"Oklahoma was empty"
Storying Land in Oklahoma Land Run Settler Memory

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YOU KNOW," THE STUDENT RESPONDED, "where we dress up like pioneers and line up at a park to run and stake our claim. Just like the 89ers." Prior to my teaching in Oklahoma, I was vaguely familiar with the history of the Oklahoma Land Runs in the late 1880s and 1890s. The federal government had brokered treaties of Oklahoma territory—or "Indian Territory"—at that time with Indigenous Nations such as the Cherokee Nation through the Treaty of Echota and the Choctaw Nation through the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. While I knew pieces of these histories, I did not yet know about the widespread reenactment practices in elementary school in which school children lined up along a playground, dressed in pioneer garb with cowboy hats and make-shift covered wagons, waiting for the signal to run and claim a piece of the land. Nor had I considered the exact work schooling did in the United States to uphold particular structures of a settler nation-state society.

Schooling, as an institution, does particular types of work in the United States. This work, through policy and practice, includes the production of racialized and gendered subjects as well as the production of settler-migrant-Indigeneity subjectivity (Aladejebi & Fraser, 2023; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Pewewardy, et al., 2022; Rice, et al., 2022; Rudolph, 2023). Scholars have long looked to the ways in which schooling in the United States has and continues to exist as an institution in the service of settler colonial nation-state work (Sriprakash, et al., 2022). Part of this is the preservation and enactment of dominant narratives and dominant collective memory, including a collective amnesia of the nation's past and present sins (Sriprakash, et al., 2022). The reification of dominant narratives is not just a cognitive process, but also an embodied and affective process rooted in Whiteness in which some bodies can hold space within institutions comfortably and other bodies are Othered (Ahmed, 2007; McDermott & Simmons, 2013; Rice et al., 2022; Sriprakash, et al., 2022). So then, schooling, as an institution, reproduces and maintains settler colonial, heterocispatriarchy, and racial capitalism through affective and embodied engagements in Whiteness. The disruption of this requires an examination of collective memory as part of this reproduction and maintenance process. Further, as settler colonialism is a land-based project hinged on the elimination of Indigeneity (Wolfe, 2006), this work includes how land is

remembered and becomes a White space in dominant collective memory. As a result, *settler memory* is core to the functioning of US schooling, meaning that students undergoing schooling in the US encounter settler memory through various levels of adoption and refusal.

In collective memory studies, scholars primarily have focused on museums, memorials, and monuments, with educational institutions often under-analyzed or not considered part of memory production and transmission. Paulson, et al. (2020) argues that education must be considered as a fourth site that not only transmits but also shapes memories and makes them meaningful for young people. In education, memory is never static but produced through the labor of policymakers, educators, and young people, requiring active participation and production (Paulson, et al., 2020). Taking collective memory work in education seriously is to also consider how memory is "an instrument for achieving control, strategically utilising remembrance to legitimize political behaviours" (Paulson, et al., 2020, p. 434). If education is a site of memory making and settler colonialism relies on memory production to reify and perpetuate its structure, then education must also be a site of settler colonial memory making (Brown, 2019; Paulson, et al. 2020; Sriprakash, et al., 2022).

In this paper, I offer one qualitative study of how collective memory around land reproduces and maintains narratives and subjects of the settler-colonial nation state. I study how land is enacted, remembered, and contested through examining a yearly "Land Run" ritual across elementary schools in the state of Oklahoma. This study seeks to understand how adult participants remember this pedagogical practice in their own youth and how they make meaning of this event now. Currently, no studies exist examining how adults who participated in this event as children remember and make-meaning of their participation. While fewer schools participate in this event currently, a study of this focus matters to scholars and educators in understanding how *land* is articulated through pedagogical maintenance of settler colonialism. From participants' shared experiences, I seek to understand how this one practice embedded in schooling serves a larger conversation on the way schools participate in memory management of *land* for settler-colonial nation states. Drawing from Bruyneel's (2021) conceptual framework of "settler memory" I argue that settler memory maintenance and particularly *the storying of land* is key to schooling in the United States through affective and embodied practices. By storying of land, I refer to the ways in which land is narrated, infused with meaning and value, employed in settler memory, and physically enacted and embodied.

This paper will unfold in the following ways: first, I will situate the Land Run re-enactments in the context of the historical event. Then, I will provide an overview of scholarship on settler colonialism and scholarship on collective memory to situate Bruyneel's (2021) conceptual framework of "settler memory." Next, I will describe my qualitative inquiry and methods. I will introduce my participants in this study and how they shared and made meaning of their participation in the event. While all participants were critical of Land Run reenactments, complicated feelings and reflections arose. Finally, I will work through three key findings and the implications of this study as a whole. My aim with this paper is to contribute to the ways in which settler-colonialism is the core framework of US schooling as well as extend Bruyneel's (2021) framework to the ways in which settler memory gets taken up in the work of US schooling.

1889 Oklahoma Land Run: Historical Context

Initially—as with the entirety of what is now the United States—the land Oklahoma occupies belonged to Indigenous people of North America. With the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the US government forcibly removed sovereign Indigenous nations across the eastern United States, marching entire communities to treaties land west of the Mississippi, including land that is now Oklahoma (DeLyser, 2008; Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019). These forcible removals perpetuated cultural genocide, widespread disease, death, and devastation among Indigenous communities (Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019). By the late 1860s, as westward colonization continued across the continent, the US government forced Indigenous nations into new treaties which included ceding back part of granted lands to federal control (DeLyser, 2008; Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019).

One two-million-acre area in central Oklahoma territory became the "Unassigned Lands" through which the US government could grant land to other nations forcibly removed from other areas in the United States (DeLyser, 2008; Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019). In the decade that followed, a campaign known as the Boomer Movement developed. White settlers and several railroad companies began rallying for the federal government to release "Indian Territory" and "Unassigned Lands" to non-Native settlement and use (DeLyser, 2008). This included caravans of White settlers, fueled by sentiments of White deserving-ness to the land through political leaders like David Payne.

These individuals and families began encroaching on the land prior to the government's release of the land to White settlers, earning the nickname of "boomers" (Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019). By 1886—just three years before the first Oklahoma Land Run—there were already 36,500 settlers living in the territory through a series of legal loopholes, arrangements, and outright theft (Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019). Finally, in 1889, the federal government under President Hayes opened the "Unassigned Lands" under the Homestead Act of 1862, and the first in a series of Land Runs occurred on April 22, 1889, with 10,000 settlers lining up to claim land, primarily with participation from single White men or families with a male head of a household (DeLyser, 2008, Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019). Since Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the 1889 Land Run is often pointed to as the origin point of statehood and Oklahoma's becoming (Oklahoma History Society, n.d.b; Oklahoma History Society, n.d.c).

While land runs have occurred in other places where settlers have rushed in to claim land for the purposes of utilizing land as resource—the California Gold Rush for instance—the most famous are the Oklahoma Land Runs in which settlers could claim up to 160 acres of land. While Black Americans, women, and immigrants participated in the Land Runs, White male settlers—either single or as heads of households—became the primary claimants to acreage during the Oklahoma Land Runs. Following the 1889 Land Run, other White settlers followed in Oklahoma along with lottery allotments to primarily White settlers. In the first Land Run on April 22, 1889, settlers lined up along the boundary of the "Unassigned Lands" on horses and wagons. Settlers included farmers, businessmen, tradesmen, politicians, and more, eager to begin anew in Oklahoma territory (Oklahoma History Society, n.d.b). Many were desperate and down-on-their-luck, seeking a new home and fortune to be made, uprooting wherever their life began for something promising. Most often, White male settlers found a place at the boundary's starting line for a clear shot into the territory. Others rode trains into rail stations for more advantageous starting points when guns, canons, and trumpets sounded. Still others illegally entered the "Unassigned Lands" prior to April 22 so as to stake a claim more quickly—nicknamed "sooners"—and were

often prosecuted with legal action. At the sound of gunshots, trumpets, and canons at noon, the line of people rushed the "Unassigned Lands" to stake their claim. What followed was a chaotic and frenzied stampede of horses, wagons, and some settlers by foot running to claim a parcel of land. Cries and shouts from the settlers echoed and dust from Oklahoma's red dirt clouded the air as the settlers seized upon the land. The narrative echoes of these shouts and clouds of red dirt continue on in popular Okie memory.

Remembering the Land Runs and Reenactments

In the years since, the Land Runs—and particularly the first one in 1889—are deeply romanticized and looked to for narratives of hardy pioneer resolve and self-sufficiency to begin a new life. Monuments commemorating the Land Runs exist across the state, and the event continues to serve as a core origin and identity-formation story to the present-day state of Oklahoma. In addition, re-enactments of the event became part of the commemoration of both the settlement of Oklahoma territory and statehood. Shook (2016) notes that these re-enactments as commemoration—also known as "89er Days" are first noted in a March 20, 1912 issue of *The Guthrie Star*, but are already referred to as "annual." Shook (2016) notes that the earliest records of school reenactments can be traced to 1964. Since at least 1964, elementary school students across Oklahoma participate each year in Land Run re-enactments to commemorate the 1889 Land Run and subsequent Land Runs in the 1890s that began the settlement of the territory now commonly known as the state of Oklahoma.

These re-enactments often coincide with units on Oklahoma history and typically take place during the month of April, as did the first Land Run. Students dress up as pioneers and settlers, wearing slacks and straw hats or long skirts and bonnets and bring with them Conestoga wagons made from toy wagons at home to pull along with them. Some bring stick-horses. Then students line up on playgrounds or recreation fields, and at the sound of a horn, they "rush" the playground or schoolyard to stake a "claim." They hammer stakes into the ground and often the rest of the day is filled with picnics or "pioneer activities." In some schools, students even form little families, often consisting of a mother, father, and children, to rush the land and stake a claim.

In recent years, through immense activism by Indigenous Nations in the state and allied community members, several districts—in particular Oklahoma City Public Schools and Tulsa Public Schools—stopped elementary school reenactments in the 2010s. Major media outlets have not covered Land Run re-enactments within the last five years; however, the practice still persists in 2025. Several public districts such as Guymon Public Schools, Hollis Public Schools, Marlowe Public Schools, and private schools such as Wesleyan Christian School in Bartlesville, OK still host elementary Land School Land Runs, as can be seen through school calendars, YouTube recap videos, newsletters, and details about field trip opportunities (Estes, 2025; "MES Students Host Land Run," 2025; PTCI, 2024; Wesleyan Christian School, n.d.). Each year, Facebook searches show several other schools hosting and posting images of elementary students in pioneer garb, rushing to stake their claim. Further, news articles written by Indigenous leadership, such as Chuck Hoskin, Jr., the principal chief of Cherokee Nation, continue to advocate against the practice in areas where the re-enactments continue on to this school year (Hoskin Jr., 2024).

Critical scholarship on the Land Run includes critical historical analysis (DeLyser, 2008; Shook, 2016), historical gendered analysis (DeLyser, 2008; Smith, 2010), statistical analysis (Maguire & Wiederholt, 2019), discursive monument analysis (Swain, 2008), critical media

analysis (Shook, 2016), and family narrative inquiry (Hess, 2015). While some of these scholars address elementary school reenactments as part of commemoration efforts, there is no scholarship that investigates the experiences of children as actors and participants, nor the way adults who participated in reenactments as children make meaning of the event now.

In the following section, I detail scholarship on both settler colonialism and collective memory to situate Bruyneel's (2021) conceptual framing of settler memory. By focusing on how adult participants remember engaging in Land Run reenactments, I seek to understand how they remember narratives of Indigenous dispossession, land as property, and discussion about gender roles, women, Black Americans, and immigrants as part of their experience and meaning-making of this event.

Conceptual Framework

For my conceptual framework of this inquiry, I draw from Bruyneel's (2021) concept of settler memory. I situate this framing by drawing from settler colonial studies and collective memory studies.

Settler Colonialism

Settler colonial studies is an off-branch of the larger colonial studies field. As European imperialism grew, colonialism became a process in which the empire held "outposts" to extract, control, classify, commodify, and subjugate land, plants, water, animals, and Indigenous peoples as natural resources (Smith, 1999, Tuck & Yang, 2012). In time, settler colonialism became an extension of this in which settlers forcibly displaced Indigenous people to claim and acquire land for a means of production. Wolfe (2006) argues that settler colonialism is an ongoing structure rather than event and at its core is the drive to "destroy to replace" (p. 388). The drive to destroy harkens to a "logic of elimination" (Wolfe, 2006) in which the dissolution of native societies is done via the settler invasion of land—a drive and logic still at work today. As a land-centered project, settler colonial structures use a variety of coordinated efforts, tools, and mechanisms to eliminate Indigenous peoples and Indigenous societies as a way to acquire and maintain territory in a logic of elimination (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). Tuck & Yang (2012) argue settler colonial work is done through internal and external modes. Externally, settler colonialism extracts animals, plants, and human beings for the consumption and wealth of the colonizers (p. 4). With internal settler colonialism, biopolitical and geopolitical management of these resources become central to the nation-state project that takes place in many forms of control—including schools (p. 4). Through these modes, the structure of settler colonialism operates to justify a logic of elimination and a logic of settler occupation through which bodies are also racialized, gendered, and co-constructed through social relationships with land as property.

Settler Collective Memory

One of the ways settler colonial structures operate is the reproduction of a dominant collective memory to remember, forget, and disavow settler colonial histories (Bruyneel, 2021;

Khoury, 2023). Collective memory, or public memory, is most often rooted in sociology contexts and refers to "group-based frameworks providing context for individual memory" (Ritter, 2023, p. 192). Essentially, collective memory is a collection of narratives passed intergenerationally that structure belonging or communal sense-making for a particular group. This field of studies grew from memory-work of Holocaust survivors and post-war Germany in the way that individuals, communities, and the nation-state chose to remember the atrocities of the war and the Nazi regime. This includes the way in which histories are remembered collectively through curriculum, through public memorials and museums, and through the public stories told about events.

Collective memory is not only how we narrate history but is also "affectively laden and invokes habitual and even automatic responses" (Ritter, 2023, p. 195). Memories are constructed, narrated, and repeated for particular affective turns and cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2014) not just rooted in understanding the past, but also in how a community makes sense and represents themselves presently. Collective memory sustains national character and determines the values of a nation-state as well as who gets to belong, be represented, and count as a citizen and member (Tanesini, 2018). And, of course, as collective memory is constructed, so then it can be abused (Ricouer, 2004) through colonial logics.

Bruyneel (2021), drawing from settler colonial and memory studies, offers settler memory as a conceptual framework in which memories habitually reproduce erasure of Indigenous history, violence against Indigenous people, and Indigenous dispossession. Settler memory undercuts political relevance of memory through disavowing Indigenous presence. Bruyneel (2021) offers the term *necro-Indigeneity*, drawing from necropolitics, to identify how Indigenous people are firmly situated in a paradox of absence and presence, both here but made to be in the past or unalive presently. Necro-Indigeneity occurs throughout settler memory as a way to firmly place Indigenous people in the past, mask settler presence with indigeneity (so often settlers will speak about a distant Indigenous grandparent) so as to justify settler occupation, and through the erasure of Indigenous people and dispossession when discussing racial capitalism and White supremacy in the United States.

Settler Memory and Storying Land

One of the ways Bruyneel (2021) extends this conceptual framework is through examining how settler memory addresses and remembers land. In settler memory, memories of land position Indigenous people, settler colonial practices, and White settler masculinity in the background of political memories. Bruyneel (2021) argues the story of land 1) tells how land comes to have its political, economic, and cultural meaning and value; 2) is a story rooted in Indigenous dispossession consolidated with racial capitalism; 3) collapses the terms and definitions of land and property; 4) understands land as property through a construction of social relationships of gendered and racialized bodies; 5) presents land when it concerns what groups of people want but is absent in the story when informing about who people are in racial, gendered, classed, and colonialist terms, and what land means to them; and 6) positions settler identity and interests as shaping the meaning of Whiteness, anti-Blackness, and necro-Indigeneity (p. 90). Bruyneel (2021) posits that in understanding the story of land, one can see how land becomes property through a colonial logic:

> …shapes the meaning and treatment of bodies in gendered, racialized, classed, and colonialist ways. To draw out the story of land then is to draw out the story of people and life in relationship to the land, in stories that invoke oppressive experiences while potentially offering liberating alternatives about how to live in relation to one another and to land (p. 59).

Thus, the story of land in settler memory is an articulation of *how* land becomes property through racialized, gendered, classed, and colonial ways, as well as what land as property *means* to particular groups of people and how land as property constructs and is constructed by social relationships. The settler story of land is about a particular narration of land, enactment with land, and epistemological understanding of land to frame settler occupation, control, and subjugation of any beings who are not White.

Settler memory located in US schools then functions to tell the story of land over and again to reproduce narratives of land as property through gendered, racialized, classed, and colonialist terms. This can happen through textbooks, class discussions, field trips, or experiential and embodied learning such as re-enactments as several scholars discuss focusing on storying of land and land based curriculum (Bang, et al., 2014; Calderón, 2014; Lees & Bang, 2023; Lees, et al., 2021; Peweardy, et al., 2022; Sabzalian, et al., 2021; Shear, et al., 2015). For example, Sabzalian, et al. (2021) and Shear, et al. (2015) discuss the ways in which state standards across the U.S. present Indigenous people as existing in a pre-1900 context so as to justify continued settler presence and control of land, and Bang, et al. (2014) discuss the ways in which discussion of place in educational settings often begins with the erasure of Indigenous points of reference, histories, and cosmologies. These sorts of settler-land-based pedagogies continue to frame a particular story of land that leads to such curricular events as the elementary school Oklahoma Land Run reenactments. These curricular events work circularly to then reify stories and justify settler colonial occupation, ongoing Indigenous dispossession, and White settler belonging. Here, I take up this framing to understand how participants remember and make-meaning about Oklahoma Land Run re-enactments.

Inquiry Framework

My interest in this issue stems from the eight years I lived and taught in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, between a private independent school and a community education program. In neither educational space did we reenact the Land Run, nor did we host an 89er celebration. Even still, my living within Oklahoma for an extended period with awareness and knowledge of Oklahoma history does grant me insider status with participants. I can connect to much of the language and terminology participants utilized in describing their experiences in Land Run re-enactments. However, I did not grow up in Oklahoma and thus did not participate in any sort of Land Run reenactment as a child—though I still did participate in elementary school activities celebrating pioneer spirit. Because I do not share this experience with participants, I hold an outsider status that both provides me space to question logistics, lessons, and practices of the experience for further clarity. Further, being a White, able-bodied woman with settler status and US Citizenship, I share various qualities with participants that can further emphasize an insider/outsider positionality throughout interview processes.

I utilized a qualitative inquiry approach through semi-structured interviews with adults who participated in Oklahoma Land Run re-enactments as children and who currently still reside in Oklahoma, and then analyzed data through a critical narrative analysis of settler memory (Bruyneel, 2021). This inquiry approach allowed me to depart from a prescriptive set of steps and provided space for the research to unfold and extend. I conducted five interviews with adults who participated in Land Run reenactments as children and who currently live in the state of Oklahoma through a snowball sampling beginning with emails to current contacts in the state. I hoped to speak with individuals who, through childhood participation and current residency in the state, could speak to the ongoing grappling with lessons learned within the context of their residency in the state of Oklahoma. My driving research questions were:

> How do adults who participated in Land Run re-enactments as children make meaning of these events now?
> How do adults who participated in the Land Run articulate *stories of land* as part of their remembering and/or meaning-making?
> What affective movement arises in the *storying of land*?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using video conferencing software for approximately one hour. During interviews, participants responded to questions about what they remembered from the Land Run re-enactments; lessons that stayed with them from this experience; and what they remembered learning about Indigenous communities, land, women, and Black communities as part of this experience. In addition, participants also shared about what they wish they would have learned and how participation in the re-enactments continues to shape their views of Oklahoma and Oklahoma history.

I transcribed interviews into scripts for data analysis. Drawing from Saldaña's (2009) guidance, I also utilized extensive memo-ing throughout the project. In data analysis, I used a deductive analysis approach drawing from characteristics of collective memory studies and settler colonialism to engage how settler memory articulated narratives of land. I coded data through three categories: types of memory, characteristics of settler colonialism as articulated by Wolfe (2006) and Tuck & Yang (2012), and interpretations of participant emotions. After these three rounds of coding, I employed a thematic analysis of codes to examine collective memory engagement, narratives of land, and narratives of race, gender, and Indigenous presence/absence. In utilizing Bruyneel's (2021) conceptual frameworks of settler memory and storying of land, I analyzed how codes, categories, and themes exhibited *storying of land* in re-enactments as remembered by participants.

Findings

The Land Run re-enactments for children as an experiential learning experience did more than just teach students about a historical event in the state's territorial past. The re-enactments did work to orient children in specific ways within their communities: these events teach about social and cultural life, produce particular types of knowledge and identify some actors as more knowledgeable than others based on the narratives most platformed, and teach about a specific way of being in the world. In my analysis, I am curious to understand how participants share these movements in their meaning-making and remembering, if these memories reflect settler memory

as Bruyneel (2021) articulates, and how they narrate land as part of this memory. I recognized that land may not be explicitly taught about in the reenactment curriculum; however, I wanted to know how participants might talk about land in recalling their memories. Further, this study works to contribute to the gap of research around Oklahoma Land Run re-enactments while also providing explicit examples contributing to the rich research and theory on land-based curriculum and storying of land research, including work from Bang, et al. (2014), Calderón (2014), and Lees, et al. (2021).

For this paper, I am choosing pseudonyms randomly selected to represent each of the five participants interviewed.

Stephanie is a White woman who lives in the Tulsa area. She participated in the Land Run reenactment through her public school, and her parents helped facilitate the re-enactment as public school teachers. Stephanie often expressed conflicting feelings throughout our time together. She remembered the Land Run reenactment being a fun week with other activities like candle-making, but throughout she expressed disappointment and frustration that a full story of the event was not told.

Jean is a White woman who lives in the Oklahoma City area. She participated as a student in the Land Run reenactment through her public school and later as an educator helped facilitate the re-enactments for other public school students. Jean expressed deep frustration and anger at Land Run re-enactments and the effect these events had on Indigenous students she attended with and who were in her own classroom.

Mara is a Black woman who lives in the Tulsa area. She participated in the Land Run reenactment through her public school. Mara was very critical of the Land Run re-enactments and schooling as an institution, and she also expressed a deep pride of being from Oklahoma despite the state’s faults she named.

Laura is a Black woman who lives in the Tulsa area. She participated in the Land Run through her private school. Laura expressed a complex frustration and anger with the Land Run reenactment, particularly as her family immigrated to the US. However, she also expressed a deep love for her teacher to make history experiential for her and her classmates. Laura talked about feeling “other” during these experiences but not “othered.”

Sam is a White man who lives in the Tulsa area. He participated in the Land Run reenactment through his public school, and his parents and brother participated in the day’s event with him. Sam expressed his frustration with the Land Run in a matter-of-fact way, but often became more critical with the larger state of Oklahoma and felt more admiration for Tulsa as being “different” than the rest of the state.

Each of the five participants expressed a critical and often negative viewpoint of the Land Run re-enactments looking back. All explicitly named the erasure of Indigenous perspective and story as a central problem of the Land Run reenactments, and a few drew parallels to other historical events, such as the Tulsa Race Massacre. All participants were very forthcoming to share about their experiences. In all interviews, participants expressed some sort of frustration through pauses, looking off camera, or audible sighs as they recalled the events from the Land Run

reenactments from their schooling. Further, many of the participants struggled in how to make meaning of the event now.

Stephanie, for instance, felt that the experiential learning was important to engage students in history; however, she felt that the Land Run reenactment was not important. Mara also felt deeply upset about the Land Run experience, but she saw it as part of her experience as a burgeoning athlete to express how fast she could run versus other classmates. Laura seemed to express the most distaste and anger for the event, even as she spoke with a deep affection in how her teacher included everyone in the event. Jean, in particular, expressed a deep sorrow for how the event affected Indigenous students she taught and went to school with and the expressed desire for Indigenous voices to be centered as part of school curriculum. Sam, while less outwardly emotional than other participants, still expressed a disgust with the Land Run reenactment experience, though his criticality of the event and its structures did not seem to go as far as other participants.

When speaking about present day events, Sam shared his worries about the recent Supreme Court ruling on *McGirt v. Oklahoma* (2020), a landmark US Supreme Court Case in which justices ruled that land reserved for Muscogee Nation and nine other Indigenous Nations by the US government in the 1800s was never disestablished and thus still "Indian country," meaning that the state of Oklahoma cannot criminally prosecute Indigenous Americans for offenses within these domains. When asked what they remembered learning about land as part of their experience, all participants shared they did not explicitly learn about land during the Land Run reenactment or curriculum so far as they could recall, though the participants collectively used the word "land" 126 times in their responses across the 5 one-hour interviews, averaging 25 uses by each participant.

Throughout this study, several themes around settler memory and particularly those pieces Bruyneel (2021) refers to as the story of land emerged. As stated earlier, when I asked participants if they remembered learning about land as part of their experience, all participants said they did not. When I asked why they thought this was, Stephanie and Sam shared they did not know why. Mara shared that she did not learn about land as part of Land Run history, as it may have been a topic better suited for science. Only Jean and Laura offered corrections to their answer of no. Jean, shifting in her chair, shared that she learned about conservation through building log cabins in her class and expressed a gratitude that her teacher made space for this topic. Laura shared that she learned about land through a separate unit about Indigenous people such as how Indigenous people used all parts of land, naming how the unit described Indigenous people as resourceful. However, throughout the interviews, the word "land" was used 126 times: participants spoke about staking a claim on land, rushing the land, and settling the land. They spoke about what the land was like before White settlers arrived and what the land was like after settlers arrived.

Through Bruyneel's (2021) conceptual framing of settler memory, I understand these as part of the way *storying of land* happens through the reenactment's collective memory work. Here I discuss how storying of land appeared throughout interviews as participants articulated the collective memory of Oklahoma history, their personal experiences with Land Run re-enactments as children, and how they interpret both that experience and the larger lessons with which they were imbued through this activity. I will focus primarily on three themes that arose through coding: 1) land as place of White collective belonging, 2) land as settlerness through Indigenous dispossession, and 3) land as gendered, racialized property.

Land as a Place of White Collective Belonging

Stories of land within Land Run reenactments and the historical event of the Land Run situate land as place for White collective belonging. This collective belonging was most often signified by the use of a "we" pronoun—by White participants—about who settled land, who was present, and who remains part of this collectivity. Throughout interviews with participants, the pronoun "we" was often used not just in reference to themselves and classmates but also to an overarching collective that spanned back to the original "89ers" of the April 1889 Land Run. Often, historical events curated by actors from long ago become part of the "we" from which participants spoke, or participants became part of these actors—even in cases where participants contested, questioned, or criticized the events of the Land Run. This speaks to the work that collective memory does through social groups to develop and reproduce belonging to these same groups. For participants in this study, White settlers in a particular geographic location—Oklahoma—serve as the social group from which they speak.

For example, Stephanie spoke about the lessons students learned about as part of the Land Run reenactment. As she spoke, she paused often and looked off screen in thought:

> *I would say (pause) just like (pause) everything that we did historically was in our right to do. And we were just going out to claim (pause) claim ownership of (pause) of things to like make (pause) make a better world and a more civilized world…*

While throughout the interview Stephanie shared her frustration and lament about the Land Run re-enactments and the lessons imparted from the experience, her use of the word "we" points to the ways in which lessons imparted from the Land Run speak about a particular group of people's "right" to land ownership. Bruyneel's (2021) conceptual framework of the *story of land* is important to understanding how participants learned about belonging through this school event.

If the story of the United States is that it is not just a White nation, but a White settler nation, *land* is central to developing this collective "we." The "we" utilized by Stephanie in the former statement reveals a specific way land is narrated by a dominant collective—even when members like Stephanie are critical of the dominant. Stephanie articulates this "we" as staking a claim for the sake of a better and more civilized world. The transfer of land to property— discussed as a later theme— and land as being claimed are central to the making of the "we." In the 1862 Homestead Act signed into law by President Lincoln and through which settlers made claims to the Unassigned Lands in Oklahoma territory, settlers obtained land through three phases: file an application for a claim, improve the land, and then file for a deed after five years (Potter & Schamel, 1997). Stephanie's phrasing of the lessons as "making a better world and a more civilized world" demonstrates how the settler ideology of land improvement is rooted both in White control of land as well as *who* still exists in the present day. Shear, et al. (2015) describe the ways in which the United States' learning standards state-by-state often situate Indigenous people squarely in the past as a practice of settler memory. The Land Run re-enactments, as described by participants in the study, demonstrate the way Oklahoma state standards played out do just this work—the *we* is still present; the *them* in the past.

Participants also spoke directly about the affective turn of the "claiming of land" as inspiring a pride in the state and thus the larger nation-state system. Pedagogically, they recalled learning as children to be proud of Oklahoma indirectly through the curriculum and experience of

the Land Run re-enactment. In my analysis, I understand this pride of Oklahoma being tied to the act of claiming land as White settlers. Jean shared about this lesson, saying:

> *I remember it, and you know part of Oklahoma history, and how proud you are to be in Oklahoma. And you know…when when you're a kid (long pause) and (long pause) you're good at something, and (smiles and shakes head) we were good at spreading out and taking the land and being in charge (emphasis on "being in charge"). And you know that. You know we—we were good at that. And I mean, Whiteness was good, you know.*

In this excerpt, Jean speaks to the attachment of pride and being good at taking land—and directly names whiteness as part of this implicit lesson. This speaks to the ways in which the Oklahoma Land Runs are framed in elementary education through a settler memory lens of "taking charge" of a space. This hierarchical work—of taking charge—is meant to be taken up with pride as part of this event inviting students to a belonging constructed by white settlerness.

Of course, in participant excerpts Indigenous erasure and dispossession largely frames the White settler "we" and Black and Indigenous communities as made "other" by this event. Participants spoke about how this "othering" is part of the erasure constituting the belonging to Oklahoma. Further, participants suggested the work the Land Run event does for children is to fold them into the White settler heritage. This pedagogical work of othering seemed to be the goal,—even if the children's ancestors did not participate in the Land Run. Mara spoke about this pedagogical work of cultivating state pride with children, saying:

> *We flipped a narrative and made something that was negative and turned it into something that was very positive by attaching it to kind of like state pride. (Pause, smiles.) And so and you do that by, you know, as a kid, having all the patriotic songs, and, and participating in these ritual-ed events, and saying, oh, these are things that our ancestors did (laughs), even if your ancestors weren't actually doing it, you know. But hey, I'm in Oklahoma. So, I can share in this pride.*

The work of settler memory the participant is describing here is: 1) the move to settler innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012), and 2) the move to *be* an Oklahoman through reenactment of the Land Run, despite whether your own family participated in the event or were "original Oklahomans." Settler memory works to erase and dispossess Indigenous people so that White settlers are made indigenous or the original people of a particular place. By having children participate in settler memory, such as the Land Run reenactments, children are invited to also become part of the story of the "original settlers" or "original Oklahomans" through which Indigenous people are erased, displaced, and dispossessed from history. These curricular erasures are core to the reification of settler memory, bringing me to the next theme.

Land as Settlerness through Indigenous Dispossession

In Bruyneel's (2021) settler memory conceptual framework, central is the practice of necro-Indigeneity, or the work to make Indigenous people, onto-epistemologies, cosmologies, and culture a part of the past, no longer of the present. In *storying of land*, participants described explicitly how Indigenous narratives and people were not part of learning about the Land Run

reenactments, even if other curricular units made learning about Indigenous people possible. Every participant spoke to the curricular erasures of Indigenous people from the Land Run history, addressing the ways in which Indigenous history became separate curricular "units," distinct from Oklahoma history. Bruyneel's (2021) concept of "necro-Indigeneity" is useful to understand how settler memory functions in US schooling curriculum to position Indigenous people solely in the past and separate from White settlers so as to justify settler occupation. The erasure and separation of Indigenous people into distinct curricular units functions as a dispossession of Indigenous histories and discrediting of Indigenous epistemologies as inferior to Eurocentric, White American histories and knowledges. Laura spoke to this distinction in her elementary school experiences:

> *So it makes me upset that they were erased. There was no context given like, these two things were held in separate pockets. (Holds hands up, to show separation) We learned the Native unit, and then we had the Land Run. They were separate. There was no intersection.*

The separation the participant names is part of the work settler memory does in US curriculum to ensure settler moves to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012) are part of how children *become* citizens of Oklahoma or citizens of the United States. Settler memory is about how land comes to have political and economic value (Bruyneel, 2021) as belonging to White settlers and justifying ongoing occupation. So then, Indigenous history must be kept separate to ensure a more uncomplicated, innocent narrative of White settlers claiming land. Sam shared about how interactions between White settlers and Indigenous people were represented:

> *The only intersection was Thanksgiving. Between, I mean White folks and and Natives, right? Which is before the Land Run. That was the only kind of intersection of theirs, of those two groups of people that I learned about as a kid, which was not what it was presented as, right? So yeah. Their history was more like United States history, and it being like (tone lifts) Oh, and you know, and we, you know, gave them blankets and stuff like that, or they gave us that (tone returns). But we exchanged these things, and then, um, we had Thanksgiving, and it was all great, like. No one ever talks about smallpox or anything like that.*

Again, the naming of Thanksgiving as the only intersection reifies a story of US triumph and unity through which White settlers are welcomed into North America rather than being invaders and committing genocide and land theft.

Stephanie spoke to what she wished she had learned as part of the Land Run experience:

> *I definitely wish I would learn more about the Indigenous communities, you know. And, and all the other groups that were involved, that was not something that was highlighted. It was definitely taught as like a, (short laugh) you know, Whites only event.*

Throughout these responses, there is a delineation of Indigenous people being solely in the past, erased, or separate from White settlers. In the last response, the participant speaks to the Land Run being a "Whites only event" which not only speaks to the belonging curated, but that the claiming of land and land as property—discussed in the next theme—is constructed through *White settlerness*.

Land as Gendered, Racialized Property

By land as gendered and racialized property, I refer to how settler colonialism functions through a drive for territorial acquisition, collapsing land to property (Bruyneel, 2021, Wolfe, 2006) and in doing so is made accessible to individuals based on the intersecting lines of gender and race (and often class, ethnicity, religion, dis/ability, immigration status, and more). I specifically name gender and race here as land in the United States collapses into property for the service of patriarchal and racial capitalist enterprise. As I shared earlier, I directly asked participants what they remembered learning about land as part of the Land Run, and most participants shared they were not taught about land or nature as part of their Land Run curricular experiences, complicating my aims for this research. When I asked, "Do you remember learning about land or nature as part of the Land Run curriculum," their initial replies included:

> Stephanie: *Mmm. Um, not much.*
> Jean: *No.*
> Mara: *Absolutely not (shakes head.)*
> Laura: *(Long pause, looking up.) No, not much.*
> Sam: *Nope.*

However, throughout interviews, participants made mention to land 126 instances throughout their responses to questions about their experience in the reenactments, the lessons they did or did not learn about Indigenous people, and the lessons of how Oklahoma came to be a state. My understanding then is that the lessons about land from the Land Run were explicitly about land *as property* and not land as knowledge, nature, or ecology to be interacted with, which is why many participants said no. For example, Stephanie shared:

> *I remember thinking, like Oklahoma was completely empty, like it was just dust, (laughs) and there were no people, and there was nothing happening in nature really, and we like brought all of these crops. And you know it wasn't like all of these things were already in on the land, and we have, like, you know, figured out how to make more of it, or you know?*

This response clearly speaks to a learning about land as "empty" and devoid of any people or nature—a key feature of settler memory that scholars name (Bruyneel, 2021; Sabbagh-Khoury, 2023). Here we also see the collective belonging—we of the White settlers—bringing in crops as part of claiming the land to be worked for capitalist aims.

Mara described how she chose where to run as part of the Land Run reenactment, sharing:

> *…the land wasn't super like flat, like, there were areas that were like up high (hand signals high). Well, if you're into, like, farming, or like raising or ranching, and things like that, you want the land to probably be pretty flat, because it's easier to, like, tame or whatever. But as a kid you want a hill or something (hands signal high hill) like (tone lefts) King of the Mountain? (Tone returns.). Right? So there was like the thing where we wanted to get up there high on the hill, you know…[The teachers] didn't give us guidelines of which land you should choose, and which was the better the worst. The whole idea was being able to claim something as they did.*

Again, Mara is talking directly about land, but land as an object to be claimed as property, which is core to the framing of elementary Land Run reenactments. The whole idea, as Mara said, is to be able to claim something. In settler memory, learning about land is learning about an object to be claimed, which requires the erasure of Indigenous people. Further, being able to claim land is not just a lesson rooted in the past, but part of orienting students to ways of being a citizen. Sam shared:

> *[The lesson] was very like (pause) like a big emphasis on freedom and rights. And you know, like, right to ownership and land. And very American (pause, smile) sentiments like, yeah. Just like deciding that you can claim something that's yours, even if it belongs to somebody else.*

The collective belonging predicated by Indigenous erasure depends on the political, economic, and cultural meanings of land (Bruyneel, 2021). As Sam shares, students in this experience learn that claiming land is a part of exercising rights as a White settler in Oklahoma or the United States.

Gendered Property

The collapse of land to property is not neutral and is orchestrated through social relationships that are racialized, gendered, classed, and on colonial terms. Meaning, who land as property is for, who gets to have land as property, and how land as property is controlled are deeply gendered and racialized in their conceptualizations and functions. For example, Jean describes these sets of social relationships by saying:

> *I think of it as like what I remember it being was just traditional White families in—I think (pause). We probably learned, a little bit about like homemaking roles. Or maybe there was an assumption there? But like, yeah, the moms doing all the candle making and making the cider. And the man is out hunting or working on the land.*

Laura shared how the lessons around gender, saying:

> *We learned a lot of women in those days may have become teachers, may have stayed home and raised their families, and tended the house. And could sew, and (tone shift) could make something out of nothing (tone shift). And the men were hardy. And they worked hard outside and and you know, tilling and working the land, hunting if they needed to.*

Important to the first excerpt is that the participant names Whiteness as being central to learning which families could claim land in Oklahoma. In addition, through the description of homemaking roles, they also described learning who worked, traversed, and used land most directly—men. Land as property is socially constructed through Whiteness and patriarchy, or what Bruyneel (2021) names as White settler masculinity which "binds racial status to heteropatriarchal claim to land" (p. 35). Settler memory in US schooling, then, such as in the case with Oklahoma's Land Run reenactments, implicitly works these lessons into teaching children who gets to own land as property and reinforces heteropatriarchal binaries and gendered enactments through social relationships to land: women maintaining the home, men working the land. However, we must

note that White women still did work to settle the land or "improve upon it" as read through the 1862 Homestead Act. The domicile place of White women to maintain the home and family is situated in settler notions of femininity and gender roles.

Racialized Property

Of course, the *who* is not just gendered, but deeply racialized and complicates the way in which erasure occurs. For example, Mara spoke about the parallels to Indigenous dispossession within the legacies of White violence against Black communities:

> *You talk about the Land Run, and it's like, Oh, wow! This is how statehood is established. This is about folks getting to get their land and area, and this, and it's like, Oh, this is great! This is great! And so it seems like super like (Tone lifts.) Yay, Oklahoma. (Tone returns.) Then you juxtapose that with, like, the Greenwood Massacre (pauses) where Black folks had this land and they were in this area.*

In situating the Greenwood Massacre, or the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, in which White mobs destroyed hundreds of Black homes and businesses and killed hundreds of Black residents, in the story of the 1889 Land Run, Mara points to the ways in which land in Oklahoma is deeply racialized. While the Greenwood District in Tulsa thrived and was known as Black Wall Street, land as property is deeply racialized, and land as property owned by Black residents is not legitimate or deserving of the same rights as White settler citizens. Bruyneel (2021) speaks to the ways in which settler colonialism and racial capitalism are mutually constructive in the creation of the United States—and therefore Oklahoma as well. As land is made property, so are Black, Brown, and Indigenous bodies made to be property that can be controlled, subjugated, and erased toward settler colonialism ends of White land ownership. Further, Bruyneel (2021) writes, Indigenous dispossession in settler memory works to reinforce a Black-White binary presently that obscures a full understanding of race in the United States and the nuanced ways land and people are made into property.

Perhaps this is why the Land Run is so central to learning about Oklahoma history as Mara continued:

> *I feel like maybe it's held up because it's a story of triumph (raises fist) and the start of the American dream, so to speak. But that's not everybody's American dream. And it's not inclusive, because whose backs was it built on? Whose land was it built on? Yeah, you know. So I don't know. Maybe that's why. Because it was like (pause) the first significant showing of ownership in this state of White settlers, White people's ownership in this state.*

Land as property through sets of racialized and gendered relationships allows us to understand how legacies of the Land Run still continue through materialist, legal, and economic ways within Oklahoma and the larger United States. In platforming the *first significant showing of ownership of White settlers*, the lessons students take away from this event are a collectivity of White settlers owning land as property through ongoing Indigenous erasure and dispossession. Settler memory is key to the functioning of schooling in the United States and in Oklahoma as a way of fostering ongoing nation-state systems of belonging settler occupation as justified for elementary school students to carry forth.

Implications

Throughout this study, I have tried to highlight how settler memory becomes situated in US schooling by examining elementary school Land Run reenactments in the state of Oklahoma. Key to settler memory is understanding *the story of land* (Bruyneel, 2021) as land becomes property through necro-Indigeneity and constructing land through White settler masculinity. Further scholarship situates this work within educational and schooling sites, noting the ways in which settler storying of land and land education do specific work to continue cycles of Indigenous dispossession and erasure so as to situate land as an object to be claimed, owned, and controlled (Bang, et al., 2014; Calderón, 2014; Lees & Bang, 2023; Lees, et al., 2021; Peweardy, et al., 2022; Sabzalian, et al., 2021; Shear, et al., 2015). While my questions focused on the gendering and racializing of land, more questioning of how land is constructed through class and dis/ability would also prove useful to studies of the Land Run reenactments to further tease out Bruyneel's (2021) conceptualization of *the story of land*.

As mentioned in the introduction, larger districts in the state of Oklahoma have removed the reenactment due to the activism of Indigenous leaders in the state, but there are not yet any studies discussing the implications of the curriculum and activities districts now utilize in place of Land Run re-enactments. And still, Land Run re-enactments do continue in several smaller school districts throughout the state and many adults who grew up in Oklahoma participated in the lessons of the event. More research is needed to understand the roles, affective and embodied work, and motivation of educators who coordinate these enactments to address settler memory within teacher education and teacher preparation programs (Hatch & Rosiek, 2024).

Of course, with the Oklahoma government's passage of HB-1775 in 2021, which was part of the wave of critical race theory bans across the United States, along with the current state superintendent of schools' aim toward far right school curriculum such as PragerU, removing this reenactment from elementary schools has become more difficult and creates a microscope on public education with concerns to any topics along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and citizenship. This means that incorporating a curriculum that does teach about land justice, racial justice, and Indigenous justice has become more difficult within the state, and instead settler memory that reifies White settler masculinity, patriarchy, capitalism, and land as property remains ever the norm.

While the Land Run reenactments seem to be a very visible enactment of settler memory within schooling spaces, the lessons of the Land Run reenactments around race, gender, Indigenous dispossession, a White settler citizenship, and land as property is certainly woven throughout curriculum in the United States and other settler nation-states (Bang, et al., 2014; Calderón, 2014; Lees & Bang, 2023; Lees, et al., 2021; Peweardy, et al., 2022; Sabzalian, et al, 2021; Shear, et al., 2015). The Land Run is just one contextual example of how much Indigenous dispossession continues at a much larger scale as the story of land is produced in particular ways to continue Indigenous erasure. However, Indigenous sovereign nations across the state—and across the world—continue to contest the practice and refuse participation of their children in settler memory, offering leadership and narratives through which teachers and district leaders might look to as a decolonized memory might emerge within Oklahoma schooling and elsewhere.

In addition, I would also like to suggest that in a state like Oklahoma where dominant public opinion has not yet taken up environmental justice as a crucial political issue, settler memory does work within the accepted curriculum to keep citizens from taking the climate crisis and environmental justice seriously. For example, Bang, et al. (2014) speak to the ways in which

the same settler epistemologies frame science education through which land is an object to be made a study of (rather than co-inhabitants, kin, and teachers) and knowledge of land is an extractive, hierarchical process. Further studies might look into the connections and correlations between how land is narrated within curriculum across subjects with the desire to understand how settler memory reinforces the structures that have made the current climate crisis possible and all the more escalating.

Ultimately, settler memory does not have to be the inevitable curricular practice in a place such as Oklahoma or the United States. Scholars point to the many ways Indigenous pedagogies make new futures possible through Indigenous storying of land and land-based education rooted in Native cosmologies (Bang, et al., 2014; Calderón, 2014; Lees & Bang, 2013; Lees, et al, 2021; Simpson, 2017). While many adults in the state still adhere to beliefs of settler memory, all of the participants in this study spoke to a critical take on this childhood experience, meaning that educational spaces—within or outside schooling—offered places for critique and pedagogical possibilities beyond settler memory for each of them at some point. As Calderón (2014) suggests, through land education we can teach and embody ways of speaking back through creativity, rather than control, toward different futures beyond settler colonialism's grasp.

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