

Tau(gh)t Subjects

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Indigenous peoples are some of the most socioeconomically and spatially marginalized peoples in the world. They are, broadly conceived, those who have no other lands to reference or to return to as home other than the geographies in which they currently live. Human geographers, including some critical, feminist, and anti-racist geographers interested in how power is expressed through semiotic and material spaces, are increasingly turning their attention to Indigenous peoples. In Canada, New Zealand, and Australia and, to a lesser extent in the United States, government rhetoric about Indigenous peoples has begun to focus on histories of colonial education and expressions of colonialism as it unfolded through schools expressly designed to “kill the Indian in the child in order to save the man.” There is urgency to this rhetoric. Because Indigenous peoples are intensifying efforts to secure self-determination and financial compensation for what some argue was the genocidal intent of historic colonial education, national rhetoric is infused with apologetic sentiments and wording designed to ward off litigation for past wrongs. Far from locating colonialism in the past, however, and given the ongoing sociocultural marginalization many Indigenous people continue to experience, extant educational systems are being identified as crucial tools in the articulation of a neocolonial agenda. Schools, classrooms, and the curricula taught within them might thus be conceptualized as tense political sites where conflicting modes of knowledge clash and where, ultimately, Indigenous children grapple with expressions of (neo)colonial power. This paper examines historic and contemporary education systems designed with Indigenous peoples in mind in British Columbia, Canada. It is informed by discussions circulating amongst human geographers concerning the discipline’s ontological turn and the need to reinvigorate social justice considerations within our research. Ultimately, and following Ann Laura Stoler’s argument that colonial projects turn on “tense and tender” practices, this paper is an investigation of small spaces and (even smaller) bodies through which colonialism attempts to establish hegemonic power.