

***A Review of Colonized Classrooms: Racism, Trauma and Resistance in Post-Secondary Education* (Sheila Cote-Meek, Fernwood Publishing: Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2014)**

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*Colonized Classrooms* (Cote-Meek, 2014) is a collection of narratives from Indigenous students, Elders and professors who courageously confront the ways in which our classrooms are colonized. This collection explores experiences in post-secondary classrooms which trap Indigenous students in the web of a colonized Canadian society – that which manifests in the further marginalization of these students. This book review provides insight for those of us needing to explore similar issues in Wolastoqey territory. In this work, I examine recent measures to both indigenize and decolonize our teaching pedagogies and classrooms, here in Eastern Canada, and the 94 Calls to Action mandated by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2105).

As I worked through this book of *Colonized Classrooms*, and the unpacking of the narratives, I acknowledge the manifestation of sadness, pain, and anger for Aboriginal students, professors and Elders. Through such unpacking, I feel it is critical for one to remember to transform such feelings into activism and awareness work. Keeping this in mind, I pair the teachings found within this work with an action of my own to bring awareness of the directives here to my current work and assist me in the process of decolonizing our classrooms.

This book explores two specific questions: how do Aboriginal students confront curriculum on colonial history that is marked by violence, in the classroom? Moreover, what pedagogies, healing or otherwise, might be useful for Aboriginal students in post-secondary classrooms that cover the topic of colonial violence on Aboriginal peoples when those students have suffered from colonial violence, a violence that remains ongoing? (Cote-Meek, 2014, p.9).

Cote-Meek (2014) goes on to share that “[t]his book should be viewed as a snapshot or a case study on experiences and negotiations that Aboriginal students and professors must contend with within a specific context” (p.11), and she reveals that even with evident changes in today’s education systems, both students and professors are met with significant challenges inside post-secondary classrooms and, further, within the academy itself.

An essential aspect of this book is that it presents ways in which Aboriginal students, Elders and professors employ a number of strategies to resist ongoing colonialism and racism. Further, in *Colonized Classrooms*, Cote-Meek uniquely links the impact of racism to psychological trauma. On a more personal note, I found the narratives shared in the book to mirror many of my own experiences. Throughout my educational journey, I have encountered many instances of racism, and I have heard many stories from my friends and family of similar experiences. The fact of the matter is colonialism and racism still lives and breathes today, and it manifests in many spaces and forms, including through teaching practices and pedagogies. I believe that the sharing of these narratives will first disrupt the beliefs of many people and they will begin to see that things are not okay for Aboriginal students and professors. They will realize how detrimental colonial practice is. Secondly, this sharing will force educators and policy makers to

critically assess curricula in a way that will work to afford Aboriginal students an equitable education. Further, there will be an examination of spaces to ensure that a safe place for Aboriginal students exists within post-secondary classrooms. The disruption of current views need to be merged with the process of healing, and efforts should be made to support Aboriginal students through the offering of ceremonies and the availability of smudging and teachings within schools, centres or classrooms.

Cote-Meek (2014) works at conceptualizing the impact of the colonial encounter, and in her work, she draws on the fields of psychology, cultural studies and variations of Native studies to lay out theoretical constructs in order to address questions of decolonization and change these questions. Further, Cote-Meek draws on psychoanalytic theories of trauma. Anti-colonial scholarship inform the framework of this work. Also, the author includes an analysis of intergenerational trauma - that experienced by the children of those affected during the residential school era. Through this framework, we can begin to understand effects of the colonial encounter. In part, Cote-Meek (2014) defines colonization by referring to an Indigenous sanctity of land, and the dichotomy of the settler's quest for the land and its resources.

Through her work we learn about 'ethnostress,' which is defined by Cajete (1994) as "primarily a result of a psychological response pattern that stems from the disruption of a cultural life and belief system that one cares about deeply" (p.27). Cote-Meek goes on to explore the negotiating of a cultural/colonial divide in post-secondary classrooms, and more specifically how Aboriginal people were racially constructed in these classrooms and communities. The Aboriginal professor narratives that Cote-Meek explores examine how these professionals experience a sense of being

trapped. That is, they feel trapped between Aboriginal worldviews and the world of academia. Through such narratives, we learn of ways in which Aboriginal professors have experienced how pedagogies marginalize Aboriginal peoples and, first hand, we see the effects these colonial practices have had on students. These narratives, paired with Aboriginal students, offer up a clear snapshot of the ways in which post-secondary classrooms are still colonized. Further, they demonstrate the harmful effects colonial practice has on Aboriginal students. In discussions and the sharing of Elder narratives, Cote-Meek works to thread together teachings in a way that promotes healing for Aboriginal students and professors.

In her book, Cote-Meek critically looks at the retention rates of Aboriginal youth in post-secondary education in an effort to highlight the traumatic effects of colonized classrooms. By exposing painful experiences for Aboriginal youth in education, we are forced to come together to reclaim a mode of solidarity, so we may decolonize our classrooms and step towards healing. The narrative healing of *Colonized classrooms* invites us into the hopeful future of education, that where Aboriginal language and culture are adequately represented. Further, we begin to see how our Aboriginal professors should be supported and equipped with decolonized content and cultural support systems such as Elders and ceremonies. Such a vision includes the resisting of ongoing racism and colonialism in the classroom. In her final chapter entitled ‘Closing the Circle,’ Cote-Meek shares her findings for a transformational pedagogy. More specifically, through an anti-colonial framework, Cote-Meek draws on Elder teachings and “understandings of how healing from ongoing colonial violence and trauma is understood and how it might inform pedagogy” (p.140). Similarly, in Archibald’s (2008) study of storytelling, we learn how Elders’ stories can inform education through an age of healing.

One of the reasons I have chosen to review this book is to receive grounding so I may create a platform where I can invite others to learn about these teachings and findings and to ensure we use them to bring much-needed change to our post-secondary classrooms in Wolastoqey territory. I have examined this work and the commonalities from Anishnaabe-Kwe to Wolastoqey knowledges. Cote-Meek's approach includes the framing of narratives, which in my culture are reflections of storywork (Archibald, 2008), both of which can be adopted to form meanings and promote various teachings. Further, I have taken the narratives Cote-Meek has shared, and I have reflected on my own personal experiences in the post-secondary classroom. I can relate to her work on many different levels, and I know that we have been impacted here in similar ways. I have had the privilege of working at the post-secondary level and have worked closely with Aboriginal students. Through the sharing of these narratives, alongside my own and the narratives of my students, I believe I can illuminate hope for our students in our territory, especially through Elder teachings and healing efforts. This work brings value to the rich voices of our Elders in an age when the movement toward healing is so critically needed. Through standing on the shoulders of Cote-Meek, and all those who have informed her work in this area, and with reverence, I will begin to do the same work in Wolastoqey territory.

## References

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- Cajete, G. (1999). *Look to the mountain: An ecology of Indigenous education*. Durango, CO: Kivacki Press.

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