

Place on Fire: A Curriculum of Resiliency

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Abstract: When the 2016 Horse River Wildfire occurred, residents of Wood Buffalo, Alberta found themselves thrust into new experiences. They found themselves navigating new identities, considering their sense of safety and security, and confronting their fractured connection to the land. In this article, two experiences of the 2016 Horse River Wildfire are considered, utilizing Therese Greenwood's personal account in her book "What you take with you" (2019) as a guide to consider both the experience of evacuation and the importance of the stories we tell about our own lives and experiences. In this work I reflect on stories of exodus, on the in-between, and on the act of returning home, and explore what these stories have to offer as a form of curriculum about resiliency. Furthermore, I consider how these stories play out in the lives of those who experienced the disaster and their movement towards recovery and how these stories might inform the conversation on learning and recovery in relation to place.

Keywords: Wildfire, Disaster, Recovery, Resiliency, Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo, Horse River Wildfire, Place, Evacuation

Locating Disaster as Curriculum

When a community experiences disaster, the residents are propelled into disruption, not only of their physical space, but also of their sense of identity, perception of security, and as a result, their connection to place. What do these people know through their lived experiences? Moreover, what do considerations of disasters offer us as lessons for moving forward towards recovery? How might communities heal when the once lush valley, blooming with greenery, is brought to a wintery charcoal gray, even in the brightest summer months? What does a community do when the "before" no longer exists, and "after" leaves much to be desired?

The need to consider how recovery can occur when place and security are fractured is both important and relevant in light of the fact that approximately 43% of Canadians can expect to experience a major disaster in their lifetime and of those who experience disaster, nearly a quarter will require emotional and psychological recovery time that exceeds one year (Ibrahim, 2016). Those people, left to rebuild, recover, and restore, are often left with both the physical reminders of their experience, as well as their stories – where they were, what they did, what they grabbed as they raced out the door. Dwayne Donald (2020) suggests that "curriculum can be understood as stories we tell about the world and our place in it" (p. 160). For those who experience disasters, the lessons live on, rooted in experience, through the stories we tell ourselves and others. The curriculum of living and learning in a specific place becomes rooted to the stories and is passed along, time and time again, to hold fast to the experience, to make meaning out of what has happened, and to in some way impart knowledge on others about what you might do should a fire rip through your once quiet neighbourhood.

If we are to accept that curriculum is the stories we tell about our lives, then it raises further questions to consider; when communities face disaster, what are the cumulative and individual curricula that live on with them? What might it take for a community to recover, for an individual to recover, and what can we learn from that? Who is responsible for telling these stories and which are valued? What knowledge might be lost if the stories aren't told? How do we make disaster, and the slow, tedious recovery mean something, and how might we construct a curriculum of recovery out of our stories so that it might be useful to someone, or somewhere, else?

For some communities, such as Wood Buffalo, in Northern Alberta, Canada, the need to address the above questions has become a regular occurrence. As a community, they have faced two natural disasters in the past four years. First, the most expensive natural disaster in Canadian history, the 2016 Horse River Wildfire (Snowden, 2016), and then a 100-year flood, severely damaging the downtown core and causing an estimated \$522 million dollars in damage (Adriano, 2020). These disasters, compounded by a global health pandemic, and the crashing prices of oil, have required the residents of Wood Buffalo to display an extensive amount of resiliency and to undertake expansive recovery projects that are both emotionally and financially taxing. The following focuses on the experience of the fire alone, as much of the recovery from the Fort McMurray Flood is still unimagined and ongoing.

Introducing *What you take with you*

Therese Greenwood's book *What you take with you* (2019) recounts the events that began in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo on May 1, 2016 and carried into the month of June when a fire breached the limits of the Urban Service Area of Fort McMurray. On that day, a new curriculum was written for Wood Buffalo. Individual and

collective stories, ones we would recount for many years to follow, were told, and retold, until we found them less raw around the edges as we incorporated the wildfire, and the new set of conditions, ways of knowing, and connections, into our lives. In the minutes and hours that made up the initial evacuation experience, residents began the process of writing new stories about themselves, ones that were previously unimaginable.

As Greenwood explores her own experiences of the 2016 Horse River Wildfire, her physical traverse through areas of the city rapidly going up in the flames, the experiences of fear, entrapment, and the resulting displacement that follows, I was reminded of my own moments running a parallel sequence during my own evacuation. I was reminded of the sound of the emergency alert playing on repeat through the car speaker, the dissonance of a lifetime between being told to call 911 for emergencies, and an awareness that no one would be answering that call. As I watched fire creep down the hill of one valley, and up another, I felt a push to move quickly towards safety, while also remaining stuck in grid-locked traffic, able to do nothing but sit and stare at the chaos around me. Unable to ground myself in the passing of time, I frequently referred to these moments, and the week that followed, as the longest day of my life.

For residents of Wood Buffalo on May 3, 2016, their sense of place will be forever marked with the memories of flames, smoke, disarray, confusion and narratives about the items we saved, or didn't, about whether we went North or South on the one road in and out of our community, and whether at the end of it all, we stayed here, or if the fire became a catalyst to leave the community.

Initially I considered that I should step away from examining this particular text and instead choose something that wasn't so close to home, both literally and figuratively. As the author sits, stuck in traffic, considering how she might manage to escape should the inferno require her to, Greenwood considers that "We are moulded in a materialist world where we do a lot of eating, drinking, and making merry until we ask the basic questions: 'Who am I? Where am I going? What is our purpose in life?'" (2019, p.21). Just as Greenwood locates herself physically in place and time in her novel, I locate myself here, drawing attention to my own place within this story as a means of remembrance and a continued effort to move towards recovery. "When we locate, we search through our memory banks and retrieve information about who we are, where we come from, and our roots" (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 115). It seems Greenwood, too, came to this conclusion. In a conversation with a friend, post-fire, the following conversation occurs:

"Why are you researching this as if this happened to someone else?"
"I'm trying to keep my distance from the story like an objective reporter", I said.
"But it happened to you," she said. (Greenwood, 2019, p.139).

And so, I search into the memory banks to see where we have come from as a community, to explore what curriculum, and subsequently, story, lives in disaster experiences and recovery, and in doing so put forth my own reflections as a sort of "First Voice".

Embrace First Voice ... "the Voice of Experience"
Rooted in Identity.
The Authority of Lived Experience.
Particular... Specific... Detailed (Graveline, 1998, p.117).

Identifying Place and Disaster as Curriculum

When considering that "curriculum can be understood as stories we tell about the world and our place in it" (Donald, 2020, p.160), we must then consider what it means to be in place. It is easy to imagine "place", especially when discussing the experience of a wildfire evacuation, as a purely physical dimension, however, "place" can be, and is, much more complex and interdisciplinary than just its physical location.

All at once, a sense of place incorporates psychological being, social community, cultural symbols, bio-physical territory, and political and economic systems...to honestly assess, address, and explore sense of place [we] must recognize the multiplicity of meanings, sources, and expressions of sense of place. (Ardoin, 2006, p.121).

In *What you take with you*, Greenwood (2019) mirrors a physical exodus of place, while exploring well-being, community making, and resiliency. In her book she offers us not only an opportunity to explore stories and, in doing so, curriculum, but also offers us a way of exploring this multidisciplinary relationship to place and sense of place by offering us meditations on the items she saved and what they illuminate about her life. While a sense of place normally occurs over a long period of time, through many interactions, and many opportunities to develop emotional attachment, reliance, and understanding, it can also occur in a shorter period of intense experiences (Ardoin, 2006), much like the rapid connections formed during the fire and following experiences of physical placelessness and later recovery.

In the following exploration, I will draw from Cynthia Chambers' dimensions of curriculum to explore curriculum as a place of enskillment. "A person's being is constituted through the tasks [they] conduct as [they] dwell in a particular place...as they learn and practice the skills necessary to live those places" (Chambers, 2008, p. 116). As a means of storying as a way of analyzing curriculum, as well as exploring the skills that are developed through the experience of a natural disaster, I will engage in the personal and community experiences of disaster, placelessness, and recovery using *What you take with you* (Greenwood, 2019) as the vehicle for moving forward the discussion.

Exodus

"As I took in the quickly emptying street it hit me that, after four years of insisting the post-apocalyptic depiction of Fort McMurray was a myth, here was a scene out of a Hollywood movie" (Greenwood, 2019, p.26). What is the curriculum of a place that comes to life when a wildfire infiltrates your backyard? Arguably, this is where the most physical sense of place becomes embedded into the conversation. You need to know where you are and where you are going, not in the spiritual sense, but in relation to the inferno, in relation to the path to safety. You must know that if the fire is crawling up the side of Thickwood Boulevard, it has breached the 1-km span of the Athabasca River threatening to cut off the ability to drive south. You must know, should you choose to drive north, deeper into the Boreal forest, that the road eventually ends at a gate, which will be closed, because the winter road to Fort Chipewyan has long since melted, and that there will eventually be nowhere else to go but to seek refuge at the "camps" that normally house transient workers of the oil sands. If you were new to this place, you might not have navigated the exodus as confidently as those who knew the backroads of their childhood.

Evacuation calls on you to act fast, to gather what is important to you quickly, and to move out of the danger's path. It calls on you to have thought ahead, even though you likely could not have, to have an awareness of the items that exist in your home, to have made choices about what you need to take with you so that those precious, irreplaceable objects don't go unsaved, and to have a full gas tank for the long traverse ahead, to make a reservation at a hotel, because in hours there will be no vacancies within 500km. As Greenwood (2019) notes, "what you think you will pack as you look around your comfortable living room and what you snatch when smoke chokes the air and flames lick the sky are entirely different" (p.1).

It also calls on you to have had enough privilege to afford a personal vehicle, as to not get stuck without a means of evacuating. Imagine, 88,000 people in a stage of exodus, and yet, you are walking out of the city. It calls on you to have joined the community Facebook pages so that when the fire moves faster than information from formal sources, you don't end up trapped in a burning neighbourhood. It calls on you to have familial ties and friendships to make sure that you are awakened while slumbering for your night shift, to make sure someone can grab your children, or pets, while you are stuck in traffic or on the other side of the bridge.

If the experience is the curriculum, then it allows us 88,000 unique stories of evacuation in which to learn from. To live in Fort McMurray, and to have made it through the wildfire evacuation, called on the skills of awareness of the geography of Fort McMurray and transportation routes, connection to community sources for information, and an unbelievable amount of luck.

Being in Between

Where the curriculum of evacuation exists mostly within the physical realm of what it means to be and move through place, becoming an evacuee is made up largely of a sort of discordant psychological and physical edgewalking (Cariou, 2014) that occurs when you have been launched into transience. It is both being somewhere physically (evacuation centers, hotels, friends' homes in other cities) and longing to be somewhere else (home). It is being safe but still recounting the danger and the fear as a form of sense-making about this new place you find yourself in. It is both

having a large collective experience and yet the individual choices and experiences feeling significant and defining. Being an evacuee is about waiting, wondering, and refreshing the news feed as you wait slowly for information to leak out from a place that is now void of anyone but emergency services personnel. Was your house still there? What condition is it in? Did everyone make it out alive? When will this be over? Life is both put on pause, removed from the place that it would normally play out, and continuing on as you navigate administration, Red Cross registration, securing housing toiletries and food, connecting with friends and family, and sense-making of why, what and how this could happen to you. In the sense of Donald's (2020) definition of curriculum shared above, being an evacuee is where the making of curriculum comes to be, because it is in this stage that stories begin to be told. Sitting in the hotel Greenwood had checked into upon evacuation, she recounts some of these stories and conversations:

People joked about the things they took and the things they didn't think to take, passports, underwear and phone chargers. Every time a new group of evacuees arrived, they told the same story - with the same words. "We were lucky. We gassed up the car the night before." "I just noticed my shoes don't match". ... "I don't have to worry about planting those shrubs". ... We were all in shock, dazed, numb, and in denial. (Greenwood, 2019, p.73)

It is in these stories of fiery evacuations and the pivotal decisions that evacuees made, or decisions that were made for them, that residents have begun to build a new story of Fort McMurray. We told stories of kindness, sacrifice, pain, loss, and strength, and in doing so, created a new curriculum of place. To live in Fort McMurray always called upon its people to bring a "raucous can-do, hell-bent-for-leather spirit, youth, vitality, wide-eyed optimism, and big, audacious ideas" (Greenwood, 2019, p.138). Now, the international community was viewing our place not as the economic generator of Canada, not as the apocalyptic oil hellhole, but as "Fort McMurray Strong". To know Fort McMurray was to know how to be industrious, resilient, and tough. To come home to Fort McMurray, post wild fire, was to reconcile how to be on the receiving end of a hand up when you have always been on the giving end, how to move forward in loss, how to be strong, while simultaneously carrying a soul fatigued by trauma, placelessness, and the unknown.

Coming Home

"My greatest fear, a fear I couldn't name ... was that the fire would always be with me" (Greenwood, 2019, p.141). In many ways, the fire was transformative and catalytic. It physically shaped the geography, it levelled neighbourhoods, changed lives, and ended two. While the actual exodus lasted only a day, maybe two, and the status of "evacuee" lifted in early June as people started to return, there is no way to discern how long recovery might take. Four years later, 74% of the buildings destroyed in the disaster have been rebuilt (McDermott, 2020) although many would again be victim to 1:100-year flooding that occurred in the spring of 2020. What does one need to know in order to recover? Is recovery possible? What is the curriculum of carrying on?

Recovery itself is multi-faceted. There is recovery of homes both decimated by the fire, and left standing but uninhabitable; the environment (burnt trees, and soil saturated with chemicals and hazardous waste); businesses, facilities, and assets in the face of an already struggling economy; and humans, the people who come back with their myriad of stories and experiences, disjointed and shaken, ungrounded. While I have very little to offer in the curriculum of environmental and economic recovery, I want to consider briefly my personal experiences of recovery in place, not as an authority on trauma and disaster recovery, but as a reflection on how lived experience might allow me to be an authority on my personal disaster recovery.

A deep connection to this place made me mourn deeply for the valley green, for the homes of my childhood, for the familiar sound of bird chirping in the morning. In coming home, I had to learn how to go about the life that had been put on pause the afternoon of May 3rd against a much different backdrop, to navigate conversations about loss with empathy even when compassion fatigue exhausted my being. I learned the importance of having someone say "I'm doing this for you" instead of asking "What can I do for you", and how to accept that help with grace and not see it as a sign of weakness. I learned how to navigate organizations and the systems of disaster response, even when those systems created a sense of vulnerability and defeat that felt unfamiliar in comparison to my usual sense of capability and strength. In the early stages of recovery, I would suggest that what I needed most was a sense of control. I sought purpose, routine, and a sense of security. I learned how to trudge through the proverbial mud with the weight of our community on my shoulders. I learned how to survive and continue on, even though continuing on and moving on could not be synonymous.

In those early days of return I slept irregularly. I remember 6am sitting in a Tim Hortons drive thru because I felt like the four walls around me would eat me alive if I didn't get out. I remember sitting in classrooms and escaping to the bathroom down the hall to gasp for air and silently sob when the stresses of university layered on top of the ongoing trauma and I felt like the fire would always live on in my heart as fiercely as it had on that first day. I remember recounting my story time and time again, committing the details to memory, so that I might make some sense about it all. I put egregious amounts of time into what others might need, supporting multiple student and community organizations in their efforts, when what I really needed most was to be gentle with myself, to be taken care of, and to not have to ask for that. In a curriculum of disaster and trauma in place, the greatest lesson I might offer to others is to be gentle, to lower the expectations, to push-in holistic support and wrap around the people as they try to get their footing again. The challenge here is that when an entire community has experienced the same exodus, experienced their own levels of trauma about it, there are very few in the community in the head space or with the resources to freely allow others to lean on them. When the community motto has become "We are here, we are strong", how do we support those that are just here and deeply tired?

"I wanted to be strong. If I wasn't that, what was I? ... A person whom other people saw, not as a warrior with brilliant wit, but a tired woman crying at random kindnesses? ... This is now where I was supposed to be. But there I was" (Greenwood, 2019, p.141).

Conclusion

There is no singular answer to recovery, it is a wayfinding experience with no final marked destination. "To be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery" (Solnit, 2005, p.6). To live in Fort McMurray, or to have lived there in that particular span of time, is to know how to be resilient, to lean into communal experience as story-making, to become lost in-between home and elsewhere and in-between before and after, and hopefully, found again. The consideration of the skills required to live and thrive in the North, the lessons rooted in both the community of Fort McMurray, the wildfire, the flood, and subsequent recoveries, each provide an opportunity to reflect on the localized curriculum that lives on here. I have, much as Greenwood has, storied my experiences hundreds of times, retelling the key moments, removing the emotion through repetition. To know Fort McMurray is to know the people here as generous, resilient, industrious, and strong, but to also know that we are frayed, healing, and in a state of "re": rebuilding, reimagining, and recovering. We are here telling our stories, building our individual and collective curriculums of place, considering how we move not only through our new landscapes but through new realities, through change, through trauma, recognizing that there is both a converging curriculum in the shared experiences of the community and a diverging curriculum in the individual stories that exist within this collective. This curriculum of place is evident in a multitude of ways, in people's connection to place, their separation of place, in emotional responses to changes of season, and in the stories we tell about our experiences of disaster and recovery. As the community continues to work on solutions, and needs continue to arise as a result of compounding disaster experiences, I remain hopeful that the lessons we have to learn here are greater than the damages we have suffered. And so, as Greenwood (2019) muses in her closing lines, "We drive on...we're on the road... We're going to be fine. (p.142)."

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