

Book Review

Sharing Breath: Embodied Learning and Decolonization

Book by Sheila Batacharya & Yuk-Lin Renita Wong (Editors)

Review by Heidi Zhang

Sheila Batacharya and Yuk-Lin Renita Wong's edited volume titled *Sharing Breath: Embodied Learning and Decolonization* is a collection of essays that seeks to address decolonization through the collective imaginings of a critical embodiment pedagogy that challenges the normative ideals of Western liberal education. The authors posit their political and ethical stance as deeply rooted within an ongoing examination of how decolonization has been taken up in higher education that becomes trapped within colonial rationality. Editors Batacharya and Wong argue that decolonization is first and foremost an action, with the political potential to widen possibilities of dislodging colonial powers, and thus extends beyond theorizing about its discursive formations. *Sharing Breath* asserts that the symbiotic relationship between meaning-making and material action needs to be addressed in order to disrupt the arbitrary binary between the discursive and material.

I posit this book as a timely and invaluable addition to critical social work because colonial legacies are being lived out in Canada and other Western settler nations. It remains problematic for social work education to address the violence of continued Eurocentric dominance in a discursive format without recognition of how colonialism operates through materiality and impacts people's lived realities. *Sharing Breath* sets out to outline and develop the use of embodied ways of learning and teaching as deeply interconnected with the act of decolonization. The authors ask: "How are lived realities shaped by social relations of power?" (p. 4). Critical scholars (Razack 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2012) have made visible the connection between liberal educational frameworks and the continued production of settler colonialism—where seemingly progressive decolonization knowledge can enable the settler subject to claim positions of enlightenment and innocence, living out what Razack (2015) identified as the "fantasy of settler civility" (p. 6). The collection of essays in this volume all contribute to illuminating and unsettling many of the ways that colonial knowledge and settler subjectivities have been naturalized and made invisible within social work education and practice; social work, as a collective practice, may imagine itself to be detached from colonial historical violence and only here to offer help, unaware these helping moments contribute to producing colonial subjectivities. If the logics of settler colonialism remain invisible, social work education can hinder the political project to decolonize and undo white supremacy, since power relations will remain obscured in its operationalization.

Batacharya and Wong introduce an important conceptual framework: the role of embodiment in processes of decolonization. The editors define *embodiment* as the

“experiences of our bodies and the ways in which that experience influences our relationship to the surrounding work” (p. 4). Embodiment perceives bodily experiences as a dynamic site of knowledge production, directly linked to the materiality of being. Embodiment allows recognition of the multiple pathways that colonial knowledge has shaped lived experiences, both material and discursive. It is then the goal of the contributing authors to reveal how material configurations of colonial power relations are able to remain hidden—yet present in bodies, beliefs, emotional capacities, and relationships—unless their readers take up the uncomfortable and unfamiliar task of making strange and unsettling these facets of colonial knowledge and systems of domination. Embodiment is positioned as pivotal in the ongoing effort to decolonize modes of knowing and being; as a way of contesting the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemology and how it is stored within active bodies. Examining embodiment as a crucial component of decolonization can lead social work scholars and practitioners to disrupt the (re)production of systems of dominance and colonial knowledge production as it reconfigures bodily relationships to land, challenging its imagined political neutrality.

Chapters in this volume present diverse and politically imaginative channels of *doing* decolonization through critical and careful embodiment, while anchoring on Tuck and Yang’s (2012) stance, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor.” Tuck and Yang cautioned against a problematic trend, that the concept of decolonization can be used to describe and encompass every and any type of oppression and social injustice. Collapsing decolonization into a generic brand of social justice or making it an umbrella term actually works to erode its political vitality, since what is being taken away is its potential to eradicate the colonial dispossession of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization becomes a purely oppositional project when it is framed as anti-oppressive and anti-racist movements, foreclosing possibilities such as Indigenous resurgence, knowledge production, and revitalization, which can all collectively work to de-centre Eurocentric colonialism from its assumed universal and transcendental status. Using Tuck and Yang (2012) as an entry point, this volume aims to create space for alternative approaches to decolonial pedagogy, resisting the temptation to rely on normative ways of understanding colonial impacts and rejecting the liberal tendency to move the settler into a position of innocence.

This volume contains a multifaceted set of strategies to counter the hegemony of Western imperialism, such as the utilization of oral storytelling (Mucina), mindfulness (Wong), poetry (Steward), journaling (Peters), Indigenous ways of healing and cultivating relationships (Leon & Nadeau), and the practice of yoga (Batacharya) and Qi-gong (Ng) to name a few. The result is a spiral effect, in which ideas weave with one another and essays become part of a collective conversation. A common thread among the chapters is their commitment to explore and make concrete the material conditions in which decolonization can come into being. The body is seen as a site where its engagement with relations of power becomes visible, as these relations of power are recognized to be both stored in and carried through the body, and contain the potential for political transformation.

Chapters from Peters, Ferguson, and Moynah examine the body’s relationship to Western knowledge production through colonial constructions of illness, pain, and

social class. Within these discursive and material relations of power, bodies are systemically devalued and fixed in ahistorical spaces. They argue that an embodiment project to decolonize cannot be untangled and disconnected from its historical materiality and discursive formations. Readers are reminded that decolonization is ultimately a historical undertaking. Conceptualizations of embodiment and the body have been produced by histories of domination and technologies of coloniality, whereby the body encountered a mind–body split as it was further made fragmented and hierarchically placed in an order that ensured the erasure and illegitimacy of Indigenous knowledge. Ng’s chapter investigates the existing boundaries of Western educational discourse. Ng suggests that embodied learning can be a form of decolonization pedagogy only if students are willing to reflect on how processes of colonial power have been historically inscribed on their bodies, leading to the often unconscious reproduction of oppression due to their mind–body split. Embodiment for Ng then becomes a method of undoing the ways colonial subjects have historically been constituted.

The pedagogies explored in this book view embodiment as requiring more than just individual reflexivity, and instead contains a shift to understand oneself and others through relationship building to affirm the value of kinship as a decolonizing framework. Leon and Nadeau discuss the Indigenous pedagogy of “all our relations” (p. 56), understood as a level of interconnection that allows for once fragmented parts of the body—mind, emotion, and spirit—to come together and actively challenge the Western concept of the biological autonomous body. Brunette-Debassige discusses the importance of moving out of individualism, and how by seeing oneself as related to others helps foster a collective sense of responsibility and shared futures in Indigenous research methodologies. Mucina illustrates through oral storytelling the pedagogy of *ubuntu* as he traces his journey to decolonize his family—a journey that utilizes humanness as a collective responsibility to care for each other, effectively dispelling the myth of individualization and forging space for renewed relational engagement.

While emphasizing relationship building and moving away from understanding the body as autonomous and intact, this volume also tends to the emotional effects of the body in the process of becoming undone. Rice provides insight into how one can utilize vulnerability from a feeling that is experienced individually and privately to seeing vulnerability as a form of relational action that is political. Rice advocates for researcher vulnerability as a way to unsettle the colonial project, where the feeling of being vulnerable can serve to de-centre the researcher as being the master of knowledge production and bring an awareness to one’s “bodily struggles” (p. 151), thus rethinking how vulnerability is interpreted within research. In another chapter, Nixon and MacDonald undertake a critical analysis of the *Kony 2012* video campaign to reveal how our emotions remain activated and produced within a settler colonialism space. The authors propose the process of disidentification as an intentional, ongoing pedagogical effort to de-centre the self as fully known in order to more effectively engage in decolonization from the concrete materialities of land dispossession.

In this volume, two central questions are posed to its readers: (a) How do we produce non-dominant ways of knowing? (b) How do we refuse decolonization pedagogy mirroring the rationalities of domination? Lawrence (2012) argued for a more critical decolonial process, as colonial signifiers and language can be used to maintain settler innocence rather than address Indigenous dispossession. In social work education, students and practitioners can get caught up in the very power relations they are trying to disrupt. Chapters from Batacharya, Wong, and Steward shed light on how some of these dangers can be resisted by taking up a critical and careful engagement with yoga, mindfulness, and poetry. Batacharya offers yoga as a counter-hegemonic strategy for decolonization through holistic embodiment, and thinking about history and community as relating to yoga and the formation of racialized identities living in a settler nation. Batacharya cautions that yoga can be absorbed into the Western culture of inclusion that colonial domination is situated on, and resists against the tendency to erase bodies in order to make room for the universal settler subject. Wong demonstrates how mindfulness, as an intended awareness of the present moment, can bring together body and mind, which disrupts the habit to react, categorize, and cement our experience. An epistemological pitfall, Wong argues, would be to categorize others and ourselves within colonial constructions of an essential dualism. A critical pedagogical orientation would be to stay with discomfort and utilize mindfulness to comprehend the “multiple constructed identities of the colonial past and present” (p. 263), so the seduction of finding the “truth” or origins of ancestry can be resisted. This refusal is embedded within the larger decolonial project that aims to unsettle the continued violence of colonization by defying Western identity construction. Steward’s analysis of the use of poetry as a form of embodied language exposes the reliance on colonial language as truth, and introduces another kind of knowing that begins with asking: “What counts as knowledge?” (p. 286). Steward suggests an exploration of other modes of knowing and destabilization of the materiality of colonization by uprooting certainty in language and unsettling the language–knowledge nexus, so that body–land relations can undergo critical examination.

Sharing Breath sheds light on the complicity of Western liberal education in sustaining colonial power relations. Indigenous dispossession is central to the constitution of Western educational frameworks, allowing for the reproduction of white supremacy and European exceptionalism. To disrupt the continued dispossession of Indigenous land and knowledge production, this volume brings forward to social work education a theoretically and empirically rich lens to support the project of decolonization. It is crucial to note that the editors and contributors do not position themselves as having discovered the “ultimate truths” in taking up this work, nor do they claim to occupy a space of mastery. Batacharya and Wong approach embodiment and decolonization with care and intent, situating the collected works along “a continuum of challenges and investigations, one that remains, and should remain, open-ended” (p. 389). This political and ethical stance is significant for social work education, as it must continue to be vigilant and resist transformative epistemologies so as not to be co-opted and absorbed by the mechanisms that aim to re-centre whiteness and erode possibilities of decolonization. This volume serves as

a budding, dynamic site of convergence where practices of embodiment, pedagogy, and decolonization integrate politically as well as ethically to reorient bodily relations, effectively opening up space for conversations and actions focused on creating non-normative and non-dominant ways of knowing and being.

References

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Reviewer Note

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