

Foreword

William F. Pinar

My congratulations to the contributors to this provocative collection of essays expertly edited by Ehaab D. Abdou and Theodore G. Zervas. *Ancient and Indigenous Wisdom Traditions in the Americas: Towards More Balanced Curricular Representations and Classroom Practices* constitutes another conceptual flashpoint in the ongoing Indigenous challenge to curriculum studies. These essays lament the loss of Indigenous wisdom traditions as they critique Abrahamic belief systems (and specifically their epistemic consequences for curriculum), critique underlining the ongoing trauma Indigenous peoples suffer as they continue to clash with the post-neoliberal culture of digital capitalism (Davies & Gane 2021).

Such truth-telling enacts Truth, but Reconciliation remains elusive, as the former does not function to produce the latter. In fact, Truth may well preclude Reconciliation, as the Truth – dislocation, disease, destruction - is unforgivable. Hare (2020, 22) cites Indigenous critiques of “reconciliation’s focus on residential schools,” adding that, if reconciliation is to be possible at all, it “must account for Indigenous peoples’ priorities of land, resurgence and sovereignty.” Given these ongoing critiques and the “cortege of bitterness and inexhaustive melancholia” they re-stimulate – for many “forgiveness” must be “immoral” (Traverso 2020, 23)¹ - reconciliation remains unlikely. After all, Traverso (2020, 22) notes, “reconciliation was an empty word if it did not mean the ‘resentment’ of the victims, on the one hand, and the ‘self-mistrust’ of the offenders, on the other.”

The “self-mistrust of the offenders” might be remediated by righteous reviews of the facts, by starting meetings with land acknowledgements – reminding all of Indigenous peoples’

dislocation - and by Indigenous allies' self-identification as settlers, the latter analogous to announcements made at Alcoholic Anonymous meetings and at admissions of Sin in evangelical Christian churches, the former presumably a prerequisite to recovery, the latter the first step toward salvation. Settlers are in search of "reconciliation," but the ritualistic repetition of these rhetorical acts "allows many ... to be invested in their own innocence" (Hare 2020, 22). When automatic, as if obligatory, all three rhetorical acts function – however falsely – as forms of self-expiation. Atonement is not bought so cheaply, if it can be bought at all.

Self-identification started decades ago, acknowledging where one was "coming from" (Simpson 2002). Rather than situating scholarship, now it appears to promise a "pass," exempting the speakers from critique. Indeed, critique carries risks, as critique can, as Kester (2023, 72) knows, be "so consistently structured through a reified understanding of inside and outside, heretic and true believer, purity and impurity, [that it] is destined to devolve into the very thing it seeks to replace." Condemnations of "Western Civilization" – like Mac Sweeney (2023, ix), I capitalise the term to indicate that "it is an invented abstract category, rather than a neutral descriptive term" – eclipse its achievements, one of which is reasoned critique. As does Mac Sweeney, this collection confirms that "in this historical moment we have the opportunity to radically rethink the West and to remake it for the future," something "we can do ... only if we are willing to confront its past" (Mac Sweeney 2023, 1). That confrontation this collection conducts.

In this confrontation is embedded the faith that critique matters, that the curriculum can be corrected ("balanced"), that injustice can be redressed. It is a secularized faith, an "idea of history as the story of human salvation," an idea, Carr (2014, 142) points out, "embedded in Christian theology from its earliest beginnings." What changed during the European

Enlightenment, Carr continues, was acceptance of “the idea that human beings, through the exercise of their reason” – including critique – “could work out their own salvation: (2014, 142). “While it is certainly possible to identify a central strand of Enlightenment thought that was used to justify the cruelty of colonial domination,” Kester (2023, 34) reminds that “there is also a robust, anti-imperialist tradition associated with figures such as Rousseau, Montaigne, Diderot, and Herder.” These figures – Kester (2023, 35) continues – “openly attack the corruption, violence, and materialism of their own culture, and hold up the societies of the New World as exemplifying a morally superior form of civilization.” Rather than, as Kester (2023, 34), phrases it, “rejecting the traditions of Enlightenment thought in their entirety (which extend, of course, to the insights of Marxism itself), we must, as Gayatri Spivak describes it, ‘ab-use’ them, recovering and reinventing a potential that has been lost or not yet realized.” Perhaps inadvertently, certainly unselfconsciously, this collection “recovers” and “reinvents” one “tradition” of “Enlightenment thought,” specifically its “tradition” of scholarly critique.²

And as my generation of critical theorists and scholars know all too well, that “potential” of truth-telling through critique that Kester identifies does not always produce the political results scholars intend. Political pushback is possible, even likely, as the recent news from New Zealand confirms.³ Scholars risk more than overconfidence when they take for granted that they “possess the intellectual acuity necessary to impose their transformative will on existing political reality” (Kester 2023, 68).⁴ It is also overconfidence to assume – despite our high ideals and best intentions – that we ourselves “enjoy an absolute immunity from ideological conditioning” (Kester 2023, 68), that our scholarship – our practice of critique – exists in any straight-forward causal relationship not only to social change but also to self-transformation, specifically self-exoneration for the sins of our ancestors, forgiveness for the unearned privileges that we - as

their descendants – enjoy today. Still, academic study – truth-telling – is not without subjective effect, as it can become, as Resina (2020, 3) appreciates, a “medium of self-production,” even “a striving for self-knowledge, a protensional activity that is subject-constitutive.” Indeed, echoing the Enlightenment – including the Adorno-Horkheimer critique of it⁵ – and its Christian antecedents, we educators committed to critique can fancy ourselves as “engineers of souls” (Banville 2023, 82). With like-minded colleagues across the academic disciplines, we can appear to live by (while denying if asked) – in John Gray’s phrasing - “an ersatz faith for those who cannot live without the hope of universal salvation inculcated by Christianity” (quoted in Banville 2023, 83).

Such “hope of universal salvation” starts by truth-telling and critique followed by demands for decolonization, a concept not specific to Indigenous struggles in Canada. Shepard (2006, 5) tells us that “the word itself first appeared in an 1836 tract titled ‘Decolonization of Algiers,’” composed by a journalist named Henri Fonfrède who “called on France to end the six-year-old occupation of territory in North Africa,” lands two years later the French government named “Algeria.” The term surfaces again in the late 1920s, when, Shepard (2006, 5) notes, “a few social scientists and Communists began to employ the term ‘decolonization’ in their works.” During the 1950s, he continues, “European and American scholars and politicians hesitantly applied it to describe specific shifts of sovereignty in particular territories” (2006, 5). Shepard (2006, 5) then cites the French ethnologist Henri Labouret, who in 1953, in the first book with “decolonization” in its title, advised that such “shifts” could be “avoided through wise political choices made in Europe’s imperial capitals” (2006, 6). North American audiences were introduced to “decolonization” when the term appeared in a 1959 article in *The New York Times*; in the four years that followed the newspaper used it in ninety-nine articles (Shepard 2006, 56 n.

4).⁶ Prompting the proliferation were anti-colonial struggles for independence across Africa; Shepard (2006, 60) suggests that “the invention of decolonization made the distinction between anticolonial movements and the U.S. civil rights movement obvious: one was about state sovereignty, the other about racism,” noting that “at the time a number of people made clear connections between the two struggles,” connections also made in Indigenous struggles today.

Then, as now, decolonization was not only a political concept; then the Martinican-French writers Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, in particular, sought to express the ways – Shepard’s words again - “diverse demands for ‘decolonization’ posed political and epistemological challenges to Western humanism” (2006, 61). That is certainly the case today, as even Canadian concepts of “recognition” – central to humanism – have come under sharp attack by Indigenous scholars, as when Coulthard (2014, 3) claims that “instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of *reciprocity* or *mutual* recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that indigenous peoples’ demands for recognition have fought to transcend.”

Shepard focuses on the Algerian War for Independence, noting that “French responses to the Algerian Revolution gave birth to the certainty that ‘decolonization’ was a stage in the forward march of history,” a certainty that “allowed the French to forget that Algeria had been an integral part of France since the 1830s and to escape many of the larger implications of that shared past” (2006, 2).⁷ That confidence in progress – “the forward march of history” - may be shaken even lost among many, but surely it remains a subtext of critical scholarship. That sense of “shared past” is one emphasized by Susan Dion (2009) in her concept of “braiding,” a key concept expressed even more expansively by Ehaab Abdou and Theodore Zervas when, in their

introduction, they write that “we adopt and support *pluriversalism* as a key concept and approach that informs our commitment towards encouraging a constructive dialogue among different worldviews, knowledge systems, and epistemic traditions,” adding that “we aim to acknowledge, celebrate, and uphold the value and significance of the multiplicity of worldviews, knowledge systems, belief systems, historical narratives, and perspectives.”

That commitment echoes one that made by the founder of the first permanent French settlements in North America, Samuel de Champlain, who, Fischer (2009, 143-144) reminds, regarded the Indigenous “as fully equal to Europeans in intelligence and judgment,” and, as did “most of his contemporaries,” considered the Indigenous peoples as superior to the Europeans in health and physical well-being (2009, 144). He respected not all Indigenous customs of course,⁸ but a “recognition of common humanity in the people of America and Europe – and all the world – lay at the heart of Champlain’s dream” (2009, 147). It was a dream that turned into a nightmare for many Indigenous, what Hare and Barman (2006) depict as “good intentions gone awry.” This collection carries on the course correction so many have sought. It could not appear at a more opportune time, as Hare (2020, 31) believes “we’re at a unique historical moment when profound change in Indigenous - settler relations in Canada is possible.” Surely this collection makes the most of this moment. Like Césaire, contributors to his collection call on us “not to follow Europe’s footsteps, and not to go back to the ancient way, but to carve out a new direction altogether” (quoted in Shepard 2006, 62). This collection carves.

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Endnotes

¹ Traverso is writing not about the Indigenous peoples of Canada, but about survivors' grappling with the crimes committed during World War II.

² Critique includes, critique of critique. There are occasions when it can become compulsive, not progressive.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/16/world/australia/new-zealand-maori-rights.html> I am not implying critique should cease for fear of “pushback,” but I am suggesting that its instrumentalization might inadvertently stimulate reaction. Critique, I am suggesting, is justified ethically, not only instrumentally.

⁴ Kester is here discussing the vexed relationship between intellectuals and revolutionary movements, specifically Lenin and the Russian Revolution, but the point reverberates among critical scholars and theorists working today.

⁵ Recall that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's modify Immanuel Kant's thesis that the Enlightenment meant the end of the intellectual immaturity of human beings; the advent of the Age of Reason, accepting that the Enlightenment did bring about the Age of Reason, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that “reason is a double-edge sword, or in their words a dialectic, because as humankind exercises its reason and transforms its environment according to its own needs it also allows an ‘instrumental’ way of thinking to dominate every aspect of thought with the paradoxical result that rational ways of thinking give rise to irrational acts.” Composed during World War II, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), translated as *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972), theorized how a country like Germany, “so rich in its intellectual tradition, could have succumbed to the atavistic appeal of Nazism,” concluding that “thought had been allowed to become a mere commodity, something to be exchanged, rather than something that influences life.” Quoted from:

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095715751> The commodification of scholarship – including critical scholarship – is a reality all of us working in universities know all too well.

⁶ Shepard (2006, 56 n. 4) points out that the infinitive form - “to decolonize” - didn’t appear until 1963.

⁷ Shepard (2006, 2) points out that “most people from Algeria who had French citizenship in March 1962 (some nine million) had it taken away by 1963.” He adds: “It was under guise of ending empire that the French government redefined the nation’s boundaries to exclude Algerian ‘Muslims,’ sidelining republican ‘color-blindness’ rather than confronting republican racism” (2006, 273). Could the cultural separatism decolonization demands result in the same for Canada’s Indigenous peoples?

⁸ Among these were the “sadistic tortures” the Indigenous inflicted on captives (Fischer 2009, 145).