

The Emotional Labour of Indigenous Post-Secondary Students:

A Trauma-Informed Autoethnography

By

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Naomi B". The signature is written in a light grey or blue ink and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Signature of Author

Dedication

To [my] Nokum. My loudest and proudest supporter, *kisâkihiti*

To Margaret, who believed in me when I needed it most

To Kathleen and Nicole, for bringing me love, joy, and laughter

And to all the emerging Indigenous scholars:

May we one day tear down these colonial institutions

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Abstract

Indigenous students in post-secondary institutions often become labelled 'Native Informants' -- coerced into offering their lived experience(s) and/or knowledges of Indigenous worldview(s), oppression, and culture to benefit the learning outcomes of settler students and professors., Indigenous students are also put in positions where they feel pressured to respond to in-class racism and microaggressions. Responding to racism and being labeled a 'Native Informant' in classrooms settings prevent autonomous learning by demanding the emotional labour of Indigenous student, which may also reinscribe colonial traumas. Similarly, Indigenous students may become retraumatized through course content that triggers embodied intergenerational and/or lifetime trauma(s). To reduce Indigenous emotional labour and (re)traumatization, this autoethnographic thesis posits that educators must employ trauma-informed pedagogies and restructure the social hierarchies within post-secondary institutions.

Glossary

Affirmative action: “[A] program in which people who control access to important social resources offer preferential access to those resources for particular groups they think need special treatment” (Schuck, 2002, p.5).

Blanket exercise: “[A] full participation, feet-on, story activity that teaches the loss of First Nations lands through a series of historical events and treaties. The activity was developed by Kairos Canada...” (Baldasaro, Maldonado, & Baltes, 2014, p. 222)

Colonial Mentality: “[D]enigration of self and culture, and acceptance and tolerance of historical and contemporary oppression” (Paradies, 2016, p.88)

Chrononormativity: “[T]he interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life”. (Freedman, 2010 P. xxii)

Cultural Indian: An ‘authentic’ Indigenous person, who is seen as fulfilling “the racialized expectations of non-[Indigenous] students and professors as being cultural and spiritual beings” (Cote-Meek, 2014). Generally, a cultural Indian practices their culture and can speak their language [fluently].

Difficult knowledge: Contrary to ‘lovely knowledge’, which is information that reinforces one’s own knowledges, beliefs, and identity. Difficult knowledge disrupts one’s understanding(s) of the world, and may “potentially lead[] us to re-conceive our relationships with those traditionally

defined as “other”. Acknowledging that as north Americans we continue to benefit from the colonial projects that created our nations is one kind of difficult knowledge.” (Patterson & Milton, 2011, p.8)

Education-industrial complex: “...ideological, technophile, and for-profit entities that seek to promote their beliefs, ideas, and products, and services in furtherance of their own goals and objectives. This complex is fueled by significant resources and advocacy provided by companies, foundations, and the media that want to shape American education policy to conform to their own ideals and that also stand to profit significantly from its development. (Picciano & Spring, 2013, p. 2)

Gaslit[ing]: A term taken from George Cukor’s 1944 film *Gaslight*, in which a husband isolates his wife and makes her believe she is insane, therefore making her willing to accept the husband’s reality. (Sweet, 2019). “Today, gaslighting is an increasingly ubiquitous term used to describe the mind-manipulating strategies of abusive people, in both politics and interpersonal relationships” (Ibid, p. 851) .

Heteropatriarchy: “the social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent” (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013)

Imposter syndrome: “ a psychological term that refers to a pattern of behavior wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud.” (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019, p. 403)

Microaggressions: brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of colour” (Sue et al., 2007b)

Native Informant: An Indigenous person (specifically a student in this context) who is tokenized by peers and expected to provide pan-Indigenous knowledge and insights for the educational and social benefit of others.

NDN: (pronounced 'n-dee-n) is used by Indigenous people of Turtle Island to reclaim and subvert the word “Indian,” forced upon Indigenous Nations after contact.

Pan-NDN / pan-Indigenous: The [colonial] notion that simplifies and amalgamates the numerous Indigenous Nations, cultures, and experiences. Nation specificity is replaced by pan-Indigeneity.

Settler-colonialism: “an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of indigenous peoples and cultures. Essentially hegemonic in scope, settler colonialism normalizes the continuous settler occupation, exploiting lands and resources to which indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships. Settler colonialism includes interlocking forms of oppression, including racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism”. (Literary and Critical Theory, n.d.)

Tokenize: To include a racialized or minoritized individual for the sake of appearing ‘diverse’. Generally, a tokenized individual is asked to speak on the behalf of the community they ‘represent’ in the eyes/minds of onlookers.

The Academy: Post-secondary institutions. The physical and metaphysical structure of academia.

White Fragility: White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar (Diangelo, 2018, p. 57)

Iskwew: [Cree] woman

Intergenerational Trauma: “describes historical trauma in which the collective emotional and psychological injury experienced by a group of people is subjectively remembered and experienced by both individuals and the community of later generations.” (Fernando & Bennett, 2019, p.49)

Vicarious Trauma: a psychotherapeutic concept in which trauma is passed from a traumatized person to witness, family member, or loved one. (Meek, 2016)

Tansi. Naomi Bird Nitsiyikason

My Name is Naomi Bird

Niya Ochi Montreal Lake nee Saskatoon

*I'm from the Montreal Lake Cree Nation,
raised in Saskatoon*

Hunger [introduction]

~ môskowâhkatisow ~

We're in the lull between the first and second wave of the pandemic. I'm sitting in a café, trying for third time to write my thesis. I've been struggling to find the words to describe how Indigenous students are hurt in academia, not only by the education-industrial complex but also by our own peers and professors. I feel like I must not get this wrong. This analysis from a 22-year-old Cree Iskew must be perfect. This goes beyond my own perfectionism.

As an Indigenous student, I feel an immense privilege to have made it to my fourth year of an undergraduate degree. I have a treaty right to education; however, there is a cap on Indigenous educational funding, and not all Indigenous folks can access higher learning. In the beginning of my undergrad, I kept my band funding a secret to avoid supporting the common stereotype that "all Indigenous students get a free education". As there were few Indigenous students at Dalhousie, I knew my participation would be heavily scrutinized.

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We cannot simply be students. Our professors and peers deny us the opportunity to navigate the Academy as whole individuals. We are stripped down to our Indigeneity— left bare

for all to examine and learn from. This problem is described by Marcelle Marie Gareau in an article for *American Indian Quarterly* where she writes:

We need to be able to attend universities as students, not as “local informant” in which we are exploited for information or used as a means of entry into the communities to which we belong (Gareau, 2003, p. 196-197).

We are the token Indians. The ‘Native informants.’ An Indigenous friend who got into a prestigious law school wasn’t a smart, hard-working student; they were deemed a case of “affirmative action”. In a third-year course on ‘Indigenous peoples’ [taught by a settler], Native students were asked to self-identify on the first day of class. This demand made us Indigenous first, student second, while also putting us at risk of racially motivated interpersonal violence. We’re not autonomous individuals; we represent ‘Indigeneity’ in the Academy.

I am a tokenized NDN in my academic program(s), which creates a pressure for my thesis to serve as the ‘Indigenous take,’ for many of my professors— at least until another candidate enters [survives] the program. I hope this thesis will communicate to educators and administrators how traumatic and exhausting it is to be Indigenous in the Academy. However, this work is not primarily intended for the settler-professor gaze. As other Indigenous researchers have noted (Johnson, 2016; Kovach, 2010), we do not have the luxury to undertake research that does not serve our communities. To me, my community is the next generation of Indigenous students. I write this thesis in the hope that future Indigenous students will not feel as alone as I did.

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Being an Indigenous student in a postsecondary institution often requires emotional labour. Emotional labour was first defined by Hochschild in 1983 to describe the regulation of

one's emotional expressions as an added component of ones' job, which was observed primarily in female-dominated occupations (Hochschild, 1983). The term has since been applied to the experiences of people of colour (POC) in white institutional spaces, who must "negotiate ways to protect their humanity in the face of racism, while at the same time negotiating their emotions to prevent themselves from being further marginalized or excluded from the institution" (Evans & Moore, p. 449).

Emotional labour is demanded of the Indigenous students who become labelled as "Indigenous informants" and are subsequently expected to share their lived experience(s) in class(es), in order to facilitate the learning experience(s) of professors and classmates. Certain circumstances may also require Indigenous students to correct and challenge colonial frameworks and histories presented in class lectures and discussions, or in course assignments and readings. Indigenous students who chose (or feel forced) to undertake these education interventions are required to so in ways that are non-threatening to peers and professors. Indigenous students *must* regulate emotional responses when responding to racism and micro-aggressions in the Academy, or risk further marginalization. Thus, emotional labour in this context refers not only to the palatability of critiques and knowledge(s) offered by Indigenous students, but the expectation that we willingly and freely offer our 'services' of Indigenous knowledge dissemination to our professors and peers.

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While pursuing a university degree often requires emotional growth, the expectations placed on Indigenous students may be a source of colonial trauma, and/or may re-inscribe historical colonial traumas (including intergenerational trauma). This burden often goes unacknowledged by professors, classmates, and broader university systems. Indigenous students

may enter academia with embodied trauma(s), stemming from historical, intergenerational, and/or lifetime trauma events. These embodied traumas may be triggered by class content, discussions, assignments, and/or incidents that occur within the institution. To mediate this harm, professors must employ a trauma-informed pedagogy, necessitating improved understanding(s) of contemporary and historic Indigenous issues, oppressions, and resiliency. In addition to critiquing the coerced emotional labour of Indigenous students, this autoethnographic thesis will seek to describe how Indigenous students are (re)traumatized in the academy and offer suggestions for how educators may reduce these harms.

### ***Chapter (re)naming***

Building on the work of Shawn Wilson, who considers research to be ceremony (2006), my autoethnography chapters are named to honour Indigenous systems of harvesting, instead of extractivist Western logics of ‘collecting and finding’ (Johnson, 2017). My autoethnography also adopts a cyclical method of reflection; by this I mean that the ordering of my thesis chapters does not necessarily correspond to my learning process, nor do I consider my research to be complete by publishing this work; I am always learning and evolving. Parts of my literature review and discussion sections were informed by my own reflections prior to engaging in any external research. Additional reflections and conclusions emerged during my research, as I linked theory with previous or ongoing experiences within academia.

I begin my thesis with *hunger*, a chapter that describes being starved of Indigenous culture in colonial academia and expresses my yearning to be properly nourished. I then move to a *tobacco offering*, which is my ‘methods’ section, before delving into my literature review, which has been renamed ‘*berry picking*’. This restructuring of my thesis was deliberate and was

an attempt to undertake my research ‘in a good way’ (Kovach, 2010). In an Indigenous worldview, it is improper to ask for knowledge from an Elder or knowledge keeper (or to pick berries) without first offering tobacco and/or giving thanks. We must ensure there is balance, that an individual does not continually take without giving back. To maintain energetic/spiritual balance(s) within my work, I must ensure that prior to ‘harvesting’ information for my research project, I give thanks for those who came before me, introduce myself, and state my intentions.

I then move to *berry picking*—outlining the sources and scholars that discuss or allude to the issues I am seeking to address, critique, and/or ‘solve’. *Berry picking* feels never-ending and will continue annually if performed in a sustainable way: this refers both to the berry plant and harvester; research and researcher. The ‘literature review’ already feels dated and insufficient, as if I have barely scratched the surface. There are new berry patches sprouting as we eat the preserves of a summer past. I am always yearning to know more—to delve further into theory. I do not want to leave any voice(s) out.

Finally, I move to *feasting*, a process of celebrating and sharing with my NDN kin the sustenance I found. I cannot eat alone, nor do I want to. This research/harvest is not about me, but is rather an attempt to contribute to my Nation. I wish to provide for the next generation of Indigenous scholars in a manner similar to the authors I have cited; I would hope my NDN peers might read my words and feel less alone. I hope non-Indigenous kin read this and come to understand the need for this feast. Eat! Grow! Learn!

## Tobacco Offering [Research Methods]

~ *Kîskisamawêw* ~

This thesis is written through an autoethnographic method. I began this work knowing I was being traumatized by academia, forced to provide emotional labour, and I theorized that there were pedagogical interventions that might reduce the emotional pain(s) experienced by Indigenous students in academia. There were few articles specifically about ‘trauma-informed pedagogy’ (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018; Gutierrez & Gutierrez 2019, Harrison, Burke, & Clarke, 2020;), but many sources alluded to this in different terms, as this specific wording was my own way of contextualizing the problems I faced in academia.

I chose the method of autoethnography to respond to Castellano’s quote from an Elder—that “if [Indigenous people] have been researched to death, maybe it’s time we research ourselves back to life” (2014). Locating myself within my writing is not indulgent, but rather a “methodological necessity of tribal epistemology” (Kovach, 2010, p. 84.). Multiple scholars stress the importance of positionality in Indigenous research methodologies—of locating and honouring the personal amongst collective experiences (Kovach, 2010; McIvor, 2010; Wilson, 2006). Through storytelling and reflection, I hope to uncover new knowledge (McIvor, 2010), and by placing myself within the narrative, I clearly state my research intentions and ensure I am not misrepresenting or generalizing others while attempting to find commonalities with other Indigenous students. In an interview in Margaret Kovach’s book *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, curriculum developer Michael Hart states:

*“I am Indigenous, I speak English, and that’s where I come from. I am trying to understand that perspective because it reflects my reality. My mother was fluent in Cree. I listened to her growing up, but when she spoke to us she spoke English. My mom said*

*we didn't want to learn, so there is that piece. It doesn't mean that I am not Cree, but I have a different understanding than a Cree speaker. **The journey for the fluent Cree speaker ... isn't the same journey that you or I would take. The journey you and I take wouldn't necessarily be the same, but they are all a part of being Cree. If we deny that, we deny ourselves, and my understanding about our people is that we don't do that. We are inclusive, we bring people in.***" (2010, p.69-70) [Bold emphasis mine]

English is my first language, and I know only a limited number of words and phrases in Nehiyawewin. Thus, while my critiques of academia are inherently Cree and Two-Spirited, they are not fully rooted within a Nehiyaw worldview, which is informed by our language.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

My work was exploratory, I looked up any article blog post or book that I could find by Native scholars about (re)traumatization, emotional labour, racism, and microaggressions. I aimed to uplift marginalized voices; specifically, Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples and their work(s). I searched Dalhousie's online library, Google Scholar and Google for academic sources. I ordered and borrowed a few books about Indigenous education to supplement the knowledge I found in scholarly articles. After weeks of intensive research, I began to type in 'Nehiyaw' and other Cree words into search engines to find Nation-specific materials by Nehiyaw scholars. I highly recommend this, as I was able to filter articles about Indigenous education written by (and for) settler academics. I also looked to Twitter, Instagram and other social media sites for 'informal' knowledge, employing 'social media as method,' a practice of renowned Indigenous scholar Kim Tallbear. Due to our historic and present-day exclusion from academic space, there is a lack of Indigenous scholars with PhDs. The fact that I

can find multiple memes yet few academic papers about our emotional labour and (re)traumatization in academia, demonstrates the need to write this into being.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

As I mentioned earlier, this thesis serves as an educational reference for educators but is primarily for the new generation of Indigenous students. This adheres to pan-Indigenous research ethics that stress the need for research to give back, build capacity, or otherwise benefit the community (Kovach, 2010). I consider the next generation(s) of Indigenous students as my community. This thesis may not be particularly ‘ground-breaking’ information for upper-year Indigenous students; I am simply ‘translating’ (Blackstock, 2009) knowledge many Indigenous students hold, into a language [format] deemed appropriate by the Academy.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

It took me years of experiential learning, theorizing, and research to understand the processes of (re)traumatization and coerced emotional labour in academia. I began to think I was making up the oppression(s) that surrounded me. I felt racially gaslit because the racism and microaggressions that surrounded me went unnoticed by my settler peers and professors. Were it not for a few stellar Indigenous scholars uplifting me, telling me my critiques and observations were valid, I might have left academia.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

This autoethnography had five goals:

1. To acknowledge and detail the emotional labour required of Indigenous students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University;
2. To understand how emotional burdens emerge within and support colonial educational frameworks;

3. To understand the impact of emotional labour on the learning process, retention, educational achievement, and overall wellbeing of Indigenous students;
4. To build solidarity among Indigenous students pursuing a degree within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University;
5. To inform changes to policy and practice at Dalhousie University in order to improve the postsecondary experience of Indigenous students.

From the goals above I identified four research questions for Dalhousie University's research ethics review:

1. What emotional labour is required of Indigenous students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University?
2. How do the emotional burdens described by Indigenous students support colonial educational frameworks?
3. What impact does emotional labour have on the learning process, retention, educational achievement, and overall wellbeing of Indigenous students?
4. What does trauma-informed anti-racist, anti-colonial education practice look like?

### ***Ethics Board***

This research was approved by the Dalhousie University ethics board (REB # 2019-5014). The board asked that I anonymize and/or use pseudonyms for those I speak of in this thesis. I feel uncomfortable about this, not because I need to name my oppressors, but because I am unable to credit the individuals who positively influenced my learning journey, and whose invaluable insights are now enmeshed within my work. There are community members, Elders, professors, and students who made this thesis possible and cannot be properly credited, and for

this I am sorry. *I hope you know who you are. Kinanaskomitin [thank-you]*. Nehiyaw scholar Margaret Kovach describes this situation well:

*[C]onfidentiality can be interpreted differently in Western and Indigenous contexts. In some instances, university ethics boards allow research participants to have the choice to remain anonymous. The choice however, does not exist for everyone... Why does this matter? **It matters because our stories are our truth and knowledge.** It is about standing behind one's words and recognizing collective protocol, that one is accountable for one's words. It is difficult to honour this cultural tradition if it is disallowed (2010, p. 138).*

I have been forced to omit highly pertinent stories of Indigenous peers dealing with racism and trauma in academia, yet I am able to cite similar accounts from established scholars. The confidentiality agreement I am bound to thus marginalizes emerging Indigenous scholars in order to safeguard the identities of those I critique in this work (Tri-Council, 2018). As the primary participant in this research project, I was never given the same protection(s) offered to my oppressors.

### ***The ethics of academia***

I do not believe colonial institutions are the sole arbiters for the validation of Indigenous learning and knowledge dissemination. In 'Land as Pedagogy', Leanne Simpson asserts that our knowledge come from the land, and that our knowledge systems are contextually based in our Nations (2014). Simpson urges students engaged in 'radical resistance' to avoid colonial institutions, and learn on the land instead, with the guidance of local knowledge keepers and Elders. I agree with Simpson; however, the both of us needed to navigate academia to realize it was not the 'new buffalo' as promised by certain [Indigenous] leaders and scholars (Stonechild,

2006). The settler gaze and our own internalized colonial mentalities trick us into thinking in hierarchical settler terms, where the colonial institution is framed as superior to our traditional ways of teaching and learning. Harris summarizes this discussion:

*The Western educational system is so effective in perpetuating the belief that Western ways of knowing are universal that even many non-Western people come to believe that learning the most intimate secrets of Western society through the medium of the West's ultimate knowledge-production institution will allow them to participate as equal members of Western society.*

I entered academia young and naïve, with internalized shame and confusion regarding my Indigenous identity. I didn't know that learning outside of a Western institution was a serious possibility. I didn't know that being an NDN shaped my entire existence. I didn't yearn to learn my language in the way I do now. I was indoctrinated by Western learning systems.

Indigenous students will continue to access academia/colonial institutions for a variety of reasons, including (but not limited to): being scooped by colonial 'care' systems and coming 'in' to one's identity/ies while in post-secondary; wanting to 'Indigenize academia; wanting an education to help one's communities; or not being able to access knowledge keepers and land-based education. Whatever the reason for attendance, and whether we agree with the ethics of Indigenous participation in colonial systems or not, Indigenous students should have equitable access to and inclusion within these spaces.

I do not believe the masters tools will dismantle the masters house (Lorde, 1984) but somehow, I ended up in the house and I'd like to stay until *I chose* to leave. I've been told I'm good at using the masters' tools, so I'd like to carve out space for my NDN kin with my words. In the Cree worldview we have an ethic of non-interference—which based on my understanding,

means that we can share stories related to a certain topic, but we do not direct, alter, or contest the decision[s] of another person; we do not purposefully interfere with their personal [learning] journeys. I'm proud of those who never enter colonial institutions and of those who enter and stay for a while/forever. We are all on different learning journey's and deserve the same chances at success and the inclusion granted to settler and/or otherwise privileged students.

### ***Transferability***

A lot of my insights, especially in the berry picking and feasting sections, are not exclusive to Indigenous students. The conditional hospitality of academia, wherein Indigenous students are not offered the same inclusion within the academy as settler peers, would certainly correspond to the experience(s) of BIPOC and international students. When I wrote about collective trauma and daily microaggressions, I found it difficult not to add in mention(s) of how Black students may be dealing with similar situations. I think my research and findings may be applicable to other racialized and minoritized students, but given my own positioning, I refrained from speaking and/or speculating on the experiences of others. Moreover, as a category, 'Indigenous students' does not adequately speak to experience(s) of disabled, neurodivergent, and/or Black Indigenous students.

### ***How did I get here?***

I was raised in a racist urban context. By grade two I knew it wasn't safe to wearing beaded jewelry or other items that would hint at me being NDN. By middle school I was scared of what the police might do to me if they realized I was an NDN. In Cree culture it is rude to look someone in the eyes, and since I child I've avoided the gaze of others, including the settler

and male gaze. This refusal led me to believe I moved through the world invisible. I thought I was white passing; I now realize a better classification would be racially ambiguous, or simply Cree for *those who know*.

I hid my Indigeneity by never embracing it or discussing it with settler peers. In fact, I thought my life was fairly un-Indigenous, that not claiming an identity lessened its impact on my lived experience. I had not yet linked the mental illnesses, substance abuse, and family dysfunction I witnessed or experienced to ongoing colonization. The closest understanding I had to intergenerational trauma was that members of my family were alcoholics, and therefore I had a predisposition to drinking. Thinking I could escape intergenerational trauma by not drinking, I managed pain and the disorder of my life through self-harm, an eating disorder, and later, cannabis. Each coping mechanism numbed the pain or created pain where there had been an emptiness I could not describe. I now take anti-depressants; I'm unsure how long my depression went undiagnosed.

In elementary school we learned about residential schools every year, causing students to become annoyed with the subject. NDNs were a module students were tired of learning about. I wonder if this type of inclusion was worse than not being included at all. Did my peers become desensitized from this education? When I entered high school and witnessed anti-Indigenous sentiment and stereotypes, I knew they were wrong, enmeshed in a history of oppression, but I could not draw upon this history. I did not know how to respond to students who asked questions like: 'why don't NDNs pay taxes'.

Starting in elementary school, I unknowingly ignored my familial trauma by overworking and achieving high grades, so I had no time to experience my emotions. In high school I went to class with tingling wrists and a tough exterior. I would cry in the bathroom then emerge as if

nothing had happened. I took pride in this façade. I remember evenings on the brink of tears, telling myself I could either be upset or finish my homework.

I cannot do this anymore. It feels like failure—to be less productive, less powerful, less in control. I am looking for balance, for a way to feel authentic without slumping into bed forevermore. I remember an Indigenous woman telling me that you get used to the pain, the racism, the microaggressions. That these words and actions do not take hold, consume you. I haven't gotten there yet.

By overworking my mind, I was able to succeed in elementary and high school, and I assumed higher learning was the only place for me to use my gifts. I learned how to read professors and excelled in their classes. My unravelling began when I started to question the academy, rather than automatically moulding my body and mind to fit it. In my first year, I questioned certain pedagogical techniques, but generally navigated the academy with ease. I began to hear land acknowledgements at extra-curricular events or society meetings, and I realized that it was safe, acceptable even, to be Indigenous. I began to 'come in' to my Indigeneity (Wilson, 2008). In my second year I started taking Indigenous studies classes, and [un]learning history. I was shedding my 'colonial mentality' (Cote-Meeks, 2014).

### ***Initial perceptions of (re)traumatization***

I began conceptualizing post-secondary Indigenous (re)traumatization in the summer of my third year. I was in Montreal for a week and had booked a tattoo appointment with a local artist. The tattoo was on my inner thigh, requiring me to sit and twist my leg in an awkward position for a couple hours as the artist used a small needle and many fine lines to add a bird's nest to my collection of tattoos. I left the studio ecstatic about my new piece yet in a fair amount

of pain. I wanted to rock climb at a nearby gym before heading home, telling myself not to expect to climb at my usual level.

My eyes widened and I stopped in my tracks, stunned by my inner monologue. I knew physical pain diminished my physical performance(s), but I had never extended this thinking to the emotional pain and trauma I experienced in academia. I remembered crying while writing a short reflection paper on residential schools, pushing my intergenerational trauma down so I could get a good mark. I thought about a Kairos blanket exercise for faculty and students within my department, and about my professors' eyes on my Indigenous friend and I, consuming our pain as a learning experience. Our blood memories had us re-experiencing settler-colonialism while others looked on us with pity, curiosity, or enlightenment. My friend and I clung to each other for support, yet were pulled apart in a cruel irony, when I was designated a child who went to residential school. I thought about my grandpa and wanted to run away as he had done.

As I reminisced on negative academic experiences, I considered other aspects of academia that harm Indigenous students, and how we are forced to navigate spaces, syllabi, and learning systems that are not designed for us, actively marginalize our voices, and re-inscribe our trauma.

### ***Broadening the scope of trauma***

For a while, I applied Indigenous (re)traumatization only to traumas Indigenous students (re)experience in the academy, including professors who fail to take our lived experiences seriously, lectures void of Indigenous-specific 'trigger warnings', and classes that lack Indigenous content or misrepresent our realities. Indigenous students face disproportionate levels of lifetime traumas including but not limited to: societal and individual racism; adverse and/or

abusive childhood experiences; sexual assault; and interpersonal violence (Gaywish& Murdoch, 2018).

*~Trigger warning: discussion of sexual assault~*

In Winnipeg later that summer, I was researching for a chapter on Two-Spirit mental health. I had been considering identifying with this term for a couple months but needed more time to process my feelings; the material I was reading proved exceptionally useful in my journey of ‘coming in’ (Wilson, 1996) to my own Two-Spiritness. I was looking for both qualitative and quantitative data, however my research involved a lot of statistics surrounding substance abuse, self-harm and/or suicidality, intergenerational traumas impacting childhood experience(s), sexual assault, PTSD, depression, and anxiety. As I read articles about trauma and symptoms of PTSD impacting Two-Spirit people, I realized I had been dealing with PTSD symptoms for several months following an acute trauma. I had been sexually assaulted that January, days after my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

I had known since I was in elementary school that one in five women would be sexually assaulted in her lifetime (I believe the numbers are now one in three<sup>1</sup>) so this was not exceeding surprising to me. My trauma response was neither fight nor flight, which led me to I underplay my trauma for months. I placed a blame on myself, which only resolved once I learned that ‘freezing’ was indeed a trauma response, and extremely valid given the dangerous situation I was

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<sup>1</sup> Breiding, M. J. (2014). Prevalence and characteristics of sexual violence, stalking, and intimate partner violence victimization—National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, United States, 2011. *Morbidity and mortality weekly report. Surveillance summaries* (Washington, DC: 2002), 63(8), 1.

in; I didn't want to make things worse. Following the incident, I pushed the memories down as best I could, and buried myself in my studies, achieving my highest term GPA.

My summer research was both uplifting and devastating. As I came-in to being Two-Spirit, I began to feel as if my rape was completely inevitable. I had lived my life knowing the sexual assault statistics of white women, and now I was being confronted with the horrifying reality that Two-Spirit femmes are subject to even high rates of sexual assault given our multiple interlocking oppressions. Moreover, I realized the data I was compiling didn't include rates of reoccurrence. Would it happen again? Multiple times?

Similarly, I realized that a lot of the challenges I encountered as a youth and young adult were specifically addressed in articles about Two-Spirit mental health. Seemingly isolated experiences merged. In my mind I watched my younger self deal with a broken family, self-harm, depression<sup>2</sup>, and an eating disorder, but I no longer felt proud for overcoming or actively working through these challenges. Just like my rape, these experiences felt inevitable, and instead of honouring my resilience, I narrowed in on the pain.

I came to realize that it was insufficient to analyse Indigenous (re)traumatization within the strict confines of violence emerging *from* the classroom. We bring embodied trauma *into* these spaces. My trauma response was only favoured by the academy because I was able to keep producing work. Had I wanted to heal, or been unable to suppress the majority of my emotions during the school semester, how could I have asked for accommodations when I could barely speak about the experience? Did my professors notice my PTSD symptoms or mistake them for occasional inattentiveness in class, along with a few unexplained absences? I was lucky my abuser wasn't in my classes and that the Academy felt *relatively* safe to enter and navigate.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, I didn't know I was actively depressed, but knew I had been at the past.

There are people I knew who have been forced to attend the same class as their abusers. *I would have left.*

Just as we cannot operate as singular aspects of our intersecting identities, we cannot leave our lifetime trauma experiences at the doors of our classrooms. Our embodied traumas sit with us, and may be activated by curriculum, class discussions, and/or events within the institution and in larger society.

## Berry Picking [literature review]

~ *mawisowin* ~

This thesis defines Indigenous student trauma as composed of three interlocking forms of (re)traumatization: 1) discrete occurrences of microaggressions and/or racism in classroom settings along with racism embedded in curriculum; 2) lifetime trauma events occurring prior to, or during an Indigenous student's university career; 3) and embodied responses to historical and ongoing violence against Indigenous Nations/communities/kin. Though I separate racism and trauma into discrete sections, racism lends to, and should be considered a form of trauma. Certain scholars posit that daily, repetitive microaggressions, including intimidation, exclusion, ridicule, and devaluation are 'subthreshold traumatic stressors'; combined these stressors are characterised as insidious trauma (Brown, 2003, p. 446).

### *Conditional Hospitality*

In her essay, 'On Being Included: diversity and Inclusion in Institutional life', Sarah Ahmed discusses the concept of 'conditional hospitality' in university contexts, where "people of colour are welcomed on condition that they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by 'being' diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity" (2012, p. 43). In academic spaces, Indigenous students are habitually denied the experience of being students in the classroom, forced to be(come) learning subjects for other students. In *Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma, and Resistance in Post-Secondary Education*, Shelia Cote-Meek notes how Indigenous students and faculty are expected by peers and professors to perform as 'Native informants', 'Native experts' and/or 'the cultural Indian';

Indigenous learners are given these roles by being put in positions where “they are expected to respond to everything related to Aboriginal peoples, despite the fact that they are learners in the classroom” (p. 142, 2014). The lived experiences, culture, and spirituality of Indigenous students become an exploitable resource for settler students and professors alike. This claim is echoed in the 2018 INDSPIRE report, derived from surveys sent to 2000 NDN students who won bursaries and scholarships from the organization. Participants described being one of few Indigenous students on campus or in their departments, tasked with “representing ALL Indigenous peoples (INDSPIRE p. 10)”; students also described feeling as if “post-secondary settings *expected* them to bear some of the responsibility for transforming the [post-secondary] system”, and that it was up to them to be personally involved in the implementation of TRC Calls to Action within academia (Ibid, p. 10). A few students in the survey reported feeling as if they could not opt out of this process of decolonization. Multiple respondents reported feeling that self-identifying as Indigenous put them in the uncomfortable position of having to “speak to all things Indigenous” (Ibid, p. 17).

*“I feel that overall, I was treated like all other students, unless it was revealed during class discussions that I am Indigenous. Then professors often did not handle this well during discussions of Indigenous content because either I became singled out and would be expected to speak on my personal experiences and share these with the class, or I would have to challenge what the professor was sharing because they did not always share correct information (INDSPIRE, 2018, p.32) (emphasis mine).*

Given these findings, it is unsurprising that in another study of Indigenous experiences in post-secondary, a common theme among participants was shifting one’s behaviors and choosing when to reveal oneself as Indigenous (Bailey, 2016).

Multiple scholars assert this forced extraction of knowledge and lived experience(s) from Native students is emotional labour that “wears on Indigenous students” and diminishes their sense of inclusion in post-secondary settings (INDSPIRE, p. 32). Many students describe the facilitation of cross-cultural understandings and coming to the defense of Indigenous worldview(s) as both a responsibility and burden they hold. Nehiyaw scholar Erica Lee-Violet notes how being forced to represent all Native people and break down stereotypes while her “very existence is scrutinized” by faculty and peers, incurs an immense emotional toll (Loyer, 2018, on Lee-Violet, 2017).

Currently, there are few Indigenous people in academic spaces. Lack of representation, twinned with long-standing misrepresentation(s) in colonizer history and avoidance of Indigenous history at all levels of education, means Indigenous students are forced to shoulder the burden of representation when uninformed and/or ignorant faculty fail to intervene against anti-Indigenous violence in the classroom (Clarke, Kleinman, Spanierman, Issac, & Poolikasingham, 2014). This also applies to course work wherein Indigenous students are not “afforded the luxury” of simply writing a paper but must (at times) challenge their professors in addition to completing the assignment (Loyer, 2018, p. 146). In a 2014 focus group of Canadian Indigenous undergraduate students, one participant described how Indigenous realities were misrepresented by their professor, undermining their trust in the professors’ sensitivity when discussing lived experiences. Curricular misrepresentation and/or absence was a common theme amongst focus group participants (Clark, et al., 2014)<sup>3</sup>. In a recent study from McMaster University, a student reported a joke made at the expense of the Six-Nations, later resulting in

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<sup>3</sup> This study had 6 participants, which is not ideal for data analysis, but was defended as critical knowledge, and an expected low participant count given the underrepresentation of undergraduate Indigenous students.

their professor revealing that he “didn’t know what *they* were calling themselves now” (Bailey, 2018, italics mine), demonstrating a continuance of faculty insensitivity and ignorance on Indigenous issues. The INDSPIRE report echoed the findings of Clarke and colleagues; students described the lack, or poor quality of Indigenous content as “a significant problem in their post-secondary experience” (INDSPIRE, 2018, p. 9) and noted a particular lack of Metis and Inuit content. The following graph from INDSPIRE depicts the abysmal representation of Indigenous content in non-Indigenous post-secondary programs and institutions:

### Students in Non-Indigenous Post-Secondary Programs

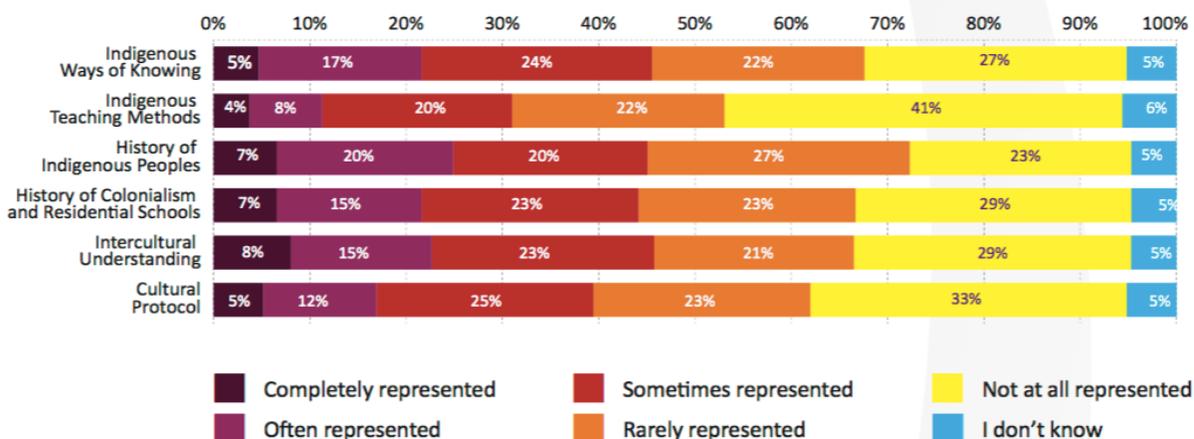


Figure 11: Classroom experience of all respondents who are not in programs or institutions for Indigenous learners

Cote Meek (2014) notes that when an Indigenous student encounters racist and/or inaccurate material, they may choose to speak up, risking victimization, increased racism, and/or becoming implicated in the process[es] of ‘proving’ why a reading or remark was inappropriate. Sue and colleagues describe this as a “microaggression catch-22”, in which responding to a racist incident may be more damaging than the incident itself. (Sue et al., 2007b, p. 279). Another risk to speaking up is having to engage in difficult conversations with no assurance of reduced microaggressions or heightened class understanding(s), when professors fail to properly

moderate a student's 'educational intervention(s)' (Andrews, 2018). However, choosing not to engage with in-class racism comes with its own impact(s) on the psyche of Indigenous students. Staying silent in an attempt to protect oneself from victimization and/or increased racism may result in a student feeling as if they were complicit in enabling the continuation of a colonial norm or stereotype, which can lead to internalized impacts.

A number of Indigenous scholars (Cote-Meek, 2014; Clark et al, 2014) introduce another element involved in responding to in-class racism: the assumption that an Indigenous student has [willingly] chosen to become the 'Native spokesperson' and the expectation that they will *always* speak up when 'Indigenous things' are being discussed. For Indigenous students there is no returning to the Indigeneity closet once one leaves it<sup>4</sup>. When marked as the 'Native informant' Indigenous students are often expected to adhere to static stereotypical tropes of Indigeneity, or risk being labelled as 'inauthentic' (Cote-Meek, 2014). Being unable to speak one's native language and/or not partaking in cultural events is enough to be deemed inauthentic by settler students and faculty (Cote-Meek, 2014).

When marked as the Native informant, students are expected, asked, or coerced to provide emotional labour, which results in feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness. This dynamic expects Indigenous students to be well-versed in *all* Indigenous issues, such as governance, law, gender, cosmology, botany, philosophy, and history. At times students are expected to hold knowledge of other Nations, given settler notions of pan-Indigeneity. Settler faculty would never be expected to offer the broad range of knowledge expected of Indigenous students paying to attend post-secondary. However, the financial compensation of knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to note that this speaks more to the experience of Indigenous students who are racially ambiguous or not visibly Indigenous; for visibly Indigenous students, there is often no hiding or masking of Indigeneity.

dissemination is not the crux of this issue; expecting Indigenous students to be ‘Native informants’ is a racializing practice, which removes agency from Indigenous students in their learning journeys.

### ***Racism & Microaggressions***

In the studies of racism and/or microaggressions faced by Indigenous students in post-secondary education institutions, I noted that the terms racism and microaggression were often used interchangeably (Bailey, 2016; Clarke, Kleinman, Spanierman, Issac, & Poolikasingham, 2014). Bailey (2016) notes that in addition to “traditional racism” characterized by open discrimination and prejudice, there is also subtle, indirect, and often undetectable “modern” forms of racism when analysing Indigenous student experiences. This includes microaggressions, which Sue and colleagues define as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, *whether intentional or unintentional*, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of colour” (Sue et al., 2007b, emphasis mine).

Sue and colleagues (2007b) identify three distinct types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. *Microassaults* are characterized as direct, intentional, and overt forms of racism perpetrated by individuals purposefully intending harm, and who may feel anonymous and unable to control their biases. *Microinsults* may be unintentional and are characterized as ‘seemingly innocuous’ actions and remarks regularly experienced by racialized individuals. *Microinvalidations* occur when individuals “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feeling, or experiential reality” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278) of racialized individuals. This can include saying one ‘doesn’t see colour’, invalidating the

real impacts and lived experiences of systemic racism and oppression. In *Colonized Classrooms* Cote Meek reflects on microinvalidations from her experience as a faculty member and through her observations and discussions with Indigenous students:

*In my opinion, one of the most frustrating forms of racism occurs when there is a denial of its very existence. It is extremely difficult to address racism when those around you do not feel or see that racism is operating. Sometimes you are made to feel that you are actually imagining it or you are told that you are too sensitive. In either case there is an emotional toll. (Cote-Meek, 2014, p. 100).*

Baily (2016) argues that whether direct or indirect, subtle or overt, intentional or unintentional, racism deeply impacts racialized students' experiences and feelings of inclusion in post-secondary spaces. It is mentally exhausting to deal with microaggressions and racism, and the frequency of these incidents, often perceived by others as 'isolated situations', is emotionally taxing and can lead to feelings of self-doubt.

In the INDSPIRE report, 45% of Indigenous students reported experiencing racism, isolation, or marginalization (2018). In Bailey's study from McMaster University, fifteen of seventeen participants noted *personal* experiences of in-class racism, including: classmates claiming Indigenous students were only accepted by a post-secondary institution due to affirmative action; being openly mocked for using traditional indigenous medicines; and a student indicating they would "look into Google and type in the definition of a savage and dress like that" for an in-class mock trial activity (2016, p. 1269). One student in Bailey's study described losing motivation and being concerned about failing after their professor used as a survey question example, "on a scale of one to a hundred how much do you like Aboriginal people?" (Bailey, 2016, p. 1270). In a study by Clark and colleagues a student

described becoming uncomfortable asking questions in class after their professor made a joke about 'Indians doing rain dances' (2014, p. 117). Notably, the majority of students in Bailey's study asked for clarification on the definition of overt racism, stating they had not experienced this form of racism, though their narratives suggest otherwise (2016). Other students described instances of overt racism as ignorance, such as being called the 'Native friend' or having people say, "oh my god, you're like Pocahontas, right?" (Ibid, 2016, p. 1270).

### *Lifetime Traumas*

According to a 2012 study from south of the medicine line, up to 50% of university students may experience a traumatic event within their first year (Galatzer, Burton & Bonanno). Trauma scholars strongly recommend that educators develop a 'trauma informed lens' when teaching, refuting the assumption that students enter and/or navigate university psychologically healthy and free of traumatic experiences (Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019). Exposure rates to lifetime trauma(s) are high for Indigenous people, at 67% for males and 70% for females (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2011). These exposure rates are likely higher when considering multiple axis of oppression beyond biological sex, such as gender identity, perceived gender, or sexual orientation. Gutierrez and Gutierrez (2019) suggest that those who have experienced trauma are at a higher risk of re-traumatization, and those who have experience childhood traumas are more susceptible to dropping out of school, experiencing depression, and attempting or completing suicide. Similarly, individuals who have a history of childhood sexual abuse, or who have experienced two or more kinds of abuse, or those who report PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are more likely to drop out of school than their non-traumatized counterparts (Carello & Butler, 2014). Notably, the historic experiences of colonization (Bombay, Matheson &

Anisman, 2009), along with high rates of life stress, poverty, and family violence/instability place Indigenous people at a greater risk of developing PTSD (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018).

### ***Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder(s)***

PTSD was included within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders in 1980, following advocacy work by war veterans for the American Psychiatric Association to consider the impacts of war on psychological well-being. Symptoms of PTSD included avoiding trauma-related stimuli, re-experiencing trauma through dreams, flashbacks or intrusive memories, and an elevated response to stimuli (Murdoch & Gaywish, 2011). Diagnosis of PTSD was based on experiencing an event “outside the range of normal human experience” (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014, p. 186). This definition of trauma was critiqued by feminists as reflecting the ‘privileged standpoint of white men’, for as Wilkin & Hillock aptly note, “physical and sexual violence, extreme terror, harassment, and humiliation are not outside the ‘usual’ range of human experiences from many women, poor, queer and racialized peoples (2014, p.186). Framing trauma as a singular incident excludes the reality that for many oppressed people, trauma is not an isolated experience, but is “ongoing, multiple, longstanding, repetitive, covert as well as overt, and perpetuated by more than one individual or group” (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014, p. 188).

The DSM has undergone multiple changes since the initial inclusion of PTSD; Volume 5 defines trauma as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Trauma theorists such as Wilkin and Hillock note the current definition fails to reflect the exposure(s) to and impact(s) of trauma:

*“since its introduction in the DSM-III, the diagnosis of PTSD has failed to not only capture the political complexities of vulnerability to trauma and the impact of identity on experience both during and after traumatization but also the effect of social environment on increased risk of trauma” (2014, p. 187).*

Brier and Scott define trauma as an experience that is “extremely upsetting” and “temporarily overwhelms the individual’s internal resources” (2006, p. 4). This definition separates traumatic events from ordinary stressful events, as the latter do not result in becoming ‘psychologically overwhelmed and feeling powerless’ (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014, p. 188). Trauma theorists, such as Cote-Meek (2016), posit that traumatic incidents may “resist understanding at the time of their occurrence and reappear as symptomatic disruptions in later representations of history; meaning one may be traumatized and [later] suffering from PTSD without being aware of the embodied trauma (p.94). Other scholars suggest PTSD exposure can occur vicariously through witnessing or hearing about a family members’ traumatic experience(s) (Murdoch & Gaywish, 2011).

Several types of PTSD and trauma may be at play in post-secondary settings when considering Indigenous students, including disorders of extreme stress not otherwise specified, betrayal trauma, and historical trauma.

### ***Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified***

Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified is a complex post-traumatic syndrome involving responses to *ongoing* traumatic experiences, with symptoms including hopelessness, withdrawal, problems regulating feelings, a sense of stigma, shame, paralysis of initiative, guilt and self-blame (Murdoch & Gaywish, 2011). Multiple trauma theorists and

Indigenous academics have asked, can we heal a wound that remains open? Writer and social worker Kai Cheng describes these contemplations succinctly:

*I was once at a training seminar in Toronto led by a famous (among therapists) & beloved somatic psychologist. She spoke brilliantly. I asked how her healing from trauma was possible for people for whom violence & danger are part of everyday life. She said it was not. Colonial psychology and psychiatry reveal their allegiance to the status quo in their approach to trauma: [t]hat resourcing must come from within oneself rather than from the collective. **That trauma recovery is feeling safe in society, when in fact society is the source of the trauma** (2019, twitter)*

When considering rampant anti-Indigenous racism in settler-society, ongoing attacks on Indigenous Nations/sovereignty by the settler state (and industry affiliates), along with the colonial originations of post-secondary institutions, there is truly no escape from colonial trauma(s) as Indigenous students.

### ***Betrayal Trauma***

Freyd and Birrell (2013) introduced the term ‘betrayal trauma’ to describe how institutions induce trauma through ‘legal, institutional, or cultural norms’. Gutierrez and Gutierrez build upon this work, positing that events and (in)actions performed by institutions because of a ‘deeply embedded institutional culture’ may result in trauma. Gutierrez and Gutierrez depict betrayal trauma in an example of administrators who failed to report sexual abuse allegations against a professor who was later charged with 45 counts of sexual abuse, noting that while the assaults were individual, the cultural norms of the university were to hush the issue which enabled further trauma(s) (Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019, p. 13). Andrews provides Indigenous

context, detailing how institutions have and continue to act as ‘sites contributing to colonization and trauma of Indigenous communities’ while predominantly occupying stolen or unceded lands, creating sites of learning that “accept and reinforce oppression and white supremacy” (2018 p. 184). Analogous to Ahmed’s description of conditional hospitality, Andrews asserts that minoritized students are expected to assume inclusion in these [colonial] sites, even if “oppressive normativity continues to be insidiously embedded into the culture of the institution (2018, p. 184).

The embodiment of trauma varies, though common responses include hyperarousal such as sweating, increased heart rate, difficulty breathing, muscular tension, tingling, and cold sweats; constriction of the nervous and digestive systems; dissociation and/or dysphoria; and spacing out, numbness or blacking out (Carter, 2015, citing Levine, 2008). People who have been traumatized may also experience hypervigilance, sensitivity to sound and light, difficulty sleeping, amnesia and forgetfulness, a reduced capacity to handle stress, chronic fatigue, headaches, immune system problems, and a diminished ability to connect with others (Carter, 2015 citing Levine, p.14-19).

Notably, trauma theory is moving away from deficit models that pathologize individuals and moving to what Wilkin and Hillock call “normalized understandings of human reactions to extreme harm” (2014, p. 187). This signals a movement away from blaming victims and toward holding accountable the structures and systems of oppression that inflict or cause trauma(s) (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014; Cote-Meek, 2016). To better understand Indigenous student experiences and sources of trauma, one must have a basic understanding of the embodiment and manifestation of historical and/or intergenerational trauma(s).

### *Historical Trauma*

Mohatt, Thompson Thai and Tebes (2014) report that the concept of historical trauma emerged when researchers noted that offspring of Holocaust survivors exhibited PTSD symptoms and diminished psychological health similar to their parents. Subsequent work on historical trauma has been applied to Indigenous people (Duran, Duran, Heart & Horse-Davis, 1998) Historical trauma is defined as systemic, traumatic events targeted at a community or group (with shared identity) with genocidal or ethnocidal intent; given the cumulative nature of settler-colonial violence, a historical narrative of sustained targeting has become ‘conceptualized as collective’ impacting mental, physical and spiritual health of Indigenous people (Mohatt et al., 2014; Walers et al., 2011).

Though many Indigenous [and] trauma scholars differentiate historical and intergenerational trauma, noting that the latter involves [a] direct, epigenetic link[s] to Indigenous trauma histories, for simplicity I side with Paradies (2016) who suggests that historical loss, historical trauma, intergenerational and/or multigenerational trauma are ‘all terms for the same construct’. Indigenous students with direct familial ties to Indian Residential school and other collective traumas may experience differing and/or heightened trauma responses compared to students who came to hold trauma narratives and responses vicariously. It is impossible for educators and even Indigenous students themselves to know the source(s) their embodied trauma, necessitating a trauma-informed pedagogy inclusive of both realities.

In 2004, Whitbeck and colleagues found that thinking about historical loss was associated with symptoms of emotional distress for individuals on two Midwest reservations in what is currently the United States. The study involved a preliminary focus group with local Elders to identify types of losses associated with historical trauma(s). Study participants were first asked to

indicate how often they thought of these losses. Participants were then asked to fill out a ‘historical loss associated symptoms scale’, which linked thoughts of losses with the emotional responses. Notably, 16% of respondents indicated experiencing feelings of sadness or depression always or often when considering loss(es), and an additional 44% indicated feeling these emotions sometimes. Almost 50% of respondents reported having intrusive thoughts regarding historical losses, and a third of participants indicated they would sometimes avoid places or people that reminded them of historical losses. However, a noticeable number of participants indicated never having emotional responses to thoughts of historical losses, indicating that embodied trauma responses can differ for individuals.

It is crucial to move away from individual pathologizing and toward noting systems that cause harm to Indigenous people. As Evans-Campbell writes, “historical trauma serves as both a descriptor of trauma responses among oppressed peoples—and a casual explanation for them” (2008, p. 320). Paradies (2016) notes that reminders of historical trauma can be structural or individual, and may abound in colonial institutions, such as universities. Notably, Bombay and colleagues (2014a) found a correlation between historical trauma and higher self-reported racism, indicating the complexity and interrelation of historic and contemporary harm(s). Thus, the assumption that an Indigenous student is ‘too sensitive’ compared to their peers may be a poor response to a manifestation of historical trauma and acute harm in the classroom.

Unfortunately, few empirical studies look into the impacts of intergenerational trauma on students, though many anecdotal accounts link both intergenerational trauma and residential schools to impacts on the mental health of Indigenous people (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018). Becoming familiarized with common impacts of intergenerational trauma on students is an important responsibility of university professors and administrators. Identified effects of

intergenerational trauma on students include: adverse childhood experience with trauma, violence and/or abuse; family disconnect and communication issues; personal and family problems with drugs and alcohol; lateral violence in families and community/ies; unresolved grief, anger, shame, and loss; negative feelings of self, including low self-esteem and confidence; ongoing issues such as living with fear and/or pain; mistrust of non-Indigenous people; and internalized racism and memories of being degraded (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018). Paradies adds:

“Constructs such as colonial mentality and historical trauma may also impact on health forms of hyper-vigilance or rumination which, in relation to racism, have been correlated with emotional distress, depression, aggression, risky behaviours, hypertension, and sleep disturbance (2016, p.99).

Noting these behaviours and symptoms as potential manifestations of trauma, rather than pathologizing individuals creates inclusive, trauma-informed spaces, where Indigenous students can honour their resiliency.

### ***Traumatizing Material***

In a 2015 article for *Active History*, Metis scholar Jesse Thistle describes an emotional pain that comes from researching and writing about Indigenous [trauma] histories. At first, Thistle describes this pain as manageable, as it enabled him to understand “why [he] was plagued by the effects of intergenerational trauma throughout [his] life. In *Colonized Classrooms*, Cote-Meek describes this process of relearning history beyond the Eurocentric gaze as ‘aha moments’ in which Indigenous students expand upon their own critical consciousness of colonization’s historical and contemporary impacts, find validation in their lived experiences of oppression, and

come to understand how colonial imposition and racism has impacted both their communities and own families (2014). Gaywish & Murdoch similarly describe Indigenous students becoming “emotional affected as they gained understanding of historical trauma and how it contributed to current problems” (2018, p.18).

Elders have noted how students may have not yet begun their ‘healing journeys’, or be partway through, and may thus be vulnerable to issues arising in the post-secondary classroom as “class lectures, topics and assignments can trigger feelings of distress associated with unhealed traumas” (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018, p. 14). Meek asserts vicarious trauma may be experienced when students are exposed to elements of historical abuses, violence and trauma through video or narratives, noting that many educators “trained in western methods of teaching and learning pay little attention to the emotional and spiritual aspects of students’ lives (2014, p 31.). One student in Meek’s study described feeling as if she “couldn’t even come up to breathe”, speaking to her own unresolved trauma in addition to class content, assignments, and Indigenous curriculum (2014).

Ahmed warns that too often, social institutions turn trauma into a ‘spectacle’ in which the pain of others becomes commodified (cited by Zembylas, 2008). Those who have personally, or vicariously experienced trauma narratives may be forced to sit in the classroom and watch as peers often exhibit ‘post-emotionalism’— described as blasé responses to trauma, informed by cues from peers and media (Zembylas, 2008). Rather than supporting learning, subjecting students to trauma narratives can re-traumatization those who hold trauma histories, and place “all students are at risk for secondary traumatization (Carello & Butler, 2014).

As of 2014, there were no university level studies of re-traumatization, but researchers note that mental health care workers with trauma histories face a heightened risk of experiencing

secondary traumatization or becoming re-traumatized themselves when dealing with traumatic information related to clients. Similarly, a 2011 paper notes that social work students can vicariously experience the trauma of their patients if the workers themselves have similar trauma histories (Murdoch & Gaywish).

Cote-Meek notes that while Indigenous students often experience a “profound sense of relief and validation” when presented with material on historical and contemporary Indigenous issues, this heightened understanding of colonization and a deepened understanding of self, family, and community can be devastating, painful, and may “be a time of psychological distress” for Indigenous students (2014, p. 144). Many Indigenous students, especially urban Indigenous students (Envionics Institute, 2010), come to post-secondary with “a disturbing combination of absence of basic knowledge and misinformation about Aboriginal people and issues” (LaRoque, 2002, p. 213). When considering historical trauma, high rates of PTSD, and daily experiences of racism, it is unsurprising that Cote-Meek writes: “Indigenous people’s lives are complicated by a number of factors that exacerbate the intensity of feelings that a student may have when confronting narratives of ongoing colonial violence (2014, p. 121).

Cote-Meek notes that the process of (re)learning history through a non-Eurocentric lens and better understanding contemporary Indigenous issues can be exceptionally validating for Indigenous students, but making personal links to course material may be emotional and require support(s) not readily available in most post-secondary institutions (2014). Due to low enrollment numbers, Indigenous students often learn about historical and contemporary oppression(s) in the presence of settler students, who may react with “guilt, anger, denial, or racist justification for continued colonial privilege” (Battiste, 2004, p.8). Meanwhile, Indigenous students with ties to colonial historic traumas may be inadvertently re-traumatized by curricula

on topics such as forced relocations, residential school, or the 60's scoop (to name a few) (Cote-Meek, 2014). Given the embodied nature of historical/ intergenerational trauma, students who experience trauma responses in classrooms may have no idea why they are reacting so strongly to course material(s).

As time progresses, trauma [his]stories may harm students mentally *and* physically. Thistle describes being twice admitted to hospital for intestinal issues while heavily engaged in Indigenous trauma research. According to Thistle, this is a common experience for scholars engaged in trauma work:

*Some [scholars] have had serious mental breakdowns and have been side lined from academic work for up to a year. Some have become so emotionally unstable that they quit school with thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of work on the line. Of those who seem to deal “somewhat” with the trauma, many have taken up some sort of rigorous exercise regime...[,] Others have gone into psychotherapy, sought the advice of Indigenous Elders, or have come to rely on psychotropic medication. But most, like me, do not have any support; instead, we have to let the spirits of colonialism haunt us as we write history until stress fells us with some ailment for which there is no apparent medical explanation.” (Thistle, 2015)*

At the same time, unlearning colonial history and (re)learning Indigenous history narratives can benefit Indigenous students. Shedding one's colonial mentality may result in a student exhibiting trauma responses yet has also inspired NDN students to participate in social justice activism and to resist ongoing colonial oppression(s) (Cote-Meek, 2014). Learning this material can be a homecoming—the validation of one's feelings of and physical displacement(s) in a capitalistic, violent, settler-colonial society. In the words of bell hooks:

*I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend --- to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw theory and then a location for healing. (1994, p 59)*

Thus, professors may reduce Indigenous student (re)traumatization through trauma-informed pedagogies that reflect an understanding of how certain course materials, assignments, archival documents, and classroom dynamics may be emotionally distressing for Indigenous students and may privilege the learning outcomes of settler students. Nehiyaw-Metis scholar Jessie Loyer writes:

*[T]o research as an Indigenous scholar is to confront horrific stories, many of them directly tied to my own experiences or the experiences of people I love. Recognizing, confronting, and assessing **how trauma is experienced in the university looks different for different Indigenous peoples**” (Loyer, 2018, p.147) [emphasis mine].*

This is a critical field of study requiring research into culturally appropriate ways of disseminating information on Indigenous trauma narratives in manners that support learning processes, resiliency and healing. However, searching for ‘trauma-informed pedagogy’ specific to Indigenous post-secondary students yielded few results, while there are ample blogs, memes, twitter posts, and other forms of knowledge dissemination from Indigenous students describing the (re)traumatization involved in post-secondary education.

Indigenous student (re)traumatization extends beyond the classroom. According to Cote-Meek, there is an “enormous psychological toll” on students learning historical trauma narratives while having to defend against racism and colonial violence (2014, p. 142). This speaks not only to the inherent colonial violence embedded in university buildings, practices, and epistemologies,

but the ongoing, systemic oppressions facing Indigenous peoples and Nations worldwide. Professors may mediate individual oppression(s) and/or microaggressions against Indigenous students within the confines of their physical/virtual classrooms, but they have little agency in reducing the structural oppressions that plague Indigenous students on an ongoing basis.

Concerningly, Meek notes that the current literature on racism in post-secondary spaces tends to separate the impacts of racism and microaggressions within academia from Indigenous lifetime and historic trauma, creating “a sense that the two are unrelated” (Cote-Meek, 2014, p.14) instead of interlocking and linked to Indigenous student [mental and physical] health.

## Feasting [discussion]

~ wihkohtowak ~

In this feast, I move between personal and academic writing, to share my reflections, learning(s), and suggestions for educators. I refrain from synthesizing my findings into a list of ‘interventions’ or practices that anti-colonial, trauma informed, educators might take up. I want you to read my words, hear my experience, and learn in context. I do not want my work to become a checklist you bring into an equity, diversity and inclusion meeting. Trauma informed educational praxis is more than a set of principles to adhere to; context is key.

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When I began this thesis, a professor pulled me into their office, and warned that I could be sued for defamation if certain identities were not protected in my work. I had planned to employ an autoethnographic method and to use pseudonyms. My thesis supervisor had previously stated there was no precedent for completing a research ethics board application for an autoethnography, so I was confused when another professor asked to discuss my thesis and insisted I would need ethics approval prior to any ‘research’ (reflective writing). I felt as if I was being silenced, though my professors assured me they were acting in ‘my best interests.’ After three years of microaggressions and having my experiences of racism be minimized, denied, or ignored I felt as if I could trust no one.

I spent the evening in a Student Council meeting, balancing councillor responsibilities while researching university autoethnography policies. I needed to know if my professors were acting in my best interests or protecting themselves, the department, and/or their higher-ups. The next morning, I went to a café to work before class. I began to shake with anxiety, overwhelmed

by the situation. This was not the first time I experienced an overpowering physical response while trying to complete my degree.

By third year I wanted to drop out. By fourth year I was deeply depressed and sometimes dissociative in class. I went from perfectionism in my studies to barely scraping by, though my marks managed to remain fairly consistent with previous years. I took fewer classes but felt overwhelmed. I dropped a class. I was used to feeling overwhelmed and pushing through, but three years of the Academy had worn me out. Familial and personal traumas bubbled in my body, threatening to spew out into the open. I felt out of control. I had what I'd consider a mental breakdown. I felt everything, deeply, fully. It felt nice, to not pretend anymore.

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Reading Sue and colleague's (2007b) article on microaggressions was a homecoming. It was relief in the height of my depression and disillusionment with academia, the [settler-colonial] world, and myself. It was my fourth year of university and I thought I was losing my perception of reality, and imagining harms perpetuated by my professors. I thought that I was being too emotional and was 'too sensitive' and overly critical. Through words and actions, I watched my professors and peers deny my experience(s) and fail to see the multiple forms of racism and microaggressions embedded and at play within our classes, institution, and world. I thought there was something wrong with me. I was ready to leave academia and I wanted to drop out on a daily basis. I realized it felt as if I was being academically gaslit.

When I read Cote-Meek's book, and Sue and colleagues's paper on microaggressions, I felt a warm embrace. I felt seen, validated, and comforted in the knowledge that I was not alone, I was not too sensitive, and I was not 'too critical'. Instead, I was critically aware of my

surroundings, noting processes others had watched and experienced through many years of academia and living in (a) world(s) not designed for us.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I'm still healing from my experiences in academia, but with the information I gathered berry picking, contextualized with my own experiences, I will try to describe how I got to this emotionally low place, and how educators could have prevented and/or responded to some of the traumas I witnessed and experienced in academia.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

When an Indigenous student comes to you and says something is racist, harmful, inaccurate or traumatizing, listen to us. Validate our experience. Listen, rather than listen to react in a manner that will safeguard your feelings. When I come to you to offer a critique, I [often] do so out of love. I have love for the next generation(s) of Indigenous students. If I have come to you to offer suggestions for making the classroom a safe(r) space, I trust you, I see you as an individual who has made a mistake but has the capacity to learn and grow. The hierarchy of academia makes these interventions into attacks on individual professors and assumed an undermining of their knowledge(s); I am not here to assert claims of superiority or of moral high ground. We teach each other. I may be angry, sad, devastated, or suffering from a breach of trust. I will have wished that you did your research, and that my interventions weren't needed. I do not want to be the Native informant. I do wish you paid me for my knowledge and emotional labour, but I digress.

In Cree culture, we are taught to follow the ethic of non-interference (Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1999). I am still looking for guidance, but I think I break this ethic by disrupting your learning journey by demanding you raise your critical consciousness and do

better for the sake of Indigenous students, communities, and Nations. However, in my culture our teachers do not assume to know more than students. Our teachers guide us to understanding, offering stories rather than direct confrontational lessons. We did not have institutions which only a certain class or portion of the population could attend. We did not give certificates to those who could afford and endure these institutions. Learning is not a commodity for us.

When I interfere, I do so to protect my kin. I protect myself, my family, and my relations. I do so because it doesn't seem like many others are here to do the same (yet). I do so because you were [likely] taught to [in]directly hate and invalidate us. I interfere to slow the cyclical nature of racism. I see you as a loose cog in the settler-colonial machine, that needs only a small push. You stop being a cog and become an engineer when you fail to engage with NDN critiques, theory & knowledge. When you tell me I'm too critical and I need to stop bringing Indigeneity into everything. When you continue to live blissfully in ignorance and perpetuate harm. How intimate with the settler-colonial machine do you wish to be? Why?

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The Native Informant

NDN students are not students, but props for augmenting the learning experience(s) of settlers, with no concern for our bodily autonomy or learning needs. We are, as others have termed: 'Native informants or cultural experts/educators/Indians' (Cote-Meek, 2014; Gareau, 2004). On the first day of a third-year class, my professor asked the Indigenous students to raise our hands and self-identify, noting a previous Mi'kmaq student had enriched the class by bringing in their language and cultural teachings. I knew it was not safe to raise my hand, as I had not surveyed my professor or classmates to gage the possibilities of [c]overt racism. The professor did not seem to realize they were jeopardizing my safety for the benefit of settler

students. I knew raising my hand would mark me as an NDN. I also knew that I wasn't the NDN my professor wanted; I could not bring my language to the class, nor was I immersed in my culture. I'm on a journey of reclamation because residential schools and colonialism stripped my kin of their culture, and the desire to pass it down. This professor expected me to be the 'cultural Indian,' and/or the 'Native expert,' not the mixed urban NDN that I proudly am.

At the end of the next class, I pulled my professor aside and offered them guidance: 'please do not ask Indigenous students to self-identify; doing so is our own decision, and if we choose to, we will do so when we feel safe in the classroom. You would not begin a gender and women's studies class by asking: who's gay?!' Throughout the semester, I brought critiques to my professor when they used inaccurate settler articles that marginalized Indigenous experience. I refused to complete portions of assignments that did not align with my Cree values, and watched my marks suffer. In one instance, I was asked to provide my definition of two Indigenous terms regarding land and sovereignty. Our professor asserted there were no wrong answers. I wrote from the heart, guided by my ancestors, along with knowledge from lived experiences and my academic training. I was given a poor mark. Was I not Indigenous? I was sharing my knowledge, my experiences, and was told they were wrong.

Since that assignment, I've read the work of prominent Indigenous writers, including Leanne Simpson (2017), Alicia Elliott (2019), and Bonita Lawrence (2004). I had similar ideas and experiences, yet mine were deemed 'incorrect,' which exacerbated my imposter syndrome. My voice held no power, so my ideas needed to be backed up by another Indigenous writer or academic. In my final essay for that course, I cited everyone. I continue to struggle with trusting my own voice and thoughts in academic writing. This story embodies many aspects of being

Indigenous in the Academy: being the Native informant; providing (unpaid) emotional labour; and enduring racism and/or microaggressions.

Emotional Labour

Indigenous students are expected to provide emotional labour. This refers not only to sharing our languages, cultures, and worldview(s); we often are implicated in speaking out against or educating our professors and peers on anti-Indigenous rhetoric and/or stereotypes, microaggressions, and [c]overt racism, while often challenging sexism, ableism, transphobia, and/or homophobia in our classrooms. This emotional labour is unpaid, which mimics extractive settler practises on stolen lands. The 2018 INDSPIRE report on Indigenous experiences in post-secondary notes that Indigenous are implicated in ‘truth telling’, and are “in many ways, cultural elders in training” (p. 35).

I cannot name all the instances in which I provided my peers, professors, and institution with unpaid emotional labour. Perhaps the most absurd example of this labour was being an unpaid search committee member for a Faculty in which I was not a student. However, being the student representative on that search committee (for an Indigenous candidate) did go on my resume, unlike most of the emotional labour I’ve done. Generally, there was at least one major ‘incident’ per semester that required my *assistance*. Sometimes I would have panic attacks prior to or after addressing the incident, but the alternative felt like enabling oppression. I considered multiple times sending invoices to my professors for the work I did; not because I wanted to be paid but because I sensed they had no appreciation for my time and effort(s). I do not think my professors would have considered exploiting an Indigenous professor in the ways they exploited my knowledge and time.

After one or two interventions, I became marked as the ‘informant’ who would always speak up. Interestingly, both professors and peers had this expectation: by my third year it wasn’t unusual for friends to tell me about incidents of anti-Indigenous in classes I was *not* even taking. I did slightly enjoy having my own ‘informants’. Knowledge is power and useful in safeguarding new students. Senior BIPOC students told me about past instances of racism, and I did the same for newer BIPOC students. We protect each other when/where the institution fails to.

Racism & Microaggressions

While sharing our lived experience(s) and implicit knowledges, our physical and emotional responses to microaggressions, racism, and other violence in the classroom are often refuted, ignored, or challenged, due to differential worldviews, experiences, and understandings of what constitutes racism and oppression, inflated egos and white/settler fragility, and because we are marked by chrononormativity and educational hierarchy as simply students, who cannot know more than our professors. This leads to and is enmeshed with (re)traumatization in post-secondary spaces, as we are told we are ‘asking too much’, ‘being too critical’ or that the racism and microaggressions we experience are not real or intentional and thus ‘not *really* causing pain’.

It took years to understand and name the source of my pain, and even then, professors often failed to take me seriously. I felt as if I was seeing a different reality than everyone else; I noted racism and microaggressions where others adamantly asserted there were none. I second- and third-guessed myself. I thought I was being too sensitive and doubted my physical and emotional feelings. I want future Indigenous students to believe themselves and to be attentive to their emotional and physical trauma responses.

(Re)traumatization

The academy (re)traumatizes Indigenous students through inappropriate exposure(s), improper warnings, and inadequate aftercare when discussing Indigenous trauma narratives and contemporary oppressions. Arguably, the exclusion of Indigenous contexts, knowledge, and worldviews reinscribes colonial trauma(s) of Indigenous exclusion and marginalization by settler colonialism. As previously mentioned, contextualizing Indigenous (re)traumatization in post-secondary spaces requires an understanding of three distinct forms of trauma: historical, individual/lifetime, and intergenerational trauma(s), though when symptoms arise, it may be impossible to locate the source(s) of the embodied trauma.

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I knew I was experiencing historical trauma symptoms long before I encountered the term ‘historical trauma’. Throughout my undergraduate studies, I attended rallies about Indigenous issues and/or sovereignty. I distinctly remember attending a rally in my second year, honouring the life of Tina Fontaine, who had been found dead in Winnipeg [Treaty 1 territory]. At the time, I wasn’t close with the Indigenous organizers of the event, but I could feel their emotions as they performed ceremony and took turns speaking; it was as if we were all sharing the same body—the same pain. I had no [known] familial trauma about MMIWG2S, but the emotions I felt pass through me felt bigger than myself. A couple weeks later, Colton Boushie was murdered by a settler farmer in my home territory, [Treaty 6] and another rally was called to seek justice and honour his life. I went with friends, but left them for a few minutes to sit alone, breath, and calm myself; my emotions were too overwhelming to remain in the crowd.

I began to realize that while these rallies were emotional for my non-Indigenous friends, they did not become as overcome with emotion and emotionally drained in the ways that I and

other Indigenous folks did. I began researching to understand what I was witnessing and experiencing. In my queries I used the term ‘vicarious trauma’, which eventually led me to historical trauma literature.

Learning about historical trauma marked a significant shift in my life as a student, budding community organizer, and *Nehithaw* person. Though I had ‘hidden’ my Indigeneity for many years, but my body and mind *knew* where I came from. I carried historical trauma, and there was no shame in this— no need to pathologize myself. With this new terminology, I continued to observe my emotions at rallies and in my studies, and soon realized that misrepresentations and/or elimination(s) of Indigenous history, culture(s), and worldview in class curriculum and greater society similarly awakened embodied historical trauma(s).

Generally, I was able to handle manifestations of embodied historical trauma and complete my studies in tandem. However, in the second semester of my fourth year I watched matriarchs and land protectors be invaded by militarized RCMP in Wet’suet’en territory. I was incapable of concentrating in my classes and struggled to do assignments while another Nation’s sovereignty was under attack. I felt powerless being in academia instead of on the frontlines. It felt as if I was in another reality than most of my peers and professors; while I watched settler-colonialism continue on its path of destruction, others saw only a land dispute. Soon, rallies, sit-in, and blockades across Turtle Island emerged in solidarity with the Wet’suet’en Nation. I needed to be in community, but the pressures of academia had me straddling two worlds, planning actions, witnessing violence at blockades, and trying to find brief moments in which I could sit down and work on my assignments.

Notably, I was part of a year-long group project at this time, and watched as my contributions deteriorated in comparison to the first semester. Unexpectedly, my groupmates

supported me. They knew where I needed to be, picked up the slack, and offered me kindness when I apologized for being unable to produce work at my usual caliber. Rather than demonizing me for becoming a ‘bad groupmate’, my peers chose to respond to my symptoms of trauma in a trauma-informed manner.

I need my professors to do the same.

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In my tobacco offering, I described how I came to include Indigenous lifetime traumas within the scope of (re)traumatization in the academy. While berry picking, I noted the high rates of lifetime trauma experiences for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, necessitating trauma-informed education. However, this goes beyond including trigger warnings in classes when traumatic topics are going to be discussed.

When considering Indigenous lifetime traumas, educators must understand that we carry these stories into our classes and may be dealing with ongoing trauma(s) in our families, communities, and/or lives. This does not mean we are in need of saving; however, when educators have little knowledge on Indigenous realities, we cannot turn to you for support. Besides, academia often packages our lived experiences into bite-sized lessons, modules, or lectures, which may not reflect our own lives.

I sat through many lectures on the 60’s scoop, only to realize in my third year of classes that one of my own [half-]brothers was scooped. He was put in the system by my Indigenous aunt, who was a social worker<sup>5</sup>. This story did not match the 60’s scoop narrative I had learned

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<sup>5</sup> The story is more complex than described, but I do not wish or need to contextualize for the sake of my argument. I also cannot share more, as this is not my story to share [publicly].

through my studies, in which the arms of the settler state reach out and tear Indigenous children from their families. No outside colonizer came for my brother. How do you begin to process this realization while in full or part-time studies?

I could not turn to my professors for accommodations or support in this time, nor could I in my fourth year, when family trauma events were causing me immense pain. In short, my mother had moved back in with my biological father, after being separated for 21 years. My oil-rig-working ‘father’ is a homophobic, misogynistic, racist. Though my mother and I have a tenuous history, I care deeply for her, and worried immensely for her safety and well-being. This happened in the same year as the MMIWG2S final inquiry report was released, linking violence against Indigenous women with the man-camps that house employees of extractive industries. Whenever this finding came up in my classes or day-to-day life, I thought of my mother, and hoped that she would not fall victim to the violence of my ‘fathers’ man camp. I feared she would be hurt, go missing, or be killed. My body was under such stress that my menstrual cycle stopped for over five months, returning only minutes after my mother called to tell me she was going back home to the rez.

I was in so much emotional pain, but how could I explain this situation to my professors or even my peers? Moreover, I was the tokenized Native, a Native informant — I didn’t want pity, or to perpetuate stereotypes of broken NDN families. I wanted to be in school, but not for my professors to assume that my attendance meant that ‘all was well’. I needed my professors to teach with the understanding that students in their classrooms had rich and at times traumatic lives.

I find it noteworthy that accommodations for traumatic or stressful events can be given to students, but generally the trauma must impact settler-students to become an issue for individual

professors or the institution at large. Such is the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein educators and administrators have realized that students emotional well-being has been impacted by lock-downs, and thus students may require additional accommodations beyond the usual allowances<sup>6</sup>. Educators have become increasingly aware of their student's emotional well-being in this time, and I hope this continues in the future, and that these courtesies are offered to Indigenous students.

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Intergenerational trauma refers to ‘maladaptive effects ‘of an original trauma experience from one generation being passed down to the next or subsequent generations (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018). A common example of an intergenerational trauma are the residential school systems, in which Indigenous children were stolen from their kin and communities and indoctrinated with the language and ideals of the dominant, capitalistic and heteropatriarchal settler society. Indigenous youth in residential schools were physically, emotionally, and spiritually abused; a disruption of traditional Indigenous parenting styles, as abuse became normalized and self-replicating. As survivors returned to their communities with a new language, worldview, and embodied traumas— substance abuse became a reprieve from the pain for some. At residential school, students were harshly punished for speaking their original language, and some survivors later refused to teach it to their children due to internalized shame or to protect their kin from perceived harm. Indigenous gender diversity was viewed as antithetical to Christianity and heteronormative gender(ed) roles, which were enforced at the schools, which led to the widespread loss of Two-Spirit⁷ teachings and acceptance (Bird & Robinson, 2020). Same-

⁶ As a student senator, I would like to mention that these supports are still insufficient

⁷ This is an anachronism, as Two-Spirit is a pan-Indigenous term coined in 1990 to describe and reclaim Indigenous gender and sexuality diversity, associated roles, and teachings which were common in many Nations pre-colonisation.

sex abuse by priests and other staff further engrained negative associations with queerness about Indigenous youth, which has led to a normalization of homo/transphobia in reserve and urban communities in the present-day (Ibid).

I can perceive the impacts of residential school in my own life through my difficulty in accessing Two-Spirit teachings and in having to reclaim nehiyawewin, as [my] mushom asked his family not to pass the language on to his children, a request respected up to and after his death. There is also residential school trauma in my body, passed down from my mushom that I cannot name so easily. I feel this trauma when I have a panic attack when a residential school module is introduced in class. I feel this trauma when I cry, dissociate, or otherwise feel emotionally overwhelmed and experience lessened productivity when writing about residential school. I felt this trauma in writing this very section of my thesis.

I want to write this thesis without having to explain residential school. I want this painful knowledge to stop circling in my brain. I want this knowledge to be out in the world— *known*, so I do not have to constantly speak it into existence in the minds of peers and professors. I want to dwell in the joy of Indigenous existence but instead I am stuck explaining and providing evidence of the pain.

Moving Foreword

To reduce Indigenous student (re)traumatization educators must teach with consideration for all aspects of a student—meaning professors must teach with empathy and understanding for the [Indigenous] students with underlying trauma histories and/or those subject(ed) to ongoing trauma incidents. The students who are disproportionately subjected to individual and systemic oppression(s) should be privileged and protected from harm(s) in the classroom, rather than

forced to accept the conditional hospitality the academy currently provides. Likewise, Indigenous students should not be situationally or intentionally forced to share details of their lives and/or Indigenous knowledge(s)⁸ in order to benefit the learning of settler students; this is emotional labour that wears on the indigenous student psyche. In addition to employing a trauma-informed educational praxis, it is essential that educators work to remove the hierarchy embedded within Western education's teacher-students dynamic. This improves an educator's ability to connect with students which supports trauma informed pedagogy that encourages lifelong learning journeys for both new(er) and seasoned academics.

Removal of Hierarchy

The removal of the hierarchical student-teacher dynamic has been on my mind for several years. I was lucky to be in outdoor programs in elementary and high school which fostered relationality between students and our teachers, and I critiqued the power relations in academia soon after I began my undergraduate degree. When I speak of this power dynamic, I refer to the assumed superiority professors have over TA's and students, along with the pseudo-power(s) given to TA's over undergraduates, which normalizes a systematic, tiered approach to power in the learning environment. I also am speaking about the entitlement and superiority complex of some academics with Masters and PhDs, who fail to acknowledge and make room for the brilliance, insights, and wisdom of students. Neither situation creates a safe and equitable learning space, nor do these power relations support mutual learning in the institution. Harris describes this situation well:

⁸ I am speaking about information we learn through ceremony, the dream world, or through other forms of Indigenous-specific knowledge transmission. I also wish to note that there are some things we as Indigenous people know/learn that we are guided to not share freely or record on paper.

In [a] Western approach, we learn that the teacher has authority. In Indigenous societies, learning is often an integral part of living, and all situations can be learning opportunities. All people are lifelong teacher and learners, and an individual is expected to know many things, not only for survival, but to ‘understand the universe and our place in it, so having a deep knowledge of only one part is dysfunctional (2002, p. 189).

Harris indicates that in Indigenous learning paradigms, while certain individuals may be well versed in [a] certain topic[s], these individuals do not assume intellectual superiority *over* others. In my third year, I read Andrea Smith’s article, *Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism*, in which she states that “heteropatriarchy is a logic which naturalizes social hierarchy” (2010, p. 60); this cemented in my mind the notion that power relations in academia stem from colonization and European influence, and are thus exceptionally un-Indigenous. The following is some autoethnographic prose about hierarchy in academia.

The hierarchical teacher-student dynamic of academia enables professors to make Indigenous students ‘Native informants’ in the classroom. My emotional, physical, and spiritual energy is [apparently] not worth compensation at this stage of my academic career, though I provide you with emotional labour on a regular basis. The money isn’t the issue; one kind professor bought me books when I gave them ‘Indigenous insights’ for a faculty event. How are you preparing me for the ‘real world’, if not by teaching me to know my worth and ask for proper compensation? You are teaching me to exploit myself.

The hierarchical teacher-student dynamic of academia enables professors to callously lecture about trauma(ic) (topics) and create syllabi devoid of trigger warnings and

brimming with emotionally challenging assignments for students with embodied trauma. If my professors saw me as their equal, could they so easily inflict harm?

The hierarchical teacher-students dynamic of academia strips students of personal agency instead of acknowledging that we may also be parents, caretakers, working multiple jobs, experiencing food insecurity, chronically in pain, and/or working through/with embodied trauma. ‘Student’ is but one of my labels. As Harris (2002) notes,

“Many non-Aboriginal teachers in traditional disciplines have no idea of the burdens that some students carry, have no sympathy for them, and expect them to fulfill their presumed role [as a student] without question” (p.191) When it is clear we only have a ‘working relationship’, why must I tell you I’m depressed to get an extension? Did you think I was daydreaming in class when I was dissociating?

The hierarchical teacher-student dynamic allows professors to enforce ableist (and classist) attendance marks, equally punishing the students who might have skipped class or had a panic attack, while rewarding students who had the capacity to attend class.

Generally, the university has the technology to record these lectures. I didn’t know PTSD counted for an accommodation at my university, but regardless, why must I be physically in class for material I could learn online. You lectured with minimal class discussions; attendance marks were used to inflate your ego, not to indicate learning.

The hierarchical teacher-student dynamic enables professors to avoid [publicly] apologizing for racism, homophobia, transphobia and other incidents that harm BIPOC and other marginalized identities. Everyone makes mistakes, but when over forty students are watching, a ‘slight’ slip-up could be disastrous. An apology (re)creates a safe space, reaffirms

anti-oppressive classroom values, and is not about you as an educator. How you chose to react stuck with me more than the incident itself.

The teacher-student dynamic is why students write/say what professors want to hear to get a good mark, rather than speaking honestly. My marks suffered when I began to shed my colonial mentality and challenged you—the settler prof teaching about Indigenous relations. Your ego and my critiques couldn't fit in the same room, and I nearly left academia because of this. I'm so glad NDN kin supported me when you failed to.

The hierarchical teacher-student dynamic is not an Indigenous way of teaching. Our Elders and knowledge keepers command respect by action(s), words, and spirituality. Respect is given without the toxic influence of hierarchy. My mom sometimes conflates her age with being an Elder—I chuckle, just as I do when you claim your PhD makes you deserving of my respect and admiration because you are 'above me'.

The teacher-student dynamic of academia is not an Indigenous way of learning. Learning on the land and in community helps contextualize the big fancy words we use in academia. Learning is a continual, iterative process—you hold knowledge, as do I. Margaret Kovach interviewed fellow Nehiyaw scholar Cam Willet, whose words add to my own:

*“When I was taking a course in a master’s program, I was talking to my professor during a break, and we were talking about how far I would go in my program. Would I become a faculty member or would I get a Ph.D? Of course, when you are a student, you have the privilege of being radical. You can go into a classroom and say, ‘I defy school. I think we should tear down all the universities because it’s all bullshit.’ But then he pointed out to me, ‘Well, you know, if you don’t get the Ph.D, will people ever listen to you? Will Western-minded people ever value what you have to say?’ That’s the thing. **It’s these two***

*worlds we are living in. The one world where you are honoured with the eagle feather and the other where you are honoured with a Doctoral degree. Maybe that's one of the big reasons why I wanted to finish the Ph.D. I guess finishing is partly for validation, though it's not really that important to me. **But if that's what it takes for people to listen to you, well the...***"p119. (Kovach, 2010) (emphasis mine)

You told me you were excited to read papers on environmentalism, but when I asked you to read the TRC and other texts to keep anti-Indigenous racism from emerging (again) in your classroom, it was 'not within your field of study'. Maybe in the era of EDI you'll reconsider. Maybe someone with a PhD will tell you the exact same thing as I did but this time you'll listen.

When hierarchy is removed from academic contexts, true authentic learning processes emerge; the development of positive relationships between professors and students can help foster safe learning spaces while also ensuring that the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of students are met (Gutierrez & Gutierrez, 2019). This is one of the first steps in dealing with intergenerational and other embodied traumas in the classroom (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018). If my professors followed the Nehiyaw law/principle of miyo-wicehtowin (good relations), they would consider how class content, discussions, and research impact [Indigenous] students; as Loyer notes, within a Nehiyaw worldview of kinship and relationality "there is space for instructors to see themselves responsible for building a student's research capacity, including physical, emotional and spiritual components of research" (Loyer, 2018, p. 153).

Trauma informed teaching

Employing a trauma-informed educational praxis involves the assumption that all students may have embodied trauma, and thus class content must be chosen, assigned, and

delivered in such a manner that does not exacerbate the risk(s) of (re)traumatization. Calls for this aspect of trauma-informed pedagogy have been issued as early as 1995. Patrician Monture Angus describes a law class, wherein rape was carefully discussed, but not when issues of race emerged in her law classes:

[P]eople took great pains to make sure that they were not inflicting any harm on any of the women in the room. 'You never know when one of the women in the room that you are teaching has been a victim of rape.' But when as an Indian woman, I never had the same courtesy extended to me when the issue was clearly racism (1995, p. 123)

This demonstrates the dire need for all educators to learn about Indigenous issues and consider Indigenous emotional health in classes, even when the subject matter is not specifically an 'Indigenous issue'. To broadly conceptualize trauma-informed education, I look to Carello & Butler who outline six key principles:

- 1) Learning as the primary goal, and student emotional safety as critical/necessary component
- 2) Recognize students have trauma histories that might make them vulnerable to exploitation by authority figures and 'highly susceptible to symptom recrudescence'
- 3) Be ready to provide institutional and outside counselling/emergency care if needed.
- 4) 'Appreciate how a trauma history may impact your students' academic performance, even without trauma being a topic in the classroom.
- 5) Become familiar with research on trauma, re-traumatization, and secondary traumatization.
- 6) Become knowledgeable on clinical literature on traumatic transference and countertransference (Carello & Butler, 2014, p.163-164)

Educators in all faculties must become familiar with Indigenous [trauma] histories, contemporary oppression(s), and protective factors of Indigenous mental health in order to understand and appropriately discuss Indigenous content and/or trauma histories. Gaywish & Murdoch urge that in addition to developing compassion surrounding indigenous realities, that professors to stay connected with Indigenous grassroots moments (2018). Given the breadth of Indigenous knowledge and our worldview(s) that see all things as interconnected—no educational silo, department, or Faculty is excused from employing a trauma informed pedagogy. However, it is equally important for educators to learn about Indigenous strength and resiliency (Murdoch & Gaywish, 2014), so as not to subject Indigenous students to (internalized or verbal) assumptions of mediocrity or deficiency. Likewise, educators must gain a familiarity with embodied trauma and linked responses, including but not limited to PTSD, historical trauma, vicarious trauma, and intergenerational trauma. Cote-Meek asserts that responses to embodied trauma and ongoing violence may not always be evident in the classroom, and might include: “missing class, spacing out, having extreme reactions to class activities/discussion, or leaving class to go cry” (2014, p. 34).

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Students in the INDSPIRE report spoke of being emotionally triggered and devalued by professors who “lacked the skills and knowledge to sensitively work through difficult points in Indigenous history” and feeling the ‘damaging impacts’ when Indigenous content was not offered across the university (2018, p 17). As mentioned, these situations compel Indigenous students to provide the class with their emotional labour to ‘Indigenize’ the course content. However, this may reinscribe collective colonial traumas as the marginalization of Indigenous

content and worldview(s) is a fundamental aspect of settler-colonialism, and a negative determinant of Indigenous mental health.

Scholars have critiqued “potentially perilous pedagogies”, in which professors expose students to trauma narratives and then misread symptoms of primary or secondary trauma as “indicators of effective teaching and learning” (Carello & Butler, 2014, p 158-159.). Carello and Butler note the lack of evidence “that experiencing fear, horror, and helplessness are precursors to effective learning or that the development of PTSD symptoms is evidence of effective teaching” (2014, p. 160). This does not mean educators should ignore trauma narratives, as teaching and learning about trauma is “essential to comprehending and confronting the human experience” (Carello & Butler, 2014, p. 164) and can lead to what Cote-Meek terms “aha moments” when Indigenous students come to a better understanding of how [settler] colonialism has impacted their lives, families, and communities.

Offering trigger warnings when traumatic topics are to be discussed in the classroom is one component of trauma-informed teaching; these warnings may be offered in emails, in the course syllabus, and/or prior to a lecture discussing [a] traumatic topic[s]. Rae (2016) asserts that leaving class as a trauma response does not mean one learns less, as the traumatized individual will generally have first-hand experience of the material being taught. Rae notes that discomfort and trauma have become conflated in educational spaces, and used to contest the use of trigger warnings; to differentiate between the two, Rae describes a session on sexual assault that was part of her resident assistant training:

As the session began, I was already feeling wound up and uneasy. To me, that is one critical difference between feeling discomfort and trauma in the classroom. Instead of hearing the information and then feeling discomforted-- as many students do when

learning about horrific topics such as sexual assault, colonization, or war-- I was already uncomfortable prior to the session and from there it only escalated. The session started with college rape statistics (of course), scrolling from one PowerPoint slide to the next. I did not see or hear any of them because as far as I was concerned, I was not there anymore. In that moment, I was right back in my dorm room where it all happened.”
(2016, p. 97)

Additional strategies for navigating trauma in the classroom might include: providing lecture notes (Gaywish & Murdoch, 2018); limiting exposure rates and/or varying content intensity (Carello & Butler, 2014); and providing self-care information and strategies to students (Ibid; Loyer, 2018) such as contact information for local counselling services (INSPIRE, 2018). Importantly, Carter notes that seeking a diagnosis or documentation of mental distress can be largely inaccessible for marginalized folks and urges professors to teach with consideration of student needs, rather than ‘pushing out’ traumatized students who cannot access university accommodations (2015).

Introducing students to trauma narratives *must* centre the needs of students who hold trauma histories. Zembylas argues that a key liberal narrative ties compassion to feeling the pain and suffering of others, but asserts this process may reinforce existing hierarchies:

“Identifying with someone else’s suffering leads not only to an impasse in terms of connecting with others, but also threatens to diminish the implications of trauma. In other words, mobilizing either the universality or the particularity of trauma does not necessarily lead to any transformation... In order to move beyond the dangers of sentimentality, resentment and desensitization, trauma narratives should constitute a pedagogical ground in which renewed political vocabularies of justice must be fought

for. That is, educators' and students' task is to constantly re-invent new ways of becoming critical witnesses of trauma narratives" (2008, p.2 & p. 14, emphasis mine).

When I endured a Blanket Exercise with my settler-peers and professors, someone noted in our closing discussion that having their own child helped them understand how awful the separation of families must have been in the residential school era. I cannot put into words the devastation I experienced hearing this. Why must you step into our moccasins to see the harm? Why must you experience/view the pain in a settler body to understand the harm? *I do not need (or want) you to 'play Indian' to finally understand the pains of colonialism.*

While the blanket exercise experience did [apparently] lend to 'positive' learning outcomes for my settler peers/profs, my Indigenous friend and I walked around in a daze the following day. Our embodied trauma had been [re]awakened, and we struggled to think clearly or perform simple tasks. I was finals season. I gave myself ample time to walk around the city, hoping to find emotional stability before I went to an exam prep session. I didn't make it. I made it to campus, and even into the proper classroom, but upon my arrival I immediately balked and ran to the washroom to cry/endure a panic attack and then shamefully walked home. I deserved to be in that prep session. This kind of situation has been discussed by trauma scholars, who assert the risk of non-Indigenous student re/traumatization is minimal in the presentation of Indigenous trauma narratives. Moreover, scholars suggest those in [relative] positions of power are less likely to identify with trauma, but will instead become either defensive, resentful or desensitized to the material (Fernando & Bennett, 2019; Zembylas, 2008).

The blanket exercise was itself a response to anti-Indigenous racism in class presentations. I was the Native informant who wrote an open letter to the class explaining the harm(s) that occurred, because my professor did not notice. I asked an Indigenous prof to

proofread my open letter, who immediately asked what was going on. They were not pleased with the situation, and immediately demanded the department do better than take advantage of the emotional labour of a young Indigenous student. I was subsequently asked to offer my input in a couple meetings with xxxx department faculty and admin to ‘address the issue’, and to ensure similar incidents would not occur in the future. I asked for increased Indigenous content in classes, but this was apparently ‘too difficult’, so we settled on a blanket exercise for faculty and students who wished to join. I realized in that moment that I would not be taken seriously unless I had a PhD. I was a student; I had no power and my knowledge was not appreciated because no fancy letters followed my name. My professors wanted to tokenize me but only if my critiques and suggestions were easy and simple, not radical. Not that asking for increase Indigenous content is radical, but I digress.

A few days later, I was studying in the department. A professor came out of their office, looked me up and down, and then turned to speak to a colleague who had their door open. They said: “Oh! Naomi’s here, which reminds me— we should have a discussion about the blanket exercise.” I was in my second year of university and I had been reduced to nothing more than ‘Indigenous’ by someone in a position of power [over me], and directly involved in my learning journey. The professor would later say that my brilliant [Indigenous] friend got into a prestigious law school because of affirmative action, instead of merit. Years later, a professor in the department would confirm my perceptions: that professor had always seen us as one of our intersecting identities. We were always just dirty NDN’s to them.

I continued to study in the department, foolishly thinking I was ‘Indigenizing it’, and honestly, because I wanted my professors to be unable to cast me out of their minds, to instead see me diligently working, and to know I was a force to be reckoned with. I eventually stopped

going, around the time I was told I could be sued for defamation if I wasn't careful when writing my thesis.

Do it.

Sue me for shedding light upon your racism

Sue me for speaking my truth.

I'm no longer scared by your intimidation tactics.

Signed,

Flying Eagle Woman/Person

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