

Chapter 8

Land as Agency: A Critical Autoethnography of Scandinavian Acquisition of Dispossessed Land in the Iowa Territory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings from a critical arts-based autoethnographic study of Iowa digital maps and historical archival data of the Iowa territory (1838-1846) for Indigenous Nations with previous land tenure. Researchers have noted land and voice dispossession for these Indigenous Nations resulting from forced removal followed by decades of intentional cultural erosion, forced assimilation, loss of language, and religious discrimination and persecution into the latter 20th century. Current research highlights the resultant damage of these historical losses on living descendants of Indigenous land-based cultures. Agency of self was explored from a socialized perspective of a descendant of Scandinavian immigrants who acquired dispossessed land within the Iowa territory. This was contrasted with a cultural perspective of land as capital wealth vs. the principles and tenets of land-based culture whereby agency may be strengthened via Indigenous knowledge rooted in land-based connections and environmental sensitivities. Data representation involved poetic excerpts of land as agency.

INTRODUCTION

The Mississippi River serves as the state of Iowa's eastern border. The 1830 Indian Removal Act passed by the United States Congress and signed by President Andrew Jackson required the forced deportation of Indigenous Nations east of the Mississippi River and subsequently accelerated Indigenous land cessions west of the Mississippi River (Anderson, 2016; Martinez, 2018). The Act culminated from the era of President James Monroe who had enacted a voluntary land cession effort that largely benefited the U.S. government and land speculators. Continued cession treaties were used as further strategies to facilitate

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movement of Indigenous people further west (Rigal, 2009). Over the past decade, much research has focused on the acculturation and trauma of these land treaty and cession betrayals (DeMarni Cromer et al., 2018). Bremer (2017) noted:

By the time Iowa opened to formal white settlement on June 1, 1833, an acre purchased from the federal government cost \$1.25. Settlers bought about one-third of Iowa's land directly from the federal government with cash; another 40 percent of the state's land was purchased using land warrants that veterans received for military service (p. 263)

By 1840, fewer than 23,000 white settlers had moved into the Iowa territory. Another approximate 150,000 settled by the time Iowa was officially named a state in the Union (Bremer, 2017).

Since the 1980s, some researchers have described the treatment of Indigenous Nations as genocide and ethnic cleansing (Anderson, 2016; DeMarni Cromer et al., 2018; Ostler, 2016). Others have noted land and voice dispossession for these Indigenous Nations from decades of intentional cultural erosion, forced assimilation, loss of language, and religious discrimination and persecution. This lasted into the latter 20th century with no reparations (Altaha, 2017). Still others have noted the atrocities as cultural terrorism and ethnocentric desires for capitalist incorporation, which persists under hegemonic rationales and other forms of justification (Jalata, 2016). While research remains ongoing into the resultant damage of these historical losses on living descendants of these Indigenous land-based cultures (Altaha & Kraus, 2017; Anderson, 2016; DeMarni Cromer et al., 2018; Whyte, 2017), less research has focused on the intentionality of Scandinavian settler societies across the Iowa territory and subsequent dispossessed land acquisition by European and Scandinavian immigrant groups (Carter & Kruzic, 2017).

This chapter presents findings from an autoethnographic study of the Iowa territory (1838-1846) that resulted from an arts-based autoethnographic analysis of Iowa digital maps and historical archival data for the same period (see Figure 1). Fidelity of researcher positionality was used as a conceptual framework to guide the autoethnography as the researcher-participant was outsider to Indigenous cultures who maintained land tenure prior to forced removal and governmental dispossession to stimulate European and Scandinavian immigration. The results of the autoethnographic study presented here focused on the author as researcher-participant to explore the agency of self as socialized from the perspective of a descendant of Scandinavian immigrants who acquired dispossessed land within the Iowa territory. The researcher-participant was socialized and educated within a sociocultural perspective of land ownership synonymous with capital wealth and dissimilar to the land curation expectations of the dispossessed culture. Findings illustrated the moral injury and diminished agency amidst affinity to the feminist principles and community-centered values of Indigenous knowledge of land-based cultures over perceptions of land as capital wealth, which may contribute to the erosion of agency of self and environmental sensitivities.

BACKGROUND

Scandinavian women immigrants were essential to the settlement of the Iowa territory, dispossessed from Indigenous Nations. However, many literary and other depictions characterized these women as singular pioneers of a new frontier, which often led to narrow representations of these women immigrants. These women were often economically dependent upon a spouse or male family members with

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