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Reshaping educational spaces: An emerging framework for place-making and belonging in higher education with practical considerations for the classroom

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This paper explores place-making and belonging in higher education through a framework rooted in Indigenous relational ethics, posthuman philosophy, and autobiographical narrative. It examines how settler colonial legacies shape educational spaces and proposes strategies for fostering inclusive, ethical, and communal learning environments. Emphasizing epistemology, methodology, axiology, and ontology, the framework encourages critical reflection, experiential learning, reciprocity, and collaborative knowledge webs. It invites educators to reimagine classrooms as living, relational spaces where all beings can feel valued, connected, and empowered.

Key words: place studies, place-making, settler colonialism, relational ethics, posthumanism

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Introduction to Place

Place is an amorphous concept. Places are simultaneously physical locations and socio-cultural constructs co-created and continuously shaped by human beings and our histories (Seamon & Sowers, 2008). Place is a construct of our minds (Nguyen, 2018). Place has epistemological, or knowledge, dimensions that define and shape it (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991). Place is phenomenological, defined by how we feel and sense it (Abram, 1997, 2010; Toadvine, 2005), and in Indigenous knowledge systems, place is spun from a web of relational entanglements each loaded with their own ethical imperatives (Gordon, 2023).

Impetus for Research: Questioning Belonging

As a white Appalachian woman, I find myself deeply connected to the land, cultures, and traditions of my home place where I feel belonging. I come from a family of mountain coal miners - hillbillies. My ancestors moved to the region from Scotland in the 1600s. They stayed in central Appalachia for centuries, eking out impoverished existences on soil stolen from Indigenous people and owned by absentee companies that benefited from resource extraction. Yet, my own family's story of movement and colonization, of residing and making a living - however meagre - on stolen land, is a colonial legacy that *I* embody.

When I moved from my Appalachian home to Calgary and began my doctoral program, I came to understand that my existence is a continuation of colonial and oppressive harm. I traded the lands my ancestors stole for more stolen lands. I was in crisis questioning not only what my relationship with this new place and the Indigenous inhabitants of it should be, but I also wondered, *did I even have a right to feel belonging here **or** back home in Appalachia*?

Legacy of Harm in Education

Educational institutions, while often viewed as spaces of growth and development, have historically also been sites of harm and tools for systemic oppression (Patel, 2021; Schleck, 2022; Snaza, 2017). This duality is evident in the legacies of residential schools and school segregation, where education is used not to empower, but to marginalize, control, and suppress. As a military historian, I recognize these histories and see their shadows in the higher education place I now reside.

Leigh Patel and the Settler Colonial Engine: Core Tenants

Patel (2021) argues the settler colonial engine continues to underpin the operations of higher education through core tenants. (1) This system begins with the seizure of lands, cultures, and resources from Indigenous communities. (2) The engine then perpetuates the systematic erasure of Indigeneity and other racialized and/or marginalized identities through promises of upward mobility that call on Other to minimize parts of themselves which do not adhere to dominant narratives (i.e., structural racism and white supremacy). (3) The settler colonial engine exploits physical and intellectual labor, reducing those involved to chattel and perpetuating the violent legacies of slavery and exploitation upon which our institutions were built.

My Ethical Struggles with this Legacy of Harm in Education

As a white cis scholar, I acknowledge the privilege I hold within higher education places. However, as a poor neurodivergent woman from a family of hillbillies with limited formal education and histories of violent exploitation, I also recognize that higher education operates

within a racist settler colonial framework that harms all of us in different ways. This harm is evident in how scholars bully one another (Buitenhuis, 2016), use exclusionary language (Rose, 1985), are forced to compete for funding and recognition (Patel, 2021), and must participate in the production and sale of knowledge (Schleck, 2022). These practices perpetuate colonial harms and reinforce the exclusionary nature of the academy.

As an educator, these reflections have led me to question what I do with these understandings in light of my existential belonging crisis. What is the point? How can I encourage both myself and others to foster belonging within systems deliberately designed to perpetuate exclusion, systems where - in my case - my very presence is a driver of the settler colonial engine? How can I empower my students to explore their own intersectionality, identities, and experiences in ways that cultivate critical understanding, self-awareness, and relationship with community, especially in times when authentic discourse about these ideas is under attack? How can I ensure my student can feel belonging in my classroom ***even if*** the system is designed to erase individual identity and uphold hegemony?

This unease has inspired me to articulate a framework influenced by the people of the land on which I now reside as well as my own experiences. This framework is intentionally fluid and adaptable, rather than fixed or rigid, and it is not intended to serve as a universal solution for addressing settler colonial harms and structural racism in higher education. Indeed, for many Indigenous scholars and learners from other historically marginalized and/or racialized groups, these ideas may not be new or groundbreaking. Rather, this framework aims to shift perspectives and foster meaningful dialogue on belonging and place-making within the academy.

Methodology

I encourage the use of autobiographical narrative methodology (Caine et al., 2018; Clandinin et al., 2007, 2018) to explore and ground work into place studies and belonging. Narrative methodology distinguishes itself from self-study and autoethnography through its reliance on story and story-sharing as part of the meaning-making process (Hamilton et al., 2008). Stories are powerful tools which help us to make sense of our experiences.

Posthumanism

In exploring concepts of place and belonging, I also find it meaningful to adopt a posthuman perspective. Posthumanism is a branch of continental philosophy that emerged as a response to anthropocentric, or human-centered, thinking (Snaza, 2017). This philosophy encourages us to move away from prioritizing human minds and existences in our research. Instead, it recognizes that all beings have their own experiences, existences, and ways of knowing and being (Doing, 2022). Nancy Hales, an important figure in posthuman research, provides a valuable analogy for conceptualizing posthumanism (Hales in Doing, 2022). In this analogy, she asks listeners to think of "cognition." If we define cognition as experiencing a set of stimuli then responding to those stimuli, then let us consider deciduous trees. These plants experience stimuli and respond to those stimuli by dropping their leaves in preparation for winter. They are engaging in cognition, in *thinking*, just not in a way that humans think.

Ethical Relationality and Belonging

With this philosophical positioning in mind, I asked myself what does it mean to belong as a *human* in higher education spaces? To belong in a place is to feel accepted, valued, and

connected (Fong et al., 2024; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Korandei, 2023). Understanding this, I find myself experiencing belonging when I can simply be myself, and that is what I hope to cultivate for my students.

Shawn Wilson's Indigenous Research Paradigm

At the beginning of my doctoral program, I was introduced to the concept of ethical relationality in Shawn Wilson's (2008) *Research is Ceremony*. In this piece, Wilson, who is Opaskwayak Cree, describes an Indigenous research paradigm which eschews dogmatic definition and highlights relational research as a circular interplay of philosophical grounding in epistemology, methodology, axiology, and ontology (Wilson, 2008). See Figure 1 for Wilson's wheel of relational ethics. Though Wilson acknowledges he writes from a Cree perspective, he also highlights the commonalities between Cree epistemology and other Indigenous philosophies.

Figure 1. Shawn Wilson's wheel of relational ethics where "the entire circle is an Indigenous research paradigm" (Wilson, 2008, p. 70).

My Storied Experience and Beginning to Understand Wilson's Words

Since first reading Wilson, I have had the honor of becoming part of a ceremonial family guided by two northern Cree Métis Elders who work for a Calgary-based not-for-profit organization connecting Indigenous families and youth with culture. My involvement in this community was not driven by research or doctoral work but stemmed from a personal invitation to ceremony extended by my partner, an *Oskâpêwis* - a Cree term for Elder's helper. *Oskâpêwis* learn ceremonies and teachings orally from Elders and play a vital role in preserving and upholding tradition.

As a white colonial woman grappling with my own legacy as both a product and perpetuator of colonialism, I deeply wrestled with the decision to attend my first sweat lodge. For nearly six months, I deliberated, struggling with the implications of participating. Even after attending, it took considerable time for me to fully engage in the ceremonies. Yet, through this journey, I discovered a profound sense of love, community, and belonging that exceeded anything I could have anticipated.

For the past two and a half years, I have spent most Fridays and Saturdays supporting sweat lodge ceremonies, my partner in his role as *Oskâpêwis*, and the Elders. At the lodge, I take on various ceremonial roles, ensure protocol is followed, and welcome newcomers into the place, stepping up or back as the situation calls for, slowly growing to recognize the power and limits of my understanding as a settler woman. Although these experiences are not the focus of this

publication, partly because I lack the rights or authority to share them in detail, they remain significant to me. It is through attending the lodge that I began to truly understand the depth of Wilson's words and see resonance with my passion for posthuman philosophy.[1]

Using The Gift of Wilson's Model to Create a Framework for Shaping Places in Higher Education

Inspired by posthuman thought, Indigenous relational ethics, and my own lived experiences, I consider what principles should lie at the heart of higher education places which foster belonging despite their oppressive legacies.[2] Below I outline my observations and practical strategies which can be implemented in our classrooms to attend these principled imperatives. You will notice these ideas overlap and intersect because they exist in a *circle*, flowing in and out from each other.

(1) Epistemology (Knowledge)

Regarding epistemology, I want to learn in places where knowledge is recognized as a gift carried by all beings, with one being's knowing not dictating or dominating the knowing of others (Abram, 1997, 2010; Kimmerer, 2013, 2024). These places should be sites where a love for learning is fostered, and the entire learning process is understood as experiential and embodied because our bodies are always actively engaging in the learning, like in ceremony. Some relevant learning theories which align with this epistemological outlook are experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015) and embodied cognition (Coello & Fischer, 2016).

Epistemological Considerations for the Classroom: Critical Reflection Assignments

To actualize disrupting colonial knowledge frameworks in the classroom, educators can incorporate critical narrative reflection assignments (Freire, 1970/2017; Freire, 1992/2021; Gavidia & Adu, 2022) which invite students to articulate and frame their relationship with knowledge.

In my *Global History I* courses for undergraduates, for example, my first assignment is a writing assignment that asks students to explore their relationships with history by answering questions like "Do you know your family's history? Tell me their story. If you don't know, why might that be?" and "Do you like studying history? Why or why not?" In a follow-up assignment, I then invite students to expand on their earlier writing by discussing the word "power" and explore how power manifested itself in the stories about their family that they shared. This framing assignment at the beginning of the term attuned students to the fluidity and diversity of experiences, and several students highlighted how this assignment led them to look at not only historical figures but also the curriculum itself in more empathetic, less rigidly linear ways.

Throughout the course, I reinforce this relational and reflective approach by incorporating readings from scholars of diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous, Global South, feminist,

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[1] I ***am not*** Indigenous. I am a white hillbilly from the mountains of Tennessee and Virginia in the United States. **Because I am a settler raised in Western tradition, I recognize there are limits to my understanding with and through Indigenous ceremony and community**. I ask for forgiveness and correction as I do my best to parallel my understandings.

[2] Indigenous research paradigms are not posthuman because they are born out of different histories and ideological foundations, but I do see resonance between posthuman philosophy and Indigenous philosophy which inspired me.

and anti-colonial perspectives. This multiplicity of voices invites students to recognize themselves within the material and to critically examine how historical narratives are constructed. It also challenged the idea of a single, fixed interpretation of history, encouraging students to see the past and the discipline itself as dynamic, contested, and shaped by positionality. In doing so, the course models a disruption of colonial knowledge frameworks, making space for more relational, empathetic, and pluralistic ways of understanding the world.

(2) Methodology: How Research and Learning are Conducted

Research and learning should be regarded as sacred practices, not extractive transactions. Knowledge and the process of acquiring it are not commodities to be bought, sold, and controlled but gifts to be shared with care and reverence. Reframing learning in this way directly challenges the settler colonial model, which treats knowledge as a product manufactured for profit through publications, grants, and market-driven accolades (Patel, 2021; Schleck, 2022). In contrast, I advocate for places of learning that honor knowledge as relational and living, despite the structural challenges of current higher education funding systems. Indigenous methodologies model this reverence by following relational protocols and oral traditions, offering a powerful reminder that learning is first and foremost a gifted relationship, not a business deal.

Methodological Considerations for Classrooms: Mastery Learning

One practical way to disrupt colonial frameworks within the classroom is through mastery learning. Rather than treating knowledge as a fixed outcome or standardized achievement, mastery learning views understanding as a dynamic, personal process, shaped by students' lived experiences (Bloom, 1968; Feldman, 2024; Guskey, 2007), much like individual experiences of sacredness and relationality. This approach fosters deeper relationships with knowledge by prioritizing comprehension over speed or competition. Techniques such as flexible timelines, one-on-one mentorship, and opportunities for revision support the idea that learning, like relationship-building, is ongoing, patient, and human.

(3) Axiology (Ethics)

Our relationships – with each other, with knowledge, with university leadership, donors, and even the physical spaces we inhabit – are intricately woven into the fabric of our lived realities. These relationships extend to the buildings we occupy with walls that hold the weight of institutional histories and the stolen land on which our institutions stand carrying the legacies of colonization and dispossession. Each interaction and connection, whether with people, places, or systems, shapes the way we understand and experience higher education. Though it is not often acknowledged under colonial frameworks, these relationships give to us, and we give to them.

A Lesson in Reciprocity

In Indigenous methodologies, to live in a good way means to acknowledge this interplay of relationships, honor it, and give back to it (Kimmerer, 2013, 2024; Kovach, 2021; Wilson, 2008). A good place for learning is one where people do their best to understand and attend to their

relations and give back to their communities. In Indigenous research, this is called reciprocity (Kovach, 2021).

Axiological Considerations for Classrooms: Universal Design for Learning

A practical method for honoring our ethical obligations to our relationships with our students is incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is when we strive to care for all types of learners by ensuring there are multiple means of expression, representation, and engagement in our educational contexts (Roski et al., 2021). UDL can be implemented by offering students multiple assessment options, such as written essays, visual presentations, podcasts, or creative projects, enabling them to demonstrate their understanding in ways that align with their strengths and learning preferences. For example, a student passionate about storytelling might create a podcast to analyze course material, while another might prefer a research paper for detailed exploration. For me as a neurodivergent learner, a place where I feel belonging includes design elements like dimmable lighting and sensory-friendly accommodations. These considerations allow me to fully embody my intellectual and spiritual self, enabling me to better engage with learning and support my relationships in the educational process.

While it may not always be possible to meet every individual preference, the act of asking students about their needs and responding thoughtfully acknowledges our relational ethics in the classroom. In this way, UDL is not simply a technical strategy, but an axiological (ethical) commitment to creating spaces where multiple forms of existence are seen, respected, and empowered.

(4) Ontology (Being)

Finally, learning is communal. It does not happen in a vacuum. Even individualized work happens in places shaped by communities of human and non-human actors, and the learning we do in places shapes the learning of others. Therefore, a framework for good higher education places where people feel belonging honors the communal nature of learning and encourages learners to not only learn the knowledge we present but also to identify and attend to the communal relationships that make up our being.

Ontological Considerations for Classrooms: Collaborative Knowledge Webs

Inspired by connectivism (Kathleen Dunaway, 2011; Siemens, 2004), a practical consideration for the promotion of collaborative learning in our classrooms is consciously creating collaborative knowledge webs. This means structuring learning environments where knowledge is not siloed within individuals but shared, extended, and co-created across learners.

One way to implement collaborative knowledge webs is through sustained group projects where each student's contributions are interconnected. Unlike traditional group work where work is artificially divided, collaborative web-building encourages students to see how their thinking impacts others' learning processes and vice versa. Techniques such as dynamic peer feedback loops, open-ended collaborative documents (e.g., collective concept maps, living bibliographies, class-constructed glossaries), and group reflection journals can foster this communal becoming. Additionally, instructors can model participation in the knowledge web by sharing their own learning processes, acknowledging when student insights shift or reshape their own thinking. This relational pedagogy reflects an ontology of interconnectedness where being is understood

not as isolated individual existence but as relational co-creation. In doing so, we affirm that learning is not just about acquiring information but about entering into, nurturing, and sustaining webs of living knowledge that transform everyone involved.

Visualizing This Framework

Recognizing that this framework is still emerging, I have created a visual representation (see Figure 2) to illustrate my key strategies for place-making to support belonging in higher education. This visual aims to guide me in fostering inclusive, ethical, and supportive learning environments, and I encourage educators to create their own model which adheres to their guiding education principles.

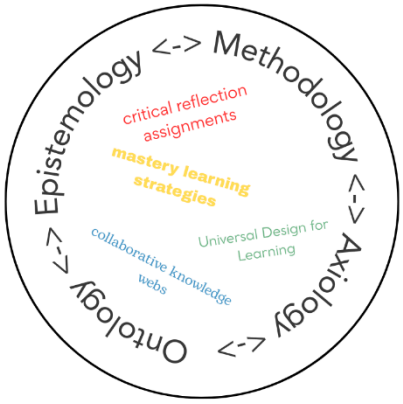

Figure 2. Alex's emerging framework with guiding principles for place-making in higher education inspired by Wilson where the whole circle is the teaching paradigm (2008).

Conclusion

Creating places of belonging in higher education can feel overwhelming, especially amidst funding cuts, ideological pressures, and the structural racism embedded in our places. Some of the strategies I have described may not be easily attainable in your education context. Yet change begins with small, deliberate actions. Simply reading and teaching diverse works can expand our frameworks of thought. Assignments grounded in ethical and relational learning, such as personal narrative sharing, cultivate sensitivity to interconnectedness and representation across differences. As educators, embracing vulnerability by positioning ourselves as co-learners fosters more inclusive, dynamic spaces. Asking students what they need from their learning environments and honoring their agency can transform classrooms into sites of belonging. Intentionally and thoughtfully integrating methods like mastery learning, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and connectivity web practices further ensures all students can engage as whole beings - intellectually, spiritually, and physically. Remember that while change-making is slow and complex, small, consistent steps toward ethical, relational, and inclusive education will ripple outward, creating the more connected futures we urgently need.

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