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# Naming beyond the white settler colonial gaze in educational research

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I describe the ways educational research often calls us out our names, meaning that educational researchers often name communities not as they are but as the academy needs them to be along damaging logics of erasure and deficiency. I use Morrison's concept of the White gaze, Tuck's concepts of damage-centered and desire-based research, and other contemporary scholarship on settler colonialism, White supremacy, and education to offer ways of naming in educational research beyond the White settler gaze. Finally, I look to hashtag naming in current social movements (e.g. #BlackLivesMatter, #DearNativeYouth #NotYourModelMinority) to imagine educational research that understands the naming of the communities of our work as informed by movement speech, the sort of naming that can save lives and show us and others who we are and desire to be.

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Naming; settler colonialism; Indigenous education; Black education; research and social movements

## Land Acknowledgment

*I acknowledge and work to honorably write this article on the ancestral Native homelands of those who walked here before us and those who still walk here, keeping in mind the integrity of this territory where area Native peoples identify as the Duwamish, Suquamish, Snoqualmie, Snohomish, and Puyallup, as well as the tribes of the Muckleshoot, Tulalip and their descendants. I am grateful to respectfully live and work as a guest on these lands with the Coast Salish and Native people who call this home.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

A few years ago, after reading some tweets about education that employed common deficit-based terms for students of color, I tweeted this reply: "And by 'minority,' 'diverse,' 'at-risk,' 'underserved,' 'achievement gapped,' 'struggling,' 'free & reduced,' you mean us?" (Paris, 2015). Indeed, educational research often calls us out our names, meaning that educational researchers often name people and communities not as they are but as the academy needs them to be along damaging logics of erasure and deficiency. As a scholar of color – I am Black, born on Ohlone homelands in San Francisco, California to a White mother and a Black Jamaican father – I work with the understanding that our cultural ways of being as people of color are not deficient (while educational research and practice often works within the opposite understanding).<sup>2</sup> And as a cis-hetero, non-disabled, light-skinned man, my understanding is also situated in layers of

unjust power; unjust power I must continually commit to divesting from in the ongoing work toward justice in education. In this article, I offer some thinking about naming and justice work in educational research, and I do so as someone whose life and work is implicated in my critique in multiple ways. In calling attention to the importance of naming in this piece, I join many others who have reminded us over time that, as bell hooks writes, 'Naming is a serious process. It has been of crucial concern for many individuals within oppressed groups, who struggle for self-recovery, for self-determination' (hooks, 1989, p. 166).

One thing 'urban,' 'diverse,' 'minority,' 'underserved,' 'at-risk' and so many terms our fields and society use to name students of color have in common is their avoidance of the prominence of race, racialization, and racism. This erasure – and it is an erasure – is no coincidence. It is part of a schooling system, of which educational research is part, which continues to perpetuate beliefs in the superiority of White, middle-class, monolingual, cis-hetero-patriarchal-ableist ways of being at the expense of all others. Indeed, notions of 'difference' are generally set against these norms, so that difference and diversity are implicated in projects of erasure and deficiency (even as they claim to be projects of 'inclusion'), codes for what is not White, not cis, not dominant English monolingual, and so on. We might ask, 'different' from what? Different from whom? And while my work in this article focuses importantly on race, racialization, and also land, this larger point about namings and so-called difference foregrounds the ways crucial and intersecting memberships, communities, and identities are subjected to this larger project of erasure and deficiency (Brooks, 2018; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016).

I offer these early meditations with the knowledge that race, of course, is a White colonial social construct (Grande, 2015; Kendi, 2016), itself formed and maintained to forward that imperial anti-Indigenous, anti-Black project. Indeed, what the U.S. nation-state counts to race a person has been a fundamental part of settler colonialism and White supremacy, with hegemonic classifying regimes attempting to eliminate the numbers of Native people as part of dispossession of land (through blood quantum policies) and increase or maintain the numbers of Black people for continued stolen labor (through one drop policies) (Grande, 2018; Wolfe, 2006). As well, race is of course not the only axis on which oppression turns, which is particularly salient for Native communities where land has always been central (Grande, 2018). And yet, race matters immensely not only in ongoing systems of oppression, but also in the ways we understand and love ourselves, and in ongoing resistance and liberation work (Paris, 2017; Sharpe, 2016).

Morrison's (1998) notion of the White gaze is helpful here. In other work, I have learned with Morrison's notion to think about pedagogy beyond the White gaze (Paris & Alim, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). In a 1998 interview, Morrison responded to misguided critiques of her books as not centering White characters and worlds with the rebuttal: 'as though our lives have no meaning and no depth without the White gaze. And I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the White gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books.' How would we name, research, and know ourselves and others if this gaze weren't the dominant one through which education (research and practice) was imagined and enacted?

Terms like 'non-White' and, in ways perhaps more subtly, 'minority' and 'diverse' are always filtered through the White gaze in that they are explicitly and implicitly set against whiteness as the norm. 'Non-White' is a personal favorite as it names people of color in the negative, in absence of that which all else aspires to. As Tatum (1997) has noted, pointing to the ludicrous nature of the term 'non-White,' we might imagine the patriarchal erasure of calling women 'non-men.' 'Minority' is somewhat less explicitly filtered through the White gaze, though it remains a problematic less-than, deficit-based naming. Minority as a term is used to identify (and contain) a people or community by their smaller number in relation to White people and is often used instead of naming race, tribal community/nation, migration, or other important markers of membership. As well, minority is often used when the purported numerical rationale for the term is not even true: the work a person or society must do to imagine education spaces as 'majority-

minority' is instructive – it doesn't even make basic sense! 'Difference,' too, as I have offered, is even more subtly filtered through this gaze.

'Diversity' and 'inclusion' may be the subtlest, and so in some ways the most dangerous, in their centering of whiteness. The terms are used to name students ('diverse students') and processes of assimilation (inclusion into what?) often without naming race and other intersecting and crucial memberships (e.g. gender, sexuality, dis/ability, language) or the ways educational settings (and studies of such settings) position those memberships. Work in dis/ability studies has contributed particularly nuanced critiques of rhetorics of difference, diversity, and inclusion that, while forwarding goals of 'access,' have also long been an axis of discriminatory sorting at the intersections of race, language, gender, class, and dis/ability (Artiles, Dorn, & Bal, 2016). And, of course, the example of so-called school 'integration' is helpful in seeing the ways creating 'diverse' educational settings through 'inclusion' has always been understood in a one-way assimilate or fail model filtered through the White gaze: enforcing the Brown v. Board decision did not involve bussing White students into Black schools and firing White teachers (Walker, 2013). All of these erasures, these less-than namings, and framings operate on explicit and implicit logics of White superiority.

### Settler colonial erasures

One thing I did not understand well when I wrote that opening tweet back in 2015 or in my earlier research and theorizing more generally, is that such erasure through naming is a foundational tactic of ongoing settler colonialism and the ways violent erasures through education – education as a space of erasure – is an expected part of this structure. My own early and ongoing awakening to this fact is particularly indebted to the work of Indigenous women (Bang et al., 2014; Grande, 2015; Keene, 2015; Pihama, 2019; Smith, 1999; Tuck, 2009). In the U.S. nation-state context, settler colonialism as it intertwines with White supremacy is fundamentally about the ongoing legacies of land theft, genocide, and enslavement. Schooling and research on schooling have played and continue to play a key role in these ongoing processes (Dumas, 2018; Grande, 2018). For this reason, understanding the ways Native and Black people, communities, and spaces are named and framed in educational research is particularly foundational to intervening in the broader issue of deficiency-based naming.

Erasure and deficiency-based naming in our fields can be understood through what Tuck (2009) has called *damage-centered* research. The history and ongoing practice of such research have been waged for centuries against Indigenous, Black, and other people of color by the academic settler colonial project (Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2014, 2018). Tuck (2009) provides a way forward through her conception of *desire-based* research, which 'accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities' (p. 417). In essence, a desire-based naming would recognize our full humanity in critical and nuanced ways, which is always necessarily linked to our racialized, linguistic, placed, community, and/or cultural memberships.

The naming of people and places has been a violent practice of control and erasure against Indigenous peoples and lands across the centuries of White settlement on Turtle Island (currently most commonly referred to as the nation-states of the United States, Canada, and Mexico). As I acknowledged earlier, I write this article on the tribal homelands of the Duwamish (dx<sup>w</sup>dəwəbəs), Suquamish (suq<sup>w</sup>əbəs), Snoqualmie (sduk<sup>w</sup>albix<sup>w</sup>), and Puyallup (puyaləp), as well as people of the Muckleshoot (bəqəlšut) and Tulalip (dx<sup>w</sup>liləp) Tribes, and the shared homelands of other Native and Coast Salish peoples in what is currently referred to as the Seattle (siʔat) area, but which is originally known to Duwamish and other Coast Salish peoples as dzidzələlič (among other place-names for locations in and around present-day Seattle). This original place-name can be translated from Lushootseed as 'Little Turning Around Place' or 'Little Crossing-Over Place' (Nancy Jo

Bob and Tami Hohn, personal communication; Waterman, 1922; Thrush, 2017). On a clear day, from the campus of the University of Washington where I work, you can see glacier-capped Mount Rainier. Washington. Rainier. George Washington, enslaver of Black people, dispossessor of Native lands, and first U.S. President, is a namesake many will know. Rainier many will not. Peter Rainier, a Rear Admiral in the English Navy, was the buddy of English Admiral George Vancouver, who renamed the mountain after his friend and fellow imperial agent during Vancouver's voyage in 1792.<sup>3</sup> Mount Rainier, to the many Native peoples whose homelands have existed in its abundant presence since time immemorial, is known by its original place-names, including Tacoma or Tahoma (təq'wubəd), which can be translated as the mountain of 'Closed Water' (referencing the glacier cap) (Tami Hohn, personal communication). The Salish Sea or what many Native peoples referred to as Whulch (x'wəlc̓, meaning 'sea' or 'salt water'), much of which is currently commonly referred to as the Puget Sound, was also named by Vancouver after a fellow naval buddy, his officer Peter Puget. A violent pattern is emerging: erase the Indigenous place-name (and attempt to erase the people) and name the place after yourself (or your friend), in the image of White men: Think also of Mount Rushmore, on sacred Lakota homelands in H́é Sápa (the Black Hills) (Alayna Eagle Shield, personal communication).

And of course, this naming can be violent in still other ways: more than twenty states are named after the Indigenous nations and/or in the languages of the original peoples of the land while the nation-state simultaneously seeks to dispossess those same Indigenous peoples of said land and lifeways (Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, North Dakota, Minnesota, as examples, are all derived from Indigenous namings). While there can, of course, be beauty and power in making visible and (re)claiming those Indigenous namings, they also exist within ongoing settler colonial violence.

The state-sanctioned naming of people and places are part of the fabric of the dominant social order, in this case, the settler colonial, White supremacist, cis-hetero-patriarchal, ableist, English monolingual, capitalist social order. And because the academy – what it wants and so what and how it researches – is deeply linked to the imperatives of the nation-state (Tuck & Yang, 2014), research often participates in and perpetuates such namings of deficiency and erasure. In their work on 'refusing research,' Tuck and Yang (2014) build from Simpson's (2007) notion of *refusal* to offer that:

refusal turns the gaze back upon power, specifically colonial modalities of knowing persons as bodies to be differentially counted, violated, saved, and put to work. It makes transparent the metanarrative of knowledge production – its spectatorship for pain and its preoccupation for documenting and ruling over racial difference. Thus, refusal, to be made meaningful first and foremost is grounded in a critique of settler colonialism, its constructs of Whiteness, and its regimes of representation (p. 241–242).

What would and does it look like to refuse these regimes of representation, to name beyond erasures, to engage in a desire-based naming, to name as part of an educational research and practice that sustains communities and their lifeways? Where do we land when we refuse erasure and deficit-based naming, when we refuse to uncritically use terms like 'minority,' 'non-White,' 'at-risk,' 'diversity,' and 'inclusion' to name the people, processes, and goals of the work?

## Naming and movement speech

In the previous section, I acknowledged the Indigenous homelands on which I write this essay. In my own ongoing awakening, I have learned from Indigenous people about how important such land and ancestral acknowledgments are as we push for educational justice and liberation in institutions and a broader society that continue to live out the settler colonial, White supremacist legacies of land theft, genocide, and enslavement. A land acknowledgment as a place-naming, as one small part of decolonization, is not an end but should be part of an ongoing respectful relationship with Native peoples and their homelands (LSPIRG, 2018). I am hopeful

that the relative prevalence of such land acknowledgments in more academic spaces (academic conferences, universities) shows necessary movement (versus simply more settler performances or logics of 'inclusion,' a type of what Tuck and Yang (2012) call 'settler moves to innocence') – not as an end in and of itself, but as movement toward disrupting and dismantling settler colonialism, toward returning lands.<sup>4</sup> And it is no accident that this movement toward a more widespread naming and honoring of Indigenous lands and people is happening in the era of #IdleNoMore and #NoDAPL, as academic and larger social and political awareness has been raised through these Indigenous-led social movements (NYC Stands with Standing Rock, 2016). Related to this naming homelands and people is the naming of nation-state celebrations, with many more U.S. cities choosing Indigenous Peoples' Day over Columbus Day. Indeed, as Chang (2014) has written, cultural change proceeds to political change. This is to say that these social movements are opening the space for potentially meaningful political change – and (re)naming is a central tactic within such change.

#BlackLivesMatter (Cullors-Khan & Bandele, 2018; Garza, 2014) and the larger Movement for Black Lives, too, have created space for us to name beyond the White gaze, to publicly and necessarily call out race, racism, and White supremacy in the media, in scholarship, and in our everyday lives. And this necessary naming of Blackness and life in the face of unending anti-Blackness has pushed for still more cultural change that then becomes political change. The removal of Confederate flags and statues across the nation, spurned by activists on the ground from New Orleans to South Carolina, are examples of such change (Joiner, 2017), change that raises the possibility of challenging fundamental structures of racialized settler capitalism.

These ongoing social movements, then, have been central to how communities name and understand themselves and their futures, and also how the dominant settler society names (and is forced to see) communities and issues, particularly those of Indigenous, Black, and other people of color. I should note that Native and Black youth, women of all genders, and elders have been the central leaders in these movements, which speaks to the necessary push to exist and name beyond the White settler, cis-hetero-patriarchal gaze in particular.

If naming in academic research, as I have offered, is so closely linked to the ongoing White settler-colonial project, and if research hopes to join and be part of resisting that project, we must learn from the namings Indigenous, Black, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander activists, researchers, and community members (and folks who hold all these and more memberships) are doing to resist, reclaim, and reimagine.

A central place to understand the role of naming in social movements is through one of the most important contemporary political organizing platforms available: Twitter. Back in 2016, I tweeted, 'Hashtags as movement speech have saved lives, shown us who we are #BlackLivesMatter #DearNativeYouth #NotYourModelMinority' (Paris, 2016). The three hashtags in this tweet were all interventions by activists who were working to refuse damaging narratives that participate in ideological, educational, physical, and material violence against Black, Native, and Asian youth and communities. These hashtags, like so many others, have done much to reshape narratives beyond the White settler gaze, both for people in the authoring communities themselves and for people outside the authoring communities (Hill, 2018).

What would it mean to understand the naming of the communities of our research as informed by *movement speech*, the sort of naming that can save lives, and show us and others who we are? Such movement speech is strength and desire-based, it is about nuanced and critical presence – #BlackLivesMatter, #StandWithStandingRock. It refuses deficiency and erasure, and imagines and enacts an otherwise beyond racialized settler capitalism. Rather than calling us out our names, such movement speech very intentionally calls us in and by our names. It names our racialized, linguistic, placed, community, and/or cultural memberships from a theory of change that is founded on strength, wisdom, and the possibility of a world beyond state-sanctioned dispossession, extraction, and violence. Many educational scholars seeking to contribute to various projects of decolonization, resurgence, liberation, and justice through education

understand naming in similar ways, as a crucial part of the goals and possibilities of critical inquiry (Annamma, 2017; Love, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2018). I am hopeful more of us can join such naming practices, seeking to refuse the White settler gaze, with the knowledge that naming the communities, processes, and goals of research is fundamentally about who is and can be valued through the work.

## Notes

1. I offer this land acknowledgment as one attempt to enact naming practices beyond the White settler gaze. How can I discuss such naming practices without recognizing the Indigenous lands and the peoples of the land where I write? I make other attempts in this article to name beyond this gaze. In the Acknowledgments section, I thank the people who offered needed guidance along the way. For example, in the original manuscript I did not begin the piece with the land acknowledgment (thanks to Sandy Grande and Rae Paris for recommending this needed revision). As well, I did not include Lushootseed spellings of the local place-names and I had errors in my naming of peoples and places (thanks to Tami Hohn, Nancy Jo Bob, Dawn Hardison-Stevens, and Anthony Craig for their knowledge and recommendations). I have much learning to do as I seek to understand and enact naming beyond the White settler gaze. This learning will include meaningful ongoing consultation with the people and communities I seek to be in reciprocal relationship with in my life and work.
2. My White mother grew up in California and has settler family from Missouri and Aotearoa (New Zealand). My Black father is from Jamaica.
3. The debate over the naming of Tahoma/Tacoma as Mt. Rainier, as well as the original Native place-name(s) of the mountain has raged for well over a century. See Wickersham (1893) and Waterman (1922).
4. I am grateful to Nancy Jo Bob (personal communication) for forwarding the importance of *permission* in addition to acknowledgment. Who has permission to acknowledge and be on and with the lands? Have those of us who are not Indigenous to the lands sought such permission?

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Django Paris** is the inaugural James A. and Cherry A. Banks Professor of Multicultural Education and director of the Banks Center for Educational Justice in the College of Education at the University of Washington.

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