

What a failed project taught me about settler research with and for Indigenous peoples

This is a story of failed research and of good work. As a settler researcher working within Canadian academia, previously I would have assumed that these two labels could never be applied to the same project. How can work both be good and fail? This essay will explore the failure of my recent fieldwork, what it taught me about settler research, and how I feel that both failure and refusal are essential within settler-colonial research on Indigenous topics.

THE INITIAL PROJECT

As a white settler living and working on Indigenous land and territory, I feel a responsibility to use my privilege to further conversations about settler colonialism and colonial violence. During my PhD research, I attempted to undertake a collaborative research project with a First Nation whose land I have lived, worked, and researched on. The initial project was designed as a collaborative project, where data would be collected through interviews and centre on contemporary engagements with the site of a residential school. The project grappled with the ongoing meaning making of the site and was intended to explore the residential school in the present day, even decades after its closure. However, I could not have anticipated what would take place in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in massive disruptions in my research and, importantly, meant that my would-be collaborators were less focused on the work we were hoping to undertake, and much more focused on pressing public health needs.

In 2021, the important and difficult work of Indigenous groups to use ground-penetrating radar to locate unmarked burials on the sites of residential schools resulted in a significant shift in how

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research about residential schools and about settler colonialism was done (Blackstock & Palmater, 2021). My PhD research, as I had always imagined it, necessarily had to end. I was left with an incomplete project and my immediate reaction was one of panic—what do you do as a researcher when your project fails?

Although I had wanted to undertake work that was wanted and important for the Indigenous nation I was collaborating with, when they no longer were interested in collaborating, my first reaction was concern for my academic future. I realized that, even with good intentions, all of my settler expectations around success, completing a project, and academic publications were creeping into my collaborative relationship. I took the opportunity of the failed project to look more closely at my own position within structures through which settler colonialism shapes academic research.

REFUSAL AS A STRATEGY

Within anthropology and now more broadly within a number of human- and society-focused disciplines, refusal as a strategy is important (Simpson, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2014). This refusal can take many forms, including refusing to speak or share ideas, perspectives, knowledge, or evidence on the part of participants, or refusing to capture, write about, analyze, or highlight certain parts of the research and its findings on the part of the researcher. Actions such as withdrawing consent or deciding to end conversations are also components of refusal, where individuals, anywhere within a collaborative research model, remove themselves or something they have control over from the research story as it unfolds. Refusal can be a powerful tool within research on settler colonialism, where the act of stopping or refusing can be anti-colonial. Refusal is ultimately about commitment: not a commitment to complete a project or work, but a commitment to continue only when the work being done is relevant, culturally safe, and wanted.

Refusal is something that is done by both the researcher and any research participant. In collaborative research, refusal is also a testing of trust between all collaborators. It is the rejection of continuing to engage in work in ways that are not serving the interests of the participants. Refusal is a strategy to oppose the dominance of damage narratives, and it is also a large component of ensuring that work is culturally safer, less colonial, and more collaborative in nature (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Simpson, 2007).

Refusal as a strategy and as a component of protecting research against becoming extractive or damage-centred is also

What a failed project taught me, page 16

What a failed project taught me continued from page 15

something that may be misunderstood as a stumble, an obstacle, or, to some, a failure. Failure, in a traditional sense, is often associated with shortcoming or inability. Halberstam (2015) discusses the fourth-place finisher in the Olympics, or someone who has made poor financial decisions. Failure is positioned in stark opposition to success. But what makes a project or research a failure?

WHAT IS FAILURE?

Academic research is always focused on completion: complete the research, complete the book, complete the publications. Within academia, failure is often a failure to produce or to finish what is expected. Academic failure is so often tied to not producing “results” and ultimately not having the tidy and publishable material that academia focuses on. However, failure is not just collapse; it is also productive as a critique (Halberstam, 2015).

Failure, even if unintended, opens a deeper reflection and critique of what structures underpin what is valued and prioritized. In the case of research, failure can also be an active refusal to continue to operate in certain ways or to continue with work that is doing harm. I picked up the language and productivity of failure as a means for unpacking the ending of the initial project that was no longer needed or wanted. The failure of that initial research project to progress to what settler academia understands as a successful, completed project was, ironically, productive; it allowed for deeper reflection on my own work and my relationship to settler colonialism, without the pressure and limitations of pushing to complete work that was no longer tenable.

Failure as a practice instead of an assessment is an important distinction to be made here. Failure can become a component of research praxis, another available research tool to be incorporated within the broader processes of rejecting and seeking to dismantle the taken-for-granted-ness of colonial goals and assumptions within research and

academia. Failure also allows for more flexibility and responsibility within research. Instead of focusing on the end result and the outcome of research, failure proposes a recognition of research as tangly and unfolding. It opens up the opportunity to pause and actively choose to go no further, instead of continuing to push toward a goal of finishing or completing that does not allow for responsibly engaging with research participants and collaborators.

Research failure as a settler recognizes possibility in taking alternative routes and pursuing other approaches in the face of the initial route or approach no longer being productive or helpful in responding to the social needs of research participants. Halberstam (2015) explores this potentiality within failure by arguing that “failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (p. 88). Failure results in a loosening and opening up to alternatives, which is particularly needed in dismantling structures such as colonialism that thrive on constraint and control. Failure demands flexibility and creativity in the face of obstacles, barriers, and rigidity.

The failure of my PhD fieldwork made me consider how research is assessed and prioritized within the settler-colonial academic structures I am shaped by and embedded in. The failure transformed my project away from the initial design but allowed me to see the productivity of the work not done, to see the valuable learning completed through the collaboration I participated in, even if a finished product, according to settler-colonial measures, would never come from it.

The incomplete project taught me a great deal about the limitations of settler research in doing good work with and for Indigenous peoples. The failure allowed me to contribute to ongoing conversations about settler colonialism within research and within project design that I

never would have done with a completed project. The ongoing collaborative efforts to shape a project that was and is rooted in respect and trust meant that a lot of the work was reflexive in nature, allowing me to engage with my own whiteness and settler-colonial status.

This essay will necessarily be read as incomplete. There is no tidy conclusion or finding to be gleaned from this work beyond the illumination of how refusal and failure must be built into settler research instead of treated as obstacles. I cannot (and will not) offer up tidy and publishable findings from semi-structured interviews, nor will I defend the dissertation that I have been working toward. I have failed, and in failing I have acted on my commitments to do good work and to combat settler colonialism as it infiltrates academia. The act of refusing or perhaps leaning into failure within projects that no longer meet the needs of Indigenous research collaborators is an essential component of combatting the ways in which settler colonialism continues to shape research in Canadian academia. 🍁

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