

“A Mind Spread Out on the Ground” Objective Summary – Etienne Rutkowski

In her essay, “A Mind Spread Out on the Ground,” Alicia Elliot explores the intersectionality between colonialism and mental health, the often-hidden nature of intergenerational trauma, and the perpetuation of colonialist labels and perceptions, specifically as they relate to language barriers.

Elliot begins by giving context to the situation, outlining confusion around coming to terms with and dealing with depression, and the challenge of finding helpful support. In addition, Elliot describes her own mother’s struggle with mental health, and the challenging circumstances her family faced in dealing with her mother’s mental health issues. The essay continues with Elliot acknowledging the effective analogy of depression as demonic possession, a theory that held strong through long stretches of history. However, Elliot challenges the related religious nature of colonialism, asserting the significance of religious difference (and inferiority) in making claims to land and culture, and the continued abuse of these rhetorical arguments.

Elliot continues by endorsing the clarity of the harmful effects on Native people through colonialism. She supports this by pointing out that suicide is the leading cause of death for Native people (and how noteworthy it is that suicide was comparably rare pre-contact); that suicide and depression rates are between two and seven times the national average; how suicide and depression rates are lower when cultural continuity is present; and that suicide rates are lower when more than half of the population speak the Indigenous language (Elliot 8). In addition, Elliot observes the fundamental importance of language, particularly in order to understand the nature of reality through the lens of another culture. Elliot points out that “cultures have meaning and worth” (Elliot 8), and that “culture lives and breathes inside our

languages” (Elliot 8). Through this, she emphasises not only the importance of recognizing the fact that colonialism aspires to take culture away, but also that imposing a different language causes cross-cultural relations to become lost in translation. Elliot strengthens this point through the dialogue she shares with the therapist, specifically, how he “[chastised her] for not saying the right words” (Elliot 11). Similarly, Elliot suggests that the language barriers and subsequent loss of meaning through translation of the dialogue concerning post-colonialist First Nations mental health issues is perpetuating colonialist perceptions. She points out that Canada not only attempted to commit cultural genocide by forcing people to assimilate, but also continues to support this country’s ongoing mental health dialogue by viewing it through its own colonialist lens, worldview, and language.