

## Identifying and working through settler ignorance

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Critical Studies in Education* on October 13, 2020, available online:  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17508487.2020.1830818>

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**Recommended citation:**

Rice, C., Dion, S. D., Fowlie, H., & Breen, A. (2020). Identifying and working through settler ignorance. *Critical Studies in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1830818>

# Identifying and working through settler ignorance

Carla Rice, Susan Dion, Hannah Fowlie, and Andrea Breen

## Abstract

As Canadian education systems implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, various expressions of white settler resistance become amplified. This article examines the potential for settler-educators' stories to teach about processes for working through settler ignorance. Insight into the question of how to transform settler subjectivities and relationships with Indigenous peoples cuts across theoretical terrain in three fields: decolonizing education, epistemic ignorance, and affect/felt theory. We engage with these currents to analyse settler resistance through *n/shnabek de'bwe wln*, a project aimed at transforming relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers through collaborative storytelling. We report on one project facet that brought Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, educators and students together to create digital/multimedia stories about experiences of schooling that could inform settler-educator learning by offering critical insight into unlearning ignorance as one strategy (among many) for decolonizing colonial structures of schools. Attention to settler stories reveals a triadic relationship between power/knowledge/affect wherein these forces are inextricably entangled in ways that create and reinforce the epistemological knot of settler ignorance and resistance. The emotional work storytellers undertook as part of their embodied learning offers insight into the promise of creative pedagogies for untying that knot.

## Keywords:

Epistemic Ignorance, Affect, De-colonizing Education, Embodied Knowing, Digital/Multimedia Storytelling

From initial contact, Indigenous people have resisted settler colonialism. As early as 1532 (Simon, 2005, p. 24), there were non-Indigenous people who recognized Indigenous humanity and contested colonizer claims to Indigenous lands. Despite historic and ongoing efforts to recognize Indigenous rights to traditional lands, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples continue to be shaped by settler colonialism. As a mutable set of ideas and structures deployed by white colonial powers to justify land theft, settler colonialism continues to shape all spheres of social life and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial nation states.

In Canada, the conclusion of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) Commission on Indian Residential Schools (2015a) represented a moment of settler reckoning with Canada's colonial violence. Through its comprehensive report, the TRC urged Canadians to contend with a difficult origin story, one that disrupted the dominant narrative of Canada as a peacemaking nation and demanded that non-Indigenous peoples acknowledge themselves as "occupiers of Indigenous homelands, perpetrators of cultural genocide and sustainers of settler colonial practices in the present" (Davis et al., 2017, p. 399). As governments and institutions, including education systems, rushed to respond to the Commission's findings with promises to implement its "Calls to Action" (2015b), various expressions of white settler resistance became amplified (Breen,

Wilson & DuPré, 2019). One such response was overt denial, including assertions that Residential Schools happened a long time ago and thus that Indigenous peoples needed to move on, that schools were well run institutions where children received good educations, and that claims about widespread abuse of students were exaggerated (Cook, 2018). Not all settlers responded so defensively, however; as Lenapé-Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion (2009) argues, denial can be nuanced and complex. For instance, some settlers now recognize that Residential Schools caused harm but continue to proclaim their ignorance, distancing themselves from responsibility for that harm. Others taking up the call to engage in reconciliation still resist grappling with questions of how they benefit from settler colonialism and white supremacy (Dion, 2009; Breen, 2019).

Such resistance is unsurprising given non-Indigenous peoples' indoctrination into a hegemonic progress narrative that denies violence perpetrated by settler colonial regimes even while asserting that western intellectual and sociopolitical systems represent the best pathways to human enlightenment and liberation (Rice, 2020). The question of how to transform settler subjectivities and relationships with Indigenous peoples cuts across well-traversed and newly forged theoretical terrain in three fields relevant to this paper: the literatures on decolonizing education (Dion, 2009; Davis et al, 2018), epistemologies of ignorance (Cook, 2018), and affect and felt theory (Ahmed, 2004; Million, 2013). In contrast to conventional western approaches to education, Indigenous approaches centre relationships and seek to disrupt white settler power/privilege, in part, by speaking Indigenous truth to settler-colonial power. According to education scholars Dion (2009) and Regan (2010), pedagogical

approaches that aim to transform Indigenous-settler relations *must* engage with and unsettle white settlers' emotional attachments to dominant narratives of Canada and to their own kinship stories of origins, and call into question their assumed right to material benefits accrued from colonization.

For theorists working on epistemologies of ignorance, this necessitates making ignorance audible as a problem that flows from structural privilege and power, which work to shape "what can and cannot be known" (Cook, 2018, p. 15). As members of the dominant group, white European-descended scholars have contributed to engendering ignorance by producing omissions and misconceptions in knowledge—knowingly and unknowingly "seeing the world wrongly" in ways that serve white hegemonic interests (Alcoff, 2007, p. 47). Affect theorists have shown how undoing resistance involves more than correcting faulty thinking; knowledge and ignorance are tethered to emotion, which generates forms of resistance that affect/felt theory helps us to understand. For example, Tanana Athabascan scholar Dian Million (2013) has proposed "felt theory" to explain how settler ignorance is maintained through delegitimizing Indigenous people's first-hand knowledge of colonization. Indigenous women's felt testimonies about sexual and other colonial violence, Million argues, show how colonial processes have centrally involved the violent imposition of heteropatriarchal relations and kinship structures (nuclear family, heterosexual matrix, masculinist political economy) onto Indigenous nations. In Sara Ahmed's version of affect theory, emotions are powerful relational forces that inform knowledge production and uptake; emotions are relational in how they circulate between individual and social bodies, binding certain people (white settlers) together and casting (Indigenous) others out of the body politic; and they are powerful in

how they mediate knowledge, shaping what knowledge gets generated and whether it is accepted, greeted with ambivalence, or vehemently denied/opposed (2008).

In this article, we engage with these three theoretical currents—theories of decolonizing education, epistemologies of ignorance and affect/felt theory—to analyze the complexities of settler resistance in a project that aimed to transform relationships through collaborative storytelling. We report on one facet of the project, titled *nlnshnabek de'bwe wln//telling our truths* (hereafter *nlnshnabek de'bwe wln*), that brought Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, educators and students together to create and share digital/multimedia stories about experiences of schooling that could inform settler-educator learning and offer critical insight into unlearning ignorance as one tactic among many required to decolonize schools. Over the four-year project, 40 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers across four school districts in Ontario learned technical and creative skills of multimedia/digital storytelling through immersing themselves in one of four workshops. These were designed for: i) Indigenous students and teachers, ii) a mixed group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, iii) a mixed group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and iv) non-Indigenous teachers who watched the videos as part of a professional development (PD) session and who then made videos to document their un/learning about decolonizing education. We have written elsewhere about the decolonizing gaze in videos created by Indigenous and settler storytellers (Rice et al., 2020a) and are working on articles about the impacts on settler-educator pedagogies of viewing the videos in PD sessions; here we focus on a selection of videos made by white settler-educators whose films confront what they know and don't know, about settler colonialism and relationships with Indigenous

peoples. We ask: What do the stories of settler-educators who are examining their settler consciousness (Llewellyn & Ng-A-Fook, 2020) teach about resistance and processes for working through resistance?

## Theorizing Settler-Educator Resistance

Regan (2010) describes settler subjectivities as comprised, in part, of collective narratives of Canadian identity that are rooted in national historical myths. These myths, and the emotions they engender, pervade all sectors of society, including the education system. Dion (2009) examines how Canadian public schools are sites where white settler superiority is nurtured through the cultivation of nationalist colonial narratives that position white settlers as ethically, socially and economically advanced reformer-saviors of Indigenous peoples. The school system emerges as a place of historical erasure, where settler denial is reproduced, and Indigenous counter-narratives are discounted. Since it is easier to deny than unlearn “truths” and engage with counter-narratives, settlers’ “refusal to know is comforting” (Dion, 2009, p. 56); however, both Dion and Regan (2010) also note that settler subjectivities can be transformed if settlers, through revisiting colonial histories/legacies and their kinship/life stories ‘re-cognize’ their implication in those relationalities. These works are useful in helping unravel where and how settler denial is reproduced, and how we might interrupt the narratological and social structures that sustain settler superiority and ignorance.

Work on epistemic ignorance helps to explain why the white settler-teacher majority is ill-equipped to disrupt nationalist myths and teach Indigenous perspectives on colonization. Theories of epistemic ignorance approach ignorance as a particular kind of knowing and explain how white settler denial “is sustained, made visible and [so

can be] disrupted” (Dion, 2009, p. 185). Theories of ignorance veer away from a Foucauldian analysis (1977) that examines how knowledge claims carry power toward a subaltern one (Mills, 2007) that reorients to how ignorance reproduces power, by analyzing the “conditions that promote and sustain ignorance, conceived not as the mere absence of knowledge, not as a void but as a force all its own which often blocks knowledge, stands in its place, and tacitly or more explicitly affirms a need or a commitment not to know” (Code, 2014, p. 154). Hence, rather than being a *deficiency* of knowledge, ignorance might be thought of as a *surfeit* of a particular kind of knowing produced by dominant settler groups, who create omissions and misconceptions in knowledge systems, undermining the credibility of Indigenous peoples and upholding their own knowledge claims as objective and true. Dion’s work with teachers reveals the labour of not-knowing. Further, scholars including Lorenzo Veracini (2015)—theorizing settler as distinct from other forms of colonization—have convincingly argued that a primary goal of the settler-colonial system is to eliminate Indigenous peoples (through genocide, forced assimilation, reserve systems, etc.) in order to legitimize land theft and enable white settler self-indigenization. To preserve settlers’ sense of moral authority and superiority while (tacitly or actively) continuing colonial violence, settler-colonial regimes reproduce and indeed, require ignorance on the part of those who carry it out. This dynamic explains why no amount of evidence alone will remedy historical erasure or reconcile relationships with Indigenous peoples until settlers become aware of and challenge their culpability for colonial conditions.

Theories of epistemic ignorance help to explain omissions and distortions in knowledge systems; however, it is unlikely that people develop deep commitments to



dominant accounts through cognition alone. Knowledge and ignorance are also tethered to emotion. In many ways, it is impossible to commit to a thought alone as the very act of attaching to an idea indicates that emotion is somehow operating. Sara Ahmed is helpful in theorizing emotions as relational forces that inform and carry knowledge commitments. Emotions necessarily transmit ideas, values, and judgements since, as she notes, “[t]o hate or to fear is to have a judgment about a thing as it approaches” (2014, p. 99). Not only do emotions attach to ideas or things; they also attach to people—both individuals and collectives (2004). Ahmed goes on to explore whiteness as a “real, material and lived” bodily orientation, as a way of being “at home” in a social world structured by white supremacy (2007, p.150). Since institutions under white settler colonialism reflect and orient around whiteness, white settlers do not have to confront white hegemony, which disappears through the embodied comfort that comes with fitting in. She describes the relational work that embodiments and emotions do to buttress white hegemony as “skin encounters”—discursive and material moves that white settlers make to mark certain groups as strangers who do not belong, which shapes how “a nation comes to feel itself as a body through apprehending this intruder who has to be expelled” (2014, p. 100). Emotions emerge as relational in their circulation between individual and social bodies, binding certain people together and casting others out of the body politic. This explains an especially perverse facet of the settler colonial nation, namely its construction of its sense of itself as a nation precisely through its expulsion/elimination of Indigenous peoples from its fabric. Together, theories of ignorance and emotion help to clarify how knowledge and ignorance come to bind to settler and Indigenous bodies and to bind white settler social bodies together

through emotion—and how, given their embodiment, these affects are difficult to disrupt. They further help us to theorize how white comfort might be thought of as an embodied expression of ignorance insofar as it is premised on a denial of the comfort (wellbeing, safety, self-determination) and ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples.

Million orients away from theorizing the intractability of colonial affects to the transformative potential of Indigenous affect by positing felt theory, or theory emerging from Indigenous testimonies that bear “witness to felt colonial experience” (2013, p. 75). For Million, Lee Maracle (Sto:lo) and others who write from the intersections of heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism—whose work animates how sexualized colonial violence is embodied and felt—Indigenous women’s testimony carries potential to move settlers’ psyches and worldviews. Million argues that while first-hand testimony is often rejected as unreliable, it can push settlers past the emotions driving ignorance (fear, guilt, shame, loss) and into the felt complexity of experiences narrated, thus productively galvanizing some into critical reflection and action. Her hopeful perspective on affect suggests that felt and embodied storytelling might offer pathways to transforming relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Our project explores the potential of storytelling about settlers’ histories and relationalities with Indigenous peoples to help unravel affects (fear, guilt, shame, loss) that secure epistemologies of ignorance. Following Million, we suggest that settler stories told in the same register as Indigenous testimonies—in an embodied and felt way—might aid in scaffolding counter-hegemonic knowledge systems (in this case, in educational institutions) by generating new sensations that circulate across bodies, places and ideas to mobilize new insights and actions (in educator affinities and

practices). We wonder whether/how settler self-interrogation might instigate affective pathways out of ignorance through crafting “felt stories”, stories in which they reckon with their relationships with Indigenous peoples and their accountabilities as beneficiaries of settler colonization. Though it risks re-centring settler narratives, this move is important because it opens settler storytellers to decentring colonial and centering Indigenous knowledges in ways that might provoke them to de/reconstruct their positionalities in relationship with Indigenous peoples. Following Davis et al (2017), our reading of settler stories crafted in this research indicates that “processes of centring and decentring are two necessary pieces of the same transformational puzzle” (p. 409) and further, that processes of re-authorship might be an important step for settler-educators to confront their implication in and begin to dismantle colonial thinking.

## Notes on Method: Listening To, Learning From

The Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice is an arts methodology research hub at the University of Guelph that investigates the power of art-making to open up conversations about systemic rather than individualized injustices in education, healthcare, and beyond (Rice & Mündel, 2019). Since its inception, Re•Vision has built an archive of over 1000 films from a range of projects, including *nIshnabek de'bwe wIn*. What makes *nIshnabek de'bwe wIn* unique is that Indigenous principal investigator, Susan Dion, lead the research team in decolonizing and indigenizing Re•Vision's arts-based methodology and in creating spaces in which storytellers could work together to decolonize knowledge in service of transforming relationships in public school systems.

In recent years, story-based methods have gone mainstream as “traditional” social scientists have begun to recognize the centrality of narrative to knowing and

meaning-making; however, these approaches rarely engage with Indigenous understandings (Kovach, 2009). Within Indigenous contexts, stories are understood as co-creations that exist in the storyteller-audience relationship and are grounded in connections with land and spirit. Stó:lo researcher Jo-Anne Archibald (2008) uses the term “storywork” to capture the centrality of storytelling as Indigenous methodology. In *n/shnabek de b’we wln*, we emphasized the creation of transformative stories through co-creation with Indigenous and settler researchers and artists. Following Lee Maracle (2017), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) (2018) and Thomas King (Cherokee) (2003), we approached stories as carriers of people’s knowledge, values and relationships—as speech acts that have the power to make and change the world.

To decolonize and indigenize our method, Dion guided the research team in mounting four three-day-long workshops in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, artists, and educators worked with storytellers to co-create multi-media stories: 1–4 minute-long videos pairing audio recordings of participants’ narratives with video, photographs, music, dance, artwork, and more. Storytellers benefitted from Anishinaabe Knowledge Keeper, Ed Sackaney who reminded us that stories are sacred; and Dion emphasized that knowledge encoded in stories exists in the relationship between storyteller and listener—that stories are told in the moment for specific reasons and that tellers and listeners both have responsibilities in the exchange. An important move in decolonizing our method entailed researchers making their own stories, thus disrupting the ethnographic gaze and upending conventional divisions between researcher/participant, knower/known, storyteller/audience. Given the saturation of the social world with stereotypic representations that distort Indigenous

experience and hegemonic narratives that construct white colonial perspectives as normative, we realized that “telling our stories” was not enough (Rice & Mündel, 2019; Rice et al., 2020b; Rice, et al., 2018a; Rice, et al., 2018b; Viscardis, et al., 2018). To push against colonial framings, we co-created curricula that highlighted problems with popular and curricular representations of Indigenous peoples, showed how Indigenous artist-activists have responded to these, and discussed how participant-video-makers might use their stories to intervene in colonial gazes and storylines (Rice et al., 2020a). Dion led the storytelling circles with care, emphasizing the embeddedness of participant stories in relationship and community before moving to the technological realm. The research team also hired Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists (including Fowlie) to lead the workshops in order to (temporarily) shift colonial power dynamics that operate in storytellers’ lives.

In designing our settler workshops, we applied Dion’s (2009) theorizing on the power, possibilities and limitations of stories, which helped us to think critically about how we might support settler-storytellers to avoid re-centering colonial narratives. We built a “pedagogy of accountability” into the process by holding one workshop in which settlers crafted stories collaboratively with Indigenous storytellers, and another in which settler-educators who had participated in PD sessions featuring *nishnabek de'bwe wln* videos crafted their responses in storied form. In both cases, settlers were supported in video-making by Indigenous artists working under Indigenous leadership. We also enacted a pedagogy of accountability through emphasizing how Indigenous storytelling methods center the necessity of *listening*. Throughout we remained attuned to the problematics of settler stories that look for recognition from Indigenous peoples rather

than take responsibility for transformational change through decolonizing thought and action. We took insight from settler scholar Elspeth Probyn (2004) who frames settler shame and other 'negative' affects as potentially productive insofar as these disrupt colonial worldviews.

We expected that settler-storytellers would feel some resistance as they listened to Indigenous experiences of violence and erasure. Ahmed (2007) describes how whites are protected from racial stress in institutions built in their own image and hence, unaccustomed to critical examination of white supremacy and how it manifests structurally and in daily life. We found that enacting the interrelationship between the story/storyteller/listener required that settlers be willing to confront their resistance to hearing Indigenous experiences of colonial erasure and violence in schools, and to think critically about contexts of the stories they sought to tell. In our PD sessions and videomaking workshops, we acknowledged how hearing Indigenous people's stories is risky since it entails vulnerability and discomfort. Further, we found that moving from listening to Indigenous stories to crafting stories about relationships with Indigenous peoples within an indigenized context created greater accountability and opened the possibility that settlers would de-centre their subjectivities/expertise even as they told their stories. While story-based methods often emphasize individuals *telling* their stories, what we found more important in this process was scaffolding spaces for *listening differently*; by creating opportunities for settlers to listen and learn from Indigenous perspectives, they became more equipped to revise their relationalities with Indigenous peoples.

To push against reproducing colonial knowledge in interpretation, our team engaged in a triple hermeneutic: following Indigenous research protocols, we watched and discussed videos with “insider witnesses”—urban Indigenous artists, educators, students and parents—and “outsider witnesses”—settler researchers and educators—to hear both groups’ affective reactions to, and thoughts on meanings embedded in the videos; we showed curated selections of the videos in PD workshops as a way of opening dialogue about decolonizing educational systems; we then analyzed the stories in relation to theory, discussing our interpretations as Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers deeply engaged in co-producing videos with the makers. For the settler stories, three of us (Rice, Fowlie, and Breen) watched the stories and met twice to discuss our theoretical impressions, questions and feelings generated, and to identify themes. Rice then drafted a theoretical account, putting theory into conversation with themes identified in the stories. All authors wrote descriptions of the films, connecting these to theory. As a final step, we shared our writing with storytellers and invited them to provide feedback on our descriptive analyses of their stories to ensure we “got it right”. One co-author, Fowlie, opted to include her story in this paper and the other storytellers welcomed the opportunity to engage with our analysis of their work. This analytic approach reflects our commitment to Indigenous methodologies of co-creation and community accountability (Kovach, 2009). Positioning storytellers as co-creators of storied knowledge reflects our aim to disrupt traditional hierarchies that exist between researchers and participants; knowers and that which is “known”; and what knowledge is legitimate and who determines this.

## Settler Stories of Transforming Subjectivities and Relationalities

We turn to explore settler processes of working through affect-laden ignorance surrounding their relations with Indigenous peoples and perspectives on colonial educational structures in creating their stories. We present and analyze four films<sup>1</sup> made by white settler educators, interspersing films made prior to and during the mixed workshop with Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers. We observe two themes across the stories and curate them accordingly into two sets: 1) knowing/not knowing: ruptures in the colonial ordering of things; and 2) reorienting through embodied and embedded knowing. To deepen our discussion, we punctuate these themes with descriptive analyses of settler videos; we focus on videos that we deem to be exemplars of at least one of the two themes and develop our descriptive analyses based on the work that the stories do in illustrating that theme. While we chose videos that we think offer specific insights into each theme, we recognize both themes surface and overlap across these stories. As our methodology makes clear, the focus here is *not* on educators who remain entrenched or confirmed in denial; rather we orient to settler-educators who position themselves in relationship with and who seek to tackle their resistance. We define “resistance” as a move by settlers to dis/engage themselves from their responsibilities in re-dressing colonization, a move informed by the complex knot of emotions—fear, anxiety, guilt, terror, confusion, anger, sadness, and shame—that is tethered to and helps to sustain and entrench settler-colonial knowledges and narratives. This knowledge/affect/power nexus circulates among settlers in response to



Indigenous testimony, which settlers use to distance themselves from (rather than accepting) their responsibilities in dismantling settler colonization.

### *Knowing/Not Knowing: Ruptures in the Colonial Ordering of Things*

Krista Tucker Petrick begins *I See You*<sup>1</sup> as a young girl living in a colony, a characterization that she underscores with irony: “yes, it was called a colony”. Her repetition of the phrase, “I see you” takes on multiple meanings as she traces her journey from ignorance towards insight and, as a First Nation, Métis and Inuit Equity Resource Teacher, embodied knowing. While in Western empirical traditions *seeing is believing* and thus equated with truth, Tucker Petrick calls into question this premise by interrogating what she and other white settlers learn to see/not see, returning throughout her story to seeing as a place of both knowing and not-knowing. As a young girl she notices the unacknowledged absence of Indigenous students from school activities; and she recalls grappling with what she was taught to ignore—yet still observed and sensed was wrong. In this retelling, settler epistemic ignorance surfaces in the form of imposed erasure, a collective silence surrounding Indigenous presence that upholds the settler “status quo as natural and inevitable, thus allowing the...denial of the systemic nature of oppression” (Schaeffli et al., 2018, p. 4). The gap between what Tucker Petrick observes and what she is authorized to see implicates a double vision that mirrors the “white settler imaginary [that has] normalized the history of colonial relations and in turn the erasure of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples from the historical narratives taught inside and outside the school curriculum” (Tupper cited in Llewellyn and Ng-A-Fook, 2020, p. 6).

Tucker Petrick implicates her many professional roles (court reporter in children's aid/youth court, probation officer for Indigenous youth, teacher in a secure custody facility) in the continued structural violence of surveillance, policing, and jailing of Indigenous people. She witnesses their overrepresentation in carceral systems and concurrently learns from Indigenous people about Indigenous cultures and protocols. Each encounter becomes a moment of learning-unlearning, of questioning what she has been taught to see/not see. When she was teaching in a secure custody facility, for example, students described Tucker Petrick as a white polar bear, and themselves as baby brown seals trapped in the class. Acknowledging their observation, Tucker Petrick struggles to recognise and respond to students' attempts to give voice to an uncomfortable, pervasive truth: as the polar bear, she is predator and they, baby seals are her prey.

For settlers, our predatory role is an uncomfortable truth that we must face in navigating affective pathways out of ignorance and in learning how to perceive and respond differently. Many scholars emphasize the need for discomfort (Aveling, 2013; Dion, 2009; Tupper, 2011), arguing for the transformative potential of a "pedagogy of discomfort" (Zembylas & Boler cited in McGloin, 2015 p. 272) as a motivating force towards dismantling colonial structures. Tucker Petrick attempts to find her way out of the predator position by standing in opposition to settler culture, asserting, "Those with authority aren't listening to you, but I know you are here." Here she enacts what Swan (2017) describes as a feminist praxis of generous encounters with the Other, an attempt to get closer, to speak what is present, while acknowledging the distance between. Tucker Petrick cannot find the words to communicate what she understands, perhaps

because words are insufficient; instead we feel the truth of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's disparate realities through her refrain of "I see you" that reverberates with the affect that "moves between subjects not through voices or speech" (Ahmed cited in Swan, 2017, p. 558).

Tucker Petrick describes Indigenous students as "hidden in plain sight" (Dion, et al 2010), referring to the fact that many do not self-identify in systems of schooling and others don't perceive them as Indigenous. We contend that what is really hidden in plain sight is white settler ignorance, upheld by a "school curriculum [that] reinforces settler identities and students' ignorance of how these identities have been normalized over time" (Tupper, 2011, p. 40). Learning about settler colonialism as an ongoing structure and set of inequitable relations is akin to coming out of a fog, where settlers begin to realize that Indigenous people have been present all along, in our schools, neighborhoods, and cities but we settlers could not (would not) see all that we did not know. It is hidden from us and we hide it from ourselves.

In *This Wall*,<sup>1</sup> Jaya Johanna Karsemeyer Bone tells the parallel story of the visible wall in Palestine and the invisible wall in Canada. Showing video footage from her educational trip to Palestine, where she painted a mural on the wall, Karsemeyer Bone discloses, "I wanted to see what I could not understand". As her footage pans the spray-painted quote from German-Jewish essayist Kurt Tucholsky, "[a] country is not only what it does. It is also what it tolerates" (1933) she speaks of her disorienting experience in Palestine, "I was close but I could not see". Here *seeing* becomes a metaphor for knowing/not knowing. Upon her return to Canada, she encounters the growing momentum of *Idle No More*, breaking through settler culture's denial about

colonialism; and once again she confronts her ignorance, this time, of Indigenous realities in her home country.

Karsemeyer Bone refers to herself as a tourist, not only in Palestine but also in Canada. She juxtaposes footage of her sandaled feet walking on the warm ground in Palestine with that of her boot-laden feet walking through snow back in Canada. A tourist takes a trip, for pleasure, and is usually just passing through. A tourist consumes what a place and people have to offer—culture, food, experiences—as entertainment. What does it mean to be a tourist in your own country? How is one of a place and not of that place? Settler ignorance allows, and indeed scaffolds, this dual reality, living in Canada, unaware of so much of Indigenous-settler history and current realities. Karsemeyer Bone realizes, “This wall has always been my neighbour” and recognizes how this wall is a structural barrier built of ignorance. Karsemeyer Bone inundates the viewer with the structural violence of colonialism in a series of photographs—cigar store Indians, Indian head logos, appropriated images of peace pipes, beads and feathers—in rapid succession. Through tracing her journey away and back again, Karsemeyer Bone arrives with a new affirmation, “This work is not a trip for me to go on. It is where I live.” She has moved through denial and ignorance to solidarity in relationship with Indigenous peoples.

The scene shifts again as Karsemeyer Bone shows herself attending the installation of Lenape/Potawatomi artist Vanessa Dion Fletcher’s reimagined Western Great Lakes Covenant Chain Confederacy Wampum Belt entitled *Relationship or Transaction*. Dion Fletcher (2018) describes her installation thusly: “This belt depicts two figures holding hands in the center flanked by pentagons and the date 1764. [The]

reproduction is made using \$5 bills as the quawahog (purple) beads and replica \$5 bills as the whelk (white) beads”. Encountering Dion Fletcher’s work, settlers cannot escape their failure to uphold this and other treaties. Ample historical evidence shows that settlers verbally agreed to certain terms in treaties while writing documents with different key terms that advanced only settlers’ interests, thus betraying the trust of their Indigenous co-singers (Obomsawin, 2014). Karsemeyer Bone concludes by asking, “How have I let something so big be so invisible?” Her story reveals that settler “ignorance is not neutral or incidental...[not] passive or haphazard but a profoundly purposive and wilful ignorance” (Godlewska et. al., 2010, p. 419). As she feels through these uncomfortable truths, Karsemeyer Bone begins the transformative process. Knowing where she lives differently, she is engaged and can act rather than continue to uphold structures of ignorance.

### *Reorienting through Embodied and Embedded Knowing*

Hannah Fowlie’s *Vertigo*<sup>1</sup> begins with Fowlie lying in bed, unable to get up due to the onset of dizziness. The dizziness lasts for months and only dissipates when she understands its genesis—her ignorance about the true history of her country. In her role as social worker at the Toronto District School Board’s Urban Indigenous Education Centre (UIEC), Fowlie is hearing from Indigenous students, families, and community members about the atrocities of Residential Schools and multitude of injustices they are currently experiencing in schools. At the same time, supported by her Indigenous colleagues and Elders, she is learning about Indigenous cultures, teachings and protocols. This decolonial education has a disorienting, even shocking impact on her body, mind, spirit and emotions. *Vertigo* is about the difficulty of embracing discomfort

and learning that discomfort is necessary in order to disrupt colonial educational structures. McGloin (2015) mobilizes the phrase 'listening in' to describe a form of political listening that encounters difficult knowledge and risks conflict, rather than seeking safety. In this form of listening it is crucial to avoid the "imperializing desire for absolution on the part of dominant groups" (Dreher, quoted in McGloin, p. 274) and to reflect critically on one's complicity with colonial structures: to look inward at their role in colonization and outward to understand how they reproduce and/or resist structures of colonialism.

Fowlie reflects on her experience "as the daughter of a Holocaust survivor" and remembers that her mother taught her early in life that "it was the Germans othering of the Jews that allowed the massacre to happen". Her embodied and embedded family history and lessons about oppression and genocide informed her choice to become a social worker. However, social work like settler identity is complex. The practice originates from social justice work; however, social workers are also agents of the state, implicated in the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in child welfare systems (Sinha et al., 2013). Fowlie's subjective experience of intergenerational trauma helps her *listen in* to Indigenous experiences of colonization and her ignorance evinces settler privilege and indoctrination by the colonial system. At the end of her story, Fowlie shows both an image of a small seedling, indicating that she is only at the beginning of her decolonial learning and pans an image of the Kaswenta or Two-Row Wampum belt, affirming her commitment to "walk together, in a good way, and honour the space between us". Settler historian Jon Parmenter (2013) describes the Kaswenta as "symbolizing a separate-but-equal relationship between two entities based on mutual

benefit and mutual respect for each party's inherent freedom of movement" (pp. 83-84). By including this image, Fowlie demonstrates that the Kaswentha will guide her moving forward in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, in a relationship that brings forward an "intimacy that does not annihilate difference" (Scapp as cited by Reynolds, 2013, p. 65).

Louise Azzarello's *EmBodying and EnActing Change*<sup>1</sup> uses sparse imagery and a clear, powerful voiceover to juxtapose different kinds of knowing. "I always knew, but really I knew nothing," she says. As her story opens, the camera scans piles of books and readings, representing her formal knowledge. She makes a list: genocide, residential schools, loss of language and culture, the work of writers and artists. With a focus on these specific details, Azzarello demonstrates her "expertise" in managing knowledge of colonialism as she speaks with confidence that exudes authority and control. Yet each expression of knowing is followed by the statement, "But really, I knew nothing". Faintly at first, an image of Azzarello comes into focus wearing a black unitard and dancing on a stark black stage. With these images and words, she brings us into the dichotomy felt between what she knows from books and what she learns from embodied experience. Here she shares a knowing that lives in our breath, bodies and movements. She sets up viewers to learn from and with her first by letting us see her perform good teacher—asserting that her professional self knows, covers, and controls the content—and then by undoing this disembodied performance through disclosing, "I taught about these things, but I didn't know".

The listener/viewer anticipates and wants to know how Azzarello became conscious of this disjuncture between mind-body, knowing-not knowing, as while she explains, almost justifies her expert position, she simultaneously refuses her own

(embodied) knowing. As the viewer solidifies the question: *What happened to make you question this knowing/not knowing*, there it is: Azzarello describes the moment she “caught herself in the act”. She tells us about the day she handed out agendas to students at a new school. The visual shifts to the familiar image of a student agenda, but this agenda has an “Indian head” on its cover. “It was an exchange. Fifty bucks for a red Indian head”. This is the moment—the moment of shock when the familiar is interrupted. Her knowing sinks into her body; emotions emerge that tug her towards new understanding; and new knowledge ruptures her confident assurance. The sound of a heartbeat becomes audible and intensifies, and over this Azzarello speaks the words: “Shaking. Devastated. Raging. Panicking. Feeling implicated. Told me I had to act. I had to do the work of learning”. In this moment Azzarello unveils how colonial structures operate in schools and how she is complicit.

She slaps her hand hard on the wooden stage and the sound reverberates, breaking the melodic movement of her dance. Mirroring her shock, Azzarello emphatically calls viewers to hear how we are each implicated in a system forced by the colonial space. While she could name, define, create a list detailing the irrationalities and injustices of colonial structures, she did not know herself as settler, or know the extent to which her being and actions reproduced a dominant settler subject position or narrative of knower; while she teaches about colonialism, she does not attend to its impacts on her subjectivity, history and relationality with Indigenous people. The end of Azzarello’s story suggests possibility in recognizing her complicity and how examining it might initiate a strengthened commitment to ‘re-cognizing’ Indigenous people’s



experiences, and to moving towards new embodied and felt ways of knowing that orient to decolonial action.

## Conclusion

The themes animated in our descriptive analysis encapsulate video-makers' accounts of a process of remaking settler subjectivities that is both linear and cyclical. This process of learning-unlearning is linear in how settlers story the complexities of working through resistance and the feelings that initiate resistance (fear, anger, sadness, guilt) as an identity and boundary-marking force; confront systemically-imposed ignorance that is scaffolded by dominant narratological, political and geo-spatial structures of Canadian society; and come to a transformed subjectivity through learning that is both embodied (felt, relational) and embedded (accountable to Indigenous people and to power structures). The settler storytellers make visible colonial relationships operating in schools and, in so doing, reveal underlying structures of ongoing settler colonialism—including the structure of epistemic ignorance. They also make visible individual agency in reproducing and/or resisting colonialism; their stories surface commitments and accountability to relationship with Indigenous peoples and worldviews in ways that challenge epistemic ignorance and other colonial structures. The process of learning-unlearning is also cyclical, in how settler-storytellers emphasize on-going, recursive cycles of embodied education and action as critical to transforming settler relationships with Indigenous peoples and structures of colonization on Turtle Island. The circularity of their learning foregrounds how decolonization is a process that, at least in terms of white settler storytellers, researchers and institutions, remains ongoing and incomplete.

Four storytellers—three teachers and one social worker—made multimedia/digital stories and, despite the risks, allowed us to analyze their creative work. That these storytellers and all of the white settler-educators (10) who made videos for this research identified as women invites consideration of possible gendered dimensions of epistemic ignorance. On a surface level, this might reflect the fact that a majority of Ontario teachers are white women; however, it may also be true that epistemic ignorance works along gendered lines. Perhaps white women learn to orient to, and white men away from body/emotion as part of their performance of gender, and this difference surfaces in their un/learning processes. While expressions of racialized gender might differently influence white men's and women's willingness to confront ignorance as an affective, embodied force, racialized gender might also shape their attachment to white comfort, as white femininity is culturally imagined as more innocent and in need of protection than white masculinity or racialized femininity. In this context, white-women's performance of racialized gender might be understood as double-edged: it might create impetus for white women to become missionaries/saviors in education systems whilst maintaining ignorance through claiming innocence; and it might allow them to express a felt desire to engage in relationship, confront white ignorance head on, and open to the vulnerabilities associated with first-person story-making and analysis.

It is important to acknowledge that these storytellers were willing to engage with settler ignorance as they signed up for our workshops. Further, we did not identify "becoming an ally" as an aim of our workshops; instead, we aimed for settler-educators to explore their implication in settler colonialism and relationships with Indigenous

peoples, and premised these on the insight that simply by inhabiting Indigenous territories, settler-educators were already implicated in colonization and in relationship with Indigenous peoples. Thus, our workshops focused more on decolonizing white subjectivities than on becoming allies. While neither our workshops nor our story analyses focus specifically on questions of allyship, our reading of the stories does give us pause to consider the relationship between allyship, decolonizing education and epistemic ignorance. We suggest that confrontation with epistemic ignorance through disrupting white embodied comfort is a necessary but insufficient condition for decolonizing education, which requires dismantling schooling's colonial underpinnings and logics, or for enacting ally-ship, which entails lasting commitment to making change in teachers' spheres of influence in/beyond their immediate worlds.

Attending to the emotion flowing in, around and across settler stories, to the affects circulating between them as story-makers and us as story receivers, and to the emotional work that they undertook as part of their embodied learning has helped to inform our understanding of how ignorance as an epistemic force is defended/undone, at least in these stories, through affect and dis/embodiment. Feminist theorists have long argued for the political importance of bringing the body back in, for understanding of that which exceeds language—the fleshy, the sensory, the felt, the yet-to-be languaged--and here we have shown one reasons why this is necessary: to capture/analyse the operations of what Ahmed (2004, p. 46) calls the “affective economy”, the sedimentation and movement of affect in and through individual and social bodies that block and/or open possibilities for change. Exploring the process of unlearning epistemic ignorance (and its undoing of the self) through art is vitally

important since artistic expression enables us to capture/convey aspects of unlearning/undoing in its fullness—not reducing this process to speech alone but bringing us closer through engaging, disrupting and satiating all of our senses. This way, artmaking contributes to Million’s (2009) concept of felt analysis, allowing for a multifaceted telling, “that illuminates the deeper meaning of...‘education’ in Canada” (p. 54).

This has implications for how we understand the power-knowledge neologism, suggesting that rather than being a dyadic node where power and knowledge are understood as indivisibly entwined and co-extensive (as Foucault would have it, 1980), this node might more meaningfully be thought of as a triadic nexus of power/ knowing-not-knowing / affect—as a triad or trine where emotion, knowing/not-knowing and power are understood as inextricably entangled with each other. In storying how they come to recognise their complicity in colonialism, the storytellers teach us something about the challenges of attending to emotion and dis/embodiment in the work of unlearning hegemonic and learning difficult knowledge; in attending closely to the embodied and embedded elements of their stories, we learn how we might begin to identify and work through the power/knowing-not-knowing/affect knot of settler resistance in order to act in support of Indigenous people’s rights to be self-determined, self-sustaining people on these lands.

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> To watch the stories presented in our article, go to <https://revisioncentre.ca/identifying-and-working-through-settler-ignorance> (password “unlearning\_ignorance”). These videos are intended for classroom use, and are not for public screening.

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