

“Watch Out for Their Home!”: Disrupting Extractive Forest Pedagogies in Early Childhood Education

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The frictions of living and learning in times of climate precarity, global unrest, and uncertainty require educators to consider the ways we can collectively engage in speculative pedagogies that respond to the complex, coinherited common world(s) we inhabit. This conceptual and practice-based paper considers the way early childhood education is implicated in ongoing settler colonialism. It aims to notice, generate, and stay with the trouble of stories that disrupt and unsettle the extractive and colonial dialogues about the forest as a resource and pedagogical tool.

Key words: forest pedagogies; climate precarity; early childhood education; settler colonialism

Human relationships with old-growth forests saw an increase in public attention and concern in 2021, with news cycles dominated by an extremely active forest fire season in western North America (CBC News, 2021), historic old-growth logging protests (McKeen, 2021) and a landmark call to action by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC; 2021). In these times of climate precarity and uncertainty, educators, instructors, pedagogists, and researchers who work, think, and engage with young children in settler colonial contexts are compelled to engage in speculative pedagogical processes that respond to the complex worlds that are coinherited, coconstructed, and coinhabited by human and more-than-human communities. In this conceptual and practice-based paper we consider the ways early childhood education is implicated in and reproduces ongoing

systems of settler colonialism. We aim to notice, generate, and “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of stories that disrupt and unsettle colonial dialogues that often reverberate within forest pedagogies. According to Donna Haraway (2016), troubles are tensions, complexities, or knots that challenge us to “stir up potent response” (p. 1) in our pedagogical practice. We see troubles as generative entry points for resisting taken-for-granted practices in early childhood education and for speculating about how we might be able to activate new ways of living well together (Government of British Columbia, 2019). Throughout this piece, we respond to a series of everyday moments that occurred in a forest-based early learning program (forest school) that operates out of a municipal park on unceded Coast Salish territory (land colonially known as coastal British Columbia (BC), Canada). The narrative below illustrates the complicated and, at times, troubling relations between children, educators, and place. As we think carefully with these happenings, we take up David Greenwood’s (2016) invitation to pay attention to the paradoxical nature of place as both a concept and a relationship. We see place as meeting ground and contact zone (the collision of conflicting values, discourses, logics, and practices) that locates us within the past, present, and future of settler colonial contexts (Greenwood, 2016).

Situated with/in this contact zone, we enact a troubled dialogue grounded in resistance to the romantic coupling of child and forest and engage deeply with pasts, presents, and futures of BC's coastal forests. We notice how the particularities of practicing within a forest-based program include frictions that are often overlooked as they compose shifting colonialisms. As Fikile Nxumalo (2015) notes, settler colonial conditions can present themselves through "material and discursive erasures, as well as dispossessions, displacements, and appropriations" (p. 22). We see traces, echoes, and scars of these erasures within everyday relations in the forest and are particularly troubled by the risk of perpetuating romantic, extractive, and redemptive discourses that present the pairing of child and forest as neutral, innocent, or inherently good (Nxumalo, 2015; Taylor, 2013). Inspired by Nxumalo, we seek to consider the ways colonialism shapes everyday relations in taken-for-granted ways and refigure our presence in the forest to dwell with the frictions and fraught complexities we encounter. We take seriously the provocation by the editors of this special issue and the organizers of the Responding to Ecological Challenges with/in Contemporary Childhoods colloquium to deepen our grappling with these issues into a speculative discussion of imperfect relations. We are also curious about what might happen if we shift our pedagogical focus away from the polarity between extractivism and reciprocity in ecological relations and toward dwelling in uncertainty, imperfection, and intimate unknowings. By remaining with unknowing, uncertainty, and trouble, we see possibility for resisting complex forms of settler colonialism that are enacted in early learning environments. The following story about a log is intended as a provocation, a narrative purposefully written with no solution or consensus to the dilemma of the log. We invite readers to pause and stay with the trouble in the children's and educators' experience.

"Watch out for their home"

The decaying log had been a centrepiece of the forest-based preschool program for many years. Not only was it a landmark and a place to gather, it had also in moments become many different things: a boat, a mountain, a balance beam, and even a kitchen. Over time, the log slowly rotted and decomposed, returning to the earth on which it once stood tall as a tree. After years of getting to know the rhythms and temporalities of particular parks, the educators at the forest school choose to gather in particular areas and avoid others. We pay close attention to what has changed over a hot, dry summer, or to where a river might be surging due to a fast snow melt in the alpine. Thinking with Robin Wall Kimmerer (2003), we carefully select meeting points for the school year that are open and generously spaced and without dense bush or a high presence of moss, so that our running and jumping bodies do not trample or interfere with the vital role moss plays in the creation and function of forest. Further, when salmon spawn in the fall, we might avoid the river entirely to give them (and the bears) space. By paying attention to plants, animals, and other ecological community members that coinhabit the forest, we hope to nourish a responsive and reciprocal relationship with the forest rather than an extractive one.

In the spring of 2020, educators had been suggesting to the children that they try out other fallen logs during their play in an attempt to minimize the damage the program does to this particularly favoured log. On a crisp, damp morning, one of the younger children in the group was sitting quietly beside the log as older boys jumped off of it playing a "big movement game." The boy's attention shifted from the group's energetic activity to carefully examine the smaller details and happenings of the log. All of a sudden, another child landed precariously on the side of the log and a large chunk of decaying wood fell to the ground. Hundreds of wood bugs and other tiny insects scurried out of the commotion. The children began excitedly running about and kneeling down to catch a glimpse of a bug in transit. A heated debate broke out over whether or not they should continue to play there, as a few children pointed out that the jumping had "broken" the bug's home. Alex (pseudonym) pointed out the many small holes on the log and said that they had noticed bugs crawling in and out of those holes. Jamie (pseudonym), who had been sitting next to the log originally, began to share with the group all of the different bugs he had observed that morning. The discussion turned to a consideration as to whether or not the group should play on the log in the future.

On our return to the forest the following week, Jamie carefully sat down in the same spot next to the log. As the group of older children moved throughout the forest, he watched warily. When the group neared the decomposing log, Jamie jumped up and yelled, “Hey! Watch out for their home! We don’t want to break it again!”

Moments like these become troubles, or contradictory contact zones for activating our pedagogical responses. In this instance, this particular log became a “protected” area of the forest, avoided and cared for by children and educators. However, this event exposed a trouble, a knot of uncertainty that has possibility to be activated pedagogically. How and why do we minimize our damage? Who gets to decide which log gets touched and which goes untouched? How should we respond to the forest’s rhythms? As educators, in situations like this, navigating the tensions of learning with and in the forest while upholding symbiotic ecological relations is paradoxical. Our presence is not and has never been neutral or innocent. We are deeply implicated within the ways colonialisms shift and are recomposed. This leaves us with uncertainty. What has or has not been protected? Who is here with us? Who isn’t? How might we stay with our troubles and contradictions in order to activate new relations between forests and pedagogy?

Troubled histories, uncertain futures

Paying attention to everyday encounters between children and place is essential in attuning to and upholding the pedagogical and ethical values of living and learning well together in common worlds (Latour, 2004; Taylor, 2013). These small but significant moments provide insight into the ways children and educators relate to and with place and support educators in enacting responsive pedagogies. Central to our work is a concern with the ways that narratives of innocence and purity have penetrated deeply into conceptualizations of both forests and children (see Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013 and Taylor, 2013 for critical engagements with nature-based early childhood programs). To operate a forest school, there must be a partnership and agreement between the local parks board, which results in a business licence to operate in that space. Conversely, there are areas such as crown lands or provincial parks that forest schools are prohibited from operating within. For the forested areas that are deemed open for this type of educational use, programs carefully complete risk and impact assessments of the spaces within the park, explaining how they will mitigate harm to the ecological community. This process is grounded in a Eurocentric assumption that particular parts of the forest should be protected from human and other damage. In North America, “nature parks,” or enclosures of “wilderness” cared for and controlled by local and federal governments, have a history fraught with “strategic amnesia” (Apffel-Marglin, 2012) on the part of settlers about Indigenous communities’ ancestral stewardship and deep relationships with lands, a history that has resulted in the systematic displacement and legal erasure of Indigenous presence, agency, and ownership (Plumwood, 2001). The idea of preserving large areas of land through conservation policies to protect them from the environmental consequences of industrialization conveys a utilitarian relationship intended to contradictorily rein in the excesses of capitalism through the lens of conservation. What results is that some places, chosen for their beauty, fragility, or biodiversity, are extremely protected, while others are devastated (Apffel-Marglin, 2012; Cronon, 1996).

Conservation policies intertwine deeply with neoliberal logics, which, as we demonstrated above in Jamie’s request to protect a particular log, have inadvertent consequences. The park in which the forest school operates has been selected for conservation—positioned within BC’s Lower Mainland as a pure space that must be protected from damage. As a part of the school’s collaboration with the local parks board, children and educators must carefully protect particular logs from the consequences of forest play and leave no trace of our presence in the forest. However, in troubling the settler colonial logics that insidiously permeate 21st-century forest relations, we are moved to orient ourselves and our pedagogies differently. We wonder, how might we refigure our relationships and attempt to unknow powerful hierarchal assumptions about the forest? In our work, the issue of minimizing

damage to natural spaces unfolds into uncertainty as we consider the assumptions, conditions, and logics that have been inherited and recreated. The romantic and redemptive coupling of the child and nature further the parallel assumptions of innocence and purity that are dominant in 21st-century conceptualizations of forests and children. There is a push to conserve children's innocence from technology and artificiality by seeking to resituate early childhood education in green spaces, the assumption being that by simply pairing the child and the forest, we can preserve the purity and "goodness" of both (Louv, 2005, Taylor, 2013). This maintains early childhood education's political neutrality, as well as a system of logics that ignores the colonial pasts, presents, and futures of forests. A romantic coupling of the child and nature as innocent often results in fundamentally extractive encounters with nature. In this arrangement, the forest is positioned as a resource or pedagogical tool that offers redemptive qualities. The child is positioned as deficient, in need of intervention or a "return to nature" to ensure their health, well-being, and developmental trajectory (Burman, 2017). A significant amount of research regarding children and "nature" focuses on how children benefit developmentally and academically from spending extended periods of time in nature (see Louv, 2005 and Sobel, 2005 for detailed accounts of the benefits of nature). This positioning has repercussions that uphold settler colonial logics of extracting resources from the forest for human gain, as well as dominant, colonially driven discourses about who and how a child should be (Burman, 2017).

Forests are a meeting point and contact zone for activating different types of pedagogical, political, and ethical relationships to the climate crisis. As we invite the reader to stay with the trouble of the narrative of the log, it is important to note that certain knowledges or ways of being are privileged in early childhood programs, where others are ignored. Jamie's response to the possible destruction of the log is similar to how many people respond to the intensifying climate crisis. Societal responses to the ecological devastation all terrestrial beings face (but are not equally implicated in) commonly (and paradoxically) manifest as a search for human solutions: technological interventions, conservation policies, and collective or individual action. Researchers, journalists, and politicians steeped within Western scientific values often settle into a discourse of positioning humans as agents of change, or caretakers of the environment who are obligated to troubleshoot technological initiatives that will reverse the damage we have done. Capitalist, neoliberal, and extractivist logics orient us toward the belief that the world can again be "pure," rid of toxicity and waste, if only we invent or discover the right technology, resource, or cure (Shotwell, 2016, Tsing, 2015). These logics have emerged from a Euro-Western historical assumption of humans thinking themselves to be central to and separate from ecological, earthly relations, an assumption that is closely tied to a powerful value system oriented around notions of truth and objectivity—an epistemological fascination with conflating legitimacy, consensus, and power (Burman, 2017; Marker, 2018; Taylor, 2013). Centuries of Western imperialism and colonialism have influenced what we have come to know as normal, neutral, or self-evident and have accelerated the emergence of an artificial binary between that which is "natural" and that which is "human." Such "legitimate" knowledge systems silence onto-epistemologies of non-Euro-Western communities and have contributed to what Marie Battiste (1998) terms cognitive imperialism, a form of manipulation used to discredit nondominant knowledge systems and values with the intent of universalizing one source of "valid" knowledge. This powerful form of imperialism has its resonance in all aspects of society—politics, education, ethics, the economy, and so forth.

According to Michael Marker (2018), "modernist social systems and knowledge taxonomies have too often followed a colonialist recipe for seeing the landscape as an inanimate surface for extracting, shaping, and constructing the artifacts of progress" (p. 453). This view of land is evident in the ways forests are often seen and positioned as a resource or "weapon" in the "fight" against climate change, with much debate and speculation about their role in the stabilization, restoration, and ultimate redemption of the climate (Popkin, 2019). Seeing a forest as a "surface" also presents itself powerfully within discourses of early childhood education—and is visible in Canadian approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, as well as dominant images of the child throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. We

offer the log narrative as an example of a messy and uncertain everyday encounter (Taylor, 2013) that illustrates the need to refigure forest relations as more than instrumentalized, neutral, or static. The encounter troubled us, and made us rethink the ways our pedagogical choices are implicated in recreating settler colonial logics. What values or relationships do we as educators want to sustain, resist, or disrupt in our practice? Conversations about damage to the log and how we might minimize that damage might lead us to enact place inquiries. For example, as educators we might bring children into conversations about why certain rivers should be avoided in the fall, or about the flight patterns of birds who noisily join us at certain time of day or year and otherwise disappear, or about what it means to be implicated in the destruction of a home. In essence, we speculate that a deep attunement to place opens up pedagogical possibilities that resist extractivism. What stories do forests hold? Ultimately, these everyday, small encounters might support us in locating ourselves and our pedagogies differently within BC's colonial pasts, presents, and futures. However, as Glenda MacNaughton (2005) reminds us, "critical reflection means that there are always far more questions than there are answers" (p. 15).

Refiguring endings: Pedagogies of staying with the trouble

In coming together to write this paper, we recognized and grappled with the trouble that in making visible the mattering of this forest story through writing, we tell—and, one could argue, extract—a one-sided story of the child-log encounter to express our thinking and concerns. As Haraway (2019) says, "it matters what stories tell stories; it matters whose stories tell stories" (p. 565). We acknowledge that telling forest stories outside of the forest with(in) which they emerged indicates anthropocentric bias, but we hope our attempts to stay with the trouble of tensions might contribute to a body of work that resists extractivist logics and colonial discourses. Pedagogy is and will always be troubled, be it through ideas, pasts, presents, futures, and that which we cannot predict. We speculate that thinking-with unknowing, uncertainty, and trouble is a generative pedagogical response to the complex, coinherited common worlds (Latour, 2005) we inhabit. In doing so, we position forest relations as imperfect, always emerging, and situated, and hold space for multiple ways of being, understanding, and knowing the land. Our pedagogies privilege unknowing and uncertainty and seek to create a space for discussing imperfect ecological relations. If we consider ourselves a part of an ecological community, recoiling against the extraction of resources, how do we navigate this tension of being with(in) and outside of this story? The frictions of caring for the forest, of having empathy for more-than-human community members and falling into ongoing settler colonial patterns of deciding what or who should be protected in a forest are intricate and nuanced. It is uncomfortable for a story to have no ending, and as Haraway (2020) states, "it matters what ends end endings" (p. 445), but we believe that ending with uncertainty is pertinent in staying with the trouble of refiguring forest pedagogies. We invite readers to pay attention to everyday encounters in the early childhood spaces you inhabit. How might you invite children to see the forest as relationship rather than resource?

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