

2-15-2023

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Recommended Citation

Kerri J. Malloy. "Indigenous Spaces" *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003127550-52>

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Indigenous spaces

Unsettling the Status Quo: Memory Activism in North America

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Keywords: Indigenous, Settler-Colonialism, Communal Consciousness, Erasure, Land Restoration

Indigenous memory activism pulls back the mythological veil that shrouds settler-colonial violence of the past and justifies the present violence. For Indigenous people, activism rooted in memory is not invoking communal and individual memory to inspire their actions—the occupations of Wounded Knee and Anicinabe Park Occupation in the 1970s. The past is ever-present for Indigenous peoples in their travels across a landscape of stolen land, continually confronting the effects of the intergenerational trauma of forced assimilation and genocide. For Indigenous the memories of the past are visible and experienced in the present. The protest at Standing Rock and the Mi'kmaq exercise of their right to catch lobster in the 2000s are all actions intended to awaken and remind settler-colonial societies of the historical past, promises made and broken, to shatter the rose-colored glasses through which history is viewed and taught. The #LandBack is a virtual reminder that the lands that constitute the United States and Canada are the territories of Indigenous nations unceded. #NativeTwitter brings together Indigenous people in the virtual realm to call out fallacies and challenge the willful ignorance that pervades settler-colonial memory. Drawing on the history of Indigenous interactions with settler-colonial societies, Indigenous memory activists focus on displacing the amnesia that has consumed the settler-colonial memory.

At the core of Indigenous memory, activism is place – the geography, environment, and life of their ancestral lands. The relationship between place and Indigenous peoples exist outside of the constructs of Western conceptualization, which perceives humans to be above nature or

merely a mechanism that extracts resources from the natural world (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, 32). Place in an Indigenous worldview is understood to be an integral part of shaping humanity, social practice, and knowledge through individual and communal interactions with the environment (Tuck and McKenzie 2015, 32). Since time immemorial Indigenous peoples have lived in these places. They are "the heirs to vast legacies of knowledge about" these places which have "been ignored in the larger picture of European invasion and education," by settler-colonial societies whose imposed presence spans a mere handful of centuries (Cook-Lynn 1997, 9).

The use of memory by Indigenous activists to unsettle the dominant narrative that pervades the understanding of Indigenous peoples as something of the past serves to spark the settler-colonial state's remembrance that Indigenous people are of the present. Challenging settler-colonial erasure and replacement have been at the center of the Indigenous rights movements since inception nearly a century ago (Wolfe 2006, 388). In 1923, Cayuga Chief Deskaheh traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, making the first recorded attempt to remind the international community of the promises made to Indigenous people. Deskaheh attempted, without success, to address the Council of the League of Nations in the hopes of securing the fulfillment of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix (1768) between the Haudenosaunee and Great Britain to be recognized and treated as an independent nation free settler-colonial influences (*New York Times* 1923). Once recognized as independent sovereign nation-states, Indigenous nations were transformed into non-state actors and dependents by the intentional absence of memory in settler-colonial states that subsumed authority over their homelands and personhood.

Indigenous memory activism is focused on the restoration of settler-colonial memory of the past that does not rely solely on the historical and legal record created by the settler-colonial state. Memory is transmitted within Indigenous communities through an extensive body of oral

literature and tradition from one generation to another (Santiago et al. 2016, 19). Each successive generation becomes the caretaker of the community's history and memories, ensuring the continuance of cultural, linguistic, spiritual, and political cohesion. Passing on knowledge is a communal responsibility that extends beyond the immediate family to the broader tribal community. Indigenous communal consciousness is not dependent on written text; instead, it relies on each generation's responsibility to transfer memory and knowledge accurately, without embellishment, to maintain a cohesive communal identity. Settler-colonial institutions have generally dismissed the absence of a body of written literature or codified laws as unreliable and fictional. The undermining of Indigenous knowledge's archival genealogy serves to continue the erasure of Indigenous peoples and support Western interpretations to explain Indigenous peoples as wild populations that need to be tamed (Wolfe 2006, 393). The burden to defend the traditional knowledge systems, their accuracy, and appropriateness is borne and advanced by Indigenous peoples in the face of Eurocentric suspicion.

Motivated by the desire to reframe the atrocities of the settler-colonial project as a necessity to civilize the wild, untamed lands of Indigenous people, those suspicions support the selective amnesia of the promises made and rationales for what occurred in the securing of land and resources (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 39–42). Vine Deloria, Jr. expressed the essence of Indigenous memory activism as pushing back on the settler-colonial master narrative that had erased and replaced Indigenous people from history to secure Indigenous peoples' place in history and society.

For the most part, Indians have not accepted the mythology of the American past which interprets American history as a sanitized merging of diverse peoples to form a homogenous union. The ties to tribal heritage are too strong, the abuses of the past and present too vivid, and the memory of freedom too lasting for many Indians (Deloria, Jr. 1974, 2).

Restoring the fragmented memory of settler-colonial societies is essential to securing the past promises and ensuring Indigenous rights in the future. However, it has required Indigenous people to utilize the settler-colonial societies' legal and administrative systems that worked for their extinguishment.

Memory activism in Indigenous communities has been focused on achieving recognition and respect of the treaties. The promises made as European empires and their successors embraced the age of global conquest. The rise of the Red Power and American Indian Movement in the United States in the 1960s and 70s centered on respecting the legal agreements that had secured the United States and Canada's land base. During this period, Indigenous nations and people advocated for the restoration of the guarantee that tribes were "to deal directly with the federal government" and maintain their recognition with the constitutional system that had been forced upon them (Deloria, Jr., 1988, p. 194). The social, political, and cultural predicaments of Indigenous nations are a reminder of the continent's history that has faded from settler-colonial society's memory. Indigenous activism spurred the faint recollection in the public's mind of a history lesson from their youth, which led to an awakening of the fog of sanitized history (Blackhawk, 2003, p. 561).

Capitalizing on renewed awareness, Indigenous scholars moved to resuscitate settler-colonial and Indigenous consciousness by co-opting a system that long-ignored native and aboriginal cultures systems of education. Indigenous scholars, artists, traditional historians, and professionals convened at Princeton University in the early 1970s to establish a new academic discipline, Native American Studies (Cook-Lynn, 1997, p. 9). This new discipline was and remains centered on the development and expansion of Indigenous bodies of knowledge that will affect Indigenous affairs throughout the United States and Canada (Cook-Lynn, 1997, p. 9).

Centering Indigenous knowledge and viewpoints, this discipline is intended to transform higher education into a mechanism for advancing and protecting Indigenous land rights, sovereignty, and treaty rights. Through scholarship, Indigenous academics work to transform colleges and universities' pedagogy from western-centered approaches to Indigenous ways of knowing and doing. Incorporating Indigenous epistemology and pedagogy has not been limited classroom; the concepts and ideas have spread to the broader settler-colonial consciousness reawaking dormant national memories.

Recognition of the significance and accuracy of Indigenous oral literature and tradition within the settler-colonial legal systems gained prominence in the Supreme Court of Canada's 1997 decision in *Dlegmuukw v. British Columbia*. The court held that Indigenous oral history was given the same weight as the written and physical evidence that courts were familiar with; the court set a precedence within the western legal cannon that recognized the significance and accuracy of oral history's genealogy (Weir 2016, 160). The understanding of Indigenous memory systems was no longer merely a connection to the past. It was now recognized outside the Indigenous community as a conduit of expertise in Indigenous history, diplomacy, scientific understanding, and legal systems that had been shaped since time immemorial. Indigenous activism had been employed to unsettle the settler-colonial way of knowing through Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous legal scholars and practitioners had broken through settler-colonial jurisprudence to create an Indigenous space of memory activism to counter of erasure of Indigenous rights it long supported.

Indigenous memory activists are non-state actors who have used the colonial regimes' systems that worked to replace their existence to restore Indigenous rights and people to their place in the national and international narrative of civilization. These legal victories have been a

driving force in the surge of Indigenous activism in response to erasure, environmental degradation, climate change, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and reparations for historical wrongs. They contextualize these issues with the historical actions and processes that served to subjugate Indigenous people divesting them of their legal and human rights and push settler-colonial states to reevaluate their past.

In the early part of the 20th century, Edward S. Curtis, photographer and ethnographer, was hired to document Indigenous peoples in the United States before they passed into extinction. (Curtis, 1907, p. xi). Curtis spent twenty years documenting the United States' Indigenous people to record their way of life before their prophesied disappearance (Curtis 1907, xvii). His images formed the basis for the cliché image of Indigenous people in North America, the romanticized and stoic noble savage. Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip) has taken on undermining the misconception that Indigenous people vanished from the land. Inspired by a dream where her grandmother asked her "why she was not photographing her own people," she set out to photograph all 562 sovereign Indigenous nations in the United States (Fiege, 2019). The goal of Project 562 "is to unveil the true essence of contemporary Native issues, the beauty of Native culture, the magnitude of tradition....," that Indigenous people live vibrant and meaningful lives in the present beyond the bounds of stereotypes (Wilbur, 2017). Wilbur's work is memory in action. It pushes back on the perception of Indigenous people "as the leathered and feathered vanishing race" and shows the world that Indigenous people are "modern successful people (Wilbur 2014)." The project grew beyond its original parameters to include over 900 Indigenous communities, state-recognized tribes, urban Indian communities, and tribes that received federal recognition over the course of the project (Fiege 2019). The work to undo the misrepresentations encompasses more than showing Indigenous people as part of modernity; it

works to complicate and question the mythical history of the civilization project undertaken on the continent.

The boarding and residential school systems in the United States and Canada transformed education into a mechanism of genocide. Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their homes and their families to be raised and educated in western systems and worldviews. The burden of reconciling past atrocities with the sterilized national histories taught in schools is carried out not by government institutions charged with educating but by Indigenous people. Indigenous filmmakers like Michelle Hernandez (Wiyot) who wrote and directed *Douk* to bring attention to how native families dealt with their children's abduction by government agents and placement in Indian Boarding School. The film addresses the historic trauma that the boarding school era wrought on Indigenous families and communities (Reynolds 2018). While the film's purpose is to tell a personal story that would remind and further educate settler-colonial societies of forced assimilation of Indigenous children in the early part of the twentieth century (Reynolds 2018). For non-Indigenous individuals, *Douk* and other works that look at boarding and residential schools are reminder settler-colonial assimilation programs inflicted on North America's first people.

Indigenous spaces of memory activism are not limited to the temporal world; #NativeTwitter has brought Indigenous memory activists together in cyberspace. Using the hashtag to curate commentary and raise awareness of settler-colonial actions, they share experiences, organize and support actions to defend Indigenous rights. Connecting Indigenous peoples across national borders, movements have been spurred to restore the land to its Indigenous caretakers. The #Landback movement's mission is to return lands to Indigenous peoples and achieve justice for historical and present wrongs (Thompson 2020). The campaign

launched on October 12, 2020, by the NDN Collective to restore ecological health to stolen lands and return the land to Indigenous ownership across North America (Thompson 2020). Using #LANDBACK across social media, the NDN Collective brought together local and regional efforts into national movements in the United States and Canada to regain stolen lands. The reacquisition of land by Indigenous people undercuts the erasure and replacement efforts that spurred the genocide of Indigenous peoples in North America and destabilizes the efforts to erase and replace the original caretakers of this continent.

Unsettling the settler-colonial societies' mindset, which has worked to erase and replace Indigenous people, is a confronting of willful ignorance and failure to take responsibility to learn the multifaceted history of North American. Acknowledging the past by honoring the promises that were made undermines the historical fiction of Indigenous people belonging only to history pages and lacking a place in the present. #Landback and #NativeTwitter are more than hashtags connecting social media posts; they are the infiltration of memory activists into the digital world to continue the work of restoring memory to settler-colonialists. With the successes in recognizing Indigenous land rights and sovereignty, the genealogical offspring of the initial interactions between Indigenous people and settler-colonialists, the selective amnesia may be remedied, and the status quo unsettled.

Useful Resources

Books

Blackhawk, Ned. (2006). *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empire in the Early American West*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Warry, Wayne. (2008). *Ending Denial: Understanding Aboriginal Issues*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Podcasts

Let's Talk Native, With John Kane

www.letstalknative.com/

The Red Nation Podcast

<https://therednation.org/>

Return to Thunder Bay

<https://www.canadaland.com/shows/thunder-bay/>

Websites

Genoa Indian School Digital Reconciliation Project

<https://genoaindianschool.org/>

NDN Collective

<https://ndncollective.org/>

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