

The Colonization of Classrooms: An Examination of the Erasure, Misrepresentation, and Romanticization of Indigenous Peoples in History Curriculums

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Over the course of elementary school, I remember many lessons, activities, and projects that included Indigenous American people. For example, there were trips to Plimoth Plantation where we would go to the two distinct areas to see the pilgrims and the Indigenous people and their different ways of life. I researched the Wampanoag people for a project, we learned about Columbus, and about how the rhetoric that he “discovered” America is false, and, of course, around Thanksgiving, we would learn a version of the history of the holiday. As I grew up I learned more about the realities of history, how pilgrims and Indigenous people did not simply live near each other in harmony, that not only did Columbus not discover America, but that he brutalized the people that had been here before, and many more parts of the story that had not been filled in. This sparked an interest for me in how history, which includes so much horror, can be taught to kids in ways that are honest, but not traumatic, in that they are able to be understood by and are appropriate for young children, while not minimizing the atrocities that have occurred.

This interest eventually led to my research question, “How is Indigenous history taught in elementary schools in the United States? What determines how it is taught? And what efforts have been done and are being done to improve curricula?” There are many themes that I came across in my research, but there are seven that I will focus on. First, the standardization of history curriculums, which will provide background information as well as beginning to explain how standardization can create gaps in education concerning Indigenous histories. Second, how the settler narratives that are ingrained into curricula create a general lack of accurate information. Important to note, is that in this case and throughout this paper, “settler” does not simply refer to the people who first came to America. Throughout my research I came across this term when referring to descendants of these people, and generally the people that gained power through the

colonization of America. The next four themes are more specific ways that Indigenous stories are misrepresented, which include: skipping over interactions between Indigenous people and settlers, the erasure of modern Indigenous people, the romanticization of Indigenous people, and appropriation of Indigenous culture. Lastly, I will explore place-based education as a possible way to improve how indigenous history is taught. Throughout the research it is clear that experts agree that the standardization of curriculum and lack of accurate information in classrooms has led to major problems in the way Indigenous stories are taught in schools, and some propose place-based education as a solution to these issues.

Standardization of history curriculum

Standardization of curriculum is, in general, a controversial topic, especially when it comes to national standards, which Diane Ravitch speaks to in her book *National Standards in American Education* while describing an attempt to enact national standards, “Setting a new course in a democracy is never easy, because political action requires a high degree of consensus, and national consensus is difficult to achieve in an area such as education where responsibility broadly dispersed....Critics on all sides were warning that national standards were unnecessary, undesirable, unfeasible, and unwise” (xvi). The main criticism that prevented this attempt was that national standards were not worth the struggle to get them passed, but there are many reasons why national standards for education can be beneficial if they are done right. Ravitch describes some of the faultlines in the educational system, such as inequality in schools, low expectations contributing to poor performance, and lack of priorities within the system, and how standards can work to solve them. By standardizing the curriculum across schools, they can

combat the huge disparities between schools in some ways, and they can raise expectations and provide focus, which in turn can improve performance by students.

Despite the benefits, the criticisms of the difficulties in creating and establishing national standards are justified, especially in subjects such as history. Standardization of history curriculums is often even more challenging because the knowledge that needs to be taught is hard to measure and therefore the expectations are vague and unhelpful. Ravitch touches on this as well when describing the current standards, “Many states have curriculum documents that list broad, diffuse objectives or behavioral outcomes or lofty goals, but these are rhetorical statements rather than content standards because no one is quite sure what they mean or how to measure them” (14). This does not exclusively apply to history curriculums, but the vagueness is often magnified in history curriculums because there is more room for differences of opinion about how something happened than in some other subjects; this can lead to difficulty in finding consensus on what information should be included, “The challenge is to pose issues and controversies without resolving them; to recognize that historical and scientific debates are always subject to investigation and evidence; and to acknowledge those instances where investigation and evidence have established conclusive fact” (20). Ravitch is clear that there are always going to be controversies about what should be taught, but that one way of dealing with those disagreements is to include and acknowledge them within history curriculums.

In the book *Teaching and Learning History 11-18: Understanding the Past*, Alison Kitson speaks about some of the issues in history curriculums in Britain, which does have national standards, demonstrating the fact that they cannot fix everything, especially if they are not done well. She examines the fact that history curriculums will always be influenced by the political history of the country and therefore can be biased (19), the emphasis being on historians

over the actual history (23), the fact that history is often not prioritized by schools, and the fact that there is too much history to be covered in the time it is given (18). However, Kitson does not argue that the national standards are the problem, she actually mentions that it was much worse before they were put into place, but she does make it clear that they need to be improved.

Other scholars, however, are less forgiving of the idea of having standards. In *An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards*, Wayne Journell demonstrates how standards are harmful, “Within social studies education many scholars advocate a thematic approach where curriculum is student-centered, deliberative, and focuses on issues of social justice and equality...However, increased efforts to ensure that students throughout the nation are exposed to similar instructional content has narrowed the social studies curriculum, forcing teachers to prescribe to the traditional Eurocentric canon that seeks to maintain the status quo” (19). This is especially true when it comes to curriculums about marginalized minority groups because it amplifies the bias created by the influence of political history in ways that can further ingrain the oppression of those groups. One of the groups that this often affects is Indigenous people, Journell describes this process in detail throughout this article:

Moreover, when members of minority groups are mentioned within the curriculum it is often to remind students of periods in history when a particular group was discriminated against and then to celebrate their subsequent struggle for equality. This practice raises an important question regarding the representation of marginalized groups in American history; should members of minority groups be included within the curriculum as exemplars of people who fought for liberation against their oppressors, or as productive

members of society that have contributed to the social, political, and economic fabric of our nation? (21)

The idea of the over-victimization of Indigenous people is one that comes up many times in Journell's article, but there are many other ways in which Indigenous stories are misrepresented in history curriculums.

Lack of accurate information about Indigenous people in curriculum

There are many ways that Indigenous stories are taught incorrectly in classrooms. This is especially true in elementary school classrooms. There is one central basis upon which stories are told or not told, which is especially relevant in social studies curriculums. There is a vast amount of history that has happened involving Indigenous people, but the events that are chosen to be shared are chosen by those who are in a place to make them. In the US, this means that the narratives used in school are defined solely by settlers. In his article *Missing in Interaction: Diversity, Narrative, and Critical Multicultural Social Studies*, John Wills explains that "The first step is to recognize the fundamental problems with these lessons and activities: they are about culture, not history, and they continue to focus on 'important' historical events as defined by the privileged, Eurocentric narrative of US history" (57). There are many ways in which a settler perspective is instilled into the lessons about these events, meaning that it is not simply what is taught, but how it is taught and why. In her article *Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum*, Delores Calderon emphasizes this idea of the need to understand why this narrative is chosen instead of just acknowledging that it exists, "However, labeling US social studies as forms of settler education is not enough. We must peel back another layer to reveal why these

narratives are commonplace and commonsensical, [which is what makes] them difficult to challenge” (316).

One of the reasons why the stories that are taught are chosen is that they reinforce settler power structures. As a result, there are significant gaps in the Indigenous stories that are taught (it is important to recognize that there are gaps in all history that are taught as time is a major constraint in a classroom). Since these gaps have also been chosen by settlers, the places where they exist are intentional. In her article *Speaking back to Manifest Destinies: A Land Education Based Approach to Critical Curriculum Inquiry*, Delores Calderon discusses how the lack of knowledge about Indigenous history is crucial to the colonial narrative, “This ignorance is actually a product of how gaps in knowledge are actively produced in order to protect power, in this case settler colonialism in the US” (6).

These gaps in knowledge are not only based on leaving out events, settler narratives also often diminish Indigenous peoples by using generalizations and framing all Indigenous people as one group. Wayne Journell explores these ways of erasing Indigenous people in his article, *An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards*: “When American Indians are included within the curriculum, they are too often treated as a collective entity and only receive attention near the Thanksgiving holiday when teachers tell exaggerated and historically inaccurate stories about the relationship between American Indian tribes and European settlers” (20). He elaborates on this idea of a “collective entity” when he discusses how uncommon it is for Indigenous individuals to be included in history curriculums especially in the context of how many white men are often referred to specifically, “From Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Edison, there is no shortage of Euro-American males that are guaranteed to appear in an American history course. Yet, no American Indian appears

overwhelmingly important enough to be included as part of a general survey of American history” (26). These generalizations are a major part of the way that Indigenous stories are left out of classrooms.

Another issue with education about Indigenous stories which both comes from and creates settler power is the fact that even the stories that are included in curriculums are not complete. They are entirely from the perspective of white settlers and leave out a lot of information that is vital to a full understanding of the history. Stacia Cedillo brought this up in an interview while talking about her own experience learning about Indigenous people in school, “I remember growing up and learning Texas history...we learned about different tribes and everything, but everything was from the white perspective. It was from white colonial groups who wrote the history, but the entire story is told from a settler perspective.” This creates even more gaps in the knowledge provided about Indigenous peoples, but they exist in places where it seems like there may not be gaps, so they are more likely to be overlooked.

These stories and gaps in stories make up the narrative that settlers have molded from history in order to suit their own interests, and because this is the narrative that exists in curriculums and classrooms, it is only further instilled into society. This settler narrative often actively contradicts evidence and facts in history, but settlers are able to get away with this because they hold so much power, as stated by Stacia Cedillo in an interview: “...so much of the history that we've institutionalized is honestly sometimes just outright false, like actually lies [and] myths that we tell.” Delores Calderon also speaks to this in her article *Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum*: “To deal with Indigenous presence, settlers invent, construct, and rely on ideologies and legal mechanisms to work out this contradiction and construct an imagined community amenable to settler nations” (318-319) and it is further emphasized by Jean O'Brien

in her article "*Vanishing" Indians in Nineteenth-Century New England: Local Historians' Erasure of Still-Present Indian Peoples* in which she talks about the erasure of modern Indigenous people, "How could the narrative of Indian extinction coexist with the actual survival of Indian peoples in New England?... Within this broad historical narrative constructed by local historians and other published commentators on the New England past, stories about Indians often appeared. These stories usually served to justify colonialism, to confer glory upon Euro-American ancestors, and, importantly, to insist that New England Indians had vanished from the region" (415). This erasure that O'Brien talks about is something that is an obvious contradiction to the fact that Indigenous people are still alive today but is something that is relied on heavily in the settler narrative. It is often used both in this context of pretending Indigenous people only exist in the past, as well as attempting to erase them as much as possible from history as a whole.

In *Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum*, Calderon also explains how the settler narrative relies both on the absence and the presence of Indigenous people in different ways, "Thus, to begin to decolonize we must first learn to account for settler colonialism. To do so necessitates that we grapple with the dialectic of Indigenous presence and absence that is central to settler colonialism in the United States and its social studies curriculum" (313). Settler societies usually do their best to erase Indigenous stories, but it is impossible to claim that Indigenous peoples were entirely absent from history, so Indigenous presence is used to "validate settler presence" (319) and to frame settlers as better than Indigenous people. This idea of presence and absence shows up in the stories that are told in classrooms, but the stories that are skipped over would give a different picture of Indigenous presence throughout history.

Calderon also explains how these gaps in knowledge and this ignorance play into the way non-Indigenous students' settler identities are produced within their schooling in her article *Speaking back to Manifest Destinies: A Land Education Based Approach to Critical Curriculum Inquiry*, "My examination of social studies curriculum textbooks thus attempts to show how settler identities are produced through schooling processes associated with settler legacies that underlie the diversity of land relations in the US" (2). In his article *An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards*, Wayne Journell also speaks to this idea of the creation of settler identities for students through these gaps in their education: "For students of European descent, such a curriculum reinforces their notion of being part of the majority and predisposes them to acts of discrimination toward minority groups, particularly in relatively homogenous settings where many students have little knowledge of other ethnic and cultural groups" (25). The type of curriculum that Journell is referring to is one that "...glorifies the majority at the expense of a particular minority group..." (25). This way of teaching settler identities is one of the many contributing factors to the continuation of settler power.

Skipping over interactions between settlers and Indigenous people or misrepresenting them

One way that Indigenous stories are often left incomplete is when curriculums have teachers teach about Indigenous people by focusing on cultural differences between them and the settlers. This will often lead to the actual interactions of these two groups being left out of the units entirely. John Wills' article *Missing in Interaction: Diversity, Narrative, and Critical Multicultural Social Studies* focuses on this specific gap in history classrooms as it relates to both Indigenous people and other groups, "Through an analysis of the curriculum in use in

elementary and middle school classrooms, I argue that diverse groups, including whites, are ‘missing in interaction.’ That is, missing in the curriculum are meaningful representations of the actions and interactions of diverse groups as agents, actors, and subjects in US history and society” (44). He mainly talks about this concept in the context of Indigenous people and white settlers during the time of colonization of North America as well as Black people and white people during the civil rights era. He argues that this specific gap in information “effectively removes or silences whites as active participants in history and society” (47) and therefore removes some of the blame from them.

Later, he explains how this idea is often found specifically in classrooms teaching about Indigenous history and states that “These discussions of point of view and stereotyping, and the students’ research on the cultures of different Native American tribes during the colonial period, are directed towards constituting knowledge of the distinct culture(s) of Native Americans, and the differences between the cultures of whites and Native Americans. But what remains invisible are the interactions between whites and Native Americans during the colonial period...” (53). Throughout the article, he discusses a specific case study in a classroom where the teacher had sought out more information to teach her students about Indigenous history because she felt that the textbook they were using did not cover it sufficiently, but she still solely taught about cultural differences. He describes an example of this in her classroom when despite having the students read a book that included descriptions of conflicts between settlers and Indigenous people, the teacher chose to ignore these conflicts in discussions of the book (53-54).

Curriculums that focus entirely on cultural differences are harmful both because they leave out information and also because they often add to stereotyped ideas of each culture, especially those of Indigenous people. This results in increased alienation between the two

groups. In the article *Elementary Students Learn about Native Americans: The Development of Knowledge and Empathy*, Jere Brophy observes this in a case study that he examined:

Some [students] stereotyped the Europeans as greedy and otherwise immoral people who practiced slavery, confiscated other people's valuables, and murdered anyone who tried to stop them. These students had difficulty in identifying similarities between the two groups. They had much less difficulty in identifying differences, but the differences they stated tended to reflect the stereotypes described above. The students had not yet learned much about, nor come to appreciate the implications of the cultural exchanges that changed both the Old World and the New World in so many ways as a result of the Encounter. (43)

Even in this example, where the students had more positive views of Indigenous people, which he mentions earlier in the article, and negative ideas about settlers, the differences in cultures were still what was emphasized resulting in a similar harm being committed.

In the same article, he talks about how this emphasis on culture eventually led to the alienation of Indigenous people once the class shifted their focus to another part of history:

The change began with the unit on the American Revolution, which shifted attention from events in North America in general to a focus on the English colonists. As students learned about the problems that the colonists experienced with the French, the Indians, and later the British, the colonists gradually became "us," and the people with whom they came into conflict gradually became "them." This identification tendency gathered momentum as students went on to learn about the pioneers traveling over the mountains and "settling" the west, and so on. From this point onward, in both the textbook and the teacher's explanations and storytelling, the pioneers were the heroes of the stories. (42)

The omission of interaction between Indigenous people and settlers in curriculum means the omission of the horrific actions that settlers took against Indigenous people, allowing for this shift in who is seen as the hero.

However, not every classroom completely skips over this part of history, some do cover more of the interactions that occurred between settlers and Indigenous people during the colonization of North America, but even the curriculums that do include stories of Indigenous people and settlers coming into contact are far more likely to include inaccurate and romanticized descriptions of Thanksgiving or Pocahontas where everyone gets along as opposed to the truth of the brutality of the encounters between the settlers and Indigenous groups, most of which focuses on land and property. Wayne Journell speaks to this in his article *An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards*, "...most elementary students are annually exposed to stories of relations between American Indians and the first European settlers, at such a young age they are more likely to hear romanticized stories of Pocahontas rather than accounts of settlers knowingly trading disease-laden blankets with tribal leaders" (25). The misrepresentation of these interactions is just as, if not more, harmful than simply leaving them out. Settlers being portrayed as getting along with Indigenous people will most likely have a similar impact on the students' view of European colonists as simply skipping over these interactions.

The other common issue that arises in the way that interactions between settlers and Indigenous peoples are represented is that the curriculums that do include the conflicts between these groups usually pose them not as the power imbalance that they were, but simply as a clash of cultures. This is an inaccuracy by itself, but it often ends up also representing the cultures as unchanging, which adds yet another layer to this misrepresentation. John Wills discusses this in

Missing in Interaction: Diversity, Narrative, and Critical Multicultural Social Studies, “The essentialized cultural differences constructed in class discussions represent the conflict between whites and Native Americans in US history as a clash of two opposing and incompatible structures (because culture is represented as fixed and static, not a process but an object that groups possess). That is, the conflict between whites and Native Americans is represented as a cultural conflict, rather than differences in the power of whites and Native Americans to realize their interests during the colonial period and beyond” (53-54). This demonstrates how even when curriculums include some amount of information about interactions, they still seem to focus on the parts of the conflicts that do not place as much blame on the settlers and therefore do not give the full story.

The erasure of modern Indigenous peoples

The fact that Indigenous people still exist today, and that they have existed throughout history outside the time of colonization in North America is another concept that is not found in many classrooms. As the curriculums move past the first part of colonization and into the Revolutionary War and Westward Expansion, the tone around Indigenous people shifts, and eventually they disappear from the curriculum altogether. Wayne Journell talks about this in his article *An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards*, “As the curriculum progresses, American Indians increasingly take the position of victims, initially decimated by disease and then forced to relocate as part of the Westward Expansion of European settlers. This representation in public education perpetuates racial stereotypes by ending the American Indian narrative in the early 1800s and failing to explain how American Indian culture has evolved since then” (20). As well as allowing for the alienation

of Indigenous people as mentioned earlier, this shift takes away from the importance of Indigenous peoples throughout history.

He continues his discussion of this theme later in the article, “Having American Indians virtually vanish from the curriculum after the forced relocation in the 1830s also creates gaping holes in the historical narrative. Not only does the lack of a modern American Indian focus fail to explain to students what happened to tribes after the Trail of Tears, but it perpetually leaves American Indians in a victimized light” (25). Throughout this article, Journell repeatedly mentions this theme of Indigenous peoples as being overly victimized in history curriculums. He argues that this constant victimization is problematic because it means that Indigenous people are not acknowledged for their accomplishments. This concept of the harm that victimization causes is one that comes up throughout history, regarding many different marginalized groups, as stated by Viet Thanh Nguyen when talking about the legacies of the Vietnam War in *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, “Raising the issue of how a minority can inflict harm acknowledges that a minority is a human and inhuman agent, not merely a powerless victim, a passive subject in history, or a romanticized hero” (196). This idea of showing how a marginalized group has complexities and flaws can be difficult, especially in cases like that of Indigenous peoples who have been incredibly demonized in the past, but it is incredibly important. The erasure of flaws also erases Indigenous peoples’ humanity by only allowing them to exist in one context, and prevents them from being seen in their wholeness.

The erasure of Indigenous people is often viewed more literally by other scholars, though many bring in this same idea of Indigenous people vanishing from the curriculum after they start learning about later parts of history that Journell talks about in these quotes. Jere Brophy mentions this in his article *Elementary Students Learn about Native Americans: The*

Development of Knowledge and Empathy, “From this point onward in both the textbook and the teacher’s explanations and storytelling, the pioneers were the heroes of the stories. Except for the brief appearance of Sacagawea, Indians disappeared or were mentioned only as faceless impediments to western expansion” (42). This quote also ties into how this form of erasure contributes to the alienation of Indigenous people. As the curriculum moves away from Indigenous people, it allows for ignorance about the horrible things that settlers did to Indigenous people in order to acquire the land in North America, and therefore makes way for the settlers to become heroes.

Creating one image of Indigenous people that only exists in the past is integral to the education system and allows for the retention of settler power. Delores Calderon illustrates this in her article *Speaking back to Manifest Destinies: A Land Education Based Approach to Critical Curriculum Inquiry* “...an entire ideological and institutional project has been put in place that has effectively erased Indigenous realities in the present and reconstructed Indigenous peoples as relics of the past...” (5). Calderon emphasizes the fact that modern Indigenous history is not simply left out of curriculums accidentally or because they do not have enough time, but that this is another very intentional gap in history curriculums that is ingrained into these curriculums because they were built on it.

This erasure stems from a few different places. One is that Indigenous stories are often taught in classrooms because they have to be included in the curriculum, so once the unit on Indigenous peoples during the colonization of North America has been taught, Indigenous people disappear. In an interview with Fikile Nxumalo, Nxumalo discussed this, “I see [colonialism] as still quite pervasive in education in many ways. One of those is through erasure of Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous lands, and [Indigenous] curriculum, or if [these] are included in

curriculum, they're done in very...essentialist, superficial ways where Indigenous people are only in the past." As she mentions, this idea of Indigenous being left in the past is closely connected with the other gaps in the versions of Indigenous stories taught in classrooms. The fact that so much of what is taught about Indigenous peoples is taught at surface level is one of the causes of gaps in the stories, and it also means that the telling of Indigenous stories simply drops off when the requirement is fulfilled.

The ignoring of Indigenous people in more modern history is something that is not only instilled into curriculums, but also throughout our society, and it is something that has been happening for a long time. Another reason for the erasure of modern Indigenous people that starts more outside of classrooms, but often shows up in them is the telling of stories of the "last" of a certain group of Indigenous people that happened a lot during the 1800s. Jean O'Brien gives many examples of this in her article "*Vanishing*" *Indians in Nineteenth-Century New England: Local Historians' Erasure of Still-Present Indian Peoples*, "Perusal of other local histories reveals a New England thickly populated by 'last' Indians throughout the nineteenth century, and occasionally...into the twentieth" (419). These stories completely ignore the realities of Indigenous stories and force Indigenous people into the past.

O'Brien discusses a few specific instances of historians telling the story of the "last" of a group of Indigenous people, and one theme that also comes up again and again throughout the stories is non-Indigenous people attempting to police who "counts" as Indigenous and who does not. This policing allowed for these stories to be more believable because, by non-Indigenous peoples' standards, Indigenous people who had ancestors who were not Indigenous or who did not know much of their people's culture or language were not considered to be Indigenous, even if that was how they identified. This stripped Indigenous people of their humanity by reducing

their identity to what non-Indigenous people considered to be paramount. These “last” Indigenous people were, and are, really just a way to pretend that Indigenous people do not exist anymore even when they very clearly do, and O’Brien mentions how this policing and these stories are a way for these narratives of the “end” of Indigenous people to coexist with their presence in contemporary times (415).

One of the reasons O’Brien gives for why settlers have erased Indigenous people in more recent history is that it allows settlers to distance themselves from the horrible actions of the colonizers. She mentions this in the same article, “Like Ebenezer Clapp and many others, this historian could use the language of extermination by removing it from his own immediate past and place and applying it to the rest of Indian America, and thus argue more forcefully for the unique gloriousness of New Englanders' historical legacy in connection to Indians” (428). In this case, she is talking specifically about historians in New England separating themselves from the horrors of colonization by pretending that the rest of the country did something wrong, not them. Delores Calderon gives another reason in her article *Uncovering Settler Grammars in Curriculum*. She first says that “...Indigenous peoples are constructed in textbooks as relics of the past while providing little to no perspectives from Indigenous peoples themselves” (315), and she goes on to talk about how by framing Indigenous people only in history, settler narratives have another way to justify the theft of Indigenous land. If they say the people do not exist anymore, other people will care less, and settlers get to maintain their power without substantial criticism.

The romanticization of Indigenous peoples in curriculums

Another way the settler narrative plays out in classrooms is through the widely accepted romanticization of Indigenous people and their culture. Micheal Kent Ward talks about this at length in his article *Teaching Indigenous American Culture and History: Perpetuating Knowledge or Furthering Intellectual Colonization?*. One common way that this happens is through the teaching of Indigenous cultural practices taught by non-Indigenous people, especially when they are taught by attempting to actually perform the custom, “Such re-enactments of culture typically involve self-styled indigenous activities defined by authorities and educators who, despite their credentials, are most often non-Indians or are without ancestral, familial, or similar ties to the traditional cultures under discussion...[and] they tend to perpetuate notions about the exoticness of such cultures” (107). Throughout this article, Ward also emphasizes that this is something that does not always come from a place of malice, and many people do not even realize the harm that they are causing because of how ingrained into our society and curriculums this exotification is. This, however, does not mean that it is any less harmful, instead it means that it goes deeper than simple changes in curriculum or classroom activities.

This romanticization of culture is also emphasized by the gap that often exists in history curriculums around interactions between Indigenous people and settlers. This lack of representation most often manifests as a strong emphasis on culture over history, as discussed by John Wills in his article *Missing in Interaction: Diversity, Narrative, and Critical Multicultural Social Studies*, “The first step is to recognize the fundamental problems with these lessons and activities: they are about culture, not history...” (57), and because that culture is so often taught in ways that are insensitive and exoticizing, this strong emphasis of culture instead of historical events only becomes more problematic and harmful.

Another place the romanticization of Indigenous people and their culture frequently arises is in the stories that are often at the forefront of units about Indigenous people in classrooms with young kids. History is often taught to children through specific stories because it holds their attention more than a list of facts would, but these stories are often the place where this romanticization is found most. Jere Brophy addresses this in his article *Elementary Students Learn about Native Americans: The Development of Knowledge and Empathy*:

Egan and others, noting children's responsiveness to stories that feature romantic elements such as heroes fighting for good against evil, have argued that the elementary curriculum should emphasize such stories...Such stories are interesting and memorable, but they encourage the development of misconceptions about the Encounter. They should be replaced, or at least balanced, by more realistic treatments that reflect what is known about the motives and the information available to the historical actors in question, without either idealizing or demonizing them. (43-44)

As discussed, some people argue that these stories are an effective way to teach history because their romanticized nature makes them more captivating and more memorable, but these stories can also be extremely damaging to Indigenous people, and therefore they need to become less prevalent in curriculums. Brophy also talks about the fact that this applies even when they frame Indigenous people as the heroes of the stories because idealizing and demonizing in general just creates more alienation that is especially harmful later in the curriculum once the focus shifts away from Indigenous people. This is especially true because these stories are often the parts of a curriculum that are most memorable, which contributes to this alienation as well as solidifying the romanticization of Indigenous people. It also ties back into the theme of Indigenous people being overly victimized, or only being seen for one thing.

Wayne Journell backs up this idea of the stories told as part of history curriculums being overly emphasized, and a common instance of exotification in his article *An Incomplete History: Representation of American Indians in State Social Studies Standards* while discussing a study of social studies curriculums in different states that he uses throughout the article:

For example, the fact that only three states explained the way colonists systematically took land from American Indian tribes weakened from smallpox and other European diseases implies that the colonists had no problems expanding their territory or that American Indian tribes welcomed them with open arms. Although Weatherford (1991) states that most elementary students are annually exposed to stories of relations between American Indians and the first European settlers, at such a young age they are more likely to hear romanticized stories of Pocahontas rather than accounts of settlers knowingly trading disease-laden blankets with tribal leaders. (25)

As stated, although it seems like these stories are beneficial because they provide accounts of Indigenous history, and specifically accounts of the interactions between Indigenous people and settlers, but because they are romanticized and do not portray these events accurately, they simply do more damage.

These stories do engage students, in *Teaching Indigenous American Culture and History: Perpetuating Knowledge or Furthering Intellectual Colonization?* Micheal Kent Ward discusses how it is common for people to be very interested in learning about the cultures of different groups of Indigenous people, "... many of today's elementary and secondary school students are regularly exposed to interactive and hands-on instruction about the cultures and lifeways of indigenous peoples. Reflecting a hunger to know and a desire to experience something of another culture in an increasingly global environment, interpretations of Indigenous American cultures

through educational presentations are widely held and remain very popular,” (104-105), but usually what they are taught is inaccurate and romanticized because it comes through the lens of the settlers, even when that is not the aim, “The goals of this kind of education are usually carried out with good intentions, but in practice such presentations about Native American cultures are also just as often romanticized, presenting problems that usually go unnoticed or ignored for a number of reasons” (105). As Ward states, this romanticization often goes unnoticed because it is so widely accepted, and because it is so deeply ingrained into the ways that Indigenous people are viewed that it happens unintentionally.

Appropriating Indigenous culture in classrooms

One way in which the romanticization of Indigenous culture often presents itself is through appropriation in classrooms. Often, customs and traditions are taught about without context or in inappropriate ways, and because it is most common that the classroom is entirely or at least dominated by non-Indigenous people, these traditions are not always respected. Micheal Kent Ward speaks to this throughout his article *Teaching Indigenous American Culture and History: Perpetuating Knowledge or Furthering Intellectual Colonization?* and it comes up specifically when he discusses the way a case in which non-Indigenous students attempted to re-enact an Indigenous ritual was talked about in a newspaper:

Of course, this media description was meant for a regional non-Native audience; its obvious biases were never challenged nor were they recognized by the readers, as evidenced by the lack of any negative or challenging public comments in the editions that followed. On the surface such expressions of non-Indian ethnocentrism and romantic sentimentality might seem fairly innocent. Underlying them, however, is an old colonial

exploitative imperialism that objectifies the other and preys upon Indigenous peoples and cultures. (108)

This quote emphasizes the point that examples of appropriation are often overlooked, or further romanticized by the people who witness them. This appropriation is closely tied to the romanticization of Indigenous culture, and they often lead to one another.

Because appropriation is so often overlooked and ignored while attempting to teach or learn about Indigenous stories as a non-Indigenous person, it can have an evermore insidious effect and is therefore all the more key to keep in mind. Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo discuss this in their article *Decolonizing place in early childhood studies: Thinking with Indigenous onto-epistemologies and Black feminist geographies*:

For instance, is acknowledging the risks of working with Indigenous knowledges enough within ongoing settler colonialism? What might it mean for settler educators to encounter and tell such stories in places where the absences of Indigenous children, families, and educators are intimately connected with ongoing settler colonialism? Who can tell the stories of this place and the “more-than-human” things in it? These frictions also highlight the important challenge of conceptualizing pedagogies of place that trouble ongoing settler colonialisms through histories and stories without appropriating or “museumifying” Indigenous knowledges and without co-opting them toward settler colonial emplacement. (104)

This again ties this theme of appropriation back to romanticization. It also points out the fact that the absence of Indigenous people in the spaces where Indigenous stories are being taught is something that is a direct result of settler colonialism. This absence makes being conscious of

how Indigenous stories are being taught more salient and brings up discussions of who should be teaching Indigenous stories.

Appropriation is one that comes up even in classrooms that specifically attempt to combat settler colonialism by moving education into spaces that fit better with Indigenous values and views of the world, such as the education centers featured in Fikile Nxumalo's book, *Decolonizing Place in Early Childhood Education*. In this book, she brings up that one of the main criticisms of these classrooms is that they still have non-Indigenous people teaching Indigenous stories, "These critiques suggest that this work can act to reinscribe settler connections to Indigenous land and situate non-Indigenous educators as the transmitters of Indigenous knowledges" (9). This positioning of non-Indigenous people in places of power in discussions about Indigenous people feeds into settler's influence in Indigenous spaces. The theme of the difficulty in finding ways to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in non-appropriative ways is something that comes up throughout this book.

Nxumalo also spoke to this in an interview. When speaking about her thoughts on ways to teach Indigenous stories in respectful and constructive ways, Nxumalo talks about the fact that it does depend on the context and where the school is. She talks about how, if possible, Indigenous people should be present to teach about Indigenous stories in meaningful and productive ways, "And so, for instance, in Toronto, we're pretty fortunate in that there are some Indigenous knowledge keepers that do work with schools and [that] there's a possibility to make meaningful relations so that it's not kind of just a token come in and do a lesson and that's the end of it... Building relations with communities so that that work can be done and can be done in a world in a way that's not tokenistic and not extractive." She also goes on to talk about how it is these Indigenous people must be compensated, and how that can take many forms. She

emphasizes the fact that there is no perfect solution, there are always going to be risks, but working towards better education around Indigenous stories is critical and worth the effort, “But I will underline that, I think. As I said, I think it's challenging work and there is always that risk in terms of making mistakes, but I think coming to it from a good place and a place of not just wanting to check off a box, I think, is really important.” This idea of trying to not just be “checking off a box” is something that is connected to all of the major controversies Indigenous stories are taught in schools.

Place-based education and how it could improve these issues

The ways that Indigenous stories are taught are so deeply ingrained into the education system and the way it works, that finding solutions to them will mostly have to go beyond simple changes in curriculum. One way that some scholars suggest that improvements could be made is through the use of a method called place-based education. David Sobel, as cited in Cynthia Williams Resor's article *Place-Based Education: What is Its Place in the Social Studies Classroom?* defines place-based education:

[P]lace-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environment quality are improved through the active engagement

of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (185)

Place-based education is not only used for education about Indigenous stories, it can be used in many subjects, but because it relies so much on learning the history of the location of the school it has to include the Indigenous stories because they are everywhere. This means that Indigenous stories are woven throughout the student's education instead of being confined to one unit that tells the stories that have been deemed mentionable by the settler narrative, and which often do not change regardless of a school's location, which makes them all the more vague and unproductive.

Placed-based education can take many forms. There are schools that are located in or at the edge of forests that use that space as a classroom centering nature throughout the curriculum, but it can be used by any type of school, no matter the location. Many times, place-based education is thought of only as going into a forest or being surrounded by nature in some way, but it bears noting that place-based education is actually about working with what is around you, and if that is a city, there is still always Indigenous knowledge to uncover, and that nature does not have to be "untouched" in order to be nature. Fikile Nxumalo spoke to this in an interview, "I think an important point of my work and [the work of] others that are trying to think about environmental education with young children in less romanticized ways is that nature is not something that's out there. It doesn't have to be this pristine place. It's about working with what's there. And so for me, urban nature is also really important and can be engaged with children." This means that no matter where the school is, whether it be in the middle of a forest or the middle of a city, the location of it and the area surrounding it can be integral to the education it provides.

Although the form of place-based education used in the schools that are based around pristine nature, or forest schools, as they are often called, can be extremely effective, these schools can sometimes work against the idea of disrupting a settler narrative because they are often expensive and hard to get into, realities of an education system that is rooted in settler ways of thinking. Nxumalo speaks to this in her book *Decolonizing Place in Early Childhood Education*, “At the center of the processes is the remaking of land into settler property, replacing pedagogical, ancestral, and ontological Indigenous land relations. Early child education is not outside of these colonial processes. For example, the increasing popular forest preschools in North America are one site at which to interrupt colonialist representations of ‘pure nature’ and innocent couplings of settler children and nature” (39). This is one reason why the fact that place-based education can be used and applied anywhere must be kept in mind. In an interview, Nxumalo touched on the fact that this concept of using what is available is important when talking about using place-based education in schools that are under-resourced. This does not mean that the exclusive nature of forest schools is irrelevant, but it does mean that place-based education as a whole does not have to be exclusive in the same way. As Stacia Cedillo said in an interview, “The beauty of place-based education is that you can do it anywhere and [that] every place has a story.”

As mentioned earlier, place-based education is not solely used to improve education about Indigenous peoples, but one way that it does do this is by focusing on the story of the land and how that story might be viewed differently by different groups who have used it, such as settlers and Indigenous people. Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo speak to this idea of looking at different perspectives and versions of the story in their article *Decolonizing place in early childhood studies: Thinking with Indigenous onto-epistemologies and Black feminist*

geographies, “Perhaps one entry point might be for educators and researchers to inquire, alongside children and the Indigenous peoples of a particular place, how these places might be known and experienced differently through stories that highlight marginalized Indigenous stories of place and attend to the vibrant more-than-human relationalities of place” (103). Another point that is brought up in this quote is that it is not only the people who have used the land that are principal to the story. The land itself, as well as the wildlife, play an integral role.

Current ways of thinking in the western world are incredibly human-centric, which is something that place-based education seeks to disrupt. Nxumalo discusses this at length in her book, *Decolonizing Place in Early Childhood Education* when she highlights the fact that we are surrounded by systems that prioritize humans over other parts of the world and explores the idea of “refiguring presences,” which involves reimagining the ways we think about the things that surround us in less human-centric ways. Settler ways of thinking are essentially defined by being human-centric, and therefore to disrupt settler colonialism, we must move away from this.

One way that this shows up in education is when the idea of a child’s development is emphasized too much, causing the scope of what is thought of as an education to be narrowed. Fikile Nxumalo explained this in an interview, “And then, as you mentioned, the focus on developmentalism, which again, is always a very individualized focus in relation to children’s learning often leads to a very narrow perspective of what counts as learning if the focus is on developmentalism and on child-centredness.” These two terms, developmentalism and child-centeredness, are deeply connected though they refer to different things. Developmentalism is about the idea of focusing on the way that children develop, whereas child-centeredness relates to prioritizing students over both teachers and the world around them and distances them from these things. Nxumalo also mentions that

Sometimes critiqu[ing] child centredness is read as meaning that children's interests don't matter or that it means not caring about children. [But] it's not a binary of child-centered versus teacher-centered. It's more about thinking more relationally in terms of education. It does not mean that children's interests or children's curiosities are not listened to, in fact, it means the opposite. It's just [changing] the ways in which those curiosities are engaged. How can that be more relational ways and how can it be less narrow and focused on developmental skills or a narrow kind of literacy skills?

Place-based education often moves away from the prioritization of the child as the only practice because it is less human-centric in general, and instead emphasizes the connections and relationships within the world as the education center. This idea of deemphasizing humans is one that is often found in Indigenous cultures, which means that Indigenous stories are more easily incorporated, and can be incorporated in more productive ways, when these values are present.

The main idea of place-based education is contextualizing the information provided in classrooms, and outside of classrooms, within the physical area around the school. This usually involves including Indigenous stories in curriculums in more productive ways, as well as focusing less on humans, which fits in with Indigenous ways of thinking more than education that is entirely human-centric does. This requires a different understanding of what education looks like, and because education is so intertwined with so many parts of our society, these ideas can go beyond the classroom. In *Decolonizing Place in Early Childhood Education*, Fikile Nxumalo describes this concept, and once again, the concept of refiguring presences comes up. “Refiguring presences materializes place stories in diverse ways, encompassing critical narratives generated from situated place-based historical fragments, written non-Indigenous and Indigenous stories of particular places, visual images, and stories of specific plant and animal

species encountered with children” (44). These different perspectives are integral to place-based education, and they are a necessary part of any curriculum attempting to improve education about Indigenous stories.

The six main flaws in education about Indigenous peoples that I have discussed, standardization of curriculum, lack of accurate information about Indigenous stories, misrepresentation of interactions between Indigenous peoples and settlers, erasure of modern Indigenous people, and romanticization and appropriation of Indigenous culture are key as individual issues, however, they also intertwine with one another as well as a variety of other topics that are not explored in this paper. Throughout the process of my research, I was often overwhelmed by the sheer number of flaws that can be found in education surrounding Indigenous peoples and their stories and culture, although I was not often surprised. I came into this process knowing that there are many faults, but being confronted with so many of them at once, as well as beginning to recognize the flaws where I had not seen them before, made improvements seem out of reach.

The few problems that I have outlined here are the ones that came up over and over again in my research, but there are so many more. As well as these concerns within the education system, settler narratives and ideologies are so ingrained into our society in the United States that they seep into every aspect of our lives. Whether that is directly through flawed education about Indigenous people specifically, or simply the way that the education system is structured, they are everywhere. This means that simply changing education about Indigenous peoples is not enough, it has to go deeper than that, which is another topic that came up time and time again in my research. This is a daunting task, and one that cannot be fixed overnight, or in any kind of a short time frame. More widespread knowledge about this topic is crucial to any kind of change.

There is so much more I wish I had had time to research, including diving deeper into the complexities that exist with the current system, but even more so into the vast amount of ways that the system could be changed and improved. In the next stage of this project, I hope to be able to answer some of my outstanding questions about these possibilities, and about place-based education in particular. I am excited to steer away from all of the flaws that I have researched so far because, although they are important to understand, they also make change feel out of reach and I would like to create a sense of hope with my final project.

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