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Alexei Desmarais
Western Washington University

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(w)here is here?: variations on voice and location in environmental education

Alexei Desmarais, Western Washington University

Abstract

This paper revolves around the question “where is here?”, a question that has implications for the politics of self and politics of place. Implications for how we think about ourselves in place, in relationality to other perspectives and epistemic positions, and specifically in relationship to specific geographical, socio-political, and historical structures. Attending to place and emplacement can help us to uncover and celebrate the vitality of particular, incomplete knowledge(s). In working to unsettle universal and hegemonic conceptions of how and what we know, this paper employs a polyphonic and queer logic, which is to say that the many voices and perspectives of this capstone are irreducible, and not fully locatable; the boundaries between them are blurred and porous and mobile. These voices will always be moving, shifting, impossible to pin or fix in place.

Keywords: environmental education, epistemology, decolonization, standpoint theory, performative writing

We are all emplaced; our emplaced lives are embedded with socio-political, -cultural, -economic, and socio-epistemic implications. (Seawright, 2014, p. 562).

Resistance...is not the futile hope for a better day, the self-indulgent staking out of a political position, or a reckless descent into disorder. It is self-determination with integrity. It is the assertion of life without apology. It is the willingness to defend what we love with our lives. (Pinkard, 2014).

All narratives are finite and flawed. To write performatively is to acknowledge this, not as the impossibility of meaning, but as the possibility of gaining a surplus of meanings. (Pollock, 1998, p. 96)

S2SS

Invitation

This performance hangs on and revolves around the question “where is here?” This is a powerful question. As the noted scholar of education John Willinsky (1999) argues, “The geoidentity question ‘Where is Here?’ ...[has] a way of linking our various histories as indigenies (sic), colonials, immigrants, expatriates, tourists, citizens, refugees, and displaced persons.” (p. 9). To ask this question means attending to the stories we tell ourselves about our identities and about “what we know” and the ways in which these are not neutral, uncontested stories, but exist in relation to and conflict with an irreducible number of stories that are all linked through the social and geographical spaces that we inhabit. The stories we tell about this place are intimately intertwined with the stories we tell about ourselves.

I believe that attending to and critiquing the ways in which “place” operates in creating and communicating knowledge is especially relevant for environmental education—as a discipline rooted in particular understandings of place (i.e., “place-based”) and dedicated to particular conceptions of social and environmental change. It is good to think critically about where here is, to pay attention to the various stories that play out on, construct, and are embedded in this landscape—especially those that are not sanctioned as legitimate ways of relating to and speaking with place. “Here” is a historical construct, a patchwork of contesting stories. Asking “where is here?” is one way to attend to the seams, to the conflict and negotiations—both epistemic and political—that have produced what we receive as stable knowledge and stable systems and social structures. “Here” holds diverse and competing meaning for different groups and individuals, an irreducible diversity which entails a responsibility to never be satisfied with the stories we tell, to never settle on one story, to always open toward those voices that have been silenced and struck from the historical record, though never erased.

My performance’s orientation to “here” both disrupts and fails to disrupt the politics of self (social location) and place (geographical location), with the goal of unsettling, complexifying, and examining the ways in which positionality and relationality matter in how we construct and transmit knowledge. The performance is meant to attend to place and emplacement in illustrating the importance and vitality of particular, incomplete knowledge(s), while resisting urges toward universal and totalitarian conceptions of what and how we know. My commitment is to the particular.

In the interests of honoring the contingent, co-creative and collaborative aspects of knowledge-creation, I have involved you all in helping me to disrupt my position as presenter, guide and authority by responding to the question “Where is Here?” on these cards. Each time I ask the question “Where is Here?” during this performance I will draw from this pile. Then I will tell a story that reflects whatever description of “here” you have supplied. Before circling back again to the question: “Where is Here?”

(w)here is here?: Sovereign Indigenous Land

The land we are gathered on today are the traditional ceded and unceded territories of the Nlaka'pamux, Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, Swinomish and many other tribes—coast and interior Salish—both federally recognized and not recognized. I say this because the federal government does not have the authority to regulate Indigeneity and home. “Here” is Sovereign Indigenous Land, which speaks to the meaningful presence of Native Americans here, to the ways in which they have taken care of this land since time immemorial. “Here” is Sovereign Indigenous Land, which speaks to these diverse tribes’ and peoples’ connection to this land, which is not merely property or resource but intimately bound up in identity, as the grounding, meaning-making force that structures their lived experience. And yet, it is also important to note that while these diverse tribes and peoples have not been erased—despite the ongoing efforts of colonization—their physical presence on these lands is constrained by political and economic forces, including, but not limited to, the existence of this national park.

(w)here is here?: my watershed, my home, my world

When we attend to such complexities as “here as Sovereign Indigenous Land,” the world spills out of our nice, neat organizational and conceptual categories. “Here” is always more complex than we can understand; “here” is always contested and contestable. This notion of Sovereign Indigenous Land does more than merely disrupt the stories we tell about this place – as wild, scenic, preserved, as our natural heritage. It disrupts the very category of “here,” the dominant Western notion of what a place can be, and of what forms our relationship to place can take.

To recognize this land as belonging to Native Americans, to recognize Native Americans as belonging to this land, is not merely to tell a different story about place. This recognition unsettles the very structures that hold in place our Western understanding of land and the natural world, based on beliefs in “ownership and private property” and mutually reinforcing ethics of stewardship and domination (Seawright, 2014, p. 569). Unsettling the dominant understanding of land and the natural world entails simultaneously unsettling our dominant understandings of selfhood, which reinforce and support these logics of domination.

What do I mean by our “dominant understandings of selfhood?” According to Gardner Seawright (2014) – whose studies focus on the everyday presence of whiteness within educational spaces – “within the white settler epistemology, a person’s state of being and identity is correlated with” their capacity to exercise “power over (appropriating and cultivating) the Earth and those marked as inferior.” (p. 568). This normative self, untainted by any limitations on their perspective of any kind – be they racial, gendered, or related to mental or physical faculties – is posited then as the rightful inheritor and master of land and the natural world.

Which is to say that this ideal self, this rightful owner of the land and settler-made-Indigenous, reflects the various operative logics of domination that exist in our colonialist, white supremacist, heterosexist society. He is, therefore, a white cisgendered able-bodied male settler. These are all identities that I hold, and since these dominant stories about place and self and knowledge continue to hold sway over U.S. culture, I inhabit and benefit from specific positions of privilege that are built on the exclusionary power of these narratives. To deconstruct these dominant narratives of place and self, we must interrogate the two simultaneously, attending to the ways in which they are linked and mutually supporting, attending to the logics and relationships that maintain their dominion over our social imaginaries (see Seawright, 2014, p. 556). As feminist and activist Andrea Smith (2013) argues, “a liberation struggle that does not question the terms by which humanity is understood becomes a liberation struggle that depends on the oppression of others.”

In this capstone, I am searching for a reimagined politics of place and politics of self, one not predicated on exploitation and cultivation.

(w)here is here?: interconnection

And who are you connected to, who could you connect cedars, or trees to? (*long pause*)

Okay, great, how are salmon and trees connected? (*pause*) That's okay, there's no right or wrong answer. What are some ways we might talk about that connection? What sorts of things are trees and salmon connected through?

Voice over (systems thinking):

Ecosystems are complex, interactive systems that include both biological communities (biotic) and physical (abiotic) components of the environment. As with individual organisms, a hierarchal structure exists; groups of the same organisms (species) form populations, different populations interact to form communities, communities live within an ecosystem, and all of the ecosystems on Earth make up the biosphere. Organisms grow, reproduce, and perpetuate their species by obtaining necessary resources through interdependent relationships with other organisms and the physical environment. (National Research Council, 2012, p. 151)

Mmhmm...so maybe they both need water? How else could we connect these two? Anyone else? How are salmon and trees connected?

Voice over (representation):

We talk and write as though names, categories and numbers represent and signify the world 'as it is.' (Gough, 2014, 22).

Yes, totally! So sometimes trees create habitat for salmon, like when they fall over in the streams. And salmon provide nutrients for trees too, bringing important nutrients from the ocean all the way up our streams into these alpine forests. There are so many ways that we are all connected...it's pretty much impossible to go wrong, when we're talking about the ways we're all interdependent.

Do you think we could start over again and connect everyone in a totally different way??

Voice over (standards-based):

Students investigate systems by examining the properties of different materials, the structures of different components, and their interconnections to reveal the system's function and/or solve a problem. (NGSS Appendix G)

I think so!! We've created a web of interdependence. It's complex, and it's all connected. Everything depends on everything else in this web. Including us, right? Now what do you think would happen if any of these one individuals or elements was affected? So let's say that our water source becomes polluted...

Voice over (speaking back):

Unfortunately systems theory works against its own good intentions by using an atomistic scheme of classification and categorisation to name, describe and characterise environmental qualities. This is because systems theory reproduces a metaphorical treatment of nature that was initiated in the seventeenth century and reinforced by modern science and industrialisation. (Gough, 2014, 23).

(w)here is here?: interconnection

I have arrived; I am home

I was first introduced to this gatha—this verse, this mantra—and to walking meditation in the alpine meadows of North Cascades National Park. Before we left our campsite at Hidden Meadows, we walked out in the morning light to the pace of our breath toward the big Larch where we had hung our food bags. And as we walked, each to their own rhythm through the wildflowers—some quick on their feet, others ponderous, slow, loath to let go—I repeated these words over and over.

Voice over (resistance and conformity):

Our cognitive, affective and political lives are permeated by different forms of conformity and resistance that shape our lives in various [not always fully coherent] ways. (Medina, 2012, p. 14)

And now here we are, on the shores of the Salish Sea. About to depart from this particular location, which we have called home for the last week, and to embark on the final leg of our journey. And so we wanted to make space for us to say goodbye to this place, while also rooting ourselves into the shifting sands—not in a way that erases the history of this place or assumes any kind of privileged connection. But in a way that acknowledges how our presence here fits into the various narratives of this place, how our presence reproduces past traumas while also reaching for something as yet unimagined.

Voice over (the social imagination):

Both our ability and our inability to relate to others (and to particular aspects of ourselves) is mediated by the social imagination, the kind of imagination that opens our eyes and hearts to certain things and not others, enabling and constraining our social gaze (Medina, 2012, p. 22).

And I know that we've been talking about home a lot. About some of the complexities of where we call home, the historical and present contexts of colonialism, and how these various places inform and construct our identities. And we've been talking about the ways in which our identities, our social and political locations, interact with geographical and historical locations. Often in contradictory and confusing ways.

Voice over (heterogeneous energy):

Heterogeneity does not destabilize; it re-energizes.

We've been moving fast this summer, pushing ourselves and one another to open onto new ideas, holding our feet to the fire. Which is important. But it is also important

be gentle with ourselves. To take a step back, to take a moment to truly arrive in, and leave, each place. To attend to where we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. And to try to sink into and embrace some of the complexities through which we have been moving, and which we embody.

Voice over (the heterogeneous self):

Rather than seeking a wholeness of the self, we who are the subjects of this plural and complex society should affirm the otherness within ourselves, acknowledging that as subjects we are heterogeneous and multiple in our affiliations and desires. (Young, 1990, p. 124)

We have this idea in Western culture of needing to be whole, fully realized beings. Of needing to be able to speak coherently to our experience, to feel assured in our knowledge. Of needing to be clear and consistent in our desires. And when we don't live up to this ideal—because we never can—we feel fragmented and lost and unworthy. We feel lost, rather than being able to celebrate the complexity that is our life—and the specificity of the multiple, curdled locations that we inhabit. And this logic of fragmentation translates to our relationships, to the groups that we belong to, to our classrooms, to our political parties. Where dissent and resistance and difference are seen not as necessary and honest reflections of the irreducibly diverse positions that different people inhabit, but as flaws. As wrinkles to be ironed out in pursuit of a more seamless consensus.

But the truth is that our identity is always open and unfinished, not because of a deficit but because of an excess.

Interdependence is not a concept, not a logic that connects various discrete individuals in the construction of a system. Interdependence is curdled. It cuts across identity boundaries. It is lived, active. Interdependence exposes the precarity of the individual position, opening us to the necessity of embracing our internal contradictions, if we are to recognize external connections.

In the words of Pulitzer-prize winning author Junot Diaz (2017), “it is incumbent upon us to be reflective, to be complex, to be subtle, to be nuanced, to take our time in societies which are none of these things and which encourage none of these things.”

So with that in mind, I ask you all to join me in walking meditation. There's no rush; just focus on your breath. And on those words, if you like: “I have arrived; I am home.” You can even close your eyes. Just take the next step when it feels right. And when you feel the water around your toes, ankles, knees—when you feel it's a good time to stop—then stop. Thanks this place in whatever way seems appropriate. And we'll gather back up here by the wrackline.

(w)here is here: mountain school

Thanks everyone for playing that game, and for sharing. Remember that's just a beginning. Over the next few days, we'll continue to get to know one another, and this place, much better. This trail group is going to be our community.

What does that word mean to you?

Yeah, I think it has to do with living together, working or playing together, and—particularly in our case—learning and having fun together. We have a responsibility too when we're in community, to make sure that everyone is learning, and having fun. So we're going to come up with a Community Agreement; this agreement describes how we want to treat one another so that we can ensure that everyone is having fun and is able to learn.

I'd like everyone to think of a rule or a guideline that we should all follow that describes how we want to act and treat one another in community. I'll give you a minute to think of one and then we'll share these ideas and you'll all write them down on the Agreement.

Great, thanks y'all. I think we have a great list going here. I'm going to add one more, which is Listening. You all have been doing a great job of modeling this, and I know I've been doing a lot of talking, but I also aspire to do a better job of listening during our time together. Can everyone agree to all of these principles? Are there any that we're missing? And that's okay, we can add to it as we go. Alright, so now I need everyone to sign it, to show your commitment to this community.

As we're signing, let's think about who this community agreement extends to.

Just the people here in this circle? What about your other classmates? What about other staff up here? Who else might be part of our community while we're up here in the North Cascades? Yeah, we'll be learning from a lot of different members of this ecosystem, this community, during our time together up here. I think it's important to think about ourselves as part of this natural community too; after all, we're in their home—the ravens', the squirrels', the cedar's—and we want to be respectful, just like if we were visiting a friend's house.

Alright, thanks y'all. Let's get our packs on, and then we'll stop by the bathrooms and the gear room, and we'll be ready to hit the trail...

(w)here is here: a community of friends, new and old

I want us to be honest about what this community contract is. And what it is not. It can be a bit of a roadmap for our time together, something that helps to guide us, that reminds us how we should act and treat one another within this trail group classroom space. In these ways, this community agreement is kind of a set of ideals. Ultimately, this is a tool of control. We want to create a certain kind of space on the trail, and we want to be able to hold one another accountable to that, so that we can engage in a certain kind of learning. But the community agreement is not the end-all, be-all for learning and acting in this community together.

What this community agreement does not do is it does not automatically cement us into community with one another. Authentic community takes sustained, hard work. It's not something that we can attach to a picture of a tree. It's not something that we can assume will happen in three days. It's not something that is centered around a set of rules, but something that is centered around the ways that we live out our commitments to one another. That is centered around the very real, concrete relationships between you and your classmates, between you and this place – the North Cascades, between me and each one of you, and between all of us. Community is created in the interactions between the knowledge that we all individually and collectively hold and the knowledge that this place has to offer us.

Voice over (community):

"Community is not a contract; it's a covenant." (Pinkard, 2014)

So I just treated place as a metaphor again. As a-historical. As unresponsive to and uninformed by your being here. As something that can be mobilized and applied back in your home communities. And I'm sorry my friends. Because I don't think that was honest. I don't think that fulfilled my accountability to you or to this place and the history that it speaks to.

I referred to you as y'all. Yeah, right, like co-opting some southern dialect makes me more folksy, more community-oriented, more in-touch than the uber-urbane over-educated person that I am. Well, the reason I did that is because saying "guys" assumes the male gender is the norm. It's ubiquitous in our society. Because patriarchy and heterosexism are ubiquitous. Which doesn't make saying "guys" any more right. Or any more wrong. It's just something that I feel is important, if—that is—we are really committed to creating inclusive communities where all feel they have the right and the capacity to define themselves, to determine for themselves who they are, rather than being mis-defined or boxed in by others.

The truth is, my friends (see there I go again, assuming familiarity and a consensus of connection), that three days is not nearly enough time to get to know this place. Or really get to know one another. I want to assure you that I am committed to your learning and to your development over the next three days. But I also want to foreground some of the

limitations of our time together. We get to spend much of the next three days together. But then you leave, go back down-valley and I get to go home to Marblemount and we will not see each other again. That doesn't mean that we can't engage in some really great conversations up here over the next three days, or that we won't learn anything. But I think we have to be realistic about what we're able to accomplish.

To say that this experience is going to transform you, to change how you think about yourself in relation to others and the natural world, is false on a number of counts. Three days is not nearly enough time to undo or alter a lifetime already of learning. But I think there's a bigger assumption here. To assume that this experience should be transformational is to assume that you and your home communities are somehow deficient and in need of transformation and that I—and my fellow instructors and co-workers at this organization and in this environmental education movement—have the answers that will fix you.

This is a really complex place. And I hope to introduce you all to a sliver of that complexity. But the fact of the matter is that I am still very much learning from the many beings whose home this is. I'm still figuring it out, too, so to claim that I'm going to be able to teach you all about this place, to facilitate your connection to the natural world, is maybe a bit of a reach.

Given this complexity, all of those concepts in your mountain school journal are limited and insufficient in their ability to really help us understand this Place, its history and the multiple perspectives that infuse its consciousness. That's right, Place has a consciousness. And if we treat this place as something that can be categorized, known, and carried down-valley with you, then we are still doing a disservice to the particulars of this place and of your place—your home life, your lived experience—and the ways that these complex places mix and mingle during your time in mountain school. In relying on universal concepts, on the language of Next Generation Science Standards, we are separating knowledge from the particular and, in the process, we are limiting your learning potential. We're limiting what counts as learning to what can be measured made sense of within the limited frameworks of state and national academic standards and environmental education curricula.

Heck, the whole idea about you all getting to know this place is a bit problematic. First of all, because these uncritical moves to “reconnect to place” are really moves to settler innocence, moves that erase Indigenous sovereignty by naively positing the possibility of settler connection to place (McLean, 2013; Tuck and Yang, 2012). The fact that so much of our language around these programs affirms “exploration” and “discovery” corroborates this colonial orientation.

But there's an additional issue. We stress the ecological connections between your home and this place (i.e., we are all part of the same watershed; healthy, local food and healthy, local economies down-valley rely on glaciers/snowpack in the north cascades). But there is a distinct disconnect between your home lives and here. Which can certainly be a positive difference; this can be an opportunity for you to experience something that

disrupts your day-to-day, that encourages you to think about things from a different perspective. But this won't be a productive disruption if I as an instructor don't challenge myself, reciprocally, to look critically at my own assumptions, and to listen to your experiences in a way that disrupts my day-to-day (Tzou, Scalone and Bell, 2010) Otherwise, I am reinforcing this idea that you have something to learn from my worldview, that I have something to offer you, while not engaging the "mutual potential of our learning" partnership (hooks, 2009, p. 43).

You do not live in the North Cascades. Which is part of what makes this place "special," but which is also part of what makes your homes un-"special." There's a hierarchy here, see? Even though no one will actually tell you this, one of the reasons you are up here is because your experiences of nature at home cannot compare to this. Because you can't learn as much from them as you can from experiences in this wild, pristine environment. So we devalue your lived experience, unless it aligns with our experiences here at mountain school—experiences like hiking, seeing new places, being out in the wild, botanizing, birding, etc. The experience here at mountain school offers you a very limited picture of how you form a connection to place, of what experiences count as meaningful, of what environmental consciousness and action looks like, of what counts as knowledge. A picture that will exclude much of what you know.

And so while this place is distinct from your home, it is actually intimately connected. But that's not because of the Skagit or glacial meltwaters but because you are here. And this is not some ideal setting where it doesn't matter where you come from or what your home life is like. You always exist in relationship to "specific economic, political and social conditions." (Noguera, 2006, p. xvi). And when we ignore these conditions, we ignore you in your particularity. We devalue your experience; we refuse to acknowledge your funds of knowledge. We disregard you as a knower and as a person. And that is both personal and political.

I would like you all to pull out your mountain school journal. Does everyone have a journal? Does anyone need a pencil?

I want to take five minutes and go through and I'd like you to circle any word that looks familiar or any activity that looks fun.

Okay, what did we come up with?

That's okay if you didn't find anything. That's not your fault; that's on me. What that tells me is that we should maybe put these journals to the side for now and think about a curriculum that is more inclusive and relevant to your experience. Maybe these questions will help to guide us, in deciding what to do with our time together.

What can we accomplish in these three days? Who is this Mt. School experience really for? What do you get out of it? What does NCI get out of it? Your school district? Your teachers? Your families?...

(w)here is here?: today

I have the mic, so to speak. Which I'm quite happy about because I have a lot to say. These past 21 months have been incredibly rich and rewarding and frustrating and filled with deep learning. And I'm excited to be able to share some of this for you here today, to share a few partial aspects of the ways that I think environmental education—and education, broadly construed—are always both sites of resistance, of speaking back to the dominant narrative, of empowering students as producers of knowledge, AND sites of reproduction, sites in which we reinscribe the same old logics of oppression and control, logics that limit our capacity to resist by masquerading as commonsense, as the “only possible world.”

This “having the mic” also terrifies me. Because, even though this capstone is ultimately for and about me, speaking in this context carries a certain weight. A responsibility. Storytelling is always a negotiation of power. And where power is at play, as it always is within our white supremacist, heterosexist, settler colonial, ableist, adultist society, injustice is not merely a possibility but a reality.

I have a responsibility to the subjects of the stories I have told here today. None of these stories are mine; complex relationships and power dynamics tie me to the others whose stories these are, to the writers whose works I am citing, to the various narrators and narratees of these texts; responsibilities to the specificity and complexity of their experience. And these ties, these responsibilities, do not end in the telling; my responsibility extends to the way these stories are interpreted, to the ways you all carry these stories into the world beyond this room.

And because representation is always imperfect—and even dangerous or destructive—I will never be able to do justice to the various lives whose stories intersect our performance here today. This capstone has real limitations—spatial, temporal, cultural and linguistic. Language has the power to reduce a life, my experiences and the experiences of my friends and teachers and students, to those neat little categories within which we make sense of the world and through which we “create the illusion of univocal or static meanings.” (Pollock, 1998, p. 95). Which illusion supports and is supported by oppressive regimes of Truth. Which illusion of pure representation is connected to colonial urges to neatly package up the experiences of Others, to settle knowledge claims, to fix Truth.

I have a responsibility to each and every one of you in the audience today. I am immensely grateful for your presence here; the collective wisdom that you all bring fills this room with possibility. Your presence and the diverse ways in which you will interact with my words—and bring them out of this room and into your lives—are what give these words weight, meaning. My responsibility to each of you is connected to, but not fully explained by your expectations of me, expectations that may very well be unconscious. These expectations are complex and heterogeneous, as is my ability to respond to them. They are rooted in your knowledge of me, in your familiarity with this

program, in your having witnessed many of my cohort members' stunning presentations. They are rooted in your notions of what a presentation entails, in how you think about storytelling structures, as well as in the ways you automatically and unconsciously read me and those like me – as a white, cisgendered, able-bodied, heterosexual, settler male.

As an important side note, I want to point out that each time I speak about the various intersecting agent identities that I embody, I find it important to think about and list a plurality of these identities—with the understanding that these lists will always be incomplete. Always incomplete because each of these identities is linked to a specific social location, and has a particular relationship to an array of privileges and oppressions—epistemic and socio-political. Each identity is in itself specific and concrete, and irreducible to all the others, while also intersectional and interconnected. I entreat you to view this list not as overbearing, but as incomplete and insufficient.

You have expectations, in short, not merely about the subject matter of my capstone, but also about the way in which this information is being communicated, about my authority and identity as a knowledge-holder and knowledge-producer, and about the nature of knowledge itself. And I have a responsibility to respond to and address these expectations.

I hope to also make explicit and disrupt some of these expectations. For example, I have intentionally organized the room so as to decenter myself, the presenter, which plays with our expectations that—in this space and format—I am regarded as the holder of knowledge, and you all become spectators, receptacles for that knowledge. In disrupting this dynamic physically, I am hoping to also disrupt the script that says my role as presenter is to persuade you of a given reality claim. Instead, I am treating you as “co-constituent of an uncertain, provisional...practice” of meaning-making and presentation-viewing (Pollock, 1998, p. 95). If you are confused or uncomfortable at any time during the performance, I ask you to sit with that discomfort. The way that I have structured this capstone is strategic and pedagogical. It speaks to the fact that while there are reasons to be intelligible and legible at times, there are also reasons to obfuscate and obscure, to jostle the spectator's gaze, to unsettle familiar acts of reading and interpreting presentations. As Della Pollock (1998) – professor of Performance and Cultural Studies – puts it: “Rather than appealing to given audiences or speaking in the language of established discursive communities performative rhetoric names a new public...projects new modes of being and relating,” while unsettling the often oppressive norms that are always already inscribed in our established discursive practices (p. 95).

My performance is mobile, amorphous, nebulous, responsive, contingent, and shifting, committed to generativity (rather than normativity). My performance is composed of fragments that open onto irreducible possibilities, rather than foreclosing meaning within the structure of these words, of this presentation. In part, I have written the presentation in this way because it reflects the nervous, nomadic movement of (my) mind. But I have a deeper purpose. I am refusing to leave you with a message, to tell you how to think or how to proceed. In the words of social justice educator Frank Pignatelli

(1998), I want you to be more alert to, but less secure about what you know (and the ways in which you know it) (p. 419).

(w)here is here?: on the trail

All bodies are “becoming.” That is, all bodies are in a dynamic state of being between organic and “other,” organic and machine. No body is enclosed, static, or purely organic. This insight undermines the notion of the independent, self-reliant figure the wilderness body ideal champions. It suggests that all bodies, not just ones designated “disabled” by dominant discourse, are becoming, dynamic, always in a process of being both abled and disabled relative to context, geography, purpose, or habit. The relationship between the body and its environment is constitutive. (Ray, 2009, p. 277).

I am, you are, we are an assemblage—a complex web of objects, bodies, intensities that connect momentarily to generate something new. We are always already entangled with(in) the world, hence knowledge cannot be a separate essence for me to extract. There is no “out there” from which to extract this truth. Knowledge is only ever produced in particular contextual relations; it always involves omissions, contestations. Limitations, gaps, excesses. Knowledge is bound up in and produces contexts of oppression. And of liberation.

Whenever I teach, I enter the classroom environment—the classroom could be on a snowy mountain, on a sandstone bluff surrounded by the Salish Sea, or in a stone building with rectangular desks. Regardless of the context, I enter in the middle. We are always jumping off from and already embedded in a relational context, not so much jumping off from last class or from the last phrase we read in the readings for today, but—more so—jumping off from the last conversation we had, from the last article we read about the state of a world we increasingly wish we could dis-identify with. Jumping off from the last pair of eyes our eyes met. And the fact is that SO IS EVERYBODY ELSE IN THE ROOM. And this is the marvelous and fantastic and miraculous thing about teaching. This space is so rich, so beautifully complex. It does not only welcome these individuals, these theories that we have distilled from the ether onto a page; we welcome whole publics, entirely different ways of knowing and being in the world, extensive histories and accompanying historical analyses, and a mess of social and political structures. We are all characters and narrators and narratees of messy, intersecting texts. (Vagle, 2015, p. 610). And yet somehow we are able to communicate.

In fact, this is the only position from which we can communicate. In attending to difference, to the messy, incomplete nature of our individual texts, and the ways in which they are woven into various intersecting and heterogeneous social imaginations, we can actually start to speak across difference. Toward something more than difference.

Toward solidarity. Toward coalition. Toward a future, an unimagined “not-yet.”

God, that’s beautiful. And so, so scary. Because it’s impossible to hold all of that in your head at one time. The classroom has such potential to be alive, to be a site of

resistance and complex community. But we have to attend to the lived-ness of the curriculum, to the (im)possibility of pedagogy, “and the utter necessity of turning our attention back to pedagogy as the task of entering into ethical relationships with others in light of the pressing moment.” (Gaztambide, 2011, 327).

We have to attend to the dynamic relational web of knowledge production and valuation that we are always already caught up in. And every time I enter an educational space, I have to also acknowledge that I—as an identity—and this educational project are subject to failure, open to incursions from the room, and from the wider world, unable to contain what spills out and splits the cracks.

In a very real sense going outside does help to disrupt certain constructions about what counts as knowledge, what counts as learning, about who counts as a knower. It makes a more responsive, contextual, constructivist, emergent student-directed learning possible. It enables us to pay close attention to our bodies as sites of knowing. And provides opportunities to attend to the other-than-human world as teacher. Which is not to say that engaged, critical learning cannot happen within the four walls of the traditional classroom; it very much can, and in many ways the classroom is a better environment for this—given the extended interactions between bodies in these spaces.

And I think that environmental education, too often, does not acknowledge its limitations. We focus on the classroom as a physical space, celebrating our ability to extend learning into the natural world, while leaving intact the various power dynamics and structures that hold oppression in place and limit learning within the classroom. Structures like standardized “science-based” curricula, colorblindness and difference-blindness, meritocratic and individualistic approaches to success and assessment, adultist notions of classroom control, and the assumption that any education can be neutral, a-political, safe and accessible for all.

All education may very well be environmental education (in a broad, abstract sense). But environmental education is not for all. And in some ways I don’t think it should be; maybe we shouldn’t even aspire to be “for all.” Environmental education does some things really well; I think that it has a role to play in creating social and environmental change. But the status quo of environmental education, the traditional theories of change that it operationalizes, are racist, colonizing, classist and dehumanizing on a whole number of levels. That process of becoming more inclusive as a field will be slow and painful. It’s not a matter of “granting” kids from “underserved” communities “access” to the natural world and environmental educational possibilities. Rather, it’s a matter of committing to the sustained struggle of transforming the nature of what we think we are doing up here at places like the ELC.

There’s a savior syndrome in environmental education that holds the field back. So long as we view what we are doing as the solution, the remedy, for all the ills of society and the shortcomings of our education system, we are bound to fail. So long as we think of our work in the context of sacrifice, a sacrifice that absolves us from our complicity within systems of oppression, we are bound to fail. That by itself is not a condemnation

of the field. We are fallible; we will fail. But we need to be able to recognize this fallibility, to recognize the narrow scope of what we're actually doing up here, to grapple with its historical context—as the heir to logics of colonization, slavery, patriarchy, etc.—and to listen to other voices, to perspectives that are currently silenced in environmental education, in reimagining the possibilities for this field.

(w)here is here?: where the dream of a sapling takes root

This brings me to another sense of responsibility that this capstone entails. I am responsible to myself. I am accountable to my commitments—as an educator and as a human being. Commitments to social justice, to particularity, to critical openness, to the specificity and emplacement of the irreducibly diverse positions from which we know. I am accountable to the limitations of my own perspective, accountable to the complexities and fallibility of my own experiences as an educator and as a human.

My performance today reflects my teaching pedagogy and my commitments as an educator for social justice. Which is to say that this performance is not a finished product, is not self-contained, nor is it reaching for an ideal, finished knowledge. I do not position myself as an expert. My performance today may at times feel awkward, raw, not fully integrated or perfectly articulated. And that is because I am still fumbling toward even asking the right questions, let alone finding any sort of clear-cut answers. No. I am not today presenting you with the seamless shell of an argument—airtight, locked up and hermetically sealed. Rather, the stories that I tell, and their various attachments, should feel like they are on the verge of unraveling. Bleeding into one another, saturating the page, leaking from this room.

Implicit in this project is an invitation. I invite you to join me in the doubt, in the contradictions, in the grappling, the mess, in the struggle both to enact and uncover the push and pull, the friction that lies at the heart of any sort of educational or communicative enterprise. This capstone is a “radical grasping for the particular, eventful, contextual and unusual; as open to contingency and interpretation and incursion as the concrete social experiences upon which [it] is based” (Pignatelli, 1998, p. 420). I hope that this piece is able in some small way to move with, alongside and through, rather than operating above or beyond the fluid, contingent, unpredictable, discontinuous rush of experience (Pollock, 1998, p. 81).

“Here” is a capstone, a performance, a spectacle. I am here to perform, to weave and unweave a web. Teaching is an act of performance (hooks, 1994). And I am here to teach.

(w)here is here?

The land we are gathered on today are the traditional ceded and unceded territories of the Nlaka'pamux, Upper Skagit, Sauk-Suiattle, Swinomish and many other tribes—coast and interior Salish—both federally recognized and not recognized. I say this because the federal government does not have the authority to regulate Indigeneity and home.

To speak of “here as Indigenous, as Land” is ambivalent. Multivalent. “Here” speaks to various (im)possible pasts, and the futures that they evoke. This acknowledgment takes on variable, shifting intensities; its meaning at any given moment, in any given utterance, is multiple, self-contradicting, and slippery.

This Land Acknowledgment—if unaccompanied by actions that build relationships with local tribes and follow their lead in working toward reparations and decolonization—can represent another instance of tokenizing native knowledge and native peoples, relegating their presence to the past, enclosing their identity within a static story, and marking their absence and disappearance by speaking the names we, modern settlers, know them by.

Attending to “Here” in this way can also be the first halting step toward reconciliation, toward disrupting the dominant narrative around our National Parks, whose very existence—whatever the lofty rhetoric around preservation for future generations—is predicated on the genocide of an entire people, and continues to inscribe this erasure in rock and ice, deep grooved bark and rich humic soils. This little act of turning towards place, and acknowledging land, is a radical act in a settler society that is designed to not consider place—because to do so would require consideration of genocide. The United States is based on the ongoing dys-placement and dispossession of people in relation to land, based on behaviors that inscribe an ignorance toward land, water, environment, and sustainability. Based on behaviors that turn away from “Here,” toward an “Out There.” The existence of the ELC, Mountain School, NCI, and our presence here today are implicated in these logics of dys-placement, dispossession, and ignorance.

This alternative sense of acknowledging Indigenous Sovereignty speaks to an ethics and a politics of acknowledgment. This ethic calls on each of us to not only see that another way of being in the world exists, but to acknowledge other lives and other possible experiences—even un-lived and un-livable ones, even those that are in conflict with ours—and to engage with this multiplicity of voices, to put our perspectives “in relation” to those of others (Medina 2012, p. 50). This ethics of relational acknowledgment also calls on me to recognize the limitations of my own perspective, my own positionality. To recognize the incompleteness of my own story. This acknowledgment hopes to speak back to the dominant story of settler colonialism. A dominant story that erases past genocide, and posits a future in which we all—even and especially settlers—have become indigenous to place. A dominant story that aspires to a utopic “multicultural” society in which race no longer matters. A story that plays out even in well-intentioned encouragements to “reconnect to place,” or to “live well in place.”

By contrast, to acknowledge the land that we stand on as Indigenous territory is to open myself to incursions, to conflicting perspectives and experiences from the past, and to allow these to expand my understanding of the present ground on which we stand, while simultaneously opening onto an unfamiliar future that recognizes the “necessity for reparations based on these histories” (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015, p. 3).

Attending to “Here” as Indigenous Land can also be a gesture that points beyond the past or present, beyond reconciliation. An act that does not merely recount historical fact, or project itself onto a time when these words will no longer be necessary because we have all become indigenous to place, but rather an act that commits itself to the possibility of decolonization. These words, deeply rooted in past and present struggle, are inscribed with desire for an Indigenous futurity on these lands—a desire shot through with uncertainty and the pangs of transformation. A desire accompanied by a fear of the loss of self that I—and those like me—open ourselves to, if we are to speak these words honestly and openly. A desire that is itself not itself merely announcing facts, but enacts the imagination of something radically new.

This is a third and more radical sense of acknowledgment. In which acknowledgment, authentic engagement with these words, entails a radical unsettling of the self. An unsettling of and estrangement from both this land and my sense of identity, from the narrative that I have been told and have told myself about my relationship to land and to others.

“We have an obligation to explore the limits of our collective imagination and to expand it; we have to take responsibility for the things that we are capable of imagining, but also for the things that we are contingently unable to envision.” (Medina, 2012, p. 266) Which is to say that we are responsible not merely to what we should know, given how things are, but what we should aspire to know, given how things can become.

The stories people tell about themselves and about society are entangled and move between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching towards (Tuck, 2009, p. 420).

What is it we are reaching towards?

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, stylized font. The '2' is written as a simple horizontal line between two 'S' characters. The signature is located in the bottom right corner of the page.

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Appendix A—additional stories of here: (w)here is here?

Oppression in its many forms—white supremacy, settler colonialism, ableism, heterosexism—is not an abstract term that exists somewhere out there and is somehow fixed and unchanging. Oppression, and resistance, exist always at skin level. These mutually reinforcing logics of domination are embedded not only in our social structures, but in the everyday ways that we think and act, in our very identities. To think of meaning and knowledge as fixed and universal, of the social order and power relations as static and unidirectional—leads to a breed of thinking that is both fatalistic (i.e.. this is the only possible world) and magical (i.e., the powers that structure our social relations and produce knowledge and meaning are beyond my reach, are universal, supernatural).

It is all of our collective responsibilities to resist this sort of thinking and to interrogate the ways we reproduce and are entangled in these logics of domination—within our selves, in our communities and in our relationships to one another and to place. This will look different for each of us, because we all inhabit different social positions; we all have different relationships to power and to these dominant narratives about selfhood and place. Especially for those of us who inhabit multiple positions of privilege, for those of us who identify with these logics of domination, this resistance entails a process of self-estrangement and self-problematization.

To quote feminist philosopher Jose Medina (2012) at length:

This sort of resistance begins at home, that is, in the most intimate aspects of our cognitive-affective functions...it has to start by interrogating the activities in which we feel at home...becoming strangers to ourselves...Becoming perplexed about who we are affords us opportunities to interrogate what we find in the most intimate corners of our perspective, and to recognize its limitations and the possibilities of correction and improvement. (p. 17)

Because, as a privileged subject, I am “at home” in these exclusive and oppressive structures—because I am protected from the ways in which these structures delegitimize, dehumanize and exclude others—I have a heightened responsibility to “interrupt the flow of familiarity and obviousness,” to make the familiar unfamiliar and to engage with and acknowledge perspectives that unsettle and challenge my own experience (Medina, 2012, p. 17). This is no easy task. Because of my relationship to these structures of oppression, I am ill-equipped to resist these patterns of thought and action, precisely because they seem natural to me, because they affirm my identity. I am conditioned to ignore and even silence those whose voices and lived experiences unsettle and challenge my own. Precisely because to acknowledge these others would require me to acknowledge the fact that my humanity rests on the domination and dehumanization of others.

Self-estrangement and self-problematization are never processes that we can engage in alone. These are relational and collective tasks, requiring “a deep interrogation of the perspectives of individuals not only as individual perspectives but also as instances of

social perspectives and in relation to other perspectives.” (Medina, 2012, Ch. 2). Only through interactions with others can we unlearn knowledge and patterns of behavior that are deeply embedded in our socialized understandings of who we are in this world. The ideal of perfect individually-attained self-knowledge is impossible and, according to feminist activist Andrea Smith (2013), itself rests “on a white supremacist and colonialist notion of a subject that can constitute itself over and against others through self-reflexivity.” Smith continues, claiming that “the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges.” Relatedly, Reverend Lynice Pinkard (2014), in speaking of reparations, defines this process as “ongoing...focused on the transformation of society and of institutions, not just individuals. I’m not saying that individual transformation doesn’t matter, but as long as white supremacy exists, we all remain captives or our positions within it, which for white people means maintaining an oppressor identity.”

As the above quotes suggest, self-estrangement and self-problematization are not end-states but processes. They refer not to a process of rebuilding, but a process of unsettling. I am not working towards a destination, a resolution, an ideal justice, towards a state of complete self- and other-awareness, a complete lucidity. Often, these premature claims that I am doing work that supports social justice or equity, these claims to “wokeness,” actually belie a sense of insecurity and guilt, an unwillingness to sit with the implications of my interactions with perspectives that unsettle my own. To speak toward some ideal end-state is to foreclose the possibility of future learning; to claim that I have figured out how to educate for social justice, or how to resist oppression and marginalization in their many intersecting forms, is to ensure that the next time I talk to someone who explains how my actions or words were exclusive, dehumanizing and damaging to them, I will not be open their experience. I will reject their claims to knowledge and their very capacity to know, while doubling down on my own claims as a self-aware white male – in direct contradiction to my actions.

The unsettling itself is simultaneously process, purpose, and objective.

(w)here is here?

*epistemologies of stone
up-thrust worn down
wind rain ice
the contest of millennia
not fixed in flux
the hunger-driven becoming of instances of being
and their passing into the generative folds of nonbeing (Hinton, 2012)*

*bearing colonial names
up-thrust worn down
by the ongoing weight of settlement
submitted but unconquered
by a stone story*

*the terrain of place is rough ragged
and filled with resistance(s)
sheer rock walls block our way
sheets of gray dampen the imagination
there is no absolute perspective
that can encompass the range
a topographic map is not the terrain*

*what makes this place
is the way we are thrown together
in the unavoidable challenge
of negotiating a here-and-now
of responding to the experiential
perspectives of mountains
to the discontinuities of shifting talus fields
freezing melting glacial steeps soft
heather seeps*

*we all come from places
irreducible in their complexity
you can't pick them apart
separate what is water what is land
what is sky what is flower what is self*

*what is self but assemblage
shifting emotional intensities
producing produced perplexed by knowledge
spaces wrapped in other bodies
both knower and known*

*saturate the land
twining in hyporrhic flows
sub- and e-mergent suffuse with
one another milky and rich*

*our students we carry these
terrains in our bodies are always
already navigating the complexities
of these shifting heterogeneous landscapes
ideals are smooth uncontested
draw us away from our bodies
from the concrete which is uneven
messy obscure hard
and which connects us
across divergent perspectives
in the struggle of navigating
this here and now*

*we all have a responsibility to undo
the harmful illusion which is not the shadows
on a cave wall
blindness is not an epistemic deficit
blindness is our default condition
as well as being an inapt metaphor
for knowledge
visual metaphors – illusion, blindness – are inapt
but helpful in revealing what we cannot see
what we cannot know
the illusion is the “purported self-mastery and
self-transparency of knowledge as if nothing
properly escaped its grasp” (Medina 2012, p. 294) which harms
us in our particularity in our fallibility
if knowledge is self-mastering and self-transparent
then particular ways of knowing and being
that reveal contested terrains unacknowledged
by official knowledge are mastered
made transparent ghostly erased impossible to recognize*

(w)here is here?

not mountains
 as a category
 not stone
 nor story
wind whips snow into ice
 not wild
 which is a stance that
 mirrors mind in dull peaks
rock bows into blue bowls
 no-gate
 flowing
 singing
 flowering

north cascades

north always relative
to my position

north to whom?
 for whom?
 who belongs in to the north cascades?

will cascades always spill
high mountain seeps?
always swell
 valley floor
 cut rock
 carry milt

here is neither rough
 nor soft
nor steep
 nor north

here is a negotiation
 negotiation means
 every encounter
 is always already mediated
every perspective
 is dys-
 en-abled
 by location

ability
 does not mean agility
the capacity
 to negotiate rough terrain
 to look out from the summit
ability
 is a sense of place
 of limitation

can i even speak of place
 without ableist language
 cascading forth?
 my relationship with place is constructed against
 an un-namable other
ability does not require
 a body or a mind
 that conforms to any image
 ability does not require
 overcoming challenge
ability does not require
 hands-on

See how hard it is? Those last stanzas, especially, shifted from a description of the physical terrain of this place into metaphor, into a (dis)ableist critique of my language in the preceding poem. Which is surely necessary (and also in itself limited and limiting) and so I refuse to erase what flowed out. In fact, I wish I had more space to enact an ableist critique of environmental education—which is itself defined, in many ways, against a socially constructed disabled body (Ray, 2009, p. 63).

And yet, perhaps I should also start over. Should strike what I just recited from the record. Because “here” is not a metaphor. Treating “here” as a metaphor overlooks the very real, concrete injustices that adhere to this physical place. Not only past wrongs but on-going injustices that this current presentation is both carrying forward and desperately (disparately) striving to resist.

Yes, the very question, “where is here?” begs the answer: (in)just(ice). Notice how injustice here is, in the way that the word is constructed, defined by “what is not.” We define injustice as the lack or absence of justice. Our very language prioritizes Justice (notice how it’s only ever singular) over injustice(s). Which seems reasonable, straightforward, until we start to recognize that justice is not the “default,” is not the condition in which we find ourselves. In-justice(s) ARE.

When we prioritize justice, when we idealize end-states—justice, equity, inclusion—we ignore and delegitimize the injustices, inequities, exclusive interactions that so many

experience in their day-to-day. In their trips to the grocery store. In their day at school. In their visit to mountain school. In their interactions with colleagues in the workplace. We relegate injustice to being a prelude to or a breakdown of justice, while rendering real injustices invisible and unintelligible. Injustice maintains its invisibility by the fact that it is differentially spread across the social body (Medina, 2012). And this is one reason that attending to place matters. Why – instead of attending to an ideal justice, or only to the injustices that I experience – I attend to place. Place as the site of injustice, differentially experienced by the many differentially situated individuals and groups who interact with and tell stories and make meaning in this place.

To return to metaphor. Treating “here” as a metaphor directly invalidates my opening statement, that “here” is Indigenous Land. By reverting to metaphor, I am refusing to wrestle with the implications of this particular location. And I am refuting Indigenous peoples’ knowledge of place, for whom Land is not merely physical but ontological ground, for whom meaning and existence do not exist except as emanant from and imminent in Land.

“Here” as metaphor extrapolates and extends meaning beyond the particularities of place, pointing to universal ways of knowing that transcend place and particularity. Ways of knowing that, in pointing toward universality, erase the unequal power dynamics and historical contestation that define “here.” An erasure of how these local, particular dynamics construct and define what counts as knowledge.

Metaphors help to convey meaning. In Greek, *Metaphora* means truck–transit, freight. Metaphors carry meaning from here to there, from me to you, across socio-ecological landscapes, by referring to cultural signposts. Metaphors in this sense rely on cultural currency; they lend meaning by resorting to commonsense, to the dominant narrative. Sure, metaphors can be disruptive, but they generally, as communicative devices, function by referring to and therefore reinforcing common—and dominant—structures of reality.

Throughout this performance, I will use metaphors. Because, and this is a microcosm of the way the commonsense, the way dominant meaning-making structures operate, I cannot communicate without metaphor. Which is to say that I am never operating outside of power. No one is. We are all embedded, emplaced; our language, our structures of communication, are themselves tools of domination, historical effects of oppressive meaning-making structures.

And I recognize in some ways the limitations of this space in our ability to talk about power, privilege, Indigeneity. And the limitations of this language to reach beyond. As Critical Race Theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) state, “The idea that one can use words to undo the meanings that others attach to these very words is to commit the empathic fallacy—the belief that one can change a narrative by merely offering another, better one—that the reader’s or listener’s empathy will quickly and reliably take over...The idea that a better, fairer script can readily substitute for the older, prejudiced one is attractive but is falsified by history.” (pp. 28-29)

But all of this does not mean that we cannot resist. It is simply another instance of the complexities of resistance, of speaking to something radically new. Another instance where Reverend Lynice Pinkard's (2013) words ring true, that "there is no space of purity from which to act...[that] we must begin imperfectly from within the messiness, in ways that respond to and engage with our concrete and particular contexts and circumstances." (p. 40). I will therefore attempt, even as I use these metaphors, to re-purpose and interrogate them, as a means of disrupting the dominant narratives of place – of self and relationality – that they enforce.

(w)here is here?

I want to ask you all something, and this may seem a little bit out of the blue. But I assure you that it connects to community, and to our goals here as a trail group at mountain school.

How do we know things? How does that happen? Do I one day just wake up and know that the sky is blue? That my name is Alexei? That one plus one is two?

So, yeah, sometimes it happens with people telling us what something is. Like a teacher. But it doesn't have to be a teacher. It could be your friend. How did they learn it?

Yeah, so maybe someone told them, or they looked it up on Wikipedia, and so on and so forth. Way back to the chicken and her egg, right? What's another way that we gain knowledge? What about listening in a different way? What about what's going on right now? Do any of you have younger siblings or cousins? Are they constantly asking you questions about the ways that the world works?

Right, so asking questions, inquiry, is a really important way that we not only receive but actually produce knowledge. But if we ask questions, we have to be willing to hear the answers. Which may seem simple, but is actually a whole lot more difficult than it sounds. Because sometimes listening involves tension and dissent, involves having to confront our assumptions, and those of others.

Voice over (true safety):

[B]y teaching students to value dissent and to treasure critical exchange, we prepare them to face reality. In the classroom and beyond they will face many situations where learning must take place in circumstances in which they may or may not feel in control, feel good, or feel that the mood will always be harmonious. True safety lies in knowing how to discern when one is in a situation that is risky but where there is no threat, and then again to be able to recognize when a situation, even a classroom situation, is unsafe, and to respond accordingly. (hooks, 2009, p. 88)

So, here's what learning is to me. Knowledge is produced in interactions, in conversation, in the tension, the friction between my experience and yours, in attending the limitations of what I know – of what I can know. And this friction can encourage us to move beyond our individual viewpoints, into more inclusive, more expansive, more responsive and responsible ways of knowing.

Voice over (a great conversation):

When was the last time you had a great conversation, a conversation which wasn't just two intersecting monologues, which is what passes for conversation a lot in this culture.

But when had you last a great conversation, in which you overheard yourself saying things that you never knew you knew? That you heard yourself receiving from somebody words that absolutely found places within you that you thought you had lost and a sense of an event of a conversation that brought the two of you on to a different plane. And then fourthly, a conversation that continued to sing in your mind for weeks afterwards. (O'Donohue, 2015)

Producing knowledge requires that we ask good questions, questions that come forward when we're feeling perplexed, confused, when what someone is saying or something in the world that we encounter doesn't fully make sense to us. When we can't fit it into what we understand of reality. It's asking these questions, questions that recognize the limitations of our own knowledge, and then listening for the response.

Voice over (open to learning):

Thinking is a communal act; critical thought, and critical experiential approaches to living in society, require that one is responsive to other experiential perspectives... Cultivating openness to perplexity and interrogating received attitudes and habits is essential for cognitive, affective, ethical, and political learning. (Medina, 2012, p. 20)

Knowledge is not something that is fixed and out there that we all then just download into our brains. It's not like we hear a birdsong and I tell you it's a varied thrush. And then you're like, right, that's a varied thrush, I've got it now. Moving on. That information is not relevant to everyone at every point in time. It only has limited contextual salience. And so questions like "who knows what bird that is?" are misleading and exclusive; these sorts of questions obscure the power dynamics that knowledge produces and with which knowledge is entwined – the exclusions and oppressions that operate underneath what we view as static, unproblematic, commonsense knowledge. Because knowledge is nothing. Knowledge does. And so, instead of focusing on the facts that we learn as discrete pieces of knowledge, I want us instead to be asking the questions: "How does knowledge function? How do we produce knowledge? And what does knowledge produce?"

Knowledge is a production. It's an activity that we engage in, it is a negotiation. And this negotiation depends on how you – and the knowledge that you embody and carry with you – are interacting with the messages of this place, and with the words that I am saying. You are all constantly not merely receiving knowledge, but producing knowledge. Each one of you is processing this experience in different ways right now. Some of you aren't really paying attention because this doesn't seem relevant to you. Fair enough.

Our responsibility, though, is to try to be active participants in this relational, context-dependent knowledge-creating process. Our responsibility as learners is to one another, is to collaborate and listen to one another in developing a knowledge that doesn't feel

static, that isn't just a fact, something that some person knows by virtue of their being smart, an adult, a teacher. We know nothing on our own. We know, rather, with one another, which is a complex and complicated inter-subjective process. A communal process.

Voice over (multiple knowledge):

"Knowledge...is an ongoing contest, not a final resting point, but a multiplicity"
(Pignatelli, 1998, p. 416)

And the beautiful thing about producing knowledge together is that if we are engaging in this process with one another openly and critically, we will build community. Knowledge can be the result of our working and collaborating together. Both the result of and the foundation for community-building processes.

Voice over (mutual learning):

Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership. (hooks, 2009, p. 43)

My commitment to you as students is to work with you to produce knowledge. Knowledge that is not merely my opinion or experience—or the limited knowledge of a science textbook—projected onto you all and onto this place. But knowledge that is rough, collective, that involves all of us in questioning our assumptions. Learning that does not cover up the ragged process of producing knowledge, or the history of how our knowledge about this place has been constructed, but revels in this collaborative, relational, partial process. Knowledge that engages us in the process of community.

When everyone in a classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful. In such a community of learning there is no failure. Everyone is participating...to ensure that we leave the classroom knowing that critical thinking empowers us. (hooks, 2009, p. 11)

(w)here is here?

It's no accident that the show is set in the 1980's. An era which looms large in the American imagination as the realization of the American dream—post-civil upheaval, post-racism, post-Vietnam, a period of relative stability and prosperity. And the show traffics in the idealized, nice-home-with-a-yard, middle-class, small-town midwest, nuclear family, colorblind America of the Reagan years. Where resistance looks like neighborhood kids riding around on bikes and occasionally missing curfew. Where resistance is The Clash, poppy punk rock played by straight white men that speaks back to the injustice of the system—and sometimes borrows from reggae and other cultural traditions. Where resistance does not look like sit-ins, like marches, like police brutality, like #MeToo. (The one instance where resistance does not take this form, where it looks more like revenge and involves killing, robbing, living on the margins, is not sanctioned as a legitimate way forward; and so Elle leaves the city and returns to finish what she started in Hawkins).

This is the U.S.A. of our collective imaginary. This is the ideal toward which we are reaching, whether we recognize that or not. Much of the conflict in the show results from the opening of a portal between “reality” and “subterranean” alternative dimension(s) (of which I would argue, there are many such dimensions; i.e., it's not that binary) that are always moving alongside while saturating and undermining the ideal, stable space of the white, male, settler American imaginary. This conflict, this threat to the town, can only be resolved by closing this portal—by banishing what is strange, queer, or unintelligible, as defined by the constraints of our dominant social imagination (which is white, heterosexual, cisgender, male, settler, able-bodied, etc.), back from whence it came. What is queer, what unsettles our assumed conceptions of reality, is viewed as a threat not just to our notions of reality, but to our very lives, as these play out in the town of Hawkins, PA.). The show recognizes this fear, exploiting our “anxiety about leaks—their source, our inability to keep up with them, the rot they produce, the dysfunction of our [stable structures], how they unsettle our sense of space—as well as how unnoticed they can go.” (Tuck and Rees 2013, 653).

The show is right; these insurrectionary perspectives, these experiences that cannot be encompassed or explained away by our commonsense ways of making sense of reality, are dangerous. They are monstrous. Because these perspectives expose the limitations of any dominant knowledge system; they exploit the gaps, oozing through walls we thought were solid, impermeable, and making visible the remainders that we have repressed and excluded—the experiences, the bodies, that our dominant narratives violate, reduce to objects, or relegate to the margins, to the past. This leakage erodes and rots the stability of the town—undermining the nice stable, known landscape we know as the town with a literal rhizome of tunnels. The first sign of this sprawling rhizome? The death of crops, the decay of trees. Literal rot. This show is profoundly ecological; the woods are also the site of the original disappearance and the spectral appearance of Elle.

The show's power derives from its ability to exploit the tension between our fear of what is unknown and strange and our desire to know what lies beyond that veil (see scenes where characters like Nancy crawl through the slimy, somewhat resistant gate between worlds—against the viewer's admonitions to stay where you fucking are!—seduced by the unknown, seduced by what is not available to her with her feet planted firmly on the ground in Hawkins). The show revolves around this boundary—and the tension between desire and fear that it exploits. The stable middle-American values and ways of knowing that many portrayals of this era (which this show evokes and leaks into our present) are inverted (literally), queered. Other ways of knowing and being leak into the atmosphere of Hawkins. Ways of knowing that are queer, which is to say oddly familiar, strange even in their bent similarity to what is common and known or to what common sense calls normal. What common sense calls good. Characters are literally able to “speak from an elsewhere,” as portrayed by the creepy flickering of lights.

There's also a classic underdog story going on here, wherein a small-town cop (with past trauma), alongside the town's kids (many of whom are themselves outcasts), triumph over an obscure, sprawling, evil, near-omnipotent governmental agency. This classic story of resistance, of the otherwise marginalized (kids, women, small-town people) triumphing and having their voices heard against a centralized—and clearly evil—power is particularly salient in our current political climate (especially given current fears of big, centralized government and current fascinations with local movements). But this narrative of resistance actually serves to obscure the more subtle ways in which this show reinscribes and reproduces the oppression and exclusion of deviant bodies and deviant perspectives, those that unsettle the status quo, the American dream, our ideals of a stable post-racial, post-colonial social justice.

The show is most powerful when you still do not understand the source of this “evil.” When you have not fully seen the rhizomatic tunnels of rot, or the “demi-gorgon” who embodies the fearsome desire for blood and revenge. When these remain numinous and unexplained. Partly because once they are explained, they once more become legible, intelligible, territory that we are able to traverse (burning the demi-gorgon to harm it; traversing the tunnels to find the source). Once the upside-down becomes legible, we are able to wrap it up in our existing concepts. And it ceases to be excess, to be horror; it ceases to invert and to surprise.

This can most powerfully be seen in the show's resolution, wherein the “gate” between worlds is closed and the monsters banished to that other realm by the superhuman Eleven. This is what resolution, reconciliation, restoration looks like. The world restored to normal—awkward teenagers at a school dance—the past foreclosed and locked out, the future more of the same. Sleepy mundane small town life.

And yet, the show, as it zooms out from the dance, ends with the hovering implication that closing the leak is not a possibility. Is never a lasting change. Haunting cannot be vanquished; it can “be deferred, disseminated, but there is not putting it to rest.” (Tuck and Rees, 2013, p. 649). The threshold can only be shut for so long. *Stranger Things* enacts and reproduces our desire to move past haunting, to move towards a resolution of the

injustices and scars of our pasts—individual, collective, and national. A desire to once more affirm the innocence of those who are haunted, and to banish the monstrous, the inconceivable, from their midst.

Drawing from Eve Tuck and C. Rees (2013), however, I would argue that these quick moves to justice and resolution, these premature claims of having vanquished the monsters of Inequity and Exclusion are misguided and harmful to the very process of making the world more just that they presume to support. “The logic of righting past injustice or reconciliation” actually glosses over the present injustice, and further delegitimizes and erases what is excessive, failing to acknowledge “the depth of injustice that begat the monster or ghost,” while seeking to legitimize the “good intentions” and rightness and innocence of those who are actually implicated in these wrongs, though unaware and uncomfortable with this responsibility (p. 641)

The haunting itself is the resolving, not what needs to be resolved. We are not at the point where we can just move past white supremacy, colonization, ableism, heterosexism, towards a destination, towards ideal justice. Our responsibility is to grapple with the legacies of these various oppressive logics—and the ways that we continue to reproduce oppression, inequity, and exclusion in our daily lives and in our work as environmental educators. Our responsibility is to acknowledge and engage with the various insurrectionary knowledges that are always already everywhere questioning the status quo, leaking through our social and epistemic structures. We have to learn to live with the feeling of being haunted by a present saturated and active with the legacies of colonization, slavery, and other past injustices. This is our responsibility as environmental educators, as members of our various communities and publics.

Haunting is the cost of subjugation and oppression. We are all of us haunted.

(w)here is here?

[Decolonization] is not converting Indigenous politics to a Western doctrine of liberation; it is not a philanthropic process of 'helping' the at-risk and alleviating suffering; it is not a generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions and outcomes. The broad umbrella of social justice may have room underneath for all of these efforts. By contrast, decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice. (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 21).

“Here” is settled. Which is to say that “Here” is colonizing. I use the present tense to indicate that this project of colonization is not something that is over and done with, in the past. Colonization has been overwhelmingly successful and has deep roots in our settler society, and in the psyches of the inhabitants of this land—both settler and Indigenous. But it is not over; it is a continual process. And it has never been fully successful. Not at killing off the Indigenous peoples of this Land, nor at repositioning white settlers as the rightful inheritors, nor at silencing or erasing the many who actively resist its influence on their lives and lands. Colonization as a project is riddled with gaps, leaks, inconsistencies.

Colonization is the aporia at the heart of environmental education. The stumbling block that we can dance our way around, or temporarily throw a tarp over, but never fully get over. And this is because it is not something “to get over,” a status to overcome. Colonization is an aporia, not that which prevents us from moving forward as a field, but that which we cannot get over. That which exposes and will always expose the inconsistencies and contradictions and contestations endemic to environmental education as a field. And, therefore, I would argue, settler colonialism is precisely where we ought to be focusing our efforts. The ongoing act of grappling with colonization, and the ways in which its present instantiations structure both place and identity, is necessary in working to create a more effective and just environmental education.

I want to take some time here to unravel one of the ways in which this aporia of colonization plays out in environmental education. Environmental education is overtly place-centric, or place-based. As articulated by Critical Place Theorist David Greenwood—formerly Gruenewald—this emphasis on place is drawn from the assumption that “connections with the natural world are an important part of being human.” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7). And that connections to place are an important part of developing a healthy self-identity that is linked to local socio-ecological processes. This is an assumption that I share.

But I think that it begs the question: what then of the colonial, and socially unjust, histories and presents of these places? If we understand ourselves always in relation to others, to the social world in which we are embedded, and yet the injustices of this social world are not a part of our education—or are only a small subunit that we rush through on our way to more central pieces of knowledge—what implications does this have for

our identity and for our relations to one another, our history, and place? If we are teaching our students about the ecological components of place while glossing over the social aspects and the colonial legacy, what disservice are we doing them as educators? In what ways are we limiting their development, their learning and our own, when we exclude certain subjects – and certain bodies – from our trail groups and our classrooms?

This is what I mean by emphasizing the primacy of place, Place as a complex socio-historical, socio-ecological, socio-political, socio-cultural construct. This is why a deep interrogation of place – geographical and social – matters. Our understanding of how we are positioned in these geographical and social spaces is intimately linked to how we understand ourselves as individuals, and how we understand our obligations and responsibilities to diverse others. We need to understand positionality and relationality in order to communicate authentically and justly, in order to build coalitions and solidarity.

According to Gardner Seawright, whose work focuses on the everyday presence of whiteness within educational spaces:

How individuals understand themselves and their relation to the social world is dependent on their perception of the socioecological world and the interpretations of place available to them according to their operant epistemology. Settler society's knowledge system provides a vision of an ideal actor rooted in a 'rational' drive to appropriate nature, accumulate property, and cultivate. (Seawright, 2014, p. 566).

And this is precisely why we need to pay attention to epistemology – to how and what we know and what this knowledge produces. Because it's not just what we do or what we say, but the unconscious structures that limit and structure our thinking or knowing at all; for example, though the overt manifestations of racism have been diminished, the system as a whole remains intact. The foundational epistemology and ethic are still in their required position, as is the idea of what counts as being an agent of knowledge, and becoming a successful person within the Western imaginary. The ideal white actor's sense of being is entangled with a conception of place established upon ideas of self-cultivation, capital extraction and accumulation.

To truly understand and resist the structures and ideologies that construct place – such as the way in which settler colonialism is linked to our view of these lands as wild, as National Parklands, as “belonging” to the American public – we also need to understand how these same structures and narratives are reproduced and resisted in our own identity, and how this influences our relationship with others. For example, I must also attend to the way in which settler colonialism constructs the U.S. as a nation of immigrants, which affirms my own identity as a child of immigrants and as a rightful resident of this land, and thinks of social difference merely in terms of historical roots – a curiosity perhaps, but not related to current social and structural inequities.

Once we start to attend to positionality in this way, as with an interrogation of place, we begin to understand that moves toward universality, conceptions of knowledge or of being that overlook place and social position, erasing the differences that these entail, are hegemonic, exclusionary, and shot through with failure. These moves toward universality necessarily entail the extrapolation of a specific perspective, a particular way of being in the world, onto a universal plane. Which conflation of particularity with universality oppresses those who experience the world differently by rendering their experience unintelligible and meaningless, relegating them to social death (unless they are willing to assimilate to dominant ways of knowing, which is attended by all sorts of psycho-social trauma).

And this is another reason why positionality matters, why a more complex, “kaleidoscopic” understanding of place matters. As feminist philosopher Jose Medina (2012) argues, “we all have an obligation to resist...to collaborate in pursuit of epistemic justice, fight against ignorance, to know oneself and others, to learn/facilitate the learning of others.” (p. 37). But, continues Medina, “the possibilities of epistemic resistance have to be contextualized in relation to epistemic positionality, for differently situated subjects have differential epistemic responsibilities.” (p. 17). My responsibilities as an educator committed to social justice are directly related to who I am and the meanings that those identities hold in our society.

I am a white, upper class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, male settler. These are only a few of the more apparent “agent” identities that I occupy. The intersections of these various privileged identities afford me power, privilege, respect—access to narratives and forms of knowledge that reflect my experience and affirm my agency. When I go for a hike in North Cascades national park, when I walk through the hallways of a college campus, when I run down the streets of Bellingham, when I step into a “men’s bathroom” no one thinks twice to question my presence there. I am immediately read and registered as a body that “be-longs” in these spaces. I am viewed as a producer of valid knowledge, someone worth listening to, and as someone who is capable of effecting personal and social transformation. Which is to say that I am not limited to or defined by my skin color, my gender, my sexuality, my ability, my history; I walk through this world unmarked, assuming unmediated access to knowledge and narratives that will reflect my experience, secure in the knowledge that my story will be told, that my experiences will be validated and made intelligible.

This happens unconsciously, whether we want it to or not. Our social imaginary reproduces certain scripts that define norms/normativity, that define what sorts of being in the world count, that define who counts as an individual. These unconscious structures inform my everyday interactions—my judgments about others, the ways that I carry myself, the ways that others read me (and my responses to these readings).

What I am getting at is a recognition that becoming aware of my social positionality—of the various ways that my identity is read and gains meaning within social contexts—necessarily requires an awareness how I am positioned with regard to specific others, an awareness of how my identity is embedded and positioned within a contextually specific

and always already contested social and geographical fabric. It is my responsibility as a white, male settler assemblage of agent identities to move past ignorance and fragility, to unsettlement.

(w)here is here?

What if I told you that epistemic injustice is embedded in, and a contributing cause to, social injustice? That living in a White Supremacist, settler society makes authentic communication nearly impossible. Makes teaching across difference difficult, if not impossible? And that what is required is not communication that denies difference (true difference, which is not Objectively true, but which is embedded in our social actions and epistemic transactions and in our identity) and searches for a common language, but insurrectionary communication? What if I told you that what I am teaching and talking and writing towards is not some utopic society wherein all barriers to communication have been removed, but one in which the real barriers to communication – the injustices we butt up against every day – are acknowledged and brought into the foreground? What if what I am speaking to is a frictional society, a communicative public that seeks to undermine any sort of ease or comfort, because ease and comfort too often affiliate with hegemony and oppression?

(w)here is here?

first meeting

Annan Idil Nadia Me

*noisy room mr. Allen sits in the corner
tossing a nerf basketball through a plastic hoop
there's more than one language in the room
language of sneakers on squeaky tile
of chairs scraping back language
of markers wafting off the page
"join the environmental club" but why? Why me Why
you language of headscarves of braces lisping speech
of black desks straight rows etched with pencil gouges
accumulated scars from years in a classroom
"so you're going to get these kids outside?"*

third meeting

*no one speaks or rather
everyone speaks chatting about yesterday at school
teasing Nabil about his jersey Melo? really?
no one responds to my question
"what sorts of projects do you all want to do?" maybe
it's the wrong question maybe i don't know how to ask
questions maybe i don't know
how to speak i want so badly to hear them
want so badly to be heard they want
a safe space to hang after school the perfect
jumpshot they want college they want bugatti
i want results a project something we can sink
our teeth into a ragged flag we can fly that shows
we've made it that shows how much we've lost they want
so much more than i can comprehend than they themselves
can encompass or stand*

sixth meeting

*we've seen this song and dance before and
it's not funny but we'll humor it because
well because each downbeat handclap echoes
with care we play a compost knowledge game
this is what knowledge counts we need to meet with
administration that is how you make yourself heard
we need to tell the story of what it means
to compost at this school of what it means*

*to be part of this community which is really my story
and i tell you that this is what leadership
looks like that this is the language of power why
what does this have to do with your communities
with your home with your bodies with what you know
that even in this welcoming space becomes contraband*

*eight meeting
i want so badly to make this real to make this count
i don't listen when you tell me no one cares
when i'm the only person at the garbage cans in the lunchroom
and you ask what happens next year when i'm gone
and another white face takes my place when i'm
the only one who speaks in answer to the principal's pointed
questions would she hear them anyways you represent
policed bodies bodies i march up to the principal's office
echoing the pathways of discipline
stumbling over my words
foreign in your mouths
i validate your voice which leaves you silent*

So that was kind of the classic story of a well-intentioned white male educator going into a “community in need” (big air quotes here) with a savior mindset. And you know how much I despise classic stories, tropes. These don't get us beyond, they don't direct us into the not yet. This telling just allows us to wallow in our past mistakes, and to congratulate ourselves for not being there anymore.

I still don't know what I would say to this group of students, how I would navigate these spaces saturated with power and narratives that dehumanize and devalue their experience. But this is perhaps a slice of what I would say. While still recognizing the impossibility of the following, I hope that it can help us to story a radical solidarity, to reimagine and relive our ordinary practices, so as to inhabit differently our shared future. (Medina, 2012, p. 252).

So the first thing that I want to say is that I am white. My whiteness matters, and I want you all to remind me how my being White matters when I lose sight of it. Because I will forget, I will act as if it doesn't matter. Who do you see in this school who is white? A few students maybe, but not many. A lot of teachers. The principal. Yeah, so my white face is the face of authority. I'm also young and naïve, so that helps to unsettle my authority within this specific classroom context. But from a broader social standpoint, I am the face of authority.

Sure, I'm an immigrant in some ways. There are parts of my family who came here recently, within the last couple generations, to seek better economic prospects. But I don't

bear the marks of being tied to immigration. You all do—in your bodies, in your accents, in your dress and your religious practices. And that matters. I say this—not because this is news to you. This is something you live every day.

I say this because I want to recognize that this whole notion of my helping to mentor you all in environmental projects is not just outdated. It's damn racist. It's tied to ideas about knowledge, empowerment, leadership, and what marks environmental change that exclude your perspective. That try to export an upper-class white supremacist agenda into "schools in need."

So I'm going to ask you now, what do you need? Why are you here? What does it mean to take leadership in your school community? I have my own assumptions about what counts as change, what sorts of projects will be validated by me and others like me as creating value for your community, assumptions about who you all are as agents of change. But I am not here to empower you; I don't want our activities as a club to be dictated by those ideas. Because they're limited, right? Because as an upper-class white guy who comes here once a week from Seattle, I've only been exposed to ideas that reinforce my identity. Ideas that often exclude and devalue your ideas as "students of color." Which, yeah, I know isn't able to capture the complexity and specificity of your diverse national, immigrant, cultural identities. Those are the limitations of our language.

What I'm saying is that I don't need you to bus all the way up to Seattle to help out with our Leadership Summit or with service projects. I want us to do things that speak to your needs, not necessarily projects that fall under the traditional environmental tenets of sustainability or stewardship. To do things that interrupt and address problems that you see in this school community, and that create positive change in your environment. See, this is still coming out all problematic—there's still the assumption that I need to be here for you all to create change, and some assumptions about what change looks like, and also some assumptions that I have about what needs to change in your school community—and I'm asking you to be gentle to me and to yourselves throughout our time together. That's not to say you shouldn't call me on my shit. I need that sometimes. We all do.

But we need to recognize that this work is complex. And that we are always going to do this work in complicated and contradictory ways. We're always still going to be working within structures that have no intention of enabling you all to succeed, at least not unless you give up those parts of your identity that do not align with dominant ideas about what counts as a good student, about what sorts of knowledge matters, about what success looks like. We are always already going to be working within structures that limit what we are able to achieve, even what we are able to think—structures including the public school system, the way this environmental education program is structured, the history of the environmental movement, settler colonialism, white supremacy, dominant social narratives about dark skin or Latin(x) names, narratives about immigration and assimilation.

But still we have to do the work, with the recognition that it will not be perfect. We will fail. Which is not a cop out, but a recognition of our limitations and of the complexity of working toward a future that looks radically different. We have to commit ourselves to the struggle for liberation, commit ourselves to “sustainable relationships rooted in a shared commitment to grappling with our identities in relation to domination.” (Pinkard, 2013, p. 40). This is work is always both deeply communal and impossible except in solidarity.

And this is my commitment to you. Solidarity. I know; that’s just another big word that we throw around all the time but that often doesn’t really mean much. Solidarity needs to be active and lived or else it falls flat. And I don’t really know how to paint you a picture of what solidarity looks like in our context. Because it’s not my picture to paint. That’s the whole point. If I come into this space and assume that I know how we’re going to do things, that immediately violates what I have said are my commitments. One thing I can say; solidarity is messy, imperfect, always a learning process. But I’m in this with you. Sure, I have a different role to play because I’m white, male, college-educated. So I’m going to be listened to differently than you all, which means I have different responsibilities – in addition to my professional responsibilities. But I’m in this with you, trying to figure out the best way to use our time here in this club. My intention is not merely to “empower” you all (which still has this connotation where I have the power that then I can bestow on you), but to create place in which I too am empowered by the process of learning from you. I have to be vulnerable too if we’re going to create an open, critical club space that enables learning for all involved, myself included (hooks 1994, p. 21).

And this, I think, really speaks to the deep learning that is possible in this club. Not learning about composting, or about gardening, or about plastics. Not learning how to run a campaign, or how to host a service project, or how to be stewards of your school community. Not learning that speaks to one specific, limited idea of what knowledge counts or of what environmental change looks like. But learning about what it means to work toward community, to communicate and strategize and plan and teach across difference.

I don’t need you all to always agree with me or with one another; no one will require you to step in line if you do not agree with what we are doing. My commitment – and what I ask for from you – is to honor the diverse, which sometimes may mean, dissenting experiences that each and every one of you embodies. Even and especially when it’s only one or two of us who is thinking about something differently, we need to support them and hear them out. This is the strength of our group – that each of us is going to approach things from a totally different set of experiences, a different understanding of the situation. We all have different resources and knowledge to pull from. This diversity is our strength, because it gives us a much more complicated and complete sense of where we are. And of what we are capable of as a collective.

If we cover up those differences – by all trying to be some narrow definition of an environmentalist that I may have in my head, or by trying to get others to conform to

who we think they should be, we will undermine our ability to learn from one another and to achieve our goals as a group.

Voice over (talking back):

These students have no voice here from which to speak back to the ways in which my words reduce their deep, complex lived knowledge to some cultural symbols, to the difference between black and white, and to my interpretations. It makes absent exactly what it attempts to reveal. This is the power of representation to rub out the very object it covets.

I want to be clear that I recognize this is all still my interpretation. I'm still imposing my framework and ideology on these students, who occupy radically different social locations than I do. I'm still assuming that I have access to their experience, that I can erase the difference before me and speak for those who cannot (in this pseudo-academic context) speak back. I am uncomfortable about telling these stories at all in this space. In some very real respect, the very act of speaking them out loud, the very act of presenting them here in this room, while intending to honor these students from whom I learned so much can erase their existence in the real world.

I think there's a question we're all dancing around here, one that unsettles my legitimacy as an environmental educator, that unsettles the very practice of environmental education, that questions whether it is possible to do this work without serving a colonial, capitalist, hegemonic agenda. No; don't try to respond immediately. Just sit with that one for a little while, and we'll see what wells up.

(w)here is here?

There are many other stories of injustice and oppression and marginalization and death and loss that do not fit in this room, but which are not disconnected from this room. We have to acknowledge the broader context against and within which environmental education plays out. It is not just what we say up here—what we tell students about public lands or vegetarianism—that is political, but what we don't say. Whose voices remain silent, whose experiences are actively shut out of our outdoor classrooms, whose perspectives were never considered during the construction of this learning center. We, collectively and differentially, up here for this week, have the privilege of being able to shut our eyes and ears, to enjoy this stunning landscape, these exquisite meals, one another's company and stories, to take a step back from "the world" and take the time celebrate this cohort's hard work. While there are so many for whom these stories, this violence, is a daily experience. And *that* is political.

(w)here is here?

When I was 8, I always did my homework standing up. Pacing the tile floors of our home, nestled into the subtropical metropolis of Jakarta, guarded by gates and barbed wire, I would work through long division problems in my head. Grappling with figures.

I still move to make my way through things. Not quick on my feet, I require long-distance to process, to learn.

When I run, I enter into the middle. It may seem like the start of the trail, but it is the middle, one spot amidst a sprawling inter- and exchange of ideas, breath, and being. Amidst a vast forest ecosystem, in communication with the other ecosystems that ring around the roots. Our very concept of an ecosystem is too static to truly encompass that dynamic, inamic exchange that weaves the world. As is our concept of a trail run. Sprawling across temporal boundaries, each footbeat attendant to the contested past(s) that swell this moment, irradiated with the anticipation of radical possibility.

When I write, I enter into the middle. Mid-thought. Thought, past tense and gone, already slipping to the margins as the language, the ways I have been taught. Taught, past tense, to construct arguments, to frame my words. Bleeding into the present. Trying so desperately to reclaim presence, to re-present the world in words.

But the world will always exceed these words, will always continue moving beyond them and through them, eating away, undermining their supposedly static meaning, leaking through to drip onto the page, to smudge the ink, bleeding serifs. No, the world is not in these pages. Nor could it ever be. The world is at this table, an empty beer near my left hand. Two candles, a bottle of Sriracha, light folk music from Portland. Seasonings to another bland night spent writing. Spent peering into the distance of this screen that promises so much, hoping for once to see something of that other shore, but only ever reflecting my own face. Trying to harness some inner machinery I never fully gained mastery of, compelling it to present some argument that makes any sense, to tie some threads together, to add something to the weave of this world. Of which it both is and is not a part.

(w)here is here?

*we talk about empathy
"suffering with" as an antidote
to the powerful poisons of oppression*

*and it's true
that to listen actively critically
deeply we need to hear not merely words
or meaning but to feel the breath in these words as their speaker
would have us feel to see them as human
in the wondrous specificity of their experience
overflowing the narrow static meanings
we impose suppose oppose*

*and yet and here's the danger
when empathy and understanding
cross into "identification-as"
when the enclosure and foreclosure of other bodies
masquerades as inclusion
and empathy bleeds
into the desire to be absolved
to merge with those we deem oppressed
all one human race*

*when i assume access to the experience
of these students or speak of sovereignty as a concept
i position these ways of knowing
these bodies these people these lives
who speak to so much more than
my narrow experience of here can hold
within a space that has already determined
what is truth
and which way of moving through the world
is fully human*

*i hear what i want to
what fits into my lesson
and the excess the life the body
is flensed
seams erased
the limbo of non-identity abnormality reduced
to non-human*

i do not give my students a voice

*they have one from the start
vibrant complex resonant
with identities too rich to name resonant
with joy and pain we ask them to contain*

*we must recognize distance
difference
even as we reach for kinship*

(w)here is here?

Voice over (love):

The highest form of love is the love that allows for intimacy without the annihilation of difference. (Palmer, 1997).

“Trivia” you write, painstaking even now in the formation of your letters, “I used to make my own pesto.” Strange how now the details that compose a life become trivial. And I know what you mean—because who you are goes much deeper than these details of what you used to cook, whether you like pancakes or not, whose chair this is, who painted that picture of columbines. And, especially now, each word counts. Each sentence is precious. Each letter requires a heroic effort. But I can’t help myself: “That’s not trivia,” I say, for the third time this visit.

We communicate so carelessly, with such facility, every day that we lose sight of how strange and miraculous it is that we can reach across that great distance between my experience and yours with something so unconscious (yet complex and subtle) as language. Communication, dialogue—not merely two intersecting monologues—is revelatory, transformative, spiritual.

Society trains men to value silence over speech...becoming people who either cannot talk or, when they talk, can only engage in a monologue. These are the people who talk at us, who by refusing to converse, promote and maintain a hierarchy of domination wherein withholding gives one power over another person. Conversation is always about giving. Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise. (hooks, 2009, p. 45).

Dialogue enacts a great paradox: that every relationship is composed of both intimacy and an inescapable distance. That I must make myself vulnerable to you, open up my perspective to the friction and resistance that naturally follow when our two perspectives meet. A creative, productive friction that can only occur if we respect and engage with the distance and difference between our perspectives and experiences. We must acknowledge difference and distance if we are to communicate openly, honestly, and clearly.

Voice over (color blind):

To not see difference is part of the phenomenon of the normalizing and homogenizing tendencies of a privileged perspective that protects itself by blocking out recognition of differences, by saying that my perspective is not a perspective, that your experience is not a genuine source of knowledge. (Medina, 2012, p. 265)

You are not reducible to me. Nor is either one of us reducible to some universal standard. Communication, dialogue requires the ability to see the specificity of one’s own

world among others, and to see the specificity and concreteness of your own world in relation to mine. “We all have a responsibility to avoid processes that hide, constrain, erase, silence, marginalize, invisibilize difference(s)” (Medina, 2012, p. 257)

I must respect you as an individuated subject of experience, as a person, as a wilderness, as a frightening generative force in your own right. So to respect this difference is not merely to respect your subjectivity; it is simultaneously to respect myself as a multiple, complex person. And I must respect this distance in order to conceive of any intimacy whatsoever.

Voice over (education as the practice of freedom):

More than ever before, students need to learn from unbiased perspectives, be they conservative or radical. More than ever before, students and teachers need to fully understand differences of nationality, race, sex, class, and sexuality if we are to create ways of knowing that reinforce education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 2009, 110)

I haven’t done a very good job communicating with you in our short time together. I listened politely, I thanked you for your gifts – for food, for music – and then I left to play outside. Alone. Only now, when your capacity for communication has been reduced, do I recognize the sustained imagination and attentiveness that is required to say anything that reaches across that chasm, or to hear anything that speaks beyond my story, that speaks to parts of myself I thought I had lost. In the pause, as I wait for you to form the next character, as I watch your frail form battle the white space of the page, and see your distinctive handwriting take shape – a bit shaky and clenched but unmistakably yours, I cannot help but marvel at your presence here at this table. At your strength. At your capacity – wracked by illness – to give and give and give and give.

I lack the proper vocabulary to speak what you have taught me, what you have given me. I’ve forgotten all the words – they evacuate my mouth. We do not have a language your “Trivia” suggests, for the rounded becoming that is a person – for the forgetting and lack, for the beauty and presence you recall. I remain in the pause, the pulse of your focused breath, as you will your next word onto the waiting page.

(w)here is here?

None of you, in this setting, have epistemic agency.

I am speaking about an educational moment I shared with you some twelve months ago, and while you had limited agency in that setting, on the trail, none of you, in this setting, are able to talk back, to interpret your own experience. I have somehow been positioned as the expert on this matter, which – much as I try to avoid it – attributes you a deficient, precarious and less reliable epistemic agency, while enclosing your experience within mine and muting your voice. In short, in the intervening months, my dialogue with you has become impoverished and anemic (see what I mean about metaphors??), if it ever was truly rich and productive and mutual and reciprocal. To be in dialogue, in communication – communication that does not oppress or deny but rather affirms all parties' humanity – “crucially involves the capacity to engage in epistemic negotiations.” (Medina, 2012, p. 95). And while there may have been some negotiations during our time in the same trail group, my learnings from that moment have since calcified. Those negotiations are settled.

So anyways, we were out on the trail. I had given you all “jobs” to try to give you a sense of ownership over different aspects of our being on trail together. A number of you were in charge of spotting and identifying the various flora and fauna who flanked our trail through the forest. And I remember one in particular being super jazzed about mushrooms, especially, the poisonous ones. And the north cascades, as many of you know, are mushroom central. We stopped every few steps as a new mushroom was spotted and we leafed through the limited laminate guide trying to identify it. At first a number of you were interested and would cluster around the fungus trying to get a good look. But after repeating this pattern a number of times, your interest waned. While a few of you still hunkered around each new “discovery,” the majority had already moved on, up the trail, off the trail, or into your respective cliques, expressing an impatience verging on the dangerous edge in environmental education of idleness, boredom, and frustration.

I was excited. I enjoy fostering students' passion and I enjoy empowering and validating particularly those students who are more socially awkward, less self-aware, more willing to express interest in and spout of facts about and experiences with mushrooms or bugs. I kept trying to pull in more of you, to engage you all in a conversation about fungi. When this flopped, I too started to get frustrated with you, for your insistence on stopping at every mushroom, for your reliance on a deficient mushroom guide, for your certainty that it was this one or that.

This is a banal environmental education story; it happened at mountain school, but it may as well have been Mt. Baker a few weeks ago or Magnuson Park a few years ago. I tell it because I think that exposes the kind of knowledge that we validate in these programs, a validation that at the same time attributes a deficient subjectivity to those of you who don't show interest in these same subjects.

In attending to the one student who showed interest in fungi, I was neglecting my responsibility to the rest of you and to the context in which we were all teaching~learning~hiking~speaking~speaking back. I was so focused on this particular form of knowledge and engagement, and the role that you were filling in that moment, that I was unable to look “into the communicative dynamics in which these roles are entangled, become alive, grow, shrink, and develop interrelated trajectories.” (Medina, 2012, p. 95)

See, learning is always interactive. Teaching involves more than the “mere pooling of information; it also involves negotiating processes of mutual interrogation and the collaborative generation of meanings and interpretative possibilities.” (Medina, 2012, p. 95). And this is where it gets complex, because true learning happens when we are able to attend to the unintended, those experiences that do not fit into my lesson plan, the “immanent possibilities existing outside of the intended” and which “are integral to...justice-oriented education.” (Bazzul and Santavicca, 2017, p. 62).

I am committed to creating and sustaining contexts in which this learning is possible. To enacting and supporting practices that foster a plurality of voices that can critically engage each other without suppressing differences. This is ongoing work, and I will continue to fail in my commitments. The complexity, the shifting dynamics of the classroom, are always impossible to get a handle on. Especially because I am embedded in and wrapped up in these dynamics—and because these dynamics spill out of the classroom and are embedded in broader social structures. Especially because my position as an educator—and as a white, cisgender settler male—already undermines my commitments to foster a plurality of voices, already curtails what is possible. But that does not mean that I cannot commit myself to accounting for this positionality, to imagining of the (im)possible classroom. I have a responsibility, as stated by Marc Higgins (2017)—whose work engages with the complications that occur through the navigation and negotiation of Indigenous and Western modern ways-of-knowing—to “attend to the ways in which my normative positionality works against accounting for and being accountable to the flux of culture and nature involved in meaning-making processes with nature. Western modern science, which largely shapes science education and educator, dialectically negates other ways of knowing. (p. 32).

Western ideals of static, universalized knowledge, of knowledge as a finite resource, inhibit learning, limiting what learning is counted within the classroom (i.e., facts about natural processes), while thinking of knowledge as out of our reach, as something that we have access to but do not have the capacity to alter, or to produce. This division of knowledge from bodily, lived experience disempowers, stunting the development of relationality and ethical relationships between teacher and students. Stunting the development of ethical relationships between teacher, students and the knowledge they are gaining. Attending to knowledge as relational and not static is an ethical move. It seeks to recover an ethic of teaching.

(w)here is here?

*there's a party going on right here
and we're all invited no really
as Veronica Velez always says no one is disposable
we are all invited into the "not yet"
and the "not anymore"
though our invitations are not the same
and our roles once there the positions we take on the dance floor
are all different
let me be clear this is not your party
but you are invited*

*how do we get in? how do we get there?
we start by focusing on the wealth of this present moment
a present enriched by both past and future
a present enriched split by the insurrectionary*

*this focus on a particular present contests settlement
and its generative ties to past and future possibilities
makes the past come apart at the seams
unsettles any unity continuity
denies the fatalism dominant ways of seeing reproduce
revealing reimagining rearticulating a sunset
colors categories queered bent kaleidoscopic
all colors are light bent differentially
relations reconfigured*

*then we need to learn the dance
which has no prescribed steps no form
it is fluid sure it's awkward at times
at times it seems you're not going anywhere
it seems the seams are going to burst apart
like the dancefloor itself is slip-sliding away
but the beat goes on an imperative
to renew our perplexities a reinvigoration of our openness
with each step with each move we fumble toward an unsettling
expansion extension of
our individual and collective imaginings (Medina, 2012)*

*see hope is not the opposite of pain
hope is a recognition of suffering
an embrasure of pain resisting the erasure of
history and its excess black brown bodies
hope is an embodied understanding of the costs*

of settler colonialism capitalism slavery patriarchy
an embodied understanding of how marginalized bodies
thrive in spite of the damage
reveal the inconsistencies gaps failures
of the colonial imagination
hope is the larger crime of desire
that spills outside norms
vengeance excess the uncontainable uncontained unimagined
(Tuck and Rees, 2013)