1000 Voices to Tell a Story: the impact of Native pedagogy on institutional and individual conditions of university experience.

Sean Eve
Clinical Associate Professor, Liberal Studies, New York University

Contingencies: A Journal of Global Pedagogy, volume 2, number 2, Spring 2024;
https://doi.org/10.33682/jdzr-h5a1

Keywords : Indigenous pedagogies, cultural values and traditions, indigenous perspectives, reimagining traditions

> **"As a Native child, you are born an enemy of the state."**
> Deborah Jackson Taffa, *discussion with the author, 3/4/24.*

I recently had the good fortune to sit down and have a public facing conversation with Deborah Jackson Taffa at an event at NYU that coincided with the release for her memoir, Whiskey Tender. The book chronicles her life and that of her family, with particular emphasis on the choice her parents made to move away from their reservations in order to find economic opportunities for themselves and their children. The sense of dislocation and loss that comes from this migration and the legal history of the US government's systematic dismantling of the foundations of Native economic, community and family life through property confiscation, forced relocation and racist educational practices are keystones of her narrative. Taffa's story not only characterizes many Indigenous lives here in Americas but shares an outline with the restructuring of human experience globally across recent centuries through what is termed economic modernization.

Taffa's is a very personal story, but at the same time, as Taffa writes, "(t)his story is as common as dirt." … "So many people could tell this story; it is shocking how rarely it has been told" (Taffa 7). The telling of one's own story as a way to articulate shared history, community values

and traditions, and as a response to systemic external oppression is a technique, ` I have watched play out across the country to powerful effect through a series of live performances by female identified storytellers, including Deborah Taffa, titled The Aunties. This is a series I have been involved with through Indigenous Performance Productions. As a settler, what struck me about the impact I have seen these stories have on audiences is the profound healing properties these narratives possess. The largely autobiographical narratives have several functions. They serve as historical correctives that challenge false constructions of the past, as and as a context for community-wide celebrations that give people a chance to come together and share their affection and respect for honored individuals and the values they embody. The narratives show that Native ways of developing and sharing personal stories, along with the cultural practices and traditions that inform these acts of storytelling, have extraordinary transformative potential, serving as enactments of effective interconnection between Native and non-native lives and perspectives where the transformative potential of Native understanding within these dialogues is given the recognition and appreciation they deserve.

When one thinks of how much contemporary global culture stands to learn from Indigenous beliefs, understandings, and practices, and how vital these insights are as we face the realities of current Anthropocene extinction, it's important to reimagine the place of Native thinking across our institutions. Furthermore, it is necessary to recognize that the resilience of Indigenous thought and community in the face of global genocide has profound lessons for all humanity. As we face a global future that is more uncertain than ever and reckon with the political landscape that seems to tilt ever more towards authoritarianism, the dynamism, possibilities and resilience of indigenous perspectives become ever more attractive to a global audience hungry for alternatives to our present civilizational trajectories. But if we simply subsume the ideas, images,

and practices of Indigenous cultures without taking into to account the very real challenges these offer to our dominant epistemologies, we risk missing crucial opportunities for growth. Furthermore, if we are not mindful that those who come from these traditions must be the ones to educate the rest of us on their true nature and introduce us to the behaviors that need to accompany these concepts, then we will fail to realize even a fraction of the potential within these rituals to transform the societies that sought to have them erased.

Reciprocity draws into sharp relief the futility and profoundly unnatural and dehumanizing characteristics of capitalism. Putting individual narrative at the center of community history points out the structural brutality and erasure that still inform many rhetorical habits within the social sciences. The experience of Native peoples with regard to policies of economic exclusion, and the subsequent failures of social welfare and education responses to this structural violence, help us to recognize the role seemingly well-intentioned institutions can play in supporting the economic, cultural and ecological violence in whose wake they come into being. The articles in this special issue of Contingencies, and the one that preceded it, which focus on Indigenous, pedagogy, help us grasp how important these concepts could be in reforming our fundamental social architecture. These articles also point to ways in which Indigenous insights and practices can be introduced in non-indigenous contexts.

The current special issues on Indigenous pedagogy were conceived by the editorial board after Liberal Studies at NYU hosted an on-line gathering of Indigenous artists and thinkers on Feb 24th, 2022. “Reimagining Traditions: A Colloquium on Indigenous Art and Advocacy”, was made possible through the generous support of Contingencies- A Journal of Global Pedagogy, Animated Ecologies, a non-profit in the service of socially and ecologically engaged filmmaking and sustainable photography; and the Liberal Studies Dean’s Office at NYU. The four essays in

this issue, give voice to a broad range of native, settler, and two-spirit perspectives on Indigenous pedagogies and their potential impacts on students, educators and the institutions we operate within. What is contained in the following pages are not just ideas and ideals we might want to apply in our own lives, but concrete steps through which we can build a safer space for the next generation, aligned to the needs of students, in sympathy with the larger social and ecological frameworks we call home.

The first of these articles, Kyles Jacob Gemmell's, "Coast Salish Canoe Pedagogy", explores 10 rules developed by Quileute tribe for their annual canoe journey, which was revived in 1989, looking at the potential these directives have as pedagogic instruments in university education. The emphasis of the rules themselves and of Gemmell's article is on the gifts each participant brings to the educational journey, and how a dynamic of exchange, sharing and mutual respect can be introduced into the classroom. Drawing on Eve Tuck's work, Gemmell argues for the need to move away from a "damage-centered" approach to historically marginalized students and communities and instead to focus on the distinct perspectives and insight these individuals have to offer others within an educational context (Tuck). Gemmell also quotes from "Literacies of the Land" by Sandra Styres, who remarks that, "decolonizing pedagogies and practices open up spaces within the learning environment where students can question their own positionalities, prior knowledge, biases and taken-for- granted assumptions together with the they ways they are implicated in and/or affected by colonial relations of power and privilege."

(Styres 33). The focus in Gemmell's pedagogic approach is not on student weaknesses but strengths, an important shift in educational orientation that can be transferred from the canoe journey to the modern classroom. As with many of the articles in this issue, Gemmell's work looks to ritual, behavior and practice within Native cultural contexts as tools that have

transformational potential within post-secondary education, emphasizing lived experience over other types of acquired knowledge, when considering the authority of educator and student within the university classroom environment.

The second article, “Indigenous Knowledges and New Materialism: A Citation Analysis of Exclusion,” by Jacquelyne Kibler, traces Euro-Western epistemic privilege by identifying the failure of new materialist scholarship to recognize and credit Indigenous material knowledges that have been essential to the emergence of a recognition of agency of land, materiality and environment. “Ignoring such a robust body of knowledge”, Kibler argues, “weakens and undermines new materialism’s application towards environmental and social justice.” The author applies social network analysis in order to identify how patterns of citational exclusion are part of a social relational system that sustains ongoing colonizing practices in contemporary academia. The focus of her study are key publications housing new-materialist work and center on the terms, ‘new materialism’, ‘object-oriented ontology or ‘posthumanism’.

Through an analysis of articles cited, Kibler is able to identify not just a pattern of disregard for “indigenous knowledges but the intersection of indigeneity and gender,” as locations of prejudice. Kibler links settler colonialism to patriarchy and sees this pattern continuing in contemporary scholarship. Despite the preponderance of female scholarship in new-materialism, Kibler’s analysis identifies that barely a third of the authors and articles cited in the literature are by women. Her article thus points to one of the main vehicles by which ‘patrilineation’ is maintained in the academy. This privileging of certain scholarship has profound implications for students and academics alike in their understandings of the origins and implications of new-materialism, bringing a pattern of exclusion and misrepresentation into classrooms and another generation of scholars who may unwittingly be participating in these distorting scholarly

practices “Unlearning our own colonial, sexist citing habits, Kibler reminds us”, requires the labor of looking longer and differently to connect non-Western intellectual systems to support our research interests.”

The third article, “Weaving Our Perspective: Reciprocity within Indigenous Post-Secondary Education,” by Shawn Marche, Carolynne Warton, Samantha Roan, Michael Farmer and Jackson Pind, explores the ways indigenous ideas and practices of reciprocity can inform a range of processes in university education, through a series of graduate guest lectures on Indigenous research methods in undergraduate classes, and through the conversations and individual experiences of the graduate students, who each contribute a portion of the text for this essay. The strategies articulated and embodied in this essay and its constituent parts, employ “ ‘principals of respect, interconnectedness and mutual responsibility’ that define Indigenous reciprocity as characterized by Johnson” and others (Johnson et al.). This approach is opposed to the typical values employed in the university environment that “prioritize individual achievement, competition and knowledge extraction,” a situation where “grades, assessments and hierarchical structures prevail, reinforcing a one-way flow of education from educators to students.” The focus of this piece is on the co-creation of knowledge, and how multiple voices, perspectives and positions coming together in dialogue offer opportunities for critical thinking and social change and come out of an awareness of the need to decolonize post-secondary education and acknowledge what Dwayne Donald identifies as the “conflictual nature of Aboriginal and Canadian relations” (Donald 536).

Each author has their own space to share stories regarding their experiences with this process and each articulates a little differently what reciprocity offers us as a society. Shawn Marche, focuses on storytelling as instruments for “transmitting cultural knowledge to the next generation” and

sees reciprocal teaching methods as contributing to: “the broader goal of reconciliation, fostering empathy, understanding, and a more inclusive educational environment.” For Carolynne Warton, sharing Indigenous research methods “with others outside her community”, while looking at the “effects of the Indian Act on belonging and identity for many women in her Nation,” … “allows for this work to continue to have meaning and be impactful.” Samantha Roan, on the other hand, who “mainly researches in the healthcare domain”, sees reciprocity as offering “the ability to share in the interconnectedness of knowledge, spirit, and body in a way that gives,” and is her, “version of seed banking for the benefit of future generations.” While for Michael Farmer, “(r)eciprocity is” … “a universal truth: one essential for the harmonious fusion that keeps a living universe alive.”

A key feature of this essay is the way the impacts of reciprocity on post -secondary education extends beyond social justice into areas of sustainability. This is because reciprocity informs our relations to the non-human world, and through these practices opens up our perspectives and considerations beyond familiar realities. The potential of reciprocity to expand perception and regard beyond the human and the corporeal world is touched on numerous times in this work and by multiple authors and suggests problem-solving implications for Indigenous pedagogy outside of educational contexts.

The fourth article in this issue, by Raphaela Pavlakos, “Ethical engagement through ‘critical dispositioning’: A pedagogical and research praxis for responsible engagement with indigenous literature” looks at how non-Indigenous scholars can ethically work with Indigenous texts. Key to this ethical engagement is what Pavlakos terms, ‘critical dispositioning’, which “involves settler and BIPOC scholars participating in a self-awareness of their positionality, and willingly “surrendering the biases and privileges” … “in order to acknowledge and read texts in the critical

and cultural frameworks particular to their nation specific contexts." Pavlakos comes from a settler background herself and recognizes when engaging in a dialogue with Indigenous writers and texts that "an onus is placed on a settler to put additional effort into studying, understanding, and finding relevant community-specific epistemologies when engaging with Indigenous literatures." Part of what Pavlakos is calling for is a response to Indigenous texts that honors "the resistance each text enacts.". While Pavlakos recognizes we cannot entirely avoid our biases, she sees scholars who utilize 'critical dispositioning' as avoiding bringing these biases unconsciously into their work. She also wants scholars and the public in Canada "to admit that colonization happened, that it had devastating impacts on Indigenous nations and communities, and that a colonial legacy persists into the present in the form of socio-economic inequality, racism and discrimination, and political marginalization of Indigenous communities" (Lowman and Barker 22). That such acknowledgement is still not common practice within Canadian public and private discourse is evidence enough that 'critical dispositioning' needs to be undertaken on a nation-wide scale if Canada's future is to include some meaningful justice for its Indigenous peoples.

As a settler raised most among white Canadians and Americans, I am fortunate to have grown up in a generation that was asked to recognize the injustices perpetrated on and the extraordinary richness present within Native cultures. The journey to understanding and restitution is a very long one, where we are just at the beginning, I am grateful to these essayists, to the colloquium participants, and to The Aunties for helping me on my own journey and for moving the academy a step closer to placing Indigenous culture and understanding at the center of modern thought, where it belongs.

Works Cited

Lowman, Emma Battel and Adam J. Barker. Settler: *Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*. Fernwood Publishing, 2015.

Donald, Dwayne. "Indigenous Métissage: a Decolonizing Research Sensibility," International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, vol.25, no.5, 2012, pp.533-555.

Johnson, Jay & Howitt, Richie & Cajete, Gregory & Berkes, Fikret & Louis, Renee & Kliskey, Andrew. [1] [JP2] (2015). "Weaving Indigenous and Sustainability Sciences to Diversify our Methods" Sustainability Science, vol. 11, pp. 1-11.

Styres, Sandra. "Literacies of Land: Decolonizing Narratives, Storying, and Literature." Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View, edited by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang, New York, Routledge, 2019, pp. 24–37.

Taffa, Deborah Jackson. *Whiskey Tender*. Harper, 2024.

Tuck, Eve. "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." Harvard Educational Review, vol. 79, no. 3, Sept. 2009, pp. 409–28.