

Life and Death at Talawanda Ridge

T.S. Poetter, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio

AAACS Annual Conference, Toronto, Canada, April 3, 2019

Abstract

In this exploratory treatment of a fictionalized scene of conflict on indigenous land, framed inside a “currere” project, I “try” to frame a narrative of value and possibility by centering the violent, destructive, and ubiquitous colonizer, who is, of course, me. For me, this is a troubling (not your problem), never ending project of discernment, critique, deconstruction, and transformation on a personal and socially political level in education. I am constantly asking, “What is the educational, curricular, and critical project of self-examination? What forms can it take? What outcomes can it have? What are the possibilities for producing personal, political, and social justice? How does one account for the persistent logics of “othering” and other factors that block the inquirer from insight, communication, and liberation, or even from a place to stand, though I, colonizer, stand in the middle of all of it, empowered, at every turn? What are the possibilities for this type of work, and how can it lead to forms of solidarity that are educative, defensible, and perhaps revolutionary? Can we create or even live within the sanctity of a “relational, transitive, and/or creative pedagogy of solidarity”? (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012)

A Shake Up

Sometimes I feel as though I know a lot of about what’s happening in the curriculum field and that there isn’t really anything new under the sun. But then sometimes people and ideas come along that really challenge and change me; and it becomes clear that it was all right there in front of me the whole time. And so it was that I had the great, good fortune of reviewing several of Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández’s scholarly articles this past Fall (especially Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). They shook me up, shone light on areas I had left under-interrogated myself and as a scholar, and that connected with me personally, which isn’t always the case when we are studying, consuming scholarship.

Truth be told, the work left me dangling, hanging helplessly with nowhere to step for relief: exactly where I belonged, colonizer. I know who I am – an upper middle class, white, straight, able protestant with a PhD raised in a public midwestern U.S. grade school, who went on field trips to forts, places where “heroic” U.S. soldiers “defended” the soon to be new nation and frontier from “warring natives.” I wanted and received toys as gifts that mirrored the lie, and I built forts for them to “play in,” like the Marx Toy Company’s fort housing Captain Maddux, and of course, General Custer.

And so Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2013) description of fort pedagogy – and the “settler colonial curriculum project of replacement,” their name for the process of curriculum in schools and in national narratives that systematically replaces the stories and lives of the native, bringing about their vanishing, moving us away from “settler complicity in the erasure of indigenous people toward fantasies of the extinct or becoming extinct Indian as natural, forgone, inevitable, indeed evolutionary” (p. 78) – literally hit home. Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández argue that settler futurity is the ubiquitously powerful curriculum project that continuously focuses on the “complete eradication of the original inhabitants of contested land” (p. 80). They say, horror of horrors, that this isn’t simply, and ever so tragically once and for all, but that “Indeed invasion is a structure, not an event...The violence of invasion is not contained to the first contact or the unfortunate birth pangs of a new nation, but is reasserted each day of occupation” (p. 73).

Their theorizing reminded me of the theorizing and the argument for revolution against colonized, settled, and dominant structures that Syd Walton (1969) makes in his masterpiece *The Black Curriculum*. In the book, Walton provides a detailed description of the rules,

traditions, and processes that the white administration at Merritt College in the mid 1960s calls on consistently to create the barriers for delaying and derailing the creation and control of a new, Black- oriented and Black-centered curriculum, for Black students and their white allies, and delivered by Black faculty members. Merritt defends its fort of higher education, fighting for its white curriculum, white faculty, and white curriculum with all of the vigor of a vigilant white colonizer set on erasing “Black” from the curriculum of higher education altogether.

But even more so, it was Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2012) article “Decolonization and the Pedagogy of Solidarity” that provided the framing I needed to recognize where I was (that is, paralyzed) and needed to move (toward solidarity on others’ terms, not my own). It’s no one’s fault I felt paralyzed. The colonizer can’t see behind or beyond, typically, blinded by the present, a not so hidden past, and all of the power that imbues existence, and possible futures/futurity: the living and being inside white supremacy. But I hungered as a learner, a scholar, a teacher, a human being for some hope, a vision of “the possible,” and I was led to it by Rubén: the challenge of solidarity.

Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) posits that:

First, solidarity always implies a relationship among individuals or groups, whether as a way to understand what binds people together or what brings them together for civic or political action. Second, solidarity always implies an obligation, or a sense of duty regarding what is just or equitable, whether it is construed in relationship to some notion of human rights or a social contract, or to commitments to struggles against particular forms of oppression. Third, solidarity always implies a set of actions or duties between those in the solidary relationship, from the disposition to treat others as one would like to be treated, to the kind of life sacrifice that Hoelzl (2005) theorizes as the limit case of asymmetrical solidarity. Based on these three observations, I want to propose a way of thinking about solidarity specifically in relationship to anti-oppressive education and projects of decolonization that take seriously the conditions and implications of the present moment. Through the pedagogy of solidarity, I seek to reimagine the conditions for ethical encounters with others that challenge present conditions of colonization and inequality. (p. 50)

And so the opportunity here is to make a move toward solidarity, to engage it, to yearn for it. I can start by admitting my ignorance, being aware of my power, and by mortgaging all of it for a moment of possibility, of thoughtful reimagining of a different way forward, dreamed into existence, and maybe even in the end, possible. And through all of it, including the journey, the process has to involve others, and commitments that are real. I have to continually ask, “What ‘skin’ do I have in the game?”

And so I pledge to pursue solidarity here, to acknowledge every pitfall and mistake, to attempt, at least, not to hurt anyone, and to fail miserably every single step of the way, in public and in private, like I have for a lifetime. While engaging the complicated conversation that is curriculum (and/or pedagogy, this distinction will have to be the focus of another paper!), “moments of synthesis may be deferred, and when invoked, they are contingently articulated, as ‘working through’ what is the present requires the continual reactivation of the past...” (Pinar, 2012, p. 50).

As a currere project, this paper reactivates the past (the regressive), challenges the future (the progressive), and approaches a more complete present (the analytic/synthetic) (Pinar, 1975), at least for me in this moment. What follows is a set of purposeful, reflective autobiographical movements, my “working through” several experiences, ideas, and themes – allegories, if you will – specific “bits” (Poetter & Googins, 2015) that imply a more general significance, and that might at least hint at the prospects of solidarity, or of what might be possible, at least for me, maybe for us.

A Commitment to Pedagogy in Practice: Failed Attempt (regressive bit)

As a beginning high school English teacher in Indiana many years ago, I tried to engage students in meaningful discussions about literature we read together, hoping that the work we did on those texts would engage them, moving them to think about ideas and concepts around being human that they might not encounter (though they might) in Science or Math classes (my best students over the years in education by the way have been science and math educators!), or any place else in the worlds they inhabited now or would live in the future.

In my third year of teaching, I discovered a short poem buried deep in our sophomore anthology (remember those big text books with bits and pieces of literature in them?) written by a Native American about the land, about peace, about hope, while lamenting the violence of forced removal that her progenitors endured on the “Trail of Tears.” I don’t remember the name of the poem or the author, it has been so long ago and I recycled the teacher’s copy I kept with the poem in it more than 20 years ago now (You can sample native poems such as Hogan, 2014 or Alexie, 1993 that strike similar chords).

But I do remember, starkly, the failure I experienced teaching that poem to a group of sharp and seasoned sophomores, most of them white and middle class, but some Black, some Latino, some Asian. We read the poem in class, discussed it and its form, its purpose, the author’s use of language, standard English-class stuff. *Then I asked them if they could take a similar point of view, and write their own poem about their connection to the beautiful land they inhabited at this school or at their own homes/communities, and in particular if they were writing about it after they were forcibly removed from that wonderful place. What would be*

lost? What would they miss? How would they feel? In fact, I said, “This is the very land the author’s family may have been removed from generations ago, all of the tribes east of the Mississippi forced to relocate west of the great river. The pain of it, the horror, is still there, as you can glean from her words, from her story.” I just wanted to see what they could come up with, no grade, just writing late sophomore year. I always hoped as the teacher I was and would become that literature could challenge us, open up new points of view, deepen our sense of self and our relationship with the world around us.

We took our notebooks outside, and found a serene spot on the lakefront that bordered the school. The day was gorgeous, 72 degrees, sunny, light wind, perhaps the kind of day that the earliest inhabitants would have treasured, told stories about, maybe. But my students were confused. They just couldn’t identify with the author, with the history, the horror of it.

They said:

“I’ve moved 10 times, what’s the big deal?” (Celine)

“What’s the difference between Indiana and Oklahoma? It’s all the same anyway.” (Bill)

“I don’t even like being outside.” (Myra)

“That happened a long time ago. Why should we care about it now?” (Cliff)

And on and on it went, while the students struggled to come up with anything to write, or say. I broadened the prompt to urge them on, “Write about a place that you love, then, that you know. What do you like about it? How does it define you? What would you miss if you couldn’t go back?” Nothing.

And we had taken on political topics in literature all year. We read Twain’s *Huck Finn* and Weisel’s *Night*. We explored aspects of racial genocide across centuries and our complicity,

and the world's complicity, in all of it. What was going on here? I had my theories. I don't know if any of them are right or not. I do know, however, what I wanted to happen when I read the poem to them and with them, after I read the poem for the first time and had been so moved, in that place.

I wanted them to feel the way the poem made me feel: As though my life and how I live it, and how it connects to a world more than 150 years in the past, has an impact today on issues of social justice and peace. What part of me (if I had known much about the broader implications then, I might have started with my own carbon footprint, or how I turned a blind eye to modern day slavery, the horrors of indentured immigration, etc.) is still colonizing, removing, erasing, hurting others? Can I even identify with the deep connections people had in the past to this place, to this land? Does the land itself, and what it means for who we are, have meaning anymore? Does it resonate at all? If not, what does that say about us? If so, what does that say about us? Etc. And what would I do if similarly threatened with removal? Why does this keep happening? Will the world ever achieve peace at a macro level? Micro?

But... Nothing. I realize that a lot was going on in this micro-moment. If I had it to do over again, I would teach that poem much differently. Maybe. But this is how it went down, and it has stuck with me for three decades. No lie, since that day the experience with that class has haunted me, stuck. One thing I have dedicated myself to is not giving up on first blush when I can't get a basic idea across, or students resist it all together from the beginning. I am more persistent now. I wish that I would have pushed much harder back then, and continued on with the tack I was on over several days. Rookie mistake. There is, after all, so much at stake! And to be frank, while that poem and those early ideas and feelings woke me up, I

realized in that moment that my developing point of view, the one that challenges and interrogates my own assumptions about the world and my place in it, was on the way somewhere, but that my students had not yet turned their corner.

Talawanda Ridge: A Future Clashes with History, and the Present (progressive bit)

Life and death at Talawanda Ridge. Cliff “Broken Branch” Silver lived to see another day the morning that he climbed the elm tree on the front lawn of the tribe’s cultural center on a sunny spring afternoon during his 6th year, in 2019. While reaching for a hawk’s nest just above his head to replace an egg that had fallen from so high to the ground below and miraculously had not broken, the branch he stood on tenuously as he reached up, broke, sending him sprawling and flailing 40’ to the ground. He broke both arms and hands, broke his left leg, and broke almost every rib; he was out of school with a concussion for 10 weeks, ultimately needing 36 stitches to stop the bleeding from the gash across his forehead, now only faintly visible at his hairline so many years later. Henceforth, he was known to everyone in his world as Broken Branch.

He was lucky he didn’t die that day.

Now 36, head of the cultural center and the presumed next chief of the tribe, Cliff seemed no worse for the wear the fall had caused way back then. Broken Branch looked up at the tree, at the azure blue Ohio sky, and several hawks circling, and felt very glad to be alive and well enough for the meeting with Celine Batton, who asked to discuss a deal that her company, Batton Enterprises, was proposing: To purchase this land from the tribe in order to drill for and process the iridium embedded in an asteroid deposit in the earth’s crust directly

below the property, 21 miles below the center. The iridium was needed to create the fuel cells that would power the future U.S. colony on Mars.

Several hundred tons of iridium were needed for the project (so much more than is produced in a year world-wide, about 3 tons total). The world's best geologists money could buy had recently given Celine the location of the material to within 1/16", and thought it would take two years or so to mine and process the Iridium. She was prepared to offer the tribe \$15 Trillion, on behalf of the U.S. government, for the 16 acre plot. The U.S. government also planned to invest \$34 Trillion in Batton to get the material out of the ground and to the surface, processed, and ready to use in the manufacture of the super powerful fuel cells (batteries) needed to run the new world.

Of course, you might think in 2049, 80 years since Armstrong's first walk on the moon, that iridium could be gotten out of the earth more easily (or even synthetically manufactured), and that it might not matter where the tools went into the ground to get at it. But the angle of the deposit, and the tools available for use, required the acquisition of this plot – which housed the tribe's cultural center and repatriated burial grounds – in order to get the material up from the crust.

But, of course, Broken Branch couldn't speak for the tribe as head of the center, or even as presumptive chief. He took the meeting with Celine because of their connection as classmates so many years ago, in a high school in Indiana, where they had both been sent by their families to prep for college studies. They hadn't seen each other for many years. But it didn't take long to warm up, even though they mainly came from different worlds.

"Cliff!" "Celine!"

They embraced each other and talked about old acquaintances and family and their careers and such, then they looked up at the sky, and at the beautiful elm that towered in front of the center, and Celine asked, “Is this where it happened? The fall, I mean?”

Cliff laughed nervously, “I’m surprised you remembered that. It is so natural living here, that I sometimes forget about the tree and how closely we are tied, what it means to me. But this place definitely has a pull, a gravity to it that draws me back, constantly, so to speak, to my roots, to its roots. I think that my awareness of it has grown over time, too, so that I am in tune with it, not scared or excited by it all now, in life. It just is.”

“I can see and sense that, in the beauty of this place, the trees and the birds and the center. But this extraction, Cliff, it is a great opportunity for your people, to provide for them, to be completely independent. Not just to be sovereign, but to be truly independent financially.”

Cliff laughed. He wasn’t laughing at Celine, not mocking her. And he didn’t find anything she said to be funny. Instead, he laughed because he somehow knew it would all come down to this, as fate might have it, to concepts of the world clashing, the colonizer, the colonized, the colonizing, all eating at their humanity with more intensity each second, on and on it goes.

“Listen, Celine, I have nothing against you or your company, or the Mars mission, or any of it. We have been friends for so long. But when the tribe bought this plot in 2000, we intended for this to be a place for us to engage in educational activities related to the tribe, and to bury those who died during forced removal west of the Mississippi two centuries ago. Our goal was to bring them home. And all of this has come to pass, and this small place represents

for us the life we have now, connected to the past, but oriented toward the future, and alive each day in our present. And the land has always been important to us, in the now, and to our future. We aren't merely historical. We are alive now, and wish to continue on as living, breathing human beings making a difference in this world, here and now. Believe me, the money is tempting, of course, but we signed many treaties the past 300 years, and got so little in return after all: \$15 Trillion? \$20 Trillion? 30? 40? Do you think the money matters?"

Celine thought for a minute, letting Cliff's words sink in a bit, then she said, "I moved 10 times before I met you in high school. I never had a sense of place growing up. And I can see why this place matters to you, just being here with you. The elm tree where you fell, the grounds, the birds, the center. Perhaps my high school years were the first ones when I cared about any certain place, and the people I knew there. It's funny, I was thinking about that poem about the Trail of Tears that we read in high school for that crazy teacher, I can't remember his name now. And I get now in this moment more than I did then the importance of place. But you can buy any other plot in this region. It could be 100 times bigger than this. And we can help you move your burial grounds and the cultural center. You could practically buy all of this historic land back from Ohio yourself, from I-70 to the Ohio River!"

They both laughed out loud over that line. But they both knew Celine wasn't too far from wrong, either. \$15 Trillion would make the tribe nearly as wealthy as most small countries in the world in terms of cash holdings. And the tribe could do a lot with it: Pay off every debt. Begin a new era in the history of their sovereign nation with meaningful, purposeful industries created at home by their own people in the interests of their own people. They stood silently for a few moments, looking up at the tree. Broken Branch broke the silence.

“My own blood is buried in the soil here. That fall.. When I die, I will be buried here. My father’s progenitors fought here valiantly, spilling their blood to protect our people. Women birthed generations here, and toiled in the fields. We are part of the soil, this earth, this place. The hawk flying above us is related to the hawk I saved so ‘foolishly’ as a child. In addition, my parents buried their great-great-great grandparents here after returning them from distant soil to this soil. I belong here. I am here. My people are here. This is our place... In the end.”

They both continued to look up in silence for a few moments, while Broken Branch’s words sunk in. Then he turned to Celine, and said, “But I will take the offer to the chief, and our council. And we will consider it. It is very generous. And it comes from a friend. I’m not so sure how far out on a limb I can go for you, or even if I think doing such a thing is a good idea. I am, of course, actually conflicted to some degree, given what is at stake.”

Celine said thoughtfully, in response to him, “With all due respect, Broken Branch, you seem to me to be stuck in the past. You aren’t able to see the possibilities, yet. You stake a position and hold it. There is no fluidity. I am not judging you. Just saying what I see and sense. And I know what I am, a capitalist who sees \$19 Trillion lying on the table. But I don’t need more money. This is bigger than us. This is Mars. Can you imagine your nation being responsible for creating the next safest, most prosperous, and beautiful colony in human history?”

Broken Branch said, “Well, you know we already did that, and it was stolen from us. But it is true that I create colonizing structures around my life, embattling colonizing structures that have an impact on me and our people, in a never ending binary regression that I can’t solve. And you want to blatantly, unashamedly offer the prospect of monetary wealth to use what lies

beneath us to build our next 'prison,' the next 'temple,' the next 'fort'? Who will suffer from it? What lives will be sacrificed? Who will go unnoticed, erased? Is that all we are, builders of settlements, forts, colonizing everything, even in new worlds? What am I supposed to say to that? That we will keep talking?"

"But more. We don't even really know each other, what's behind the fort walls. Can we take some time to do that, no matter what? Yes?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

They walked together to Celine's vintage Tesla, which ran on gasoline, and that she actually drove on the old broken backroads that had been saved in this region. As he walked back to the center from the parking lot after sending Celine off, passing the elm as he always did, Broken Branch spotted a familiar-looking, dull sphere lying on the ground in a grassy heap. He leaned over when he got right up to it and reached down to pick up a lone, unbroken hawk's egg. He held it in his hand and looked up at the beautiful, branching elm only sporadically blocking the midday sunshine. Glorious beauty.

Analytic/Synthetic Moments of Curriculum and Pedagogy Related to This Allegory

The allegory of Broken Branch is meant to spur a response, deeper thought, and to help us (me) think and act more deeply with regard to what is at stake in the search for solidarity in the presence of radical and rampant colonization. This concluding section addresses the regressive and progressive bits shared here, my memory associated with teaching a native poem, and a future based allegory meant to help push forward questions around the pursuit of solidarity in curriculum and pedagogy. I use the progressive allegory (I'm almost always stuck in

the regressive past, so this is new ground for me) as a springboard for commentary regarding the curricular and pedagogical implications of my educational journey.

First, I'd like to add that there is no doubt in my mind and experience that many teachers and students from the dominant majority don't care at all about diversity, difference, injustice, equality, equity, and/or solidarity. Many believe that the law is settled in favor of opportunity and equality, and that it is up to the individual to exercise the rights we have. Whatever happens to a person is his or her fault, or a credit to his or her ingenuity. So they believe, and so they say... The students in my early English class 30 years ago believed this, were raised this way, and no doubt still hold to longstanding values and norms that are embedded in their culture, their lives. Maybe. They probably had sporadic, temporary encounters with teachers and materials that pushed them beyond their comfort level and power center on issues they never thought were "in play." Do we stop trying because the attempts don't "work"? How do we even know? When will any form of deep understanding manifest in Celine? Has it? Can it?

The thing is that we don't really know when or how our teaching (or our learning!) will take effect. It appears in my career and in our lives together in education, over and over again: that is, a person (or a group) is moved to act *ex post facto*, and sometimes even after they resist or even reject the subject matter, the ideas in play in the lesson, or module, or unit, or reading, or project at the time it was consumed. I have heard stories of ideas nagging and pushing and pulling a person for decades before learning can materialize in the kind of thinking that leads to action meant for the process of working through solidarity. I don't know, since the story is a fiction, but maybe Celine and Cliff have a chance at a future together, a sense of solidarity, a

new way forward that is defensible, ethical, and socially just. That story remains to be written, by us. Mark my words, and this isn't a joke: Human beings will colonize Mars.

The question is what do we do with the continuously colonizing structures of our lives, embedded in ways of life and values and beliefs and institutional structures that both manifest them and continue to propagate them? (that is, for instance, that only those with power can and build and protect forts of place and other sorts of structural dominance, and whether or not that is a good thing politically, economically, religiously, socially, ethically, or existentially) My answer is to encourage those of us who can and who will to curricularize and exercise pedagogies that push toward solidarity, working through colonizing structures that bind and erase. We can build relationships with students that allow us to push them and ourselves to read and write in ways that take on significance with them, challenge them, and help them create new ways forward in the world as we know it or want to know it, especially in ways that resist colonization.

Second, I purposefully attempted to focus on images of beauty and possibility in the wake of violence and destruction in this paper. All the while, in the background, violence looms here, as it does in each of our lives to some degree, no doubt for some more than others because of the colonization they experience in the world. Death and physical injury lie just around the corner, as Broken Branch knows so well. People fall, and get hurt. Nations of people are decimated, nearly annihilated from the face of the earth through the violence committed against them by those in power. We constantly push the boundaries with nature, figuring out ways to exploit our resources for gain. At what cost?

But inside the story lies the great power of relationships, and commitments, and a sense of working through things because we care. Perhaps here lies the elusive but meaningful process/end of creative solidarity, that is in making choices simply to pursue, through conflict, relations, and commitments, and future solutions that have meaning. These are things and processes and destinations of beauty. At least they are to me. I don't think that I or we should be Pollyannish – certainly irrepressible optimism masks our colonizing pasts and presents (presence?). But to be pessimistic is also to be chained. I choose to be a work in progress, like the elm, the hawk's egg, the earth's crust, a journey to Mars, the lives and times of my own Cliffs and Celines... You may say that this is a luxury I have because of my positionality, and I agree, since there is so much unsurfaced and uncritiqued violence out there, and in here. But I felt like I had to say it.

Last, I am hoping for the next wave of great talent in curriculum studies to figure out how to capture (not essentialize) our complex longings in the areas that Rubén and Eve Tuck so brilliantly outline in their scholarship, and that I only tangentially illuminate with my story and journey here. What I know is that for the work to be consumed, on a greater level than the ones that we incubate in our journals and conferences, great talent and connective approaches must be developed in future communications, through the arts no doubt, to capture our hearts and minds and ways that spur us to action. Advanced study, new ideas, the future's hopes and fears as embodied in our future presents, has to work to shift our beliefs and actions, in education and across society. Narratives speak to us, and move us. There is so much at stake that art can impact. Will you be a part of this journey? How will you contribute? How will you shape it, and to what ends?

References

- Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2012). Decolonization and the pedagogy of solidarity. *Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), pp. 41-67.
- Hogan, L. (2014). Trail of tears: Our removal. In *Dark: Sweet*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press.
- Pinar, W. (1975). The method of *currere*. In Pinar's *Autobiography, politics and sexuality: Essays in curriculum theory, 1972-1992* (pp. 19-27). New York: Peter Lang.
- Pinar, W. (2012). *What is curriculum theory? (2nd edition)* New York: Routledge.
- Poetter, T.S., & Googins, J. (Eds.). (2015). *Was someone mean to you today? The impact of standardization, corporatization, and high stakes testing on students, teachers, communities, schools, and democracy*. Cincinnati, OH: Van Griner Publishing.
- Sherman, A. (1993). *Old Shirts & New Skins*. Los Angeles, CA (UCLA): American Indian Studies.
- Tuck, E., & Gaztambide-Fernández, R. (2013). Curriculum, replacement, and settler futurity. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 29*(1), pp. 72-89.