Beyond Reconciliation: Calling for Land-Based Analyses in the Sociology of Sport

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This article examines the possibilities engendered by land-based analyses within the sociology of sport. We examine how “Canada’s” Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action on sport reproduce a logic of social inclusion, one which assimilates Indigenous athletes and Peoples into settler models of sport. To consider epistemological tools for unsettling settler sport systems, we turn to critical Indigenous scholarship on land-based analyses and pedagogies. To illustrate the possibilities of land-based analyses, we examine lacrosse, an Indigenous sporting practice with roots embedded in relational interconnectedness with the land. A land-based approach to sport offers opportunities for revising the assumptions, values, and ethics underpinning settler models of sport through, for example, emphasizing the importance of community, healing, and land stewardship.

In 2007, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established by the government of “Canada”\(^1\) in response to the cultural, sexual, psychological, and physical violence and neglect committed against Indigenous Peoples in the residential school system. In 2015, the TRC released its final report with 94 “calls to action” to further reconciliation between settlers and Indigenous Peoples. In their final report, the TRC identified sport as an important focus of reconciliation, including five calls to action directed toward sport (Paraschak & Heine, 2019).

Although the TRC has undertaken important work, its process, approach, methods, and delivery were fundamentally shaped by the “Canadian” settler state. As a result, the TRC’s calls to action do not disrupt the primary function of settler colonialism, the dispossession of Indigenous land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Although sport scholars are increasingly undertaking the crucial work of examining sport’s role in the reconciliation process (Millington et al., 2019; Paraschak, 2019; Phillips et al., 2019), it seems that many accept the validity of Indigenous land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Although the TRC’s calls to action attend to a symbolic reconciliation on settlers’ terms, the calls to action do not address the conversation about the land that is now known to be central to Indigenous healing and well-being (Coulthard, 2014; Lyons, 2010; Simpson, 2016). Reconnecting and regaining land stewardship is crucial, rather than peripheral, to addressing the harms of settler colonialism. The fact that repatriation has not been meaningfully taken up in the TRC’s calls to action points to how the whole process might merely represent another “settler move to innocence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 11).

The TRC’s calls to action regarding sport’s role in reconciliation do not go far enough. With regard to the sport-related calls to action, providing public education on the story of Indigenous athletes (call to action number 87), ensuring long-term athlete development and funding for the North American Indigenous Games (call to action number 88), or making the “Canadian” sport policy more inclusive of Indigenous Peoples (call to action number 90) are all potentially good starts in recognizing, valuing, and helping to develop some Indigenous practices and sporting ways. However, here, we argue that these concessions work as “redistribution schemes” that are represented as Indigenous self-empowerment but ultimately normalize and reproduce colonial structures that serve as a strategy for alleviating settler guilt and discomfort regarding the tragic residential school legacy and other ongoing shape shifting forms of colonialism (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Coulthard, 2014). These calls to action are focused on the inclusion of Indigenous athletes and communities into settler sport models rather than a revision of settler understandings of sport through integrating Indigenous worldviews. In this regard, the TRC’s calls to action do not invite a reimagining of a settler model of sport; they simply call for including—or, rather, assimilating—Indigenous athletes within it. The primary focus is placed on inclusion; but as Cornell and Jorgensen (2019) have argued, social inclusion as a mechanism for reconciliation “fails to comprehend or address the distinctive situation of Indigenous peoples” (p. 283). In this regard, reconciliation efforts can easily become a strategy for producing outcomes and research results that problematically reconcile settler colonial complicity (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Janice Forsyth (2020b) has led the field in raising this issue, yet more scholarship is needed to elucidate the limits of an equity diversity and inclusion-based framework for integrating, or assimilating, Indigenous athletes into settler sport models (also see Peers et al., 2023).

What would it mean to, instead of “including” Indigenous athletes within settler models of sport, radically reimagine sport by meaningfully integrating Indigenous epistemologies within it. In their multisport analysis of 143 “Canadian” national sporting organization equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies, Peers et al. (2023) showed that although sporting organizations declare themselves to be inclusive, frequently these EDI policies “serve to reproduce the very exclusions they seek to address” (p. 193). The authors illustrate how, rather than focus on structural barriers to marginalized groups’ participation in sport, EDI policies frequently function to erase the experiences of these groups vis-à-vis including them in a laundry list of exclusions and issuing inclusivity statements that refuse the organization’s accountability. Peers et al.’s work demonstrates how performative initiatives that seek to include...
(or, rather, assimilate) marginalized groups into the status quo can function to reproduce harm rather than to integrate marginalized groups. The TRC’s calls for inclusion risk perpetuating a similar outcome; rather than revising assumptions about sport, the TRC seeks to incorporate Indigenous athletes into the status quo.

In this article, we engage with the work of critical Indigenous studies scholars, activists, and elders to imagine how sport could be revised and reimagined in response to Indigenous Knowledges and worldviews. Modern settler sport reflects hegemonic values that prioritize individual success over collective well-being. Emotionally secular, settler sport has a long legacy of not only repressing and appropriating Indigenous Knowledges, practices, and worldviews but also advancing the settler nation state and the accumulation of capital (Forsyth, 2007, 2013). Indigenous epistemologies provide another paradigm for understanding sport, one that links athletic achievement and participation with spiritual connection and communal health (Downey, 2018; Gilbert, 2012; Whitini, 2021). Indigenous epistemologies of sport also illuminate a reimagining of a connection between sport and land. Indigenous epistemologies refuse a conceptualization of land as a vacant and potentially universal location but demand that land be understood as spiritually and historically contextualized and inhabited by other-than-human beings (Forsyth, 2020a; Gilbert, 2012).

In this article, we center land-based pedagogy in the study of sport. Indigenous worldviews are, in many respects, incompatible with settler understandings of land as a mere resource or parcel of property. Rather than an extractive relationship, Indigenous epistemologies assert that humans adopt the role of stewards over land rather than as extractors (Brant, 1990; Simpson, 2014b). Drawing on the work of Indigenous scholars and activists, we attempt to illustrate the possibilities that a land-based approach to the study of sport has to bridge settler understandings of the geographies of sport with Indigenous worldviews surrounding land and place. Land-based analyses of sport consider and disrupt the ways that sport often functions in service of settler colonialism. Sport regularly functions to obfuscate Indigenous claims to land, for example, through normalizing settler state sovereignty and settler understandings of land. Critical Indigenous studies scholars and activists continue to call attention to the need to incorporate land-based pedagogies in scholarship across myriad disciplines (Tuck et al., 2014). In this article, we join in addressing that call.

Sport functions in service of settler colonialism through the ways in which the sites of sport become “de-placed” as sporting “spaces,” standardized and universalized locations that can easily be replicated or relocated seemingly anywhere. Land-based analyses of sport can function to disrupt settler hegemony by calling attention to the land on which the sites of sport are located, land that is embedded within a millennia-long legacy of sovereignty, belonging, and autonomy. A land-based approach to the sociology of sport is an epistemological tool for examining the importance of land within sport. As we will describe in detail in the sections that follow, a land-based approach to sport opens up possibilities for examining how sport has been and remains positioned by the settler nation state and within the project of settler colonialism. Land-based analyses also create opportunities for revising assumptions, values, and ethics underpinning the settler model of sport, for example, through emphasizing the importance of the collective, community health, and land stewardship. We consider how land-based analyses, when applied to sport, can create possibilities for drawing upon Indigenous epistemologies to imagine a more just, ethical, equitable, and holistic approach to sport.

In the section that follows, we position ourselves as settlers and articulate what brought us to this work of engaging with land-based analyses in the sociology of sport. As settlers, we recognize the importance of approaching the topic with “ontological humility” (Wilson, 2020) and self-reflection. In this regard, we certainly do not put forward these concepts as our own, but rather, we point attention to the important intellectual work of Indigenous scholars and suggest how this work makes meaningful connections between land and sport. After providing our positionality statements, we examine the importance of land dispossession in relation to settler colonialism and examine how a social inclusion framework functions to further reproduce the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. Engaging with Indigenous scholars’ writings on land as pedagogy, we suggest how scholars might imagine sport from a different epistemological standpoint. We discuss lacrosse as an example of how sport can be conceptualized through relational interconnectedness with human and other-than-human kin, and the land.

Author Positionality Statements

We undertake this article with an awareness of settler scholarship’s long legacy of harm upon and extraction from Indigenous communities (Chrona, 2022; Smith, 2013). We attempt to envision how settlers can better integrate Indigenous worldviews and knowledge into scholarship by destabilizing and moving away from an epistemological comfort zone. We are aware that the grasp of Indigenous Knowledges, and what has been referred to as Indigenous land-based pedagogy, are engrained in lifelong learning experiences and are carried through values of humility, respect, and commitment. Here, we are offering a modest beginning to an ongoing reflection on how settler sport scholars might think about sport differently. We wonder how we could learn from land-based pedagogy and, ultimately, how reconciliation through sport could be framed a little more meaningfully with Indigenous Peoples. Both authors have some experience working with and in Indigenous communities and wish to express their commitment to an ongoing conversation by providing their positionality.

An Indigenous elder who worked with Alexandra once reflected “people come to our communities, they want to know everything about us, about our stories, but we don’t even know who they are, they don’t tell us where they come from.” Western academia encourages researchers to “disappear” and focus on the “subject” of study, a one-sided extractive exercise that does not nurture a “holistic endeavour that situates research firmly within the nest of relationship” (Kovach, 2009, p. 99). For this reason, locating ourselves and describing what led us to this topic is an essential part of our epistemological and theoretical framework (Kovach, 2009; LaVeaux & Christopher, 2009; Smith, 2013).

In 2011, Ali moved to the remote Temagami First Nation (Teme-Augama Anishnabai) reserve on Bear Island, Lake Temagami, (n’Dakimenan) in Northern Ontario. For a year, Ali worked for the Temagami First Nation chief, Roxane Potts, managing the island post office and store. Ali was surprised by how quickly they were welcomed by community members. Ali was invited to bingo nights, language classes, arts and crafts events, and even into community members’ homes for Christmas dinner. Elders took Ali “into the bush” to learn about how to pick and fell a tree for firewood and to tap trees for syrup. The elders taught Ali how to tell when the ice on the lake became too delicate and dangerous to walk on during break up and freeze and what to do if Ali took an unexpected cold plunge. Watching the seasons change on Bear
Island, Ali gained a sincere appreciation for the land and its centrality within the Teme-Augama Anishnabai worldview. At the end of their life-changing stay on Bear Island, Ali was sharing a meal with one of the elders, Chief Potts’ mother, Ann. Ann, who never finished high school, paused thoughtfully, looking out the window at the bright sun sparkling on the surface of Lake Temagami, and remarked, “University can give you a lot of power to make change, and it can also make you forget what’s changed you. Don’t forget how the land changed you here.” Ali promised to the elder to do their best to fulfill this obligation and has visited Bear Island every year since leaving. Ali’s contribution to this article is connected to that promise.

Alexandra first pursued graduate studies with projects in the Andes of Peru and connected with Quechua culture and Indigenous communities of “South America.” She later became involved in different projects with Moose Cree First Nation and the Anicinape People from Kitcisakik. Alexandra also had the chance to “supervise” a Métis PhD student who accompanied her in some of these projects and reinforced all these important questions. Years of building these friendships and relations taught her the importance of reciprocity, humility, and respect. Building these relationships are crucial for anyone, especially settlers engaged in research. The question, “Where am I from and why am I doing this?” took her a long way back, to where she was born, in Santiago, Chile, where her Quechua “Bolivian” grandfather and great grandmother lived with her from birth until she was four, when she exiled to “Canada” with her family. Alex’s grandfather and great grandmother spoke Quecha (an Indigenous language) in her birth home, relationships that complicate an easy claim to being a settler. Regardless, the work of deferring to Indigenous worldviews is ongoing, and she believes that her birth home, relationships that complicate an easy claim to being a settler. Regardless, the work of deferring to Indigenous worldviews is ongoing, and she believes that her birth home, relationships that complicate an easy claim to being a settler.

Settler Colonialism, the Land Issue, and the Inconsequential Redistribution Scheme of Social Inclusion

Throughout this article, we understand settler colonialism as a structural, systemic, and cultural logic of domination through which one group (settlers) justifies the annexation and occupation of Indigenous land (Grande, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Settler colonialism is also characterized by a particular conceptualization of land as a form of private property for which humans are the exclusive and best proprietors (Wolfe, 2006). Settler colonialism is distinct from other forms of colonialism, which focus on extracting resources (Liboiron, 2021). In settler colonialism, however, the central issue is the occupation of Indigenous land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Settler colonialism constitutes an ongoing mode of domination that not only attempts to legitimize practices of claiming sovereignty over unceded Indigenous land but also attempts to naturalize the appropriation of the concept of Indigeneity itself (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Settlers seek to become “native” themselves/ourselves, a process that justifies the occupation of Indigenous land vis-à-vis the displacement, annihilation, and/or assimilation of Indigenous Nations, bodies, languages, and governance systems (Tuck & Ree, 2013). Critical Indigenous studies provides a useful epistemological framework for examining settler–Indigenous relationships, unlike other dominant frameworks, which tend to focus on diversity, inclusion, and symbolic reconciliation (Coulthard, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The term decolonization has become a widely used slogan for myriad processes. Slogans such as “decolonizing classrooms,” “decolonizing research,” and “decolonizing minds” are often the focus of academic and activist activities. Although these slogans metaphorically employ the concept of decolonization to reference a process of intellectual growth or discovery, these processes often have little or nothing to do with Indigeneity and decolonization. Tuck and Yang (2012) prepare a compelling argument that “decolonization is not a metaphor”; rather, decolonization is a process linked specifically to the repatriation of Indigenous land, a repatriation necessary for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Tuck and Yang argue that the indiscriminate and widespread use of the term decolonization operates to dilute the urgency informing the imperative of veritable decolonization. They write: “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1). Decolonization, conceptualized as both a conceptual and material practice, pushes us to a reimagining of land: land’s belonging, land’s value, and humanity’s relationship to land.

Indigeneity is an identity category yoked to a relationship to place and land. Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) (2005, p. 597), for instance, define Indigeneity as an “oppositional, place-based existence,” a geographically situated identity embedded within the ongoing legacy of settler colonialism. Settler nation states have represented Indigenous Peoples as part of a racial category, a designation that has functioned to de-place Indigeneity, ultimately consolidating settler nation state legitimacy (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). This deplacing of Indigeneity replicates and reinforces a doctrine of terra nullius, a Eurocentric logic that envisions land belonging to Indigenous Peoples as vacant and available for settler (dis)possession (Calderon, 2014; Lyons, 2010; Watson, 2014). Terra nullius is perpetuated as a misrepresentation of Indigeneity as an identity category designated by race rather than by place (Tuck & Yang, 2014); according to this logic, Indigenous land becomes vacant and available for settlers to unproblematically claim (Assembly of First Nations, 2018). No doubt, to link Indigeneity to place risks replicating a trope of Indigeneity as an identity category “closer to the land,” one that has been responsible for dehumanizing and infantilizing Indigenous Peoples and Nations as well as for devaluing highly complex and sophisticated Indigenous economic, democratic, and ecological processes (LaVaux & Christopher, 2009).

Settler nation states increasingly perform rites of recognition for Indigenous Peoples: Apologies are issued, special commissions are formed, and funds are allocated (Coulthard, 2014; Grande, 2015). The TRC’s calls to action may be understood as initiated out of and reflective of this process. Although settler states present these rites of recognition as demonstrations of progress and diversity, critical Indigenous studies scholars insist that these practices reflect symbolic strategies employed to both naturalize settler legitimacy and convey the settler nation state as noble, paternal, and beneficent (Grande, 2015; Tuck & Ree, 2013). Ultimately, this supposed recognition can operate to further undermine Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy. Coulthard (2014)—drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon (1967) and Taiaiake Alfred (2009)—argues that these supposed recognitions risk producing psychosomatic effects for Indigenous Peoples whereby the state becomes internalized as the arbiter of sovereignty, autonomy,
and self-determination. These psychoaffective attachments may not only further legitimize settler sovereignty, they may also deradicalize and undermine Indigenous potential for action and uprising. To this point, Coulthard argues that state-sanctioned recognition of Indigenous Peoples “structurally ensures continued access to Indigenous People’s land and resources by producing neocolonial subjectivities that co-opt Indigenous People into becoming instruments of their own dispossession” (2014, p. 156). Through these neocolonial subjectivities, Coulthard suggests, a politics of recognition is leveraged by the state to co-opt or undermine the capacity for Indigenous resistance to settler state subjugation. In this regard, the TRC’s “calls to action” may be understood as an example of what Coulthard calls “neocolonial subjectivities.”

This is not to say that the calls to action are inconsequential; indeed, the TRC has functioned as a disruptive force to the status quo of settler colonialism. We wonder how the process leading to these calls to action could have been articulated in a more meaningful way or through a more receptive framing to integrate land-based epistemologies. Cornell and Jorgensen (2019) explore how the idea of social inclusion fails to address Indigenous peoples’ distinctiveness. The authors discuss how social inclusion implies the work of identifying exclusionary practices that emphasize deficit and needs-based approaches measured through the leveling of mainstream socioeconomic standards. This approach can contribute to internalize negativity as we keep pointing up deficiencies within communities (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). The TRC’s calls to action on sport identify a number of issues: the erasure of important Indigenous athletes’ achievements, the lack of long-term resources for development and growth in athletes, the lack of support for Indigenous sport events, the lack of education on physical activity, poor sports participation levels, and the need for sport and capacity building. However, these calls to action poorly embrace or recognize Indigenous principles, aspirations and approaches to sport, physical activity, and well-being (Henhawk, 2018).

In addition, social inclusion follows universalist versions of what unifies and homogenizes wider undifferentiated society through individualization where, for example, the celebration of “successful” and “performing” athletes highlights personal achievement and carries values and principles that veil culture, communities, and nations (Cornell & Jorgensen, 2019). In fact, the calls to action related to sport can also be understood within redistribution and concession schemes that mitigate perceived inequalities through right-based and democratic values, the ultimate goal of which is to incorporate Indigenous Peoples into the societal mainstream. This approach takes for granted that Indigenous Peoples are in favor of being engaged in the planning and participation of, for example, the Olympics, Pan Am, and Commonwealth Games (call number 91) or of being provided with capacity building that would allow them reaching individual excellence within the “Canadian” sport system (call number 89). This “distributional politics” can be well received and necessary, but a “positional politics” could be more meaningful as it would be organized around the degree of autonomy or power—the political position—that the collective retains or manages to build within the larger polity . . . in which the survival and the autonomy of the community or nation takes precedence over the statuses of its component individuals. (Cornell & Jorgensen, 2019, p. 289)

From Cornell and Jorgensen’s perspective, these calls to action should be developed and articulated in a nation-to-nation relationship that provides the opportunity to integrate and express different approaches and ways that relate to sport and well-being. Indigenous communities may well be underperforming and underresourced with regard to the “Canadian” sport system and its measures of success, but they may, rather, appraise and value other activities, ceremonies, and land-based practices that carry different sets of meanings and significance. Besides, “Canadian” sport is known to display significant inequity and injustices while valorizing hypermasculinity, racial discrimination, and norms of abuse and harassment (Peers et al., 2023). We now turn our attention beyond the TRC’s calls to action on sport to consider how Indigenous epistemologies of land, kinship, and connection engender opportunities for a radical reimagining of what is possible in and through sport (Forsyth, 2020a; Gilbert, 2012; Welch et al., 2021; Whitingui, 2021).

Toward Land-Based Analyses in the Sociology of Sport

Although Indigenous Knowledges and learning systems are not uniform across regions and Nations, the production and transmission of Indigenous Knowledges are derived from intimate relationships with the land. Indigenous Knowledges are understood to be an extension of a relationship with the land (Luig et al., 2014; Simpson, 2014b). Beyond the physical environment, the land “includes all aspects of creation: landforms, elements, plants, animals, spirits, sounds, thoughts, feelings, energies and all emergent systems, ecologies and networks that connect these elements” (Simpson, 2014b, p. 15). Land as pedagogy is the basis of all life wherein the land is the first teacher and knowledge generator and wherein the individual human is considered to be deeply connected with their environment and has the responsibility to maintain respectful and reciprocal relationships with it (Styres, 2011).

A most eloquent account of land-based pedagogies is presented by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson through a Nishnaabeg variant of the story of maple sugar (Simpson, 2014b). The oral story is about a young girl immersed in nature, and as she observes it, she mimics a squirrel drinking maple water and adapts it to her situation, creates a technology using a cedar shunt to collect the water, shares her finding with her family, which then boils deer meat in the sweet water while learning about reduction and sugar making. All this knowledge is generated from the land via values of self-trust, curiosity, compassion, and family and is supported and nourished by her mother, aunties, and elders, who celebrate her discovery and learn with and from the land (Simpson, 2014b). Simpson shows how this process of coming to know is learner led and achieved collectively through embodied practices that create “generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, inter-dependent and self-regulating community minded individuals” (2014b, p. 7). Coming to know is grounded in a relational dynamic of reciprocity and interdependence according to which the individual bears the responsibility to engage with humility, honesty, and respect toward their environment. In return, the land becomes a source of knowledge informing and ordering humans to take care of their environment (human and other-than-human kin) through an ethic of care that is reciprocated and returned exponentially from the land (Wildcat et al., 2014). As such, learning is fundamentally experiential and grounded in holistic perspectives connecting physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual interactions (Styres, 2011; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

This process also values autonomy and noninterference in learning where knowledge creation meets the needs and corresponds
to the lived experiences (Brant, 1990; Castellano, 2000). Individual potential, creativity, and passion are valued through a non-competitive and nonhierarchical framework (Brundige, 1997; Castellano, 2000). According to these principles and this epistemology, there is no “absolute” or universal truth (Simpson, 2014b). The spirit world is also involved in learning and teaching through dreams, ceremonies, and visions. Henderson (2000) explained the spirit world as where Indigenous ancestors, spirit beings, plants, animals, and human spirits reside and interact. The story of the young girl coming to know maple sugar engaged her spirit, body, and mind with the spirit of the maple (Simpson, 2014b).

Land pedagogies are not constantly measured against a curriculum with set principles, “They inspire and affirm ancient codes of ethics” (Simpson, 2014b, p. 8). This relationship with the land escapes settler colonial commodification, extractivism, ownership, and contamination. Land dispossession points at the heart of culture, soul, meaning, and knowledge. Land-based pedagogies, Tuck et al. (2014) argue, challenge settler ideologies, which conceptualize place (rather than land) as a neutral, apolitical, and ahistorical setting upon which human activities occur. Instead, land-based pedagogies examine settler colonialism as an ongoing structure that shapes settler-Indigenous power relations. Land-based pedagogies center place and land within scholarly analyses and, in doing so, focus attention upon Indigenous claims to, relations to, and cosmologies of land.

Land education puts Indigenous epistemological and ontological accounts of land at the center, including Indigenous understandings of land, Indigenous language in relation to land, and Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism. It attends to constructions and storytelling of land and repatriation by Indigenous peoples, documenting and advancing Indigenous agency and land rights. (Tuck et al., 2014, p. 3)

Implicit within land-based pedagogies, then, is not only a critique of how settler-centered epistemologies tend to frame nation state boundaries and histories as fixed and uncontested but also a recognition of the legitimacy of Indigenous sovereignty and land title (Cornassel & Hardbarger, 2019; Tuck et al., 2014). Furthermore, although Indigenous Peoples’ relationships to land and place are diverse, place specific, and ungeneralizable (Lowan, 2009), land-based pedagogies advocate for an alternate conceptualization of land, one in which humans are not located as the central referent.

A land-based sociology of sport is an epistemological tool for examining how, and most importantly, where, sport is situated within the project of settler colonialism. Centering land within the sociology of sport may give the field an opportunity not only to assert its relevance within mainstream sociology—a relevance that Ben Carrington (2015) and Cheryl Cooky (2017) have persuasively argued is in a state of crisis—but also to assert the field’s capacity for attending to issues pertaining to settler colonialism.

Cultural (Un)Intelligibility: Translating Land-Based Pedagogies Across Worldviews

Despite the fact that the sociology of sport is increasingly including articles on Indigenous issues and featuring the work of Indigenous scholars (Arellano et al., 2018; Arellano & Downey, 2019; Essa et al., 2022; Forsyth, 2007; Millington et al., 2019; Paraschak, 2019; Phillips et al., 2019; Whitinui, 2021), the sociology of sport largely remains rooted in Eurocentric knowledges and worldviews. Applying land-based pedagogies to sociocultural studies of sport can present epistemological tensions; in this section, we briefly address these tensions and offer suggestions for integrating land-based pedagogies into the sociology of sport.

One of the ways sport sociologists initially began studying the geographic and physical locations of sport was through the study of sport and space or the geographies of sport. The publication of “Sport and Space,” a double special edition in the 1993 International Review for the Sociology of Sport, is widely regarded as the inception of literature exploring the geographies of sport. This special edition did the important work of prioritizing a spatial analysis within sport sociology, although it did not address the ways in which settler colonialism or Indigeneity are significant to the geographies of sport.

The focus on space, rather than the land, in studies of the geographies of sport has likely contributed to a conceptual myopia surrounding the relationship between the land and sport, as demonstrated by several key texts exploring the geographies of sport. For instance, Patricia Vertinsky and Sherry McKay’s (2004) book, Disciplining Bodies in the Gymnasium: Memory, Monument, Modernity, details an ethnography of War Memorial Gym, an athletic facility built at the University of British Columbia, “Canada,” in 1951. Vertinsky and McKay examine the ways in which War Memorial Gym, named in tribute to “Canadian” military projects, offers both a symbolic and architectural monument to masculinity and militarism. Absent from Vertinsky and McKay’s analysis of War Memorial, however, is an acknowledgement that the facility stands upon the unceded, traditional territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) First Nation. This omission is a significant one, especially considering the extent to which the concept of memory is a key theme throughout the book. This omission reflects how settler amnesia operates to legitimize and narrate the facility’s symbolic and physical construction and as a result, the ways in which a focus on space, rather than land, can reinforce and reproduce settler worldviews surrounding sport and occlude opportunities for engaging with Indigenous understandings of land.

Even when the concept of Indigeneity is discussed in literature on the geographies of sport, a focus on space, rather than land, can occlude analytical opportunities for challenging settler understandings of place. For instance, in the opening paragraphs of John Bale’s (1994) book, Landscapes of Modern Sport, Bale describes the “Canadian” Oka Crisis of 1990 to exemplify the social and political importance of the geographies of sport. During the Oka Crisis, members of the Kahnawake (Mohawk) sovereign First Nation—who held and held legal and traditional title over the land that was under dispute—refused to permit their ancestral burial grounds to be annexed into a golf course development. After exhausting legal and political efforts, the Kahnawake warriors, supported by numerous Indigenous Nations, blockaded the development. As a result of this resistance, “Canadian” government officials deployed the Royal “Canadian” Mounted Police to intervene in the political crisis that had emerged in Oka. Bale does the important work of demonstrating the links between sport, Indigeneity, and geography; however—we argue because of a focus on space rather than land—Bale’s analysis falls short of addressing the ways in which the events that eventually erupted into the Oka Crisis were shaped not only by sport but also by the conditions of settler colonialism.
Our intention behind this critique of sport and space literature is not to dismiss this writing—nor is it to claim that there is little writing on land within the sociology of sport—rather, we aim to suggest that a focus on land-based pedagogies makes available possibilities for displacing settler worldviews as a central analytical referent. Certainly, within settler worldviews, the concept of space makes ample sense as a conceptual frame for understanding the geographies of sport. Engaging with Indigenous understandings of land invites settler scholars, however, to revise our assumptions about and understandings of place. Land—Indigenous elders, scholars, and activists insist—is not solely a matter of territory or geographical material space (Luig et al., 2011; Simpson, 2014b). Land is also a source of life. Land is a source of knowledge, and land is the root of language. Everything—Indigenous worldviews insist—is physically, conceptually, and spiritually tied to the land (Simpson, 2014b). This understanding of land is a marked shift from settler understandings of land, which conceptualize land as a form of private property for which humans are the exclusive and best proprietors. As a result, land-based pedagogies call for an engagement with land that extends beyond land claims and territorial disputes, although these remain crucial. Land-based analyses extend beyond grievances for the fact that settler states have expropriated Indigenous land, although they consider this as well. Land-based analyses consider the significance and importance land has for Indigenous culture, knowledge, and life.

As an example, In Hopi Runners: Crossing the Terrain Between Indian and American, Matthew Sakiestewa Gilbert (Hopi, 2018) demonstrates how this epistemology shapes Indigenous sporting practices. In his book illuminating the experiences and worldviews of Hopi runners in Arizona at the turn of the century, Gilbert examines how Hopi and settler understandings of sport diverge from one another. Long-distance running, Gilbert illustrates, is linked to the Hopi origin story and cosmology. Runners did not race to win medals or accolades; instead, the rewards for competition were community health and collective well-being, a reward provided by the rain that the races inspired. In this regard, Gilbert indicates how racing is linked to a responsibility to human kin, other-than-human kin, and the land.

Tensions between settler and Indigenous understandings of land cannot be dismissed nor tidily managed. These tensions call for what Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree Nation, 2020) calls ontological humility, a practice of adopting curiosity about what one may not yet know. Managing tensions between settler and Indigenous worldviews also requires settler scholars to ask thoughtful questions rather than supply answers (Smith, 2013; Smith et al., 2018). It is from this ontological humility that settlers will be best prepared to apply land-based pedagogies to settler ways of thinking about sport and land.

**Lacrosse, the Creator’s Game**

For the Haudenosaunee nation, the game of lacrosse was a gift from the creator (Arellano & Downey, 2019). The genesis of lacrosse or “woven stick” can be traced back to the earliest history of Turtle Island (Downey, 2018). Several examples of oral tradition re-affirming the connection of the game with the land are presented by Arellano and Downey (2019), showing that understanding the Indigenous epistemology of lacrosse requires knowledge from oral history, Indigenous governance structures, sociopolitical dynamics, and the rituals of Indigenous nations. For the Haudenosaunee, lacrosse serves as both a ceremonial expression of gratitude to the Creator and a means to resolve both internal and external conflicts with and between communities (Downey, 2018; Robidoux, 2002).

Lacrosse holds a medicinal significance with healing properties and prophetic meaning (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Robidoux, 2002). Lacrosse holds significance in the afterlife, referred to as the “skyworld” by the Haudenosaunee; some of their members are laid to rest with their lacrosse sticks, anticipating the game’s presence in the afterlife (Arellano & Downey, 2019). Rules for the game change from one Nation to another, and the style of game is often different between Nations. The sport functions as a conduit for transmitting specific knowledge within communities and encompasses physical, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional realms, influenced by the distinct epistemological worldviews of Indigenous Nations wherein creation stories, other-than-human beings, dreams, ancestors, the afterlife, different Indigenous Nations, and healing and medicine practices intersect (Downey, 2018; Arellano & Vaillancourt, 2019).

In the mid 19th century, European settlers became interested in lacrosse and began appropriating the sport with the aim of forming a national “Canadian” identity. With this appropriation, Euro-Canadian settlers revised the sport to align it with settler society’s secular, competitive, and masculinist ideals (Robidoux, 2002; Zgory, 2010). When Euro-Canadians started holding lacrosse games, the Indigenous traditions and beliefs associated with the game were disregarded. William George Beers, who was involved in lacrosse and its sports organizations, wanted to cultivate a more “civilized” version of the game to satisfy White, middle-class settler values (Robidoux, 2002). To achieve this goal, the game was stripped of most of its original epistemology and influences, such as “styles of play, negotiation of rules, conceptualization of time and space, and eventually Indigenous athletes” (Arellano & Downey, 2019, p. 463; Downey, 2018). New standardized and “official” rules were created in 1860, and in the 1880s, the Montreal Lacrosse Club and the Athletic Association Amateur of Montreal announced that Indigenous athletes had no place in the competitions and prohibited Indigenous lacrosse players leagues (Fisher, 2002). Robidoux argues,

> Of course, Beers makes no apologies for appropriating an [Indigenous] game and promoting it as the national pastime. Instead, he sees appropriation as an accurate depiction of European presence in Canada and argues, “just as we claim as [‘]Canadian[‘] the rivers and lakes and land once owned exclusively by Indians, so we now claim their field game as the national field game of our dominion.” (2002, p. 215)

By enforcing these restrictions and altering the game’s rules, lacrosse underwent a transformation into a “civilized,” secular, and settler sport. By 1879, lacrosse had become such a symbol of Euro-Canadian civility and secularism that administrators of residential schools began teaching the Euro-Canadian version of lacrosse to the Indigenous children, the game becoming an assimilation method for teaching “white civility” and Canadian nationalism or a tool for “taking the Indian out of the child” (Arellano & Downey 2019).

Although Indigenous athletes remained prohibited from competitive lacrosse until 1990, Indigenous communities continued to organize their own games separate from settler leagues at community and international levels (Downey, 2018). There were occasional exhibition games between Indigenous and settler teams during sporting events and overseas trips. The Indigenous teams were able to easily adapt to the regulations created by “Canadian” and “American” lacrosse organizations. To this day, the...
Haudenosaunee Nationals Men’s Lacrosse Team (formerly the Iroquois Nationals) continues to celebrate traditional ceremonies associated with the game (Downey, 2018).

Over the years, the sport of lacrosse has developed on Turtle Island, and increasingly, the knowledge of this game has been transmitted from the Euro-Canadian settler perspective. Even though the Indigenous origins of lacrosse are recognized in “Canada,” the dominant form of the sport remains the Euro-Canadian settler revision of the game. Euro-Canadian culture’s adaptation of a traditionally Indigenous sport has removed the sport’s cultural, spiritual, and epistemological qualities (Arellano & Downey, 2019). And ironically, settler-funded sport for youth development programs have refashioned the Euro-Canadian Lacrosse to allegedly “develop,” regenerate identity and revitalize the culture of Indigenous communities (Arellano & Downey, 2019; Essa et al., 2022).

The relationship between land, sovereignty, and lacrosse is also taken up by critical Indigenous scholar Audra Simpson (Kahnawà:ke Mohawk, 2014a) in her ethnographic book, Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States. Simpson examines the Iroquois Nationals’ Lacrosse Team’s withdrawal from the 2010 World Lacrosse League Championship tournament in Manchester, England. When the Iroquois Nationals arrived at the United Kingdom airport, they presented their Haudenosaunee passports for inspection. Border authorities dismissed the athletes’ Haudenosaunee passports and demanded the athletes provide proof of either “American” or “Canadian” citizenship. The Iroquois Nationals’ Haudenosaunee passports were dismissed as illegitimate by British border authorities despite the fact that these passports “were signed and issued by the chiefs of the Iroquois Confederacy, a governance structure that predates the [“United States”] and the United Kingdom by at least three hundred years” (2014, p. 25). The team was forced to choose between providing settler passports—and thereby affirming settler sovereignty over “Canada” and the “United States”—and returning home. The team refused to provide settler passports, insisting that their Haudenosaunee passports were valid and legitimate. As a result, the team was forced to withdraw from the tournament.

Simpson points out how, through insisting upon the recognition of their Haudenosaunee passports, the athletes simultaneously rendered visible and refuted the logic that necessitated they declare themselves to be settler nation state citizens rather than as members of a sovereign Indigenous nation. At the core of Simpson’s analysis is a recognition of the Iroquois Confederacy as a governance structure whose legitimacy and authority remains unassailable. Through refusing to claim status as “Canadian” or “American” citizens, the athletes demanded recognition for the Haudenosaunee nation’s sovereignty and its claim to land, a demand that was refused. Simpson’s examination of the politics of sovereignty and land in the Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse Team’s withdrawal from the world championships signals a significant departure from Euro-Canadian settler understandings of sport and space, which often neglect to acknowledge, first, how Indigeneity is linked to political sovereignty and, second, how borders are tied to the legacy of settler colonialism over Indigenous land.

To maintain the course toward the self-determination of Indigenous Peoples, a true reconciliation and respect for the complexity of Indigenous sport is necessary. This can be enabled by favoring the resurgence of the interconnectedness between the physical, spiritual, intellectual (including the political), and emotional elements that are all holistically tied to the land. This initiative—Indigenous scholars, elders, and activists have argued—must be led in consultation with Indigenous organizations that place more emphasis on language, elder engagement, and self-determination as well as learning about ceremonies, spirituality, the cosmologies of Indigenous Peoples, and the land (Forsyth, 2020a, 2020b; Whitinui, 2021).

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that epistemologically centering Indigenous understandings of land can offer an innovative analytical framework for studying settler colonialism as well as revising and reimagining settler models of sport. We have argued that the TRC’s calls to action related to sport are articulated through a logic of social inclusion, one that conceives of sport as a secular enterprise wherein Indigenous sport is homogenized and undifferentiated through the leveling of universalist settler colonial mainstream sport guided by individual achievement. These inclusion efforts have been directed toward incorporating Indigenous Peoples into a system that has systematically excluded them for centuries (Labonte, 2004). The TRC’s calls to action were produced by a settler state-controlled process, which elides the importance of land as a “way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 61). The TRC’s calls to action, though important, may ultimately further legitimize settler sovereignty and reproduce the status quo with regard to sporting practices, principles, and values (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Although understanding that land-based pedagogy and analysis constitutes a lifelong learning process that requires respect, reciprocity, and commitment, scholars can begin to engage with this epistemology through centering the work of critical Indigenous scholars, elders, and activists. Through a land-based analysis that centers Indigenous Knowledges, scholars can begin to expand a focus beyond sport and space to also consider the material, political, and spiritual implications of sport’s inextricable relationship with Indigeneity, settler colonialism, and the land. Through our focus on the sport of lacrosse, we have attempted to reveal how Indigenous models of sport prioritize a reciprocal embodied engagement with the land (Downey, 2018; Simpson, 2022; Whitinui, 2021).

A question that remains for many is how to do this work as settler scholars. Universities and academic scholarship have a long legacy of sustaining imbalanced settler–Indigenous power relations. As members of academia, settler scholars have an ethical responsibility to attend to these power imbalances (Grande, 2015; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2013; Smith et al., 2018). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Curve Lake First Nation) identifies the appropriate role of settler scholars as the “holder[s] of space” (2017b, p. 15). Simpson outlines how settler scholars have a responsibility to “divest[] power and authority as academic[s]” and “place[] responsibility where it belong[s]: with the leaders and the intellectuals of the [Indigenous] community” (2017a, p. 15). Simpson expounds that the appropriate role for settlers is to “create[] the space to put Nishnaabeg [Indigenous] intelligence at the center and to use its energy to drive the project” (2017b, p. 1). Through centering the importance of land in our scholarship, we have attempted to illuminate the intellectual work that critical Indigenous studies scholars, activists, and elders have done to help us—humanity—conceptualize our “right relationship” to our human kin, other-than-human kin, and the land (Castellano, 2000). Bringing land-based analyses into sport sociology necessitates a radical ontological shift, one directed toward properly recognizing and valuing Indigenous and non-Western forms of knowledge as legitimate forms of knowing.
Notes

1. In this article, we place quotation marks around “Canada” and the “United States” in recognition of the fact that the borders of these nation states remain contested by numerous Indigenous Nations, whose legal and sovereign status predates “Canada” by centuries if not millennia.

2. In 2022, the Iroquois Nationals changed their name to the Haudenosaunee Nationals Men’s Lacrosse Team. For the sake of consistency, we use the language Simpson used in her 2014 book.

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