to synthesize the field of critical pedagogy and place-based education, calling for a “critical pedagogy of place”. In doing this, he recognizes that social justice and ecological justice are interconnected. Greenwood (2003) posits, “Perhaps the two most significant intersections between these traditions are place-based education’s call for localized social action and critical pedagogy’s recognition that experience, or Freire’s ‘situationality,’ has a geographical dimension” (p.317). In critical pedagogy of place, Greenwood proposes that **decolonization and reinhabitation are two interrelated objectives for the purpose of connecting local and place-based experiences to the larger social, cultural and ecological scene. Reinhabitation involves learning to live well in places that have been disturbed⁵. Decolonization involves uprooting the causes of social and ecological disruption.** The twin objectives are two “dimensions of the same task” (Greenwood, 2003, p. 318) that should not be enacted separately. On the one hand, one risks the danger of cultivating disconnected indoor ecologists when solely focusing on decolonization. On the other hand, without unpacking the colonizing effects of the dominant culture, one does not have the necessary tools to pursue the kind of living that recovers social and ecological disruption of places.

The story above from the building-less MRES can shed light on the deficiency when ‘decolonization’ and ‘reinhabitation’ are not realized concurrently. With its focus on place and the natural world, children in the MRES are learning how to live/re-live in the natural world, but in this fort village students adopted an economic model that resembles the exploitative nature of capitalism. In assigning exchange value to the resource students go through a kind of social labour in which they fetishize the sticks, the pinecones, the loose leaves, actually removing them from their natural context and replacing that with a fantastical and arbitrary value. One of the other first things the children set up in their village is a punitive system that involves policing and prison. In a place surrounded by nature, students are still re-enacting dominant cultural behaviours. In my observation with the recent outdoor education movement, many of us think that somehow being in the woods we will magically understand what it means to inhabit the land, but what we have forgotten is that we are cultural beings. Without unpacking these deep cultural roots, re-inhabitation will not be possible, as Greenwood emphasizes ‘decolonization’ and ‘reinhabitation’ are not two separate steps but interrelated goals. I start to ponder then how do we weave these goals within our place-based educational setting?

Here, we will dig deeper into the complexity involved in realizing these interrelated goals. Since Greenwood’s paper on critical pedagogy of place, there has been

⁵ David Greenwood takes the definition of reinhabitation from Bioregionalist pioneers Berg and Dasmann in Berg, P., and R. Dasmann. 1990. Reinhabiting California. In *Home! A bioregional reader*, eds. V. Andrus et al., 35–38). Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

voices contesting and reaffirming his concepts and the field has started a discussion surrounding issues of de/colonization, reconciliation, revitalization and reinhabitation of place⁶. C. A. Bower (2008) has provided one of the critical/oppositional voices. As one of the quintessential critics of Freirian critical pedagogy, Bower believes that by placing critical pedagogy and place-based education together Greenwood creates an oxymoron and ignores the importance of conservation. One of the main critiques Bower has put forward regarding critical pedagogy is that Freirian critical pedagogy promotes progress as linear changes replace past traditions. A critical pedagogy of place also relies on a linguistic tradition of abstraction, including abstract theories that conceal many of the unexamined assumptions that underlie efforts to universalize Western consumer culture (Bower, 2001;2008). For this reason, a critical pedagogy of place fails to recognize that there are many intergenerational traditions that have evolved in ways that co-exist with the environment in non-destructive ways and it also fails to include the long and diverse histories places have. Bower calls those traditions and places “cultural commons”. He urges that instead of thinking everyone needs to decolonize or learn to reinhabit, one needs to understand one’s cultural commons and that therein is the potential to unveil what has been taken for granted in a place and therefore recognize it as either problematic or sustainable. I believe the environmental education field needs more voices from the various cultural commons. Perhaps Bower’s intense criticism does not encourage the kind of harmonious collaboration that we are in need of, but we cannot dismiss his poignant comments around the diversity of culture and respect for traditions and Indigenous communities.

In response to Bower’s criticism, Greenwood (2008) emphasizes that his purpose in formulating critical pedagogy of place is not to be aligned wholesale with Freirian critical pedagogy, but rather it is an invitation to educators from both ecological and social justice traditions to dialogue about what might be shared concerns. For Greenwood, the construct *place*, has the potential to join cultural and ecological thought and experience. It can help educators become more aware of the relationship between culture and ecology. In Greenwood’s view, the best place-based education emerges from the particularities of places and the people who know them best. Therefore, the concepts of decolonization and reinhabitation can spark a related set of questions, such as what needs to be conserved, transformed, restored, or created; and this set of questions provides a pragmatic direction for inquiry and action while helping educators to braid works in social justice and ecological sustainability. Other scholars, such as Gregory Smith (2008) and Marcia McKenzie (2008), recognize the common ground Bowers and Greenwood share as they both concern themselves with the interwoven relations of social and ecological realms. Smith (2008) states,

Ideally, critical place-based education could help prepare more young people under the sway of ecologically and socially destructive modern institutions to develop the ability to decolonize and reinhabit... By learning what to conserve and protect [and/] or how to critique and adapt (p. 352).

It enables the affirmation or modification of relationships to intergenerational knowledge and place.

⁶ See Environmental Education Research Volume 14, 2008.

So far the discussion seems to be fixated on a dualistic conception of decolonization and reinhabitation; or to be more specific the concern has been focusing on how to find a balance between critical consciousness and embodied engagement. However, I believe we also need to pay our attention to how we might understand learning—as both cognitive and embodied intersubjective experience. Ellsworth’s term, “places of learning” (quoted in McKenzie, 2008), is helpful in thinking about the cognitive and embodied in relationship to intersubjective experiences. “Places of learning” goes beyond geographical locations. It is a space that defies the binaries of inside/outside, self/other—a space of relations that “take shape when our minds and bodies pass through time, and events” (McKenzie, 2008, p. 365) through which a sense of self as well as social and cultural positions and determinations start to emerge. This sense of immediacy is like when we are listening to music, reading poetry or watching the starry night sky. We are with the melody, the words and the stars. At the same time, we are in our minds, bodies, and senses as well as in the cultural experience—all at once. This is a space in between embodied feeling and making sense. When learning located in this space is attempted, the possibility to imagine, inhabit, or restore is emerged. Marcia McKenzie (2008) writes,

Rather than considering educative experiences as centered around conceptual critiques or place-based experience, a rich range of pedagogical places are opened up when we consider socio-ecological learning to occur more broadly in the space between the lived and the articulated (p. 369).

Places of Incongruence

*We reimagine pedagogy to be
the art of unlearning.
Take all that we have been told*

*about this country and search
for the omissions in our textbooks.
How the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*

*took half a million miles
and rewrote a history cast aside.
The way Manifest Destiny made*

*a masquerade of brown skin. How
it skews the way we contemplate
the antiquity of this melanin.*

*We pick up our pens,
reclaim a humanity
that was stolen.
(Excerpt from *The Art of Unlearning* by Clint Smith)⁷*

⁷ Smith, C. (2015). The art of unlearning. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(3), 413-414.

With this review of Greenwood’s “decolonization” and “reinhabitation”, we need to make two important points. First, the authors in the discussion seem to have a diverse framing of what a place is. “Place,” suggested Dolores Hayden, “is one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” (as cited in Nesper, 2008, p.478). The very naming and locating of place (be it formally, geographically, historically, culturally) draws together a messy collection of phenomena, relations and processes (Reid, 2008). Is place to be understood largely in absolute representational spatial term that are mappable, empirical, and objective? Or is it relational, symbolic or non-representational? How do we as (place-based) educators develop and apply perspectives that take better account of the historical interweaving of shared and distinctive cultural representations, practices, imaginations and commons? To push further, how do we understand and recognize that land is not a mere location upon which humans make history, but possesses its own agency and culture (Tuck, 2012; Piersol, 2015). Yupiaq scholar, Oscar Kawagley (2010) asserts, “We know that Mother Nature has a culture, and it is a Native culture” (quoted in Tuck, 2012, p.30).

This brings us to the second point—the bias and blind spots that might be present in the discussion of “decolonization” and “reinhabitation” are the works of predominantly white, middle-class and/or male scholars⁸. There is little mention and little voice from Indigenous groups and peoples of other ethnicities. In fact, the word “decolonization” has been used conceptually as Greenwood (2003) describes through Smith and Katz (1993), “Decolonization becomes a *metaphor* for the process of recognizing and dislodging dominant ideas, assumptions and ideologies as externally imposed” (italics added, p.319). However, indigenous and feminist scholar, Eve Tuck (2012), emphasizes that decolonization is not a metaphor. She noticed that there has been a trend in education to replace social justice discourses with decolonization discourse without acknowledging that decolonization wants something different than other forms of justice. When decolonization is used as a metaphor, it undermines the possibility of unsettling decolonization and re-centers whiteness and settler colonialism. We need to understand that decolonization is unsettling and does not entertain settler normalcy. It is not simply critical consciousness although that is a necessary first step (Fanon, 1963). Decolonization is actual action that disrupts settler colonialism and restores Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Educators who are engaged in critical pedagogy and/or place-based education need to first critically examine what is it they are seeking for when they work to decolonize their practices. We need to ask ourselves an unsettling question of “what is colonization”. This question cannot be reduced into a universalized answer, nor a historic answer. It needs to be answered specifically with special attention paid to the “colonial apparatus that is assembled to re/order the relationships between particular peoples, lands, the natural world, and civilization” (Tuck, 2012, p. 21).

What does decolonization and reinhabitation truly entail? As Franz Fanon (1963) explains:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices,

⁸ I would even go so far as to extend this critical recognition into the field of environmental education writ large.

nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot be intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content (p.36).

Within different historical and cultural contexts, different voices have been calling for actions that might also need to be added to the twin goal of decolonization and reinhabitation. Here I draw upon black voices, as they have been influential and tireless in resisting colonial oppression. Clint Smith, An African American PhD Candidate at Harvard University, poetically describes in his poem, cited above, that people of color have internalized the false conceptions about themselves/ourselves, each other and their/our world. Their/Our history has been altered to portray a different story—a story of the dominant culture. In the process of decolonization and reinhabitation, I believe it is also important for one to unlearn the oppressive and/or privileged narrative that informs one's sense of identity. At the same time, we need to relearn and reclaim who we are as humans, as part of a beautiful and intricate web of life on earth. In her book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, hooks (2009) urges the crucial need of reclamation. For hooks, the mainstream discourse, when representing black lived experience, the experiences of black people living in urban cities seem to define black identity as a whole. She stresses that black people are inherently people of the land as before the 1900s the majority lived in the agrarian South (p. 41) and “healing begins with [reclaiming] self-determination in relation to the body that is the earth and the body that is our flesh” (p.47).

The dominant industrialized culture has resulted in a false dichotomy manifesting a metaphor of hierarchy that promotes human over nature, industry over subsistence, mind over body, reason over emotion, white body over black and brown bodies. This global dominant culture is “an extension of the most recent iteration of (settler) colonialism” (Tuck, 2013, p.325). Settler colonialism⁹ is built on extracting surplus values from land, which requires displacing the people (of color) from their homes. Settler colonialism manifested in the dominant culture cannot be viewed as one single event in history, but rather as a structure that continues to oppress not only the colonized but also the colonizers (Tuck, 2013; Memmi, 1965). Jean-Paul Sartre points out in his introduction to Albert Memmi's book *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965), “[Oppression] diverts and pollutes the best energies of man—of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizers” (p. xvii). As a result, we as the human species have lost the essential connection and spirituality¹⁰ to land, community, and our own bodies and agency. bell hooks proclaims once again, “To heal our collective spiritual body the very ground we live on must be reclaimed” (p.49).

⁹ Settler colonialism is when colonizers come to stay/settle by claiming the land as their own and profiting from other ‘resources’. Canada and United States are examples of settler colonialism. For more, see Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1(1).

¹⁰ I want to clarify that the word ‘spirituality’ here is not used to explain a religious experience but our relationality to ourselves, each other and the natural world—a sense of wholeness and fulfillment. A colleague of mine explains it well. She said it is like that feeling when you climb on top of a mountain, you look down to see the vastness under your feet and you go “ah”. Spirituality is the moment of ah, of an awe when we realize that we are not a fragmented being.

There is a river running alongside of the Southern highway in Belize. My family and I would go there almost every day during spring break. I will never forget how my mother's face turned to joy as she ventured into the water and watching schools of little fish swimming pass her going about their lives. It is the same joy I see on my grandmother's face when she savours the sweetness of the roses or when she bites the green crispy guava brought forth by the soil. hooks sees that joy as calling for "accountability in reclaiming that space of agency where we know we are more than our pain, where we experience our interdependency, our oneness with all life" (p.48). As an Asian immigrant that grew up and worked in Belize and Mexico¹¹—two places colored by colonialism and globalization but also by vibrant cultures and resilience—I am slowly un/re/learning to be accountable in reclaiming my own connection with the world¹² and allowing the world to reclaim its own agency. In this slow and continuous journey, I can pinpoint five specific encounters that have brought me to the place I am in today. I hope these encounters will portray the messiness and the particularity in how one (I) grapples with decolonization, reinhabitation, reclamation and relearning. In each encounter, I am pushed, perplexed, softened, hardened and dare I say decolonized...

My Decolonizing Encounters

Sitting in the back of the classroom with a rubric in front of me, I was supposed to evaluate my students' presentations. In front of the classroom, there were three students stumbling and lost in their notes full of foreign and impersonal English words trying to explain the importance of the 4th of July. All of a sudden, I felt I was alone in that classroom. Where did my students go? Where were their personalities, passions, emotions, and sparks?

Chetumal, Mexico was the place where I came to see the world in some of its truest colors. In the literal sense, I swam in lagoons of seven different shades of blue, climbed to the top of Mayan pyramids with colors of clay, and walked through jungles of vibrant green seedlings while followed by the intense gaze of the big yellow-brown cats. In another sense, I felt shades of students' disbelief in education, my colleagues' frustration of not being able to find a good teaching job, and the anger of having to teach to a curriculum that has nothing to do with the rich lives in Mexico. Studying and teaching in Chetumal pushed me to see my own privilege – projecting into the world like a neon sign - when I tell students, "if you work harder, you would be able to do anything you want" or when I secretly judge my colleagues for not being able to find a teaching job while foreigners like me command the job market washing out local teachers. At the same time, I was dismayed by the English curriculum we were using. Every page of the textbook tells a different glorious story of the great 'white' north sending a message that there is no hope

¹¹ I was born in Taiwan. My mother and I moved to Belize when I was twelve. I went through high school and first year of university majoring in anthropology dreaming that one day I will get the golden pass to pursue my 'American dream'. But something happened. My mother and I started growing roots in this beautiful Caribbean region. I then move to a small Southern town of Mexico, a few hours away from Belize, when I was nineteen. In Mexico, I pursued an education degree in teaching English and became a teacher.

¹² The word "world" for me it's not an abstract use as in "worldview" but a concrete relationship and connectedness to myself, my human siblings and the natural world that nourishes and holds me so carefully.

in Mexico unless it becomes like that. Students, especially students of Indigenous Mayan descent, felt doomed from the beginning of their educational journey.

“There is something wrong. Something has to change,” I kept thinking to myself. If the love and joy of being able to foster learning and create happiness even within the four-walled classroom was even a little bit true, then how can I combat the rigid curriculum control and innate racism of the hiring process. I knew I wanted to change but my vision was colour-blind. In fall 2013, I came to graduate school in Canada and started my journey of seeking change. In my mind at the time, I saw the fundamental issue with the despairs in education lying in curriculum and believed there was a universal fix. If I can find a ‘better’ curriculum, everything will be better. But soon, I realized it is more complex than that. The kind of change I am looking for is not just about stretching the disciplines from within¹³ but it is about a cultural change that necessitates a rethinking of the system that dominates our ways of being and an awakening to understanding our role as human animals in the intricacy of the web of life on earth¹⁴.

Sofia Thompson¹⁵ is an inner-city elementary teacher in Surrey, British Columbia. For one school year, she spent three months gathering permission slips from the parents and approval from the school board, so she could finally take her students to a nearby park. When the day came, the children were excited. They lined up and walked hand in hand to the park. As they arrived at the park, a little girl sheepishly tapped on Sofia’s arm. “Yes, dear?” Sofia gently asked. “Ms. Thompson, why are there so many trees?”

The natural world has always been an indispensable part of my life. It is my sanctuary and has been the context where I overcame my own internalized racism and the racism I felt against me¹⁶. When I first moved to Belize, I had an innate feeling of fear of my Belizean classmates. It was incomprehensible to me, but I was confronted by that fear when I took a trip to a southern village in Belize. The village has no modern system of running water or electricity. For three days, I with the villagers went into the woods to gather firewood for cooking, made traditional Garifuna food, bathed in the river that has a small water fall, chased fire flies, and watched night sky filled with millions of stars. That fear in me was gone as I fell in love with everyone with me on that trip. Co-existing in nature, I met my own racism that was instilled in me through my growing up. In Taiwan, White supremacy culture and beliefs are exalted through an unconscious worship of American media and Western education. Confronting that in myself also helped me to see the kind of oppression that was done to me because of being different.

Being an Asian woman walking down the street in Belize, catcalling by the men passing by is inevitable. I was often referred to as “chiney gial” or “sexy chiney gial”. In school, my classmates would look at my lunch with disgust or outwardly told me to go eat somewhere else because they didn’t like how my food smelled. Some teachers would look

¹³ This was suggested in Noddings, N. (2007). Curriculum for the 21st century. In D. J. Flindres & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (2013, p. 379-398). London: Routledge.

¹⁴ See Abram, D. (2011). *Becoming animal: An earthly cosmology*. Vintage.

¹⁵ Pseudonym is used here out of respect.

¹⁶ bell hooks (2009) shares a similar encounter. She recounts in *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, “Nature was the foundation of our counter hegemonic black sub-culture. Nature was the place of victory. In the natural environment, everything had its place including human. In that environment everything was likely to be shaped by the reality of mystery. There dominant culture could not wield absolute power” (p. 8)

at me in puzzlement when I didn't get a math or physics question. "Aren't you Asian? Aren't you supposed to know this?" But there was one place where all of these seemed to fade away—the river behind the chicken shop, where my family and I would go for a swim and picnic. I can remember vividly by that riverside, there is a big rock that children would use as a diving platform. I would always jump off the rock with the children there. There would be villagers bathing and washing their clothes in the river. On the riverbank, there would be families cooking and my family would bring our stove and cook a huge pot of noodle soup. There was no name passing, perverted gazes, or shaming. We would swim, play, laugh and just be together. Somehow in that setting with the natural world in the forefront, we, people of different cultures, co-existed together in harmony.

Sofia's story – the girl shocked by all the trees - alarmed me and as I reflect back to my own educational journey, Nature was just pages in my biology class even though my school was built within a tropical forest. We were taught that learning should be confined in the box-like classroom and knowledge is what's given by the teacher and the textbook, while the richness of the world is right there surrounding us everyday. We are taught that we are separated from nature. We are rational beings and nature is chaotic that needs our control. Somehow, we are placed in a higher position to the very earth that we are so deeply connected to and depend on for survival. The hierarchical way of thinking and compartmentalization of knowledge in our educational system fails to recognize the interconnectedness of the whole earthly community¹⁷. Not only the separation with nature, we gradually become separated from ourselves and each other as our society becomes more and more instrumental and individualistic. We somehow think we (humans) have the right to exploit nature and 'other' humans¹⁸. Now, I can see why my students and colleagues were hurting, why the land I love so much is roaring painfully in silence.

It was cold and wet. I was walking on a trail surrounded by Douglas Firs and Cedar of different sizes. I couldn't help feeling the frigidity seeping into my bones and the dampness that made my body uncomfortable. I stopped in front of a giant Douglas fir. I could feel its greatness and history, but I could also feel the unfamiliarity. I whispered, "who are you?" And I could feel it asked me back, "who are you?"

Although I had grown up in a place of nature, I have never consciously cultivated a connection with the place. I had always treated Belize as a place of transition, a place that serves as a jumping board to the success defined by the modern Western culture. Purposely, I did not pay attention to the land upon which I walk everyday or reflect on the joy swimming in the river had brought me. I became an "anthological machine"¹⁹ marching day in and day out waiting to be more instrumental for the very system that was sucking my life away. Like a child with Nature Deficit Disorder²⁰, I had an innate feeling of fear of the natural world, much like the fear I had for my Belizean classmates. I

¹⁷ See Snowberry, C., & Blenkinsop, S. (2010). "Why are those Leaves Red?" Making Sense of the Complex Symbols: Ecosemiotics in Education. *Trumpeter*, 26(3), 50-60.

¹⁸ See Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Psychology Press.

¹⁹ See Agamben, G. (2004). *The Open: Man and Animal*. CA: Stanford University Press.

²⁰ See Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our kids from nature deficit disorder*. Capital Hill: Algonquin Books.

did not appreciate the slowness that is so central to the people's way of life. When I began my postgraduate study in Canada, I started to see and understand the rotten fruits of my education and my own actions that contribute to perpetuating the system, at the same time recognizing a growing feeling for the potential education has to reverse the current dismay²¹. I remember a Latino scholar Richard Rodriguez once describe the paradoxical effect of education, "If, because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents, my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about the fact" (quoted in Warnick, 2007, p. 60), and I extend that feeling of separateness and the articulation of that separateness to the natural world.

I knew then I had to re-learn and re-cultivate affinity with nature and start slowing down to appreciate and understand life's beauty and suffering. Through this process, I had come to see the complexity of my own situatedness. I had to shed the layers of my own privilege and oppression— as drifter from culture to culture, and place to place, I have become a colonizer and the colonized, the privileged and underprivileged, oppressor and the oppressed. In the discourse of social justice and environmental education, I often find human complexity being reduce into dualistic or single-constructed term of black and white, rich and poor, or male and female. There is a lack of deeper conversation on the in-between spaces and the people who dwell in those places. The more I listen to this discourse the more I find myself disappear in it.

It's six in the morning. Waking up to the sunrise, I put on tank top and shorts and started running on the white sandy beach. I roamed on the beach covered in sweat and when I came across a pier, I jumped and immediately floated back on the salty Caribbean Sea. I am home.

Summer, 2015, I visited Belize, after two year away. As I arrived, I immediately felt the heat and the humid air. I changed out of my long jeans and jacket, donning a tank top and shorts, what I would always wear when I was home. I went on the beach and walked around the island of Caye Caulker. I saw coconut trees, different kinds of palm trees, sea grapes, sour saps, spiders and their intricate webs, different sea birds, and lizards of different sizes and kinds. I might not know some of the plants and animals by the names that humans have given them, but I know them. The unfamiliarity that I experience in the boreal rain forest of the Pacific Northwest vanished and inside my body there was a surge of power directing my every move. I didn't need to articulate. I didn't need to ponder. My body knew where to go. I was covered in a sweat of comfort. A sense of belonging overwhelmed me. I felt at home. bell hooks describes a culture of belonging as she quotes Carol Lee Flinder, "there is intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, expressiveness, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing, playfulness, inclusiveness, nonviolent conflict resolution, and openness to spirit" (p.13). All these ways of belonging were coming back to me pushing open the false cover of the dominant culture. However, a sense of belonging does not mean a sense of settling.

The primary reason to visit Belize was not to visit my family but for a research project. A school in Caye Caulker, a small island Northeast of Belize City, was opening

²¹ See Orr, D. W. (2004). *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

and the funder of the school wants to radicalize this new elementary school. He wants something unique, different from how schooling is done in Belize. He would often say that he wants his school to be the ‘best’ elementary school in Belize. But his vision was blurred. He knew he wants something different, unique and the ‘best’ but he doesn’t know what that means. He doesn’t know what an education for Belizeans by Belizeans should look like. We struck up a conversation about that. Everyone had glints in their eyes and I could feel visions, imaginations and possibilities were forming in each of us. People started talking passionately. They mentioned the beautiful natural world and the vastly diverse cultures represented in Belize. However, in that conversation, a familiar feeling of disappearing crept up in me. Where are the Asian minority in this conversation? The children who came to this land and have become part of the land? In my own homeland, I felt not at home. The at-home-but-not-at-home feeling somehow pushed a voice out of me. I need to speak to that. I need to start a conversation about that. We can no longer talk about socio-ecological justice without addressing the multiplicity of people who have displaced time after time.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the school year, the kids were so happy to return to MPES. They were gathered at a woodlot that’s full of Douglas Firs and Cedar trees as is common in the Pacific Northwest. The woodlot is situated on the unceded territory of the Kwantlen and Katzie Peoples. The younger kids were there a week before the older kids because the older kids were away camping. When the older kids came back to school, everyone gathered in their various ‘clans’, a way the school organizes the children into multi-age groups. The clans were to set out to find a place to set up their tents for the week. Before they went on their search expeditions, the principal said to the older kids, “remember to let the younger kids choose the place first because they were here before you”. All of a sudden, a strange discomfort emerged in me. As the kids excitedly spread out on their journey of finding their clan’s new home, I looked at this beautiful group of kids who are from predominately white middle class homes, I wondered to myself how about the Indigenous people that were here way before the younger kids, the older kids, way before all of us? And how about the children that would never have the opportunity to participate in a cultural change project as the MRES because of the lack of privilege?

In this paper, I have presented in a kind of exploratory and probing way the various discussions and challenges around cultural change projects of decolonization and reinhabitation in place-based education and the distinctive ways people understand place, colonization and social justice issues (including my own). Greenwood (2003) emphasizes in his essay *The Best of Both Worlds: Critical Pedagogy of Place*,

The critical synthesis posed by a critical pedagogy of place posits that the questions of what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved are equally critical and necessary, that cultural and ecological contexts are always two parts of the same whole, that decolonization and reinhabitation are mutually supportive objectives, that outrage toward injustice must be balanced with renewing relationships of care for others—human and non-human—and that the shared experience of everyday places promotes the critical dialogue and reflection that is essential to identifying and creating community well-being (p. 320).

In this statement, Greenwood points out the intricacy of realizing decolonization and reinhabitation. To answer the question “what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved” and to understand “the shared experiences of everyday places” requires us to examine ourselves and our own understanding of colonization. We need to understand this is unsettling work that compels us to ‘settle’ in that unconformable place. Educators that are engaged in the work of decolonization and reinhabitation need to practice “hyperactive pessimism” (Foucault as cited in Blenkinsop, 2014, p.154)²². That is, it is not enough to be constantly critically vigilant and questioning of the status quo. We also need to find ways to help our students recognize the dominant oppressive ways and provide a space for processing and finding alternative. This will lead to “further questioning and adjustment as the layers of colonization, including environmental, are peeled away and the teacher and community develop a more complete picture of the culture towards which they aspire” (Blenkinsop, 2014, p.154). For me, to keep vigilant and to keep shedding the layers of colonization, I understand that I need to reclaim the joy brought forth by the land I walk on, and the journey continues bring me to moments of relearning and unlearning.

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²² In my other paper, I argue that teachers need to assume a role of “activist” to actively stand against currents of the dominant system. See Ho, J. (2015). Towards a Linking Activist Pedagogy: Teacher Activism for Social-Ecological Justice. *Ed Review* Fall 2015 (1). <http://journals.sfu.ca/sfuer/index.php/sfuer/issue/current>

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