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Playing (with) identity in Canadian university classrooms

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Issues of race, cultural difference, and group identity are nowadays staple curriculum items within the social sciences field. Navigating the intersectional web of identitarian meaning-making without perpetuating, to a certain extent, pigeon-holes views of identitarian group appurtenance, continues to remain a challenging task.

The well-known Blanket Exercise constitutes one such example. Developed about two decades ago by **Kairos** (<https://www.kairoscanada.org/>) -- an ecumenical organization advocating for general issues of social justice and human rights -- the exercise was designed with the aim of reconciliation in mind. It was planned in collaboration with Indigenous educators and envisioned to unfold as an experiential workshop that interactively plays a light historical version of Canadian colonialism.

The blankets used in the exercise serve as a metaphor for the Aboriginal lands prior to the British occupation. At the end of the exercise, they are folded to conceal a much smaller part of the prearranged area. Very few people from the initial group are left standing on the blankets. The message is fairly straight-forward: This is how colonial settlers took over the Indigenous lands.

Initially proposed by Kairos as a free activity, the Blanket Exercise developed as a programming branch of its own. It now has its individualized **website** (<https://www.kairosblanketexercise.org/>) as well as pre-appointed assistant managers and regional coordinators. It contracted its appellation to fit the KBE acronym (i.e., the Kairos Blanket Exercise) and expanded its reach by rendering a **Spanish version** (<http://www.rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/kairos-canada/2016/08/spanish-kairos-blanket-exercise-connects-colonial-dots>) now ready for import into Latin America. The scripts are no longer publicly available and facilitators need to be specifically trained. The KBE training is provided, in turn, to RCMP



Questions arise, however, in using the kairos scripted activity within university halls. Especially if higher education intends to challenge the status-quo. Inviting Indigenous Elders to co-facilitate the activity might not be as straightforward as it seems. After all, the ones bringing Indigeneity *in* are asymmetrically positioned on the dominant side of society. In other words, the ones paying attention to the difference are the ones that firstly created the difference.

Such engagement is doomed to structurally fail from the get-go. Acts of differentiation do have differential effects. Reasoning that an invitation for Indigenous Elders is sufficient enough to legitimate the KBE activity embeds the tacit assumption that identity is ontologically contained within categorically defined group sameness, and that a presumed essence of difference is contained in what deviates from sameness. Following this logic, when discussing Indigeneity, one should include Indigenous people, when discussing race, one should include racialized subjects, when discussing gender, one should include women, and so on and so forth. For the reason that a singular Indigenous person is representative of a universal essence of Indigeneity, regardless of the heterogeneity existent within and amongst Indigenous communities. The 2016 Canadian Census alone reported that more than **70 Aboriginal languages** (<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/98-200-x/2016022/98-200-x2016022-eng.cfm>) are spoken in Canada, including Athabaskan and Northern Athabaskan, Eastern Algonquian and Algonquian, Atikamekw, Blackfoot, Inuktitut, Inuit languages, Malecite, Mi'kmaq, Ojibway-Potawatomi, Ojibway Cree-Montagnais, just to name a few. Let alone the sociopolitical and ideological differences existent within these linguistically defined communities.

The logic also implies that racialized experiences should be generalized to all racialized bodies despite existent differences between racialized subjects. Take for example the differences between African Americans born in the U.S. and racialized subjects from Zimbabwe. Or the hierarchical differences amid Kenyans and Somalis, the Kurds in Iran and the Iranian-born population, the Japanese and the Chinese, the Chinese and the Taiwanese, or the Filipinos and the Chinese. The list could go on and on. Such thinking rests on racist assumptions at their core, and implies that a certain biological commonality is possessed through group appurtenance. Reasoning not that far away from the times when scientific racism was the norm. From the times when Carl Brigham and William Ripley secured their professorships at Princeton and Harvard by writing about race as expressed by blood, skin colour, or one's shape of the head. The knowledge production apparatus moved away from defining race on biological terms and towards social constructivist interpretations. Yet our everyday vocabularies continue to engage in biological meaning-making in relation to race and identity formation.

Two consequences unfold from assuming biologically essentialized constructions of identities.



indigeneity in the classroom, only when convenient, without a subsequent intentionality to change the material conditions that continue to disregard the dissemination of Indigenous knowledge -- i.e., the lack of Indigenous content in the curriculum; the lack of thorough consultation prior to designing class activities with Indigenous content; the unavailability of platforms to discuss and engage with current issues of colonialism affecting Indigenous people; the lack of concrete and symbolic academic support to anti-resource extractivist struggles, such as those that unfolded in Elsipogtog in 2013 and the subsequent responsibility-placing on the shoulders of civil society leaders, engaged citizens and local activists - - raises question marks as to who benefits the most from such teaching-learning modalities.

Certainly, the course instructors will, since they now partake in an already curated class they no longer have to prepare. Institutional benefits follow. The department is now in the position to check-mark the provision of Indigenous curriculum in the classroom. After all, **Article 62** ([http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls to Action English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls%20to%20Action%20English2.pdf)) from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada outlined the need to introduce Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods as an educational action call. Leave alone that Indigeneity is rarely mentioned in systematic curriculum development programs. Indigenous perspectives are merely portrayed as supplementary perspectives but not as *the* perspectives; as other viewpoints, valid as the *other* yet not worthy enough to stand on equal foot with the main, Canadian viewpoints. Participant-students additionally benefit. They gain awareness on historical matters and experience an alternative form of instruction. They learn to use their affect in making sense of the world. Hardly any direct benefits are traced back to the Elders. An honorarium could barely be considered a benefit unless one starts from the presumption that no remuneration should be provided to compensate for one's time. The so-called benefit of telling their story, an advantage anecdotally implied through educating future settler generations towards greater tolerance and less discrimination, embodies the ultimate racist epitome. One does not need a PhD to realize that extending the courtesy of *lesser* racism from the settler towards the colonized is a racist statement in itself. Less racism should by no means represent a 'favour'.

Second, assuming a biologically essentialized identity-formation re-positions the other to its minoritized status and maintains a dominant nationalism through the juxtaposition of categorically framed identitarian appendages to Canadian ethnocentrism. It is still up to the settlers of the late-formed Canadian nation state to decide how reconciliation and education should unfold. The tacit or verbalized directives that we, the nationals, 'allow' them to tell their story, epitomize the good ol' liberal card of playing with tolerance for as long as practicing tolerance never has to disrupt the national way of doing things, of allocating privileges, of distributing the rights to access further rights if one was to speak in Arendtian terms, and of deciding how identity is to be classified.



given a platform to speak are presumably inclined to support rather than to snake the system. The voices from below, those completely opposed to the status quo, rarely get a publicly open platform. An Elder from the self-governing Pimicikamak nation in Manitoba, a community with an **80 per cent unemployment rate** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/pimicikamak-elder-weighs-in-on-manitoba-premier-s-hydro-apology-1.2927127>), which fought the water dams imposed by Manitoba Hydro for over 40 years, would perhaps be less inclined to sign up as a facilitator with Kairos. Similar with someone from the Aamjiwnaang First Nation near Sarnia, Ontario, a community located in proximity to the so-called Chemical Valley. Industrial releases from Sunoco, Shell, DuPont, Imperial Oil, NOVA Chemicals, Suncor Energy and Enbridge have materialized in health issues in the area, including miscarriages, chronic headaches and asthma. The **Chemical Valley** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/windsor/first-nations-exposed-to-pollutants-in-chemical-valley-1.2438724>) is now classified as the region with the worst air quality in Canada.

The aforementioned Indigenous communities are struggling with contemporary forms of colonialism. A colonialism which does not monopolize the land in the old, traditional ways, through treaties, grants or squatting, but rather through the soil extraction carried out by transnational corporate entities. It is rare, however, that fracking, mining and other resource extracting activities as well as their influence on Indigenous communities are thoroughly analyzed in academic curricula.

The push for de-colonial education is oftentimes a matter of political performativity. So as the 'benevolent' act of the good, compassionate agent who *allows* the colonized other to tell their colonizing story.

Image: **Queen's University**

(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/queensucanada/26508815664/in/photolist-RFrHPi-SJ3R1k-SRPrAh-22f7MRX-CqouBR-GouBkW>)/Flickr

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