

# Using Autoethnography to Examine Settler-Colonial Farming Practices Within the Okanagan Valley

*Ashley Lee, Simon Fraser University*

## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Ataman Avdan's SA 326 course *Food, Ecology and Social Thought*. The assignment asked students to utilize autoethnography to reflect on our relationship with food and the complex social processes behind it. We were encouraged to connect our relationship with food to wider social structures, historical developments and public issues, then analyze them using theoretical perspectives and analytical concepts. The paper uses APA citation style.

Yearly summer road trips to the Okanagan Valley (OKV) has been a frequent routine of mine since early childhood. This local paradise is located in the southern interior of British Columbia. As a young adult, I have now begun to take these similar trips on my own with my circle of friends, continuing the nostalgic getaway I experienced as a child. It has come to my attention that I have never left each visit without stopping by a local "You-Pick" farm or farmers market to bring home fresh peaches, cherries and apricots. More recently, vineyards have been a frequent attraction of mine to take pictures, have brunch and take home a bottle of local wine. The OKV is one of British Columbia's most important agricultural regions, specializing in the production and exportation of a variety of fruits and more recently wine. The OKV produces BC with cherries, pears, plums, apples, nectarines, apricots, raspberries and grapes. A significantly high number of BC's fruit growing trees are located here (Marsh, 2006). More importantly, the Okanagan is home to the Syilx People of the Okanagan First Nations. The OKV and the abundance of agricultural production operates on unceded Indigenous land. European settlement saw the Okanagan as a marketing tool to enhance their economic gain, however, this resulted in the establishment of colonial borders and a significant loss of Syilx land and their autonomy to govern and protect the valley (Hjalmarson, Bunn, Cohen, Terbasket & Gahman, 2015; Wagner, 2008). In this essay, I utilize autoethnography to illustrate how my leisurely and ritualistic summer activities in the Okanagan reflect commodified forms of exploitation, land degradation and Indigenous land dispossession.

Food and farms are central attractions in the Okanagan. Kelowna and Penticton are known for their vibrant orchards that can be seen along the scenic drive along the BC-97 highway. On the drive up, I always stop at a fruit stand and pick up a fresh box of peaches and cherries to snack on during my trip. Additionally, visiting “You-Pick” orchards cannot be ignored while in Kelowna or Penticton. “You-Pick” or “Pick-Your-Own” farms are significant when marketing agriculture in the Okanagan. These operate on the idea that the customer picks their own fruit. The farms that I have visited are typically owned by white families. These pick-your-own fruit farms aim to connect the visitor or customer to the land. The agricultural community in the OKV promote the consumption of local, organic fresh fruit and how manual farm labour can be an enjoyable experience. Only a small portion of these orchards are reserved for customers to pick their own fruit, the rest of the orchards are maintained by paid labourers. At one of the orchards I frequently visit, the area reserved for customers is set up to reflect an aesthetic countryside lifestyle with rustic outdoor furniture, white painted ladders, and a tractor for kids to play on of families to take pictures on. In reality, agricultural labour is not always a fun leisurely activity.

In Canada and across the globe, agricultural labour is dangerous and exploitative. Farm workers are constantly exposed to harmful chemicals and pesticides and can be significantly underpaid. Migrant workers are more prone to experience far worse working and social conditions (Lo and Jacobson, 2011). These working conditions are an inherent characteristic of settler-colonial capitalist methods of farming. In the article, “Race, food, and borders: Situating migrant struggle in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia,” the authors conducted a study to explore the social, economic and physical landscape of the Okanagan Valley. They focused on migrant workers on Okanagan farms who were part of the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). In 2012, roughly 2,500 workers were sent to farms in the Okanagan Valley. The study describes how the migrant workers faced elevated levels of racism within the farm and in the city. The employers who are required to house these workers imposed strict rules like curfews, no visitor policies and restricted access to reliable transportation. Additionally, the title of being a migrant worker often resulted in unwanted and less desirable work being assigned to them at significantly lower rates (Hjalmarson, Bunn, Cohen, Terbasket & Gahman, 2015). My participation in pick-your-own-fruit farms embodies commodity fetishism because the fun past-time of harvesting your own fruit is a facade for the unbearable and exploitative working conditions SAWP workers experience in the agriculture economy of the Okanagan.

Moreover, the land on which Okanagan for-profit farms, orchards and vineyards operate on are unceded Syilx territory. Settler-farmers operate in the capitalist market, which focuses on the unsustainable overproduction and exploitation of land for monetary value (Kepkiewicz and Dale, 2018). Agriculture and farmland are essential to the landscape in the Okanagan. In Kelowna alone,

55% of the land is for agricultural purposes. The farmlands in Kelowna operate for commercial and capitalist purposes. These farms export domestically and internationally, however, in the smaller communities of the OKV, farms enhance locavore habits through “buy-local” programs. Farms also serve as tourist attractions (City of Kelowna, 2017). These competitive and profit-seeking initiatives can result in numerous environmental and social problems. When I am not in the Okanagan, I still contribute to their agriculture economy from home. Being able to shop local and support local farms in BC can foster feelings of sincerity in one’s consumer habits. Buying local often has more benefits for the economy than it has for the environment. John Janmaat, a professor at the University of British Columbia argues that buying local is not equivalent to environmental sustainability. Growing local does not erase the fact there more land, irrigation, fertilizer, and pesticides are being used. The only positive environmental outcome is less pollution from transportation (Janmaat, 2016). A research study that examined the environmental effects of farming industry in the Okanagan Valley found high levels of pesticides in runoff and stream water samples along Osoyoos Lake and the Similkameen River (Kuo, Soon, Garrett, Wan & Pasternak, 2011). The agricultural economy in the OKV operates on settler-colonial farming practices that foster competitive, profit-seeking behaviours that damage and overexploit the land.

Lastly, every for-profit orchard and vineyard I have visited has been typically owned and run by white families or non-Indigenous people of colour. There has also been no acknowledgment of their occupation on traditional, unceded Syilx territory. Often, if I do not want to go out of my way to an orchard or farm for local produce, I will go to the weekly farmers market located in downtown Penticton or Kelowna. Similarly, the only people who partake in the Okanagan locavore culture are primarily white, non-Indigenous locals and tourists. While the Syilx people continue to live in communities along the Okanagan, they are not significantly represented in the marketization of Okanagan agriculture. The lack of Indigenous representation witnessed today can be attributed to the the introduction of European settlers in the twentieth century. Settlers transformed the Okanagan Valley into an agricultural hub, new agricultural technology allowed for many fruits to be mass produced. This led to the ongoing dispossession of the Syilx peoples from their land and resources because it was needed for the market (Wagner, 2008). Due to the fact that the Syilx peoples have been dispossessed from their land, they have also lost access to partake in traditional ways of living. Indigenous food systems focus on participating and learning off the land, this includes all land, soil, water, air, plants and animals. Food reinforces a collective solidarity within Indigenous communities that fosters emotional, mental and spiritual health. Indigenous perspectives on food also reinforce the idea of sustainability and not for-profit behaviours. Individuals are encouraged to take only what they need from the land. (Avdan, 2020). About all of the farm lands in the

Okanagan operate in favor of the capitalist market and does not align with Indigenous perspectives on food.

Fortunately, on my most recent visit up to a vineyard, I have noticed a resurgence of Indigenous peoples returning to their land and entering the agricultural industry in the OKV on their own conditions. I visited Nk'Mip Cellars, an Indigenous owned winery in Osoyoos. As a way to challenge the profit-seeking behaviours within the settler-colonial framework, Nk'Mip Cellars puts a portion of their revenue back into their community. Their profits go to funding social service and wellbeing programs (Gilpin & Wood, 2019). Thousands of acres where vineyards and orchards are located on provide touristic attractions and generate revenue for the local economy and often ignore the social and cultural repercussions they have on Indigenous communities. As I have seen in Indigenous owned vineyards and orchards, they are still able to successfully operate under Indigenous knowledge systems, it is evident that there needs to be more Indigenous representation to prevent ongoing physical and cultural dispossession.

Overall, in this paper I reflected on my seasonal participation in the growing agricultural economy in the Okanagan Valley. Most of the mundane touristic activities I partake in on my visits up the OKV derive from settler-colonial farming and economic practices. This autoethnography demonstrated how the development of agritourism operates as commodified forms of exploitation, land degradation and Indigenous land dispossession.

## References

- Avdan, A. (2020). Week 5: Indigenous Perspectives on Food [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from: [https://canvas.sfu.ca/courses/54045/files/12450296?module\\_item\\_id=1521036](https://canvas.sfu.ca/courses/54045/files/12450296?module_item_id=1521036)
- City of Kelowna. (2017). Agricultural plan: Background report. Retrieved from: [https://www.kelowna.ca/sites/files/1/docs/related/agriculture\\_plan\\_background\\_report\\_august\\_2017.pdf](https://www.kelowna.ca/sites/files/1/docs/related/agriculture_plan_background_report_august_2017.pdf)
- Gahman, Levi, Hjalmarson, Elise, Bunn, Robyn, Cohen, Amy, & Terbasket, Edna. (2015). Race, food, and borders: Situating migrant struggle in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(4), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.007>
- Gilpin, E., & Wood, S. (2019). How the Osoyoos Indian band cultivates prosperity. Canada's National Observer. Retrieved July 19, 2020, from <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/07/15/meet-first-indigenous-winery-owners-north-america>
- Janmaat, J. (2016, April 24). The importance of agriculture to the Okanagan. Retrieved from <https://www.kelownacapnews.com/news/the-importance-of-agriculture-to-the-okanagan/>
- Kepkiewicz, L., & Dale, B. (2019). Keeping 'our' land: property, agriculture and tensions between Indigenous and settler visions of food sovereignty in Canada. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 46(5), 983-1002.
- Kuo, Jen-ni, Soon, Alicia Y, Garrett, Christine, Wan, Michael T. K., & Pasternak, John P. (2012). Agricultural pesticide residues of farm runoff in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia, Canada. *Journal of Environmental Science and Health, Part B*, 47(4), 250–261. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03601234.2012.636588>
- Lo, Joann, & Jacobson, Ariel. (2011). Human rights from field to fork: Improving labor conditions for food-sector workers by organizing across boundaries. *Race/ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, 5(1), 61–82. <https://doi.org/10.2979/racethmulglocon.5.1.61>
- Marsh, J. H. (2006, April 20). Okanagan Valley. Retrieved July 19, 2020, from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/okanagan-valley>
- Wagner, J. (2008). Landscape aesthetics, water, and settler colonialism in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. *Journal of Ecological Anthropology*, 12(1), 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.5038/2162-4593.12.1.2>

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Student Learning Commons to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Simon Fraser University website or in the SLC Writing Commons Open Journal.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Ashley Lee, 2020

Available from: <https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwc>