


Article

Composting Settler Colonial Distortions: Cultivating Critical Land-Based Family History

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Abstract: A collective of three intergenerational and intersectional educators engage in anti-colonial and/or decolonial processes of composting colonial distortions through Land-based conceptualizations of Critical Family History. Engaging in spiral discourse through Critical Personal Narratives, the authors theorize critical family history, Land-based learning, and Indigenous decolonial and anti-settler colonial frameworks. Using a process of unsettling reflexivity to analyze and interrupt settler colonial logics, the authors share their storied journeys, lessons learned and limitations for the cultivation of Critical Land-based Family History.

Keywords: colonial distortions; critical family history; critical personal narrative; land; settler-colonialism; indigenous methodologies

1. Introduction

We ask that you, the reader, journey with us by engaging in deep listening, pausing, asking questions, engaging critically with these words and perspectives, and reflexively process what is shared with you. We are currently guests—occupying and benefitting from—the traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples who have been in relation to this Land since time immemorial, specifically the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) and Noxws'á?aq (Nooksack) nations, in what is now Northwest Washington State. This territory is marked by the Point Elliot treaty of 1855, where the Lummi Nation ceded land for “reservation lands and guarantees to retain the rights to hunt, fish, and gather at [their] usual and accustomed grounds and stations and traditional territories” ([Lummi Indian Business Council 2016](#)). We recognize that it is not enough to acknowledge these Lands and Peoples; we are also responsible for taking reflexive actions toward being in a relationship. This is on-going and collective work. As Eve Tuck with the [Indigenous Education Network \(2019\)](#) writes:

This is not a land acknowledgement, but instead, a call to acknowledge land and waters and what it means to be in right and respectful relationship with Indigenous peoples. We are committed to pushing the practice of land and water acknowledgements beyond static scripts, towards more meaningful commitments/expressions of relationship, reciprocity and responsibility to land and water.

In an effort to actively engage in this commitment, we offer the possibilities of engaging in Critical Land-based Family History (CLFH) as we ground ourselves in how we came to be in this process together. This article developed out of personal critical family history work that we each began before our adventure into researching together. As we gathered and wrote this piece, we grappled with our collective struggles ([Snelgrove et al. 2014](#)). Our storied journeys were on different Indigenous Lands and took different paths but, ultimately, brought us together. We came to this work searching for

answers, looking for clarity, seeking a community of critical scholars, hoping to provide possibilities to support others in a coalition to resist settler colonial violence. We found ourselves angered by the histories we unearthed—the racialized, economic, xenophobic, settler colonial barriers—to our own family histories, the challenges of DNA testing (see [Tallbear 2013](#)), and our hope that our process may support others on similar paths.

We (Amy, Eddy and Kristen) are an intergenerational, intersectional coalition of Chicanx, White, Queer, Settler and Indigenous educators initially connected through our relationships to higher education, including multicultural education, education for tribal sovereignty, environmental education and elementary education. Our Critical Family Histories (CFH), or storied journeys (described in Section 4), grounded us in an embodied dynamic and complex unsettling of our collusion and refusals of settler colonialism. As autonomous individuals within our collective, we share histories of imposed U.S., Mexican and Canadian borders, grapple with settler colonialism, and honor Indigenous survivance ([Vizenor 1994](#)). Our journey begins with our initial research retreat, and then follows with our theories, methods and analyses. We then offer a brief opportunity to learn with us through our individual storied journeys and how we came together. We conclude with some of our lessons learned, as well as our limitations. While reading this article, we request that you take time to listen, pause for deeper understanding and self-reflection, and remember that this is a long-term, on-going process. We reject the cookie-cutter curriculum and are not offering a new toolkit or framework. As we are currently still engaged (and may always be) in this process, we share our experience with hopes for transformation and the possibilities of readers to be inspired to engage with Critical Land-based Family History.

At our first research retreat, Elizabeth Bragg, an Indigenous organic farmer of Long Hearing Farm ([Chang 2019](#)), offered us a bell hooks teaching that led to a rich discussion, creating the conditions for our title, ‘Composting Colonial Distortions, Cultivating Critical Land-based History.’ Bragg described bell hooks’ rendering of her first encounter with Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist scholar and spiritual leader. Flustered by immediate confrontations with sexism and racism, bell hook’s first words to Thich Nhat Hanh, in this monumental meeting were “I am so angry!” ([Yancy 2017](#), p. 19). He responded beautifully with “hold on to anger and use it as compost for your garden” ([Yancy 2017](#), p. 19). As hooks grappled to put this into the context of the “trauma of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist [hetero]patriarchy” ([Yancy 2017](#), p. 20), she envisioned this composting as “energy that can be recycled in the direction of our good. It is an empowering force. If we don’t think about it that way, it becomes a debilitating and destructive force” ([Yancy 2017](#), p. 19).

This conversation between bell hooks and Thich Nhat Hanh resonated with our struggles as we critically engaged with our family histories, our work and our continued development as educators. We struggled with a sense of not belonging, with stories of displacement, dispossession, dislocation, disclosure/enclosure, discomfort/comfort and binaries. We were consistently enraged with the settler colonial systems of oppression and violence that we uncovered historically and that we currently experience in our institutions. We were unwilling to allow settler colonialism to become a destructive and debilitating force in our deconstruction and reconstruction of family history. Because settler colonialism is structural, and not an event, it is invasive, ongoing and invisible within settler societies ([Wolfe 1999](#); [Tuck and McKenzie 2015](#)). It is characterized by outsiders coming to “land inhabited by Indigenous peoples and [claiming] it as their own” ([Tuck and McKenzie 2015](#), p. 59). In order to sustain itself, settler colonialism works to disappear, silence, and remove the histories of Indigenous peoples and Land. Our hope was to cultivate anti-colonial or decolonizing possibilities with our driving question, “How shall we live?” ([Tuck 2018](#)). We wondered how we might begin to compost the anger and grief we were unearthing as a result of the settler colonialism narratives in our own family histories. When bell hooks was asked how to compost trauma, referring explicitly to the trauma that Black People were experiencing, she argued that “we have to be willing to be truthful” about “the trauma of white supremacy” ([Yancy 2017](#), p. 19). We committed to an energy of composting, by which we mean the unearthing and breaking down of the ways settler colonialism distorts history. Not all

history, but the histories that get told and understood as family histories. Within our critical personal narratives, we began to recognize the absence or invisibility of Land as a central colonial distortion. In the spirit of cultivating a garden of truth-telling, critical family history and Land-based learnings, we leaned on many Indigenous and critical scholars who guided our process and actions.

2. Theoretical Foundations

As we present our theoretical foundations and processes, we ask that, rather than search for a template to engage in Critical Land-Based Family History (CLFH), you resonate and grapple with the work of the many scholars, poets and philosophers who are informing our storied journeys. While we have utilized these theoretical foundations in our process of meaning making, and they have informed our developed and developing pedagogies, we have not created a new framework, curriculum, or unit template. Our hope is that you will journey with us and engage in your own CLFH by reflexively unsettling (Calderon 2016) your family histories. We ground this research in the scholarship of critical family history (Sleeter 2019), Land (Styres 2019), and anti-colonial and decolonizing (Patel 2016) frameworks.

2.1. Critical Family History

The fields of ethnic studies and multicultural education are grounded in critical examinations and multiple perspectives of history in relation to the sociopolitical context of U.S. society. Many teachers in U.S. schools engage children in “garden-variety family history” projects with little to no critical analysis of the complex social positionality of their familial histories and the implications for past and current power relations (Sleeter 2019, p. 129). Sleeter (2008) challenged her predominantly white teacher education candidates to transform the standard family genealogy curriculum into a critical research process of “understanding themselves as cultural beings,” as well as understanding “institutional discrimination” (Sleeter 2019, p. 114). Sleeter defined this Critical Family History (CFH) as applying “critical theoretical traditions to an analysis of how one’s family has been constructed historically within and through relations of power” (Sleeter 2011, p. 423). Collectively, we resonate with Sleeter’s definition, including examinations of family power and resources, genealogical research using primary documentation, oral history, and analysis of historical, social and political resources situating ancestors within larger local and historical contexts, rather than as individuals (Sleeter 2019). Sleeter raises many essential and challenging questions relating to land acquisition, property, settler colonialism and dispossession.

2.2. Land-Based Learning

Building on Sleeter’s CFH, conceptualizations of Land are central to our CLFH. While our theoretical and methodological frameworks are deeply informed by Tuck and McKenzie (2015), the enormity of Indigenous Land-based learning (Bang et al. 2014; Bang and Marin 2015; Cajete 1994; Cajete 2016; Calderon 2014; Coulthard 2014; Goeman 2008; Grande 2014; Simpson 2014; Simpson 2017; Styres 2019) cannot adequately be covered in this article due to the limitations of space and time. Within our discussion of lessons learned, we will highlight our specific learnings from Land. For this particular moment, we provide a foundation of Land conceptualizations to clarify our intentions for CLFH.

First, we explicitly ground Land, rather than ‘place’, within our scholarship and research. Within Western frameworks, ‘place’ is inanimate, relegated to property, and derives from Cartesian philosophy and settler colonialism (Bang et al. 2014; Calderon 2014). Land, from Indigenous and decolonizing perspectives, “refers not just to the materiality of land,” it is “familial, intimate, intergenerational, and instructive” (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, p. 57). For our CLFH research, we understand that, in order for settlers to “make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples who live there” (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 6). Historically, the juxtaposition between Indigenous peoples and settlers is clearly articulated as “those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how they came to be in a particular place” (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 6). Therefore, it is essential within a

CLFH to investigate our familial relationships to Land and examine the possibilities for composting and cultivation.

From this perspective, we highlight Styres's (2019) Indigenous context of "Land (with a capital 'L') rooted in "decolonizing frameworks and praxis that critically trouble and disrupt colonial myths" (Styres 2019, p. 24). Similar to Tuck and McKenzie, Styres describes Land as embodying the abstract and concrete. She states that "Land is spiritual, emotional, and relational; Land is experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land is consciousness—Land is sentient" (p. 27). If Land is theoretical and philosophical, it "comprises storied and journeyed connections of self-in-relationship—to each other, to our places, and to all of creation—as a central model for interpretation and meaning-making" (Styres 2019, p. 28). Within this context, there are pathways for the cultivation of conscious actions through the analysis of these storied journeys. As Styres (2019) suggests—and it is our hope—it is possible to "disrupt and problematize normalizing and hegemonic dominant discourses while opening spaces that liberate critical thought, questioning and sense-making" (pp. 31–32). We have come up against settler place conceptualizations in our family histories, our respective educations and our work. Indigenous Land conceptualizations are not independent of place; however, they are unique and independent of settler understandings and realizations of place (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). We have found that engaging with Indigenous scholarship on Land has supported us in decomposing settler place conceptualizations in our own individual and collective processes.

2.3. Anti-Settler Colonial/Decolonizing Frameworks

As described earlier, we root CLFH in anti-settler colonial and/or decolonizing frameworks. It is important for us to define these terms to explicitly trouble the ways they are appropriated in the academy. To understand settler colonialism, there must be an account of colonization. Grande (2015) defines colonization as "a multidimensional force underwritten by Western Christianity, defined by White supremacy, and fueled by global capitalism" (p. 18). Because of the insidious project of colonialism, in all its forms, we emphasize that "when we theorize settler colonialism, we must attend to it as both an ongoing and incomplete project, with internal contradictions, cracks, and fissures through which Indigenous life and knowledge have persisted and thrived despite settlement" (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, p. 61). For this purpose, we resist damage-centered narratives of Indigenous Land conceptualizations, and center Indigenous, Black, Latinx and Queer futurities. Furthermore, "decolonization is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity" (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 35). We use both the terms 'anti-colonial' and 'decolonial', which are not interchangeable or consecutive (Patel 2016). Leigh Patel uses anti-colonial to make visible "the ways which coloniality must be known to be countered, and decolonial should always address material changes" (Patel 2016, p. 7). Tuck and Yang (2012) identify the material changes of decolonization as "repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted" (2012, p. 7). Each of us are differently located in the project of dismantling settler colonialism. Like Patel, we are coming to know and understand our own social locations. She argues that "critique is necessary for noting the contours of colonial logics but is insufficient for imagining into existence praxes that decolonize" (Patel 2016, p. 2). This highlights our struggle to make an offering of meaning-making to all those reading looking for guidance on how to apply an anti-settler colonial or decolonizing framework to your CLFH. Instead, we provide our process, engage in ethnographic refusals, and try to identify our theories of change as we learn with Indigenous scholars and from our histories as a continuing analysis.

2.4. Unsettling Reflexivity

Unsettling reflexivity is "an ethnographic method of data collection and analysis that helps contextualize and uproot" the ways that settler colonial epistemologies invade research and are so ubiquitous that they go unnoticed or avoided (Calderon 2016, p. 6). Like Patel's anticolonial and

decolonial considerations, Calderon suggests that “moving toward a decolonial reflexivity first requires this work of unsettling” (2016, p. 17). An unsettling reflexivity refuses “to feed the settler colonial gaze that seeks to assuage settler anxiety by affirming the racial logics of settler colonialism in place” (2016, p. 17). We agree that “it is not enough to know about settler colonialism” (2016, p. 17). Based on Calderon’s own research questions and reflexivity, we ask questions of ourselves, our narratives, our discussions and our lessons learned. How have particular types of colonialism(s) impacted our identities and our communities? Where are settler colonial systems located in our research? How has settler colonialism impacted our access to family history? How can we interrupt and refuse the settler colonial gaze or enclosure within our own CLFH? How does the complex reality of settler colonialism impact our critical personal narratives? How does Land-based learning impact our CLFH? How can our critical personal narratives move beyond individualism?

3. Methodology and Analysis

We begin our discussion of our methodology and analysis with a “pause” (Patel 2016). We write this article with trepidation. We are concerned that this work could be taken up as a template or checklist for a sanitized practice of making connections to ‘place’ as ‘decolonizing’ family history. Patel writes that “perhaps the best move...in the interest of decolonization, that is to say eradicating, dismantling, and obliterating colonialism is to pause in order to reach beyond” (Patel 2016, p. 88). Our ‘pause’ reflects this particular moment in our research, recognizing that we will always be in process while considering what it means to reach beyond. We ask that you cautiously and thoughtfully enter into our ‘pauses’ by engaging with our process and understanding that we will not present ‘findings’; instead, we provide lessons learned.

We currently identify our methodology as Critical Personal Narratives (French 2008; Espinoza-Gonzalez et al. 2014)—a form of autoethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997), storywork (Archibald 2008, p. ix), counternarrative (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) and testimonio (Beverley 2005). We engage in analysis through the process of unsettling reflexivity (Calderon 2016) within a spiral discourse model (Bishop 2005). This process requires repeated ‘pauses,’ reflections, discussions, regrouping, eliminations, dismantlings and ethnographic refusals. These refusals concern our choices in what to share and what not to share. Our stories are not just our own. They belong to our families, ancestors and communities, and are shaped by larger structural systems of harm or healing that may impact the futurities of Indigenous, Black, Latinx and Queer communities, as well as communities not addressed in our research that have been historically marginalized within settler colonialism.

Our Process

At present, we are in our second year of our collective research process. Our collaboration developed organically within the university where we each engaged in CFH research, as well as Land-based learning within coursework, theorizing and praxis. At the onset of our research together, Amy was preparing to present her master’s capstone in Environmental Education; Eddy was engaged in undergraduate academic coursework, including an independent study on Critical Family History Praxis with Kristen; and Kristen was grappling with CFH and Land-based learning pedagogy in courses in multicultural education, tribal sovereignty and Native education.

After a few initial meetings, we agreed to engage in what Maori educational researcher Russell Bishop (2005) describes as a spiral discourse process, or a collaborative on-going storying with reflexive meaning-making. Within this process, there is an extended welcome honoring all voices present, with an emphasis on reciprocity and the sharing of power. Dialogue continues after each participant has shared their stories, which may be retold, modified, deleted or adapted with a purpose of creating jointly constructed meaning that can be revisited, revised, composted, or cultivated (Bishop 2005). This provides an ethical space to “reimagine, change positions, develop, negotiate, and come to some form of meaning making that can be reconstructed through time and context” (French 2008, p. 209).

Over the course of 15 months, we entered into storied journeys together, by journaling, reading, eating, farming, and engaging in critical dialogue that was recorded, transcribed (when possible) and coded.

Our stories came in the form of critical personal narratives (CPNs) or reflexive self-narratives based in our multiple identities, cultures and Land “highlighted by performance and storytelling, with the power to disrupt, reproduce, reimagine, debate, and dialogue” for the purposes of composting colonial distortions through Land-based learning. We resonated with the teachings of Stó:lō and St’at’imc researcher, Jo-Ann Archibald, who described the importance of sharing stories “of personal life experience” within Indigenous traditions as being “done with a compassionate mind and love for others” (Archibald 2008, p. 2). With commitments to unsettle settler colonial narratives, we held Archibald’s (2008) research closely as we came to know “the healing power and influence of story” (p. 27). We understood how storying could “make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together” (Archibald 2008, p. 12). Holding loving space (Archibald 2008; Hooks 2000 for one another through this research became an integral part of our (re)membered and storied journeys (Styres 2019)). As intersectional Indigenous, Queer and Chicana researchers, we engaged with and challenged the oversimplification of our complex relationships with each other, Land, Indigenous theories and research, settler colonialism, and theories of change. We grappled with our real lived experiences occupying Indigenous lands while disrupting colonial myths (Wilson et al. 2019). Our stories provided opportunities to analyze our relationships to Land, similar to questions raised by a Gitskan elder to Canadian governmental foresters: “‘If this is your land’, he asked, ‘where are your stories?’” (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, p. 65, as quoted in Chamberlin 2000, p. 127).

One of the ways we engaged this complexity of our colonial histories and stories with Land was through our analysis. After we transcribed our meetings, we coded them for repeating words across conversations and found that the following terms were significantly represented: ancestors, futurities, grief, healing, Land, love, place, relationality, relationships, settler-colonialism, silence, and whiteness. We also coded for repeating themes within our conversations, as a method to either tie our dialogue or to identify an explicit reference to a theoretical framework. This allowed us to revisit conversations so that we could clarify, introduce new thoughts, apply unsettling reflexivity questions and reframe personal findings, keeping in line with the spiral discourse model outlined above as an approach to counter damage-centered research in auto-ethnography.

4. Setting the Context with Our Storied Journeys

Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous ethno-botanist and writer, speaks to the importance of relationality and reciprocity in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (2013). In her chapter, ‘The Three Sisters’, she shares with us a teaching learned from growing corn, bean and squash:

The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others. Being among the sisters provides a visible manifestation of what a community can become when its members understand and share their gifts. In reciprocity, we fill our spirits as well as our bellies. (p. 134)

Kimmerer’s writing and teachings have both inspired and reflected the importance of our work as three researchers uncovering our critical personal narratives in a process that allows us to grow and cultivate relationships with one another.

Amy’s Journal Entry (for 9 May 2019):

Three sisters. Bean. Corn. Squash. Kimmerer (Braiding Sweetgrass) speaks to the tendency of the squash, the youngest, to travel the furthest away from home. Science points to her need for sun, often framed as a response to competition. But the youngest sister is so well

mothered that it allows her to move further away from home. She travels further, reaches across the land, continuously rooted to home. The care that she receives allows her to experience the land in a different way. Dipping tentative roots into new soil, allowing her leaves to broaden. How can she not think of her sisters as her body/being broadens. How can she not think of giving back as she comes to know parts of the land that her sisters have not?

I love that we are a triplet of researchers. Each sister knows her own story, and each sister allows that knowledge to inform her care for the rest.

Our stories will disrupt and uncover settler colonial distortions within our own narratives so that we may know where we come from; what lands have been traveled, rooted into, claimed, exploited, cared for, carried, preserved, and begin to imagine new futurities of Land and Beings.

We choose to share the following narratives to emphasize the importance of our work as contextual to each person while we continue to engage in this process as a collective journey. Like [Styres \(2019\)](#), we embrace “journeying [as] a process of coming to know” (p. 29). As we engage in the journey to come to know ourselves, each other and the Land, we invite you to learn with us.

4.1. Kristen’s Storied Journey: Books, Bison, and Berries

Although I have lived half of a century now, writing from a place of knowledge or wisdom not only makes me uncomfortable, but it is inappropriate. Much of my Western settler colonial education did not adequately prepare me to engage humbly or ethically within the academic, familial, or natural world. My family history has been distorted by mission and boarding schools, and settler colonial narratives of Indigenous peoples and Lands. My most profound education has come from my Indigenous history and the mentorship within—and outside of—academia, through the stories, teachings and lived experiences of my mother, family and community members, mentors, students, and loved ones, whose actions demonstrate integrity. Therefore, as an Amskapi Pikuni (Blackfeet), Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) and Eastern Band Cherokee descendant with settler colonial roots in Europe, I hold my histories, teachings and learnings with deep respect and complexity. So, as I begin my storied journey, I ask for forgiveness for any words, concepts, ideas, or theories that may inadvertently infringe on the sovereign and inherent rights of the communities that I belong to, write about, or Lands in which I occupy.

This storied journey began with grief. I had recently lost my mom to ovarian cancer. She was my person. An extraordinary Indigenous woman. She embodied love and strength as she resisted displacement and intimate forms of settler colonialism. I felt (and still feel) her guidance on this journey.

When I was in my youth, I didn’t understand the complexity of my CLFH. However, my body understood as I sobbed when I first read about the Marias Massacre (or Bear Creek Massacre) in *Fools Crow* ([Welch 1986](#)):

He rubbed his eyes and there were no more tears, not from the smoke, not from his heart. He sat for a long time, tired and numb, until his mind came back and he remembered where he was, what he had seen. Still he was in no hurry to open his eyes. (pp. 380–81)

Reading *Fools Crow* was personal. That was my family’s story, written by my cousin, Native author James Welch, recounting my great-great grandmother, Mary Jane ‘Long Hearing Woman’ Phemister’s, accounts of events that happened in her lifetime, where traditional ways were being dispossessed by settlers, whiskey runners, U.S. and Canadian policies, practices, and government sanctioned violence. She was most likely 12 years old when she was one of the few survivors of the—23 January 1870—slaughter of at least 273 peaceful Blackfoot members of the Heavy Runner Band. Rather than center this narrative on documenting damage through the resulting intergenerational historical traumas, I am most inspired by Long Hearing Woman’s survivance. In accounts by my

mother and family members, she was profoundly kind, loved her family, shared her knowledge with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, refused to speak English, and was deeply connected to the Land. Loving, traditional and resilient. In fact, much of my knowledge about the challenges she faced and my unsettling of settler colonial history came through primary BIA federal documents, land allotment, Carlisle Boarding School death announcements, and newspapers. While I am currently composting the documentation of settler colonial violence and dispossession that Long Hearing Women experienced, I am most grounded cultivating how she remained beautiful in the face of genocide. How did she live? How can I learn from her? How did she compost settler colonialism? What is my responsibility to her, my children, my grandchildren, my mother and grandmothers, and all my relations that have made it possible to write this for you now? And ultimately for me, while holding this history, I resonate with Eve Tuck's question: "How shall I live?"

As I continue to situate my storied journey, my praxis is embedded in multicultural education, Native education, and a pursuit of decolonizing theory and pedagogy. My academic apprenticeship with Dale McGinnis (Crow), William G. Demmert, Jr. (Tlingit/Lakota) and Sonia Nieto, among many others, including Christine Sleeter, have made possible my survivance within the academy. As the Professor of Elementary Education and Director of the Center for Education, Equity and Diversity (CEED), I teach coursework in multicultural education, and more recently on tribal sovereignty, as well as the history of Native education and policy development. The passing of two significant tribal sovereignty laws in Washington State (SB 5433 & SB 5028) required coursework for all K-12 teachers and teacher candidates in locally specific tribal sovereignty. In addition to a required stand-alone-course, in an effort to deepen the sociopolitical and historical understandings of tribal sovereignty for teacher candidates, tribal sovereignty is partnered with our education, culture and equity courses.

In 2002, I began teaching multicultural education under the tutelage of Dr. Sonia Nieto at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst. At that time, the culminating project was a critical family history. I have since continued to transform this practice at Western Washington University over almost two decades to create what is now the Critical Intergenerational and Personal History Podcast. This project relies heavily on the scholarship of [Sleeter \(2008, 2011, 2019\)](#), and became the ideal space for Land-based conceptualizations. Having invested in this CFH journey as a transformative practice in my research ([French 2008](#)), I came full circle back to engage explicitly with Land-based pedagogy with Eddy as a student in my multicultural education course, and later Amy, as a critical member of CEED and the Environmental Education Master's Degree community.

Inspired by the collective journeying with Amy and Eddy, my pathways led me to Land-based learning with genealogists, scholars and relatives through the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in Cherokee, North Carolina; with relatives (human and more-than-human) through the Kainai Ecosystem Protection Association knowledge holders in Standoff, Alberta; with family, students and bison on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, Montana; and through berries, medicine plants and Long Hearing Farm on this Land.

4.2. Amy's Storied Journey: Migrations and Mountains

After living in the North Cascades National Park for a year, on the ceded and unceded lands of the Upper Skagit, the Noxws'á?aq (Nooksack), and the Nlaka'pamux, I found myself at Western Washington University, situated on the occupied lands of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) Nation in Bellingham, WA. It was during my time in my graduate program that I began to examine the intersections of my identity, my development as an educator and my relationship to land. I arrived at this inquiry as a result of the centering of the development of a 'sense of place' in Environmental Education, a concept that I have come to understand as being rooted in settler conceptualizations and realizations of place, such as the separation of man and nature ([Cronon 1995](#); [Seawright 2014](#)), and land as property through the dispossession and displacement of bodies and Land. ([Calderon 2014; 2018](#); [Friedel 2011](#); [Tuck and McKenzie 2015](#); [Tuck and Yang 2012](#)). It wasn't until I was able to contextualize my experience through Land conceptualizations provided by a variety of Indigenous and non-indigenous scholars ([Cajete](#)

2016; Goeman 2008; Simpson 2014; Tuck and McKenzie 2015; Paperson 2014; Calderon 2014; Seawright 2014), in conjunction with critical scholars such as Freire (2000), Hooks (1994) and Anzaldúa (1999), that I began to understand the feelings of discontent and discomfort with narratives that centered on settler ideologies. My greatest tension in this inquiry regularly unearthed the question ‘How do I teach about place and Land if I do not know my own relationship to place and Land?’, leading me through a cyclical process of unknowing and knowing myself.

This inquiry manifested an immense sense of grief as I began to examine my family’s narrative as migrants from México who left behind their ranches, El Jardín and La Cañada, both situated at the border of San Luis Potosí and Guanajuato, settled on the homelands of the Otomí and Híjil peoples. It was grief that motivated me to seek out Dr. Kristen French at CEED. I was not driven by the academic ego that so often drives research, but out of a need for connection, compassion and understanding. I had spent a year carrying my sense of loss as I processed the multitudes of truths that I held within the landscape of my body, inherited through the movement and choices of my ancestors, reflected back to me as I examined and questioned my education. Blanketed in clouds and isolated from any recognizable form of community, I could not name the source of my disconnect. I was unable to name the absence and importance of Land as political, contextual and necessary for understanding ourselves and our relations.

I was first introduced to critical family histories in my Social Justice and Environmental Education course, when Dr. Nini Hayes presented us with Dr. Christine Sleeter’s work as an example of how to make settler histories explicit in our own narratives. We spent a quarter reading and learning about Land education and conceptualizations. Feeling driven by a desire to better understand my relationship to place and Land, and feeling heavy in the process of unknowing and knowing myself, I reached out to Kristen, searching for guidance in the present while navigating my pasts, knowing that she had been engaged in CFH for many years. I sat down in front of her and began my first of many attempts to articulate the pain and loneliness that my own move up north had elicited as I wondered if I was simply reproducing narratives motivated by capitalist and settler values similar to those I had begun to see in my family’s stories.

I was raised knowing myself as the daughter of two Mexican immigrants, descendants of Spanish settlers first and Indigenous peoples second, mestizos, one of many settler distortions of the people of México. Similar to the construction of whiteness (Biewen and Kumanyika 2017) in the United States of America, the creation of a Mexican national identity, particularly that of the ‘mestizaje’, has served the purpose of establishing differing positionalities of social standing (Calderon 2018) and power in alignment with white supremacy. As I looked through the birth records of my family, I witnessed the documentation of Indigenous erasure from one generation to the next, mother to child, in conjunction with siblings being racially differentiated as white versus mixed. Imposed by the state through government documentation and indoctrination, and perpetuated by my family through selective narratives, the erasure of Indigenous ancestry and assimilation into a national identity is a reality that must be tied to Land in order to fully contextualize the implications that settler-colonialism has had on shaping this story.

Through interviews with tías and tíos, the movement of both my maternal and paternal families from rural to urban, one across settler-imposed borders, one to the center of a settler nation, can be attributed to both of my abuelas’ desires to provide their families with ‘better’ lives. My abuelos never intended to permanently leave their ranches, but my abuelitas’ concern for raising their twelve respective children urged them to move towards greater urbanization. The first move was to Tierra Nueva, a pueblito that is now a bumpy hour and a half car ride from one of the ranches. The second move was to el Distrito Federal, Mexico by most of my paternal family, and to Los Angeles, California for nearly everyone else. These moves were influenced by a changing economy, both locally and globally. The move was initiated under the influence of the final years of the bracero program, sending my abuelos and tíos north of the border to work in fields ranging from Texas to California in an effort to gain access to financial stability. Their moves were further influenced by access to resources such as

education and employment. This narrative is remarkably common, and has been typically framed as the ‘pursuit of the American Dream’, particularly on the maternal side of my family.

As with most children of migrant parents, I was raised with regular reminders that my existence in this country was intentional and in my best interest. I was reminded of the privilege I carried to grow up a citizen in the U.S., and the responsibility I had to respect and honor my elders’ efforts and sacrifices. What I have since come to understand is the significance and impact this oversimplified narrative, this distortion, has had on my own understanding of my positionality and that of my family, serving as a reflection of dominant societal narratives. It allows for these narratives to be reproduced and in turn carry the potential for settler-colonial, patriarchal, capitalist harms to continue, inhibiting the imaginations of futures that center Indigenous and Black well-being. As adrienne maree brown states in *Pleasure Activism* (Brown 2019):

We don’t learn to love in a linear path from self to self to family to friends to spouse, as we might have been taught. We learn to love by loving. We practice with each other on ourselves in all kinds of relationships. And right now, we need to be in rigorous practice, because we can no longer afford to love people the way we’ve been loving them. (p. 59)

Working through identifying and contextualizing the distortions in my personal narrative has felt deeply unsettling and painful, and it has been through our process of composting that I have been able to remain grounded in compassion and love for my family and the complexity of their stories.

4.3. Eddy’s Storied Journey: Bluebonnets and Rosemary

I came to CLFH in the spring of 2018 when I took Kristen’s introductory course to multicultural education. Inspired by Cipolle’s (2010) assertion that “multicultural education goes beyond learning about the other, most emphatically beginning with learning about yourself,” I eagerly began my final assignment for the course, the Family Education History Project (p. 6). I created a podcast, ‘Two Schools and an Alligator’s Tail,’ my first attempt at critically investigating my settler colonial roots and ancestral histories in the Lands of what is now known as Texas.

As we have noted, all three of us came to this work and to each other in the midst of tremendous grief. My podcast forced me to reconcile with difficult truths. I did not anticipate that seeking out and confronting the truths of my ancestry would force me to consciously reconcile with the harm I experienced within my immediate family. Overwhelmed, I wandered into CEED a few days before my final project was due on the off chance that Kristen was there. That morning, Kristen held loving space for me as I cried both for and about my family. In addition to holding my grief, Kristen encouraged me to heal by recommending I read bell hooks’ *All About Love* (2000). A few months later, Kristen gifted me rosemary oil and vinaigrette with herbs harvested from her healing garden.

Critically investigating my family history gave me permission to grieve the absence of the truly liberatory love that I desperately craved as a child. In relationship with Kristen and Amy, nose deep in academic theory as well as literature and poetry, I have found healing, belonging, and the courage to pursue tenderness and love. Grounded in this love, I begin my critical personal narrative.

I find the bluebonnet to be a fitting metaphor to describe my relationships to Land, critical family history and settler colonialism. The bluebonnet is the state flower of Texas, and one of my mother’s deepest loves. In late March and early April, bluebonnets bloom all across Texas: in patches of weeds growing around stop signs, in limestone outcroppings, and in fields off the sides of rural highways. I hope you get to see bluebonnets some day.

When my parents and three older siblings moved from the ancestral Lands of the Tonkawa Tribe (San Antonio, Texas) to the unceded Lands of the Yakama Nation (Toppenish, Washington), my mother brought a packet of bluebonnet seeds. Each October, my mother planted the seeds in our backyard on North D Street, but the flowers did not bloom. The conditions of the soil could not support the cultivation of this new seed. My mother did not understand the complications of transplanting a flower native to Texas and introducing the seeds to new soil in Washington. One spring, a bluebonnet

arrived late, in the middle of May, marking the week of my birth. I find it important to note here that while I am always occupying Indigenous Lands, I was born in Toppenish, a small town located on the Yakama Nation Reservation itself.

While I was born and mostly raised in the Yakima Valley; my earliest memories are of Texas—eating brisket and ribs at cafeterias, squealing at the geckos on the ceilings, standing in fields of bluebonnets in the springtime, welcoming cicadas back each summer, hiding in the basement during hail storms, my mother rubbing chamomile lotion all over my body to soothe the bites I received from red fire ants after sitting on an anthill to inspect a flower.

I am only now beginning to understand the heartache I carried with me after moving away from Texas. Like the bluebonnet, I longed for a sense of belonging and connection to Land after being transplanted to Washington. Visiting my relatives in Texas each summer fulfilled part of this longing. At gatherings with extended family, I sought the company of my grandmothers and great aunts and uncles. At their feet, I listened to their stories, asking question after question. Although few and far between, these moments of intimacy consoled me and served as tender antidotes to loneliness. In communion with my elders, a sense of belonging emerged that allowed me to recognize myself within my family. The connections I felt to Land, the sensory experiences and memories, “(re)membered” and held in my body, “integrated by the nervous system” (Styres 2019, p. 15). These “intersensory perceptions,” as Styres calls them, have allowed me to find immense comfort, joy and connection, in and on Lands across Texas. However, these embodied memories of belonging and connection to Land, “while always intimate, are never neutral” (Styres 2019, p. 15).

In these intimate moments with my elders, I also experienced profound discomfort.

I was the first child in my mother’s family to be born outside of the State of Texas for seven generations. Even so, my mother has always said that I am a Texan because of those bluebonnets. My relatives emphasized the importance of knowing myself, first and foremost, as a Texan. The bluebonnet’s name itself is a relic of settler colonialism, referencing the sun bonnets worn by white women in the 1800s, including by my maternal ancestors. As members of Stephen F. Austin’s ‘Old 300,’ my ancestors were among the first to settle and colonize the Lands of the Atakapa Ishak Nation, Karankawa peoples and Tonkawa Tribe, between the Colorado and Neches rivers (Houston, Galveston, Texas). I tried my best to please my relatives and absorb Texas State history—my history—yet simultaneously found myself unable to contend with the discomfort and confusion these histories unearthed. Somehow, I felt both curious about and ashamed of my ancestors, comforted by the attention my relatives gave me and suspicious of the truths they seemed to cling to so tightly. How could all of these things be true at once?

In many ways, CLFH has been a continual process, a critical attempt to denaturalize my childhood and the narratives of my identity I inherited. Within this framework, I began to historicize and contextualize the stories passed down to me. As Tuck and McKenzie (2015) contend, a prominent distortion of settler colonialism is the settler’s “refusal to recognize themselves as such, requiring a continual disavowal of history” (p. 60). Whiteness, white supremacy and settler colonialism have created such disavowals of family history. In memories and narratives shared by my relatives, my ancestors are glorified, honored as brave patriots to the State of Texas. Their complicity, in addition to their active involvement and investment in “Black containment” and “Indigenous erasure” are diminished and erased (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, p. 67). In claiming innocence, my family and I are prevented from engaging in knowing ourselves and our relations to Land, chattel slavery and the attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples. In claiming innocence, we recoil into ourselves and our whiteness when the discomfort of knowing feels too great.

The silences in my narrative are deeply connected to power. As Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) asserts: “The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots” (p. 19). Through CLFH, I have asked, again and again: what is my relationship to power? Can I undo my relatives’ refusals and disavowals of history? Which

roots of my family's histories do I need to expose in order to compost my and my family's colonial distortions of ourselves?

I return to the bluebonnet to excavate and wrestle with one root of a familial colonial distortion.

Like the bluebonnet, my name hearkens back to the sun bonnets of my ancestors. The name my parents gave me when I was born is a partial namesake, honoring my maternal grandmother and great-grandmother. My great-great grandmother was named Julia. Born in 1857 in Flatrock, Tennessee, Julia was eight years old when the Civil War ended. Julia carried her memories of the War with her to Ardmore, Oklahoma, where she worked with her husband at the Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females. Julia was deeply involved and invested in the distinct and intertwined settler colonial projects of Black containment and Indigenous erasure (Tuck and McKenzie 2015).

In the photograph of Julia in my grandmother's house, I see my mother's face, my sister's poise, and my dark hair. When looking to Julia, I consider my role as a hopeful educator who is not a woman, but who was nonetheless socialized as one, filled with the settler colonial promises made to white, Southern women. As I pursue my teaching endorsement, with the hope of one day teaching middle school creative writing, there is no simple way to reconcile or grapple with my lineages of white woman educators on both sides of my family. Exposing the truths of my roots, and grappling with their material repercussions in embodied, meaningful ways, rather than hiding behind intellectual language, is a continual, ongoing process. There is no end to this work, but there is meaning in the many layers offered by spiral discourse.

5. Pausing for Lessons Learned: Composting Settler Colonial Distortions and Cultivation as a Theory of Change

On 17 January 2019, we held our first meeting in CEED, with the intention to identify the threads we were each going to follow in our critical personal narratives. We began our meeting by grounding ourselves by listening to 'A Radical Gratitude Spell,' written by adrienne maree brown, read by Fhatima Paulino on the podcast *Healing Justice*, now known as *Irresistible* (Werning 2018). In her introduction to the reading, Kate Werning, the podcast host at that time, stated:

I think sometimes when the world gets heavy, when this work gets heavy, when our relationships get strained, and when pressure comes; when violence, oppression, and inequality repeat and recycle themselves, it can be hard to cultivate gratitude or appreciation. These words are ones that I've returned to many times in moments where I need to take a deep breath and appreciate how far I've come, how far those around me have come, and how deeply grateful I am to be in a shared project of liberation movements with so many incredible people throughout history [00:02:00] and across the world—and the many more that are yet to even be born that will pick up this work of movements into the future. (Werning 2018)

These words, and the practice that followed, set the intention for our pauses to come, and for the time we would set aside to commune with one another, to breathe, to compost as we worked through our pasts so that we may imagine new futures, or as Patel (2016) offered, as a reaching beyond.

Composting is a process that requires a variety of tangible materials, such as brown and green organic matter, water, and organisms such as earthworms, fungi and microbes. It is a process that also relies on less tangible, but fully sensory components such as heat, air and time. It has served as a rich metaphor for our experiential approach to documenting our stories and building relationships with one another, with our ancestors and with Land, because it is itself a relational process that repeats and is enriched with every churning of the soil.

Although our process has cultivated tangible outcomes, such as bellies full of Cherokee Heirloom Squash soup, Long Hearing Farm harvests for sharing in community, and visits to homelands to learn and love with family and friends (human and more-than-human), we would like to offer at this pause an overview of some of the less tangible lessons learned from composting colonial distortions. Although we identified several critical moments within our data and analysis, too many to adequately

cover in this article, we offer some significant learnings in two sections: (1) Composting Settler Colonial Distortions, and (2) Cultivation as a Theory of Change. Under composting settler colonial distortions, we chose to reflexively unsettle truth seeking and grief. Under cultivation as a theory of change, we grapple with relationality and love.

5.1. Composting Settler Colonial Distortions

When we look deeply into ourselves, we see both flowers and garbage. Each of us has anger, hatred, depression, racial discrimination, and many other kinds of garbage in us, but there is no need for us to be afraid. In the way that a gardener knows how to transform compost into flowers, we can learn the art of transforming anger, depression and racial discrimination into love and understanding (Thich Nhat Hanh 2009, p. 23).

In both action and metaphor, Land has much to teach us about materiality, stories, memory and relationality. Land, earth, or soil is sacred. Western science, as part of the settler colonial project, strives to understand, synthesize and manufacture soil. What we know of soil is that it is filled with millions of organisms, it can be enriched or conditioned through the process of composting, and it can also be destroyed by depletion. Compost is restorative, and contains materials often identified as garbage. It takes time to work rotting matter to create fertilizer. Our metaphor of composting settler colonial distortions, like garbage, resonates with the identification of settler colonial myths, characteristics, and histories. It takes intention, attention, time and collaboration to unsettle colonial distortions. It also processes our grief into action.

5.1.1. Composting through Truth-Seeking

As we grappled with the composting metaphor offered by bell hooks and Thich Nhat Hanh, perhaps the least surprising lesson learned when composting settler colonial distortions is that of truth-seeking. Savoy (2015) writes about the complexity of tracing the truths and accountability in our personal histories in her book, *Trace: Memory, History, Race, and the American Landscape*:

We live among countless landscapes of memory in this country. They convey both remembrance and omission. Privileging particular arcs of story while neglecting others. Historical sites are contested “story-sites” for the meanings of America’s past-to-present. To whom and what is history responsible ... The question had to be turned around and made personal. What then is *my* relationship with history, told and untold, on this land. (Savoy 2015, pp. 112–13)

Savoy points to the importance of not only examining how histories should be held accountable, but also to the equal importance of examining our attachment to those histories. Each of us has already examined much of the sociopolitical and historical contexts of our critical family histories (Sleeter 2019). In fact, we began our collective journeys with intentions to unearth truths. However, we couldn’t have known the profound impact that coming to know truth-seeking within a storywork process would have on our present lives.

On the Friday afternoon of 24 May 2019, we gathered in Kristen’s kitchen around a cheese platter filled with sustenance for hearty discussions on our critical personal narratives (referred to as “storied journeys”). Shortly into our conversation, we discussed Kainai scholar and elder Mike Bruised Head’s keynote presentation in CEED, titled ‘Knowing from Place’ (Bruised Head 2019). He shared his research on recovering Blackfoot names for water, land and places in Waterton Lakes National Park in Alberta, Canada. As part of his presentation, Bruised Head described the interconnectedness of the plains and mountain ecosystems, and the incredible qualities of soil or earth. This prompted our rich discussion of soil, which helped to frame our Land-based learning around composting and truth-seeking.

Amy: I am thinking of that comment of we can’t even make dirt. And no, we can’t. So it places this importance in my mind on the need for relationality. I hear how it is definitely

a humbling statement to make and important to hold it in that way. No, we can't make dirt, but we can take care of those that do. And it ties back to this idea of composting. We need to examine the ways in which we are relational on multiple levels. Not just to our histories, but to our present and to our futures...to do that within different bodies of story, across different bodies of Land... I am seeing so many levels of relationality that I just think are really important ... We can't make soil, but we can go through a process of composting.

Eddy: And I feel like if we just say, 'we can't make soil,' then that's apathy

Amy: Yes! That is just accepting the status quo.

Kristen: ... So then, the process of composting includes soil and soil is ancient. And it also needs relationships, the making of compost, and the processes to turn whatever it is we are composting... like anger...into something that is so nutrient rich that it supports life, it supports regrowth...I keep coming back to our title. It's almost like the composting part *has* to be relational. It *has* to be connected to soil/dirt and it also has to process in place and the processing is coming to know the history.

This coming to know history or truth-seeking through Land has been a powerful process of learning for each of us. In this transcript, we honor the sentience of Land with our discussions about soil as an ecosystem that Western science has not been able to replicate. In fact, we often use the word 'earth' interchangeably with soil. We frame this section through our discussion of soil metaphorically and directly. For Styres (2019), Land-based learning requires relationships and reciprocity. Our hope is that, by learning through Land-based metaphors, we will inform teaching with relationality and reciprocity. Land-based learning within our CLFH is two-fold because it is also "an unsettling process of shifting and unraveling the tangled colonial relations of power and privilege" (p. 30).

Although truth-seeking may seem simple, it is far from it. This is where CFH deeply informs the work of CLFH. With roots in multicultural education and ethnic studies through theorizations of critical sociocultural theories, e.g., critical race theory and critical literacies, CFH "involves locating ancestors within historical contexts shaped by membership in sociocultural groups and by conflict over power and resources" (p. 126). In providing examples of CFH, Christine Sleeter shares that investigating a "past involving homesteading ... involves taking up settler colonialism and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples" (p. 126). Building on CFH, Critical Land-based Family History centers Land. As Amy describes in the transcript, Land requires inquiries based on relationships to the natural world in a variety of ways. It requires an inventory on belief systems that frame family, history, and conceptualizations of Land. This requires taking on settler colonialism while identifying the personal, structural and political relationships to Land, and therefore, the ways in which family histories benefit and/or are hurt by settler colonialism. In alignment with the sociocultural theoretical frameworks of CFH, this knowledge requires action. As Eddy found in their storied journey, it isn't enough to just locate oneself within settler colonialism. Eddy consistently reminded us that to be "radical simply means grasping things at the root" (Davis 2006). Grasping settler colonial histories at the root is an action that must reflexively include anti-colonial or decolonizing responses. We have found that this work cannot be performed individually. It must happen in collaboration, which we describe as a characteristic of cultivation as a theory of change.

Truth-seeking as a collective process was present in both our CPNs and within our collective grappling with anti-colonial and/or decolonizing theories. While we talked about our CPNs on May 24th, a few weeks earlier, on May 2nd, we were trying to make sense of the characteristics of settler colonialism and Indigenous futurities within our research (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). We were grappling with how settler colonialism destroys to erase within the quote "Indigenous futurity does not require the erasure of now-settlers in the ways that settler futurity requires of Indigenous peoples (p. 70).

Amy: What does that mean for settlers who are part of Indigenous futurity, without co-opting it into what often gets co-opted? That makes me think of “the characteristics of settler colonial states” (p. 60) and I think that might be interesting for us to wrestle with because all of us are participating in settler colonialism. So what does it look like from our different historical perspectives to dismantle settler colonialism? I marked a couple of things ... “One of the notable characteristics of settler colonial states is the refusal to recognize themselves as such,” so that’s one, and “requiring a continual disavowal of history, Indigenous peoples’ resistance to settlement, Indigenous peoples’ claims to stolen land” so that’s another, “and how settler colonialism is indeed ongoing, not an event contained in the past” (p. 60). So those are three huge things, also: “Settler colonialism is made invisible within settler societies and uses institutional apparatuses to ‘cover its tracks’ (Veracini 2011)” (p. 60). I think that’s really important for us, because we’re unsettling settler colonialism by composting those settler colonial distortions.

Kristen: We’re pushing back on a lot of this like: “... the refusal to recognize themselves as such ...” (p. 60). And we are, through these critical personal narratives, trying to uncover, or refusing that refusal. Taking the blinders off, more or less. And “requiring a continual disavowal of history,” that’s where I really hear that intergenerational component of our approach. By not disavowing our histories, by actually engaging with our elders, or with historical data or documentation. And also recognizing how settler colonialism is ongoing within the present. How has it affected our realities today? ...

Eddy: Yes. Yes. I feel like I’ve been thinking about this idea of tracing, you know, covering the tracks, like settler colonialism is covering their tracks. I think that’s a huge thing. And I’m thinking of the idea that Indigenous futurities do make space for settlers, and what you were saying, Kristen, about settlers not co-opting that ... I’m also curious about escapism. I see escapism when white folks say, “Oh do I just go back to England?” I’ve had that thought. Do I go back there? That’s an example of escapism. Even though Indigenous futurities, yes, do include us, we’re not off the hook! I think it’s so important that we’re still grappling with and excavating and unpacking and tracing how we came to be in these places.

This powerful discussion led to many conversations about our CPNs, unsettling reflexivity analysis, and our responsibilities to these theories, histories, and actions or praxis. For Amy, addressing the dislocation and absence of storied landscapes led to relocating to California to be with family and home, and tending to precious familial relationships, particularly her nephews, as she tends to young ones while teaching within Environmental Education. It also meant going to Mexico and learning with family and in community while engaging in local and global movements. She continues her journey of grappling with the complexity of a Mexican national identity, how that informs her Chicana identity, and what that may mean in the context of a Latinx identity, all in relation to her role as an educator. Eddy has continued to seek out the truth, confront it, and allow it to make them uncomfortable and move them, particularly through identities that have been passed on. This includes tracing their family’s movement across Land, water, space, place and time from the Old 300 in Texas to Toppenish, Washington. They continue to challenge memory, exposing discrepancies in family narratives and unearthing silences. Eddy is completing their undergraduate coursework in Creative Writing and Education and Social Justice. Kristen is grounding herself in family and in the healing garden with Native students. She continues to be moved by berries (particularly chokecherries, salal, saskatoon, wild strawberries and huckleberries) and plant medicines (prairie sage, sweetgrass, wild mint and tobacco). She plans to further her CLFH research through professional leave to be in community and on Land. She continues to locate primary documentation at the intersections of settler colonial characteristics in her Indigenous and settler histories, while continuing to ask: how shall I live? This work is not an event or a destination; it is on-going. Therefore, we continue to commit to wrestling together with our complicity with settler colonialism and what it means, from each of our locations, to

honor Indigenous, as well as Black, Latinx and Queer futurities. Although we have focused here on truth-seeking as a part of composting colonial distortions, that process itself unearthed a myriad of emotions. Our next pause grapples with composting one of them.

5.1.2. Composting Grief

Our 11 December 2019 research meeting felt particularly celebratory. We were all together. It was the end of the quarter for Eddy and Kristen, and Amy traveled from California to Washington. We gathered in Kristen's kitchen with our favorite cheese platter (which had become iconic in our process). On that cold winter day, we started our meeting with hugs, laughter, charcuterie, and cooking Heirloom Candy Roaster Squash soup. Like composting and cultivation, the squash was both symbolic and tangible. A year before, Kristen brought the heirloom seeds back from Cherokee, North Carolina on her journey to come-to-know her Eastern Band Cherokee roots/routes. It was a last wish of her mother to go back and reconnect with her Grandfather's family and history. These seeds became the squash of the three sisters (corn, beans and squash) in Kristen's healing garden. Squash, the slower sister, took her time. She was the last to blossom (Kimmerer 2013). Her broad leaves shaded the soil, retained moisture, and provided protection to the corn and beans by offering her leaves to hungry insects. Like the last sister, this was the final meeting of our first year together. This meeting offered a variety of gifts. The gift of food, we later shared with two mentors and colleagues who were inspirations on this storied journey. The last sister of our harvest nourished and protected our bodies, minds, and spirits as we composted grief.

Before we share our pause on the lessons learned from composting grief, we remind you of our commitment to ethnographic refusals and interrupting damage-centered research. As you can imagine, with grief comes stories of harm, and often a lack of resolution. To understand our composting process, we identified critical moments in our transcribed spiral discourse meetings. Because this work is relational, and we may not know you yet, we have carefully chosen excerpts from our storied journeys and transcripts to tell the story of composting grief.

As Eddy wrote in their storied journey, "all three of us came to this work and to each other in the midst of tremendous grief." In our storied journeys, we identified grief from a variety of loss: physical death, displacement, settler colonial education, isolation from community, and the absence of Land as political, contextual and necessary for understanding ourselves and our relations. We processed intimate forms of settler colonialism and multitudes of difficult truths. We embodied and inherited the consequences of our ancestors, such as movement, requiring a conscious reconciliation with harm.

Back to our gathering; amid the processing of our third sister and her transformation into the most incredible soup we ever ate, we began our dialogue about grief. Amy initiated our discussion with Eve Tuck's presentation, 'I Do Not Want to Haunt You but I Will: Indigenous Feminist Theorizing on Reluctant Theories of Change' (2018). In it, Tuck reads *A Layered Body* (Morrill et al. 2016), which Amy shared to ground our meeting:

This is an aching archive—the one that contains all of our growing grief, all of our dispossessed longing for the bodies that were once among us and have gone over to the side that we will go to too. When I told you that I will probably haunt you, you made it about you, but it is about me. The opposite of dispossession is not possession. It is not accumulation. It is unforgetting. It is mattering.

The following conversation, inspired by *A Layered Body*, highlights processing grief, examining silence, post-memory, and haunting as the materials composted to create the possibilities for change:

Amy: That leads me to trying to formulate a question because I remember meeting you for the first time (to Kristen) and carrying so much grief and trying to understand it and what it is that I was grieving. Later I wrote about it by highlighting the silence that I feel I have experienced. And this came up when trying to understand my families' stories around migration. There is a lot of silence within that experience because there were stories lost even

though I feel like I have always been brought up to carry the stories of my ancestors and my elders, particularly my grandma and my parents. Because of that migration [story] ‘we have done this for you’, that is something that I have never forgotten and has always informed how I know myself...I felt like my time here (in Washington) was experiencing a lot of grief around unknowing myself, almost not recognizing myself. I feel like that is tied to needing to un-forget. How has our movement across lands shaped how we know ourselves?

Eddy: Post-memory ([Hirsh 2008](#)) [is] the idea that your body remembers your ancestry even when you don’t know specific details of what’s happened . . . When you don’t have access to those stories or to literal places and spaces on Land where you can grieve your ancestors and grieve what you have lost. This word ‘Trace’ ... I’m into that word. And tracking. [It’s] that question of what remains, what survives when it wasn’t supposed to survive. A lot of that has to do with Land and memory. That process for me is doing ancestry. And also my family’s own intergenerational trauma. And breaking through those silences and trying to figure out what has happened. It is pulling all of these threads together.

Amy: After thinking about that grief—and where I was at the start of this—I feel like the part Eve Tuck was talking about, in terms of haunting, is how it moves. It’s a theory of change, right? So it moves towards action. And that is what this grief and pain has encouraged me to do.

Kristen: . . . I think we *are* looking at this composting colonial distortion and cultivating land-based critical family history as a theory of change. Because it is! It is an explicit connection to Land. Explicit connection to history. And explicitly composting colonial distortions.

As highlighted, our analysis identified how grief creates possibilities to take action as an embodied theory of change. As we continued—and continue—to reflexively unsettle our transcript, we located several themes associated with composting grief within settler colonial distortions. We identified the following:

- Honor ethnographic refusals ([Simpson 2007](#)) of damage-centered narratives ([Calderon 2016](#); [Tuck 2009](#));
- Acknowledge the naming and making-meaning of harm, or pain, as a process of healing;
- Accept the inability to change others or eliminate suffering;
- Attachment to settler colonial characteristics, conscious or unconscious, damages relationships;
- Settler colonialism is structural, not an event. When acknowledging harm, what power must be given up?
- Interrupt settler moves to innocence ([Tuck and Yang 2012](#)) by resisting immediate desires for reconciliation or absolution;
- Settler colonialism is on-going (there is no such thing ‘as a little bit’ of settler colonialism);
- Acknowledge complicities with colonization, particularly global capitalism ([Coulthard 2014](#); [Grande 2015](#));
- Grapple with settler colonial collusion (ex. migration and consciousness-raising) and consider explicit actions of anti-colonial resistance;
- Relationships with Land are irrevocable, it is a very intentional decision to look away.

At the close of our evening on 11 December 2019, we couldn’t have known how much squash had to teach us over the course of a year, and about composting grief. Like soil, she is ancient and traveled far to join our beans and corn in the healing garden. She took her time to grow and support her sisters, and provided fruit. Her timing was perfect. Being the last, she was able to sustain us late in the season. Her final gift, her life, was the delight of her velvety, smooth warmth, rich in nutrients that sustained us through a potentially dark day of composting grief. Instead, her storied journey became a part of ours and us.

5.2. Cultivation as Theory of Change

During one of our weekend research retreats, while transcribing our recorded discussions, Kristen and Eddy met in CEED while Amy transcribed in California. As the evening progressed, the windowless basement room was filled with laughter, as Kristen repeatedly slowed down the audio of our recordings and giggled at the sounds of our voices. One time, she looked up from her computer and Eddy took out their headphones in preparation for listening to more slowed down audio of Amy. Instead, Kristen said “It’s all about love, Eddy. That’s the truth. It’s all about love. It has to be all about love.” As we bring this moment to a close, our final pause is also situated in hopefulness and gratitude. While we are still composting (this is an on-going process), we have spiraled back to our beginnings to make meaning of our possibilities of cultivation. Since compost can be used to cultivate the healing gardens we imagine, we have reflected on our critical moments in our imagining of cultivation as a theory of change, and chose to highlight two learnings—relationality and love.

First, our framework for cultivation as a theory of change was inspired by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (Tuck 2018; Tuck and Yang 2014). The theory of change “refers to beliefs or assumptions about how social change happens, is prompted, or is influenced” (Tuck and Yang 2014, p. 125) It simply “asks how what we do leads to good and just things” (p. 119). Tuck and Yang provide several examples, including “boycotts, psychotherapy, peace (Thich Nhat Hanh 1989), revenge (Tuck and Ree 2013), anarchy, prayer, and doing nothing” (p. 121). As we came to reflect on our hopeful outcomes of CLFH, we also grappled with Eve Tuck’s questions: “How shall we live? How does change happen? How do I want to be a part of change? [and] What is my theory of social change?” (Tuck 2018). We offer ‘cultivation’ as our collective theory of change.

5.2.1. Love

While Kristen transcribed and giggled, as she marinated in the voices, thoughts and ideas of her partners, she was deeply moved by an overwhelming feeling of love. Although the concept of love is often missing in academic discussions of educational research, Paulo Freire wrote about the transformative pedagogy of love.

It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short, it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love. (Freire 1998, p. 3)

In composting grief, we alluded to our theory of change, and although grief may have been what we needed (and still need) to compost, it is our relationship, grounded in a well-thought-out capacity to love, that sustains us. In fact, the word ‘love’ was present multiple times in every transcript. In Eddy’s storied journey, *All About Love* (Hooks 2000) held significance. Love is defined as “the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (Hooks 2000, p. 4). Love involves “affection, care, commitment, open and honest communication, knowledge, recognition, respect, responsibility, and trust” (p. 5). In her 2 May 2019 journal, Amy compared us to the three sisters: “each sister knows her own story, and each sister allows that knowledge to inform her care for the rest.” Like the three sisters, we encouraged one another (and eventually ourselves) to nurture our unique gifts. Recognition, respect and commitment for each other created the conditions for collective care and growth. Amy the visionary—with her humble brilliance, critical compassion and curiosity—kept our work authentic and justice-oriented with her thoughtful reflections and questioning. Amy was perceptively generous and loving in the ways she grounded and challenged us through theory and practice. Eddy brought light, poetry and laughter to each meeting. Exuding warmth and criticality, Eddy shared creative writing, literature and theories encouraging healing justice, all the while reminding us of sensory ways to ground theory in our bodies. Kimmerer (2013) best describes Kristen, as the absolute epitome of reciprocity; she “fill[s] our spirits as well as our bellies” (p. 134). It is as if Kimmerer is now speaking directly to us when she says “I want the Three

Sisters to know that we've heard their story. Use your gift to take care of each other, work together, and all will be fed" (p. 139). Cultivation as a theory of change is also a love story.

5.2.2. Relationality

Of all the wise teachers who have come into my life, none are more eloquent than these, who wordlessly in leaf and vine embody the knowledge of relationship . . . The gifts of each are more fully expressed when they are nurtured together than alone. In ripe ears and swelling fruit, they counsel us that all gifts are multiplied in relationship. This is how the world keeps going. (Kimmerer 2013, p. 140)

Relationships are central to this work, embodied in a number of ways, and have already been identified throughout the article. Cultivation as a theory of change cannot be a singular, solo, or individual journey, as reflected in the metaphor of cultivation, and in our transcripts. Keeping with Kimmerer, the three sisters (corn, beans and squash) are domesticated plants. They need to be cultivated. Not only do they need rich soil (Land) and nutrients (compost), they also need to be planted, cared for, watered, weeded, harvested and shared. We are in a symbiotic relationship. We need each other to survive. Kimmerer states that "they rely on us to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours" (Kimmerer 2013, p. 140). We also grappled with the transformative nature of cultivation and our learnings from Land.

Amy: And maybe right now I'm making too big of a statement, but just thinking about framing this cultivation as a part of transformation and not just of self, but of societal change. And it might be tiny, or it might feel tiny right now, but I remind myself that social change is a long, long process . . . It's the longview that is mentioned in "Place and Research" (Tuck and McKenzie 2015). And it's shifting towards, hopefully, a way that brings healing to the Land and people.

Kristen: The longview is inspiring. You know cultivation—when you said the longview—the image that came to mind was what the I-5 [freeway] used to look like. I-5 between here and Oregon was camas. The longview, I imagine, is no more freeway and this purple flower, beautiful...That is the longview.

Eddy: I feel like the words that are speaking to me so much right now are cultivation and relationality.

These relationships took many forms, such as relationships with theory and practice; our relationship to our values or principles in collaborative research; relationships with our histories, stories, and journeys; relationships with families and ancestors; relationships with each other (see love); and relationships to Land.

As promised, cultivation as a theory of change is rooted in relationships to Land. We have described some of our personal examples within our 'storied journeys,' such as the Lands we are in relation with, and the more-than-humans who inform and inspire us, like bluebonnets, mountains, bison, berries and the three sisters. We have cultivated our Land-learnings with theory and action with many anti-colonial and decolonizing scholars, and within our CLFH and analysis. Finally, we were directly in relation to Land together. In addition to actually cultivating Kristen's healing garden filled with heirloom Indigenous vegetables and Indigenous medicine plants, processing them, sharing them, and eating some together, we journeyed to Long Hearing Farm. On 21 July 2019, we were invited to Long Hearing farm to work the "Otaapohkat Plot," which means to 'bring gifts of food' in Blackfeet (person communication). We harvested heirloom vegetables and delivered them to a local Nation for a large intertribal community celebration. We spent the day on the Land in relationship with one another, the soil, the river and the vegetables (including the three sisters). We composted and cultivated. We ate,

loved, laughed, grieved and gifted. It was a day, a journey, a year we will cherish. Our final pause is a reminder that we are still on our 'storied journeys.' We are still composting colonial distortions. We will continue to cultivate our Critical Land-based Family Histories as a theory of change.

6. The Limitations of Composting

Because this work is rooted in identity, one of our greatest limitations lies in the construct of our identities themselves. As we unsettle family narratives, we find ourselves unable to name or provide a voice to the multitude of silences unearthed within any given narrative. This limitation is crucial in our desire to "center Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and Queer futurities," in order to make explicit our inability to imagine the futurities of identities and peoples we do not carry. We can only hope to better understand how our stories are accountable to those futurities. Even within the identities we do hold, we find ourselves limited in our intersecting positionalities, aware that we are not representative of any perceived monolith; gender, identity, race, sex or class.

Within the limitation of our identities lies a connection to the accessibility of information. We feel that it is important to name the reality of erasure or the lack of documentation for folks whose stories are affected by experiences such as adoption or inherited histories of enslavement. They will be contextual to each narrative and impacted or shaped by colonialism and imperialism, as is contextual to the lands on which these stories exist. The lack of physical accessibility to homelands/Land or family/community due to settler-imposed borders and constructions of citizenship, or due to the destruction of homelands/Lands by settler nations, would also influence a process of composting differently to our own. We would like to recognize the immense privilege in being able to do so.

Composting colonial distortions is also bound to the anti-settler colonial realm, and we see only the possibilities of decolonizing work within CLFH. That the exposure of colonial distortions leads to decolonization, specifically the rematriation of land, is not a given.

A limitation experienced within our own process centered around time. As we each navigated separate lives, needing to tend to families, friends and work, we felt acutely aware of the importance of prioritizing our meetings in order to honor being in relation to one another. This manifests as a limitation in the sense that our process of composting required time. Time to gather, time to take care of ourselves and one another, and time to feel. This has been a slow process, and we realize this likely means that there will be parts of our narratives that we never unearth and unsettle, making the work ongoing.

Another limitation lies within the difficult truth that people are neither infallible nor disposable. Academics, organizers and healers, especially those we admire, are capable of causing and reproducing harm. No one is beyond critique or reproach. After the writing of this paper, Whitney Spencer, a Black queer woman and former Digital Organizer for the Irresistible Podcast, published 'An Open Letter & A Call for True Healing Justice' (Spencer 2020). In the letter, Spencer makes explicit connections between Kate Werning's behavior and white supremacy. Before submitting our edits to our peer reviewers, the three of us discussed Spencer's letter in relation to the spiral discourse model, noting the importance of modifying our research as we receive new information. After careful thought and reflection, we decided to keep Werning's quotation from the introduction to the reading of 'A Radical Gratitude Spell.' In many ways, listening to the recording of brown's Spell together that first morning in CEED laid the foundation for our shared academic storied journeys. We felt that it was essential to acknowledge Spencer's experiences and calls for accountability in our paper.

Finally, another complexity associated with relationships with Land may be unavoidable. Tuck and McKenzie share an interview with Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson and activist Naomi Klien. In this interview, Simpson shares a warning of our current environmental crisis. Simpson offers that:

If a river is threatened, it's the end of the world for those fish. It's been the end of the world for somebody all along. And I think the sadness and trauma for that is reason enough for me to act. (as cited in Tuck and McKenzie 2015, p. 71)

Tuck and McKenzie conclude that “decolonization is not just something that humans (may) do; it is (primarily) something that the land does on its own behalf” (p. 71). While we conclude with our hopefulness of composting settler colonial distortions and cultivation as a theory of change, we are deeply aware of its limitations. We continue to grapple with Tuck and McKenzie’s final words: “whether or not humans can survive this latter form of decolonization can’t be known” (p. 71).

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