

INDIGENOUS MATERNAL PEDAGOGIES

Jennifer Brant proposes Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies (IMP) as an “approach” to teacher education and social justice by centring her teaching experiences and reporting the lessons she gleaned from teaching a graduate seminar entitled “Structural and Colonial Violence: Educational Response(abilities) and Complicities,” a course she claims is a “site of liberatory praxis that: 1) reframes learning spaces as ethical and relational; 2) requires vulnerability from both teacher and student ... as Indigenous or settler; and 3) positions curriculum as a space for emotional learning.”¹ Brant emphasizes “emotion and vulnerability as a pathway for working through difficult knowledge.”² Her “intention in the course and in this article is to unpack the way colonial violence is manifested in schools and sustained through settler grammars ... and settler moves to innocence ... as well as to document the resistance to anti-racist and decolonial curricula.”³ There is no mention of the anti-colonial violence her “approach” risks.

“Integral to anti-racist praxis,” Brant asserts, “are critical questions that disrupt the white supremacist, individualistic, and patriarchal foundations of western-centric thought.”⁴ “Aligning with anti-racist praxis,” she continues, “Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies offer a communal approach that aims to build bridges between academia and wider society.”⁵ Brant suggests that “by extending curricular work beyond our classrooms, the intention is for students to imagine ways to create meaningful change in the communities, spaces, and places they call home.”⁶ Her “goal for transformative learning is to propel students toward justice-oriented praxis, to become uncomfortable in their comfortability ..., to imagine altered possibilities ... , and to embrace the complexities of teaching and learning,” thereby “striv[ing] to create a bridge that crosses divergent worldviews through the ethical space of engagement ... so students might map out liberatory ways of engaging in educational spaces.”⁷ Brant asserts that “Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies offer a pedagogical framework that encourages anti-racist and ethical dialogue as a way to encounter difficulty, embrace vulnerability, and foster the emotional learning required to promote meaningful and transformative engagement.”⁸ Brant defines Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies “as Indigenous women-centred learning engagements that establish safe and ethical space for contentious dialogue, including heart-to-mind and emotional learning through intentionally curated resources and facilitation.”⁹

“Racism is perpetuated in many ways in the classroom,” Brant continues, including “through student resistances to learning material that brings them out of their comfort or sheltered zones,”¹⁰ although I suspect Brant resists discomfort and seeks shelter too, as these two would seem to be almost instinctual. She is sure that “resistances to anti-racism courses stem from denial, guilt, and anger related to content that challenges white nationalist ideas or documents histories and contemporary

realities of anti-Indigenous violence,” and moreover, “these resistances often manifest as micro-aggressions against racialized instructors and students.”¹¹ Since everyone is racialized – race itself a socio-political concept¹² - does Brant’s dictum include non-white students’ “micro-aggressions” against “white” students? Brant reports that she has “found that student resistance to the courses stemmed from the idea” that it somehow infringes upon their “liberty,”¹³ something academic courses could be said to do every time, regardless of content. Resistance could also be linked to prospective teachers’ “professional goals,” given that “they will not teach Indigenous students in their own classrooms,”¹⁴ a questionable even convoluted assumption, as studying anti-racism is invaluable itself, irrespective of its utility.

Brant reports that student “reactions range from a willingness and eagerness to learn to a resistance to learn,” the former she says are “often accompanied by a desire for ‘the beads and feathers’ approach, one that is celebratory but presents Indigenous peoples as frozen in time.”¹⁵ Others simply want “a ‘how to’ manual for teaching Indigenous content,”¹⁶ something many (most?) pre-service teachers want irrespective of content. “Others have expressed frustration” – I would have suspected also anxiety - given the “lack of support to ‘get it right’ in one mandatory course in light of the new demands for reconciliation education,” frustration Brant thinks “presents a larger structural issue in teacher education.”¹⁷ Anxiety enters the picture when Brant reports that “teacher candidates have expressed unpreparedness and anxieties related to teaching Indigenous content across K–12 curricula in response to the TRC’s Calls to Action.”¹⁸ Brant speculates that the “students who are interested in learning from a justice-orientated lens tend to be ones who enrol in graduate seminars and seek out additional professional development opportunities related to Indigenous content,” but “for others, the resistance is often accompanied by micro-aggressions that disrupt the teaching and learning engagement; some students will disengage through non-participation and others might engage in denialism and openly dispute some of the claims stated in course discussions, while “other forms of resistance present themselves in more subtle or passive ways such as harmful comments on teacher evaluations.”¹⁹

“While the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in teacher education programs is an ongoing concern itself,” Brant continues, “these small numbers exacerbate colonial violences in spaces where Indigenous students have gone from being erased to suddenly experiencing historical traumas and contemporary injustices by becoming hypervisibilized across mandated courses,” a phenomenon that “raises further concerns about the cultural safety of Indigenous instructors and students who are must study what could be distressing while in the company of possibly hostile others who might prefer not to be there,” and who often are unwilling “to acknowledge their own privilege or self-location.”²⁰

“To draw attention to the aforementioned challenges and explicitly acknowledge and name racist injuries,” Brant starts this “colonial violence course with the following list of examples that contribute to the classroom as a violent space for

Indigenous students,” asking “students to consider what it means when: (1) your lived experience is not reflected in your educational journey; (2) your studies conflict with your racial and cultural identity; (3) your worldview, community knowledge, ways of knowing and being, ceremonies, and customs are excluded from your educational experience; (4) your truth is refuted and denied through inaccurate portrayals of history; (5) justice is not served for Colten Boushie and Tina Fontaine; (6) education becomes an inherently violent space characterized by daily experiences of racism; and (7) the final report of the national inquiry names the violence against missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls as genocide and this is not mentioned in class.”²¹ Brant tells us she “share[s] the above list with students to set the tone for the ways in which structural and colonial violences are manifested and experienced in classrooms.”²² She adds that she has “generate[d] this list from my own experiences,” enabling her to “model the way I personally encounter racist injuries and micro-aggressions, and invite students to add to the list from their own experiences.”²³

“By introducing the ethical space of engagement,” Brant writes, “I co-construct a classroom set of ethics with the students that will govern our conduct throughout the course.”²⁴ So far the course sounds far from co-constructed, but maybe this changes during classroom meetings, as Brant reports she becomes “vulnerable with the students by entering the learning engagement and positioning myself as an Indigenous mother-scholar with personal connections to a course that is rooted in my own experiences.”²⁵ She reports that “thematic scaffolding of assigned readings, guided discussion, and assessment throughout the course offer students an opportunity for reflexivity, staying with and embracing difficult knowledges, and working through emotion as a call to action.”²⁶ Brant doesn’t seem as vulnerable as her students, not when she writes: “Sharing traumatic stories in our classrooms might open up new wounds for students,” but apparently “this is the space in which deep learning and transformation occur,” a “space that also embraces the whole student and prompts creative acts of resistance to injustices and human rights abuses.”²⁷

Citing the research of Carol Schick and Verna St. Denis,²⁸ Brant endorses an “anti-supremacist pedagogy,” reiterating their “three ideological assumptions” that “fuel resistance to anti-racism curricula: (1) Race Doesn’t Matter (culture does); (2)—Meritocracy—Everyone has an equal opportunity; and (3) Goodness and Innocence.”²⁹ From those Brant moves to “Indigenous maternal pedagogies as a theory of change amidst the unteachable moment,” that last phrase cited from Hongyu Wang,³⁰ who defines it as (still quoting Brant here) “unteachable moments as ruptures in the pedagogical relationship.”³¹ Brant considers “unteachable moments within the context of whiteness’ prevalence throughout all levels of education including curriculum and pedagogy,” as “whiteness is threaded into perceived power relations and a sense of superiority, and this exacerbates the resistances experienced by racialized instructors, particularly those who are teaching about racism and social injustices.”³² Students’ “resistance to learning difficult knowledge, particularly when it is being taught by

racialized instructors, calls attention to the need for anti-racism discourse to be threaded throughout programs, especially in teacher education courses,” as Brant thinks “such a wide-scale approach to teaching anti-racism is likely to reduce the invisible and emotionally taxing labour associated with being the only point of contact for this kind of critical work in teacher education programs specifically and higher education generally.”³³ Apparently Brant thinks what she has recommended – “anti-racism discourse to be threaded throughout programs” - is insufficient, implied when she adds that students “resistance also highlights the need for curricular and pedagogical approaches that will move students beyond their own resistances so that they can engage in meaningful and transformative learning.”³⁴

Brant cites Tarc’s conception of “reparative curriculum,”³⁵ described by Tarc as “another approach for engaging students in encounters with difficult knowledge.”³⁶ Such a curriculum derives “lessons from [a] terrible human history that cannot be saved, will not be redeemed, refuses to be forgotten, struggles for articulation, and must be heard,” in so doing “confront[ing] traumatic history through literary testimonies that serve as counter-narratives to the histories students are often taught.”³⁷ To qualify as reparative, a curriculum must “move one to a changed relation to the self and others,” all the while ensuring “that students do not get stuck in a space of passive empathy,” but instead “disrupt the power relations that contribute to historical and contemporary injustices.”³⁸ Brant reports that “Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies work with literary testimony to map out curricular moves for engaging intellectual skills, felt knowledges, and mind-body-spirit connections to demand freedom beyond our colonized classrooms.”³⁹ She is confident that “these theoretical and ontological orientations offer ways to imagine practical moves toward societal transformation and demand socially just futures.”⁴⁰

Brant then returns to Wang’s work and, specifically, to Wang’s “two related pedagogical strategies to work through difficult knowledge and transform student resistances: staying with difficulty and vulnerability,” suggestions to which “I bring two integral components of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies: 1) the need to develop a classroom community by establishing the ethical space of engagement and 2) the need to centre vulnerability in the learning exchange.”⁴¹ She again references “Tarc’s work on reparative curriculum [that] also explored curriculum as a pedagogical space for emotional learning.”⁴² That is followed by reference to Ermine’s “ethical space of engagement,”⁴³ reiterating that the “ethics of this space involves a commitment to fostering relationality and collective wellbeing,” for Brant meaning that “knowledge of the actions that can harm or enhance wellbeing is integral to establishing cultural safety within the learning community.”⁴⁴ “As a theoretical underpinning of Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies,” Brant explains, “I extend the ethical space of engagement from my own cultural orientation as a Kanien’kehá:ka woman,” specifically “hold[ing] the Ka’nikonhrí:yo ‘good mind’ teachings with me as I co-develop a space for ethical relationality.”⁴⁵

Again referencing Wang’s scholarship, Brant believes that “for the act of staying with difficulty to be transformative and move unteachable moments to teachable moments, a vulnerable exchange must occur that requires the teacher to work through loss just like she expects students to.”⁴⁶ And not only the Indigenous must “work through loss,” so must “settler instructors,” as the “vulnerable exchange” requires everyone to be “vulnerable as they move through a process of reflexivity,” demands that do not align with Wang’s focus on educators’ engagement “in their own inner work to bridge new understandings.”⁴⁷ Brant’s harnessing of Wang’s work to her own purposes doesn’t end there; she links Wang’s interest in “nonviolent relationality” – which Wang associates with the “maternal function in psychic and social transformation” – with her own “Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies,” in particular with IMP’s construction of the “classroom as a liberatory site” for (quoting Wang) “dissolving violence through both resisting injustice and promoting interconnections.”⁴⁸ Given Brant’s emphasis upon “vulnerability” and “loss” it’s unclear that IMF would be experienced as nonviolent, at least not by all Indigenous and settler students. The salve is apparently “the maternal,” as it is a “critical” element of liberatory praxis that encourages “students to embody and embrace their felt experiences of working with difficult knowledges and imagine repair and socio-political action beyond the classroom.”⁴⁹

But Brant has even more in mind for her students, as they are “called to enter into relationship with literary testimony, with one another, and with communities beyond the classroom,” that involving a “web of emotions” as “Indigenous and racialized students ... hold these tensions in myriad ways.”⁵⁰ Enacting the psychological phenomenon of projection,⁵¹ Brant writes: “I imagine, like me, they are looking beyond territorial acknowledgements for ongoing accountability to redress the manifestation of colonial violence in our classrooms,” and “this calls upon us to engage emotions as we advance racial literacy ... so we can embrace the unteachable moment as a teachable moment ... through reparative curriculum.”⁵² Engaging in self-praise as well as projection, she assures us that “my work on Indigenous Maternal Pedagogies offers a liberatory pathway forward as I showcase how one can become vulnerable with their students as they stay with/ embrace difficult knowledge.”⁵³ As the research assistant – Naoki Takemura – noted in his commentary, “the students’ responses to the approaches are not described.” Nor, I suspect, were they expressed.

REFERENCES

Brant, Jennifer. 2023. *Confronting Colonial Violences In and Out of the Classroom: Advancing Curricular Moves toward Justice through Indigenous Maternal*

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ 2023, 247.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ 2023, 248. Brant is not given to understatement.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ 2023, 249.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/race/>
- ¹³ 2023, 249.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ 2023, 250.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ 2023, 251. That last phrase about privilege and self-location Brant quotes from McDonald.
- ²¹ 2023, 252. Indigenous students are hardly the only students whose “lived experience” is absent from schooling. That fact is why I crafted the concept of *currere*. Regarding Colten Boushie and Tina Fontaine, see: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/tina-fontaine-coltan-boushie-justice-denied-1.4549469>
- ²² Ibid. That “tone” must be tense. Some would experience this list as somewhat assaultive.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ 2023, 253.
- ²⁵ Ibid. From these quoted passages, Brant does not sound so “vulnerable” - or maternal for that matter, although there are of course domineering mothers.
- ²⁶ 2023, 254. Again, this doesn’t sound so “co-constructed.”
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4126472>
- ²⁹ 2023, 255.
- ³⁰ <https://experts.okstate.edu/hongyu.wang>
- ³¹ 2023, 256.
- ³² 2023, 257. “Whiteness” is a racist ideology; it does not equal “White” people, “white” being a socio-political not anatomical or even cultural construct.

³³ 2023, 258.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41238491>

³⁶ Quoted in 2023, 258.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Quoted in 2023, 260. This is vintage George Counts: <https://archive.org/details/counts-george-dare-the-school-build-a-new-social-order-1932> It didn't work then, it won't work now - never mind the arrogance of demanding students do what adults should do.

³⁹ 2023, 260.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/17129> See research briefs #11 and #93 for other references to Ermine.

⁴⁴ 2023, 261. Is there “cultural safety” for the non-Indigenous?

⁴⁵ Ibid. Concerning the Kanien'kehá:ka, see: <https://development.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mohawk>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ 2023, 263.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ 2023, 264.

⁵¹ <https://www.britannica.com/science/projection-psychology#:~:text=The%20concept%20was%20introduced%20to%20psychology%20by%20the,raw%20sensory%20input%20is%20rendered%20into%20visual%20images%29>

⁵² 2023, 264.

⁵³ Ibid.