

Confronting Partial Knowledge Through a Pedagogy of Discomfort: Notes on Anti-Oppressive Teaching

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Abstract

Wrestling with issues of racism and colonization in the classroom requires significant nuance from dominantly positioned educators. In this article, we weave together a narrative unpacking of an uncomfortable experience in a graduate level class with an exploration of relevant theoretical literature. Our reflection on practice takes up the possibilities for anti-oppressive education to engage with the partial knowledge of educators and students. Ultimately, engaging in a pedagogy of discomfort is necessary to unsettle dominantly positioned educators and students and enable a move towards bearing witness to the unequal realities of Canadian society. In order to begin to enter more deeply into relationships of accountability between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples, teaching moments such as these are inevitable, if not required.

Keywords: anti-oppressive education, discomfort, colonialism, partial knowledge, Indigenous futurity



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On April 17, 1995 Pamela George, a Saulteaux woman living in Regina, Saskatchewan was killed by two White¹ university students. Pamela, a mother of three, a writer of poetry, and an occasional sex worker, was picked up by Alex Ternowetsky and Steven Kummerfield. The men were both students at the University of Regina; Steven Kummerfield was training to be a teacher. That night, as part of Ternowetsky's and Kummerfield's end of term partying, Pamela was sexually assaulted, brutally beaten, and left to die. The subsequent trial served to highlight the racist and sexist nature of the Canadian justice system and was followed intently across the country. In the end both of Pamela's killers, despite the preplanning of their attack, were found guilty of manslaughter and were each sentenced to 6.5 years in prison of which they served roughly half that time before being released.²

In the summer of 2015, two decades later, in the same building where Steven Kummerfield studied to become a teacher, the image of Pamela George was projected onto the screen in a small lecture hall in front of a class of students in a master's of education course. The lesson intended to draw students' attention to the racialized nature of teacher education. However, the image prompted a charged teaching moment and days of ongoing conversation about racial and gendered violence, the power of storytelling, and the complexity of creating anti-oppressive spaces. In this paper, we investigate a moment of pedagogical tension and explore both the necessity and the difficulty of dominantly positioned teachers troubling oppression in the classroom.

Initial Positionings

Michael (Mike) Cappello is a middle-aged, White cis man who, at the time of writing, was in a tenure-track position at the University of Regina. His dissertation research examined how teacher education produces Whiteness. In particular, he looked at the way that what counts as good teaching—a list of reproducible “competencies” usually focused on management or a performance task—also works to center aspects of Whiteness.

Claire Kreuger is a middle-aged, White cis woman who, at the time of writing, was completing a master's of education degree at the University of Regina. She is also a full-time elementary teacher and mother of five. Two of her adopted daughters are Saulteaux.

We begin by acknowledging that Southern Saskatchewan, where we live, is Treaty 4 land and the territory of the Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota, Lakota, and Dakota peoples, as well as the homeland of the Métis Nation. This treaty history is not well understood by Canadians (Miller, 2009) and yet it has become fashionable, of late to ritually recognize the original inhabitants of this land. More than an empty recitation of history, we claim a settler identity in an attempt to put the colonial context for our life and our work at the forefront. We acknowledge the Treaty relationships that allow us to be here and we recognize the possibility of relating to each other in good ways (Asch, 2014). Nonetheless, even as we work to undo the legacy and ongoing reality of settler-colonialism, we acknowledge that we, Canadians and the Canadian state, are not in good relations with our Indigenous neighbours.

As settlers, we are beneficiaries of the colonial system that has dispossessed and continues to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land, lives, and resources. Echoing Fine et al. (2008), we recognize that, “those of us who are not Indigenous have been profoundly shaped by our witnessing of colonization, by our roles as accomplices, abettors, exploiters, romanticizers, pacifiers, assimilators, includers, forgetters, and democratizers” (pp. 159–160). We understand both Canada-

past and Canada-present to be an ongoing settler-colonial project (Starblanket & Hunt, 2020, p. 49) and we recognize how our lives are very much bound up in this project.

Further to this settler identity, both authors, like most teachers in Canada, are White (Ryan et al., 2009). Despite increasing racial diversity in our general and student populations, Canada's teaching force continues to remain disproportionately White. Our identities exist in the nexus of privileges created by the intersection between Whiteness and settler-colonialism. However, these privileges are not equally distributed as Mike has access to both gender-based and institutional power that Claire does not have.

Using the frameworks of anti-oppressive education, decolonization, and Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, we deconstruct an unsettling conversation about oppression, Indigenous voices, and reconciliation. We have structured this paper as a reflection on teaching and learning built around our narrative accounts of an incident that occurred within a graduate class in which Mike was the teacher and Claire was a student. Given our shared work as teachers committed to anti-oppressive education, and our disparate locations in elementary education and teacher education, we believe that this writing supports similarly situated educators in planning for and navigating similar pedagogical decisions. We imagine this article being taken up by our teaching colleagues in K-12 and postsecondary who find themselves in similar contexts, with similar goals, and who may encounter similar issues.

In terms of process, we met and sketched out the salient moments of the story that would be the basis of this article. We each wrote our own narrative sections, taking responsibility for those parts of the story that seemed most connected to our individual experiences. These narrative passages are written in italics and from the point of view of either Mike or Claire. We then layered these narrative sections with relevant theory, in a sense annotating each teaching moment. While parts of this process follow the structure of a duoethnography, this is not a research paper, but rather a reflection piece on our practice. Many iterations later, this article represents both an honest attempt to describe a highly charged and complicated teaching moment in an anti-oppressive classroom as well as our subsequent theoretical analysis. The paper ends with a discussion of the complexities of teaching towards Indigenous futurity while contending with ongoing settler-colonialism. Ultimately, ethical relationships and the accountability they engender are required.

What Happened

In the summer of 2015, Mike taught an afternoon class on curriculum theory and development in which Claire was a student. The class was made up of 25 graduate students mostly from Southern Saskatchewan. Most of the students were White although the class did include a Métis man, a Cree *kêhtê-aya* (elder) and residential school survivor, and an Inuk woman from Nunavut. The class was part of an Anti-Oppressive Summer Institute, with all students participating in a morning class focused on anti-oppressive education and teacher activism. Both the morning and afternoon classes made frequent reference to the recently released "Executive Summary" of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC, 2015b) inquiry into the Indian Residential School System in Canada and made deliberate and explicit attempts to include Indigenous perspectives and voices.

As part of a discussion on the racialization of teachers, Mike projected a picture of Pamela George onto the large screen in the classroom. The image prompted a hush that descended in the room. In this quiet space, Mike talked about being a classmate of one of Pamela's murderers, how he was raised and educated similarly, and how this teacher education space had helped create a

murderer. Mike and Steven Kummerfield had been in class together in this same building. Despite an open invitation to discuss the place-based implications of this story, few students took up the offer to do so and the class ended shortly thereafter with students quietly dispersing.

Mike approached Claire, who had stayed behind, asking if she was okay, her discomfort clearly visible to him. We went to Mike's office to discuss what happened. Claire described the many ways she felt that the use of Pamela's story and image was problematic. Who gets to tell such a story of pain and humiliation? Who is responsible enough to hear it? Why weren't the images of the White male murderers projected instead?

The discussion was rich and nuanced. Mike thought it would be important to share this conversation with the other students, to allow other students to share their own possible discomfort and take part in problematizing the lesson. Mike proposed a fishbowl activity where we would sit in the center of the classroom while the rest of the students would gather in a circle around us. We both anticipated that the majority of the class would support Claire's interpretation of the lesson and find the use of Pamela George's story problematic. The idea was for dominantly positioned educators to engage with the complexity of anti-oppressive pedagogy. The next day we sat in the circle of students and recreated our discussion, inviting other students to participate and join us in the discussion. The activity did not go exactly as planned.

Context: Anti-Oppressive Education

Anti-oppressive education refers to a broad range of teaching and learning that aims to challenge multiple forms of oppression (Kumashiro, 2000). Because there are multiple oppressions (racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism, for example), and because these oppressions are "reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Hill-Collins, 2015, p. 2), educators must both understand and teach against oppression from multiple perspectives. Some examples of anti-oppressive education practices include anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), critical social justice education (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), and culturally responsive teaching (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Anti-oppressive approaches recognize the structural nature of oppression, or how oppression is "deeply embedded in the fabric of the society" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. xx).

In particular, anti-oppressive approaches actively resist and contest dominant theorizing and practices (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Rather than focusing only on those victimized by oppression, anti-oppressive education seeks to understand the ways that dominance is produced, enacted, and rooted in identities and systems. Anti-oppressive pedagogies work, especially with dominantly positioned groups, to reveal the ways that inequalities are produced through processes that marginalize *the other* and normalize dominance. Within our teaching contexts, taking up dominance is deeply personal work for the dominantly positioned—both for ourselves as teachers, and for our students. However, this is legitimate work for dominantly positioned teachers as it is, "not up to the oppressed to educate their oppressors about their experiences of oppression" (Stewart et. al., 2014, p. 13).

An enduring critique of anti-oppressive approaches centers on the tendency for these practices to individualize the effects of the systems of dominance that are being interrogated, thereby limiting the scope of the conversations that can be had. Even in the context of a critique of larger systems, the pedagogical practices associated with some forms of anti-racism (for example) that lead mostly White students to notice their (individual) Whiteness and to confront their (individual) implication in White dominance, reproduce individual responses—sometimes

personal guilt and shame, sometimes a personal sense of goodness. This personal response detracts from both understanding and working against larger systems of oppression.

This individualizing tendency also complicates the relationship between anti-oppressive work and decolonizing education. If decolonizing requires attention to complex layers of thought (wider global contexts, complicated histories of migration, imperialism, and racialization, Indigenous resistances and ways of knowing and being, etc.), as Tuck and Yang (2012) made clear, then the goals of these educational projects are not the same. Zembylas (2018b) argued that critical pedagogy can become a decolonizing pedagogy. However, it must be noticed that there are abiding tensions between rationalist ideas and individualizing practices that make up much of anti-oppressive education's work and decolonization's necessary rejection of rationalism's Eurocentrism including any move to individualize colonialism's totalizing effects. It is, therefore, necessary to take up anti-oppressive education and its emphasis on the production and maintenance of dominance alongside (and in critical conversation with) the specific and larger demands of decolonization.

Context: Colonialism/Decolonization

Mike: *My Ph.D. research examined how teacher education at the University of Regina produces Whiteness. I traced the ways that what could count as good pedagogy, competencies that usually focused on the use of classroom management strategies and specific performance tasks, also worked to center, and in some ways create, Whiteness. In our grad class, I was attempting to explore how curriculum, specifically a technical/rational approach to teacher education, racializes teachers, equating the 'good' teacher with the White teacher. Including the absent presence of Pamela George seemed crucial. In 1995, my first year as an Education student, Pamela, a Saulteaux woman from the Zagime Anishinabek (formerly the Sakimay First Nation), was murdered by a classmate of mine, Steven Kummerfield, and his friend Alex Ternowetsky. Nothing, in this first year, or any subsequent years in the Faculty of Education, would have allowed me to understand race/racism and colonialism, and the role of education in perpetuating this violence, even though a fellow Education student was responsible for this crime. Now, decades later, many of the students in our Anti-Oppressive Education Summer Institute were also (more recent) graduates of this same Faculty and I felt a keen responsibility to interrupt this glaring absence.*

Both the academy and the public school system are deeply racialized spaces that play a crucial role in perpetuating settler-colonialism (Cote-Meek, 2014; Donald, 2009; Ermine, 2007; Kempf, 2009; St. Denis, 2011). Our current and historic Eurocentric approach to education perpetuates the structures of colonial dominance that shape the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In her article exploring the trial, Razack (2000) argued that both Steven Kummerfield and Alex Ternowetsky possessed a "collective understanding of Pamela George as a thing" (p. 111). Furthermore, Razack (2000) noted that the two men's exclusively White worlds, including the University of Regina's Faculty of Education, gave them "little opportunity to disrupt" (p. 111) this objectification.

The colonial nature of our school system is well-documented and calls for its transformation are frequent, including the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples' (RCAP, 1996) recommendations and the TRC's (2015a) "Calls to Action." We as educators are called repeatedly to challenge colonialism, to make space for Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, to create an "ethical space of engagement" (Ermine, 2007), and to work towards renewed relationships and reconciliation. Challenging Pamela George's objectification in the same space that helped create

her murderer seemed to be an essential component to include in a class attempting to deconstruct colonialism.

We frame this task of deconstructing colonialism in the classroom as a necessary component of decolonization (Donald, 2009; Pete, 2015; Pete et al., 2013). However, Tuck and Yang (2012) have provocatively and persuasively argued that decolonization is not a metaphor: "Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools" (p. 1). We structure the work we are doing, nonetheless, in terms of decolonization as this is our goal, albeit long-term. As Veracini (2011) observed, "The decolonization of settler colonialism needs to be imagined before it is practised, and this has proved especially challenging" (p. 211). Our immediate task is the deconstruction of the colonial nature of our classrooms and our relationships, to get to a place where ultimate decolonization, "the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21) is seen as both possible and imperative.

Figuring out how to do this work effectively and ethically is a primary responsibility of all educators but most especially White settler educators like ourselves. We must find ways to do this work well and on our own, learning from and following the lead of Indigenous colleagues, but without always relying on their time and labour. For dominantly positioned teachers, having to do this work independently makes us uncomfortable. We worry about our lack of knowledge being exposed, about getting things wrong, about offending our colleagues and our students. Despite our deep discomfort, we know we must do it regardless, even though the work we do can be problematic and full of missteps and fumbles.

Caught Between Spectating and Bearing Witness

Claire: *On the second day of our class, Mike projected a photo of Pamela George onto the screen in our classroom. I looked at Pamela's face, and I saw the faces of my daughters and my sisters, and my friends. I looked at the women at my table, my long-time Inuk friend from Nunavut, my newly met Cree friend, and I wondered what they were thinking. I worried that Pamela's story was hitting too close to home. But I did not say anything.*

For my Master's research, I had been reading a lot about Indigenization and the problems with White people deciding what Indigenous content to include. At this moment, it felt like Pamela George's story was questionable Indigenous content. It felt like we, mostly White students, were being invited to engage with Pamela's narrative as a spectacle for our settler-colonial gaze.

The social sciences have a long history of collecting and commodifying the stories of pain and humiliation experienced by Indigenous peoples and documenting colonial damage (Tuck & Yang, 2014). This research becomes the basis for lucrative careers, promotions, and degrees. Meanwhile, the Indigenous communities, the subjects of the research, are left with narratives "that tell them that they are broken" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 227). The premise that the harm must be recorded, proven, and confirmed by dominant eyes in order for change to occur justifies this focus on the victims of colonial violence. Indeed, research itself becomes a stand-in for change. This legacy of the collection and circulation of pain narratives is invoked when we tell stories about Indigenous victims of colonial violence.

Boler (1999) defined spectating as a learned and chosen mode of viewing that deliberately omits and erases, that purposefully does not see everything. To spectate is to be a voyeur, to permit "a gaping distance between self and other" (p. 184). Furthermore, spectating is a privileged position, which involves a distinct separation and abdication of possible responsibility. In contrast,

as witnesses, we undertake a dynamic process of perceiving our own "historical responsibilities and co-implication" (Boler, 1999, p. 186). Bearing witness is a process in which we do not have the luxury of distance and objectivity. These differences between witnessing and spectating are crucial.

Looking at the image of Pamela George as White spectators of colonial violence, we had the unfortunate option of viewing this trauma from a distance, even as many of us fought to bear witness and see our complicity with this oppression. By centering our gaze on Pamela's picture, we were collectively drawn into a complicated and uncomfortable colonial tableau. Offering students the invitation to bear witness does not mean that students can or will take up that stance. There is no way of ensuring that Pamela's picture and story were not being received as spectacle. There is work involved in resisting the spectacle and instead attempting to bear witness and be implicated in the story we are offered. However, Tuck and Yang (2014) proposed that there are some stories that the academy "has not yet proven itself responsible enough to hear" (p. 232). Who decides if students are responsible enough to hear Pamela's story? Could telling this story be worth the trauma it could cause Indigenous students? The "psychological cost" (Moule, 2005, p. 31) of telling stories of pain and humiliation, is to cause marginalized communities to partially re-live these experiences. As dominantly positioned educators for whom these stories hold pedagogical, if not necessarily personal significance, the decision of if and how to use them is problematic.

Partial (Incomplete) Knowledge and Centering Marginalized Voices

Mike: *As I taught, I remembered my 1995 classroom, ED 317, just upstairs from our current lecture hall. I remembered an assignment on Piaget and learning. I worked in a group with Steven Kummerfield, presenting on Piaget's stages of cognitive development. I described the course content and my memory of Kummerfield, a star basketball player with large hands. As I think back on this moment, I remember his hands in particular.*

I want my students to understand the closeness of this colonial violence. Both Kummerfield and I were produced through our schooling to have limited understandings of racism, and our privileged Whiteness. It is important to me that my White students understand something about Pamela's humanity and about White supremacy that Steven and I could not when we were students.

It is necessary to understand that our knowledge of oppression is incomplete, especially when working with and as dominantly positioned students and teachers. Kumashiro's (2000) idea of partial knowledge is useful. First, knowledge is partial because of the limits of our understanding. In this sense, "otherness" is known only at a distance, only "by inference, and often in contrast to the norm, and is therefore only partial" (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 31). A dominant standpoint makes it difficult even to recognize that there are other viewpoints and that these other perspectives offer more clarity on how race and racialization function in our society. For example, those of us who are racialized as White are not able to easily see, understand, and empathize with the experiences of racialized minoritized people (Sleeter, 2004).

Partial (incomplete) knowledge, especially for dominantly positioned students and teachers, is confronted pedagogically by centering the voices of marginalized people. We come to a greater understanding of oppression by purposefully placing marginalized voices at the center of the curriculum. In some ways, addressing these gaps is relatively easy. In contrast to the education that Mike and Steven Kummerfield received in the 90s, in our Summer Institute, every class included voices from those social locations that were not dominant, in particular, the voices of women and Indigenous authors. As a class, we read a short story about residential schools written by Métis

author Maria Campbell (1995). We listened to Métis scholar Zoë Todd reading the beginning of the TRC report as part of the #ReadTheTRCReport movement. We compared the “Calls to Action” in the TRC (2015a) with what Indigenous people had already said through “Citizens Plus” (Indian Association of Alberta, 1970) also known as the “Red Paper” in response to the overt cultural genocide of the “White Paper” (Indian and Northern Affairs, 1969). We troubled the lack of inclusion of essential scholars of colour in the mainstream narratives of curriculum theory and history. We focused one assignment on personally responding to the TRC, which placed the voices of survivors of Indian Residential Schools and the 94 “Calls to Action” at the center of our attention. In these ways, this course attempted to confront, challenge, and potentially transform the partial nature of traditional course offerings. Even engaging with Pamela George’s murder, including the use of her picture, was an attempt to center the experiences of Indigenous women. This particular inclusion, however, was more nuanced and much more problematic.

Partial (Invested) Knowledge and a Pedagogy of Discomfort

Mike: With the portrait of Pamela George looking down on us, I gestured with my hands. At the time, I was thinking about my similarity with Steven. Both male, both White, both students in this Faculty of Education. Razack (2000) says that both men had a “very small chance of seeing Pamela George as a human being” (p. 95). Given my education, my position, my racialization, at that time, that would have been true of me as well. I feel my complicity in this violence keenly. I am partial to telling this story. I am personally invested in this narrative. This violence is not only close to me; it is also intimately part of this Faculty, part of this place. It is a story that belongs here, and I feel it must be told here. However, the more I tell it, the more I realize that I only understand the story partially.

While the incomplete nature of our knowledge is a necessary focus, the second meaning of partial is also essential. Partial knowledge is biased; it is a recognition of our investment and commitment to what we think we know. The problem for dominantly positioned educators is that we “often *desire* hearing only certain voices, we desire the silencing of others, and we desire the continuation of normalized teaching and learning practices” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 6). These emotional and affective investments in particular ways of knowing, prevent us from knowing differently, or from critiquing what we know. Whereas we address the limitations of our partial (incomplete) knowledge through centering the presence of *othered* voices, confronting our partial (invested) knowledge requires something much more difficult. The embedded nature of these oppressive desires and understandings requires a sustained pedagogy of discomfort to notice, confront, uproot, and replace our convictions about what we know. For Boler (1999), this pedagogy of discomfort represents both an approach to teaching and a form of critical inquiry that invites both students and educators to examine how our modes of seeing have been formed by our cultures, our histories, and our lived experiences. The challenge, though, is that there are so many forms of oppression. While both of us were well-versed in analyzing structures of colonial oppression, we were unprepared for the gendered implications of this teaching moment.

Context: Patriarchy

Claire: Mike gestured with his hands as if they were Steven Kummerfield's hands, and his personification of this murderer was unnerving, particularly as the picture of Pamela still looked down upon us. It seemed that in death, this woman could still get no peace. That there was no dignity for her, even now. I wondered how she would feel about her image coming to represent and personify the very real female and Indigenous price of White male dominance. And I wondered

about these White boys, these men. Faceless in this class. Their mug shots were nowhere to be seen. They got their privacy, their anonymity. They got to live. By now, they were free.

The class ended, and students silently went their ways. Mike came over and asked if I was OK, my face clearly betraying my discomfort. Despite having already decided not to say anything, I accepted Mike's invitation to discuss the class. Later, this decision was endlessly analyzed by both of us. Why did I not say anything in class? Why did I say something afterwards? What was it about me as a student and Mike as the instructor that allowed this complicated discussion to take place?

It would be a mistake to focus solely on both of the Authors' many similar positionings, White, cis gendered, teachers, settlers, middle class ... without also noticing the areas of significant dissimilarity, notably in terms of gender and institutional power. While Mike is a tenure-track male professor, Claire is a female elementary teacher. We both personified stereotypes in our own rights, the absent-minded professor and the helpful teacher.

In this curriculum development and theory class, race and colonialism formed the framework for our anti-oppressive analysis, while gender, when considered, was underdeveloped. This was something that became more evident as we analyzed this moment, with the image of Pamela George a stark reminder of the dangers, yes of being Indigenous, but also of being female.

By telling the story of the sexual violence and murder of a woman, Mike played a key patriarchal card and shifted the dynamics in the classroom significantly. Reminding a class primarily composed of women about the very tangible threat of male violence had the result of reifying structures of male dominance. Indeed, the threat of sexual violence has long been considered one of the foundations of patriarchal control (Brownmiller, 1975) and the fear of violence has been shown to limit women's participation in a variety of settings (Pain, 1991). By telling this story and by gesturing with his own large male hands, Mike's lesson had the result of putting the women in this class "in their place" as potential objects of male violence. It is unsurprising then, that no women took up the invitation to discuss this further.

But this story of Pamela George is much more than a simple story of one woman's tragic end. The extended story, the press-fueled drama that captivated the nation, was the trial of the two White men and the very light sentences they received in the end. We know that it is not just the threat of male violence that keeps women in a state of fear, but also the limited reaction of the state that solidifies this fear. The failure of the state to react in any substantive way to violence against women allows for male violence to be an effective form of social control (Pain, 1991). Not only was Pamela George sexually assaulted and killed, but her killers faced very few repercussions, a few years in jail and then they were free. Reminding a class full of women not only of the prevalence of male violence but also of the state's apathy towards this very violence was a double blow.

Having known Mike before this teaching moment, Claire was better placed to trust the good intentions of this lesson. Part of her willingness to discuss this teaching moment was due to the relationship that had already been established between the two. Claire knew Mike to be caring, fair, and open to critique. Certainly, this prior relationship is key to understanding the conditions necessary to have this student-teacher conversation in a productive way.

But Claire's actions were not just that of a helpful teacher. Systems of power are rarely so simple. By agreeing to meet with Mike, and to later discuss her concerns openly in front of the class and ultimately to co-author this paper, Claire was being strategic. By aligning herself with

male, institutional power, she positioned herself in such a way that she could benefit from these very structures of oppression that she was seeking to expose. Although, ostensibly trying to speak up for the women in the class who may have felt unable to call attention to the unsafe situation created in this class, Claire also knew that she personally had little to lose by cooperating with Mike and much to gain. As Butler (1997) noted, “Power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence” (p. 2).

Resisting Defensiveness

Mike: *Claire had been a guest in my class multiple times. I knew her teaching work as excellent, engaged, and sharp. And now she was uncomfortable with what I had just done. Oh boy.*

We head back to my office, and I can tell that she is unsettled. She asks me about the picture. We talk about the differences produced when we talk about “The Murder of Pamela George” rather than “The Murder Trial of Alex Ternowetsky and Steven Kummerfield.” She asks why I did not include their pictures. I listen as Claire describes the vulnerability she felt. I listen as she laments that these men got to remain anonymous. It gets worse.

Claire is not sure about what her Indigenous colleagues were feeling, but she was at a table with two Indigenous mothers. She asks why I would choose to hold out that pain for so long... to spend 15 minutes with Pamela's picture as the only visual in the room. Does Pamela George's family get any say about how you use that photo?³ What are their wishes? I don't have a lot of answers. I am sweating. I do not know.

I try not to be defensive ...

A pedagogy of discomfort challenges us as educators to dispense with traditional teaching methods and to join our students in learning about dominance and concurrently trying to undo it. Through this process, we acknowledge our "profound interconnections with others, and how emotions, beliefs, and actions are collaboratively co-implicated" (Boler, 1999, p. 187). A pedagogy of discomfort is a "mutual transaction" (Boler, 1999, p. 187) in which both educators and students share the vulnerability through mutual exploration and explicit discussion of pedagogy.

Mike: *I am careful to underline for my students that our desire to be seen as “good” is problematic. Often, being good or being seen as good makes it impossible for students to also wrestle with their implication in systems of oppression. I demonstrate to them how I recognize my ongoing participation in a system of racialized advantage that benefits me. In some sense, I will always be a “recovering racist,” recovering from my engagement with dominance. Goodness, however, is a persuasive discourse; the siren call of goodness can be hard to resist. I want to be good. I work in a system where I can easily be seen as good. Defensiveness arises from the tension between the legitimate critique of my participation in dominance and my desire to be seen as good.*

Resisting defensiveness is a pedagogical choice, which recognizes mistakes as the possibility of good teaching; in fact, it is the space where good teaching can happen. This type of pedagogy requires both students and educators to feel uncomfortable emotions such as fear and anger, even as these emotions can become obstacles to learning. Defensiveness is a response that masks fear and moves us away from vulnerability. When our cherished assumptions are challenged, our identity can feel threatened. In this case, a reaction of anger or defensiveness (see Boler, 1999) must be interpreted not as the righteous defense of honour but rather as the protection of our stake in the status quo. This “investment in the status quo” represents that second sense of partial knowledge, the way that our dominant position is reified in how and what we know. A pedagogy

of discomfort invites students and educators to engage in collective self-reflection to investigate the genealogies of our uncomfortable emotions. “The right thing to do,” Boler (1999) argued, “is [to] risk one’s own comfort for the sake of others’ freedom” (p. 195).

Difficult Knowledge

Mike: *As a committed anti-racist, I felt pretty sure that I knew enough about anti-racism to work through the difficulties that Claire would bring forward. I was willing to be wrong or corrected or at least shift in terms of how I mediated this material in our classroom experiences. What I was unprepared for, and unnerved by, was the reproduction of violent masculinity through my description of Steven Kummerfield. I was not prepared for, or comfortable with, hearing about the possible violence that my teaching embodied. While I have worked hard to read, listen, and care about the experiences of racialized minoritized people (and the requisite changes required of my pedagogy), I realized that I had not done enough to read, listen, and care about the experiences surrounding gendered violence. I was offered difficult knowledge, an intimate glimpse into the way that I potentially was re-enacting that violence in the classroom.*

For Britzman (1998), difficult knowledge is a concept that theorizes both the social traumas inherent in formal curriculum and how each student might encounter those traumas through the teaching and learning process. As Pitt and Britzman (2003) described, “a kernel of trauma in the capacity to know” (p. 756) complicates the relationship between educational practices and their social justice goals. Zembylas (2012) explained how the burden of engaging emotionally with this difficult knowledge is, “unevenly distributed in different members or groups of a divided community” (p. 114). In other words, the emotional labour of this work is always differentially borne on the bodies of marginalized people. Partly, it is this affective component and our inability to account for, or meaningfully work through, emotions that underline the difficulty of engaging in anti-oppressive work in the classroom.

How do we work together to undo structures which greatly benefit some of us and profoundly inhibit others, while simultaneously operating within these same structures? Is it possible to engage in this work equitably when the differential is sometimes so hard for dominantly positioned folks to even notice? Mike was unable to anticipate the gendered way that his hand gestures could be read, unable to see how his performance was also reifying existing male dominance. Standing with his hands out, figuratively asking his mostly female students to imagine the size of a murderer’s hands, places the weight of that moment squarely on the shoulders of those most affected by gendered violence. Dominantly positioned as he is, regardless of the oppression being engaged with, Mike can never bear the embodied weight of this work, and can often not even see it. As Zembylas (2012) noted, those who benefit from oppression carry with them this “troubled knowledge”: they must continue to “live together with victims of oppression while oppression and social injustice still persist” (p. 118).

Navigating Discomfort

Mike: *I know about my choices, about why I decided to engage the class through this method. I had taken to heart #sayhername, the call from Black American activists to put the names and stories of Black women, who are also victims of police violence, at the forefront. Drawing attention to Pamela, both through her image and through sharing details of her life that were unconnected with her murder—mother, sister, friend, daughter—was an attempt to highlight her humanity. And yet these choices are not without other consequences, including the tensions that Claire was now making clear. She was not wrong.*

And so I asked Claire, "What would you think about having this conversation tomorrow in class? We will start right here. You can ask these questions publicly, and I will respond publicly. The messiness of this work and the myriad of pedagogical decisions would be worth exploring in a fishbowl."

A pedagogy of discomfort requires not only students but also teachers to engage in an inquiry process, to question not only our beliefs and assumptions but also our methods. We recognize that our ability to attend to and to think about certain things, as dominantly positioned people, is impaired. We also recognize that the world, including ourselves, does not fall into neatly reductive binaries. Good teachers can make bad decisions. Good intentions can still cause harm. We, as dominantly positioned educators and students, are always implicated in the structures of dominance that we are trying to dismantle; this is uncomfortable work.

It seems important to notice that a pedagogy of discomfort also requires care for students who are wrestling with these implications. Schultz (2017) argued that “discomfort alone may be insufficient when the aim is to create positive social change” (p. 267). As educators, we create the kinds of spaces where students feel like they can be vulnerable. This is manifest in the use of “careful and care-filled language” (Schultz, 2017, p. 266), through a deep compassion for students, what Boler (2003) referred to as “lovingkindness,” and is both motivated and sustained by a sense of “critical hope” (Boler, 2003). We are mindful that comfort here cannot be a re-centering of Whiteness or dominance, a kind of complicity with dominance (Applebaum, 2017). Rather, it is a compassion that does not let students off the hook about the implications of their (in)actions, but rather supports them to “stay in discomfort” (Applebaum, 2017, p. 872) and continue learning.

An important distinction is to be made between comfort and safety. Those who are dominantly positioned will often announce feeling unsafe when what we mean is that we are uncomfortable (DiAngelo, 2011). It is necessary to acknowledge that even this discomfort is not only an individual phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon, connected to the production and maintenance of Whiteness/coloniality (Zembylas, 2018a). We have become accustomed to a “culturally sanctioned avoidance of anxiety and fear” (Boler, 1999, p. 141) that falsely positions discomfort as dangerous. We may flee this anguish in “bad faith” (Flowers, 2015, p. 38), anxious to regain our comfortable, unquestioned dominance, insulated from “race-based stress” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 55). However, it is possible to be simultaneously discomfited and pedagogically safe.

The invitation to use a fishbowl strategy here was an attempt to intervene pedagogically in the problematic situation that Mike had created in class. It was an attempt to publicly and meaningfully sit with the discomfort of this work. We felt that this structure enabled the most transparency and the least hierarchical power. Instead of standing in front of a sitting class of students, Mike would be sitting in the midst of the students, as a learner amongst learners. The fishbowl was a way to model what it might look like for dominant-identified instructors to struggle with the complexity of anti-oppressive pedagogy and to open themselves up to the discomfort of hearing about the harm that they had unwittingly created. It was meant to allow for a critique of the instructor that was not borne on the shoulders of already marginalized students, centering on the mistakes of dominance and not the pain of the oppressed. It should be noted that Mike suggested this strategy with an honest expectation that he would be criticized, given the previous conversation with Claire. Being discomfited as the instructor and addressing the flaws and potential damages of the pedagogical choices that were made is essential to creating a truly anti-oppressive classroom space. Furthermore, navigating discomfort in this way invites students to also feel this discomfort and offers the opportunity to engage.

"We Need to See You Grieve"

Claire: *Mike and I sat at a table in the middle of a circle of chairs, and the dynamic of the class suddenly shifted. Their attention was on us, was on me. There was an uncomfortable silence. But there was also a powerful symmetry to what we were doing. While during the previous class, I had been uncomfortable with the way that our White colonial gaze had been centered on Pamela George, now the reverse was true with the focus placed on us, on our Whiteness and coloniality.*

This was uncomfortable, but I also felt confident; I felt that I was right. I had organized my thoughts into compelling sound bites. I was sure my ideas would gain favour. And so we began, first Mike then me, then Mike, slowly dissecting the previous class. There were head nods and sounds of agreement from the circle around us. But as Mike and I each painstakingly explained our positions and our thoughts, something became immediately apparent. We were both right and both wrong. That everything we do as White educators in a colonial space is fraught. Naming Pamela George, telling her story, is both wrong and right. There is no correct path; everything is problematic. If anything, the one right thing seems to be this, this transparency, this deconstruction, making explicit the pedagogical choices made and showing what these choices have allowed to be possible and what they have rendered painful and problematic.

Although both Mike and Claire had expected Claire's critique of this teaching moment to be accepted and further developed by the class. This did not happen. In hindsight, the expectation that a class of students who relied on Mike for their grades and who had little to no prior relationship with him would choose to criticize him and his teaching methods at this moment was misguided. Mike expected the students to trust him, to trust the process, and to engage in a deep critique of his pedagogy on Day 3 of a 2-week course. In retrospect, this was clearly wishful thinking. Instead, what transpired was a chorus of support for him and his teaching methods that was at times deeply unsettling for Claire. Being unprepared for this situation, neither Mike nor Claire reacted to the chorus of critique and Claire was left to shoulder much of the burden of this disapproval alone.

Claire: *In the fishbowl, I said that I did not think Pamela George's story was useful, that we have too many of these types of stories. Another story of an Indigenous woman murdered perpetuates the stereotype of broken Indigeneity. Thomas King (2003) writes extensively about the power of stories, how stories are wondrous and dangerous things, how stories can come to control our lives, and how we can become chained to them. You have to be careful with the stories you tell, and the stories you are told, "for once a story is told, it cannot be called back" (p. 10). In this moment, I was thinking about my Saulteaux daughters, about all the stories they had been told. I said that I wanted them, now and years from now, to hear different stories, I wanted them to dream different dreams, and imagine different futures. I wanted stories of strength and resilience for my daughters, not another rehashing of stale and destructive tropes.*

*I expected this line of reasoning to find favour in the room, especially amongst my Indigenous colleagues. It did not. Instead, I was told unequivocally that Pamela George's story was precisely the kind of story that needed to be told. "We need to cry about this," said a residential school survivor. "We need to see **you** grieve. It is not yet time for stories of strength."*

Attending to stories such as Pamela's is deeply personal work. Learning the truth, this tricky prerequisite for reconciliation requires an emotional response. We settler-educators cannot engage with these stories without engaging with grief. We cannot hear these stories in a deep and meaningful way without also grieving ourselves. And as we grieve alongside our Indigenous colleagues, we begin to bear witness and, in this witnessing, begin to approach the possibility of

building new relationships (Zembylas, 2021). However, what we were offered, as a class, must be contextualized a little. The idea that “now is not the time for stories of strength” must be heard in the immediate context of the release of the TRC’s (2015b), “Executive Summary” a few weeks before. We recognize this as an insistence to not breeze past the trauma and to fully attend to the recollections of violence and their myriad forms that the report captured so carefully (even as those same stories also told of the strength and resilience of survivors).

Simon and Eppert (1997) argued that the act of bearing witness is two-fold. First, dominantly positioned educators must bear (support and endure) the burden of this traumatic history. However, bearing witness is not limited merely to enduring the telling of difficult stories. We are also called to bear (carry) these stories of past injustices “beyond their moment of telling” (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 178). Central to witnessing is the, “enactment of one’s relationship with others” (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 178). It is in this relationship where we carry these stories into our own lives, where we admit the dead “into [our own] moral community” (Simon & Eppert, 1997, p. 187). As a class, we were told unequivocally that Pamela’s story needed to be told and that we needed to grieve. We were invited to bear witness, to communally honour and grieve for this life that was so brutally and tragically ended.

There are dangers for educators here too, though. Gebhard (2017) demonstrated how the telling of stories about Indigenous trauma, and Indian Residential Schools in particular, can both re-inscribe colonized Indigenous subjectivities and re-inscribe settler innocence. How and when we engage with these stories requires work. We must ensure that dominant narratives of Indigeneity such as those described by Starblanket and Hunt (2020), as stories of deficit, criminality and overwhelming trauma, are disrupted.

Stories of Strength

We are struck by the words of a Métis colleague who read a draft of this article and wondered, “When will be the time for stories of strength?” (B. Pacholko, personal communication, October 29, 2018). As dominantly positioned educators, we need to tell stories of strength and resistance, and open up spaces for marginalized communities to be not just “more than victims,” but “other than victims.” We must tell stories that include moments and movements like Idle No More (McAdam, 2015), the resistance at Standing Rock (Estes, 2019), and the work of land defenders in support of Wet’suwet’en sovereignty (Manuel, 2017). We recognize that teaching only or even primarily the stories of oppression without also teaching the corresponding stories of “constant resistance” (Anderson, 2020) is not giving students access to the entirety and complexity of our history. We echo Madden’s (2019) emphasis on telling counter-stories, especially stories of refusal, resistance, resilience, and resurgence. Making space for the telling and hearing of these stories must work in direct opposition to the silencing, destruction, and erasure of community inherent in stories of colonial power (Morris, 2017, p. 461). Our Métis colleague wonders if it is possible to “hold stories of trauma and grief, side by side with stories of triumph and pride without contradicting or cheapening one another?” (B. Pacholko, personal communication, October 29, 2018) highlighting the fraught complexity of this task. How do we, as educators, learn to do both of these things deeply and well, with and alongside our students?

More than a balance of stories, we also recognize the dangers of positioning colonization as the dominant framework for storytelling about Indigenous lives and of framing colonial relations as those between Indigenous victims and empathetic settlers (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). The horrors of colonialism in their immensity have a tendency to become mythical, untouchable,

something that cannot be confronted (Patel, 2022). This is captured in Haudenosaunee scholar Courtney Skye's (2022) recent tweet:

It's so simple and easy for colonization to keep going. It's generations of harm that's so normalized, all the brutality becomes sanitized. It's a quote and a citation for you. For us, it's our life. It's our entire world. It's every child's life, and every child yet to be born.

Even when intending to demonstrate the opposite, stories of colonization insidiously present White settler-colonial violence as permanent and immutable, while simultaneously framing any potential counter-narratives of Indigenous resistance and refusal as ultimately futile. Within the context of a class taught over 30 hours, the fifteen minutes of Pamela's story might seem a small thing. However, given how any story of violent settler-colonialism taps into a familiar framework of White dominance, even a passing reference can carry a disproportionate amount of weight. In this case, Pamela George's story of pain and humiliation easily overshadowed the other stories of Indigenous resistance and strength. The massivity of settler-colonialism in the minds and biases of almost all students, renders almost all attempts to engage with stories of colonization as a reproduction and re-inscription of settler futures.

While we take seriously the need to confront dominantly positioned students and ourselves about our complicity with the settler-colonial project (Zembylas, 2018a), we recognize that this confrontation simultaneously reinforces and re-inscribes the very structures that we are trying to dismantle. We recognize that confronting settler-colonialism is not the same as disinvesting in settler futurity (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 86), which decolonization requires. Guided by Tuck and Yang (2012), we see the necessity of reframing this confrontation not with "an 'and' but an 'elsewhere'" (p. 36). Decolonization is not something to add to an anti-oppressive approach but rather it is an entire framework of its own, an entire elsewhere. Indigenous futurity is about the creation of a space not yet imagined, a future that may not be quite tangible (yet), and that is frankly not accountable to us as settlers. Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) noted that while settler-colonialism requires the disappearance of Indigenous lives, Indigenous futurity does not require the erasure of settlers but rather the relinquishing of a commitment to settler futurity, the abandoning of hope that settlers may one day be "commensurable to Native people" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 36). As we think about this teaching moment, of Pamela George looking down on us in this classroom, we are reminded of her children, of all Indigenous children born and waiting to be born. In a concrete way, Indigenous futurity is the world that they are breathing into being, and mostly, we just need to get out of the way.

But, as we name Indigenous futurity, we are simultaneously chastened by Skye's (2022) tweet, "It's a quote and a citation for you." Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) foresaw this too, that their lines would be "quoted, APA style, to either agree or dismiss, in some dusty footnote at the end of some argument" (p. 86). Because of this necessary critique, we acknowledge the need for accountability.

Reflection: Relationships

To many of the questions that this teaching moment and this article pose, we have found the answer to be relationships. At the beginning of this article, we acknowledged treaties as the ceremonies that allow us to be here. In many ways, the nation-to-nation relationship created by the treaties is our primary relationship as Canadians in this place. Given the past, present, and ongoing trauma of colonialism, teaching and learning in these complicated counter-colonial ways is part of our

obligation as settlers; it is part of how we become accountable and how we begin to move beyond our settler-colonial selves.

But human communities are complex multi-layered spaces. We are not just settlers in this place. We are men, women, and non-binary, abled and disabled, tenured faculty and elementary teachers, rich and poor, heterosexual, cis-gendered, two-spirited, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, immigrant and racialized and everything in-between and beyond. The complexity of attending to one relationship while simultaneously caring for all our relationships is daunting. As dominantly positioned folks, the immensity of what we do not know, the narrowly partial nature of our knowledge and understanding is humbling if not at times debilitating. And yet we must teach anyway. We must design lessons and assess learning and make jokes anyway, knowing that as hard as we try to get things just right, this “just right” is illusive. Every lesson that we teach may be wrong in some measure and yet we have to teach anyway. What our goal must be, ultimately, is to make our teaching the least wrong. To optimize learning and minimize violence. To deconstruct oppression while also recognizing the ways in which we are simultaneously constructing it. To be transparent about both the near impossibility and yet the monumental necessity of this work.

In this article, we have attempted to explore a pedagogical moment in a graduate classroom and reveal some of the (im)possibilities for anti-oppressive teaching and learning from a position of dominance. We noticed the importance of confronting incomplete knowledge with the vital living presence of the knowledge and ways of being of marginalized groups. We identified the necessity of confronting our biased investments in dominance through a pedagogy of discomfort, which requires a choice to take up our complicity in oppressive systems while resisting defensiveness, and an ability to navigate discomfort (a care-ful but insistent working against complicity in dominance). While these ideas may be useful to teachers in their practice, most of what is described here cannot be reproduced in any rote way; and, taking up anti-oppressive and decolonizing work must always be local (Smith, 1999) and attentive to the particular histories, local resistances, and on-the-ground realities of marginalized communities.

Good anti-oppressive teaching is always relational and contextual. If we want to do it well, we must first build and be attentive to the relationships that make this uncomfortable and challenging work possible. Relationships ultimately make spectating difficult, as we commit to resisting the objective distance that spectacle demands. Relationships allow for our partial (invested) knowledge to be encountered and pushed through. Relationships drive and support the desire to bear witness.

It is also evident that good anti-oppressive education is not enough. By itself, it also reinforces the very relations of dominance that it hopes to dismantle. It is relationships that invite us to go beyond the confines of anti-oppressive pedagogy and lead us to the elsewhere that follows. Being in relationship with members of marginalized groups enables our accountability to manifest and be enacted. Furthermore, being in relationship with members of Indigenous nations allows us, as settlers, to accept and live into an impending Indigenous future. If there is one lesson learned here that we wish to highlight, it is the power of relationships. There can be no other starting place for this work and there certainly is no other end.

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Endnotes:

¹ We have decided to capitalize the terms “White,” “Black,” and “Indigenous” as a way of marking these terms as matters of race/racialization and not skin colour. However, we note the circular and repetitive (see Salami, 2021) nature of these naming discourses and that capitalizing or not capitalizing a letter does not in itself achieve much. In using these capitalized terms, we in no way mean to limit the complexities of these identities and we recognize that race as a concept is inherently flawed. Nonetheless, for clarity, we have made the decision to use these capitalized terms.

² In December 2019, George Elliott Clarke, a Black writer and former Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate, was scheduled to speak at the University of Regina as part of an annual lecture series. His proposed talk was entitled “‘Truth and Reconciliation’ versus ‘the Murdered and Missing’: Examining Indigenous Experiences of (In)Justice in Four Saskatchewan Poets.” As the event neared, Indigenous leaders and faculty members urged the University to cancel the event due to Clarke’s known association with Steven Kummerfield (now Stephen Brown). Further enflaming the issue, in an interview with CBC news, Clarke said that he was considering reading a poem by Pamela George’s murderer as part of his talk (Allen, 2020). After weeks of tense debate, in the end, Clarke withdrew from the lecture and apologized for the anguish he had caused the Indigenous community (Soloducha, 2020). This incident serves to highlight the ongoing relevance of this story and the complexities of telling it in a good way.

³ Mike justified this pedagogical choice partly because of the permission that Pamela George’s family gave to Sherene Razack (2000) to write about her murder and has used this article many times in the past. These decisions are contextual and require ongoing discernment of responsibilities/accountabilities. This justification may not be enough, or it might be enough at one moment, and then not enough later. These pedagogical choices are fraught and require ongoing ethical engagement.