Fighting the plague: "Difficult" knowledge as sirens' song in teacher education

Cathryn van Kessel[1] & Muna Saleh[2]

1. Corresponding author
University of Alberta, Faculty of Education, Edmonton, Canada.
E-mail: vankesse@ualberta.ca

2. Concordia University of Edmonton, Faculty of Education, Edmonton, Canada.

How to cite
van Kessel, C., & Saleh, M. (2020). Fighting the plague: "Difficult" knowledge as sirens' song in teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies Research*, 2(2), 1-20.
https://doi.org/10.46303/jcsr.2020.7

ABSTRACT

Of the many plagues that affect communities today, a particularly insidious one is indifference and depersonalization. This plague has been articulated by Albert Camus and then taken up in an educational context by Maxine Greene. In this article we, the authors, respond to Greene's call to co-compose curricula with our students to fight this plague. Recognizing the role of difficult knowledge as well as conscious and unconscious defenses, we develop an approach to "diversity" harmonious with radical love during these troubled times of conflict and increased visibility of hatred. Through a weaving of our experiential, embodied knowledge with theory, we consider how we might invite students to consider contemporary, historical, and ongoing inequity and structural violence. Like Sirens luring sailors to precarious shores, we seek to entice teachers and students to the difficult knowledge they might otherwise avoid as all of us together consider our ethical responsibilities to each other.

KEYWORDS

Difficult knowledge, diversity, radical love, structural violence, teacher education, terror management theory

INTRODUCTION

"And I wonder whether the curricula we devise can be of the kind that awaken, awaken sufficiently to move persons to fight the plague."

(Greene, 1993, p. 214)

Over twenty-five years ago, drawing on the work of Albert Camus, Maxine Greene (1993) wondered about how educators might compose curricula that could "awaken" humans to "fight the plague" of "abstract thinking, indifference, [and] depersonalization" (pp. 214-215). As teacher educators, we read her words and find ourselves pondering: *How might we co-compose curricula alongside students, pre-service teachers, colleagues, and community members that allows for more humane ways of living alongside each other and other beings*? In particular, how might we honour multiple forms of diversity in the spirit of what Audre Lorde (1984/2007) and bell hooks (2001, 1994/2006) conceptualized as *radical love*? This approach is needed during these troubled and troubling times of (intra/inter)national and global conflicts, the rising tide of populist sentiment, the unabashed (re)emergence of neo-nazist and other white supremacist groups, the assault on the rights of Indigenous peoples, women, LGBTQ2+, refugees, the dis/abled, and others who are marginalized by different forms of structural violence, climate crises (and the lack of personal and political leadership to counter this), and the seemingly endless supply of "fake news." Many of these challenges are not new. However, their very persistence (and apparent rise) concerns us greatly. How do we move those in pre-service teacher education to fight the plague when collective action is ever more urgent? The hope, then, is that these emerging teachers can create a similar ethical foundation in their own classrooms.

In this paper, we draw upon our experiential, embodied knowledge (Lorde, 1984/2007; Saleh, in press; Waheed, 2013, 2014) as humans who identify themselves as first generation immigrant women in Canada with commitments to breaking the structural violence we (ought to) study in social studies pre-service teacher education. Our other identities also shape our relation to co-creating more humane ways for humans with a variety of intersecting identities learning and living together: Cathryn with a white racial identity that implicates her in settler colonialism and its white supremacist assumptions, and Muna who is a Muslim Palestinian woman in hijab and intergenerational survivor (Young, 2005) of violent displacement living as a settler within Treaty 6 lands (Saleh, in press). Through our experiences in our postsecondary institutions and ongoing conversations with each other, we seek to illuminate educative (Dewey, 1938) insights we have gleaned from our research and practice. *How we might (continue to) invite students to consider contemporary, historic, and ongoing inequities with open hearts and minds?* Unfortunately, there are few opportunities in the United States and Canada (and likely other contexts), for students to interrupt prevailing systemic inequity because some teachers avoid dialogue that might lead to conflict, even in classrooms with teachers who have self-selected for professional development on dialogic conflict education

(Bickmore & Parker, 2014). Furthermore, pre-service teachers (and likely humans more broadly) can struggle to maintain a consistent commitment to thwarting structural violence, particularly when they themselves are implicated; e.g., white pre-service teachers engaging with antiracist education (Hawkman, 2020). There is a need to "consider what supports could make them more willing to incorporate critical approaches" (Shim, 2020, p. 366). If educators want to encourage learning about the intersectional nature (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 2019) of multiple diversities and inequities—and our relationships to them—in nuanced ways, we (as K-16 educators) must attend to the highly emotional component of such experiences (e.g., Garrett, 2017; van Kessel et al., 2020). With a spirit of wakefulness (Greene, 1995) to these complexities and considerations, this article delves into some of our encounters engaging alongside pre-service teachers.

(HEEDING) THE SIREN'S CALL

"Why do we have to learn about this? It feels like you are stuffing this Indigenous stuff down our throats."

Shocked and troubled, I try to calm my breath and refocus on the undergraduate student in front of me. Although I had sensed his resistance to our class discussions in our social studies methods class, I never imagined he would confront me—and the difficult knowledge we were learning alongside each other—in such an overtly aggressive and defensive way.

"I don't think that I am 'stuffing' anything 'down your throats.' What I am trying to do is honour our responsibilities as Treaty 6 people and educators …. I think you might need to inquire into why you feel so strongly about this, and then maybe we can have a more respectful conversation about your tensions."

In Homer's *Odyssey*, sailors are drawn to the perilous and rocky shores by the Sirens' song. These mythical creatures draw sailors to them with their beautiful and enticing music—if one does not hear the song (e.g., in the myth Odysseus commands his crew to block the sound with beeswax) then there is no urge to take the risk and sail closer. Although not advocating to put students literally in peril like the sailors on Odysseus' ship, it is vital to draw students closer to the difficult knowledge (Britzman, 2013) of historic, ongoing, and systemic inequities (Au, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Nieto, 2000; Sibbett & Au, 2018) that might feel perilous to some students. It is a natural reaction for humans to avoid knowledge that might shatter their worldview or their feeling of being a "good" person (van Kessel et al., 2020), and so as educators we must draw them closer to these emotionally perilous shores. How do we move students to fight the plague of "abstract thinking, indifference, [and] depersonalization" (Greene, 1993, pp. 214-215) when collective action is ever more urgent? To begin, it is helpful to identify and describe difficult knowledge and the concomitant existential defenses.

Difficult Knowledge

One might think of the plague in the context of discussions around topics imbued with what Deborah Britzman (1998, 2013) conceptualized as *difficult knowledge*. Multiple educators and theorists have written about how students might wish to avoid a careful consideration of events like war, slavery, genocide, racism, famine, climate catastrophe, bigotry, and other injustices that reveal suffering caused by human indifference or disdain (See, for example: Britzman, 1992, 1998, 2013; Garrett, 2017, 2020; Gaudelli et al., 2012; Rodríguez & Salinas, 2019; Stanley, 1999; van Kessel, 2019). Difficult knowledge can lead to a range of challenging emotions related to the uncertainty anyone might feel as educators strive for more harmonious relations in society: "the pushes, pulls, and emotional boundaries of learning" (Britzman, 2013, p. 101), which can provoke a "sense of crisis, burden, discomfort, or trauma" (Garrett, 2019, p. 612).

Recognizing emotional barriers to learning is vital to teaching topics fraught with discomfort. Teachers might avoid topics that they perceive as potentially affectively difficult for their students, and also might shy away from potential conflict due to anxieties beyond their classrooms, such as (real or imagined) backlash from parents, administration, and even politicians. A variety of conceptual tools are needed so that teachers have a variety of sources for intellectual and emotional support in order to feel "prepared" to teach vital topics when their students are divergent in their relation to that difficult knowledge (e.g., some may feel that their teacher paints them as a victim, others as victimizers). In this way, topics can be emotionally provoking and this is the root of the problem discussed in this article. Troubling (and thus troublesome) responses arise and consequently a framework to understand defensive compensatory reactions has some potential to help teachers and students cope with their conscious and unconscious emotional responses and associated behaviours.

Existential Defenses

In order to seek ways to soften initial defenses and thus lure teachers and students into important conversations about difficult knowledge, it is first important to understand a variety of reasons these defenses occur. A key aspect is the link between defensive reactions and humans' fear of their mortality. To flesh out this connection, an interdisciplinary variety of existential scholarship is helpful. Through Ernest Becker (1973, 1975) and *terror management theory* (TMT; Pyszczynski et al., 2015) as well as *dark pedagogy* (Lysgaard et al., 2019), it is possible to map out (and thus mitigate or perhaps even thwart) defensive moves.

Drawing from cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, sociology, among other fields, Becker (1973) proposed that human behaviour is intimately linked to anxieties about someday dying as humans seek ways to repress or deflect those feelings, thus thrusting existential anxiety, in part, into the unconscious. Despite a commonality of existential anxiety of humans, we experience it in highly particular ways (e.g., those from BIPoC communities in the United States and Canada have very tangible fears of death in their daily lives, whereas those without racialized identities might experience anxieties about their mortality in a more abstract

sense). Quests for permanence and meaning are also variable. They can take a variety of forms (e.g., romantic relationships, see Mikulincer et al., 2003), but the main source according to TMT (a theory derived from Becker's claims; see Pyszczynski et al., 2015) is our cultural worldview (i.e., a symbolic conception of reality shared by a group) and the self-esteem we derive from being a valued member among others who share the same worldview (Schimel et al., 2018). Because of this protective function, when someone threatens another's worldview and/or self-esteem, we react defensively, including with prejudicial behavior (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1990; Greenberg et al., 2001).

A different worldview reminds us that ours might be arbitrary, and thus at least for a moment we lose our shield against our fears of impermanence, and we can react in hurtful ways (Solomon et al., 2015): *derogation*, a dismissal of another view as inferior (e.g., insulting the other person/group); *assimilation*, an attempt to convert another to your worldview (e.g., such as a teacher insisting students parrot their worldview); *accommodation*, an appropriation of one or more aspects to diffuse the perceived threat (e.g., a surface-level inclusion of Indigenous content, instead of engaging with the deeper cultural differences); and *annihilation*, forms of violence, war, genocide, etc., as well as the expression of support for such annihilation (e.g., a student or teacher making callous and hateful comments about Asians in relation to COVID-19). There are also more subtle defenses, such as decreased reading comprehension (Williams et al., 2012). These defenses prevent students (and humans more generally) from adequately addressing the harms that are inflicted upon individuals and groups, and thus are a breeding ground for the plague.

Denial is also a powerful defense against difficult knowledge (including worldview threat) that can contribute to the plague. As articulated in their book, *Dark Pedagogy*, Lysgaard and colleagues (2019) took an approach based upon speculative realism to explore the constructive aspects of negative concepts in the context of not only humans, but things considered to be more than human. Although our article here has a clear focus on humans and human relations, there is much to be learned from a more-than-human approach. Of particular relevance to this article is Lysgaard's (2019) individual chapter on denial which draws, in part, from psychoanalysis (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan) but then expands. Denial's harm stems from the refusal to acknowledge "uncomfortable facts and suffering the consequences of failing to acknowledge them" (Lysgaard, 2019, p. 25). Yet, denial is a coping mechanism for a reason—it can help people "limit the impact of uncomfortable facts, as not to be paralyzed in horror and/or existential angst" (p. 25). The task, then, becomes some sort of middle ground:

> We need to have denial in the form of hope, to keep on fighting to save a world that seems impossible to save, but too much denial, even in the form of hope, can make us turn a blind eye to pressing problems. (Lysgaard, 2019, p. 29)

How might students avoid the sort of denial that creates the plague of indifference, and yet still be able to function cognitively and emotionally in a way that they can sit in the discomfort of the difficult knowledge?

Identifying the potential reactions related to the plague is helpful—and thinking alongside difficult knowledge and worldview threat is one way to consider why the plague occurs—but alas such a conceptual pairing is nonetheless insufficient on its own. Critique alone will not change the existence of structural violence or instances of indifference to it. In order to take this thinking a step further, another theoretical foundation is needed: radical love.

RADICAL LOVE

A few days after his outburst, we are sitting in my office and he apologizes if his earlier words came across as "harsh" and proceeds to explain: "It feels like we are being asked to feel guilty about things we had nothing to do with."

I take a deep breath before responding, "But I don't understand why you would feel guilt? As a hijabi Muslim woman, there are people who try to make me accept guilt for the horrific actions of ISIS and other terrorist groups. But I refuse to accept that guilt. I do, however, feel a sense of responsibility to live in good ways alongside others …"

Pausing, as if surprised, he takes a moment before replying, "I never thought about it like that before."

We try to engage in this work alongside students and others with radical love (hooks, 2001, 1994/2006; Lorde, 1984/2007) and radical hope (Gannon, 2020; Lear, 2006)—not being glibly optimistic, but instead with wakefulness of our relational responsibilities (Donald, 2009, 2016, 2019) and shared vulnerability. Importantly, we believe that engaging with radical love and hope requires sustained and committed *action*. This is the sort of loving commitment that bell hooks (2001) described when she wrote, "To begin by thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility" (p. 13). Like hooks, we believe that radical love necessarily entails telling the truth about historical and continued effects of racism, colonialism, and other forms of violence within fundamentally inequitable systems—including educational systems. For, as she powerfully asserted, "To know love we have to tell the truth to ourselves and to others" (hooks, 2001, p. 48). As educators and human beings committed to fighting the plague, we need to tell the truth even when it's not easy. Especially when it's not easy.

An Ethical Foundation

As bell hooks (1994/2006) asserted, educators need "love as the ethical foundation" (p. 247) of all we do in education and beyond. She emphasized that "[w]ithout an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism" (p. 243). This conception of radical love is inherently ontological and epistemological. At its roots is honouring different ways of knowing, and of being and becoming. Like Ibram Kendi (2019), we see radical love as a profoundly needed, anti-racist way of relationally and actively bringing about individual and social changes that have the potential to root out violent policies

and practices that live at the intersections (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 2019) of racism, colonialism, ableism, capitalism, sexism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, transphobia, and too many other violent forms of injustice and inequity.

At times, students question "why we need to learn about" various forms and systems of historical and ongoing violence. They do not (yet) see the relevance to their lives. However, schools—and teachers—cannot claim to be separate from these networks of violence (Ladson-Billings, 2008, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Nieto, 2000; Paris, 2012; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014; Sibbett & Au, 2018). Accordingly, educators are called upon to uncover how profoundly implicated we all are. To foreground this in our own classes, we introduce Kevin Kumashiro's (2004) discussion of how taken-for-grantedness in education (i.e., what he refers to as "common sense") obscures the networks of violence and inequity that schools (as social institutions) continue to maintain and perpetuate. Kumashiro argued that "we do not often question certain practices and perspectives because they are masked by or couched in concepts to which we often feel social pressure to conform, including such concepts as tradition, professionalism, morality, and normalcy" (p. XXIII). Inviting students to interrogate the everyday "common sense" of our lives, we ask students: What makes a "good" school? Teacher? Student? Who/What is therefore outside these taken-for-granted notions of who/what is "good"? Where did these ideas come from? Who has (had) the power to define and impose these normative standards of "goodness"? Why?

As we attempt to trouble the structures and practices that have become commonsensical (Kumashiro, 2004), we simultaneously invite students to join us in imagining and living out different, more sustaining ways of engaging alongside each other in ways that honour our different ways of knowing and being. Here, we draw inspiration from Dwayne Donald's conceptualization of ethical relationality (2009, 2016, 2019):

> Ethical relationality does not deny difference nor does it promote assimilation of it. Rather, ethical relationality supports the conceptualization of difference in ecological terms as necessary for life and living to continue. *It guides us to seek deeper understandings of how our different histories, memories and experiences position us in relation to one another.* (Donald, 2016, p. 11, emphasis added)

Donald (2019) asserted that we need to recognize, foreground, and sustain other ways and understandings of human being-ness that are rooted in ethical relationality because, "[a]s human beings, we live in the logic of the stories we tell about the world and our place in it" (p. 119). We ask students: What other stories might we live alongside the children and youth in our care, their caretakers, communities, and each other? How might we imagine and live these stories into being?

As the storied fragments woven throughout this paper make visible, living these commitments can be tension-filled. However, we remind ourselves and students of these beautiful words from a course reading in which Ted Aoki's (1991) fictionalized teacher, Miss O,

dwells in "the Zone of Between" (p. 7) as she navigates the curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experience alongside students:

> Miss O knows that it is possible to regard all tensions as being negative and that so regarded, tensions are "to be got rid of." But such a regard, Miss O feels, rests on a misunderstanding that comes from forgetting that to be alive is to live in tension; that, in fact, it is the tensionality that allows good thoughts and actions to arise when properly tensioned chords are struck, and that tensionless strings are not only unable to give voice in songs, but also unable to allow a song to be sung. (Aoki, 1991, p. 8)

For Aoki (1991), balance is not possible, but tensionality (i.e., the in-between Liminal space where one is attuned to differences and conflict, and yet this tension remains unresolved) opens up possibilities for engaging in good ways with students with a variety of identities and commitments, some of which might be different from their teacher's as well as those of their classmates. Both educators and students can hold in the tension between different ways of knowing (and being/becoming-in-the-world). This approach allows for an exploration into how we (as humans) are all in relation to each other without feeling the need to resolve our differences by assimilating the other or finding something specific and tangible in common.

"The Diversity Dodge"

Simply recognizing diversity is insufficient. As we engage in this work with radical love, we are wakeful that the term/concept of "diversity" must itself be troubled, because it is frequently used in troublesome and troubling ways. In what she termed "the diversity dodge," Kimberlé Crenshaw (2017) discussed how "diversity" is often used as "a way of acknowledging 'difference' between racial groups while ignoring the power relations between them" (p. 55). We agree. Too often, "diversity" is used as a euphemism for humans who are racialized, dis/abled, LGBTQ2+, and Others (Said, 1978) marginalized by historic and systemic inequities/violence. Implicit in this use of the term is a "norm," a standard mode of being human. Thus, those who fall outside of the standard of "normality" (i.e., those who don't identify as white, straight, able-bodied, Christian, cisgendered and male) are often labelled "diverse." The word "diverse" ought not be used to describe a person, but (because the word is so ingrained in the field of education) there is some merit in employing the word to our classrooms, but only with an explicit caveat about the harm this concept can inflict, as well as an attention to the diversity within an individual human being.

Lugones' (1987) conception of the fluidity and multiplicity of identity as "a plurality of selves" (p. 14) provides insight into how differences are not only between self and other, but within us all at every moment. In her discussion of "coming to consciousness as a daughter and … as a woman of color" (p. 3), Lugones differentiated between what she understood as "world"-travel with loving or arrogant perception. A "world," she explained, "need not be a construction of a whole society. It may be a construction of a tiny portion of a particular society. It may be inhabited by just a few people. Some 'worlds' are bigger than others" (p. 10). Lugones

emphasized that it is possible to negotiate a multiplicity of worlds because one "can 'travel' between these worlds and can inhabit more than one of these 'worlds' at the very same time" (pp. 10-11). She asserted that "world"-traveling with loving (rather than arrogant/agonistic) perception is what allows us to remember ourselves while appreciating others, is what "enable[s] us to *be*" (p. 8), as we traverse between, within, an among our own "worlds" and those inhabited by others.

To build upon this conceptualization of "worlds," we also introduce and discuss Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 2019). As a female Black American legal scholar, Crenshaw (1989) was troubled by the "tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (p. 139). Using contemporary court cases (at that time) as places of departure, she argued, "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (p. 140). She further argued that attempting to address the unique experiences of Black women's exclusion within the existing legal framework was insufficient because "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (p. 140). Crenshaw concluded her article by noting that "it seems that placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action" (p. 167).

Holding Crenshaw's words close, we call upon educators to try to engage in this work in ways that center and uplift the voices and experiences of those most marginalized by intersecting systems of violence. We explicitly state to our own students that we are unapologetically committed to doing this because "when—in service to 'fairness'—instructors give equal time to dominant narratives, we reinforce problematic discursive effects by legitimizing the idea that the conversation is equalizing only when it also includes dominant voices" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014, p. 3). Like Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), we believe that "restricting dominant narratives is actually *more* equalizing" (p. 3) because we are constantly inundated with dominant narratives. We are literally living and breathing them. We make it clear that a "both-sides" approach is ridiculous, not only because not all "sides" hold equal weight, but also because "everyone's perspective is not equally valid when some are uninformed, unexamined, or uphold existing power inequities" (p. 4). Although uncomfortable, we agree with Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) that:

> Because schools are among the most powerful institutions wherein social stratification is reproduced, they are also where it must be challenged. To do this, we must be willing to interrogate our notions of what fairness, safety, and participation look like. (p. 8)

For, as Applebaum (2009) advised, we must be wakeful to how we might "focus our inquiries on how to get resisting students to engage, but not at the expense of the marginalized" (p. 403).

SHIFTING FROM SHAME AND GUILT TO RESPONSIBILITY

"This has nothing to do with me." "This is a problem somewhere else (e.g., the United States), not here." "Why do they get special status?" "I feel that I am being attacked." "I don't understand why we all just can't get along." "This has nothing to do with teaching kids." "I already had a class on this." "I'm not racist so I don't need to hear about white privilege." "I don't want to engage with a perspective I'm not an 'expert' on."

As I put up a slide on the projector with these statements, I can feel the visceral reactions among many of my students. I am careful not to look at any student in particular to make them feel like I'm accusing them of one or more of these defensive moves. They know, and I know, that many of the students in our class have thought or even said such things in the past, or even recently. So, how might I help these students understand why they might have had those thoughts, and how can I help them shift their thinking and actions in a more helpful direction so that we might co-compose curricula that allow for more humane ways of living alongside each other and other beings?

We, the authors, agree with Noddings (2006) who asserted that "more attention should be given to exploring the root psychological causes of hatred and abuse. We need to understand ourselves if we are to understand others" (p. 225). Yet, we seek ways to take this approach while sustaining a rigorous critique of structural violence with the radical hope that societies can change. The task, then, is for education to "invite a learner into understanding the self, the Other, and the relationship between the two" (Garrett, 2017, p. 3), and so what do teachers need to do so that students can accept that invitation? Regardless of how one or more of our identities are related to power within structures (e.g., perceptions of being privileged or marginalized and/or oppressed in relation to the topic at hand), such learnings can provoke emotional responses.

For those who feel implicated as agents or accomplices in these inequities, feelings of guilt and shame regarding privilege(s) are unhelpful and need to shift toward a feeling of responsibility to oppose and dismantle oppressive systems. Following Crowley (2019) and Sullivan (2014), we understand guilt as a result of (in)actions and shame as linked to one's identity. There is a need to coax those of more privileged identities from unhelpful feelings of guilt and shame because these can function in ways that unintentionally thwart anti-oppressive aims and teaching. When the core of someone's self-esteem is threatened (i.e., being considered a "good" person according to one's worldview group), there is an often unconscious desire to deflect (e.g., derogating others as an angry outburst), appropriate, or otherwise neutralize an aspect of the threatening information, among other reactions (van Kessel et al., 2020). Some of those with privileged status can be discouraged from developing critical thinking; for example, Crowley's (2019) study illustrated how white pre-service teachers were hindered from growing their critical racial knowledge due to experiences in relation to their skin colour (and its relation to racism) that caused confusion, fear, and shame.

It is even more complex for students and their teachers who feel implicated because of structural violence enacted against those who share similar identities (Subedi, 2008). It is understandably disturbing to learn about the structures that have harmed them directly and indirectly, and also risky—what happens if other students respond in hurtful ways, such as perpetuating stereotypes and other simplistic thinking? It is often exhausting to lead, participate in, or even witness the education of those coming to terms with hitherto unknown (or unacknowledged) structures of violence. Furthermore, their pain can become "a lesson" for other students, a situation that is disrespectful to that pain. In this way, dialogue about these perilous topics can involve the "the unleashing of unpopular things" (Britzman, 1992, p. 151).

APPLICATIONS TO CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Knowing what we know about the complicated emotional terrain of learning, educators seeking to invite students into conversations about structural violence must find ways to lure students toward difficult knowledge. Much of this task relies upon building respectful and thoughtful relationships between educators and students, as well as among the students in the class. Additionally, though, in this article we invite educators to consider two broad recommendations: attending to the emotional aspect of learning and challenging single stories.

Attending to the Emotional Aspect of Learning

Teachers' decisions are, in part, influenced by their perceptions of students' emotional responses (Sheppard & Levy, 2016), and thus if teachers are willing to do the emotional work necessary to thwart harmful systems and actions, perhaps societies stand a chance of hurting less. When this invitation is a sirens' song, we might lure those who might have been resistant to this emotional work into conversations about structural inequity and violence.

Educators and students need a language for the range of emotions and feelings that they might experience. First, to be aware that concepts and conversations can threaten a student's self-esteem and worldview, and next to warn the students of the possibility before this situation occurs and provide a language to talk about defensive reactions (e.g., derogation, assimilation, etc.). Furthermore, educators can use strategies to lure students toward difficult knowledge, such as starting with a less threatening example (e.g., a different place and/or time), then moving closer to home. As an example, a pre-service teacher in one of Cathryn's classes began a mini-lesson on the Canadian justice system with U.S. statistics; e.g., that in the United States, Black men are ten times more likely to be imprisoned than white men (worse than South Africa at the height of apartheid). He then invited his colleagues in the class to guess whether or not the statistics were accurate. This sparked a lively conversation about racism in the United States, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the urgent need for change. Then, he coyly revealed that the statistic was actually for Indigenous men in Canada. The outrage of his colleagues about the situation in the United States foreclosed the possibility of dismissing the situation here in Canada—he had lured them into the difficult knowledge and prevented a degree of denial.

In addition to beginning with a less threatening example and shifting closer to home, educators can lure students to difficult knowledge by engaging (carefully) with humour. Humour aids in the diffusion of anxiety (existential and otherwise), which is why nervous laughter is a thing. As Neil Elgee (2003) stated:

> Our sense of humor enables us not only to exist in this predicament but also to play with it to our advantage… humor in the service of faith and grace can be affiliative rather than ostracizing, and serve to disarm fundamentalism. (p. 475)

Humour can be employed with loving kindness as a strategy to help students with difficult knowledge. Much care is needed, however; for example, it is important not to make light of someone's experiences with structural violence. Furthermore, if one includes humour that derogates someone's worldview, then the prompt that was intended to diffuse anxiety might inadvertently create more via worldview threat. To this end, Cathryn often uses Internet memes (i.e., popular image macros annotated that have traction on social media) to diffuse tension, such as during a lesson on privileges in a third-year undergraduate class on social studies curriculum and pedagogy, Cathryn discusses how anyone can be antiracist in one moment, and racist in another (Kendi, 2019), a discussion that is potentially quite threatening. Thus, she uses a meme of Dr. Evil (from the Austin Powers movie franchise, who, in the movies, pathetically and unsuccessfully tries too hard to be evil, cool, etc.) doing air quotation with the caption: "I'm woke. I'm with it." This image usually engenders a chuckle or two, which diffuses some of the tension. And then the students and I can sit longer with the idea of having to be constantly self-reflective if we want to be good allies, accomplices, and co-conspirators in the fight against racism, among other manifestations of structural violence (e.g., Gorski & Dalton, 2020; Murray & Brooks-Immel, 2019; Smith & Crowley, 2018).

Challenging Single Stories

Although attending to the emotional component of learning with pedagogical strategies is essential for educators to navigate the waters of "diversity," the curriculum itself needs attention. In her TED Talk, Chimamanda Adichie (2009) discusses the danger of holding a single story of people and places. She explained that a single story is created and perpetuated when we "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become." Adichie importantly emphasized that stories—and their narration—are profoundly imbued with power:

> It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: *How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power* [emphasis added].

In our social studies methods classes, both authors often watch Adichie's twenty-minute TED talk alongside students, and then engage in group and whole-class discussions related to the video. We ask questions such as: *Have you ever felt single-storied? Do you believe you've witnessed someone else being single-storied? Do you feel you've ever engaged in single-storying another person, community, and/or place? How can we teach in ways that challenge single stories (our own and those that are dominant)?*

Often, students express resonances with Adichie's ideas and begin using the language of "challenging single stories through providing multiple perspectives" in class discussions and assignments. This is a promising step forward in fighting the plague and heeding the sirens' call; however, we also encourage students to inquire into what "providing multiple perspectives" means for them. For, we remind them, not all perspectives hold equal weight. Although it is important, for example, to understand the perspectives of settlers to the land that has come to be known as Canada, we argue that the perspectives and experiences of the original inhabitants of this land are absolutely essential to understanding this creation story. We ask: What are the numbered Treaties? How did they come to be signed? Who signed them? Who has not signed them? What was the intent and/or goals of those who entered into the Treaties? How are we implicated? Whose perspective is being considered and foregrounded in these stories? Whose perspective is being left out or ignored? What is the spirit with which I am engaging in this work (Saleh, in review)?[1] Drawing upon the work of Dwayne Donald (2009, 2013), we also ask: How might we avoid "incorporating and/or infusing" Indigenous perspectives? How might we instead root and thread our work *in relationship* with Indigenous peoples and communities?

A few key considerations we ask students to ponder throughout our work is how, considering the aforementioned concepts and discussions, we might co-compose and live out culturally sustaining curricula and pedagogies (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) alongside students and each other? How might we make the myriad of psychological and physical borders between and within us (Menon & Saleh, 2018) visible … so that they can be dismantled? How might we braid and/or thread diverse stories and perspectives in ways that honour, rather than collapse, our differences (Donald, 2009, 2016, 2019; Kasamali, 2019)? Greene (1993) recognized the danger of espousing that "we are all really just the same in the end" type of rhetoric when she asserted:

> If there is to be a truly humane, plague-free community in this country, it must be one responsive to increasing numbers of life-stories, to more and more "different" voices. Yes, many of the shapes are alike; there are tonalities that resemble one another, that merge. But there are differing nuances, shimmering contours; no one exactly duplicates any other. This is what ought to be attended to, even as we resonate to what is common, what is shared. (p. 218)

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[1] Our work must be alongside the people and communities I am discussing and advocating for to avoid (well-meaning) colonization and/or condescension (Saleh, in review).

We continue to walk uphill, only to realize that we have left some of our colleagues and classmates behind. We laughingly turn back and help each other to navigate the precarious trail near the river valley.

When Dwayne pauses to speak, I silently say Alhamdulillah for the blessings of being able to learn from Dwayne alongside students (who are also pre-service teachers) on this beautiful almost-spring day.

As Dwayne shares stories of his Papachase Cree ancestors, and their deep history and relationships with the land upon which we stand, I marvel at how much I did not know of our Treaty 6 history and vow to purposefully search out more knowledge.

A student raises his hand to speak and I briefly worry at the question or comment he might bring forward into this space. My worries are rooted in previous comments he has made about feeling forced to learn about our responsibilities as Treaty people. My anxieties are assuaged, however, when he expressed gratitude to Dwayne for guiding us in our walk and learning that day.

I say Alhamdulillah once again and continue to walk alongside everyone with a full heart and huge smile.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

"Even in the small, the local spaces in which teaching is done, educators may begin creating the kinds of situations where, at the very least, students will begin telling the stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between. As they do so, what Hannah Arendt called "webs of relationship" may be woven, webs overlaying the worldly things people normally talk about when they are together. It is when they begin disclosing who they are to one another that worldly things can be overgrown with such a web …. It is at moments like these that persons begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another."

(Greene, 1993, p. 218)

Maxine Greene reminds us that the responsibility of webbed relationships invites us all to tap into our shared vulnerability. Identity work is important, but regardless of identity/ies we (as humans) need to attend to our emotional responses when we encounter provoking knowledge. Intersectional lenses reveal that a simple identification of being Black, Brown, Indigenous, white or any other identification has limits, even in combination. No one's response is dictated by the colour of their skin, what religion (or not) they practice, what sexual organs they have inside their bodies, and/or who they love or are sexually attracted to (among other identifiers). Without robbing folks of their communities of support, shifting our intellectual focus to emotions and how they can influence our thoughts and actions allows for a framework that

does not predetermine, and thus limit, our potential as beings plagued by situations of structural violence.

At times, we have encountered students and teachers who would prefer to assert a "post-racial" (or any other post-identitarian) stance, and thus our goal has been to lure them to the difficult knowledge of structural inequities and violence. Like Sirens, we know that the shores are precarious, but we also know the urgent need for students (and all humans) to come to shore, see the horrors, and then work individually and collectively to stop and prevent hatred and violence. We invite students with open hearts, recognizing that no one's value or potential is dictated by genetics, somatic presentation, or any other mechanism for supposedly differentiating humans. This article is a call to wed a nuanced intersection of our relationship to historical and ongoing violence (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 2019) with commitments to thwart the (historical and ongoing) metaphorical plague(s) of violence, inequity, indifference, and abstraction. For, as Greene (1993) so powerfully dreamed forward: "If pestilence in our time can be identified with exclusion and violation and the marginalization of certain human beings, I would hope to see more and more teachers willing to choose themselves as healers" (p. 215).

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