SCHOLE
A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education

SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education

ISSN: 1937-156X (Print) 2162-4097 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ujle20

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To cite this article: Lance Peng (13 Apr 2026): Camping with Ghosts: Experiential Learning, Mnemohistory and the Haunted Landscapes of Outdoor Education, SCHOLE: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education, DOI: 10.1080/1937156X.2026.2649724

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1937156X.2026.2649724

Published online: 13 Apr 2026.

SCHOLE: A JOURNAL OF LEISURE STUDIES AND RECREATION EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/1937156X.2026.2649724

Camping with Ghosts: Experiential Learning, Mnemohistory and the Haunted Landscapes of Outdoor Education

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ABSTRACT

This learning activity introduces a creative, critical, and place-based pedagogy designed to help students explore how landscapes used in outdoor education are haunted by erased Indigenous, racialized, and queer histories. Drawing from Jan Assmann's concept of *mnemohistory* and Avery Gordon's *hauntology*, the activity reframes experiential learning (Kolb; Dewey) as a practice of ethical attunement to absence, memory, power. Students engage in "Ghost mapping," a field-based exercise that asks them to identify physical features of a site and also points of absence, affective responses, and speculative narratives. By layering official narratives with contested, forgotten, invisible histories, students collaboratively create "Haunted trail interpretive guides" that synthesize reflection, historical research, and imaginative speculation. Assessment focuses on reflexivity and theoretical integration rather than factual recall, and the activity is adaptable to urban, indoor, virtual contexts. This approach promotes historical consciousness, critical empathy, and more inclusive understandings of land and leisure, offering a replicable model for educators in outdoor education, recreation, cultural geography, and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Critical pedagogy; experiential learning; hauntology; land-based learning; mnemohistory

Introduction: Why teach with ghosts?

Pack your bag, lace your boots, and don't forget your water bottle… or your ghosts! Whether we're leading students into the woods for an outdoor retreat or tracing the edge of a heritage trail, field-based education often comes with an unspoken passenger: memory. But not just any memory: *contested, layered ,and often absent* ones. The landscapes we learn in are never neutral; they are dense with stories told and untold, marked by histories that still linger in the air, underfoot or just beyond the frame of the official map.

This activity emerged from my work teaching MA and PhD student teachers. Together we collectively generated this teaching activity for Year 10–13 students in UK contexts, although I believe it could be adapted to other national or regional settings. I should note that I haven't trialed this activity myself with school-age students; rather, it was implemented by the student teachers I mentored. For ethical reasons, I cannot provide snapshots of what this looked like in practice or exemplars of virtual versions, but the activity itself reflects the collective creativity and pedagogical reasoning of this group.

Conceptually, the activity draws on two powerful companions: *mnemohistory* and *hauntology*. The idea of mnemohistory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) reminds us that memory is the residue of the past and also a living, constructed relationship with it, shaped by what we choose to remember and forget. Hauntology (Derrida, 1994) invites us to listen to the ghosts that resist

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disappearance: those figures, voices, presences that refuse to stay gone, as Avery Gordon (2008) puts it. Hauntings signal incomplete histories, unfinished business, and the possibility that the past is not past at all.

Outdoor education (often idealized as a return to nature or a site of *embodied renewal*) can unintentionally reproduce sanitized narratives. In many pedagogical frameworks, land is positioned as a "*learning resource*," a neutral backdrop against which personal growth unfolds. This neutrality, however, is rarely interrogated. It may emerge from the erasure of *colonial violence* or dispossession and also from more mundane curricular logics: the demand to *simplify* tricky place-histories for assessment, the institutional preference for *universalizing narratives* of resilience or the assumption that outdoor learning requires an *uncontroversial setting* to be effective. Such framings can obscure the multiple, sometimes conflicting ways land has been used, remembered or resisted… from Indigenous sovereignties to rural working-class ecologies, *queer geographies*, and local histories that do not fit within pedagogical aims (Waite et al., 2022; Woods, 2010).

To teach with ghosts, then, is to resist *convenient decontextualisation* by attending to these layered and inconvenient pasts and to the ethical demands they place on outdoor education.

This learning activity invites students to engage in *ghost mapping*: an embodied, collaborative, and imaginative way of tracing erased or silenced memories in the landscapes they walk. Through this, students will be able to do the following:

- *Cultivate historical consciousness of place*, attuning themselves to the entangled temporalities beneath their feet.
- *Explore how different forms of memory, omission, and representation function* here and consider the possible factors that shape these patterns.
- *Practice collaborative, embodied, and imaginative forms of learning* that make space for emotion, speculation, and sensory knowledge.

After all, ghosts don't haunt to scare us; they haunt to teach.

Activity description: "Ghost mapping the field"

This is not your usual field trip. There are no worksheets with tidy checkboxes. There will be dirt under fingernails, strange silences between trees, a sharp intake of breath beside an unmarked rock. This activity, *Ghost mapping the field*, asks students to *look* and also to *listen sideways*: to the things that aren't said, the stories left untold, the histories that hover just out of sight. Informed by *mnemohistory*, *hauntology*, and *experiential learning*, this is a practice of pedagogical ghost-hunting… with care, ethics, and a good pair of walking shoes.

Materials needed

- A known outdoor learning site (a campground, hiking trail, local heritage site, national park, urban green space….).
- Field journals or mobile devices for notetaking, sketching, voice memos, or photography.
- Optional but powerful:

- Printed historical maps or timelines of the site
- Archival photos, oral histories, testimonies from local communities
- Land acknowledgment statements, past and present
- Access to Indigenous databases, environmental justice reports or queer spatial archives

Step-by-step instructions

Before the trip: Setting the haunted stage

Begin with a class session that introduces *mnemohistory* and the idea that history is never whole; it is remembered, constructed, contested, *performed* (Assmann, 2011). Offer a short set of contrasting materials that show how land and history can be framed in different (and sometimes competing) ways. Suggested texts now include:

- A clip on Indigenous land *rematriation* or stewardship
- A *queer mapping* project (e.g., *Queering the Map*)
- Avery Gordon's concept of *ghostly matters* (2008) on unfinished histories
- A heritage-sector or national park video emphasizing conservation, national identity, or "traditional" historical narratives
- An excerpt from an organization or think-tank that approaches land management or history education from a more conservative, institutional, preservationist stance.

This combination allows students to encounter different framings of land…*activist*, *critical*, *institutional*, *traditional* before forming their own responses.

Facilitate discussion with open, non-leading questions such as the following ones:

- What assumptions about land, history or memory does each source rely upon?
- How do different perspectives emphasize or downplay particular pasts?
- In what ways do these framings shape what students might expect to encounter at the field site?

Next, divide students into groups and assign them to pre-research the field site using *multiple types of sources*:

- Visit official websites or tourism/heritage pages, noting what histories are highlighted (e.g., settlement narratives, conservation milestones, national significance, recreational value)
- Use digital tools to uncover less-visible or *alternative* narratives (e.g., Indigenous place names, histories of displacement, environmental contamination, queer histories, protest events).

Invite students to build a *speculative mental map*… not of what should be remembered but of how different sources *construct* different versions of the same place: what is emphasized, what is downplayed, how multiple narratives *coexist* or conflict.

During the trip: Walking with ghosts

Distribute the *Ghost map template*: a simple sheet with layered prompts, divided into three zones:

1. *Points of absence*

b. Where is there a plaque but no mention of the people who were here before?
c. What's been sanitized or left blank?
d. Which voices seem conspicuously missing?

5. *Emotional landscapes*

f. Where did you feel something shift… an unease, a comfort, a sudden awareness?
g. What parts of the site felt welcoming, alienating, eerie, or alive?
h. What has persisted in your feelings over time?

9. *Speculative stories*

j. What alternative narrative could be layered onto this place?
k. Imagine the site as a stage for a ghost play: who would appear, what would they say, what would they want?

Students work in pairs or small groups, walking the site not as passive observers but as speculative historians. Encourage them to sketch, record ambient sounds, take rubbings of surfaces, whisper imagined dialogues to trees (yes, really). Let their data be as messy and sensory as it needs to be: this is *not* positivist fieldwork. It's about *feeling* the landscape as much as reading it.

After the trip: Debriefing the ghosts

Back in the classroom (or campsite), gather students for a circle debrief. Use prompts like the following ones:

- *What ghosts did we meet here?*
- *How does the land remember differently than the signage?*
- *Did you notice any tensions between what is preserved and what is forgotten?*
- *How can we remember responsibly without appropriating or speaking for the dead?*

Then in their groups, students create a *Haunted trail interpretive guide*. This could take many forms:

- A layered hand-drawn map with annotations
- A short zine combining field notes, archival snippets, speculative fiction
- A digital slideshow or walking tour with audio overlays
- A performance piece or embodied storytelling session.

The key is that these guides should *trouble the official narrative* while offering a more plural, haunted, ethically attuned sense of place. Encourage creative risks and non-linear thinking: students are becoming not just learners but mnemonic cartographers.

This activity resists resolution. Its goal is not to "correct" the historical record but to develop students' capacity to ask better questions, to dwell in complexity and to walk through the world with a haunted kind of attentiveness. Because to map a ghost is never to capture it; it is to let it walk beside you.

Theoretical foundations

The study of ghosts in educational contexts is descriptive and also rests on a set of theoretical frameworks that help explain *why* certain histories endure, disappear, or shape how we learn. To ensure these foundations are genuinely theoretical (rather than anecdotal or illustrative), I draw on three interrelated strands: *mnemohistory*, *hauntology*, and *experiential learning*. Each provides explanatory tools that operate at a level of abstraction relevant to multiple sites, pedagogical contexts, and empirical cases (Abend, 2008).

Mnemohistory: Memory as method (Jan Assmann)

Mnemohistory provides a lens for understanding how collective memory structures knowledge about the past. Assmann (2011) argues that memory is not a static archive of events but a

selective and political process: certain narratives are institutionalized, circulated, valorized, while others are forgotten or suppressed. This theoretical perspective allows us to explain patterns of remembrance and omission across diverse contexts… not just a single field site.

In outdoor education, "official" memory often foregrounds settler exploration, geological achievements, or romanticized encounters with nature while marginalizing Indigenous histories, queer geographies, or environmental injustices. *Ghost mapping* operationalizes mnemohistory by making visible the patterns of absence and facilitating reflective reconstruction of multiple, coexisting narratives. In this sense, mnemohistory is descriptive, and it also explains why certain histories *persist* while others are systematically excluded.

Hauntology: The persistence of the unfinished (Avery Gordon & Jacques Derrida)

Hauntology theorizes the *ongoing presence of unresolved social and historical processes*. Gordon (2008), building on Derrida (1994), conceptualizes ghosts as *social figures* that signal incomplete reckonings or unaddressed injustices. This framework explains phenomena that transcend individual cases: across contexts, social structures, and landscapes, absences and unresolved histories manifest in recurring, interpretable patterns.

In educational practice, attending to haunting involves more than noticing what is physically present; it is a method for tracing how historical, cultural, and political absences shape perception and experience. The "haunted trail" becomes a methodological tool: students learn to interpret absence and presence as relational and socially consequential, linking empirical observation to broader social theory.

Experiential learning: Knowing with the body (Dewey & Kolb)

Experiential learning theories provide a mechanism for connecting abstract concepts to embodied practice. For Dewey (2015), learning is a reflective, iterative process grounded in *tangible, practical experience*: knowledge emerges through active engagement with the world, where doing and thinking are intertwined. While Dewey's pragmatism emphasizes the concrete and the instrumental (learning through action) he also recognized that reflection and abstraction allow learners to generalize insights beyond a single instance. In other words, the *iterative process between the physical and the conceptual* is essential: the means (experience) justify the ends (knowledge gained) through ongoing engagement with both body and mind.

Kolb (1984) formalizes this into a cyclical model of experiential learning… concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation that can be applied across diverse educational contexts.

Ghost mapping extends this framework by incorporating the spectral and absent. Students engage in reflective observation of both what is present and what is missing, integrating sensory and intuitive data into theoretical reasoning. This approach generalizes to contexts where learners encounter ambiguity, contested histories, absent narratives, showing how embodied engagement can generate explanatory insight rather than simply *chronological or descriptive accounts*.

Land-based learning, heritage and ethical imagination

Critical heritage and land-based pedagogies provide additional theoretical scaffolding. Scholars such as Tuck and Yang (2012) conceptualize land as relational, historical, ethically charged, not just as a neutral resource. Heritage studies (Harrison, 2012) theorize how power shapes the preservation and erasure of histories. These perspectives offer explanatory frameworks: they clarify *why* educational encounters with land produce particular patterns of attention, inclusion, or omission, and they suggest interventions for fostering ethical engagement with multiple pasts.

Diversity, equity and inclusion: Practicing critical empathy

Finally, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) scholarship frames the relational dynamics of power, identity and pedagogy. Engaging with marginalized or erased voices is not limited to factual recounting; it provides a theoretical explanation for how social structures influence visibility, learning, and participation. By fostering *critical empathy*, students learn to interrogate the systems that shape absences, connecting empirical observation to generalizable social theory.

Assessment & adaptation

When teaching with ghosts, traditional grading rubrics can feel a bit… well, lifeless. After all how do you grade a shiver? A gut feeling? A speculative narrative whispered by the wind? In keeping with the spirit (*and the spirits*) of this activity, assessment here focuses less on correctness and more on *curiosity*, *criticality*, *connection*.

Grading the ghosts

Reflective journals

Each student keeps a field journal (digital or analog) throughout the activity. These are not diaries of "what we did" but haunted archives of *how we noticed*. Prompts may include:

- *Where did you feel something unspoken?*
- *What histories might haunt this place?*
- *How do your own identities shape what you notice or miss?*
- *Were there any feelings or moments of control that stayed the same for you?*

Journals are assessed holistically based on *depth of engagement*, *reflexivity*, and *integration of theory* (e.g., referencing Assmann, Gordon, Kolb) rather than on polished prose or "right" answers. In other words, points for wrestling with ghosts, not exorcizing them.

Collaborative ghost map presentations

In small groups, students create interpretive projects that remix official histories with their own "haunted findings." Formats might include annotated trail maps, speculative zines, creative slide decks, mock audio tours.

Suggested rubric criteria:

- *Creativity*: Does the format engage audiences imaginatively?
- *Depth*: Does it reveal erased/submerged narratives?
- *Theoretical connection*: Are key concepts (mnemohistory, hauntology, experiential learning) used meaningfully?

These presentations are opportunities to report findings and also to *perform* what it means to learn with ghosts: collaboratively, speculatively, and ethically.

Self-assessment

To close the loop, each student completes a brief reflective self-assessment addressing:

- *How has your awareness of land, place or memory deepened or stayed constant?*
- *What forms of learning challenged you the most?*
- *Where might ghosts show up in your future work or study?*

This final piece helps students consolidate their learning and identify future applications of critical, place-based inquiry.

Adaptation: Ghosts live everywhere

While this activity is rooted in field-based learning, it's also remarkably flexible: ghosts after all, are not bound by geography.

Urban settings

No access to remote wilderness? No problem. Urban leisure spaces like city parks, historic sports grounds, or riverwalks are just as haunted. Encourage students to research gentrification histories, erased neighborhoods, or unmarked protest sites. Ask: *Who used to play here? Who wasn't allowed? Who still isn't?*

Indoor and virtual versions

Can't travel? Try using tools like Google Earth, local historical archives, oral history databases, or Virtual Reality (VR) storytelling platforms. Students can "walk" landscapes digitally, mark their own ghost maps, and construct speculative histories using layered visual and textual media.

Cross-disciplinary spinoffs

This activity also plays well with others. It can be adapted for courses in:

- *Cultural geography* (spatial justice and memory)
- *Public history* (counter-mapping and archival silence)
- *Indigenous studies* (land, language, sovereignty)
- *Performance studies* (embodied hauntings and critical fabulation)

The key is to preserve the pedagogical core: *learning as haunting* and haunting as a method of care.

After all, teaching with ghosts isn't about scaring students; it's about helping them see what has been rendered invisible and listen to what has been silenced. With a little creativity (and perhaps a candle or two) this activity can open the door to more ethical engagements with land, memory, and each other. It also sits within a broader curriculum designed to balance experiential, reflective, critical approaches: students might combine ghost mapping with more traditional fieldwork, historical analysis or community engagement projects. In doing so, they learn to notice erasure and absence and also to interpret patterns, weigh competing narratives and also draw connections between observation, theory, and lived experience.

Beyond the immediate activity, this knowledge supports *critical thinking* and professional development. Students can apply these skills in research, teaching, heritage work, or any context where understanding multiple perspectives, recognizing structural silences and practising ethical attention to place and memory are valuable. The ghosts guide students toward *active reflection and relational awareness*, showing that learning is about what is present and also about listening attentively to what has been left out.

Limits, audiences and future directions

This project is presented as an exploratory teaching practice rather than a settled model. Acknowledging wider concerns about public trust in higher education (Flanagan, 2025; Russell & Patterson, 2025), the exercise is framed with care and limited ambition. Future developments

may involve collecting and analyzing student reflections to better understand its educational effects, its limits, and how it might be adapted to more clearly connect critical thinking with professional development and broader communicative responsibilities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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