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Nancy Taber, Shahrzad Mojab, Cathy VanderVliet,
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LEARNING THROUGH MEMOIRS: SELF, SOCIETY, AND HISTORY

Nancy Taber

Brock University

Shahrzad Mojab

OISE, University of Toronto

Cathy VanderVliet

Brock University

Shirin Haghgou

OISE, University of Toronto

Kate Paterson

Brock University

Abstract

This article is based on our Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circles research. Using an interpretative sociological case study methodology, we facilitated two groups that read and discussed women's memoirs as living texts of society, culture, and history; we read the self and the social through the personal narratives of violence, survival, and resistance. The themes that emerged from this collective effort were a pedagogy for learning and unlearning, a pedagogy for engaging with others, a pedagogy for social justice, and a pedagogy for reclaiming a history. We conclude that, while the contexts, settings, and geographic regions changed in the memoirs, the presence of structural violence was constant. As a pedagogy, the memoir reading circles provided a consistent grounding that helped the participants collectively recognize and negotiate the meaning of the universality and uniqueness of experiences of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, culture, and capitalism as well as the implications of silence, hope, resistance, survival, community, and arts for social transformation.

Résumé

Cet article est basé sur notre recherche des Cercles de lecture pour la pédagogie des mémoires (Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circles). En s'appuyant sur une méthodologie sociologique et interprétative des études de cas, nous avons animé deux groupes pour lire et discuter sur des mémoires des femmes comme des textes vivants de la

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société, de la culture et de l'histoire ; nous lisons le moi et le social à travers les récits personnels sur la violence, la survie et la résistance. Les thèmes qui émergent de cet effort collectif consistent en une pédagogie pour l'apprentissage et le désapprentissage, une pédagogie pour l'engagement avec les autres, une pédagogie pour la justice sociale, et une pédagogie pour récupérer une histoire. Nous concluons que, bien que les contextes, les cadres et les régions géographiques changent dans les mémoires, la présence d'une violence structurelle est constante. Sur le plan pédagogique, les cercles de lecture des mémoires offrent une base solide qui aide les participants à reconnaître et négocier le sens de l'universalité et l'unicité des expériences du patriarcat, du racisme, du colonialisme, de la culture et du capitalisme ainsi que les implications du silence, de l'espoir, de la résistance, de la survie, de la communauté et des arts dans la transformation sociale.

Our Quest

We embarked on a simple but intriguing project a few years ago. We wanted to read through and across women's prison memoirs of the Middle East as well as Indigenous women's autobiographies to consider the teachability of these texts. Our quest was to develop pedagogical and analytical tools that would advance the learning and teaching of the texts as living documents of self, society, and history. In other words, we aspired to unravel women's experiences (self, subjectivity, and agency) as constitutive of social relations (race, class, gender, and collectivity) in a particular moment of history (colonialism and capitalism). Thus, we committed ourselves to a relational, intertextual, and interdisciplinary approach to the study of women's narratives of prison and First Nations residential school experience in Canada. In this process, we relied on two thoughtful and insightful texts to inform our theoretical frame of analysis. These were the two seminal works by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (1998) and *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010). In particular, we drew from the range of theoretical possibilities in the study of women's autobiographies proposed by Smith and Watson, including "relationality," "autobiographical ethics," "the relationship of national identity formation and autobiographical narrative," "the building of archive and documentary collections," "memory," and "spatiality," among others (1998, pp. 37–40). On the interdisciplinary approach, they wrote:

Interdisciplinary studies of personal narratives that draw analytical frameworks from sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, religion, medicine, and many other disciplines will produce more nuanced readings of autobiographical texts. The separate studies of first person narratives that have gone on within fields such as ethnography, oral history, communications, and performance studies offer revolutionary possibilities for recontextualizing autobiographical writing in specific context. (1998, pp. 39–40)

We obtained more clues on how to read culturally, intertextually, historically, and interdisciplinarily from other theoretical and artistic sources. These included films, novels, and more analysis such as those provided in the two important works by Gillian

Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography* (2000) and *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (2007). The life writings we focused on were prison memoirs and a memoir of a residential school experience. Despite their geographical and historical distances, these memoirs brought together narratives of genocide, colonialism, patriarchy, religion, torture, and violence. They profoundly explicated the depth of state violence, either in the form of prison institutions or the institution of residential schools. Whitlock encouraged a "connected reading" (2000, p. 203) and wrote that this process is

a reading for supplementation rather than completion, for complexity rather than closure, for the making of truth rather than its revelation. Connected reading pulls at the loose threads of autobiographical narratives, and so configure the intimate empire in a series of (sometimes improbable) links. This is a method of a critic in search of continuities, who uses rogue connections as a way of navigating the terrain of postcolonial autobiography and negotiating with the past. It is to know autobiographies as they cannot know themselves, and to use criticism and reading as a means of suggesting new ways of thinking about ourselves. (2000, p. 204)

We purposefully selected texts that can take us closer to unravelling forms of state and structural violence, from genocide and colonialism to authoritarianism, theocracy, and incarceration. But most importantly, we wished to read the individual life narrative as a collective and the collective as a form of public consciousness, "a transforming narrative paradigm," as suggested by Smith and Watson (1998):

The autobiographical writings of imprisoned women at many sites—Palestinian, Egyptian, South African, Latin American and other—are transforming narrative paradigms as they assert the textual authority of subjects repressed by authoritarian structures. Their narratives of detainment not only propose resistance but call for global social reorganization. (p. 28)

In our Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circles, we intended to read and understand women's narratives of violence and survival. In this article, we discuss our reading circles case study and explore the themes that arose from our research: a pedagogy for learning and unlearning, a pedagogy for engaging with others, a pedagogy for social justice, and a pedagogy for reclaiming a history. In doing so, we begin an inquiry that examines a pedagogy for reading memoirs about structural violence and contemplate its future educative implications.

Reading Circles Case Study

Reading circles are a forum in which readers can discuss the content of books, explore their thinking and emotional reactions, and engage in a sociocultural and political critique (Taber, Woloshyn, & Lane, 2012; Twomey, 2007). Reading circles can challenge participants' understandings of the texts, increase their capacity for engaging in critical dialogue, and build a reading community (Taber, Woloshyn, Munn, & Lane, 2014). There is much literature on reading circles with respect to children and adolescents (e.g., Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; Casey, 2008; Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010; Clark & Holwadel, 2007; Polleck, 2010, 2011; Twomey, 2011; Vyas, 2004; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009). Although

there is research focusing on adults, it tends to be positioned more centrally within the field of literacy (e.g., Beach & Yussen, 2011; Twomey, 2007) than in adult education and learning. These fields, we acknowledge, do overlap, but adult education has its own context and body of knowledge with analytical capabilities to help us understand the interdependency of texts, thoughts, emotions, consciousness, and praxis. Irving's (2010) study, for example, uses reading circles in libraries to explore the history of community building as is grounded in the field of adult education. Similarly, Taber, Woloshyn, Munn, and Lane's (2014) article takes an adult education perspective in using media discussion groups to explore issues of gender with female college students with learning exceptionalities. Our analysis in this article is built on these works, but also explores the pedagogical method of reading memoirs—a process we have called "memoir pedagogy" (Mojab & Taber, 2015).

We used an interpretative sociological case study methodology (Merriam, 1998) to explore our participants' experiences in the reading circles. The bounded system that defined our case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was the two reading circles that we developed. As such, the case is not an organic one, but is nonetheless bounded and particular. Our focus was on the ways in which the participants' reading of the memoirs connected to their social and historical understandings of the texts. Our data collection method was focus groups in the form of reading circles.

We read and discussed women's memoirs as both living texts of society, culture, and history and as an exploration of our consciousness. In other words, we read the self and the social through the personal narrative of violence, survival, and resistance. The memoirs we used were *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Talebi, 2011), *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaq Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* (Knockwood, 2001), and *Talk of Darkness* (El Bouih, 2008). An in-depth analysis of these books, as well as an exploration of how they connect to the concept of memoir pedagogy, can be found in Mojab and Taber (2015). The discussion here is an expansion of that analysis.

We organized Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circles in two sites: one in a large urban city and one in a smaller suburban one. Participants were recruited using a snowball method from researcher contacts as well as through posters placed at both universities and in local communities (e.g., libraries and coffee shops). In the urban location there were six women participants, two research assistants, and one researcher-faculty member. The participants consisted of undergraduate, master's, and doctorate students from different socio-ethnic backgrounds. The participants came from different professional and academic backgrounds, with a common interest and focus on the topics of personal testimonies, survivors of trauma, and arts-based approaches to research within different geographic contexts. In the suburban location there were nine women participants, two research assistants, and one researcher-faculty member. Three of these participants were community members, four were master's students, and two were doctorate students. The majority identified as White. In this group, the participants were mainly interested in reading women's memoirs for personal reasons as opposed to academic ones.

The urban group met five times. The first was an introductory session, followed by one session discussing *Out of the Depths*, two sessions discussing *Ghosts of Revolution*, and one session on *Talk of Darkness*. The suburban group met three times. The first was an introductory session, followed by one session discussing *Out of the Depths* and one session discussing *Ghosts of Revolution*. Due to time and funding constraints, the suburban group

did not discuss *Talk of Darkness*. We therefore do not address this text in this article. The urban and suburban groups met together for one joint concluding session via teleconference. All sessions were two hours.

In the sessions, we asked participants about their experiences reading the memoirs (what stood out, what was learned, what was surprising); the ways in which they understood the authors' individual experiences connected to a collective history; the issues that were raised in relation to gender, race, culture, class, religion, and power relations; the strategies used by the authors to cope, resist, and survive; the manner in which the stories were constructed; how the authors' stories connected to/contrasted with popular or uncritical understandings of the culture, forms of state violence, and history of oppression; how the books connected to participants' own lives; and how to use memoirs to deepen and broaden a societal critique.

All sessions were audio-recorded. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the study. After each session, we reviewed the audio recordings and, using the constant comparative method, drew up a list of tentative themes. These themes were then used to inform the following sessions. After all sessions were complete, we reviewed the preliminary themes and arrived at a final set of themes. The analysis was done independently for each location and then shared among the researchers. The themes between groups were remarkably similar; although each group of researchers may have named them in slightly different ways, the content was comparable. All participant names are pseudonyms.

The themes that emerged were a pedagogy for learning and unlearning, a pedagogy for engaging with others, a pedagogy for social justice, and a pedagogy for reclaiming a history. The themes overlap in content but have been separated here for discussion purposes. At the end of this section, we discuss the experiences of two participants in the Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circle to demonstrate the intersection of the themes and how the knowledge constructs negotiated in the reading circles became represented.

The Emerging Themes

A Pedagogy for Learning and Unlearning

We engaged with memoirs as living texts in which stories of individual and community experiences of violence and trauma were explicit. In the reading circles, participants began a thoughtful discussion and reflected on their prior knowledge of the state and structural forms of violence. We explored how our assumptions and mode of analysis may have changed based on our encounter with the narratives. For many, engaging with the memoirs elicited powerful and emotional reflections on the "learning and unlearning" process. For example, while many participants had prior knowledge of the abuse that occurred at residential schools in Canada, the *Out of the Depths* memoir served to rekindle this knowledge and challenged them to confront and deepen their relational understandings of the act of genocide.

Participants noted the difficulties they faced in reconciling what they learned at schools or as young adults with what they now know or have experienced, particularly during their formal education. As Jennifer, Elizabeth, and Sara shared:

When I first learned about Aboriginal culture I was in grade six...and my teacher was so racist and the first time I ever heard of a status card, she told us that "native people, they all get them and it's so unfair and

it's such a terrible thing"...I left the class as a twelve year old being like, "Aboriginal people have it so easy!"...and I carried that [thought process] with me all through high school. (Jennifer)

I had a similar experience too, I think that for me university was more unlearning than learning...so much unlearning...unlearning more than I knew that I needed to unlearn. (Elizabeth)

[In public school we] learned that all "Indian people" were dead...like they just didn't exist anymore... I was probably already in my second or third year of university when I realized that what I had been taught wasn't right and...it came as a huge shock. (Sara)

The concept of unlearning was discussed at length. Although the content of the memoirs did not appear to be a shock of new information to most participants, reading them provided a more nuanced appreciation of what took place in the authors' lives at a particular moment in the history of state and cultural suppression. In contrast to a passive historical abstraction, the impact of the memoirs framed a more personable, dynamic, and *accurate* interpretation of a historical time and context. A new depth and perspective about the actual lived experiences in residential schools also raised issues that had not been contemplated before. As stated by Nicole and Jennifer:

What was powerful for me was to hear it as first-hand experiences. I think it is different, you know, learning [about residential schooling and the ongoing effects of residential schools] from a white professor in a history class...It [reading a memoir] was a bit more personable and powerful for me to read the firsthand accounts. (Nicole)

I had known about residential schools, but not knowing that [students in the schools] were never allowed to write about it or talk about it in an unfavourable way and really tell anybody...that's kind of this culture of silence that we see now. (Jennifer)

Participants' engagement with the process of learning and unlearning partially depended on their prior knowledge and experiences with various topics we discussed. For newcomers to Canada who have not learned about the colonial and racist history of this nation, the memoirs helped to bridge that knowledge gap; one woman said:

All of us came to the table, saying, you know, "we didn't know this happened or we didn't know this was happening." [With] *Out of the Depths*, having immigrated to Canada about 10 or 11 years ago, I don't think coming into Canada I knew that residential schools were happening, but the level on which this violence was happening... so, to me that was very, very enlightening. (Enaya)

The memoirs also corroborated and challenged participants' existing knowledge, provoked new questions, and encouraged greater appreciation and attention of the issues explored within the texts. For example, while discussing *Ghosts of Revolution*, many questions were raised surrounding culture and historical events within Talebi's book that were not brought up with *Out of the Depths*. Some participants initially expressed their

emotional frustration in reading the memoir and criticized Talebi for not fully explaining the historical and political context of the events recounted in her book. However, at the conclusion of the reading circle session, Nicole and Nora noted an important contrast, pointing out that the group's discussions and questions highlighted the taken-for-granted knowledge of colonialism and residential schooling in Canada:

We didn't raise any of these questions [about culture and history] for *Out of the Depths*. [Knockwood] didn't talk about, you know when the white settlers came over and the history of how residential schools... So it's funny how, because we are so disconnected from this [*Ghosts of Revolution*], that we feel the need to [criticize the author for not providing us with enough information]. (Nicole)

It does point out the importance of understanding other cultural contexts. Because we don't do any of that, right? Okay, we had the war... but who knows what really goes on in Iran and Iraq, and if you don't understand their context...the history of that [pause] and yet, everybody has opinions. (Nora)

In a negotiation of learning and unlearning, participants engaged in challenging their prior knowledge and conceptions, and in the context of the reading circle, they participated collectively in substantive critical dialogue and thinking.

In contrast to interpreting memoir writing as an objectified history of the writing/speaking subject, Smith and Watson (2010) clarified that life narrative cannot be reduced to or be understood only as historical record. They argued that "to reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it at the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions" (p. 13). As our conversation became more sophisticated, it became evident that following the text as well as gaining an appreciation for it were difficult and emotionally charged tasks, since the memoirs could not have been read out of and above the historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, participants without prior knowledge or experiences discussed in the memoirs were encouraged to venture out of the texts to make sense of their insides. Those who had a sense of the history, or who had personal experiences from Iran on prisons and political activity, were able to glean differently from Talebi's memoir. This speaks to the potency of memoirs in developing a pedagogical approach to reading these books and the ways in which different readers can engage with memoirs in a manner that facilitates their own reflexive, learning, and unlearning process.

A Pedagogy for Engaging with Others

"Experience, then, is the very process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subject owning certain identities in the social realm, identities constituted through materials, cultural, economic, and psychic relations" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 31).

I had a similar experience [reading the memoir was disturbing and anger provoking]. I was often very disturbed and I took breaks after pretty much every chapter. It's funny, a couple of times I'd be reading on the couch and I would just stop and put my book down and just sit there and my partner would be like, "What are you doing?" [and I'd say] "I just have to think about this before I go on." (Nicole)

The decision to participate in the reading circles was an intentional choice to interact and experience the memoir with others. While the participants had various motivations to be involved (e.g., academic interest, social reading club, recreational reading), they all came with a singular interest to engage in a collective experience—an individual reading of the text extended into a social. The participants did not know in advance the discomfort they would feel in reading memoirs about women's violence, survival, and resistance. In the reading circle, they were able to share their experience and lean on each other, weighing interpretation, discussing personal experience, questioning, and recursively negotiating the text with new meaning. Even in the final combined video teleconference session, the reconfigured membership evoked new insights and questions about the memoirs such that the stories continued to motivate participants to grapple and think about living texts. The reading circles provoked a kind of solidarity that supported the participants in their negotiation of the tensions of oppressive narrative. Boler (1999) argued that memoirs, as a pedagogy of discomfort, complicate life in such a way that they "rattle complacent cages" (p. 175) and asserted that there is an advantage to "collective witnessing" (p. 176) as opposed to self-reflection. As a collective, learners are better able to courageously shed the thinking of a dominant culture and are more willing to "inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (p. 176). This, Boler explained, is requisite for transformation and in the vein of reading circles; "in this process one acknowledges profound interconnections with others, and how emotions, beliefs, and actions are collaboratively co-implicated" (p. 187).

As a pedagogical process, participants began by sharing many personal stories that represented how they viewed dominant cultural thinking situated outside of the reading circle. As a newcomer to Canada, Heather was surprised at the disparity between the beliefs of her everyday neighbours and those represented in Knockwood's memoir, *Out of the Depths*.

The narrative I'm hearing from the community...is completely different. And, my neighbours and my family, all these people that I'm getting to know... Holy Cow...I'm hearing, "Them, those, lazy"...you know every negative stereotype from people that are doctors...so you see it's really interesting, that disconnect...as a new person it's fascinating to me. (Heather)

When reading and discussing *Ghosts of Revolution*, Lindsay was struck by her previous misconceptions about Iranian culture and was surprised that a culture of resistance (as represented by the women prisoners) even existed in such a substantive way. Upon further discussion, it became clearer that the memoir contributed to new tensions about the culture of Iran and the Middle East. Shannon began to question the actions of organizations like Amnesty International, realizing that at times the organization pressed for action that was in direct opposition to the resistance demonstrated in the memoir. By engaging with others, the participants deconstructed their prior knowledge and tried to make sense of the distinctions of the new ideas they were experiencing in the memoirs.

Another common theme during the group discussions was exploring the challenges participants faced in using memoirs as a resource to build discussions on solidarity and justice. Elizabeth, Sara, and Danielle, for example, shared their frustrations of their interactions with friends and family who did not embrace an anti-colonialist and anti-racist feminist orientation in life. They discussed how this gap in knowledge and experiences

drove a wedge in their personal relationships. Reflecting on their participation in the reading circle, they stated:

[I'm] realizing how much I've changed and how much my perceptions have changed and the fact that not everyone in my life hasn't—for the lack of a better term—"caught up" with me. Which sounds bad because it makes me feel like I'm "ahead" of them but just not...feeling the same way. (Elizabeth)

I feel like it's taken me at least six years to [pause] go and unlearn everything that I was taught through school [and] my parents. Like, I didn't even realize how much racism was within like my close family and friends [and] I'm calling people on stuff consistently, on a daily basis. (Sara)

But I think that willingness for other people to take up these things that we're telling them...It's like, "well why don't you share *this* perspective?" but still, unless you're *willing* to engage with it, unless you're willing to unlearn, or willing to learn, it's just like, you can't really go anywhere, and that I find is incredibly frustrating. (Danielle)

While participants thought the books could be used to help inform others on colonialist, racist, and patriarchal issues, they raised the question of how effective it would have been if the books were read without the benefit of group discussion. The question was raised, for example, about whether it would be sufficient to use Knockwood's book to teach a session on the struggle of Aboriginal people and to make the connection between colonialism, racism, and capitalism. Participants agreed the book had to be complemented by history and by theory and be paired with supplementary resources.

I think it would be really nice if we could say "we'll just give this to all of our friends! And they'll all read it and everything will be great!" But they won't. The people that I have in my life are not going to sit down and read this, but if there was some type of other medium that we could reach them through,...they wouldn't necessarily need to commit a lot of time to it, if it's on social media, for example.... To be effective, these ideas need to be more accessible. (Jennifer)

The responses from the reading groups suggest how literature, and memoirs in particular, holds the power and potential for readers to learn about themselves and others and challenge existing social systems and beliefs. We concur with Smith and Watson's (1998) articulation of "Autobiographical Manifestos":

The autobiographical manifesto is a revolutionary gesture poised against amnesia and its compulsory repetitions...They offer fascinating performances of the revolutionary subject, performances which, as Frantz Fanon noted, effectively "transform spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them." (pp. 438–439)

Participants acknowledged that reading memoirs is a social and institutional activity. They mentioned that engaging with the readings and conversations engendered a sense of responsibility to continue these conversations with others outside the reading groups.

We were even saying as a group, these books affected us because we wanted to start talking about it. We wanted to share what we learned from these books with other people, particularly people that are resistant to what's in these books. (Nicole)

I find that after reading something like this, it is really hard...to let people say stuff without confronting them. After you hear stories and it becomes something personal, you have to say something and it really...it makes you want to resist that much more. (Sara)

Elizabeth, in particular, cited the very poignant last line of Knockwood's memoir, "I pass the talking stick to you": "That final line gave me chills...I was like, 'okay, I got this.' I just felt like at the end like, that's what this was for. And now I know." Perhaps this is how the pedagogical potential of the memoirs can be seen, in the sense that participants felt such a strong emotional and ethical connection to the stories they read. It is also important to note, as Whitlock (2000) reminded us, that "social memory is not just the property of individuals, although their life stories contribute to it; rather it is a complex cultural and historical phenomenon which is constantly subject to revision, amplification and forgetting" (p. 181).

A Pedagogy for Social Justice

Much of our discussion in the reading circles focused on learning and curriculum, particularly pertaining to the current lack of focus on social justice issues and the severe gap in knowledge in what is (or is not) being taught. These discussions may be primarily driven by the fact that the majority of participants came from various backgrounds in education—either as teachers, adult educators, or researchers in the field. Teachers in the group, for example, expressed frustration with how their experiences within teachers' college focused on how to deliver prescriptive curriculum, rather than critically unpacking the lessons and encouraging students and teachers to think critically. In the classroom, they felt constrained to integrate new perspectives and thinking and were pressed to comply with established pedagogical assumptions about curriculum in schooling.

I was supposed to teach [during my teaching practicum] this entire unit on how good friends Aboriginal people and white European settlers were...and I said [to my associate teacher], "I'd like to maybe add a couple different perspectives here," and she said,..."to talk about these things would be to rock the boat. And why would you want to do that? You know this is how we've always done it." (Nicole)

Participants identified the fear surrounding "rocking the boat" or disrupting the way "things have always been done" as an ideological construction impeding the radicalization of curriculum. They recognized the difficulties in challenging the status quo and disrupting long-entrenched racist, colonialist, and exclusionary ideas about what topics should be included in lesson plans and how curriculum should be taught. As one participant stated, "Teachers are afraid to kind of dig deep into these issues. One, for maybe saying the wrong

thing. Two, coming across as racist....And three, just not having that knowledge to hold a conversation with students.” Although *Out of the Depths* is a suggested resource for high school curriculum through Curriculum Services Canada (Eigenbrod, Kakegamic, & Fiddler, 2003), its actual use in the classroom is unknown. Participants also noted the difficulties and barriers to using the memoir as a teaching/learning resource. They talked about a lack of support for teachers to learn to engage in social justice conversations in the classroom:

One of my friends is teaching in the [education] system right now and she said they had...a *one-day* in-service [about the Native studies curriculum]....And I just think like, so you can give people the information in three hours but unless there's opportunity for them to internalize that and think about it and consider their own bias and be challenged to do that, it's not going to go anywhere....I taught for 13 years before I knew what a residential school was. And so now going into it and having conversations, I'm in a different position. But [if I] was faced with teaching [Native studies] curriculum [13 years ago], it would be uncomfortable and awkward and I don't know how I would have dealt with it. (April)

While participants expressed frustration with current curriculum and pedagogy, particularly the knowledge, experiences, and history that have been “robbed” from students, this dissatisfaction poses the question as to how one would go about enacting effective pedagogical change. Smith and Watson (2010) raised questions that further complicate our learning through memoirs. They asked:

What is the relationship of the teller and the witness to the story? What are the problems in staging and participating in acts of witnessing to violence and suffering? Where are limits to a “Western” therapeutics of witnessing (a call for telling as the route to psychic healing)? How do we negotiate the tension between individualized cure and structural analysis of the causes of violence? (p. 221)

In our desire to enhance a historical, cultural, and dialogical mode of interpretation and analysis, we need to deepen and advance our explanation of what kind of cultural and historical knowledge can help us in understanding the (dis)continuity in patriarchal colonial violence against women. Silver (2011) proposed that

the use of cultural memory as a pedagogical strategy has enormous potential to encourage students not only to reflect upon their own experiences, but also to connect their stories to the larger meta-narrative of political economy and to consider how in their own lives they have simultaneously resisted and been shaped by larger historical forces. (p. 205)

Participants identified the memoirs' power of interconnectivity as a strength in understanding cultures. However, the common theme of state/structural violence “also offers stories that position those who have suffered not only as victims of violent events but as survivors with imagination, energy, and resilience” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 30).

Therefore, we suggest that in social justice teaching/learning, the traumas of everyday life should be remembered as collective, as a process to inform our collective consciousness for resisting capitalist, colonialist, patriarchal state brutality and organizing against all forms of structural and individual violence.

A Pedagogy for Reclaiming a History

Like...taking back that history is how I saw it when I was reading it, like this was a way to claim the experience and...*reclaim* the culture that they lost and I really thought that was one of the more powerful aspects of the book. (Danielle)

Smith and Watson (2010) pointed out that memoirs do not confirm or invalidate notions of objective truth as represented in history. Rather, they raise previously uncharted truths of particular lives so that one comes to realize that history is tentative as opposed to certain and finished, and as such open to the possibility of silence, ignorance, and misinterpretation. In this way, the atrocities and abuses articulated in the memoirs were experienced as intense and emotional surprises for the participants in the reading circles, even though the Aboriginal residential school atrocities happened in our own countries. Many participants spoke about their own personal experience of living next to an Aboriginal reservation and how after reading *Out of the Depths* they were haunted by the questions that were never raised or the answers no one dared to engage. In reading and discussing the memoirs, participants found themselves questioning the knowledge that had been foundational to their historical understanding of the formation of the nation state of Canada. They experienced an epistemic and ontological shift in how they negotiated and interpreted history.

I was probably already in my second or third year of university when I realized that what I had been taught wasn't right and it was a matter—like it came as a huge shock. And I think that there was a lot of guilt involved the first year, at least of realizing I needed to learn something new, like I needed to go beyond what...I was taught and try to see the other side of it. (Sara)

I think maybe the same sense of guilt that we've talked about...just in terms of what we didn't know about our own history...like being aware of the residential schools...and kind of being ashamed for not knowing that piece of our own history. (Danielle)

I was appalled. I really struggled with it [knowledge of residential schools] a lot...learning about things I should have known about and why didn't I know about them...I was embarrassed, I was ashamed. (April)

Participants not only were distraught at their own lack of comprehensive historical knowledge but also realized the epistemological lies in their former learning experiences. Each felt personally complicit in the atrocities conveyed in the memoirs, which evoked questions of how to interpret history responsibly when our knowledge constructs seem so incomplete, uncertain, and tentative.

In asking why history had silenced the knowledge of the lived experiences disclosed in the memoirs, participants focused on their prior educative experiences. As pointed out

earlier, participants identified an education system/curriculum that keeps alive a particular retelling of history set against the embodied life of the majority of the people of the world. These particular memoirs demonstrated the capability of the state to (re)produce silences through an educational system, “robbing citizens of the right to know the history and the way it has happened” (Marzeih). As Marzeih further explained, “The justification that silence is actively worked for in a dictatorial authoritarian regime [e.g., Iran in *Ghosts of Revolution*] is understandable since the educational system is controlled and managed and developed by the state, but we cannot say the same things in the context of Canada.”

The memoirs motivated the participants to rethink a dominant rational, positivist view of history, one that benevolently (falsely) (Freire, 2010) legitimized “fixing” a deficient human condition and generously devised opportunities for the marginalized to be absorbed into the power relations (Haig-Brown, 2006) of its time and context.

Moreover, the memoirs triggered an emotional response, a tension that stirred the participants into a knowledge construction space where the learners negotiated and interrogated the uncertainty of the history they had known and assumed. Referring to the memoirs, a participant explained:

It was a little bit more personable and powerful for me to read the firsthand accounts on this [the memoir] that were honest and you kind of get like a more nitty gritty experience and not just this overall history.... These memoirs kind of forced ourselves to reflect on our history and our past...the books [the memoirs] affected us because we wanted to start talking. (Nicole)

Mojab and Taber (2015) argued that memoirs are *living texts* of society, culture, and history and thus *history* can be read through the “voice of the individual” (p. 31). The participants of the reading circles challenged the narrowness of a worldview that asserted the dominance of disembodied rational assumptions and deliberated on the historic legitimacy of a subjective lived experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued:

A disembodied mind permits the certainty needed by technical rationalism. To put the body back into the mind is to wreak havoc with certainty. Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one’s past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty. (p. 37)

Memoirs not only raise deeper understanding and meaning of history, but also demonstrate epistemic (what counts as knowledge; how knowledge is negotiated and acquired) divergence that sheds new possibilities for history. Pedagogically, memoirs express a subversive solidarity and resistance to past ideological assumptions and beliefs about historical events. Historical representation through memoir employs this solidarity as a strategy to raise the hidden histories of the past. Critically, memoirs show the contradictory and irrational nature of history by telling the practical, lived story that has not been wiped clean of emotion and lived experience. The participants discussed how the memoirs reclaimed the tentative attributes of history articulated in a personable and experiential history that they found both confounding (e.g., how could this happen?) and hopeful. As noted by Enaya:

Our understanding of history becomes quite personal...and to me the thing that I took away from it is a hopeful note...that it is not outside our control in the way that we think...we can construct histories and narrative and that is within our reach.

Questions of purpose, authenticity, representation, consistency, and chronology were raised as a critique of the counter-history. The memoirs themselves evoked many robust questions and the participants realized that, pedagogically, memoirs should not stand alone but must instead be read and reread in the context of history and culture, self and society, as we have discussed above. The temporal text of the memoirs pressed the readers to rationalize the text/experience historically, and even though each memoir provoked different aspects of attention depending on previous knowledge, each demanded outside resources to legitimize and boost the historic value of the text. A dynamic and dialectic method was described as "zooming in and zooming out," whereby the learner goes deeply into the memoirs but must also come out in order to read around it. An alternative approach was described as a spiral with the memoir at the core and other material or threads spiralling out of it. The participants found themselves examining the memoir text in connection to history and theory. One reading circle was compelled to seek out complementary materials (e.g., literature, film) as a commitment to extrapolate deeper meaning of the subjectivities found in the memoirs.

Remembering in memoirs involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. It is not a passive process or a mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively and personally creates the meaning of the past within the context of the present such that the past can never be fully recovered (Smith & Watson, 2010), but only represented within the context of the present. Memoirs move past the epistemic notion of a finished historical experience. While the memoirs described lived experiences from the past, they motivated participants to be aware of the genealogical impacts these experiences continue to have in the present. "We think a lot of these things, like residential schools are in the past and we think about a lot of these things as historic, but these atrocities continue to impact the present" (Nicole). Memoirs provide a crucial pedagogical tool for explicating the complexity articulated by Spender (in Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 6):

Stephen Spender suggested that the life writer confronts not one life but two. One is the self that others see—the social historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships. These are "real" attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get "outside of." The "inside," or personally experienced, self has a history. While it may not be meaningful as an objective "history of the times," it is a record of self-observation, not a history observed by others.

In the reading circles, some participants felt personally challenged by the experience of structural violence in the memoirs and found themselves at a transformative crossroad or a call to action. For instance, Nora reflected on how the content of *Out of the Depths* was new to her. She "found it really disturbing" and "had to walk away" from the book to give herself time to process the content. But, she explained, "it also made me want to come back to it and find out what was going on." She connected Canada's systemic and

physical violence against First Nations to her own experience volunteering at an orphanage in Costa Rica, where “they used shame and fear” and “humiliation.” She did not take any action at the time and expressed a desire to make up for this now, stating that “the nuns were doing exactly the same things as in that book.” Nora wrote a letter to the Pope and the school to detail her concerns. She explained, “This is 15 years too late but...I feel like I have to apologize to the girls that were there 15 years ago for not speaking up. For being a bystander.” She emphasized the need for people to read women’s narratives of violence and survival to challenge their perceptions of the world and to advocate for change. Additionally, she stressed the need for caring and understanding to be paired with education; educators need to be “people [who]...are whole.” Nora connected her inside self, in the words of Spender, to the historical past and present as she created meaning (and took action) from her experiences in the Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circle.

Odette was commissioned to write a play for a symposium on truth, reconciliation, and engagement. The theatre project aimed to unpack the notion of trauma as experienced by refugees, people labelled with intellectual disabilities, the trans community, and the original people of this land. “The collision of the Memoir Reading Circle and the writing of this play was ‘marvelous’ in the surrealist sense!” wrote the participant. Odette included excerpts from *Out of the Depths* in the play, and the money raised by the event went toward the building of a new First Nations school.

Implications: Learning through Memoirs

One writes out of a need to communicate and to commune with others, to denounce that which gives pain and to share that which gives happiness. One writes against one’s solitude and against the solitude of others. One assumes that literature transmits knowledge and affects the behavior and language of those who read, thus helping us to know ourselves better and to save ourselves collectively. (Galeano, 2000, p. 169)

The memoir genre in literature represents a wide variety of formats, styles, and variations. The texts read by the reading groups, *Ghosts of Revolution* (2011) and *Out of the Depths* (2001), are a particular form of this genre—a variation that can be identified as prison memoirs, resistance literature, or anti-colonial narratives. This distinction is an important one, as the two memoirs serve a particular political and social purpose and were produced and read (by our groups) within a specific context. One of the significant shared characteristics of the two memoirs is that they retell the story of a form of incarceration experienced by the authors—those of life in Canadian residential schools and life as prisoners of conscience in Iran. Thus, while the contexts, settings, and geographic regions vary in the texts, the theme of structural violence remained the same and provided a constant grounding of the texts. This helped the participants in the process of recognizing the universality of some of the themes in relation to the experience of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, religion, and capitalism as well as silence, hope, resistance, community, and arts. The identification of these themes was made possible by the power of the authors’ life narratives. Talebi and Knockwood weave their stories in and out of different temporal realms and draw larger connections to a moment in the history of these nations.

Another shared characteristic between the texts is their polyphonic nature. Throughout *Out of the Depths*, Knockwood includes testimonies from students at the same residential school. In *Ghosts of Revolution*, the stories and voices of others are presented and take a central place through the words and memories of the author herself. One may ask, does the provision of multiple narratives work to support/legitimize the central narrative? Does it help to represent a range of experiences within the same context? Does the inclusion of over/inter voices help to steer away the fiction-like quality that memory/memoirs can serve?

Further, the texts share a non-linear quality in their narratives. This syntactical characteristic of the texts speaks to the powerful means by which the temporal fluidity of the authors' lives and history present themselves. The fluidity and ease with which the texts ebb and flow, through the present into the past, can be identified as the life inflow. In general, the participants attributed the temporal fluidity observed in both memoirs to the function of memories and how they unfold. The connectivity of memories to different temporal realms is also reflected in the authors' stylistic claim that stories do not live on their own but are intertwined in one another.

The language of the authors directly determines the audience for the texts, which is part of the political statement they make. Knockwood writes in English, a language that she is forced to adopt while in residential school. For Talebi, English is a language that she has gained later on in life, and writing her story in English necessitates reliving it in a different mode. *Ghosts of Revolution* serves as a counter-narrative to not only the history that the Iranian state propagates, but also the oppressed Eastern woman story popular in the West. For Knockwood, her memoir is written inside her country and exposes a history of a state suppression and genocide committed through the creation of Canada.

Further, these texts are similar insofar as they are narrating a history. As memoirs of state and cultural violence, either in the form of incarceration or residential school, the authors speak about oppression, violence, torture, silencing, and dehumanizing. The participants were struck by the universality of the pain, endurance, resiliency, and resistance that the authors presented. Further, the writing and sharing of these experiences of prison can create a transnational network of resistance against the structures of power and the culture of impunity.

The power of memoirs stems from their ability to enable the reader to locate a personal narrative within the larger socio-political context of a specific moment in history. Many participants commented on having been able to connect and understand the histories of the particular regions in which the memoirs are set. The impact and power of the memoirs was evident in the emotional experience of the participants toward the texts.

The depth and breadth of discussions facilitated by these two texts were clear indications of their power as memoirs/autobiographies. During these sessions, it was clear that these life narratives by themselves may not be employed to convey a history of a particular moment in time in a nation's story. Equally clear is that memoirs have an epistemic potential that dynamically and radically interrogates historical objectification such that they bring to the fore those lived lives theorized in that history. Memoirs can be powerful inasmuch as they are used as part of a wider selection of resources to learn about a particular moment in history, about resistance and resilience, and to build community and solidarity in the process. It is worthwhile to consider how prison memoirs can affect the consciousness of a people regarding their own histories and draw the connections between some of the

universal characteristics of prisons, incarceration, and state violence. As such, the narration and writing process can be considered as radical acts through which silences are broken and an alternative narrative of a history is provided. These alternative narratives can be nourished by adult educators through the use of Memoir Pedagogy Reading Circles to highlight, discuss, and build on women's experiences of violence and survival to make social transformation a possibility.

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