Critical Posthuman Educational Inquiry: A Disruptive and Affective Approach

Magali Forte
Simon Fraser University
magali_forte_2@sfu.ca

Abstract

This essay offers a diffractive experiment in thinking and writing by presenting readers with a text split in two columns with double-exposed pictures without humans. Through an affective approach which aims to disrupt the ways in which we conventionally conduct our research projects, I offer the story of an encounter with a child and a sticky piece of tape that happened during a classroom visit. Different bodies of theory, including posthumanism, new materialism and Indigenous perspectives, allow for a questioning of the tenets of conventional qualitative research and orient me towards envisioning what critical posthuman educational inquiry might look like. A decolonizing approach in educational practice and research is needed. I put such an approach to work here to insist that we stop describing and considering children as less than fully human, and to think with voices and values that have been silenced and/or ignored for too long.

Keywords: Critical inquiry, diffraction, affect, posthuman, post qualitative

Introduction

In this essay, I consider and experiment with an affective decolonizing research/inquiry approach that has the potential of contributing to a (re)definition of critical posthuman educational inquiry (Barreiro et al., 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020a, 2020b). In doing so, I share the story of a haunting encounter that happened during a school visit, as well as conceptual musings framed in the truth and reconciliation context I find and position myself in as an educator and as a researcher in Canada (Tuck & Ree, 2013). Double-exposed pictures without humans interfere in this text, inviting readers to pause and take in the images and the words. Following Richa Nagar (2014), I present a text split into two columns, thereby attempting to “interrupt the usual expectations around conventions of genre, temporality or chronology, and coherence, while implicating the reader in the making of knowledge through the physical act of reading itself” (p. 16). This, to me, is an experiment in diffractive thinking and writing, and I turn to the work of Karen Barad (2007),

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1 I included the first name of each author I refer to the first time a reference to their work appears in this text. Although the APA citation and format style used here does not require that first names of authors be included in the body of academic texts, as a feminist inquirer and educator, I believe that making first names visible can be an important act of resistance to a norm that invisibilizes and is detrimental to women in academia. This choice of making first names visible participates in what John Horton and Peter Kraftl (2009) refer to as “implicit activisms”, seemingly small actions which have the potential to be “politicised, affirmative and potentially transformative, but which are modest, quotidian, and proceed with little fanfare” (p. 21). I invite readers to reflect on the political weight inherent to the active and omnipresent invisibilization of authors’ first names in academic texts, and on the importance of disrupting this practice.
Vivienne Bozalek and Michalinos Zembylas (2017), Bronwen Davies (2014), and Donna Haraway (1992, 1997), amongst others, for guidance in this endeavor.

By “diffractive,” I mean two things. First, presenting the text below in two columns decenters me as the authoritative “I” and allows readers some control over how they interact with the text. Readers can choose which column to start with, when to switch from one column to the other, how long to spend reading one part of the text or another, etc. Second, I take to heart Haraway’s (1992) definition of diffraction as a process that maps where the effects of difference appear. I, therefore, observe with a cautious and curious mind the different points of intersection between the two columns. While doing so, I acknowledge my own subjectivity, but rather than imposing it as an authoritative interpretation or as a truth I discovered, I offer the ideas below as always already situated, partial, and in process. Following on the work of Haraway (1992) and Kim TallBear (2013, 2014), I call this a feminist standpoint. I encourage readers to be mindful of their understanding of these “situated knowledges”, to add to these and to keep track of how they interact with these (Haraway, 1992, p. 313). For example, readers might add by making mental notes, writing comments in the margins, reading this text through other readings, sending me an email to share their ideas, etc.

As Barad (2007) points it out, “diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter” (p. 30). While I notice certain differences and exclusions throughout the text below, it is my hope and understanding that other ones will emerge for readers. In this way, “a diffractive [account] goes beyond … reflexivity and interpretation and produces new entangled ways of theorizing and performing research practices, co-constituting new possibilities of strengthening and challenging knowledges” (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017, p. 124). As I will discuss later, this kind of theorizing calls for a different vocabulary, hence my choice to investigate the potential of the words post qualitative inquiry and the concepts supporting it (St. Pierre, 2014, 2021). For now, I only want to suggest, based on my personal observations, that diffractive thinking and writing also have an affective element that can disrupt many of the tenets of conventional qualitative research. Including affect in one’s approach to research does two things that I want to draw attention to. First, it acknowledges affect as a force that flows through the events we are inevitably a part of within our inquiries. It asks that we pay attention to the “intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise)” and to the “resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” as Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) explain (p. 1). After all, “[a]ffect is … a relational phenomenon” as Megan Watkins (2010) writes (p. 270). Second, it acknowledges that affect makes relational demands on us. It demands that we make space and time to share the affective moments we lived in our inquiries, in our papers, in our books and presentations, and also in our conversations with colleagues and students.

An affective approach asks that we take these affective intensities and resonances seriously, along with the marks they leave on our mindbodies (Barad, 2007). It asks that we consider them as felt evidence not just as not-really-data but, in fact, as much-more-than-data. Sara Ahmed (2010) suggests that “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (p. 230). I found it fitting that, in the telling of the encounter I share below, a sticky piece of tape intentionally self-affixed on a student’s shoulder plays a major role in the felt intensities that demanded I act differently when the encounter took
place, and in the months and years after it happened. Katie Warfield (2018) insists that “affect is the felt sense of possibility and impossibility that brings the body to move toward or recede from action” (p. 76). Following on this thought, sharing the encounter that keeps haunting me to this day, along with the conceptual and methodological considerations it generated, ends up being, for me, a way to move toward action.

Eve Tuck and Christine Ree (2013) explain that haunting is “the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation” (p. 642). I therefore think about the ways in which our institutions offer quick solutions to “fix” this kind of haunting (do better next time, forget about it for now, etc.). Here, I choose a different path; I choose to stay with the haunting, to write about what it produced and keeps producing. I do not view haunting, however, as some sort of retribution. I know it does not fix the past. “Staying with the trouble” of this haunting encounter led me to better understand and articulate a decolonizing approach in educational inquiry and practice (Haraway, 2016). For that, I am grateful.

Editorial Note:

As explained by the author in the first paragraph of the Introduction, the following pages, 58-68, are presented in a two-column format to challenge the reader. Both columns, each spanning 11 pages, are a single, continuous text on their own. Coherence flows downward in each column to the next page, rather than from left to right across a single page. Each column, therefore, can be read in its entirely, one following the other. Alternatively, the reader may skip between columns as they choose. We suggest that the reader begins with the left column.
I am glad and feel fortunate that the works of Elizabeth St. Pierre (1995, 2014, 2018, 2021), and Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012, 2018), amongst others, found their way to me early on in my doctoral journey. I am indebted to St. Pierre (2021) for the way she articulated her rejection of the rigid compartmentalization and seeming linearity of “conventional humanist qualitative methodology” (p. 163).

Her work has allowed me, an emergent scholar, to feel empowered to take a different avenue—the post qualitative inquiry one—when the separation of theory and method became too difficult for me to accept and justify, or when it became absurd for me to continue to follow a pre-determined and overwhelmingly dominant path. I then found solace and joy in Jackson and Mazzei’s (2012, 2018) description of how they conceive of data within a post qualitative inquiry framework. They insist that fieldnotes, transcripts, and other data texts are as much a part of our “mental furniture” as Spivak (2014) calls it, as theoretical texts are. The approach that they call thinking-with-theory, has transformed my own approach to data analysis. Then, just as I was getting comfortable in the zone of disruption that post qualitative inquiry had created for me, Kakali Bhattacharya’s (2020a, 2020b) work made me pause. In it was an invitation to consider the ontological and epistemological risks and tensions inherent in post qualitative inquiry. This shook that new stable ground I thought I had found. I am grateful for her reminder that labelling a framework, a body of knowledge, a methodology...that everyone in Canadian society has a part to play in this effort. However, nearly six years after the 94 Calls to Action were issued, little seems to have been done, in practice, to answer them according to Eva Jewell and Ian Mosby’s (2020) update.

In December 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada released its final reports after spending six years listening to and recording over 6000 stories of residential school survivors, thereby documenting the history of Indian residential schools in Canada in an unprecedented way. As Murray Sinclair (2016), former member of the Canadian senate and Indigenous lawyer, who also acted as the chair of the TRC, pointed out in an interview, this important work showed that “colonization permeated everything that Canada did and that Canadians did, for so long that we failed to see sometimes just where that colonialism still exists” (n.p.). Among these documents, 94 calls to action (TRC, 2015a) were clearly articulated, offering a road map to Canadians for engaging in the work of reconciliation, with the goal of building more respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

In the preface of the executive summary (TRC, 2015b), the Commission clearly stated that “[r]econciliation is not an Indigenous problem. It is a Canadian one” (p. vi). This means that everyone in Canadian society has a part to play in this effort. Work on addressing the calls, they suggest, has been so slow that the completion of the calls to action might end up happening in 2074, given the rate of implementation that seems to have been adopted. According to their data, about 2.25 calls were...
as “new,” provides a nurturing field for colonizing onto-epistemologies, as it risks silencing knowledges that have existed for thousands of years in the margins of mainstream Western thinking.

Within the scope of this text and, more widely, across the breadth of my own inquiries, I came to the conclusion that I need to highlight and problematize some of the oppressive, racist, sexist, ageist, and colonial ways that conventional mainstream Western qualitative research rests on. From an inextricable and always, already entangled theoretical-and-methodological perspective, I came to a definition of critical posthuman inquiry that works for me (for now), but not without the help of Rosi Braidotti’s (2019) genealogy of the critical post-humanities and Karin Murris’s (2021a, 2021b) invitation to navigate the post qualitative, new materialist, and critical posthumanist terrain across disciplines.

From an onto-epistemological perspective, I joined with Murris (2021b) in her lament concerning the deficit view of children that remains at the core of mainstream Western educational research and practice. As a way of addressing this insufficient perspective on children, I believe that Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing have the potential to support and nourish a decolonizing affective approach to inquiry, and to uphold a view of the child as a full knowing human being.

In a paper she co-wrote with others, Leslie McKesson (Brown et al., 2020) notices that post qualitative inquiry frees “the researcher from the constraints of gold standard protocols that prohibit the production of possibles” (p. 232). I agree with her but at the same time, I want to stay attentive to Bhattacharya’s cautious warning. I am mindful that this liberating horizon is completed between 2015 and 2019, and none were answered in 2020.

Jesse Wente (2021) offers a discursive explanation for this lack of engagement on the part of Canadian society. According to him, reconciliation is not an appropriate word since “to reconcile … would be to repair a once functional relationship” (p. 188). He maintains that a functional relationship never existed between Canada and Indigenous peoples. He, therefore, suggests a change of focus, to one of building a functional relationship instead of continuing to pretend that the current one can be fixed.

As a non-Indigenous person who was born and raised in France, and as the first member of my family to have moved to Canada and to have obtained Canadian citizenship, I appreciate his point. In the fourteen years I have lived in Canada, I have slowly come to realize how privileged I am and to see this in a critical way. I have been welcomed in a warm way as a French speaker and educator, in the place that is now known as Vancouver. I have been offered jobs and easily got into post-secondary education programs because I am able to read and write fluently in French, one of the official languages of Canada. I went to elementary, middle, and secondary school in France and, while French schooling isn’t necessarily an experience I have only fond memories of, I recognize that it taught me ways of learning that later became useful in the Canadian context.

As a white educator and researcher, it took me a while to understand the importance of questioning and disrupting mainstream Western ways of teaching, learning, and researching precisely because I failed to see, at first, how these keep perpetuating colonialism. Bhattacharya (2020a) was instrumental in changing
part and parcel of a privileged worldview. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) highlights the undeniable, and yet often invisibilized relations between knowledge, research, and imperialism, stressing that “the word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the [I]ndigenous world’s vocabulary” (p. 1). She says this because of the extractive nature of the research that was/is conducted with many of the world’s Indigenous peoples and communities.

There is no doubt that the words we use to define our practices, our ways of knowing, doing, and being, matter. They can hurt just as much as they can show respect. With this in mind, I chose, as others have before me, to identify my practice as “inquiry,” not as research. The verb “inquire” (also spelled “enquire” in English) comes from the old French word *enquerre* (*s’enquérir* in modern French) which means to ask, to inquire about. This stance, which suggests a curious, somewhat respectful and open mind to me, stands in stark contrast with the one suggested by the word “research.” “Research” comes from the old French word *rechercher* (*rechercher* in modern French), which indicates “the act of searching closely for a specific thing or person.” To me, researching something or someone therefore implies that you already have an idea of what you are looking for. This inevitably excludes certain forms of knowledge that could come in contact with you but that you will not take in or that you will actively avoid if they are not the ones you are searching for.

Being an inquirer places me and everyone/everything in the same world of endless possible and situated knowledges.

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3 See the following online entry for etymological source: https://www.etymonline.com/word/inquire (consulted on Nov. 12, 2021).
4 See the following entry for etymological source: https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=research (consulted on Nov. 12, 2021).
Defining oneself as a researcher establishes a hierarchical view of the world, one in which the researcher stands outside of it with one’s magnifying glass (or camera) in one’s hand and one’s notebook (or laptop) in the other. Barad (2007) states that “we don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world and its differential becoming” (p. 185). Changing my orientation from research to inquiry, from qualitative research to post qualitative inquiry meant that I included myself, the inquirer, in the ‘we’ that Barad refers to. I therefore adopted an ethico-ontological approach to knowing and being in the world.

I am aware, though, that an inquirer still needs to clarify whose interests she wants to preserve and uphold, and she must repeatedly ask herself whose voices she might be missing or silencing in her inquiry, as Dianne Biin (2021) reminded me. In addition to this, Braidotti (2019) advises that yet another qualitative shift is needed to respond to the present “epistemic accelerations of cognitive capitalism” (p. 113). The shift she proposes is towards a critical posthumanities framework. This framework, she writes, is an “epistemological vehicle” that accounts for “the missing people, the “we” who are committed to posthuman resistance” (p. 114).

Braidotti (2019) further explains that this framework “is not aiming at anything like a consensus about a new humanity, but it gives a frame for the actualization of the many missing people whose ‘minor’ or nomadic knowledge is the breeding ground for possible futures” (p. 114). Murris (2021b) answers Braidotti’s (2019) call to consider the “missing peoples” of humanism by pointing out that much mainstream Western educational research and practice views and frames children as always deficient, always in the process of becoming adult humans (p. 114). She aligning my work with certain scholars” in an ongoing manner (p. 180).

As Wilson (2008) puts it, “research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers” (p. 6). I realize that I have been sitting on a mountain of taken-for-granted privileges and unquestioned answers for a long time as a white speaker of French, Spanish, and English, with relatively easy access to educational institutions that taught me to speak and write in ways that conveniently overlook and are dependent on the ongoing oppression and silencing of “others” (Wente, 2021). Here and elsewhere (Forte, 2021), I answer Jerry Rosiek, Jimmy Snyder, and Scott Pratt’s (2020) call to stop contributing to the lack of engagement with Indigenous literature, a direct result from “racism and Eurocentrism in academic disciplines” (p. 332).

In reflecting on my citational practices, I asked myself important questions articulated by Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2015), such as: “Whose work do [I] build on to make arguments, describe the field and the problems I engage in [my] work? Who [am I] citing, and why do [I] cite them (and not others)? … Who do [I] choose to link and re-circulate in [my] work? Who gets erased? Who should [I] stop citing?” (n.p.). I consider myself fortunate to have been able to ask myself these questions at the beginning of my academic career.

I take seriously the ethical task of never separating my academic and teaching work from politics and from histories. I, therefore, choose to contribute to building an in-between space, that allows
observes that even though posthumanists invite us to disrupt the idea of human exceptionalism, “they tend to assume adult humans of a particular age and their claim to knowledge, but they do not include young children and their knowledge claims” (Murris, 2021, p. 63). In other words, when (a certain kind of) adult knowledge is always the given measure, what we are necessarily left with is a pervasively lacking view of childhood (Murris & Reynolds, 2018).

Following Barad’s (2007) proposal of inhabiting the world in an ethico-onto-epistemological manner and joining Murris (2021b) in her rejection of a demeaning conception of the child as “not fully human,” a view inherited from colonialism, I present an encounter that haunts me to this day. I’d like to stress that I don’t attach negative feelings to the verb ‘haunt’ in this context. To be clear, I do not seek for this haunting to stop by writing about it. Tuck and Ree (2013) insist that haunting “lies precisely in its refusal to stop” (p. 642) and that, with haunting, “there is no putting to rest” (p. 648). I therefore write about it to recognize and honor the ways in which this haunting encounter continues to give me pause and to make me think, years after it occurred.

Bronwyn Davies (2014) defines an encounter as something profoundly grounded in experience, because we can’t know in advance “what onto-epistemological knowledge will emerge from the experimental mix of concepts, emotions, bodies, images, and affects” (p. 734). The encounter shared below happened during a visit to a Grade 4/5/6 class, in an elementary school of the Greater Vancouver Area. It gathered an elementary school student, myself, and the more-than-human participants to respectfully and humbly “borrow” posthuman, new materialist, and Indigenous knowledges and bring them into conversation with each other. Invested in these borrowed knowledges, I think with them in the field of language and literacies education. I also realized that I needed to decolonize the curricular grounds I occupied as a white educator.

Following the argument that “curriculum might need to be one of the things “given back,” where curriculum is the ground that we provide through the courses, the texts, and the performances we teach,” I revised course material and reading lists to include more texts by Indigenous authors relevant to the courses I taught and invited students to reflect on concepts, such as relationality, that are central to diverse Indigenous perspectives (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 21).

With Suzanne Smythe’s help in articulating this idea, I now ask myself on an ongoing basis “what actions [I can] take to decolonize the curricular ground that I occupy” and that, as a teacher, I invite others to occupy with me (S. Smythe, Personal Communication, October 5, 2020). Decolonizing these shared curricular grounds started with a serious engagement, on my part, with literature that hadn’t been presented to me or that I hadn’t actively looked for in the past.

In the context of my K-12 and my post-secondary schooling, I was mostly presented with white authors’ texts, especially when it came to philosophy. Quoting the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980/1987) has always felt comfortable to me, because even though I often have to (re)read their texts carefully

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6 I want to give thanks to Dianne Biin for sharing this idea and helping me better understand that “knowledge is never ours as researchers,” that it is “just borrowed for a certain time,” and that “we can only share what we know at a certain point” (Personal Communication, Nov. 28, 2021).

_Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry, Summer 2022, 14(1), pp. 55-74_  
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http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cpi/index
that included my camera, an iPad, a windowsill, a piece of tape, etc. I had been in this classroom before the encounter took place as a substitute teacher several times and, as such, I had built a relationship with the teachers and students who inhabited it. I think it is important to note this because it allows me to stress the fact that I was not standing outside this classroom’s world, even though I was holding a camera in my hand.

Because of the previous experiences I had lived, with the teachers and students of this class and because of the relations that had emerged within that world, I was precisely of this shared world. In their critique of the “implicit bias towards the privileged logics of objectivity” and “truth” inherent to ethnography, Carol Taylor and Nikki Fairchild (2020) point to feminists, as well as post-colonial, anti-racist, and Indigenous scholars who have, for a long time, problematized this idea of “truth,” which is in fact always “a view from somewhere (white, masculinist, Euro-American)” (pp. 512-513). Adopting an affective decolonizing approach to thinking with this moment, I realize that “critical lenses demand that the stakes of structures of power—the systems and institutions that perpetuate injustice—must always be viewed as suffusing any and all encounters” as Elizabeth Dutro (2019) suggests (p. 74).

I, therefore, return to how “the physicality” of the apparatus formed by a child, named Alice to preserve her anonymity, and a piece of tape stuck on her shoulder to signal her refusal to be filmed affect(ed) me in unforeseeable ways (Barad, 2007). Ringrose and Renold (2014) point out that MacLure’s (2013) critique of positivist methodologies and, specifically, of systematic approaches reify data by trying to “neatly categorize and subsume difference into schemas of representation” (p. 773). This is precisely what pushed me to consider a different

before thinking, I’ve actually understood what they have to say, I can read them in French, my first language. Indigenous literature affects me in a different way. As Sarah Hunt (2014) suggests, “for non-Indigenous people interested in engaging with Indigenous ontologies, this may involve becoming unhinged, uncomfortable” (p. 31).

While there was, at first, a measure of discomfort experienced when I read or listened to the work of Indigenous authors, there is also an ongoing sense of wonder and amazement at a worldview I didn’t know existed. And also, a sense of reverence and a fear of falling into disrespect and extraction, both at the same time. I therefore proceed with caution and respect while reading and thinking with Indigenous authors, recognizing that I engage in an “imperfect” kind of practice that nonetheless aims at disrupting the status quo that is foundational to the worldview I am used to (Carroll et al., 2020).

As I am learning from many Indigenous perspectives, we are never alone in the acts of knowing, learning, teaching, telling, reading, writing, listening, etc. Archibald (2008), for example, stresses the importance of the engagement of a story listener when she states that “the story doesn’t work without a participant” (p. 33). As she further explains:

in Stó:lō and Coast Salish cultures the power of story-work to make meaning derives from a synergy between the story, the context in which the story is used, the way that the story is told, and how one listens to the story. (p. 84)

I thereby invite readers to consider themselves as active participants in the act of reading/receiving the text I share here. As receivers of a story (whether it’s told orally or read in its
approach to data. The affective approach I took up to understand this specific encounter was also informed by MacLure’s (2013) suggestion that we “feel the wonder of data” and respond to its glow (p. 229).

Adopting an affective approach to thinking with this encounter, and with what has become much-more-than-data to me, means that within the inquiry approach I’m tracing here, affect is acknowledged as a powerful relational force that leaves lasting impressions and marks on mindbodies. Such a force should not be ignored, nor does it need to be articulated or interpreted as precise, individual feelings. An affective approach to data acts not only as “an inventory of shimmers” as Seigworth and Gregg (2010) refer to it, borrowing Barthes’s (2005) words, but also as “a generative, pedagogic nudge aimed toward a body’s becoming an ever more worldly sensitive interface, [and] toward a style of being present to the struggles of our time” (p. 12).

The Encounter

My camera and I walk into the cloakroom space where Alice is sitting on the windowsill, away from the rest of the group. An iPad rests on her bent legs. I chat with her in French and ask her about the comfort of the space she is working in and about the story she is creating. She answers, briefly, and smiles, glancing at me but mostly focusing on the iPad screen. I recall asking myself, in that moment, whether or not I was welcome in her little sanctuary. Was she thinking my and the camera’s presence were, perhaps, an intrusion into her private space-time? The camera records her working silently for a few minutes while I take in how beautiful the morning light looks, flowing through the window by Alice’s side. She seems comfortable. She’s taken her shoes off and she’s just wearing her socks. She’s sitting on a written form), we lean into the story, into the worldview that is shared through the story, that emerges within the entanglement made of the storyteller/the writer, the listener/the reader, the places where they find themselves, and many other things/ beings.

In a similar way, Heath Justice (2018) invites us to think about our lives as the “incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories told about us, and the stories we inherit” and further writes that stories “are both the process and the consequences of the transformations into the fullness of our humanity” (p. 34). I wonder: Can we tell and hear the stories of our lives as academic inquirers in this way? What transformations happen when we tell these stories, and they go into the world? Thomas King’s (2003) refrain comes to mind here, and with it, the sense of responsibility that inheres in the stories we hear/read and tell/write: “Take [this story]. It’s yours. Do with it what you will… But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story” (p. 29).

This way of acting/writing/listening/reading is radically and ethically different from the one that has been put front and center in qualitative research. St. Pierre (2021) asserts that in her own way when she shares her hope that “post qualitative inquiry … loosens [qualitative methodology’s] increasing control of our thought,” that it “clears some space … to think thought and being differently” (p. 165).

I too invite readers to think about their own responses to the following questions:
pillow. Her face is quite close to the iPad screen. She’s focused on her task—the story that she’s creating, and she’s doing some math, whispering numbers that are almost inaudible. My camera and I leave Alice and her iPad to it to go see what other students are doing with their stories in the classroom and in the hallway.

I come back to Alice’s spot twenty minutes later. On the video, we see the camera is pointing at the floor at first, likely because those feelings of intruding and distracting sensed earlier left their mark on me. Maybe I was trying to make myself less of an intruder this way? So, during a few seconds, all that can be seen on the video is the floor and a piece of paper, lying there. Then, as the camera looks up while I ask her in French again how she is doing, Alice’s feet, still in socks, as well as her legs, appear. She turns the iPad screen towards me and smiles, inviting me to read what she has written and drawn in her story. I look at the text and the images, which represent one mathematical way to get to the number “24”. She’s drawn different groups of points and added them up.

Because of the way she shows her iPad, putting it right on top of her shoulder, covering her right side with it, I do not see that she has actually put a piece of green tape on her shoulder since the first time I came and talked to her that day. On the video, when she puts the iPad back on her legs, we can clearly see the tape which wasn’t there the first time.

I am completely unaware of the tape for a minute. Because she showed me her work on her iPad, I am still focusing on that, and I ask her questions about it: “How many points did you put in these groups? Can you show me?” She replies: “Twenty.” She traces the line of each circle she’s drawn with her index finger as she replies. All of a sudden, I see the tape, and then, it’s all I can

| - What encounters have affected/keep affecting you in your own inquiries? |
| - What does the haunting of these encounters produce for you? Do you consider them as intrusive or distracting and do you push them aside? Do you see them as musings and allow yourself to think/feel about them? Do you wish you had done your research differently? Will you let them inform how you inquire in the future? |
| - Would you consider sharing them orally or in writing with others? Why? Why not? |

Yvonne Poitras Pratt (2018) and her co-authors invite us to consider the following: “decolonizing education entails [1] identifying how colonization has impacted education, and [2] working to unsettle colonial structures, systems, and dynamics in educational contexts” (n.p.). Identifying all the ways in which our educational system in Canada still rests on colonial structures is beyond the scope of this piece. However, I believe that, as teachers and inquirers, it is our responsibility to identify the ones we encounter and adopt a critical perspective.

We can, on an ongoing basis, actively work to disrupt the ways in which we define and rely on the idea of “human.” As an idea and a category, the “human” is privileged. It is prevalent in and central to Eurocentric/Western educational research and practice, and its figuration helps construct children as beings that are “less-than-fully-human” (Muirris, 2021; Rollo, 2018).

Marie Battiste (2013) reminds us that “[r]esidential schooling was intended to root out and destroy Indigenous knowledge, languages, and relationships with the natural family [and] to replace them with Eurocentric values, identities, and beliefs” (p.
see and it’s all that matters. I remember feeling embarrassed and silly in that moment. I lower the camera and, on the recording, suddenly, all we can see is the floor. You can hear me say: “Oh, Alice, I’m so sorry! I didn’t see that you had put a piece of tape on your shoulder.” To which she replies, apologizing: “Yeah, sorry.” I add: “No, I’m the one that’s sorry” and I turn around to leave her in peace.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**
*Double-Exposed Picture “Windowsill Featured in the Encounter & Memorial Around the Centennial Flame at Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada”*

56). These Eurocentric values, identities, and beliefs, she continues, were ultimately “aimed at destroying children’s self-esteem, self-concept, and healthy relationships with each other and their families” (p. 56).

Some of these Eurocentric values, identities, and beliefs remain central to our Western educational systems to this day. They are often constructed on a non-relational, competitive, and fundamentally hierarchical binary logic inherent to Cartesian dualisms. Eurocentric values often take for granted dualisms, such as the Culture/Nature, Sophisticated/primitive or Adult/child as Murris (2021b) explains. She points out that this logic “underpins colonialism and colonising notions of relationships between humans and between humans and more-than-humans” (p. 65).

In contrast, relationality is often found at the heart of Indigenous perspectives which see the world as “a relational exchange – alive, wildly generative, an ongoing conversation of bodies, desires, conflicts, and collaborations” as Gavin Van Horn (2021, p. 10) describes. He adds that, within such a worldview, the (adult) human cannot be put on a pinnacle, above all “others.” Children are considered and honored in fuller ways within the world they are a part of in many Indigenous teachings and principles, just like Gregory Cajete (2017) explains,

in Indigenous community, all children were considered special, sacred gifts from the creator. They were seen to have a special quality all their own which was respected and prized by the community. They were considered to have a direct connection to special spirits in nature. … They were bringers of light and good fortune to the community. (p. 113)
I am grateful for this moment, and for its haunting nature. It’s given me much to think about, to feel and to understand in different ways about research/inquiry, about data, about ethics, and most importantly, about the role and rightful knowledge of children who inhabit the spaces in which I work as a teacher and as an inquirer. Ethical guidelines presumably exist to protect the rights and well-being of research participants. Here is an example of the kind of wording that can be found in the description of the consent process which guides Canadian institutions’ ethics protocols: “the researcher shall ascertain the wishes of [an individual who lacks legal capacity but has some ability to understand the significance of the research] with respect to participation” (Government of Canada, 2018).

While perhaps well-suited to procedural concerns, I found it insufficient within my inquiry especially in the light of what happened during the encounter recounted above. In my view, we need a different language to embody a different kind of ethical stance as these unforeseeable encounters happen and matter in all of their affective dimension. Sharing vignettes of moments that mattered to them, Sarah Truman (2020) and her co-authors

**Note:** Source 1: Forte, 2019a. Source 2: Wen, 2021. (Used with permission).5 The memorial honours the lives of 215 Indigenous children whose remains were found in a mass grave in May 2021 on the unceded land of the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation (now known as Kamloops, BC, Canada).

This profound belief stands in stark contrast with the patronizing and disgraceful description presented in the quote below, infamously attributed to Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald:

> When the school is on the reserve the child lives with its parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself … that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men. (Boyce, 1883, pp. 1107-1108)

Even though this statement dates back to the late 19th century, as Battiste (2013) points out, “education systems perpetuate a biased construction of the strength of colonialism … alongside the idea that Indigenous peoples are primitive, uneducated, justly conquered people who would have been assimilated long ago but for their cultural backwardness” (p. 32). We must keep this in mind at all times and never forget the harmful colonial ideals on which schooling was built in Canada. Remembering is what pushes us to re-evaluate, in an ongoing way, the vision and the values we uphold and to hold space for the voices and perspectives that have been silenced and/or disregarded for far too long, in educational inquiry and practice.

5 Twice, I offer double-exposed pictures without humans, created through the process of combining two photographs in one, an attempt to escape representational thinking. Phillip Vannini (2015) suggests that non-representational theory is built, in part, on the principle of relational materialism and further elaborates: “Material objects are no mere props for performance but parts and parcel of hybrid assemblages endowed with diffused personhood and relational agency” (pp. 4-5). I invite readers to take a moment to reflect on the ways in which these pictures might affect them, and might affect their reading.
write that “affect is slippery, atmospheric, and asks us to reckon with emotion and the geopolitical contexts in which affect is produced” (p. 228). A nine-year old student who marked her refusal to participate in my research project with a piece of tape is defined, in the same policy framework as the one I referred to above, as belonging to a group of individuals “whose decision-making capacity is in the process of development, … whose capacity for judgment and self-direction is maturing” (Government of Canada, 2018). This limited and reductive view doesn’t do justice to children’s capacities as full beings.

In Indigenous perspectives, Pratt et al. (2018) explain that “children are valued as the most sacred gift from the Creator, so kinship and educational structures revolve around the child as they hold the future in their hands” (n.p.). This is an important and thoughtful perspective, and one that our mainstream Western educational frameworks would greatly benefit from. As Murris (2021b) stresses, onto-epistemic injustices keep being inflicted on children, in and out of school, in mainstream Western society, perhaps because we have lost and/or chosen to ignore a view that considers and upholds children’s knowledges as whole and as worthy. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2021) encourages us to “re-member these ancient ways of living that are already there, to reimagine ourselves in them … [and to figure out] a way to inhabit those deep stories” (n.p.). It takes all of us to do that—children, adults, plants, animals, storytellers, listeners, readers, learners, educators, inquirers, etc. It takes all of us to engage in a kind of work that is, at once, respectful, critical, and collective.

Figure 2

Double-Exposed Picture “Mapping With Smileys Different Spaces In and Out of Alice’s Classroom Where Students Like to Work and St. Paul’s Indian Residential School Located in the City of North Vancouver”

Murris (2021b) states that “decolonisation is not a linear project towards an end point, a product, [or] a decolonised state of being” (p. 68). If I understand her correctly, this means we all need to find a decolonizing path that we can engage in collectively, in a concrete manner. Critical posthuman educational inquiry provides an avenue for disrupting the status quo and for productively and respectfully engaging with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in the reconciliation context I live in as an educator and as an inquirer working with children.

Disrupting the ways in which research has been defined and conventionally conducted in mainstream Western practice was personally uncomfortable for me, at first as an emerging scholar because I was explicitly taught to do things in a certain way and got used to doing them in that way. However, I have learned that disruption can start simply, by paying attention to the affective moments we experience in our inquiries, or when felt intensities traverse and spill over from one body to another. Doing so might allow us to inquire rather than research, to cultivate a curious mind, and to attend to encounters that might not seem to bring answers to our pre-established research question or fit neatly into the categories we’ve identified while coding data we’ve collected and organized. As I have suggested in this essay, the moments that give us trouble, that disrupt the ways in which we conventionally conduct research, especially when they involve children, have the potential to shed light on the inequities that are deeply woven in the fabric of the contexts we work and live in. Ethically, our responsibility, at the very least, is to listen to the voices that have been silenced, that continue to be silenced, and to refer to them respectfully and abundantly. Our ethical responsibility also means being critical of the injustices that occur in our institutions, because, as Zembylas (in Barreiro et al., 2020) articulated it in an interview,

[w]hat is crucial, then, is whether you are politically, ethically, and pedagogically willing to take a stance and move forward to transform yourself and, to the degree that you are able to do this, to transform your surroundings, the world around you. This is an ethics of critical affect. A pedagogy that cultivates critical affect, then, is … one that actually encourages you or makes you take action that makes a difference to people's lives. (p. 140)

Participating in (re)defining research inquiry is therefore an ethical and a political endeavour that needs to be re-evaluated on an ongoing basis, in conversation with the very people who are constantly put at a disadvantage in the normalizing framework that dominates mainstream Western societies.
References


*Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry, Summer 2022, 14*(1), pp. 55-74

ISSN 1916-3460 © 2022 University of Alberta

http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cpi/index


_Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry, Summer 2022, 14*(1), pp. 55-74
ISSN 1916-3460 © 2022 University of Alberta
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