

# We Cannot Call Back Colonial Stories: Storytelling and Critical Land Literacy

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Rosalind Hampton  
*University of Ottawa*

Ashley DeMartini  
*McGill University*

## Abstract

This article examines the role of stories and storytelling in both shaping and revealing pre-service teachers' understandings of land. The authors conducted a study using digital storytelling as a participatory method of inquiry examining participants' conceptions of land. Participants' narratives reflect stories they have been told about their families, communities, and nations, revealing inextricable links between conceptions of land, nation, and self in relation to others. The authors propose the notion of critical land literacy as a pedagogical goal in Teacher Education. They define critical land literacy as an understanding of, and relation to, land informed by Indigenous knowledges and a critique of ongoing settler-colonialism in Canada.

*Keywords:* teacher education, critical land literacy, storytelling, Indigenous knowledges, settler-colonialism

## **On ne peut effacer les récits coloniaux : les histoires racontées et la littératie critique de la terre**

### **Résumé**

Cet article analyse l'influence des histoires et récits dans la compréhension du territoire chez les enseignants en formation, sur la base d'une étude réalisée par les auteures, et au cours de laquelle des enseignants en formation ont produit des histoires numérisées à propos du territoire. Les récits des participants reflètent les histoires qui leur ont été racontées à propos de leurs familles, communautés et nations, et révèlent des liens inextricables entre les conceptions de la terre, de la nation, et du soi en relation avec les autres. Les auteures proposent de faire de la notion de littératie critique de la terre un objectif pédagogique dans la formation des enseignants. La littératie critique de la terre est ici définie comme une compréhension et une relation au territoire qui prend en compte les savoirs autochtones, ainsi que la critique du colonialisme persistant au Canada.

*Mots-clés :* formation à l'enseignement, littératie critique de la terre, récits, savoirs autochtones, colonialisme

## Introduction

Once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told.

—Thomas King (2003, p. 10)

Stories possess the power of meaning-making. They shape how we engage with and make sense of our lives. The stories we are told and those we tell both frame and reflect our understandings of ourselves, of the world around us, and of our place within it. It is in this way that Thomas King (2003) asserts that stories, both wondrous and dangerous, “can control our lives” (p. 9); that essentially, stories are “all we are” (p. 2). The stories that pre-service teachers engage with and internalize shape their emerging teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices. As teachers, many will act as the central storytellers in their classrooms (Strong-Wilson, Yoder, & Phipps, 2014), making conscious and subconscious decisions about what to pass on to their students.

In this article we discuss the role of stories and storytelling in both shaping and revealing pre-service teachers’ understandings of land. In 2016, we conducted a pilot study with Bachelor of Education students in a course on Media, Technology, and Education. Students were asked to create digital stories about their relationship with land, which we subsequently examined to assess digital storytelling as a participatory visual method of inquiry and to identify dominant themes that emerged in their narratives.

Participants share childhood experiences of learning on and from land, emotional connections to land as “home” and nation, and a sense of responsibility to care for land. Some participants acknowledge multiple, contested definitions of land. However, most of their stories do not suggest a critical engagement with historical and ongoing social-political and economic relations involving land. The stories thus highlight how understandings of and connections to land come from the “personal, community, national and global narratives” available to us (Styres, 2008, p. 75, note 17), and emerge through our material, theoretical, spiritual, and emotional engagements and ways of knowing (Tuck, McKenzie,

& McCoy, 2014; Styres, Haig-Brown, & Blimkie, 2013; Styres, 2011). If teacher candidates only know land through stories promoting settler-colonial and capitalist ideas, their impulse and ability to critique those ideas and the social relations they uphold remain limited. As future teachers, what stories will they then bring into their classrooms? Hence we identify the need in Teacher Education to foster more complex understandings of land informed by critical social theories and Indigenous knowledges, which we discuss as “critical land literacy.” We contend that the development of racial literacy and critical land literacy can support anti-colonial praxis (thinking and acting against coloniality), without reducing Indigeneity and decolonization to depoliticized metaphors. We locate this work in conversation with a burgeoning area of scholarship that recognizes the epistemological and pedagogical value of storytelling and asserts the role of land as a first teacher from where all learning proceeds (Chambers, 2006, 2008; Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002, 2008; Haig-Brown & Hodson, 2009; Haig-Brown, 2005; L. B. Simpson, 2014; Styres, 2011; Zinga & Styres, 2011).

## **Personal Introductions**

As non-Indigenous scholars teaching and conducting research at a settler-colonial university located on unceded Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) territory, we are deeply implicated in this work and do not pretend to be outside of the colonial-capitalist relations that we critique. An awareness of the incomplete and ongoing nature of our own learning as we think critically about where we have come from and the kinds of stories we have believed and perpetuated reminds us to remain humble in relation to the starting points of settler students.

### **Rosalind**

I was born in the United States, on the traditional territory of the Massachuset and Wampanoag peoples. My mother, a descendant of Scottish and English settlers, was also born in the state of Massachusetts, while my father was born in South Carolina on the traditional land of the Congaree peoples. As far as I “know,” my paternal ancestry is predominantly African (although I do not know from what area/s of Africa) and my ancestors were brought to the southern United States as slaves. Our last name, Hampton, is

likely that of famed third-generation slave owner and Confederate military hero General Wade Hampton III.

When I was five years old, my family moved to Montreal (Tiohtià:ke). Throughout my life I have benefited from opportunities to learn with, on, and about land on traditional territories of the St. Lawrence Iroquois, Mohawk, and Huron-Wendat Nations. However, much of what and how I learned about land was disconnected from knowledge about and engagement with these Indigenous peoples and had been filtered through settler-colonial and Canadian nationalist narratives. Developing an anti-colonial critique has thus involved and continues to involve a self-reflexive process of examining not only what I know, but also how I know it and how that knowing is related to the production of power. For me, this is an integral part of understanding historical and current relations between Black and Indigenous peoples and critically (re)situating myself in relation to the Canadian nation. This process is also an inherent and ongoing part of my work as an educator and researcher as I seek to Indigenize/“decolonize” the methods of inquiry and pedagogical practices I take up and pass on to others.

## **Ashley**

I grew up in rural-west Ontario—the territory of the Saugeen-Ojibwe Nation, Lake Simcoe-Nottawasaga Treaty No. 18. On my mother’s side, I come from English settlers who migrated to North America in the mid-19th century for better economic opportunities. On my father’s side, my grandparents fled Czechoslovakia following the Second World War to escape political persecution. My family’s stories of success, struggle, migration, and settlement are not unique and they shape how I exist in this world. Our relationships with land in Canada span three centuries: they are complex and a part of the ongoing national settler project of the Canadian state.

I too benefited from opportunities to learn about and with the land, developing an appreciation for the forests, meadows, rivers, and creeks around my home. However, the initial relationship I formed with land had glaring absences: missing from this relationship was an awareness of the Saugeen-Ojibwe peoples, their histories, culture, governing structures, and protocols of this territory. Nobody told me about these stories, so I never questioned why my relationship with land occluded Native peoples of this territory in the past and present. My socialization into this settler-state and its white supremacist

structures is intergenerational. Hence, I situate my work as an educator and researcher within anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist thought and action, geared toward interrupting and replacing these dominant narratives and structures.<sup>1</sup> Now on Kanien'kehá:ka territory, I think about my presence here and what is required from me to act responsibly and respectfully while I reside here.

## Stories and Colonialism

While storytelling is a widespread practice across cultures, there is a long-standing Western tradition<sup>2</sup> of creating and telling stories about other peoples' histories, societies, and cultural practices. This tradition is an essential part of imperialism, which has enabled Western Europeans to impose their stories as universal truths,<sup>3</sup> while misrepresenting non-Western narratives as the fantasies, superstitions, and lies of naïve, unsophisticated, and uncivilized less-than-humans (Delgado, 1989; Kabbani, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 2003). However, rather than "truth," Western European stories—like all stories—represent historically and culturally specific ideas, desires, and socio-political and economic interests.

European colonial ideology is embedded in the narratives and structural foundations of settler-colonial societies such as Canada. Violent histories of domination and exploitation have been replaced with comforting stock stories of "discovery" and "civilization" that have become "mainstream" knowledge through forceful repetition (Delgado, 1989). The normalization of such settler-colonial stories helps to construct a dominant shared social "reality" characterized by habitual "patterns of perception" that impede our ability to see, let alone consider alternatives (Delgado, 1989, pp. 2416–2422). Accordingly, dominant Canadian narratives portray settler colonialism as an event of the past, rather than a lasting structure sustained by state practices that continue to target Indigenous

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1 These "anti-" positions signal not only an oppositional stance, but also a commitment to building societies free from colonial-capitalist violence and oppression.

2 While we use the term "Western" to refer to ideology, epistemology, and cultural traditions attributed to Western Europeans and their descendants, we are cognizant that the construction of a reductionist East-West binary is highly problematic and was a strategic element of this very ideology. For a more in-depth discussion of the political and historical significance of these terms, see Silver (2015).

3 See Mignolo (2009) regarding epistemological and ontological imperialism.

peoples for elimination (Coulthard, 2014; A. Simpson, 2014; Wolfe, 2006). Major state institutions (particularly legal, educational, and mass media systems) disseminate narratives that celebrate Euro-Canadian benevolence, while discrediting and erasing historic and ongoing opposition and resistance (Dua, Razack & Warner, 2005; Razack, Smith & Thobani, 2010; Thobani, 2007). These stories naturalize white supremacy to make the current social order seem fair to those who benefit from it and unavoidable to those whom it marginalizes.

However, even as they are denied, histories of colonialism in Canada are implicitly known, like public “secrets of Canadian-ness” (M. Francis, 2011, p. 4). Many Indigenous Nations across Turtle Island (North America) remain engaged in centuries-old struggles to reclaim their sovereignty and land stolen through colonialism. Their stories have not been fully silenced and forgotten and storytelling is highly valued within Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and protocols (Archibald, 2008; Lowan, 2009; L. B. Simpson, 2014; Styres, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Zinga & Styres, 2011). Remembering, listening to, sharing, and recording stories has been and remains a crucial means of anti-colonial resistance for Black and Indigenous peoples (Baszile, 2014; Hua, 2013; L. Simpson, 2014; Whiteduck, 2013). These counter-narratives disrupt and challenge assumed truths about Canada. “Nations themselves are narrations,” they are a series of stories about battles over land—“who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future” (Said, 1993, pp. xii–xiii). Thus, the links between land, sovereignty, and storytelling are particularly relevant.

In recent years, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has brought some Indigenous people’s stories to the fore, facilitating broad public access to personal testimonies regarding the Residential School System and the extensive, inter-generational trauma that it inflicted upon Indigenous children, families, and communities (TRC, 2015). As educators working within this national climate, we are cognizant of the importance of the TRC and its potential to open space for explicit critiques of settler colonialism geared toward structural change. However, as several Indigenous scholars and activists have made clear, “reconciliation” requires much more than an apology from the Canadian government (Belcourt, 2015; Chrisjohn and Wasacase, 2011; Coulthard, 2014; L. Simpson, 2011). What and why is the Canadian state attempting to reconcile? Which stories continue to be muted? If educational responses to the TRC focus solely

on Indigenous trauma, they set the stage for a “rescue curriculum” that re-stories settler benevolence and white saviourhood (Paperson, 2014, p. 124; Tuck, 2009). In the absence of rigorous anti-colonial critique and action, reconciliation tends toward symbolic gestures that strengthen rather than dismantle dominant settler-nationalist narratives. Educators must therefore vigilantly work against the fetishization of Indigenous peoples and superficial assimilation of Indigenous knowledges into current Euro-Canadian structures (Battiste, 2013; L.R. Simpson, 2004). Hence, in our scholarship and teaching we work to challenge colonial ideology and the epistemologies and practices it informs.

## **Research Design**

This study is built on work Ashley had begun years earlier as a student in a Decolonizing Methodologies course taught by Dr. Celia Haig-Brown at York University. Addressing her relationship to land through Haig-Brown’s (2009) “decolonizing autobiographies” assignment had a powerful impact on Ashley, displacing her taken-for-granted notions of herself and raising critical awareness of her socialization as a white settler in a settler-colonial nation. She has continued to develop this consciousness through her own teaching practice.

In 2016, Ashley invited Rosalind to collaborate on a pilot project for her doctoral research, recruiting participants from students in a digital media class Ashley was teaching. Students were asked to create digital stories about what land means to them and how they understand their relationship to land. The assignment called on them to consider where their family has come from and “where they have come to” (Haig-Brown, 2009, p. 5), and how they are located physically and historically in relation to land. Teacher candidates selected, compiled, and edited their images, shaping how, and to what extent, their ideas about land are conveyed in the stories they produced (Dahya & Jenson, 2015; Mitchell, 2011; Rose, 2014). In recruiting participants, we explained that we are interested in how digital stories might support pre-service teachers to reflect on their relationship to Indigenous land and begin to cultivate a teaching practice that engages with Indigenous content and related topics. Those who wished to participate did so by volunteering their digital story upon completion of the course. “Participatory” in the context of this pilot study, then, refers to this role of each participant in producing a story and accompanying written text based on their perspectives and experiences. This represents a primary



level of analysis of their relationships with land. In the larger research project for which this was a pilot (DeMartini, forthcoming), participants remain centred throughout the co-creation of knowledge and research outputs (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2012; Gubrium & Difulvio, 2011; Gubrium & Harper, 2013). Hence, they also conduct a secondary level of analysis of how they have represented land in their stories.

The idea of decolonizing autobiographies is not without tensions. As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, academic references to decolonization are often superficial, reducing it to a metaphor and re-centring whiteness, thus eliminating the possibility of actual decolonization. Recognizing that “deconstructing coloniality is *not* the same as decolonization” (Paperson, 2014, p. 124), we cautiously take up Haig-Brown’s (2009) concept of decolonizing autobiographies as an ongoing, transformative process oriented towards “deep learning” (Haig-Brown, 2000) and further action. We understand decolonizing as something that is always already tied to Indigenous sovereignty, land, and land-based education (Simpson & Coulthard, 2014; Wildcat, Irlbacher-Fox, Coulthard, & McDonald, 2014). Therefore, (re)situating ourselves in relation to land and Indigenous peoples is necessary foundational work from which the development of any and all other critical consciousness in the Canadian context must proceed.

## Critical Land Literacy

Several participants’ stories operationalize the myth of *terra nullius* (“nobody’s land”): the idea that European settlers discovered and brought civilization to an empty wilderness where land was theirs for the taking (Davidson, 2014; M. Francis, 2011; Harrington, 2014). This myth informs dominant notions of Canada’s origins and has been key to the systemic destruction and attempted erasure of Indigenous cultures, knowledges, spirituality, and political systems in order to legitimize the Canadian state (Dion, 2004; Ford, 2013; Razack, 2002; Whiteduck, 2013).

Hence we are working with the concept of *critical land literacy* (CLL), defined as a critical consciousness and understanding of land that centres Indigenous knowledges and presence, while recognizing the ways in which the past and present co-constitute each other. CLL requires the critique of ongoing settler-colonial and capitalist practices that normalize white hegemony and the dispossession, exploitation, and destruction of land and Indigenous peoples’ ways of life. While the term “land literacy” has been used

to describe the ability to “read” the land in order to determine the health of the agricultural environment (Baker, 1997; Campbell, 1994), we take up Indigenous conceptions of land that extend beyond the agricultural environment. Land is a complex system of living entities that provides a basis to understand the interdependence of all life (Coulthard, 2014; L. B. Simpson, 2014; Styres, 2011; *Beyond Boarding*, 2014).

In developing the concept of CLL, we draw on critical race legal scholar Lani Guinier’s (2004) notion of racial literacy: “the capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames [national narratives]” (p. 100). Guinier defines racial literacy through an explicit critique of racial liberalism, which presents racism as an irrational interpersonal anomaly that will surrender to logic and interracial contact. Such assumptions not only fail to dismantle structural racism, they help maintain racial hierarchy through cloaking and reinforcing the social relations that rationalize and constantly reproduce it (Bell, 2004; Guinier, 2004). For instance, the racial liberalism of Canadian multiculturalism has long been critiqued for failing to address white supremacy, erasing class inequity, and depoliticizing and diverting the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles of Indigenous Peoples and people of colour (Bannerji, 2000; Dua, Razack, & Warner, 2005; Mackey, 1999; Razack, 1998; Saloojee, 2004; Thobani, 2007).

Racially literate analysis highlights the role of state institutions (such as education) in disseminating and perpetuating dominant ideologies that normalize and reproduce racial hierarchy. Such analysis deciphers “the dynamic interplay among race, class and geography” (Guinier, 2004, p. 114) that characterizes and maintains the colonial-capitalist social order of Canada. Building on this, CLL recognizes how settler colonialism has always been about the acquisition, control, exploitation, and retention of land. All modes of governance, policies, and legislation that proceed from the settler nation state are, in essence, to support these aims—land theft, slavery, unhonoured treaties, residential schools, urban gentrification, policing, and prisons to name but a few. Thus we argue that the durable racial grammar shaping Canadian society is inseparable from and works in tandem with particular assumptions about land and various peoples’ relations to land. CLL requires we engage fundamental tensions between Indigenous notions of land and sovereignty and Western notions of individual ownership and property as defining characteristics of Eurocentric conceptions of democracy (Grande, 2004). Hence, the development of CLL within teacher education programs can help us begin to dismantle—rather than

perpetuate—the *colonial grammar* of the Canadian state that rationalizes and normalizes the ongoing theft and destruction of Indigenous peoples’ territories and ways of life.

## Participants’ Stories

The participants in this study included descendants from French and Anglo settlers, a Filipino-Canadian, Italian-Canadian, and a member of the Kanien’kahá:ka Nation.<sup>4</sup> In their stories we observe overlapping influences of nationhood, colonial-capitalist ideologies, and Indigenous knowledges, which have variously shaped both their notions of themselves and their relations with land.

### Nations and Nationhood

Most participants’ stories communicate the association of land with national heritage and/or nationalism. Land is defined *as* nation in some instances, with some participants’ relations to land seemingly shaped by the dominant Canadian narrative of the nation as a multicultural mosaic. Participants whose parents moved to Canada from elsewhere acknowledge these nations and migrations as part of their own storied relations to land. For example, in the introduction to G.’s story the word “Land” appears in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen as she states: “This is land, for my parents: the Philippines.” Several unspecified images of people and places in the Philippines accompany this statement, and the Filipino national anthem plays in the background. An image of a globe follows, with a red line drawn from the Philippines across the Pacific Ocean to Montreal as G. explains her parents’ migration. While several seconds of video filmed from an airplane is shown, the Canadian national anthem becomes the soundtrack. It is the instrumental version of the anthem that plays, and the viewer familiar with it can imagine the accompanying lyrics: “O Canada, our home and native land.” This opening sequence acts as a prelude to G.’s story, which is organized into chapters indicated by titles that appear in capital letters on the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. These titles clearly assert the story and land as *hers*: MY PLAYGROUND: HOME; MY LAND: PRIDE; MY

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4 Each participant is identified by a single letter pseudonym.

LAND: OPPORTUNITY; and MY LAND: DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION. While this last chapter mentions the Philippines as one of the places she has been able to travel to, the emphasis is on travel itself. It is clear that her land is (in) Canada.

A. also introduces her story with reference to her family's migrations. She begins her narrative with a photo of herself standing in front of a fireplace in her family's home. Above the fireplace, a map of Italy is mounted on the wall. A. is holding a piece of paper in front of her chest upon which is written "ITALY" in the green, white, and red colours of the Italian flag. She explains that her father came to Canada from Italy, as did her mother's parents, while her mother was born in Canada. A. says that Canada is her place of birth as well, while a second photograph features her standing adjacent to the map, gesturing toward it. A third photograph offers a closer image of the map of Italy, with A.'s fingers pointing toward the middle of the country. She states that, especially because she has lived in the same place (in *Canada*) her entire life, land means a lot to her. This marks a clear transition into her story, the remainder of which is set outdoors in her suburban neighbourhood.

As Canadians from immigrant families, both G. and A. acknowledge their parents' national origins in establishing their relation to land and/as nation. However, while G.'s narrative quite clearly identifies her parents' land/nation as the Philippines and hers as Canada, A. does almost the opposite, strongly expressing her own Italian identity as part of her identity as Canadian. While further details regarding G.'s and her parents' relations to the Philippines and to Canada are beyond the scope of our study, we note the racialized nature of Canadian multiculturalism and how the state situates various im/migrants in relation to Canada as a nation constructed as "white" (Galabuzi, 2006; Smith, 2003; Thobani, 2007). As "visible minorities," Filipino-Canadians are located within complex, often contradictory social relations, expectations and state narratives of inclusion and exclusion (Coloma, 2012).

The idea of a Canadian multicultural mosaic is meant to suggest there is no one dominant category of citizen, and it is common to refer to most ethno-cultural groups as "hyphenated-Canadians," such as Italian-Canadians and Filipino-Canadians. However, a long-standing national narrative describes the French and English as the two "founding races" of what is now Canada, with the caveat that the British won control of the settler colony and built the nation. Thus, white people of assumed Western-European heritage in general and Anglo-Canadians in particular are largely perceived as the "real" Canadians,

as “*Canadian-Canadians*” (Mackey, 1999; Stewart, 2014). In Quebec, this narrative coexists in tension with Quebec nationalist stories of French settlement and of subsequent “colonization” by the British, complicating Québécois identity in relation to Indigeneity and Indigenous peoples, a point to which we return below.

K. and T., both of white, Anglo-Canadian ancestry, did not use explicit references to their ancestry to anchor their digital stories, suggesting to us their sense of national belonging. T. opens her story with the text, “LAND=PLACE OF DREAMS,” followed by images of the town where she has always lived and several photos of her family’s house and property. K. introduces her narrative with video of her skiing down a hill in a snow-storm. She is the only person visible in the video. Text across the bottom of the screen reads: “After skiing a day at Jay Peak I have realized that/ Land is earth at its peak beauty/ And land is here to allow people to use it responsibly for their full enjoyment/ Here is my day.”

All of K.’s story is set at the ski resort and consists of photos and video clips of the environment there and of her skiing. She explains that skiing at Jay Peak is a family tradition started by her grandfather in 1960. In her written reflection, K. does mention her Canadian identity, explaining, “Most people identify with their origins; Jay Peak is in the United States and I am Canadian. Yet, it is the personal connection with Jay that makes it feel like home.” In this gesture K. disconnects her relation to land from the confines of nation and national borders, asserting a family connection to the ski resort as “like home” based on its use by three generations of her family. While this can be read as a challenge to nationalist assumptions, we also heed how the co-construction of whiteness and settler entitlement has always entailed “the right to claim land and sometimes people as property, and conversely, the right not to be bound by borders nor bonded as property” (Paper-son, 2014, p. 116).

National identity also has a strong presence in S.’s narrative. Her story is set in the Mohawk territory where she was raised as a child, which she describes as “the place I can call home, no matter how many actual homes I have lived in elsewhere.” Her story includes video footage of the area, in which we see several Mohawk flags flying alongside the road. The audio component of S.’s story is narrated in Kanien’keha by her mother, with English subtitles provided at the bottom of the screen. S. explains in the written text accompanying her story that she asked her mother to act as narrator because she is more fluent in their language. Here we read S.’s use of Kanien’keha as reflective

of her understanding of language as an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty and epistemology (Battiste, 2013; L. Simpson, 2011; Styres, 2011; Vowel, 2016). Her assertions of nation challenge Canadian multiculturalist views that situate Indigenous peoples as “cultural communities” *within* Canada, rather than as nations engaged in nation-to-nation relationships with Canada. Moreover, S. chose contemporary Indigenous-urban music by singer-songwriter Flying Down Thunder of the Algonquin Nation, Loon Clan, as the soundtrack for her story. The song, sung in Algonquin, was produced in collaboration with Canadian DJ-producer Rise Ashen<sup>5</sup> and thus situates Indigenous nationhood in the present, in relation to Canada.

***Québécoise national origins.*** Two participants, C. and E., identify predominantly with French Québécoise heritage, although C. does not make this explicit in her story. In their stories, we perceive efforts to situate themselves in positive ways in relation to Indigenous peoples and to land. As noted above, francophone Quebec origin stories are complicated by histories of having been early colonizers subsequently subjected to British domination and anglo cultural hegemony. Moreover, early French colonial officials recognized Indigenous Peoples as separate nations and as allies, and emphasized religious conversion and assimilation (Battiste, 2013). Hence from a particular Québécois perspective, the “real Canadians” are also seen as the “real” colonizers and the French/Québécois are assumed to have essentially better relations with Indigenous Nations than the English/rest of Canada (see Vowel, 2016, pp. 44–45).

In the beginning of E.’s story, she states that her great-grandfather was Indigenous and identifies herself as “a descendent of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.” She locates her Indigenous ancestors as having been on the land prior to the arrival of her French ancestors in 1660. E. does not specify the national affiliation/s of her great-grandfather, and provides stock photos (a longhouse, an “Indigenous meeting”) and symbolic visual representations (for example, a dream catcher) of Indigeneity in her story, followed by photographs of two houses that belonged to her French ancestors. E. identifies Indigenous and French relations to land as conflicting, and states in her accompanying written narrative, “my definition of the land is quite similar to my Indigenous ancestors’ one.”

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5 An interview with Flying Down Thunder about this collaboration and contemporary Indigenous youth culture is available at <http://rpm.fm/interview/flying-down-thunder-dreams-big-with-culture/>

C. also acknowledges the presence of First Nations prior to the arrival of Europeans, although she does not clearly locate herself geographically or in relation to a family history. We learn from the written text accompanying her story that she sought to represent land as “something way more abstract than a physical space or a material entity.” However, in her attempt to expand her understanding of land beyond notions of place and property, she constructs a narrative in which she is not positioned at all, neither in relation to land, the past, nor the present.

In trying to come to terms with the colonialism of Canada, members of dominant groups employ a range of strategies, often subconsciously, to protect themselves/ourselves from having to face their/our privilege, how it was attained, and how it has been and continues to be maintained. This involves what Zeus Leonardo (2009) discusses as white racial knowledge (of cognitive, discourse, and behavioural strategies that protect white dominance) and what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) refer to as settler moves to innocence: strategies for claiming innocence in relation to colonialism and disassociating oneself from a settler identity. Among such strategies that conceal colonial relations and preserve white settler dominance are claiming proximity to Natives and/or Indigenous knowledges, and/or claiming partial, often unspecified Indigenous heritage (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Vowel, 2016). These are particularly prominent and contentious issues in Quebec, where “a significant majority of the descendants of seventeenth-century French settlers” have at least one Indigenous ancestor and increasing numbers have been claiming status as Métis, taking the French word *métis* to refer to mixed heritage (Vowel & Leroux, 2016, p. 34).

We raise this critique to highlight the ways in which E.’s story exists within the broader historical, social, and political contexts of Quebec. Indigenous nationhood, membership, and belonging have been and continue to be distorted and reshaped through colonial state practices and policies, and thus have enormous political implications for Indigenous sovereignty today (A. Simpson, 2014; Vowel, 2016). Critically engaging with such histories and local contexts is crucial to understanding contemporary social-political relations between Indigenous Nations, Quebec, and Canada.

## Colonial-Capitalist Logic

Some participants' narratives represented land as a permanent, infinite resource available and intended for their use. C. asserts, "land represents the infinity of opportunities we get in life," exemplifying several instances where participants' narratives echo iconic discourses associating land-as-settler-nation with "dreams" and "opportunity." In addition to colonialism, such notions are rooted in "capitalist ideals [that] depend upon infinite resources, infinite growth in a finite world" (Mel Bazil, in *Beyond Boarding*, 2014, 2 mins., 44 sec.). A number of the participants were athletes, which also seemed to contribute to such assumptions about land and its uses. For example, T. asserts, "the beauty of [land] will always be there. No matter what the season may be," and several minutes of her story feature photos and video of her engaging in (primarily but not exclusively outdoor) sports: swimming, soccer, indoor rock climbing, and skiing. As noted above, K. also understands land as "earth at its peak beauty," and believes "land is here to allow people to use it responsibly for their full enjoyment." Much of K.'s story features video of unpeopled snowy forests and ski trails, implying that she is alone as she skis and films. Text that appears across the screen explains: "When I think of land, I envision woods, peace, family ties, skiing the Timbuktu, and exploring everything the mountain has to offer." Finally, connections between land, exploration, and travel appear in a number of participants' stories. The final chapter of G.'s story, "MY LAND: DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION," features several travel photos and begins with the assertion: "We also learn things and experience feelings and connections on the lands that are not necessarily called home." T. identifies land as "providing ways for travelling and visiting" and shows a series of what appear to be vacation photos with subtitles identifying places she has travelled to.

These narratives suggest how colonialism, capitalism, and middle-class normativity work together in imagining entitlement to and ownership of land, generating the sense that, as T. states in the closing text of her story, "The world is my oyster and yours too." This objectification and commodification of land always involves the disappearance of Indigenous peoples: either relegating them to a pre-colonial, pre-"civilized" past, or erasing their presence altogether. In her story, C. expresses such connections between terra nullius and the accompanying myth of the vanishing/vanished Native (D. Francis, 1997; King, 2013) most explicitly when she states:



The land for me means we can build anything because if we think about the evolution of the land in Canada, it all started being nothing more than the ground and its nature, then the First Nations Peoples who build incredible things, then the European came, and did the same thing by adding onto what the Indigenous people construct, until today, where we continue to build on what was built [sic].

Furthermore, the use of stock images meant to represent Indigenous peoples by C. and E. locate an unspecified, essentialized Indigenous presence in the past, which works to erase Indigenous peoples and ongoing political struggles from the present.

It is particularly noteworthy that in C.'s attempt to articulate an understanding of land that extends beyond the limits of materialist interests, her narrative comes to rely on a simplified and generalized understanding of land. She writes, "The world is the land. One simple land. The land of every human. This is why I often refer to the land as 'our land.' The land should belong to everyone." Here we see the problematic limits of Western epistemology and liberal ideology that make meaning through categories of binary opposition and the assertion of universal ideals. Flipping myths of terra nullius and of the disappearing Native are settler moves to innocence: "nobody's land" becomes "everybody's land" and the absent Native becomes "we are all Indigenous." These are not gestures toward decolonization; they are acts of resettlement.

### **Multiple and Contested Definitions of Land**

A crucial starting point for expanding and developing new conceptions of land is becoming aware of multiple knowledge systems and beginning to understand how philosophical, epistemological, and methodological differences shape not only what is known, but what can be known. Acknowledgement of the conflicting nature of Euro-Canadian and Indigenous worldviews emerges in E.'s discussion of her dual heritage. She states that her French ancestors "must have been spiritual at some stage but over the generations they seem to have lost the connection to the land and forgot the great gifts it can give to them." She explains in her written reflection that one of her goals was "to emphasize on how one point of view could destroy the other;" how "excessive urban development, which can be related to my French ancestors' point of view...could lead to the destruction of the land, of the original earth that my Indigenous ancestors lived for." E. states that her "own understanding and meaning of the land" is based on this dual, contradicting inheritance

while attributing her connection to land and sense of responsibility for its well-being to her identity as “half-Indigenous.”

Other participants also acknowledged multiple meanings attributed to land. In her opening sequence, T. acknowledges: “Land has more meaning besides just the physical space,” and C.’s story opens with the *Webster’s* and the *Business Dictionary* definitions, adding “there is a more abstract aspect of this word which may not literally refer to the material and physical definitions of it.” She describes the dictionaries as providing “concrete definitions,” while recognizing that land means many different things to many different people. S.’s narrative reflects her belief that while land can refer to many places and environments, “it is more important to understand your relationship to that land.” Her story begins with an expression of gratitude to the Creator for everything in the universe and features a series of drawn images that make direct reference to the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén (Words Before All Else), a prayer she learned to recite at the beginning of each class at Mohawk-language school “to give thanks to everything that makes up who we are and the world we live in.” S. explains that “everything referenced in the prayer deserves the recognition whether we realize it or not and together they all make up our world, our land and impact our lives in some way.” Through interspersing the drawings with video clips filmed while driving through her home territory, S. situates herself and her community in a specific place, historically and in the present, as part of the network of relations that make up her understanding of land.

**Responsibility and concern.** Several participants articulate concern about the impact of residential and commercial development that they have witnessed in their lifetimes, and a sense of responsibility for caring for land. K. acknowledges “ski resorts are known for altering natural land, excessive water use and producing large amounts of fossil fuels,” and notes that the expansion of Jay Peak has led to increasing concerns about the “environmental impact on the mountain and surrounding area.” C. states that we “owe [the land] our life.” Suggesting the overwhelming nature of such a sense of debt, in her accompanying text she writes, “we owe [land] the respect it deserves and I think we are not truly doing so when I see how we are over-consuming and abusing the reserve of our land, but that would need another whole story to go through that issue.” E. writes that “by creating more and more urban developments, we are not only destroying the land, we are destroying our past, our present as well as our future.” She concludes, “the land is an

important source of our past and future. As humans, Indigenous or not, we must take care of it.” Finally, A. shows us areas in her neighbourhood that were “trees and forest” when she was younger, and have since been replaced with new houses and roads. She laments that “trees are being taken down *every day* to supplement the *wants, not the needs* of human life” and that this excessive development is leaving less and less space for “animals, critters and birds.” She concludes her story with the assertion that “this may not be *my* land, but this is my *home* and it must be taken care of.”

## Conclusion

Once a story is told it cannot be called back. We cannot simply erase colonial stories and decide we will no longer be influenced by colonial ideology and thus make it so. The only way to account for these colonial stories is to engage with them and directly confront the tensions, discomfort, and difficult truths they raise. This is how we will support future generations in remembering the past and telling different stories in the future. This inter-generational commitment is an essential part of decolonizing education that characterizes Indigenous, African diaspora, and other philosophies of education for liberation.

This study confirmed the potential of storytelling as a critical pedagogical practice and method of inquiry (Benmayor, 2008; Conle, 2000; Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007), while foregrounding the role of stories in the development of relationships with land. Participants came to this project variously situated in relation to land as well as to storytelling itself, carrying unquestioned narratives of self-in-relation to the world that shape their everyday lives (Strong-Wilson, 2007). Their stories provide specific examples that suggest how storytelling with and in relation to land can create openings for students to become aware of and challenge the linear, colonial, national narratives they have been taught and how they function. Understanding the stories our students come to us with will help us work with them to build CLL while recognizing the complex web of relations that these stories represent and exist within (emotionally, politically, spiritually, and historically).

Participants’ stories suggest that most came to the project with some concern for land. Beyond the scope of the work we discussed here, future work will include providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop CLL, the subject and focus of Ashley’s

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doctoral research. Building the notion of CLL within a framework of participatory visual methodologies, Ashley not only asks that participating teacher candidates tell their stories about land, but works with them to foster their ability to speak back to the colonial-capitalist logic that shapes their relationships. This kind of speaking back is an important pedagogical strategy in generating participant-driven analysis (Mitchell & De Lange, 2013). Preliminary findings in Ashley's research suggest that participants who engage in this work undergo shifts in their consciousness that allow them to challenge the linear, colonial narratives in their own stories. As the research discussed in this essay makes clear, CLL involves long-term, personal and professional commitments to dismantling colonial ideology in order to work against its reproduction in our teaching and learning. To this end, we argue that racial literacy and critical land literacy should be understood as crucial aims of teacher education programs that seek to promote anti-colonial pedagogical praxis.

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