

Abandoning Damage-Centered Teachings on Indigenous American Histories: An Open

Letter to Educators

By Raiya Suliman

[STUDENT NAME] (student's pronouns)

Northeastern University

[STUDENT] addresses this open letter to educators within and outside of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts who direct discourses concerning Indigenous American histories and experiences. [STUDENT] posits that, like damage-centered research, damage-centered teaching promotes subtractive narratives of Indigenous realities that uphold systems of Whiteness. Further, the current Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Social Sciences Framework endorses damage-centered Indigenous American history through its reductive and incomplete lesson plans. [STUDENT] emphasizes the integral role of educational curricula in systems of Whiteness and implores educators to center Indigenous voices and abandon reductive lessons that promote damage-centeredness.

Dear Thinkers and Educators,

I begin this open letter with a brief introduction of myself to situate my argument as neither undue nor all-encompassing, and to acknowledge my limited perspective on matters of Indigenous experience and history. As a student under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's from 2008 through 2020, I feel that my proximity to current curricula endows me with a platform to criticize educational narratives on Indigenous peoples in the United States to a certain extent. Moreover, as a South Asian-American undergraduate student at a private institution in the Northeast, I recognize my role within educational systems of Whiteness as being simultaneously subordinate and privileged in nature. Most importantly, however, I recognize that I am not an Indigenous American. My criticisms of teachings on Indigenous American history and lived experiences are therefore attentive more to their subtractive nature and less to the direction in which their content should shift. This, I believe, should be a discourse controlled by Indigenous Americans in their diverse entirety. Thus, in this open letter to Massachusetts educators and individuals who direct narratives on Indigenous existence, I posit that current elementary and secondary social science curricula in the Commonwealth proliferate damage-centered narratives of Indigenous history and uphold systems of Whiteness; further, I argue that the current Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education social science framework must be re-constructed so as to elevate Indigenous voices and espouse desire-based narratives of Indigenous existence. I will start by outlining general characteristics of damage-centered teaching and the extent to which damage-centeredness in curricula is essential to the wellbeing of larger systems of subjugation. Next, I will refer to Indigenous American scholars and educators who are critically situated

within the context of subtractive narratives of Indigenous histories. To close, I will explore possible shifts from damage-centered teaching to desire-based teaching of the Indigenous American experience, again centering Indigenous American voices as the navigators of such movement.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Eve Tuck, an Unangaꞑ critical scholar and author of “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities”; her open letter on damage-centered research is the basis of this text and serves as a reminder that discourses surrounding subtractive frameworks must be re-visited in a broad range of social settings - especially in the classroom.

Damage-Centered Teaching

The formalized framework of damage-centeredness in academic settings was introduced by Eve Tuck in her open letter, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities”. In it, Tuck posits that damage-centered *research* “looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy” (Tuck 413). The result is a “pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (Tuck 413). Damage-centered teachings simultaneously operate in conjunction with and separate from damage-centered research to strengthen reductive narratives of oppression and weaken the multi-dimensionality of marginalized realities:

We think about damage-centered teaching as a pedagogical enactment of instruction that aims (intentionally or unintentionally) to use the life and school experiences of historically marginalized peoples, communities, and lands as a basis for helping primarily White, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgendered, heterosexual, native-English-speaking, Christian PSTs gain heightened critical awareness about issues of race, culture, and

power in society and schools, and a heightened disposition and advocacy orientation for social justice teaching. (Carter Andrews, Dorinda, et al 7)

Similar to damage-centered research, damage-centered teaching serves the cognitive needs of a narrow demographic. As such, it is important to note that damage-centered teaching is not always directed by those immediately involved in its subject matter, but rather by those who seek to achieve self-critical awareness predicated on historical subjugation. At the crux of damage-centered teaching are teachers themselves, who act directly in accordance with current curricula: “Through use of course material and activities that illuminate the oppression, pain, and/or loss of individuals and communities, teacher educators may actually further the goals of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal, colonial agendas” (Carter Andrews 8). Unfortunately, due to the systemic nature of Whiteness and dominant narratives at play, damage-centered teaching cannot be identified and quelled on a case-by-case basis. Rather, it must be observed and remedied on an institutional scale “through program design and curriculum (e.g., policies and procedures, course offerings, field experiences, and other requirements)” (Carter Andrews 11).

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s PreK-12 History and Social Science Core Curriculum Framework discloses the following guarantee:

The Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks provide teachers, students and families with clear and shared expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of each year. They represent a promise of equitable education for all students. They formalize the expectation that all students in the Commonwealth have access to the same academic content, regardless of their zip code, background, or abilities. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)

In following sections, I will argue that this “promise of equitable education for all students” not only guarantees equal access to the core curriculum, but also to humane and equitable lesson plans *within* the core curriculum. It is therefore necessary to re-visit current curricula to identify the ways in which they uphold damage-centered teaching strategies, and ipso facto institutional Whiteness.

The Massachusetts PreK-12 History and Social Science Core Curriculum Framework

At present, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education requires all public schools in the Commonwealth to operate under its *2018 History and Social Science Framework*. The curriculum outlines detailed lesson plans for each grade level and recommends discretionary online resources. For the purposes of this analysis and given the interspersed nature of Indigenous histories within the curriculum, I will not limit my commentary to any one grade or course. Rather, I hope to clarify the ways in which damage-centeredness is ingrained across the framework, independent of comprehension level or digestibility, whatever that has come to mean in educational settings.

The most current history and social science framework proliferates damage-centeredness across two distinct, yet mutually reinforcing methodologies: 1) through pathologizing Indigenous histories, and 2) through fraudulently ascribing meaning (or rather, lack thereof) to Indigenous experiences, both past and present. In subsequent sections, I will refer to the framework itself to elucidate the ways in which the stifling of Indigenous self-representation and desire(s) has been fortified in text. As Carter Andrews et. al contends, movement away from such narratives in the classroom must include re-evaluations of the curricula that shape it.

Pathologizing Indigenous Histories

It is not surprising that most instances of damage-centeredness within the Framework appear in lessons pertaining to America's "founding". What registers as a source of national pride for many, is also problematically memorialized as the last era of Indigenous sovereignty in the United States. It is therefore fitting that the first formal mentions of "Native Peoples" in the core curriculum appear in direct connection with European settler colonialism, and later, the founding of Massachusetts (Grade 3):

Explain why Puritan men and women migrated in great numbers to Massachusetts in the 17th century, how they moved west from the Atlantic coast, and the consequences of their migration for the Native Peoples of the region (e.g., loss of territory, great loss of life due to susceptibility to European diseases, religious conversion, conflicts over different ways of life such as the Pequot War and King Philip's War). (*History and Social Science Framework* 56).

While "loss of [Indigenous] territory" and "loss of [Indigenous] life" were and continue to be obvious consequences of settler colonialism, the totality of Indigenous existence should not and cannot persist in this paradigm of portrayal. I find it especially unnerving that European weaponization of sickness is assuaged here through Indigenous Peoples' inherent "susceptibility to European diseases" – in establishing collective European immunity as the standard, this lesson plan overtly promotes othering in which Indigenous identity becomes associated with abnormal immunity (emphasis on *abnormal*).

Likewise, the Pequot War and King Philip's War are singularly characterized by loss of Indigenous life, and ultimately Indigenous defeat. Lessons on the French and Indian War and the American Revolution are analogously situated later in the Framework, laden with undercurrents

of European coercion, subjugation, and superiority. While these events have proven critical to the trajectory of American history, I fear that the context in which they are presented lacks wholeness. This is to say that the inclusion of Indigenous/settler conflict itself is not the issue, but rather the exclusion of Indigenous *desire* separate from colonization throughout the curriculum that inhibits a balanced and fair narrative:

... desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives. Considering the excerpt from Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2005), desire-based frameworks defy the lure to serve as “advertisements for power” by documenting not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression. (Tuck 416)

Just as Tuck establishes desire-based frameworks as the ultimate “antidotes” to damage-centeredness, I would argue that self-determination (in all of its many forms) is the optimum counter to incompleteness. Unfortunately, the current curriculum unrelentingly perpetrates this “act of aggression” by elevating white, colonial narratives in lieu of endorsing Indigenous self-representation. It is therefore impossible to achieve reformation without first interrupting the interests of Whiteness throughout the Framework.

(Mis)representation of Indigenous Experiences

In the following subsection, I position (mis)representation of Indigenous experience throughout the Framework as an impediment to Indigenous self-determination and thereby an enabler of damage-centeredness. On its own, external representation of ‘Native Peoples’ may not explicitly engender damage-centered teaching; however, the definite *lack* of Indigenous self-representation in the Framework proscribes any opportunity to establish desire-based narratives.

The curriculum admittedly includes direction on how to discuss Indigenous sovereignty, but even its most explicit lesson plan on the subject does little to uphold Indigenous voices and counteract Whiteness (Grades 9-12):

the movement to protect the rights, self-determination, and sovereignty of Native Peoples (e.g., the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968, the American Indian Movement, the Wounded Knee Incident at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota in 1973, the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, and the efforts of Native Peoples’ groups to preserve Native cultures, gain federal or state recognition and raise awareness of Native American history. (*History and Social Science Framework* 136)

Apart from the vagueness characteristic of this and other Indigenous lesson plans, much of what is presented as examples of Indigenous sovereignty is baked into larger hierarchies of Whiteness. The Wounded Knee Incident, for example, was a massacre of hundreds of Lakota tribespeople perpetrated by the United States Army. If the teachings on Indigenous sovereignty that do exist cannot function outside a paradigm of self-defense against historical and modern imperialism, can Indigenous experience and freedom ever thrive as a self-actualized, unprovoked reality? As Tuck maintains and I concur, oppression cannot singularly define a community, else it risks losing all perceived autonomy.

What I find most inappropriate, however, is the Framework's explicit disregard for Indigenous self-representation and simultaneous preference toward external accounts of 'Native Peoples':

Trace on a map the voyages of European explorers of the Northeast coast of North America (e.g., Giovanni Caboto [John Cabot], Bartholomew Gosnold, Giovanni de Verrazano, John Smith, Samuel de Champlain)... Explain how any one of the explorers described the Native Peoples and the new lands, and compare an early 17th century map of New England with a current one. (*History and Social Science Framework* 55)

Whereas Indigenous accounts and primary sources appear as footnotes or appendices, interspersed scantily throughout the Framework, patronizing and obtuse reports by European conquerors are explicitly elevated as the main content of this lesson. Later, in Grades 9-12, the same can be said about modern American history, in which the only explicit representations of Indigenous Americans are made through the eyes of non-Indigenous cartoonists: "cartoons by Thomas Nast on immigration, Native Peoples, and politics for Harper's Weekly Magazine in the 1870s-1880s" (*History and Social Science Framework* 126).

The continuous ignorance of Indigenous self-expression within the Framework necessitates a shift away from colonial narratives, and ipso facto damage-centeredness. The previous section is by no means comprehensive in its listing of damage-centered directives, but I intend for it to expose the ways in which even the most unambiguous lessons on Indigenous experience fail to promote self-actualization.

Re-Centering Indigenous Voices

In closing, I'd like to acknowledge the Indigenous scholars, educators, and persons who are doing so much more to realize desire-based educational frameworks than I can ever hope to in any address. The journey ahead, towards desire-based frameworks on Indigenous histories, is one that must be paved by those empowered with self-representation. It cannot and will not be a narrative monopolized by the interests of Whiteness and/or guilt-ridden individuals. Otherwise, as Natalie Diaz, a Mojave American poet and activist reminds us, mainstream convictions will trap Indigenous portrayals in systems of the past, separate from the now:

...that's the typical American way of thinking about Natives. We're always a footnote even so much modern contemporary literature is. I don't know how many times I've seen a line such as this that says, "And our native brothers and sisters" or "And we're on unseated territory" or "And we're on stolen land" as if that acknowledges us in any way, and really by doing that, that's saying we don't exist. We exist only in that past. (Diaz)

Instead, we must refer to the lived experiences and words of those we seek to include in our histories and futures. We must, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith contends, resist any craving to absolve ourselves of guilt through fraudulent representation and othering:

The desires for "pure" uncontaminated and simple definitions of the native by the settler is often a desire to continue to know and define the Other whereas the desires by the native to be self defining and self naming can be read as desires to be free, to escape definition, to be complicated, to develop and changes and be regarded as fully human. In between such desires however are multiple and shifting identities and hybridities with much more nuanced positions about what constitutes native identities, native communities, and native knowledge in the anti/post colonial times. (Smith 86)

While narratives of Indigenous loss and subjugation uphold damage-centeredness, their inclusion in curricula is not, on its own, the root of the issue; rather, it is the intentional exclusion of Indigenous voice that strips lessons of their completeness. And when we begin to acknowledge the fallacies in our current frameworks, we must not stop there in hopes of passing the torch to those who should have held it all along. We must actively seek these voices out, create spaces in which their movement away from the footnotes and into the main text is fortified – spaces that acknowledge complete Indigenous experiences of the past, present, and future. Let this be your promise to yourselves, as educators, and to your students who will continue to damage unless the script is rewritten.

Love Lessons in a Time of Settler Colonialism
BY TANAYA WINDER

I am not murdered, and I am not missing, but parts of me have been disappeared.
— Leanne Simpson

They too know all too well that some cracks were built just for us to fall through. We live in a world that tries to steal spirits each day; they steal ours by taking us away.

From Industrial Schools to forced assimilation, genocide means removal of those who birth nations — our living threatens. Colonization has been choking

us for generations. I tell my girls they are vessels of spirit, air to lungs expanding; this world cannot breathe without us. There are days I wish

I didn't have to teach these lessons, but as an Indigenous womxn silence is deadening. There is danger in being seen, our bodies are targets

marked for violence. We carry the Earth's *me too* inside us, a howling wind, our mothers & their mothers swallowed these bullets long ago.

The voices ricochet *I wish I were invisible I wish I were invisible I wish* echoes in my eardrums — we know what it's like to live in fear. Colonialism's bullet sits cocked,

waiting behind a finger on trigger. We breathe and speak and sing for survival. We carve out in lines; we write — *I know joy I know pain I know love*

I know love I know — lessons we've carried throughout time. Should I go missing: don't stop searching; drag every river until it turns red and the waters of our names

stretch a flood so wide it catches everything. And we find each other whole and sacred, alive and breathing and breathing and breathing.

REFERENCES

- Carter Andrews, Dorinda, et al. "Beyond Damage-Centered Teacher Education: Humanizing Pedagogy for Teacher Educators and Preservice Teachers." *Teachers College Record*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=22737>.
- Diaz, Natalie. Interviewed by David Naimon. *Between the Covers*, 22 Oct. 2020, <https://tinhouse.com/transcript/between-the-covers-natalie-diaz-interview/>
- History and Social Science Framework*. 2018, <https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/hss/2018-12.pdf>.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. "Massachusetts Learning Standards." *Current Curriculum Frameworks - Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*, <https://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/>.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. "ON TRICKY GROUND Researching the Native in the Age of Uncertainty." (2005).
- Tuck, Eve. *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*. 2009, https://pages.ucsd.edu/~rfrank/class_web/ES-114A/Week%204/TuckHEdR79-3.pdf.
- Winder, Tanaya. "Love Lessons in a Time of Settler Colonialism". *Poetry Foundation*. June 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/146709/love-lessons-in-a-time-of-settler-colonialism>