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FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

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This edition of APA Studies in Native American and Indigenous Philosophy first reports on two sessions that took place at the recent Eastern Division meeting held in Montréal. Both were on Thursday, January 5. As part of the Invited Symposium on Indigenous Philosophy in North America, Shelbi Meissner of Georgetown University discussed work that will appear in Hypatia journal of feminist philosophy. Andrew Smith gives an overview of Meissner’s argument. As part of the Teaching Hub, Andrea Sullivan-Clarke of Windsor University and Andrew Smith of Drexel University led a session on Best Practices for Introducing Indigenous Philosophy to Your Syllabus. Materials on the session, including a handout distributed by Sullivan-Clarke and the further development of thoughts by Smith, are included here.

This edition also includes a review, by Dennis H. McPherson, Tracy Shields, and J. Douglas Rabb of Lakehead University, of both the multi-volume set, Honoring the Circle put together by Stephen M. Sachs and numerous colleagues, and an earlier volume, Recreating the Circle, by LaDonna Harris, Stephen M. Sachs, et al., that has been recently reissued.

ARTICLES

Report on the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting
Invited Symposium on Indigenous Philosophy in North America

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“Indigenous Philosophy in North America.” Really APA-E? This is the best you can deliver? The work currently being produced in Indigenous philosophy—Indigenous philosophies, more accurately—is not just among the most cutting edge in the discipline today but also immeasurably methodologically and conceptually varied. By comparison, this title is hopelessly general and sadly simplistic.

Thank goodness that the symposium itself more than made up for these shortcomings. Initially, Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Georgetown University) and Dale Turner (University of Toronto) were scheduled to present. While Turner was forced to bow out beforehand, Meissner delivered an incredible talk to a large and engaged audience.

Meissner’s talk was based on an article forthcoming in Hypatia, “‘World’-Traveling in Tule Canoes: Indigenous Philosophies of Language and an Ethic of Incommensurability.” Here’s the abstract:

Indigenous language activists talk about incommensurability all the time—in interesting ways that link language and knowledge as disentangleable components of Indigenous lifeways. According to many of these scholar activists, what is untranslatable about Indigenous languages is often what is incommensurate about Indigenous worlds. Drawing upon resources from Indigenous language reclamation work, I outline here a non-exhaustive taxonomy of incommensurability in the Indigenous philosophy of language literature, and gesture at the ways coalitional relationships might be built that hold...
space for these different varieties of incommensurability. For ease of explication and to honor Indigenous ways of knowing, I employ here an organizational metaphor rooted in my own communities’ traditions of canoe voyaging to organize three forms of incommensurability that emerge from Indigenous philosophies of language; these forms are Impassable Incommensurability and Strategic Impassable Incommensurability: (Big Water Through A Rock Garden), as well as Incommensurability With Technical Passages: (Heavy Water Through A Rock Garden). These forms of incommensurability, as they spring from Indigenous philosophies of language, each lend themselves toward nuanced insights for careful and considerate world-traveling (a la Lugones) that holds space for epistemic and linguistic sovereignty.

Meissner began by discussing an informative exchange on incommensurability in Inuktitut between Derek Rasmussen, Tommy Akukukjuk, and elder Joanasie Akumalik. She next walked the audience through some key concepts in Indigenous philosophies of language and then considerations regarding incommensurability and world traveling, a notion first introduced by María Lugones.

The high point of the talk was Meissner’s specification of three forms of incommensurability that operate analogically to traditional Luiseño (Payómkawichum) understandings of the passability, or lack thereof, of rock beds in streams using tule canoes. Meissner highlighted that she isn’t taking a position on the ethic of incommensurability or capacities for world-traveling. Rather, she’s offering a conceptual taxonomy of possible positions. She does conclude, though, that it is important to acknowledge that not all worlds—i.e., knowledge systems—are open or navigable, that world and fluency aren’t metaphorical in many Indigenous linguistic spaces, that canoes may be able to be retooled in some circumstances through shared labor, and that those who rely on guidance for world-traveling should be sure to tip our guide!

The talk was quite well received. Audience questions included questions about Lugones’s defense of world-traveling, the capacity for a just ethnology, and the prospect of ethical work by settlers with Indigenous language reclamation projects, including with the Lumbee and Eastern Band of Cherokee. Meissner held the floor for well over an hour with both intellectual passion and cutting humor.

Symposium title definitively defied.
One best practice, especially if one is starting out to incorporate Indigenous philosophy in their courses, is to rely on the texts that are provided. For my presentation, I used a couple of stories from Lee Hester’s article, “Choctaw Conceptions of the Excellence of the Self, with Implications for a Native Education.” Before I use others’ work, I am careful to note that I am not a member of that community and that I am not teaching one to be a member. My use of stories or cultural practices in the course is strictly from the place of scholar. For example, with the use of Hester’s article, I am teaching about the values that he discusses and I note the use of stories to convey information. I believe that with whatever material you teach, you must provide context. This is especially the case when students may confuse what it means to study philosophy! Those students who do not understand what philosophy is may register for a class thinking they will gain access to cultural practices and knowledge. I wish that I could say the new age thinking with respect to Indigenous knowledge has gone by the wayside, but it is not the case in my experience.

I found the initial question from the audience, which focused on the critique of Indigenous philosophy, the most challenging, but in a good way. It prompted me to think about what I do in the classroom when presenting Indigenous philosophical thought. While critique is part and parcel of what we philosophers do and teach, there are times when it does not seem appropriate. For example, in an introductory course, I may pair non-Indigenous readings on determinism and libertarianism, encouraging students to critique one view of free will using the resources of the other. I think some Indigenous philosophy can be treated in the same way. For example, you might use the account of a contemporary Indigenous scholar (like my work on allyship or land acknowledgement statements) and offer a critique of my view. For other cases, like creation stories that contain worldviewscapes, a best practice might be to attain understanding, especially given how complex some worldviews are.

Both Andrew and I emphasized the need to be thoughtful and respectful when teaching Indigenous philosophy. The instructor must be aware of their social privilege and their relationship with Indigenous peoples. When an audience member voiced their concern about whether they are practicing appropriation when adopting Indigenous virtues, I think they are on the right track to being respectful of the people and their philosophical thought.

There is a move on campuses to decolonize and indigenize, although I am not sure that anyone knows exactly what that means, or if it is even possible in Western institutions of higher learning. Andrew’s presentation was a timely contribution to this issue. How are we to teach in a way that is appropriate for today’s student; one who may be suffering trauma, enduring great stress, and undergoing anxiety? I appreciated Andrew’s candid and compassionate discussion of how he has changed his policies with respect to teaching and the types of responses he has received from both students and administration.

In his classroom, Andrew removes the hierarchy typically present in Western styles of teaching. It isn’t simply rearranging the desks to create a circle or providing a talking stick. (Though those methods may be of use in some classes.) Andrew creates policies for the course that draw upon the Indigenous values of respect and autonomy. Andrew creates a relationship with his students that leads to surprising results. He actually structures the course so that grades take a backseat. The student ultimately decides whether to continue to attend without worry about their final grade.

It is an interesting approach and Andrew would be the first to admit that his class sizes are small, that he has tenure, and that it requires an unbelievable amount of trust. But as I listened to his talk, I was struck by how Indigenous the design was. If you consider the Indigenous way of conveying of information through stories, the conclusions are often left to the listener to determine. Stories may be used at different times for different purposes, but the point of the story is not to drum a particular conclusion into the mind of the listener, but to have them reflect on the right way to live. Storytelling is, of course, a small part of a network of practices and ceremonies that comprise a way for the individual to live in the right way. Andrew allows his students to make their decisions (what a perfect thing at the age when you are becoming an adult). And he mentioned that they still attend!

A final question, after Andrew’s presentation, seems apropos to any instructor teaching the philosophy of marginalized courses at a predominantly white institution: How to motivate students to see their privilege, respect the views of other racial groups, and acknowledge their participation in colonialism? We teach at varied institutions and for some the task may be easier than for others. Recently, I have experienced pushback from students who do not believe that they benefit from colonialism. One audience member pointed out that one might try to show empirical data in order to make their point. I think that is a good start, but I also find that particularly resistant students cling to settler moves to innocence. In one of my courses, we watch a documentary that describes an Indigenous alternative to the treatment of alcohol. It is called Poundmaker’s Lodge: A Healing Place. After watching the documentary, several students shared that they did not know the role that settlers played in contributing to the substance use in many Indigenous communities. I think that perhaps, given how history is taught, some students do not see the work of colonialism and how it is still present today.

I do not claim that with the right evidence resistant students will change their mind. That is part of the Indigenous way of learning. I provide you the stories, and you are left to decide what you will do. It is a risk, but so was the strategy that Andrew implemented in his course. It was a risk, and while not every student will attend, those who do are the better for it. For me, as an Indigenous scholar, I left the session feeling optimistic. The number of allies is increasing, and the types of questions are improving. I hope the changes continue for future generations.
5. Suggestions

a. Avoid the strong teacher centered, top-down dissemination of knowledge

b. Do not use Indigenous resources to support colonial agendas/projects

c. Talking circles, Sharing subject-focused experiences

d. Incorporate Indigenous content (materials, stories, guests)

e. Have an appreciation for the diversity of First Nations, Metis, Inuit People

f. Provide opportunities for student problem-solving/decision-making

g. Create a sense of community

h. Challenge stereotypes (Savage, Noble Savage, Warrior, Princess)

i. Challenge racist assumptions (Free College, Avoid Taxes, Poverty)

j. Seek out resources

i. Coordinator of Indigenous Curriculum and Pedagogy

ii. Centres for Teaching and Learning

iii. Librarians and Library Research Guides (Univ. of Indiana)

iv. Indigenous Canada Course (U of Alberta)
https://www.ualberta.ca/admissions-programs/online-courses/indigenous-canada/index.html (massive open online course)

v. Take a course with an Indigenous Scholar

vi. APA Committee on Native American and Indigenous Philosophy


NOTES

1. This handout is a condensed version of Heather E. McGregor’s Decolonizing Pedagogies Teacher Reference Booklet, a Service Project for the Aboriginal Focus School, Vancouver School Board. See http://blogs.ubc.ca/edst591/files/2012/03/Decolonizing_Pedagogies_Booklet.pdf.

2. To understand the potential of decolonizing pedagogies is partly to understand that there is no simple or fail-safe formula that can be used to guide teachers.

Indigenous Pedagogies for Burned-Out Students on a Burned-Out Planet

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ABSTRACT
With each passing term students in my environmental philosophy courses are increasingly burned out, just like the world they inhabit. They’re committed to pursuing ecological well-being and climate justice, even accepting these pursuits as their generation’s singular responsibility. But given their subjection to key structural deformities that prevail in the United States, they’re also acculturated to shoulder undue blame for ongoing setbacks and for the debilitating conditions—including generalized anxiety, clinical depression, ADHD, and OCD—they nearly all suffer from partially as a result. This dynamic is emblematic of their form of struggle with these structural deformities, but it’s hardly the only feature of that struggle and not always the most prominent feature. I see no obvious ways to break free from this and other such dynamics. Still, thanks largely to guidance from Indigenous scholars who generously share their experiences with pedagogies aimed at sustaining their communities within a settler state bent on their destruction, I do at least have some ideas about how to counteract the worst of my students’ suffering.

Each [Indigenous resistance] movement rises against colonial and corporate extractive projects. But what’s often downplayed is the revolutionary potency of what Indigenous resistance stands for: caretaking and creating just relations between human and other-than-human worlds on a planet thoroughly devastated by capitalism.

– The Red Nation

You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not?

–N.K. Jemison

One breakdown away from a grijpy sock vacation.

– Sticker on a student’s laptop

The fall 2022 term, just completed as I write this essay, was genuinely awful. Even measured against terms during the height of the pandemic, it was the most difficult I’ve experienced since I began teaching over two decades ago. While the proximate cause likely has to do with idiosyncrasies of my home institution (and perhaps my choice of introductory material), I have a strong suspicion that the ultimate cause involves a much bigger set of issues that many fellow teachers in higher education are dealing with as well.

Given my research interests and my home institution’s needs, my teaching consists almost exclusively of courses centered on topics in environmental philosophy. This past fall I taught environmental ethics. Among our readings, I included material from a memoir written by Greta Thunberg and her family. While it didn’t go over any better than most of what we covered, the following lines—from Greta’s mother, Malena—help us, I think, to begin to capture why:

We live in a time of historical abundance. The world’s combined resources have never been greater. Just like the chasms dividing rich and poor. Some have so insanely much more than they need. Others have nothing.

At the same time the world around us is only faring worse. The ice is melting. Insects are dying. The forests are disappearing, and the oceans and other ecosystems are struggling more and more each day.

Like so many people around us.

People who have fallen apart like we fell apart, people who are tattered and torn. [...] people who truly live in symbiosis with the planet they inhabit. Not the symbiosis we usually talk about, the one we associate with a down-to-earth life in harmony with nature.

This is about a new unanimity: a new chord. This is about burned-out people on a burned-out planet.

Do I have some quibbles with Malena’s comments? Sure. But they do capture what I see when I look out at my students from the front of the classroom.

My students are tattered and torn. They are falling apart, if they haven’t already. If they’re lucky, they’re still able to engage in most daily essentials and perhaps a few distractions. But my impression is that most of them lack the wherewithal right now to do much that they would deem genuinely worthwhile. In a classroom full of people otherwise committed to struggling for ecological well-being and climate justice, this is just devastating. As the world around them and its living communities continue to fare worse, here they are trying just to put one foot in front of the other.

Yes, Malena’s right. My students are increasingly burned out, just like the planet they inhabit. They’re well aware that others are far worse off than they are. But in this case, “first-world” problems—including being able to afford astounding tuition costs to suffer together at a modestly
well-heeled institution—are still problems. They’re “symptoms of exactly the same disease,” Malena contends, “a planetary crisis that arose because we have turned our backs on each other. We have turned our backs on nature. We have turned our backs on ourselves.”

Who exactly we are, according to Malena, bears discussion elsewhere. But if my students are afflicted by a disease, it’s heavily reinforced by a nexus of institutions—educational and otherwise—characterized by what Esme Murdock (2022) calls structures of disablement. Structures of disablement compel one to engage in practices that are profoundly damaging to the planet, to others, and to oneself. At the same time, they support pathologizing resistance to and noncompliance with these practices and invalidating resulting trauma. Navigating structures of disablement isn’t optional. Doing so isn’t my students’ path of least resistance. There’s no other path they can take. Traveling it is required for them to live and make a living.

Somatically, my students get it. Their pinched faces and slouched postures don’t lie. Nor does their dark revelry in a common Gen Z joke about needing a “grippy sock vacation”: a lengthy inpatient stint at a psychiatric facility. But, for reasons that bear attention, the very structures of disablement that hold my students captive—including those operative within institutions of higher learning—systematically lead them to misinterpret their somatic experiences in a manner that exacerbates their suffering. Again, they’re committed to pursuing ecological well-being and climate justice, even accepting these pursuits as their generation’s singular responsibility. They’re also aculturated to shoulder undue blame for ongoing setbacks and, worse still, for the debilitating conditions—including generalized anxiety, clinical depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—they nearly all suffer from partially as a result. This dynamic is emblematic of their form of struggle with structures of disablement, but it’s hardly the only feature of that struggle and not always the most prominent feature. And while I see no obvious ways to break free from this and other such dynamics, thanks largely to guidance from Indigenous scholars who generously share their experiences with pedagogies aimed at sustaining their communities within a settler state bent on their destruction, I do at least have some ideas about how to counteract the worst of my students’ suffering.

Admittedly, like me, most of my students are historical beneficiaries of settler state violence. But one can benefit from and be subject to said violence at the same time. Indeed, the perpetuation of the settler state depends on it, as we’ll see specifically with respect to compulsory schooling. Before we get to this, though, let’s talk a bit more about somatics.

THE PERVERSIVENESS OF STRESS CONDITIONS

Malena relays that for the first decade of Greta’s life, she was a happy and precocious child. Bright and inquisitive, she excelled in all educational pursuits. But at age eleven, things changed dramatically. Greta began exhibiting signs of distress, particularly in relation to school. She cried getting ready for school, on the way to school, and pretty much continually in school until Svante, her father, picked her up (often early) and brought her home to her only source of comfort, the family’s golden retriever Moses. Slowly, Malena relays, Greta began “disappearing into some kind of darkness, and little by little, bit by bit, she seemed to stop functioning. She stopped playing the piano. She stopped laughing. She stopped talking. And. She stopped eating.”

After visiting numerous doctors, Greta was diagnosed with autism, clinical depression, generalized anxiety, and OCD. Her younger sister Beata—prone to bouts of aggression, irritability, and insolence—was diagnosed shortly thereafter with ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Typically, members of the medical community treat psychiatric diagnoses such as these as explanations for a person’s behavior. Malena instead takes them to be indicators of pervasive “complications that are very often stress related. More people simply have cause to investigate why their everyday lives don’t function as other people’s lives seem to function. More and more need tools to describe, for example, functional impairment.”

Ruinous landslides, deforestation, soil erosion, floods, droughts, and sea level rise are just a few of the most obvious manifestations of the current ecological–climatological crisis. Malena notes. Less obvious are widespread, debilitating stress conditions. Greta, and likely Beata too, “simply couldn’t reconcile the contradictions of modern life. Things just didn’t add up.” How was it possible that the world’s wealthiest nations supposedly couldn’t afford to provide for climate migrants or offer equitable financial support to nations of the Global South suffering disproportionately from the impacts of climate change? Why did so many humans continue to consume environmentally destructive industrially processed ground-up muscle of other-than-human animals subject to enslavement, torture, and slaughter? Who on earth could overlook that we inhabit a world awash in plastic toxins when a garbage island larger than Mexico was floating in the South Pacific?

While students in Greta’s class were visibly horrified by phenomena like these when shown films about them during class, out in the school corridor migrants, livestock, and plastics were quickly forgotten as students’ conversations turned to upcoming vacations and shopping trips. They seemingly had left their horror in the classroom. But Greta couldn’t. No wonder she felt a crushing sense of helplessness and hopelessness. No wonder she struggled day after day trying to make sense of dystopian socioecological conditions that pass for normality.

Malena suggests that what ultimately set Greta definitively apart from her peers was that, try as she might, she couldn’t work out the equation they had solved, “the equation that was the ticket to a functioning everyday life.” Her peers may have been distraught by what they learned. Still, they adapted, Malena concludes. “As you do.”

But I don’t think this is any more plausible than Malena’s assertion that the prevailing cause of our problems is that we (whoever we are) suffer from a common disease. This
past term was only the worst in a long chain of terms in which I encountered classrooms full of students struggling with stress conditions. Very few students seem to me to have the capacity to adapt. Most have worked out how to put on a game face both inside and outside the classroom, which surely sets them apart from Greta. At best, though, this is just a mask for their suffering. It’s no salve. But, of course, students have learned to function within a system of schooling that incentivizes prioritizing surface concerns over content. They’ve long since metabolized the basic values of a pedagogical culture that demands, to the best of their ability, that they conceal their deviations and weaknesses. But my students are not okay. Not most of them anyway. Even if they’ve been trained to uphold the illusion that they are.

Numerous studies offer evidence that societies across the Global North are prototypically afflicted with high rates of anxiety, depression, suicide, addiction, schizophrenia, and the so-called 4As: ADHD, autism, allergies, and asthma. It’s no coincidence that people in these societies are awash in industrial toxins, increasingly overfed yet undernourished, sedentary, sunlight deficient, and sleep deprived. But at least two other overarching social dynamics also are at play.

First is the pervasive experience of a quintessential American affliction, chronic loneliness. “As affluence and urbanization rise in a society,” Sebastian Junger states, “rates of depression and suicide tend to go up rather than down. Rather than buffering people from clinical depression, increased wealth in a society seems to foster it.” This is the case as well with each of the conditions listed above. The drivers of this dynamic are straightforward, Junger contends. While being more financially independent affords greater access to creature comforts, it also is accompanied by increased social isolation (which only intensified during the pandemic). More pointedly, when we’re trained to prioritize products over people, or grades over learning for that matter, we less readily share time and resources. The pursuit of security and well-being, including through educational attainment, becomes not just an individualistic and competitive enterprise but something to be bought and sold. Networks of communal support atrophy and ultimately are replaced by “a desperate cycle of work, financial obligation, and more work”—whether or not that work is intrinsically satisfying.

Second is the replacement within the modern state of the role of community in maintaining social cohesion with that of authority. Not long before civil war broke out in the US in the mid-nineteenth century, Louisiana physician Samuel Cartwright announced his discovery of drapetomania and dysesthesia. The former is a disease that causes slaves to flee captivity, Cartwright declared. The latter causes them to pay insufficient attention to their work. These mark particularly egregious examples of pathologizing resistance and noncompliance and invalidating trauma, noted dynamics of structures of disablement. Yet, as Bruce Levine argues, the same logic is reflected in less pronounced forms in the ways that ADHD, ODD, and other “conduct disorders” are understood in children. Indeed, ADHD and ODD “are now the most common classification of children medicated with anti-psychotics, among the highest grossing classes of drugs in the United States today.” Like drapetomania, the diagnosis of ODD follows from overt challenges to or rejections of authority. Like dysesthesia, the inattention and impulsiveness of those diagnosed with ADHD are routinely treated as forms of misconduct that reflect covert noncompliance.

Comparably, Levine continues, adults who buck demands specifically from difficult, even dictatorial, bosses and employers often report experiencing acute anxiety and persistent depression. They exhibit genuine anguish and fear that noncompliance will cause them to be financially harmed and/or socially stigmatized. Yet they also dread the lost sense of integrity that would accompany compliance. Anxiety, depression, and other such “mood disorders” are widely assumed to have genetic or biological roots, at least popularly. Levine holds, though, that the situation with bad bosses and employers is just one example of a straightforward stress reaction to difficult existential realities.

Perhaps the popular view of anxiety, depression, and the like continues to have currency not because it has scientific backing but because it serves existing political and financial interests for the inner turmoil associated with challenging authority to be reclassified as a sign of defective biochemistry. Levine notes that the graduate schools and medical schools that select and train mental health professionals themselves are dominated by curriculums that privilege pathologizing resistance and noncompliance. More to the point, he asserts, words like illness, disease, and disorder typically indicate that our focus should be on individuals who need treatment and cure, “not on a troubled society in need of restructuring.”

What, then, if forms of behavior classified as conduct disorders and mood disorders are instead better characterized as commonsense reactions to troubling socioecological conditions? They aren’t maladies at all, Levine maintains. They’re exactly how we should expect people to react when they’re denied:

1. autonomy—self-direction, experience of potency, and capacity and ability to self-govern;
2. community—strong bonds among small groups that provide for economic security and emotional satisfaction; and
3. humanity—the variety of ways of being human, the variety of satisfactions, and the variety of negative reactions to feeling controlled rather than understood.

Societies that are hostile to autonomy, community, and humanity perpetuate themselves via a specifiable form of institutionalization that proliferates “large, bland, standardized, hierarchical, bureaucratic, authoritarian, coercive, manipulative, expansionistic, and impersonal entities.” The modern university is a clear case in point, particularly when university functionaries privilege the identification of adverse responses to institutionalization as malingering or signs that students simply can’t cope.
That these responses are evidence instead of somatic rebellion against structural deformities, neuro-corporeal refusals fully to comply, is unfathomable.

PUTTING THE COMPULSION IN COMPELLARY SCHOOLING

Of course, my students don’t interpret their own experiences as somatic rebellion either. This isn’t a shortcoming, it’s a basic societal expectation. Drawing on Fanon’s work on the politics of psychiatry in colonized spaces, Murdock contends that structures of disablement are most visible and most deadly with respect to pathologizing Indigenous resistance to settler state violence and the outright erasure of historical trauma. Indigenous lands, bodies, and psyches are subject to systematic abuse and eradication that is explained away by colonizers—via doctrines of discovery, Manifest Destiny, or other comparable appeals to cultural superiority—or aggressively made to disappear from collective memory. Indigenous peoples who are unable to play along and pretend that the murder of their worlds never actually happened or somehow was for the best are depicted as constitutionally wounded, in need of “humanitarian management,” as Dian Million quips, or what amounts to “group death that poses as care.”

A similar, albeit far less murderous, dynamic is at work within the educational system of the United States. Prior to the Civil War, no social imperative existed specifically for compulsory schooling. Schools existed, but because the ante-bellum US was largely an agrarian society, most people expected to become farmers. If they got any formal education at all, it typically ended by age twelve. Higher education was strictly for male members of the social elite, particularly those interested in learning law or medicine, joining the clergy, or becoming men of letters.

Yet, industrial sectors of the economy expanded exponentially in the American North during the Civil War. Captains of industry gained a sufficiently firm political foothold to leverage public policy on behalf of their commercial interests. The fulfillment of these interests required the establishment of an entirely new social order, which “didn’t arise as a product of public debate,” John Taylor Gatto remarks, “but as a distillation of private discussion” among “Northeastern policy elites of business, government, and university life.” These discussions were driven by “the new logic of the Industrial Age,” according to which family and community life were to refocus from the farm to the factory. An exaltation of intensive productivity and “social efficiency” resulted from the seemingly limitless potential of coal-driven machinery. And bodies were needed to tend both these machines and the bodies that tended the machines.

Surely there were many communities that resisted compulsory schooling. But several factors may help to explain how it took firm hold relatively quickly in American society. Gatto asserts that public support for compulsory schooling was already strong in the North among middle-class and upper-class whites prior to the Civil War because of (i) the Red Scare of 1848 and growing fears of revolution among the urban poor and (ii) worries about of the cultural influence of Catholicism due to an influx of Celtic, Slavic, and Latin immigrants. Compulsory schooling was regarded as a principal means to mitigate both threats. Support for it in the South and North alike gained strength among whites of all classes after the Civil War as it served to control the mobility and economic opportunities of newly freed slaves. Wide national support as well for westward expansion bolstered the creation of Indian boarding schools, a cornerstone of the federal government’s commitment of genocide.

Compulsory schooling thus provided a means to indoctrinate and sort children within an increasingly diverse yet centralized and hierarchical economy. A generation hence, sociologist Benjamin Kidd defended the need to “impose on the young the ideal of subordination to the common aims of organized humanity” rather than to ethnic and religious identifications. Elwood Cubberly, future dean of education at Stanford, argued in his 1905 dissertation for Columbia Teachers College that schools should be viewed as factories designed expressly to disassemble a system in which children learn crafts associated with provincial living. Rather than completing school by age twelve, childhood was to be extended by two, four, or even six years to provide extra time for children to be sorted and then “shaped and formed into finished products [. . . ] manufactured like nails.”

Frederick T. Gates, who, with John D. Rockefeller, funded the General Education Board, a philanthropic organization that supported the expansion of higher education, envisioned a society in which “people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands.” For this to occur, agrarian conventions and parochial traditions should be made to fade from our minds, and unhindered by tradition we work our own will upon a grateful and responsive folk. We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or men of science. We have not to raise up from among them authors, educators, poets, or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians, nor lawyers, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we have ample supply. The task we set before ourselves is very simple [. . .]. [W]e will organize children [. . .] and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way.

William Torrey Harris, US Commissioner of Education from 1889 to 1906, lauded that “Ninety-nine [students] out of a hundred are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom. This is not an accident but the result of substantial education, which, scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual.”

Far from creating an independent and informed populace, school curricula thus came to operate as a reverse elenchus, producing physical, moral, and intellectual paralysis on the part of students. Lesson by lesson, the vast majority of students continue to be taught to submit to authority
figures and obey orders, to embrace standardization and regimentation (including literally being formed into rows), to please (or at least not rile) their superiors, to be granted (or arbitrarily denied) privileges but no effective rights, to become accustomed to routine evaluation and judgment by strangers, to measure themselves by their class position, to regard emotional and intellectual supplication as normal, to spend hours doing tedious exercises, to sit quietly despite being bored stiff, and to believe that their failure at any of these enterprises represents an individual moral deficiency that may well compromise future success. “What better preparation for accepting unquestioningly the lives given us?” Gatto notes. “Where else can students ‘learn to think of themselves as employees competing for the favors of management?’”

And what of those students who refuse to comply? What about miscreants? They also must be managed. This is accomplished primarily by inducing fear of the inability to access just about the only pathway to occupations that aren’t pure drudgery. It’s incredible that in the US today nearly all such occupations are accessible only by passing through a higher-education bottleneck that itself is treated as compulsory de facto if not de jure for occupational advancement. This displays just how successful the social engineering begun in the nineteenth century still is in the twenty-first. If fear fails, there’s always medication or routine punishment. And if these fail as well, the school-to-prison pipeline provides for-profit “correctional” corporations with bodies—mainly black and brown—for cheap or unpaid labor.

Schooling at all levels thus continues to succeed, marvelously, at doing what it was originally intended to do. Its purpose was never to educate in the typical sense of the term. It certainly wasn’t meant to prepare students in any concerted way to struggle against the current climatological-ecological crisis (which surely is part of Greta’s rationale for engaging in her extended school strike). Its purpose was, and still is, to break each student’s will as it funnels and controls the flow of bodies into a market economy. And most of us who’ve been subject to schooling are left with no salient or easily identifiable choice but to take our place in a lifeway that requires us to damage the planet, one another, and ourselves and, tragically, to be thankful for it.

This is the system in which I find myself. With respect to my teaching duties, I’m paid to be a glorified sorter. I may try to teach against the grain of the settler state, but I’m also complicit with it. Complicit under duress, I suppose, but still complicit. For whatever I may teach in class runs up against the demand, states Curtis White, that I also perform “the task of sorting human beings into categories useful to the state and to future employers: these are the A students, there the B, and those over there the failures. Use them accordingly.”

Correspondingly, I’m a functionary of an absurdly expensive credentialing service the workings of which my students must spend their early lives figuring out to signify their qualification for professional advancement. And what a service it is, designed expressly to support the thinly veiled illusion that the socioeconomic institutions operative within the settler state are meritocratic. Indeed, I’ve been trained to accept that it’s part of my calling as a tenured professor to pretend that I myself am an example of the meritocracy at work.

Rubbish.

Yet here I am.

FROM INSTRUCTION TO INTERACTION

Today, nearly every student who enters my classroom spends a great deal of time working on assignments that call for a narrowly conceived, readily testable form of analytical intelligence. From the perspective of most of my colleagues, my university’s administrators, and my university’s accrediting institution, my courses should follow suit. I’m called on to play a calculable role in helping students learn to think critically, communicate effectively both orally and in writing, analyze and parse complex arguments, and so forth, all of which are to be dutifully outlined in my course learning outcomes on the syllabus.

These aren’t bad skills to have, mind you. They have pedagogical value. But within the current educational system they’re also representative of a “monochromatic flattening of education,” as James C. Scott puts it, that reduces philosophy itself to a series of threadbare mental exercises. This concerns me, but it’s probably the least of my concerns. I find the demand that I be a sorter far more troubling, which is why I began to distance myself from the practice a few years ago and gave it up entirely (save in graduate courses) during the academic year that ended with the pandemic.

The primary function of grading is to coerce students to do what they’d rather not. From a market perspective, grading also reinforces the importance of valuing external rewards over autonomy, humanity, and community. In the same vein, my students’ lives largely are governed by a productivity fetish. More often than I’d like to admit, so is mine. Work, work, work; stress, stress, stress; and feel guilty when you aren’t working and stressing about your work. Earn good grades, land the plum job, qualify for a better income, receive exemplary performance evaluations, acquire accolades, get the big promotion. Always look to improve, at least on paper.

Slowly but surely, we become our achievements. We’re a number on a transcript, a paycheck, and an annual review. We’re the pedigree of the institutions with which we’re affiliated. We’re a list of accomplishments on a résumé or vita. We are a what, not a who. And we’re well trained to judge ourselves and one another accordingly. Somehow, we never quite measure up. Happiness is always a slightly larger number, a slightly better affiliation, a slightly longer accomplishments list away.

What would it mean instead to be a teacher of veritable whos—of sacred beings, as each of my students is? What would it mean to honor their sacredness? How do I honor my own in the process?” Seeking answers to these questions has led me to devote myself less to supporting students’ learning (as it were) than our shared unlearning
of invidious educational habits and expectations. In the pursuit, we together stand to develop new and interesting forms of intelligence.

Indigenous pedagogies have proven invaluable for me in this enterprise, even if my positionality necessitates that I proceed with caution in working with them. More on my caution later. To begin, here's Lee Hester:

Correction is an important part of Euro-American education. Almost everyone in academic life has as part of his or her job the grading of papers. It is central to the Euro-American tradition. It is almost completely alien to Choctaw tradition. This is in part because of the value of context [. . .] but also because of the value of respect [. . .]. Correction implies that one person knows what is correct and the other person does not; even worse, that one person acts correctly and the other does not. Though there may be many ways of rationalizing the need for correction, or how correction, properly understood, actually is a form of respect for the person being corrected, it is very difficult—maybe impossible—for it not to convey a feeling of superiority versus inferiority; a lack of respect for, if not downright disrespect for, the person being corrected. 43

This claim is echoed over and over throughout the literature.

Lecturing and comparable forms of instruction, for example, play a central role in the typical American education. By comparison, asserts Shay Welch, myriad Native traditions favor engaging almost exclusively in forms of learning characterized by "choice making and skill development, an intense emphasis on individual initiative, and a proscription of direct guidance or correction by teachers and elders." 44 Children of all ages are left largely to their own devices, and discipline is rare. Even for the young adults Welch and I teach, "To immediately mark and correct a student's paper is nothing more than to act as if you did not believe that the student was capable of coming to the right answer eventually on her own with appropriate guidance [. . .]; it is a denial of dignity and deemed rude, which is a serious transgression in Native interaction." 45

It isn't that Indigenous pedagogies preclude guidance, Lorraine Brundige notes. It's that guidance is typically indirect, and it's never pushy. 46 Nor are learners ever treated as inferiors. Keith Basso comments that among the Apache, stories are often designed to "work on you," "get under your skin," "make you want to change," or "make you want to replace yourself" via moral transformation. 47 Basso calls this practice "interventive-noninterference," and it regularly involves telling tales that may not seem to have anything to do with whatever question the learner asks or the problem they present. The learner is hereby "given the autonomy, the complete freedom to discover the relevance of the reply." 48 The storyteller has intervened in the learner's affairs, but only on request. Moreover, the storyteller doesn't interfere with the learner's capacity to work out on their own what lesson(s) to take away.

Am I able to engage in something like interventive-noninterference in the classroom? Being at present a relatively inexperienced unlearner of invidious educational habits and expectations, it would be foolhardy of me to believe I have the skill set—or mindset—seamlessly to pull it off. But I take the above considerations as a clear reminder that to be a teacher who centers Indigenous pedagogies is to be one kind of caretaker of sacred beings. To the extent that I'm able, it's my responsibility to contribute to my students' well-being on their own considered terms. I take this charge seriously.

These considerations also highlight for me the critical role effective classroom interaction can play in facilitating what Leanne Simpson calls intelligence as diversity. 49 On the one hand, this entails creating space for students to practice disciplinary cross-pollination without me getting in the way. Budding climatologists, ecologists, community organizers, engineers, and architects are free to exchange their knowledge and share their viewpoints with budding philosophers, interior designers, urban planners, and food justice activists. It means offering them all room to support one another's diverse life paths, and, perhaps, to spark new connections and intriguing intellectual and relational variances.

On the other hand, I'm reminded to take great care not to center whiteness or replicate sexism, cisgendering, heteronormativity, and what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang point to as settler moves to innocence 50 within the classroom. I'm also reminded to have the humility to recognize that, given my positionality, I'm likely sometimes unwittingly to fail. This makes essential creating space as well for minoritized students to be comfortable and confident to speak their truth. I'm fortunate, to say the least, that most of my students already expect as much from me.

ECOLOGIES OF INTIMACY

Another key pedagogical practice offers equally helpful direction. Recall that the main point of schooling is to learn behaviors, rather than (as is commonly believed) to gain knowledge and skills. Specifically, schooling involves learning to comply to the will of authority figures and to manage any resulting grievances largely on one's own. Yet what if instead the behaviors learned have a freely embraced communal focus? I've come around to attending principally to what Jenny Davidson refers to as "self-care and the sane management of responsibilities to the broader community," 51 notably including both the living community and the transient community we may build as a class.

Davidson makes that comment in an article entitled "Forget Distance Learning: Just Give Every Student an Automatic A." It's a response to the acute stress both students and faculty faced trying to figure out how to transition to remote instruction during the early days of the pandemic. It seems even more relevant now.

Leanne Simpson remarks that what she calls ecologies of intimacy are highly prized among her people, the Michi Saagig Nishaabeg, because they foster emergent systems of "relationships in the absence of coercion, hierarchy, and
authoritarian power.°⁵² Not just young adults like those in my classroom but children, too, share the same rights as their elders. And while, like again their elders, they also bear responsibilities, they’re given the freedom and support to figure out for themselves where their responsibilities—and their gifts of wisdom—lie. For consent, caring, sharing, and individual self-determination are given pride of place. This has allowed the Michi Saagiig Nishaabeg to accumulate “networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust,”°⁵³ despite ongoing subjection to settler state violence.

Trust: It’s the first of the Four Pillars at the heart of each undergraduate course I teach. (They’re listed in place of learning outcomes on my syllabi.) My students don’t have to earn my trust. They have it by default. Instead, it’s my responsibility to earn theirs. Respect: My students’ needs, interests, and concerns matter. They deserve my attention. Empathy: Life at my home institution in expressly designed to be stressful for students. I refuse to ignore this. Consent: My students aren’t asked to do anything that isn’t subject to their prior agreement. We begin our work together by deciding not how my students will earn their grade. The A is theirs at the outset no matter what they choose to do. So we focus on how we can get the most out of our time together, and this can only be determined by collective involvement and decision-making.

The components of the Four Pillars aren’t unique to Indigenous pedagogies. Nor, in general terms, are core features of ecologies of intimacy. But Indigenous communities have uniquely rich histories of nurturing self-determination and anti-authoritarianism, particularly under the pressures applied by structures of disablement. Hierarchism and the mechanisms of surveillance and control that are central to compulsory schooling are widely rejected. If I intend to do the same, I do well as a teacher to commit to earning my leadership position in the classroom rather than imposing it. Students thus learn up front that they don’t need to look to me for instructions. But our studies—typically centered on readings, films, and far-flung discussion°⁵⁴—aren’t always the point. And they fall by the wayside at times, sometimes by design (with regular walks) and sometimes not (with ad hoc trips to a coffee shop or local park simply to decompress). Canine companions are always welcome with prior unanimous student approval, since they provide a welcome distraction.°⁵⁵

By engaging in practices like these, students ease into the idea that it’s perfectly fine to get exactly as much out of the course as they wish, that they have my support with whatever they choose to do. A small handful of students just about every term prefer to get nothing from a course and do exactly that. Many enjoy keeping a journal (I offer substantive responses to every post). Some seek out intensive research collaborations with me and/or fellow students or undertake self-directed research projects or creative activities. Occasionally, one or two create their own learning rubrics and plans for self-assessment. And it’s now commonplace in my courses for students not just to keep up with the material we cover of their own accord but, completely unprompted, to highlight not just that they’ve learned (often because the pressure of the grade is absent) but what they’ve learned—making connections and drawing conclusions that are entirely their own.°⁵⁶

This is satisfying work, which doesn’t mean it’s necessarily easy. For my students, it involves less prep (if they so choose) but more presence. For me, it requires a lot of both, particularly since I’m striving as best as I can to model ecologies of intimacy in the classroom.°⁵⁷

Still, I have no doubt that you may be concerned about free riders in this setting. I must admit that I’m not. I have no interest in forcing my students to spend time doing something they have no desire to do. Call me crazy, but if a course is running smoothly and participants’ needs and interests are being met (to the extent possible), I’m satisfied. It’s my responsibility to make my classes worth my students’ time while accepting that they always have a litany of other demands in their lives to address.

Call my courses blow-offs if you like. Accuse me of being lazy, a grade inflater, lacking in rigor (a veritable heresy for a philosopher), or overly permissive. Frankly, I don’t care.

Okay, maybe I care a little. Still, I simply can’t envision a scenario in which I’ll ever assign a grade other than an A for my undergraduates again (except if a student expressly requests to be subject to a conventional rubric, which hasn’t happened yet). I readily acknowledge that I’m fortunate to have the protection of tenure. I’m also well aware that being a cishet white man offers me latitude that colleagues who aren’t so positioned don’t necessarily enjoy. And I’m certainly fortunate that I have at most about fifty students during any given term, which permits me to get to know many of them fairly well.

Not every course gels into a community, of course. Last term was a clear case in point. But when we do succeed, which happens much more often than not, we get something far more precious than the flattened version of analytical intelligence I’m supposed to focus on. We get what Simpson calls “intelligence as consensual engagement.”°⁵⁸ This is the mental and emotional acumen or astuteness that emerges only when people learn to learn from one another on their own terms and entirely for their own edification. At worst, students are given the space simply to get to know more about one another. At best, they get a glimpse, however brief, of what it’s like be full-fledged whos: “loving, creative, self-determining, interdependent, and self-regulating community-minded individuals.”°⁵⁹ Perhaps students even begin in small and subtle ways to metabolize and embody their sacredness—no matter how much credentialing, sorting, and other forms of authoritative power continue to play leading roles in their schooling.

PROCEEDING WITH CARE
I hope it’s clear to you that I’m not offering advice or prescriptions. I’m describing some of my own teaching practices and the rationales behind them and simply inviting you to do with this information what you will. These practices are at least partially specific to the idiosyncrasies of my home institution, my courses, and my students’ interests and needs. I think they’re also flexible enough for you to investigate how guidance from Indigenous

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pedagogies can serve your students if you’re inclined to do so.

I hope it’s also clear that I’m not dealing here in panaceas or miracle cures. As I noted above, alleviating my students’ suffering, however minimally and temporarily, may be the best I can do. But this is better than nothing.

Still, I offer a stern word of caution. It would be a grave mistake for me to treat ecologies of intimacy (or Indigenous pedagogies more generally) as contextless, at least as Simpson describes them. For her people, ecologies of intimacy are an embodiment of their homeland, Kina Gchi Nishnaabeg-ogamig. Across Indigenous communities, they’re situated—literally—in places, performances, and stories specific to kinship networks marked not just by abiding more-than-human intergenerational relationships but also rich histories of relational accountability.62

Moreover, ecologies of intimacy (and Indigenous pedagogies) are at the core of Simpson’s active pursuit of Indigenous cultural revitalization and political resurgence via the creation of “islands of decolonial love” in a turbulent sea of ongoing settler state violence.63 By comparison, I’m dealing principally with the palliation of stress conditions within loose and short-lived communities comprised largely of a kinless cohort.64 We kinless just aren’t that good at the sort of intimacy Simpson has in mind. Maybe not any sort. And rather than cultural revitalization and political resurgence, I can only disrupt, modestly at best, the most immediate structures of disablement my students face.

I wonder, though. Can acknowledging these limitations itself be enabling? Consider the fate of place. My students and I are inhabitants of traditional Lenni-Lenape land ceded under dubious circumstances. This fundamentally compromises our capacity for relational accountability with respect to our wider ecology. One can’t possibly relate well to a place that one’s cultural forbearers have pillaged, particularly when resilient parasitisms by colonizers remain firmly in place.65

But maybe both embracing ecologies of intimacy and acknowledging the cultural—and structural—barriers to the capacity of my students for ecological intimacy offers them an important opportunity. Perhaps it can help crystalize not just what somatically they’re rebelling against but also what’s truly worth fighting for.

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NOTES
1. The Red Nation, The Red Deal, 8
3. Greta Thunberg et al., Our House Is on Fire, 75; emphasis added.
5. The disease in question must be something like Windigo (Anishinaabemowin)/wéwéko (Cree), a sickness of exploitation and insatiable greed that drives the afflicted to commit wanton acts of murder, brutality, and deceit (see J. D. Forbes, Columbus and Other Cannibals, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass, 205ff.
6. My students also recognize that members of older generations who urge them to take this responsibility typically provide scant support in the process (see Thunberg et al., Our House Is on Fire, 138).
8. Thunberg et al., Our House Is On Fire, 56; see also Svend Brinkmann, Diagnostic Cultures.
11. Thunberg et al., Our House Is On Fire, 46.
12. Thunberg et al., Our House Is On Fire, 46.
15. St. George and Strauss, “The Crisis of Student Mental Health.”
16. Junger, Tribe, 17; see also Hari, Lost Connections.
17. Levine, Resisting Illegitimate Authority, 3.
22. Levine, Commonsense Rebellion, 3. This distinction tracks that between the medical and social models of disability. Proponents of the former treat disability as a function of bodies that work incorrectly. Something is wrong with the disabled person that prevents them from being able to function in a given setting. Proponents of the latter regard disability instead as a function of social organization. Certain forms of embodiment are accommodated over others, which at least partially contributes to impairment among those who are denied accommodation (see Reynolds, “I’d Rather Be Dead than Disabled,” and Taylor, Beasts of Burden.
23. Levine, Commonsense Rebellion, 4.
31. John Taylor Gatto, Dumbing Us Down, 16.
33. Cited in Derrick Jensen, A Language Older than Words, 37. Gatto (The Underground History, xxviii) notes that the idea of adolescence came into being because of added years of compulsory schooling. The term was a denotation for individuals who had never before existed: persons who had reached puberty but who had not yet become adults.

34. Cited in Frederick Taylor Gates, The Country School of To-morrow, 6.


36. Gatto, Dumbing Us Down, 38; see also Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society, and Charles Eisenstein, The Ascent of Humanity, 319ff.


39. Why, then, in the US are schools at every level generally assumed to be representations of systematic failure (see James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, Ivory Tower Blues) and Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, Academically Adrift? Perhaps this is reflective of a similar sort of intentional forgetting among members of colonizer culture as that which has erased ready awareness of Indigenous genocide.

40. White, cited in Keith A. Spencer, "Critic Curtis White: Capitalism Needs Workers Who Are 'Stupid-Smart'."


42. If (i) the earth is sacred or full of sacred places and phenomena and (ii) we humans belong here, then we do well to regard ourselves as sacred too. As are all living beings, we’re enamored in relationships that call for respect and responsibility. So contrary to popular belief among colonizers, humans aren’t inherently destructive. Evolutionarily, this can’t possibly be true. Such a notion also props up the benighted notion that eccode and climate change are by-products of human failures rather than the expected outcome of centuries of accumulating colonial injustices against Indigenous lands and lives.

43. Thurman Lee Hester, Jr., "Choctaw Conceptions of the Excellence of the Self, with Implications for Education," 184–85.


46. Lorraine Brundige and Gregory Cajete suggest that the intergenerational transfer of sacred knowledge regarding tribal ceremonies often serves as an exception to proscriptions against intergenerational transfer of sacred knowledge regarding tribal ceremonies often serves as an exception to proscriptions against.

47. Leanne B. Simpson, Islands of Decolonial Love. Ecologies of intimacy also operate within a considerably broader set of pedagogical principles than I here specify (see Cajete, Look to the Mountain and Jo Chrona, Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies, 115ff).

48. Brian Burkhardt—who ably serves as a mouthpiece for Jisdzu, the rabbit trickster—refers to the people of colonizer culture as "Kinless Conquerors." Colonizers are trained to revel in "a Solitude that deceives itself as Dominating Power." Yet, where there’s no kinship there can be "no human power that is not the imitation power of domination." See Brian Burkhardt, "On the Mysterious 1832 Cherokee Manuscript, or Jisdzu Fixes John Locke’s Two Treatises of Civil Government." 47.


50. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.


52. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 77.

53. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 8.

54. I routinely complement my reliance on Indigenous pedagogies with healthy doses of content from Indigenous scholars, activists, and creators.

55. Other-than-canine visitors are also welcome. Only once, though, have we had one, when a neighborhood cat tagged along with me on my walk to class.

56. While I reject sorting outright, I’m well-aware that this may not be feasible for you. I thank Agnes Curry for pointing out to me that several grading strategies may be made compatible with creating course-based ecologies of intimacy. These include collaborative grading, mastery-based agreements, and student-centered self-grading based on agreed-upon criteria (see Blum, Ungrading). It’s worth noting, though, that effectively going gradeless is not a foreign concept in higher education. Institutions such as Brown University, Hampshire College, Evergreen State College, New College of Florida (for now), Alverno College, and Amherst University are fully or partially gradeless.

57. Simpson attests that when one has gotten to the point at which a lesson has become so familiar that one essentially could teach it in their sleep, they become responsible for modeling that teaching in practice. I’m nowhere near that at present with respect to ecologies of intimacy, but I’m not planning to retire anytime soon. See Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 156.

58. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 160; see also Ian MacPherson, "Encouraging Associative Intelligence: Co-operatives, Shared Learning and Responsible Citizenship," and Linda M. Goulet and Keith N. Goulet, Teaching Each Other, 98ff.

59. Simpson, As We Have Always Done, 151.

60. See Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour)," 23 and Kyle Powys Whyte et al., "Indigenous Lessons about Sustainability Are Not Just for All Humanity," 159.

61. Leanne B. Simpson, Islands of Decolonial Love. Ecologies of intimacy also operate within a considerably broader set of pedagogical principles than I here specify (see Cajete, Look to the Mountain and Jo Chrona, Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies, 115ff).

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BOOK REVIEW

Revealing the Circle Hidden in Plain Sight: A Joint Review of Stephen M. Sachs et al. Honoring the Circle, in 4 Volumes and LaDonna Harris, Stephen M. Sachs and Barbra Morris et al., Re-Creating the Circle: The Renewal of American Indian Self-Determination


Reviewed by Dennis H. McPherson, Tracy Shields, and J. Douglas Rabb

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Stephen M. Sachs and his research team of scholars and activists, both Indigenous and allies, have produced four, no, five, volumes revealing the incredible impact Native American Indian thought has had and continues to have on America and beyond. A similar, though unrelated, project was published in 2005 by the University of Toronto Press under the title Hidden in Plain Sight: Contributions of Aboriginal Peoples to Canadian Identity and Culture (second and final volume, 2011). We are not reviewing the Canadian
volumes here, though we do make passing reference to them to enhance and expand upon our discussion of Honoring the Circle. The circle is, of course, “a Symbol of wholeness in Native American cultures.” Because of colonialism, this wholeness requires “continuous renewal in the life of the people.” Black Elk is quoted as famously commenting back in 1931 that “the Nation’s hoop is broken and scattered.” Sachs and company argue that “Today the hoop, or circle of many Native nations is in the process of rejuvenation.” In fact, they argue that the purpose of these books is to contribute to “returning American Indian nations to sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and harmony as full partners in American federalism and society.” They express the hope that their books “will be helpful in improving the condition of Indigenous people around the Earth and in bringing into being a better approach to development in general and improved ways of doing many things, for the benefit of all.”

They attempt to justify their use of the term “American Indian” while acknowledging and respecting that “Indigenous people prefer to be referred to as members of their own nation.” However, “the question of which term is best to use to refer to Native people collectively in the United States does not have a simple answer.” Throughout all five books Sachs and his teams “sometimes use the official US government terms ‘American Indian and Alaska Native’ as the most general collective term (and either ‘Native’ or ‘Indian’ as the most geographically specific collective).” They actually “rotate among Native, Indian, and Indigenous when speaking intertribally.”

They also express concern about the term “sovereignty.” However, “it cannot be avoided because of its wide use, particularly in Indian affairs.” The terms “self-determination” or “autonomy” might be more appropriate; however, “autonomy is not absolute but exists within an agreed-to set of relationships, traditionally often seen as involving respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and redistribution in order to keep everything in harmony and balance or, as the Dené say beauty.” They conclude: “As we consider that tribal governments are governments within the system of American federalism … this definition of sovereignty is appropriate.” American federalism and American democracy have deep Indigenous roots. The same can be said, and has been said, of the Canadian confederation, though Sachs and company do not say so. However, the Canadian book on Aboriginal influence, Hidden in Plain Sight, which we mentioned in passing, notes that anthropologist Leon Hatzan, who was adopted into the Bear Clan of the Cayuga Nation as Tsa-da-ga-hes, argues as follows in his 1925 study of the Six Nation Indians: “This—the Iroquois Confederacy—was a model upon which the British colonists based their provincial government, and it supplied the basic idea upon which rests the foundation of the present system of political government of the Great Southern Republic, also the constitution of the Canadian Provinces with the central power at Ottawa.” This, we suggest, strengthens the arguments in Honoring the Circle, not that they need strengthening. This is no longer controversial. This is no longer revisionist history. It is mainstream history and should be taught as such.

Sachs and his team also explore the Indigenous roots of American Pragmatism, drawing on Scott Pratt’s definitive book, Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy. We were somewhat surprised that we could find no reference in Honoring the Circle to Pratt’s early work on this topic, published under the title of “Native American Thought and the Origins of Pragmatism,” in Ayaangwaamizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy. We think it is significant that Pratt’s work on the Indigenous origin of pragmatism was published in an all-Native journal, American editor Lee Hester (Choctaw), Canadian editor Dennis McPherson (Ojibwa), a coauthor of this review essay. The term “Ayaangwaamizin” is Ojibwa and means to go carefully or to tread carefully, not for your own sake but for the sake of all our relations including other-than-human persons. We believe that Sachs and company are treading carefully in Honoring the Circle. However, their criteria for identifying Indigenous inspiration are rather broad, allowing for rather indirect influence. For example, there can be no doubt that nineteenth-century American philosopher Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was directly influenced. “Thoreau was immensely interested in Indians and their relation to the land and to nature.” Someone has counted 1,074 references to them in his collected works. Turns out that “among many others who were influenced by Thoreau Mohandas Gandhi read [Thoreau’s] ‘Civil Disobedience’ in South Africa in 1906.” Gandhi even quoted Thoreau in refusing to be registered and fingerprinted, as all Asians were required to do by the South African government. Sachs and company proclaim: “Thus the whole nonviolent resistance movement has a major root in Thoreau’s work, from a ground fertilized by both American Indian and European traditions.” We find it somewhat amusing that a real Indian, Gandhi, is said to be influenced by American Indians through the writings of Thoreau. If associating American Indians with “the whole nonviolent resistance movement” helps to question the B Western movie stereotype of the warlike savage red man, then we can’t really object all that much.

There are, however, far better examples of indirect influence in Honoring the Circle. Indeed, the first two volumes should be used in senior high schools across Canada and the United States. The books are well laid out, even difficult to put down at times. Students, having read the first volume and graduating from high school will, at the very least, understand that deep complexities are at play when considering how American Indigenous worldviews, political structuring, and community inner workings have influenced Europe and North America for centuries. Both volumes offer a trail of historical markers, examined within the conditions of the times. The extensive nature of the influences of Native values on Europe and North America, although understood in historical circles, is not comprehended at a societal level. Colonials have a long history of taking what they want from Indians without giving credit in return, yet even this value of sharing fairly seems to have roots that can be traced to Native cultures. In this sense, both volumes are refreshing reads. A strong case is made that Indians are responsible for North America’s and Europe’s contemporary dependence on markers of our democratic societies. Certainly, pre-contact, Europe was deeply committed to a feudal system run by monarchies that
were deeply influenced by Christianity. Each connection is examined by the authors in both volumes to denote the probability of direct influence ranging from quite likely to fairly probable. Volume II continues to follow the intricate web of historical conditions that reveal influences of Indian values, traditions, deep respect for nature, and community, on colonial values and European philosophy as we know it today, especially when considering the works of John Locke. Volume II also takes a deep dive into influences on the women’s movement, philosophy, and the environmental movement to name a few.

From a First Nations perspective, we find Volumes III and IV somewhat less enticing in that few of the discussions are headed up by Indigenous authors. It is one thing to embrace Indigenous traditions on topics such as economics, politics, women, and the environment, but it is quite another to realize that Indigenous cultures around the world are suffering because of our yearning to take from Indians at every step without understanding the basic standard of respect: to give back every time we take. As we write this review, the United Nations summit on biodiversity, the COP 15 meetings, are just winding down. Colonials say that “Indigenous-led efforts are key to Canada’s conservation goals,” yet even as we acknowledge that “Indigenous-led conservation” is needed to achieve land conservation targets by 2030, we discover that no Indigenous people are invited to the table to vote on these matters. Instead, First Nations people can be found shaking their heads at colonial desires for Indigenous knowledge to now save the world. In fairness, the volumes do discuss the problem of appropriation. The general theme of all five Circle volumes seems to be that Native ways are often the better ways of doing things for the benefit of all. Do we honor them by acknowledging this? No, we honor them through particular concrete action in locality by ceasing to violate the Circle. In attempting to honor the Circle while ceasing to violate it, we conclude with the admonition: Ayaangwaamizin.

NOTES
1. La Donna Harris, Stephen M. Sachs, et al., Re-Creating the Circle, x.
2. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, x.
3. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, x
5. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xiv.
6. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii.
7. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii.
8. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xiii.
9. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii-xiii.
10. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii.
11. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii.
12. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii.
13. Harris, Sachs, et al., Recreating the Circle, xii.

BIBLIOGRAPHY