

“WHAT DOES PROTEST MEAN?”: A FREIREAN INTERVENTION IN TAMIL GENOCIDE EDUCATION.

Abstract: Genocide education in Canadian classrooms is often focused on theoretical concepts and legal processes that don't account for the lived realities of students who encounter ongoing genocidal projects. In the case of the Tamil Genocide, the Ontario government passed Bill 104, or the Tamil Genocide Education Week Act, which mandated a seven-day period in May of each year to promote education around the Tamil Genocide. Despite this, students continue to face repression, silencing, and otherwise lack of meaningful resources to explore these topics. This paper examines how Tamil, Tamil-Canadian, and/or Tamil-speaking students experience repression for attempting to discuss the Tamil Genocide in their classroom and how this inhibits their ability to recognize, address, and act on the very real ways intergenerational memories of 2009 show up in their everyday lives. It will explore how critical pedagogue and scholar Paulo Freire's critique of power and authoritarianism masked as benevolence offers a critical juncture in the study of Tamil Genocide education. Rather than be limited to the parameters of a classroom environment, this paper considers how genocide education takes place in assemblies, community halls, and even within the home. It weaves in reflections from the author as a Tamil Genocide Education facilitator with critical pedagogical theory in an attempt to think laterally with and across interlocking oppressions to conceptualize a generative space in genocide education. By engaging with the overlapping, contradictory, and contextually dense narratives of learners, Tamil Genocide educators can reject singular narrative education and imagine alternative possibilities.

Keywords: Education, Critical Pedagogy, Genocide Studies, Tamil Studies, Displacement, Memory

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Introduction

May 18th 2009, the day that marked the Tamil Genocide, saw the brutal end of war in Sri Lanka. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed, and many more were forcibly disappeared during the last stages of a genocide committed by the Sri Lankan state (PEARL, 2019; International Truth and Justice Project, 2021). The Tamil Genocide holds a significant place in the history and present-day realities of victim-survivors, Eelam Tamils, and Tamil-speaking peoples across the world. Tamil-Canadian students either recall the horrific timeline of events leading up to May 2009 or know family members, peers, and communities impacted by the over 27-year long struggle. During the last stages of war in the Mullivaikkal region, World Bank household data estimates over 169 976 war casualties, not including the reported deaths of Sri Lankan soldiers, cadres from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or civilians prior to 2009 (International Truth and Justice Project, 2021). For several generations, disappearance and violence marked the quotidian lives of people on the island. Thousands of Tamils across the world took to the streets in 2009 to demand that the international community intervene and stop the ongoing genocide. In Canada alone, the Tamil diaspora organized protests with over 100 000 attendees participating in human chains and sit-ins that lasted over four days in downtown Toronto to plead the Canadian government to stop Sri Lanka's aggressive military campaign against Tamil civilians (Piec, 2012; Philipupillai, 2013). Piec (2012) describes some of the major disruptions organized by the Tamil community, including a large-scale protest launched outside the U.S. Consulate building in 2009. From April 26 to April 29, "[p]olice were forced to shut down the area...[as] protestors refused to move until some action was taken to address the war in Sri Lanka" (Piec, 2012). These protests are a significant aspect in the history of Tamil-Canadian diaspora organizing, as "Tamil students, community organizers, parents, elders, children and allies alike protested in front of government and UN buildings, schools, and stopped traffic on prominent highways to raise awareness on the genocide" (Selvarajah, 2021). Memories of their communities' and family's experiences protesting on the streets follow Tamil learners to this very day.

Canadian media coverage of the 2009 protests followed a disturbing pattern of characterising protest-goers and the larger Tamil-Canadian diaspora as "terrorist sympathizers" (Philipupillai, 2013). This was largely due to politicized global and state narratives that positioned all forms of Tamil resistance as contributing to terrorist movements. In "Terror's Lawfare," Fathima Cader explains, "[w]hen even private speech attracts state

suspicion, the designation of ‘terrorist’ is not neutrally deployed; it is deeply racialized.” Tamil-Canadian students experienced the brunt of the terrorist designation in the classroom, where some were singled-out by their teachers and asked to step out as punishment for the protests. Many students were interrogated by police officers and administrative staff at school for exercising their right to protest. These racially-motivated interactions are not isolated in their occurrence. Rather, the targeting, silencing, and surveillance of Tamil students is enmeshed in the ongoing suppression of Black, Indigenous, Palestinian, and racialized students in the classroom. It is within this political environment that I begin my work. This paper argues that the repression students face for attempting to discuss genocide in their classrooms inhibits their ability to recognize, address, and act on the very real ways memories of 2009 show up in their everyday lives. It explores how Freire’s conceptualization of dialogue in the classroom might be used as a point of entry into transformative learning in Tamil Genocide education.

In writing this paper, I am motivated by my experiences as a student in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and as a Tamil woman, yet I believe it is important to differentiate between identity politics conceived in all the ways one group (or one person) suffers and identity politics as it is tied to all the ways in which systems construct, shape, and oppress intersecting identities. In other words, even though I share narratives, responses, and contributions from students, I do so in an effort to engage in a sustained critique of educational policy and practice with them and not to claim authority over their contributions. This paper intersperses reflections from the classroom as a Tamil Genocide Education facilitator with theory in an effort to think laterally with and across interlocking oppressions to conceptualize a generative space in genocide education. While theories of Black Feminist life writers are not explored in depth, much of my reflections on positionality, identity, and critique of systems are foregrounded in training I’ve received in Black Feminist life writing (Hill Collins, 1991; Boyce Davies, 1994).

Hauntings and Tamil Genocide Education

As a workshop facilitator and educator who teaches on the Tamil Genocide in classroom and community settings since 2019, I noticed how intergenerational memories haunt my mind and the minds of learners. Many of these memories are policed, repressed, and otherwise silenced in classroom and community spaces. Avery F. Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* defines the experience of haunting as “draw[ing] us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the

structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition.” (Gordon, 2008, 8). Rather than guide learners, educators, and policymakers in the direction of objective facts or “cold knowledge,” hauntings present a “something-to-be-done” that can reveal “complex personhood[s]” made up of fractured memories, feelings, thoughts, and actions (Gordon, 2008, 7).

Over the course of the 2020-2022 academic years, I worked as the education lead for a non-profit focused on securing justice, accountability, and self-determination for Tamil peoples in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. My responsibilities included leading community outreach, specifically by designing and implementing education workshops to community members and students in school boards across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). It is important to note that each school district, community organization, and collective have different policies and practices related to genocide education. Resources provided by the organization I worked with previously were foundational in the process of constructing a timeline of events leading up to the Tamil Genocide, as well as building a case for the United Nations. I now facilitate workshops, learning circles, and presentations to schools, universities, and community organizations on my own. Usually, I am invited into classrooms, assemblies, and community halls to discuss the history and present-day intersections of the Tamil Genocide. Many of these invitations come from Tamil-speaking teachers and allies that I’ve worked with in the past, or those who heard of my work through friends and community. Age ranges of participants vary anywhere between 7 to 50+ years old, depending on the school and community setting. Some sessions are in classrooms and school assembly halls, while others are held in virtual community spaces on a drop-in basis. Not all participants identify as Tamil, Tamil-Canadian, or Tamil-speaking in classrooms or community settings, as students from a variety of backgrounds learn, interact, and contribute during these sessions.

I start workshops by presenting a timeline of the structural discrimination of Tamils and other minorities on the island. Through this introduction, I emphasize the importance of contextualizing violence against Tamil and Tamil-speaking peoples on the island within frameworks of colonialism, ethno-nationalist state-building, class, caste, and gender. I then reference graphics designed by the previous organization I worked with to encourage students to connect the events that took place in May 2009 with the Definition of Genocide provided in the United Nations 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. By understanding how the Tamil Genocide took place and locating past war crimes

and ongoing human rights abuses, these workshops attempt to bridge the past and present through education. As a facilitator, I position Tamil-Canadian displacement alongside shared histories of resistance that cross borders. This approach offers a space for critical reflection on the Tamil Genocide that will lead to action, which allows students to feel a sense of agency in shaping their understanding and relationship to the conflict.

Following a workshop with high-school students in July 2021, a Tamil-Canadian learner shared the following reflection with the class:

I now realize that there are gaping holes in the fabric of my family's history...maybe I can try to understand their silences by connecting with the lesson in front of me in a deeper way.

This student's articulation of their familial history as a "fabric with gaping holes" struck a chord with me, as it accurately conveyed the necessity of re-visiting genocide education with perspectives rooted in the lived experiences of students in the classroom. It was the first time that this student was connecting their own family's memories and experiences with the material that was being taught to them. While equity, tolerance, reconciliation, and awareness are central values in existing articulations of genocide education programs funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education (The Zoryan Institute, 2022), meaning-making and connection-building has largely been missing. A lack of opportunities to form connections isolates students from asking deeper and more engaged questions surrounding the sociopolitical conditions of war crimes and genocide, and its impact on their own histories, families, and communities.

Freirian pedagogy offers pedagogical shifts, fissures, and tools that can help address what Gordon presents as a "something-to-be-done" when you are visited by a haunting. This paper will introduce dialogue as a Freirean point of entry into transformative genocide education. I will utilize reflections from my time facilitating and presenting on the Tamil Genocide in classrooms across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), as well as my experience organizing virtual reading groups with participants from across the world. In essence, it will aim to address the comment shared by the student from my earlier workshop by asking: *how can educators equip students to understand the "gaping holes" and "silences" around them?*

Paulo Freire: dialogue and subject formation

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who advocated for a critical pedagogy rooted in love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking. In a 1979 video

interview by the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) titled “Guns and Pencils,” Freire described a conversation with a resistance fighter in Guinea-Bissau. Freire recalled physically recoiling at the resistance fighter’s description of sexually violent war crimes committed by colonial Portuguese soldiers, balling up his fists to ask whether they castrated the soldiers upon capture (Meeting Freire: Guns and Pencils, 1979). The resistance fighter looked at Freire with confusion and replied: “*Comrade, our great leader Amilcar Cabral always said to us every day, we have to respect the enemies, even if they don’t respect us. Do you think we could respect them as human beings if we castrate them?*” (Meeting Freire: Guns and Pencils, 1979, 16:27). It was in this moment that Freire realized his question was one characteristic of a petit-bourgeois intellectual, divorced from the material realities of building revolution on the ground. While the guns of the petit-bourgeois scholar were in their writing, the politics of the resistance fighter is quite literally their “gun really, and not words, pencils, or paper” (Ibid, 1979, 19:47). In this example, the Guinea-Bissau resistance fighter’s reaction reflected the lived realities and forming futures of oppressed peoples. It is only through their sustained praxis, or as Freire defines “reflection and action upon a world to transform it” (1970, 52) that determined what type of world the oppressed hope to build through revolution. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, Freire understood conflict and struggle to be forces that “shape [and] reshape consciousness” (Meeting Freire: Guns and Pencils, 1979, 2:56). In the interview, he argued that conceptions of literacy do not account for political literacy. A person considered linguistically illiterate could very well be politically literate as a result of their experience of struggle. It is through engaging with the political literacy of students in Guinea-Bissau that Freire understood how much their articulations of political projects, freedom, and struggle inform their relationship to reading and writing. The prevalence of hegemonic knowledge functions through the suppression of knowledges considered illegitimate. This is a continuous process where both the oppressor and oppressed lose their humanity. The resistance fighter’s reply to Freire exposed a central premise of education rooted in resistance: how do the oppressor and oppressed understand and act upon an ongoing process of subjectification?

In *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage*, Freire asserts that “[it] is in listening to the student that I learn to speak with him or her.” (Freire, 2000, 71). From the very act of listening to and working with the student-teacher, the classroom can be transformed into a space where subjectivity can be uncovered and acted upon through dialogue. Understood from this perspective, the oppressed recognizing and re-claiming their

subjectivity through resistance is significant for not only the humanization of themselves, but their oppressors as well. This process is clearly articulated in Freire's interaction with the resistance fighter from Guinea-Bissau. Scholars, students, and activists struggle with this particular tenant of Freire's theory, as many argue it should not be the duty of the oppressed to reorient the humanity of the oppressor. However, Freire's particular emphasis on re-orienting the "guns and pencils" of revolution can help educators think through genocide education in relationship to student-teacher and teacher-students dynamics. It is within these tensions that I observe a transformative space for dialogue in the classroom, whereby authenticity and liberation is centered, particularly with and through the oppressed whose subjectivity continues to be denied. Here, a radical notion of hope can grow.

The search for dialogue in Tamil Genocide Education.

In an effort to engage learners in one of my workshops in 2022, I set-up a Menti-meter word bubble, and posed the following question: "What do you think of when you see the term Tamil Genocide Education?" Students were told to navigate to the Menti-meter website and input their responses anonymously. The following image depicts a visual representation of their anonymized responses:

What do you think of when you see the term "Tamil Genocide Education"?



The question sought to explore their thoughts in relationship to the concept of "Tamil Genocide Education," which had only recently emerged in Ontario education curriculum. In May 2021 the Ontario Government passed Bill 104, or the Tamil Genocide Education Week Act, which proclaimed a seven-day period in May of each year for Ontarians to educate themselves about the Tamil Genocide (Bill 104, 2021). As a Tamil Genocide workshop facilitator and educator, I was curious to see if the passing of Bill 104 would lead to an

increase in educational supports for students learning about the Tamil Genocide. This was far from the case, as students continued to express a lack of resources to meaningfully explore this topic in their classrooms. Evident from the Menti-meter, students expressed a mixture of responses from phrases related to urgency (“a pressing issue”), to more interpersonal and emotional experiences (“suffering,” or “devastating”). One phrase that stood out to me directly was “homes broken into pieces,” which suggested not only a historical connection to the lives lost and communities torn apart by the war, but also a present-day reflection of their own homes. Overall, students expressed eagerness to learn more about the history of the conflict and the psycho-social toll that it had taken on their lives, communities, and families.

At a recent workshop in the GTA, a student and her friend shared memories of how they were ridiculed by middle-school teachers for commemorating the Tamil Genocide. One student described how her Grade 7 teacher used to mock Tamil students on May 18th (the date that marks Tamil Genocide commemoration), and repeatedly created an unsafe space for her to speak on the experiences of her family that fled violence. Her story sat heavy with me as it articulated the severity of traumatic interactions students navigate with their educators. I was shocked that some teachers were continuing to treat Tamil students like this, as it reminded me of the countless times I was shamed or mocked as a student by teachers for wanting to talk about the Tamil Genocide. In addition, one school was barred from attending my workshop because school administrators perceived the topic to be “too political” for high-school students. I’ve heard this “feedback” many times before. What does “too political” insinuate? How does it uniquely position Tamil Genocide education as an othered topic, one that is not worthy or deserving to “take up space” in the classroom? Who am I speaking to in these workshops, and do I even have the words to articulate a more direct form of resistance?

Freire defines dialogue as an encounter between human beings who attempt to name the world as they are mediated by it. In order for this type of dialogue to form he argues that the learner must enter the historical process as subjects. However, how can educators expect the oppressed to envision themselves as subjects in dialogue, when their subjectivity is not acknowledged in curriculum? A fundamental component of de-constructing existing models for genocide education lies in the careful investigation and re-presentation of the student-teacher and teacher-student receiving and interacting with this information in the classroom. In order to engage in authentic dialogue, Freire asserts that there must be an exploration of both the educator and learner’s subjectivity.

Complicating subjectivity in Tamil Genocide Education.

In his 1976 lecture, Michel Foucault defined subjectification as the process through which subjects are formed in a particular social and political context. Subjectivity resembles a never-ending experience where humans are acted on, formed, and constructed as they also negotiate their own definition of power. Knowledge production is attached to structures and institutions of power and thus, narratives and discourses produced by structures of power constitute hegemonic knowledge (Foucault, 1976). Hegemonic knowledge becomes entrenched while subjugated knowledges are disqualified or insufficiently elaborated. Foucault calls for a deeper interrogation of power beyond a conception of it being a negative force used by the oppressor as “[power] needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” (Foucault, 1976, 122).

Joy James critiques Foucault’s theorization of power and punishment as it omits significant context behind the “racial bias in historical lynching and contemporary policing [which] predicts [Foucault’s] silence on the racialization of prisons” (James, 1996, 27). Choudry further identifies meetings between Foucault and the Black Panther Party within the Prison Information Group which predated his “writing[s] on prisons, power-knowledge, genealogy, discipline, biopolitics, and biopower” (Choudry, 2015, 19). While Foucault’s articulation of power may seem conceptual, these theories are deeply informed by practice and decades of struggle. As mentioned earlier, the targeting, silencing, and surveillance of Tamil students in schools across the GTA is not a unique experience but part of the systemic targeting of Black, Indigenous, Palestinian, and racialized students. This is evident in the rise of Special Resource Officers (SRO) in schools across the GTA that specifically target these students. The presence of uniformed police officers “blurs the boundaries of policing and state rule, bringing youth and schooling further within [the states’] domain.” (Da Coasta, 2024, 38). James reminds us that “a professional teacher is not inherently a war resistor.... [and as such, the] educator’s task is to teach about and dissect the empire, patriarchy, classism, and racism.” (James, 2023, 10). The object of analysis in studying Tamil Genocide education is not the concept of power itself, but the structures that construct hegemonic power in the classroom and how student-teachers and teacher-students resist. When we speak of resistance against hegemonic knowledge systems of the classroom, it cannot be limited to a specific “Tamil” experience, but must extend to our peers and comrades in struggle.

Resistance-based knowledge production is crucial in an environment where methods and processes of subjectification are made obscure. In a June 2020 letter to Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce, Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Chair Robin Pilkey referenced the Azreili Foundation’s research to justify a series of actions articulated in Report 19, Article 4 of TDSB Committee Recommendations titled, “Incorporating Genocide Education as Compulsory Learning” (Pilkey, 2020). Over the past few years, the Azreili Foundation has come under scrutiny for its monetary and vocal support for the genocide enacted against Palestinians by the Israeli state (Bodie, 2022). Students and community members have protested against any form of engagement with the Azreili foundation, citing its complicity in the destruction of Gaza and violence enacted on Palestinians. While requests made by TDSB to give university accreditation for genocide education courses offered at the highschool-level and genocide education working groups may seem helpful in the case of the Tamil Genocide, it is important to critically examine the role of organisations like the Azreili Foundation. The contradictory tensions in relationships that foreground much of genocide education policy, curriculum, and practice in the TDSB reflect an internalization of surveillance through which genocides are allowed to be discussed in classrooms, and which ones are not. Foucault describes the internalization of surveillance as “a real and effective ‘incorporation’ of power [that] was necessary, in the sense that power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes, and modes of everyday behavior” (Foucault, 1976, 124). Power becomes subdued and utilized for the oppressed to enact on themselves, through surveillance and internal policing. As a facilitator, I’ve noticed a decrease in requests made by formal school boards for Tamil Genocide Education workshops even though Bill 104, the Tamil Genocide Education Week Act, was passed in 2022. There is also an increase in surveillance and monitoring of teachers who wish to pursue Tamil Genocide Education. One can’t help but notice the obvious link between this decrease of Tamil Genocide Education workshops and the increase in policing and surveillance of Palestinian students, teachers, and community members.

The entrenchment of the oppressor’s subjectivity does not end in the classroom, as it ventures deeper to establish a duality in the psyche of the oppressed. Freire defines the internalization of suffering, or the denial of the subjectivity of the oppressed, as “[the oppressed] are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized.” (Freire, 1970, 48). The oppressed are formed into subjects by the oppressor so that particular concepts become knowable and unknowable in the former’s

psyche. In this sense, the power of the oppressed is usurped into the ontology and knowledge frameworks of the oppressor. To resist this, one must not only become aware of the process of subjectification but also build alternative definitions of the subject that extend beyond the oppressor's imagination.

In a recent workshop facilitation, a student approached me with Ontario Bill 104 (Tamil Genocide Education Week Act) pulled up on their phone. They asked me why in a piece of legislation whose title evidently centers education, there is no mention of how Tamil Genocide Education will be implemented or supported in school boards across Ontario. Bill 104 faced several challenges after its' passing, including constitutional challenges levied by groups with support from the Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka (Eñano, 2022). Even though Bill 104 was upheld at the Ontario Superior Court in June 2022 and again by the Ontario Court of Appeal in September 2024, students continue to face significant challenges in organizing events at their school that can acknowledge, educate and commemorate the genocide perpetrated against Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Their struggles urge educators, policymakers, and community members to think beyond state recognition of the Tamil Genocide and towards meaningful implementation of educational resources and programs that center collective learning and action. In Chapter 3 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that "many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions), the *men-in-a-situation* to whom their program was ostensibly directed." (Freire, 1970, 107). How does one take into account the *students-in-a-situation* to whom Bill 104, or Tamil Genocide Education Week, is supposedly directed?

Freire understands the classroom to be a space that can center and explore the subjectivity of learners. By engaging with the overlapping, contradictory, and contextually dense narratives of learners in the classroom, Tamil Genocide educators can reject the assertion that genocide education must solely focus on conveying a particular narrative to students. Learners can engage in the process of subject formation, through building connections with stories related to the genocide, and connect to their own personal experiences. Jensen (2009) writes on the call for critical pedagogues to abandon narratives in favor of creating space for the learner, or the "bearers of knowledge," to examine their differences as

...it is not simply the master narratives of the official curriculum or the controlling ideologies of state examinations or the capitalist interests of the textbook industry that

are at stake in the critical classroom; it is also the people there, the bodies in the classroom, who carry knowledge within themselves that must be engaged, interrupted, and transformed. Moreover, these bearers of received knowledge do not come with one story about the past, a common understanding of the present, and a shared vision of the future. It is divided knowledges within the classroom that constitute the starting point for a postconflict pedagogy. (258-259)

In 2019, I hosted a reading group on the Tamil Struggle, a term that describes the vast history of struggles for justice, accountability, and/or self-determination led by Tamil and Tamil-speaking peoples in Sri Lanka. This group brought together primarily female-identifying and gender-diverse undergraduate students to discuss assigned readings describing the targeted suppression of Tamil and Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka leading up to and during the war. For Week 6 of readings we discussed Black July, a week in July 1983 where thousands of Tamils in the capital city Colombo and surrounding areas of Sri Lanka were targeted during a week-long pogrom. Tamil women were raped and killed, Tamil businesses were destroyed, many sought refuge in tea estates and neighbor homes, while hundreds were sent as refugees to the majority Tamil-identifying Northern provinces (Akilan & Ravichandradeva, 2023). Tamil-speakers were able to be identified and killed because Sri Lankan politicians provided majority-Sinhalese mobs with government-issued voter ID lists (PEARL, 2019; Akilan & Ravichandradeva, 2023). During the reading group, I shared my own parents' memories and recollections of Black July, as my mother was a survivor from the capital city, and my father helped receive refugees in the North. This prompted students to talk about their own parents' experiences with 1983, and many shared how their parents fled the island immediately after following Black July to seek refuge in Canada. Not every story was the same, as Jensen introduces the term "divided knowledges" to acknowledge how a diversity of lived experiences can become starting points to imagine pedagogy that does not enforce a common understanding of the past, present, or future. Each student brought a new understanding to engage, interrupt, and transform in a space surrounded by diverse perspectives on the history of the Tamil Struggle.

Building dialogue into genocide education syllabus.

The way I structure and implement Tamil Genocide workshops changed over time, especially as I transitioned from delivering workshops through an organization, to building

workshops on my own. When I first started, my teaching strategy operated under a “banking system of education” which Freire defines as a classroom space where teachers deposit knowledge into a students’ supposedly empty mind (1970). He argued that the “banking system of education” transforms the oppressed into inanimate objects that are controlled by a “sadistic love” on behalf of the oppressor to deposit, possess, and dominate (Freire, 1970, 59). In Tamil Genocide Education, a Freirean “banking model of education” method usually resembled the inundation of learners with dates, historical facts, and narratives in an attempt to gesture towards the broader social and political debates concerning the Tamil Genocide. Rather than try to help students place themselves in relation to fundamental events and moments that mark the Tamil Genocide, this type of education was more focused on the transfer of narratives.

It is important to contextualize the narrative-focused model especially in relation to the Tamil Genocide, which continues to be a highly contested topic in Ontario Education Curriculum. During my time facilitating, I spoke to some teachers who recalled receiving warnings and threats from the Sri Lankan Consulate General for teaching students about the Tamil Genocide. There was a sense of urgency surrounding the transfer of knowledge to students, which informed why teachers and Tamil-Canadian community organizations relied on the “banking system of education” to provide information on the Tamil Genocide. However, my choice to engage in the “banking system of education” was harmful to students, as they were not allowed to explore personal experiences in relation to the texts and definitions presented to them.

Despite threats and ineffective policies, these conversations continue to persist in the classroom. Freire (2000) rejects the notion of a “neutral education,” and argues that it is important teachers and students see their classroom as one moment of many to live and express authenticity and political perspective. As I started to re-think lesson plans on the Tamil Genocide, I grappled with intersections in the history of the Tamil Struggle involving class, caste, gender and other relations that reinforce hierarchical structures. To create space for authentic dialogue, my teaching material needed to frame these various forms of hierarchies under histories of oppression on the island and, in relation to genocides in Canada and across the world. This was no easy task, but it did call into consideration the significance of dialogue. It was impossible to frame the Tamil Genocide as separate from Canada’s ongoing settler-colonial projects and displacement of Indigenous peoples on this land and around the world. This was largely because students in workshops understood how tactics of

genocide from the past and in the present were interconnected. Building dialogue into Tamil Genocide Education required a thoughtful analysis of the teacher-student relationship in this space. Freire describes the problem with the existing teacher-student relationship in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as:

[it] involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. (Freire, 1970, 71)

Describing education as suffering from “narration sickness” captured the underlying issue I faced when relaying historical narratives to students who did not have the tools or space needed to form meaningful connections. I would be met with silence and blank stares in the classroom. It is especially concerning to teach a political topic such as genocide education through a narrative format, as it does not treat students as political subjects. In returning to Ontario curriculum, Wallner and Chouinard explain how particular nationalist “narrative constructions, [in] the Ontario curriculum...reinforces the message that Ontario students are ‘Canadians’ while sidelining the knowledge and understanding of the relations between the Government of Ontario and those living within the province” (2023, 159).

Narratives are different from stories, as the former attempts to entrench a particular ideology in the student while the latter is a tool to express lived experience and form connections with learners. One of the foundational elements of treating education as a narration process is Cartesian dualism, or the deliberate separation of body and mind. Cartesian dualism understands humans as spiritual beings who happen to inhabit bodies (Dika, 2020) and represents the metaphysical stance that mind and body are two distinct substances, each with a different essential nature. The separation of body and mind in the classroom negates the embodied experience of the student receiving information. Freire (1970) refused to recognize this type of separation between the cognitive and affective domains of human existence and argued that hope, like knowledge, is an experience of the entire body, which involves emotions, thought processes and intuitions.

In order to bridge the gap between mind and body, Freire (1970) advocated for a curriculum rooted in democratic practices. A key component of centering dialogue in curriculum is by demonstrating a commitment on part of the educator to listen and communicate with the learner. This may not always look like asking questions to have

students share intimate experiences and moments in their life, as silence can be an equally powerful form of communication. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire expands on its significance as

...silence makes it possible for the speaker who is really committed to the experience of communication rather than to the simple transmission of information to hear the question, the doubt, the creativity of the person who is listening. (Freire, 2000, 87).

Rather than focus on narrating many years of the Tamil Struggle to participants, my current teaching strategies aim to create spaces where attendees can participate and discuss readings with one another. These spaces employ a rigorous and mutual process of inquiry to arrive at new ways of seeing and acting that allow us to hold the complexity of the Tamil Genocide and imagine new, radical modes of interaction. Silence plays a significant role in this teaching strategy, as the definition of “student engagement” broadens to encompass moments and periods of reflection. Over time, I learnt that meaningful engagement with the material we engage with can take many forms, including silence. In my facilitations, I acknowledge that I am not the only one with absolute knowledge over decades of history and encourage participants to contribute more information through silence and dialogue, or a mixture of both. This opens up space for the sharing of stories, memories and moments, but it also allows for an inner dialogue where students and I can participate in the re-construction of ourselves.

Thinking Ahead

Student-teachers and teacher-students must create space in their curriculum to work through crises by understanding story(ies) as resistance to oppression and by giving testimonies of lived experiences in relation or resistance to narratives they are taught in the classroom. Teaching and learning can only take place through entering and working through crises, since it is this process that moves a learner to engage with the horrifying realities of past and ongoing genocides. Dialogue and silence, while seemingly contradictory, act as compatible tools to move towards building a Freirean dialogue in genocide education. Freire understood that successful political education must be committed to authentic dialogue, rooted in love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking. His work emphasized the importance of authentic dialogue in classroom spaces, which can emerge when teacher-students and student-teachers engage in inquiry and creative transformation. In these

spaces, dialogue must take the form of a humanizing praxis, whereby action with the oppressed must be as important as reflection and naming of the oppressive situation.

I was recently invited to deliver a guest presentation to an assembly at an elementary school in Scarborough. This was my first in-person presentation to such a wide-range of learners, from kindergarten to grade 8, and I was very nervous to even mention the Tamil Genocide. I felt I didn't have enough skills to hold a conversation with young learners on difficult topics like genocide and violence. During the assembly, I spoke on how protests were a huge part of Tamil-Canadian history especially around 2009, and how these political demonstrations defined our relationship with the state and land. As I neared the end of my presentation, I asked the students if they had any questions and several hands shot up. I picked one young student who looked like they were in grade 2. He lowered his hand and asked, "what does protest mean?"

In the political pamphlet "The Garret," Dr. Nimmi Gowrinathan examines narrative captivity through a visual and conceptual reconstruction of the space occupied by Harriet Jacobs as she escaped slavery by hiding in her grandmother's pent roof. In this 30-page text, Gowrinathan, in conversation with peers, describes the oppressive limitations of narrative as it, "maintains a kind of distance that storytelling cannot." Storytelling as a practice embraced multiple forms of expression, ways of being and telling, that gently carried resistance across generations" (2023, 27). The students' question posed a significant shift in my journey to incorporate Freirean dialogue into genocide education. Four simple words ("what does protest mean?") helped me understand that student-teachers are committed to the process of returning to storytelling, as resistance to violent, oppressive narrative that entrenches a singular way of understanding and acting on grief, sorrow, anger, and rage that emerge from injustice. In my answer, I gave an example of protest, where a group of friends come together and voiced their concern against something that they do not agree with in their society and/or government. We thought of some examples of protest together, and I was left thinking about the remnants of resistance woven into our spirits. Near the end of the pamphlet Gowrinathan reflects, "when my students reckon with identity as cellular composition (rather than stylized outerwear), they return to their mothers" (2023, 28).

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