

The Natural World as Colonized Other(s): Educational Implications

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Abstract

This paper begins with two parallel, although not identical, images. The first is of Ota Benga, a Congolese “pygmy” brought to the St. Louis World Fair in 1904 and displayed in a cage for the entertainment of the visiting public. The second is of a Red Maple tree in a large concrete pot on the campus of Simon Fraser University on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. The remainder of the paper is an exploration of the varied responses these two images provoked for students, colleagues, and conference participants when confronted with the juxtaposition. In searching for an explanation, the paper deploys the work of Tunisian anti-colonial scholar Albert Memmi. Using Memmi's work as an anchor, we explore five of the most common responses in order to propose that “the natural world” and its myriad beings is/are colonized. This realization, we conclude, has dramatic implications for environmental education.

Résumé

Le présent article compare d'abord deux images évoquant une certaine similitude sans être pour autant identiques. La première montre Ota Benga, un « Pygmée » congolais qui a été amené à Saint-Louis au Missouri pour l'Exposition universelle de 1904, où il a été exposé dans une cage pour divertir le public. La seconde représente un érable rouge planté dans un grand pot de béton sur le campus de l'Université Simon Fraser, sur les territoires non cédés des peuples xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) et Səl'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh). Le reste de l'article relate les différentes réactions que la juxtaposition de ces images a provoquées chez des étudiants, collègues et participants sollicités par les auteurs à un événement. Dans la quête d'explication, on se penche notamment sur les travaux de l'érudit tunisien anticolonialiste Albert Memmi, qui éclairent l'analyse en permettant de mettre en perspective cinq réactions fréquentes et d'explorer la théorie selon laquelle le « monde naturel » et ses myriades d'êtres vivants sont colonisés – une réalisation s'accompagnant d'énormes conséquences sur l'éducation à l'environnement.

Keywords: environmental education, colonization, anti-colonial pedagogy, Albert Memmi, ecopedagogy, other-than-human beings

Having inured ourselves to the routine objectification of those around us, having lost touch with the particular (*any* particular), when we encounter another, be it tree, woman, black man, or anything else under the sun, we too easily lose sight of that other, too easily lose our hold on the slender slip of possibility of actual encounter, that joining of will and grace, as Buber put it, we encounter instead little save our preconceptions, our projections already formed in a culture based on domination. (Jensen, 2002, p. 223)

Introduction

This paper began quite simply. We were interested in seeing what would happen if one began to consistently and seriously apply the language of colonization to human relationships with other-than-human beings. To this end we juxtaposed potentially evocative images and attempted to draw parallels in order to provoke critical thinking. The first image recounts the story of Ota Benga, at the time of the 1904 St. Louis World Fair, to illustrate a human-to-human interaction that, from a contemporary position, is clearly violent and colonial. The second image evokes a specific human to other-than-human interaction—a Red Maple tree in a large concrete pot at the edge of the campus. Our hope was this juxtaposition would open space for interesting and challenging discussions and possibly compel the field of environmental education to re-think some of its core orientations and practices. Something surprising happened. As we began to gather responses from various people in the field and beyond, the image of the tree and the suggestion that it might be “colonized”¹ was met with a diversity of responses that seemed to be somewhat thematic. The lack of consensus, coupled with a range of strong, often contrary, emotions indicated that we ought to explore and possibly locate a theoretical conversation that could help us understand these varied reactions. As such, we turned to the work of Albert Memmi.

It was in the early anti-colonial literature of North Africa and the voice of Memmi (1955/1991) in particular that we found a helpful theoretical lens. Thanks to Memmi and the striking parallels between his account of the responses, attitudes, and assumptions of European colonizers and the responses that we received from those who encountered our images, we were forced to abandon the safety of our initial thought experiment and take this concept of “nature” as colonized seriously—not simply as metaphor. The five most common responses we received will thus be examined in light of Memmi’s theoretical framework. The paper ends by exploring some of the implications for environmental education that must be addressed if we recognize the myriad beings that comprise the “natural world” as colonized communities. Before we introduce the two images, we first offer a brief introduction to Memmi and a justification for our engagement with his work.

Memmi was born in 1920 in Tunisia and, as can be seen in his work and autobiographical novels (Memmi, 1955/1991), he always found himself at the edge of a larger dominant culture whether as a Jew in a predominantly Muslim

Tunisia or as a Jewish North African in pre- and post-WWII France. It is likely that a life lived on the margins of society enabled him to speak authentically about the experience of colonization from “both sides” as it were. Memmi was trained as a sociologist and his interest in philosophy and psychology enabled him to think about colonization not only at the broader cultural level, but also to examine the day-to-day experience. It is this ability to work simultaneously at theoretical and quotidian levels that encouraged us to deploy Memmi’s work to interpret responses to our thought experiment.

Memmi is important to this discussion firstly because of his historical situation. In the 1950s, when he was writing, there was a gathering of people thinking and offering language around the injustice of colonizing African non-Europeans that was vitally important for the future of anti-colonial movements. This is not to say that people had not thought about colonization or, indeed, resisted it before this time. While it probably goes without saying, it is important to reemphasize that acts of resistance are as old as colonization itself. But it was at this time that the “anti-colonialist” critique—a critique that still resonates today²—emerged from deliberate critical engagement of colonized peoples in Northern Africa (Sartre, 2001). These early anti-colonialists began to question the need to emulate colonial models or seek the validation of colonial philosophy. A shared language emerged about what had occurred and what continued to occur as a result of the colonization process from the perspective of those with the most “authority” to speak on the matter (see Césaire, 1972; Fanon, 1967; Memmi, 1955/1991). It was also around this time that a small but critical mass of those living in colonizing countries began to listen and take seriously the voices of the colonized and recognize the open brutality of the colonial project as well as its subtler and hegemonic aggressions. Memmi’s relevance today, we suggest, is in light of a small but possibly significant opening amongst mainstream environmental educators to recognize the possibility that we have *colonized* the “natural world” and thus ought to find ways to listen to the voices of its beings to inform an anti-colonial ecopedagogy.

Secondly, Memmi is part of an anti-colonial discussion that worked to establish the *ontological differences* between colonizing countries, principally those of Western Europe and North Africa. It was a discussion amongst the colonized that sought to sustain and revitalize their own vibrant cultures despite colonial efforts to denigrate and eradicate them. We see a similar ontological discussion emerging in the environmental education world today as anti-colonial scholars expose problems associated with an ontology shaped by neoliberalism that “exacerbates inequalities, damages the environment, and undermines education” (Hursh & Henderson, 2011, p. 172; see also Gruenewald & Manteaw, 2007; McKenzie, 2012). We also see them searching for other approaches, including those which recognize the multivocality and ontologies of the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996; Beeman & Blenkinsop, 2009; Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013).

The third reason for deploying Memmi in our interpretation results from the combination of his training as a sociologist, his experience as a colonized person as well as a witness living between the colonized (i.e., black Africans, which he was not) and the colonizer (i.e., white Europeans, which he was not), and, more to the point, his ability to examine psychologically the day-to-day experience of people in Tunisia including the colonial move to justify their privilege and oppression. Thus, because his book, *The Colonizer and Colonized* (1995/1991) was directed to other colonized people, attempting to give those communities voice but also to clarify the role played by their colonizers, we propose that Memmi offers a way to make sense of how anti-colonial educators might proceed in a colonized more-than-human world. He contextualized and provided an explanation for the colonial behaviour and language he observed in 1950s Tunisia and we suggest below that his experience was strikingly similar to what we observed in response to the two images we juxtaposed in our thought experiment.

Two Images: Parallel Oppressions

Image One

The 1904 St. Louis World's Fair celebrated, amongst other things, the summer Olympics, the centennial year of the Louisiana Purchase, and the recent colonial acquisition of Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico in the Spanish-American War. Among the exhibits spread over twelve hundred acres was the "Parade of Evolutionary Progress," which was a "human ethnological exhibition" featuring various "primitives" including Apache Native Americans, "ethnic" peoples from the Luzon mountains of the Philippines—who were exhibited in full-sized replicas of their living quarters—and the famous Congolese "pygmy," Ota Benga.³ Benga would later be transferred to the Bronx Zoo to be exhibited with non-human primates, cajoled to shoot at targets with a bow and arrow, weave caps out of straw, and occasionally play-wrestle with his orangutan co-captive. Benga was displayed wearing nothing but a loincloth and the cage was strewn with bones about his feet, implying he was a cannibal. The plaque beside the cage read:

The African Pygmy, Ota Benga. Age: twenty three years. Height: 4 feet, 11 inches. Weight: 103 pounds. Brought from the Kasai River, Congo Free State, South Central Africa by Dr. Samuel P. Verner. Exhibited each afternoon during September.

After some public outrage, voiced primarily by Baptist and African American church groups in New York, Benga was released to an orphanage and later relocated to Lynchburg, Virginia. There, his teeth, which he had filed to points in the Congo, were capped and he was dressed in American-style clothing. He was given a job at the Lynchburg Tobacco factory and reportedly began to make plans to return to Africa, but after the advent of the First World War his dream of

returning was rendered impossible and he succumbed to depression. Throughout his incarceration Benga found ways to resist and give voice to his mistreatment. He would hide up trees, kick his keepers, actively respond to the viewing public in unexpected ways, and on March 20, 1916, at the age of 32, Benga built a ceremonial fire, chipped off the caps on his teeth, and shot himself in the heart with a stolen pistol.

Reading this horrific account today we instantly recognize that Benga, and others like him, were victimized by the extreme racist attitudes and beliefs of the period—attitudes and beliefs that we still find today. It is also a clear example of the oppression and marginalization not only of Benga but of entire culture(s) that are reified, denigrated, and reduced to the pejorative category of “other” (Said, 2003). What Benga’s story illustrates is the power and reach of the colonial gaze manufactured by the colonizer. We see Benga being forced to act in particular ways and being placed in a particular context that generates and reinforces a calculated narrative. The manufacturers of colonial relations imprisoned this man and stripped him of his context to confirm the dominant story that Africans were wild, savage, and culturally backward thereby justifying continued domination and violence of African places and inhabitants. Visitors to the World Fair were not “objectively” observing Benga as a person from another culture on *his own terms*, i.e. functioning within his own community and culture and environment. Instead, viewers consumed a staged being displayed in an environment created by his captors to serve a particular purpose. How can Benga, as a particular being, authentically represent himself to a public who knows nothing of his people and homeland and are already imbued with racist attitudes? We share in the sense that one of the principal strategies of colonization is separating the other from their communities and their contextual meanings. It is about not hearing, even when the other finds the words to use (Memmi, 1955/1991).

Image Two

On the campus of Simon Fraser University, with a population of some 20,000 students, 50 feet back from the curb stands a Red Maple⁴ tree. This tree sits in its concrete container next to the transit loop where buses unload a seemingly constant stream of students. The Red Maple, or *Acer Rubrum*,⁵ is one of the most common deciduous trees of eastern North America. Noted guidebook attributes include: its symbolic leaf shape, the oval-shaped silhouette of the tree, its speed of growth, and maximum heights of 60 to 75 feet. It is also noted that its uses range from “bonsai” to “reclamation” and that it can be used in buffer strips around parking lots or median strip plantings along highways. This last note appears to be due to its “showy” nature that poses “no significant litter problems.”⁶ *Acer Rubrum* is frequently purchased by landscapers and gardeners to serve as an ornamental tree owing to the fact that its leaves turn scarlet, orange, and yellow in autumn. And yet, the Red Maple is not native to *this* place,⁷

a campus on the west coast of Cascadia. The nearest indigenous population of Red Maple lies at least three provinces and 3,000 kilometers away. But here it stands, alone in a cement box six feet square and two and half feet deep, separated from three others of its kind, each in their own concrete enclosures. “Acts of resistance” by *Acer* are hard to determine with any certainty, but perhaps its constant locating and pushing roots through cracks, or its curled leaves when water has been forgotten, or its pheromonal interactions with its near neighbours, or limited crown as a way of protecting its longevity, are expressions of “treeness” resistance and agency.⁸

One of the things that drew our attention to juxtaposing these two images was that the Ota Benga image was immediately understood to be an act of violence and colonization, but the Red Maple tree elicited more varied responses. We found the parallels compelling: the Red Maple had its freedom to grow in a place in which its species has become accustomed restricted in a troublingly similar sense as Benga. The tree was placed in a concrete cell unable to interact with others of its own community as it would in its native forest. The descriptions of it in guidebooks are perhaps useful to us, but of little relevance to the Red Maple itself and in a similar sense to Benga’s description plaque, the referent is silenced. This is, for us, a clear manifestation of nature/culture duality where human is placed in an ontologically superior position to other-than-human. By confining *Acer Rubrum* to the concrete block, we strip away aspects of its subjectivity and manufacture it into an object *for* humans. With this move, we also conveniently refuse to recognize the “sociality” (Tsing, 2014) of the Red Maple, its identity as a communal being,⁹ and thus we are blind to the colonial severance of the Red Maple from its indigenous context. Memmi (1955/1991) describes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as an intricate one: one does not exist without the other. Similar to the Benga example, we are being told a staged narrative about this tree: it is without communicative capacities, it is dependent on our willingness to feed and water it, it is an *it*.

Before discussing the method we employed to gather responses, we want to recognize, as authors, our privileged position and regrettable complicity with the dominant culture that drives the colonization of both human and other-than-human beings. We also recognize that our lives and the lives of the myriad beings of the natural world are “co-implicated... because [we/]they are interdependent and entangled in mutually constituted and now fundamentally damaged worlds” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabw, 2015, p. 514). It is due to our positions that we find it all the more imperative to bring this conversation to the foreground of environmental education. We acknowledge the limitation of our human voices in speaking for colonized other-than-human beings, but at the same time accept, as Erica Fudge asserts, “that what we can achieve within those limitations is important and worthwhile” (in Russell, 2005, p. 436).

It is on these grounds we began exploring and presenting the two parallel images at various conferences, in formal meetings, and, most often, in informal

settings with environmental educators, researchers, and students—in other words, we were intentionally sharing with people who have a certain degree of proclivity towards care for the natural world. We did not attempt to be systematic, we were simply involved in theorizing what had arisen for us as a research team and wanted to get feedback from others. The responses we began to gather appeared to fit into thematic categories and there seemed to be something important here that called for more theoretical interpretation. Of the five categories, four mapped quite effectively onto commentaries on colonization provided by Memmi (1955/1991). The one response that did not map so clearly is the first one discussed below.

Responses

Response One: “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor”

Suggesting that we recognize other-than-human beings as “colonized” tends to elicit emotional responses, particularly in the context of settler-colonial states. The tensions between social justice, ecojustice, and decolonization are complex as political movements are fraught with the potential for reinscribing colonial relations in the name of “working class emancipation” or “education for sustainability.” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) have addressed this situation in their article, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” reminding us that decolonization must bring about “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 21) and that we ought to be wary of “adopting it as a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our society and schools” (p. 3). We wholeheartedly agree. And while the definition of colonization we have proposed here threatens to lapse into the kind of equivocation that Yang and Tuck justifiably fear, we maintain that we are not employing colonization metaphorically, but rather as a means of confronting the dominant and colonially influenced view of other-than-human otherness.

As Tuck and Yang (2012) describe, just as the slave is denied personhood in order to render him or her an “it” (i.e., a commodity of labour), a colonial logic demands that recognition of the subjectivity, or inter-subjectivity, of other-than-human beings be suppressed. The manufacturing of otherness and objectification is, in fact, a hallmark of a colonial practice that paves the way for exploitation, be it directed at humans, animals, or “nature” as a whole. Memmi (1955/1991) states that the colonizing process is one of separation, alienation, and hierarchization as a justification for violence inflicted and privileges received. For Memmi:

colonial racism is built from three major ideological components: one, the gulf between the culture of colonialist and the colonized; two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialist; three, the use of these supposed differences as standards of absolute fact. (p. 71)

Tuck and Yang (2012) describe how the process of colonial racism manifests in settler scenarios and gets turned on land-relations:

In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed, made pre-modern and backward. Made savage. (p. 5)

... the postcolonial pursuit of resources is fundamentally an anthropocentric model, as land, water, air, animals and plants are never able to become postcolonial; they remain objects to be exploited by the empowered postcolonial subject. (p. 19)

It would seem, based on the responses we received, that most people clearly recognize Benga as a subject of colonial racism and few would question the colonial nature of the “settling” of North America or Australia. But, despite the fact that anthropocentrism is a fundamental aspect of colonial projects, it often seems “too far” to suggest that land, water, air, animals, and plants are subject to similar processes. To begin to consider this parallel seriously requires us to recognize, for example, that *this* Red Maple tree has a kind of agency, a capacity to act upon and respond to its environment and its own communities and ways of being in the world, different from that of humans, but not the “gulf” of unknowability that facilitates and justifies wholesale exploitation (Daly, 2015; McFarland & Hedger, 2009; Plumwood, 2002).

In her book, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonization*, Deborah Bird Rose (2004) describes looking out on a “wild” Australian landscape (here “wild” refers to a landscape eroded by settlers and cattle) and recognizing that the social and ecological impacts of conquest are indeed one and the same process.

Colonization and the wild form a matrix: settler societies and their violence. We cannot avoid the knowledge that conquest requires death and dispossession. Indeed, in many ways we fetishize the violence, glamourizing the frontier and erecting hegemonic silences around facts that are taken to be too demanding or too demeaning. (p. 4)

We share Rose’s sense that there is something crucial and necessary to be gained by listening carefully to the apparent silence of the other(s) and facing up to the ethical, political, and educational implications of a multispecies, more-than-human world. While this proposal by no means addresses the complexities of Indigenous land repatriation, our hope is that it may offer decolonial projects and Indigenous allies a means of undermining the mythopoetic hallmarks of settler colonialism: private property, progress, and human exceptionalism. This is not, we maintain, a liberal attempt to conciliate settlers by affirming their “innocence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9), rather it is a call to recognize our implicatedness in colonial projects that justify the denigration of “the natural world” by way of manufacturing human supremacy just as it manufactures

colonial racism. For environmental educators and researchers, this is complex and challenging work that will require developing abilities as allies and a willingness to listen to and honour the *voice(s)* of the colonized—human and other-than-human.

Response Two: Inferiority and Freedom

The second response to our parallel images tends to be accusatory in nature. These respondents suggest we are arguing that the Red Maple in the concrete planter is somehow inferior to its counterparts living in less human-shaped habitats. Intriguingly, these respondents are often genuinely concerned with both questions of colonization and environmental ethics. And yet, curiously, these responses tend to lack recognition of trees as relational beings connected to specific contexts and, in a sense, as having their own “cultures” (Van Dooren, 2014). What then does it mean to remove a tree from its home environment strictly for human utility and to limit its self-willed freedom to grow and encounter others? With Benga, it is clear that his existential freedom and possibility was being limited by colonial enframing, but we tend to hesitate naming the Red Maple as enmeshed in a similar bind. Why? To reiterate, our point is *not* to suggest that *this* tree, or Benga for that matter, is *lesser than* compared with *its/* his kin, but that there is a *parallel* process employed in isolating another from their “native” contexts and reframing their ways of being to satisfy the colonial gaze. This is to say the concrete enclosure framing *this* Maple Tree and the cage framing Benga work to generate a gulf of unknowability between colonizer and colonized that, through repetition and “commonsense,” becomes absolute fact. Any other kind of relationality is rendered sentimental and pre-modern or “made savage.”

The oppressed have long been framed as having either no “culture” or a very limited one; with a related assumption that an individual “sample” in a cell, zoo, or planter adequately *represents* the “culture” or “species.” This allows the colonizer to assume an authoritative understanding of what it is to be “pygmy” or *Acer Rubrum* as situated in colonial narratives (as opposed to encountering others contextually and *on their own terms*). As Memmi (1955/1991) points out, it is exceedingly difficult to know anything substantive about the other in situations stripped of context, language, and relationship. For Memmi and other anti-colonial writers,¹⁰ the stripping of culture was thus a key strategy of the colonial process. If executed effectively, the colonized themselves may begin to internalize the message and devalue their own histories, stories, systems of governance, and, ultimately, the ability to maintain an “alternative” ontology. Memmi stressed this point as he felt it was essential for anti-colonial projects to reclaim and revitalize ways of being independent of the narratives and relations manufactured by colonizers. As such, we suggest that the Red Maple tree is also embedded in a colonial process of enframing to shape our relations in a form acceptable to the colonizer—stripping the tree of much of its own ways of being

and making it more dependent on human managers. Stepping off the bus on the campus and seeing these four trees, one is encouraged, problematically so, to view them strictly in human terms: cultureless, divorced from context, and better off dependent on our watering and fertilization technologies than they would be rooted in their “natural” environments. We suggest, as environmental educators, that by spending time and actively listening with other-than-human beings seriously, we might make space for different narratives to (re)emerge and possibly foster a sense of what it means to be an ally entangled with other beings and species.

Response Three: Immediate Anger

Another common response to our parallel images is instantaneous, but often undirected, anger. Initially our sense was that this exasperation was directed towards the perceived “ridiculousness” of the notion, but as we reflected and gathered more responses of a similar kind, it became apparent that, for at least some, the anger was essentially an unreflective response deployed as a protective strategy. But why? We suggest that the juxtaposition risks unveiling something that the listener, and the dominant culture, has *chosen*, at various levels of consciousness ranging from intentional to suppressed, to not-know. The anger thus indicates an emotional move to protect oneself from having to bear knowing.

Ignorance and self-delusion have long provided means for colonialists to hide from the brutal realities of complicity with violent systems that afford them privileges and high “living standards.” As Memmi (1955/1991) maintains, following Jean-Paul Sartre’s in-depth discussion of “bad faith,” it becomes difficult for colonialists to actually not-know that their lifestyle is predicated on the unjust suffering and labour of others: their various freedoms and liberties, their habits and vices, even their dreams for themselves and their children. In a chapter entitled, “Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance,” Charles Mills (2007) posits that self-delusion is an essential part of white supremacy. A carefully constructed and reinforced bad faith perpetuates “commonsense” superiority as an absolute fact and enables “white people to fully benefit from its racial hierarchy, ontologies, and economics” (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007, p. 2). Contemporary expressions of bad faith also work to revise and reframe collective memory, both eradicating the contributions and achievements of people of colour and bowdlerizing the brutality of historical colonization projects.

Besides maintaining colonial power structures, self-imposed ignorance is also aggressively inscribed into the narratives and consciousness of oppressed others. For instance, feminist and ethicist Carol Gilligan (1982) has suggested that young girls, upon entering puberty, are pushed to not-know that which they know. She describes the way in which girls have been required to numb their relationships with others in order to be successful and “belong” in a patriarchal world. To be aware of others, to feel what they feel as they battle for power,

position, and places, is to suffer deeply. Gilligan asserts that we have developed a calculated cultural training system to suppress empathy and ethical consideration for the other (see Blenkinsop et al., forthcoming). If the parallel we draw in this paper between the colonization of humans and other-than-humans is resonant, then we must consider how, early in life, we are taught to suppress meaningful and ethical relations with a more-than-human world.

For environmental educators the implications here are quite significant. Does the public education system manufacture a colonial relationship between children and the “natural world”? And how might people engaged in not-knowing be supported to first overcome their protective mechanisms then come to know a more just and reciprocal relationship with “nature”? How as environmental educators might we think about, and deal pedagogically with, the guilt and pain that will likely accompany such knowing? We suggest that environmental educators must support the relationships they see occurring between students and other-than-human beings, prepare themselves to deal with the emotions that come as result of recognizing our implicatedness in damages done, and continue to name and revolt against the colonial violence exerted against oppressed communities across lines of species.

As educators in a time of ecological emergency, we suggest that it behooves us to ask why we cling to the fabrication that the “natural world” is not capable of being “colonized.” To think slowly, seriously, and carefully about a topic that tends to fly by, carried on a wave of “commonsense,” taboo, and the threat of angered riposte, lest we add to a colonially conditioned self-delusion to avoid existential reflexivity (Fisher, 2013). To admit that “we” have and continue to “colonize” the “natural world” is to confront a history of rapacious destruction and denigration, but it also offers us an orientation potentially required to begin to listen and heal from this legacy.

Response Four: “We are Nature”

The fourth response we have encountered comes in various forms but can be summarized by the ostensibly sophisticated and non-dualistic argument: “we are all part of nature and there is no division between human and other-than-human.” Thus, the things that humans do are more or less “natural.” This argument claims that everything is interconnected to the degree that it is impossible (or at least crude) to make the kinds of distinctions we have proposed. How are saplings seeded by matriarch trees in a forested place any more or less “natural” than those planted by humans in concrete containers? This point is often modulated to imply that we are proposing a natural “wilderness” removed from human contact and falling victim to romantic notions of a “pristine” wild “out there” beyond history and culture.

A related response suggests that we ignore the “nature” that exists, and sometimes even thrives, in urban environments, a comment typically accompanied by images of dandelions in the cracks of sidewalks or coyotes prowling

in the alleyways. For us, such images provide a free space to illustrate and think through how other-than-human beings attempt to resist and disturb the colonial divide between culture and nature. The *Acer Rubrum* tree in our parallel images, for example, constantly pushes its roots through the concrete block resisting its enclosure. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo (2015) also describe how “urban adapters” radically transgress the nature/culture divide; for instance, they point to the way in which raccoons exert their political agency “spatially, ontologically, and microbially” (p. 153) and are thus rendered “unruly subjects because of their refusal to maintain the human/nonhuman divide” (p. 153).

The “we are nature” response, however, raises some troubling questions. If everything is part of “nature,” including humans, and what humans do is “natural,” we essentially lose all critical capacity. If we accept that humans are “natural” how do we speak against, for example, genocide, the manufacturing of asbestos, the great Pacific garbage gyre, or any variety of human-to-human colonization? A second rebuttal to the desire to conflate human and other-than-human recalls Memmi’s (1955/1991) charge that colonizers tend to employ dehistoricization. Recently, Dene scholar Glenn Coulthard (2014) has written about how dehistoricization has been embedded in the Canadian government’s apology to Indigenous residential school survivors. According to Coulthard, while the apology admitted past wrongs, it emphasized that similar problems do not occur today thereby ignoring any current manifestations of the racism, violence, and repercussions of past atrocities by cutting connections between past and present. The “we are all nature” response, we suggest, also threatens to lapse into a kind of dehistoricization by “acknowledging” that historically “we” may have considered humans separate from the rest of the natural world, but we no longer do so we can just move on.

Our third objection to the “we are nature” response is an extension of the first in that we do not suggest that the tree is not “natural,” but that it is anthropocentrically confined and framed in alignment with colonial narratives. The “wildness” encountered in cities, while present and ubiquitous, is wild on predominantly human-shaped terms. Unless we are able to deconstruct the context and see those moments of wildness as resistance, urban “nature” tends to be hyper-managed into orderly tree-lined streets and flower-laden parkettes. The wilderness commonly referred to as “backcountry” is “wilder” in the sense that more elements of the place are beyond such constant colonial enframing and control. It is more self-sustaining and self-willed than the urban version; colonizers have not completely “appropriated” it (Serres, 2011). It is the recognition that we are not the sole arbiters of life that demands us, when encountering beings in a more-than-human world, to adopt a stance of humility and attend in ways that ethically recognize otherness in urban centres or the backcountry. For Memmi (1955/1991), it was the recognition by the colonized that they did not need to be defined by the colonizers, that they were, and long had been, fully functioning communities and cultures that ultimately led to a vibrant and inclusive anti-colonial movement. The same is surely true

of the Carolinian forest, home to many *Acer Rubrum*, and has implications for the metaphors environmental educators deploy, for the kinds of encounters we arrange for students, and for how such encounters are being understood by students and mediated by educators.

Response Five: We Have a Responsibility

The final response tends to agree with the premise that some members of the natural world have been colonized and domesticated, but then make the move that colonizers now bear them a paternal or steward-like responsibility. For example, there are hundreds of millions of cows around the world who would likely suffer and die if we were to stop caring for them—what about those “particular beings?” This position is complicated and there is some truth to its concerns, however, it also conveniently ignores the fact that cows today have, to a certain extent, been intentionally bred for docility and dependence. We worry that the performance of concern implicit in the “we cannot leave them to their own devices” echoes anti-colonial literature. Colonizers have strategically continued to manufacture colonial tropes even after some colonies gained “independence” by abandoning colonized peoples without any support—material, physical, economic, or social—and then, in a dehistoricizing move, pointing to any floundering to confirm inferiority as an absolute fact. For example, in depriving colonized peoples of their languages and access to the lands and “resources” required to maintain and revitalize their own stories, colonial interests have been able to reinscribe conventional narratives.

The parallel case with the Red Maple involves removing the tree from its homeland and community, rich in pheromonal and rhizomatic communication, and rendering it a voiceless and domesticated decoration sculpted in human terms and dependent upon our charity. This lone individual then also becomes a representative for Red Maple trees, and often *all* trees. The architecture and construction of place(s) by colonial interests is aimed at maintaining and re-enforcing a particular narrative. As noted in the opening image of *Acer Rubrum*, the plants described in guidebooks have their stories told by human subjects and are often utilitarian and almost always anthropocentric in nature. Intriguingly, the “average person” is often so limited in, for example, botanical knowledge, that the story of the dependent tree becomes rapidly naturalized. Students file past, “logically” assuming that the tree requires human managers to tend to it, water it, and prune it, ultimately manufacturing a false choice between benevolent imprisonment or death by negligence. In this way, we once again eradicate the agency of the more-than-human world, ignoring the active resistance of nonhuman beings by constituting them as “unruly” (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2015, p. 153) or the irrational other (Plumwood, 2002). For environmental educators the challenge here is to find ways to allow our students to develop substantive relationships with the “natural world” as a whole and with individual beings therein, such that we are able to recognize and

rebut colonial enframing. We argue that this process shares something with any colonized and/or marginalized community situation whereby the colonizer population is required to encounter, spend time with, listen to, and recognize the complexity of the other in order to reduce destructive and unsophisticated stereotypes and colonizing generalizations (Root, 2010; Scully, 2012).

Educational Importance and Implications

An additional comment we received focused on the limits of simply “playing” with language; that drawing parallels between the colonial relationship amongst humans and between humans and the non-humans would not actually affect the reality of the situation in any meaningful way. This may be the case, however, “actual change” has historically followed on the heels of a deepened kind of awareness in the general population catalyzed, in some small part perhaps, by academic activists, comrades, and allies (Freire, 2000). And we sensed that perhaps, like the time in which Memmi was working, that the time may be right for a kind of eco-conscientization. Nevertheless, it is important to note that although cultivating critical consciousness can seem like important work, and it likely is, it is not the sole method for disrupting colonization (Fannon, 1963; Memmi, 1955/1991) being that “raising critical consciousness” does not necessitate actual action. Indeed, Tuck and Yang (2012) have suggested that emphasising the cultivation of critical consciousness can be a kind of classic “settler move to innocence” (p. 19). They warn, “the front-loading of critical consciousness building can waylay decolonization, even though the experience of teaching and learning to be critical of colonialism can be so powerful it can feel like it is indeed making change” (p. 19).

With this recognition and with the issue of language in mind, we turn to educational implications and practice. As Leesa Fawcett (2013) reminds us, “with globalized knowledge and commodified curriculum, there is the danger of reproducing anthropocentric positions without acknowledging specific teaching contexts” (p. 409). As such, teachers must thoughtfully deploy language and cultivate pedagogical experiences to re-orient themselves and their students. The language we are in search of ceases to reinforce the manufactured objectification of non-human beings and, instead, presents a view of a more-than-human world that is multi-vocal, diverse, agential, and pedagogical (Bell & Russell, 1999). For instance, a teacher, wanting to challenge colonial narratives might play with perceptions on “weeds” as “heroes” while drawing attention to the work they often do in reclaiming sites of major human disturbance. Another might use the example of a building contaminated by mold, not as a threat to human health, but as a failure of architects and builders to take into account local environmental conditions and the agency of other-than-humans (i.e., the mold). At the same time, educators should remain hyper-aware of language that dehistoricizes and bowdlerizes the violence, contemporary and historical,

committed against the “natural world.” Teresa Lloro-Bidart (2015) points out how language employed at the ground level of educational practices can turn “otherwise would-be-subjects, nonhuman and some humans into objects for human use by muting their actual experiences” (p. 140). By intervening when particular colonial tropes and language is used to reify and objectify “nature,” a teacher can offer students the space to reflect on the presuppositions informing certain ways of thinking and, ideally, move beyond to post-anthropocentric modes of thinking and relation.

Recognizing colonial enframement and resistance are other factors of educational importance. By recognition, we mean being aware of how deeply colonial influences shape schooling from the habits and language of teachers and students, to the physical architecture of school, to the underlying structure of the education system itself (Scully, 2012). It also means finding ways to recognize the significance of living in and being entangled with a more-than-human world, and understanding that other-than-human beings have their own “cultures,” their own voices, their own autonomy and self-will, their own perspectives, and their own ways of resisting colonial infringements on their freedom as living beings. For instance, environmental education discourses tends to privilege “connecting with nature” and thus implicitly affirms the nature/culture binary if not addressed with care (Gannon, 2015). Furthermore, as Susanne Gannon points out, “outdoor education often relies on ‘individualistic behaviourist models of human nature’ that homogenize the environment and exclude Indigenous and other knowledges” (p. 3).

By resistance, we mean refusing to simply accept colonial narratives no matter how painful, rage-inducing, or “ridiculous” it may seem to pursue anti-colonial perspectives in a more-than-human world. As Paul Berger’s (2009, 2014) research on Inuit schooling demonstrates, teachers have to make conscious choices to work for or against Eurocentric assimilation. We also need to make pedagogical decisions to reject colonial norms in our teaching practices by, for example, recycling or troubling resources with outdated descriptions of the agency of the “natural world,” reinforcing moments when students connect in ways beyond colonial inscription, spending significant amounts of time outside to maximize encounters with non-human others, or critically engaging with the sociomateriality of classroom “objects” (McKenzie & Bieler, 2016). We can also design curriculum that foregrounds a more-than-human world not as a passive or inert backdrop to human subjects, but as agential “artists” involved in the learning process (see Bell, 1997; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015).

In taking the concept of colonization seriously, environmental educators will invariably have to deal with anger, guilt, and other strong emotions within themselves and among their students. It would be difficult to look at the history of human supremacy and not feel some sense of loss. Finding ways to express anger and not let it become debilitating is as important as the slow process of supporting students and oneself in the changes necessary to live in harmony with the planet (Martusewicz, 2014).

A final implication to point towards in brief is the need to rethink what and where educators understand knowledge to be and how they cultivate practices to discern less “obvious” (from a colonial perspective) and marginalized voices. Almost nothing in most teacher education programs has prepared the modern Western teacher to conceptualize other-than-humans as capable of voice(s) and culture(s) (Van Dooren, 2014), as having agency and ways of being, or as encountering one another in ways that are unique, wonderful, and, for the most part, incomprehensible to humans (Bell & Russell, 2000; Harman, 2010). We hope that the juxtaposition of Ota Benga with the *Acer Rubrum* and the reframing of other-than-humans as “colonized” aids in some small way a shift towards this kind of thinking in environmental education.

Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that our suggestion of colonial suppression of nature is not new—see the work of LaDuke (1999), Merchant (1989), and Simpson (2009) for example—but, for us, the interesting point was that environmental educators were themselves struggling with the concept, suggesting a gap between the literature and, at least for some, the lived.
- ² See current work such as Alfred (2005) or Coulthard (2014).
- ³ Background information on Ota Benga was drawn from various sources: *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ota_Benga), *NYU News* (<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/nyu-stories/pamela-newkirk-on-ota-benga-at-the-bronx-zoo.html>), and *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/03/the-man-who-was-caged-in-a-zoo>).
- ⁴ Choosing a Red Maple, an iconic symbol of Canadian identity as a nation, a colonizing nation, in order to draw this colonizing parallel to the more-than-human world is not lost on us. The challenge is the space needed to unpack everything this discussion provokes.
- ⁵ We will refer to the Red Maple as *Acer Rubrum* (with capital A and R) to offer a slightly more unique and particular name while recognizing, sadly, that this is an incomplete form of address. We do know how that tree might choose to be referred to if asked.
- ⁶ Versions of this description can be found in everything from the Petersen guides (Petrides & Wehr, 1998) to the U.S. Forest Service (see: http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/database/documents/pdf/tree_fact_sheets/acerubd.pdf).
- ⁷ Please note, this is not a more generalized comment on the value of native versus non-native species or an attempt to return the Red Maple to some imagined home, but rather used to parallel its removal from community to what happened to Ota Benga.
- ⁸ There is a great deal of literature around the agency, communicative ability, and knowledge of the more-than-human world (for examples, see Chamovitz, 2013; Hearne, 1994; Kohn, 2013; Rose, 2004; Von Uexkull, 2013).

⁹ The work of Forestry Sciences professor Suzanne Simard (2017) is extremely interesting in this regard.

¹⁰ See, for example, Fanon (1967) and Césaire (1972).

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