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Review: *Sharing Breath: Embodied Learning and Decolonization*, Edited by Sheila Batacharya and Yuk-Lin Renita Wong

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In a time of substantial social unrest within the United States in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd's death was one event of many that sparked the most recent social justice movement for racial equality. Just about every publication, academic institution, and social justice non-profit has been posting messages of solidarity and resources to aid children and adults in difficult conversations regarding privilege and biases. The conversations are poignant and timely, many of which encourage White people like myself to conduct deep introspective reflection on their fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). While many of these resources have the best intention, are all of the resources being shared practical and relevant? I read *Sharing Breath* with this question in mind, as it was published two years ago and, given the sweeping changes we collectively experienced in 2020, I was skeptical that it would appease my hunger for a timely resource. In this review, I discuss the relevance of this book and provide insight into how it pushed my understanding and provided ideas for future study. I was also curious to see how the 14 chapters would align with or expand the editors' intentions.

The introduction clearly outlines the intention of the book by writing that the editors hoped to address embodiment and embodied learning as an integral, counter-hegemonic aspect of decolonization and critical pedagogy. The introduction supplies many of the definitions and summaries for key terminology that is used throughout the book. Embodied

learning occurs when a person is “attuned to [their] sentient-social experience” (p. 5). In this compilation, what sets embodied learning apart is that the process requires keen attention to what decolonization means: lived experiences of mind/body/spirit, and discursive and material social relations of power.

This book is meant to challenge the common view of learning as purely cognitive (Ng, 2012) and decolonization as only theoretical (Tuck & Yang, 2012). I appreciated that the editors strongly emphasize the impact that Rozanne Ng has had on the field of embodied pedagogy by supplying her background and a summary of her scholarship and teaching in the introduction, which serves as an appropriate transition to the first chapter by Ng. Ng outlines her belief that modern teaching methods disregard the body when learning, treating it as a mere vessel for the brain. She relied on Tradition Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Qi Gong as a method for bringing together the physical, emotional, and spiritual functions. Having Ng’s presence and impact on the field so boldly placed at the beginning of the book made the authors’ numerous references to Ng fitting. Authors of this book use her as a literary reference and multiple authors have personal experience taking Ng’s course, titled *Embodied Learning and Qi Gong*. She used Qi Gong to bring the mind, body, and spirit together and she explicitly encouraged students to see the physical and contemplative activities as part of their everyday lives, as well as part of the course itself. Ng supplied students with readings to push them to think about the boundaries of their bodies as flexible and dynamic, rather than rigid and stagnant. For example, Ng assigned readings from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and psychotherapy, which describe the body through varying lenses. She also integrated Qi Gong as a means to make learning as physical as it is mental, with an emphasis on nonattachment. Nonattachment leads to the students resisting habits that lead to premature judgment (p. 43). Finally, her course included journaling to summarize reading, emotionally reflect on reading, and record Qi Gong practices and experiences. Ng’s work was foundational to the field of embodied learning and her chapter truly lays the foundation for the remainder of the book, as each author’s writing pulls on understandings that can relate back to Ng’s work. Other authors’ critical pedagog-

ical approaches are reminiscent of Ng's inspiring and groundbreaking pedagogy, but with their own interpretation and extension as influenced by their backgrounds, experiences, and research.

With Ng's heavy emphasis on the importance of self-reflection, I would feel remiss if I did not use this as an opportunity to reflect on my growth as an educator, researcher, and human by reading this book critically. As an Assistant Professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education and someone who has a history of practicing Tai Chi and Qi Gong, *Sharing Breath* melded my passions for physical and spiritual well-being with pedagogy in new ways. The pedagogical emphasis within many of the chapters expanded my already-established understandings of pedagogy by breaking down barriers. Within every person's area of expertise, we risk becoming siloed and restricted in our way of thinking. For me, learning theory and research-supported, effective teaching practices are my strengths. I also know helpful mindfulness practices that focus on the body and spirit that I utilize with my students as a way to help regulate emotions and their ability to be present during their time in the classroom. I felt like I would have many of my understandings reaffirmed by reading this book, which I did, but with each affirmation, I was pushed to reflect critically. Upon reading *Sharing Breath*, I realized that I, like many of my colleagues in Western academia, have fallen into the same restricted hole. I have been thinking of physical and spiritual health as ways to support learning and teaching, but separate, nonetheless. I was caught in the dualism of dividing pedagogy and mindfulness, thus dividing the mind from the body. Numerous chapters throughout the book discuss the limitations of such dualisms, like body/mind and nature/culture. With a renewed motivation to re-establish a less dualistic approach to my pedagogy, my reflections while reading became larger in scope. I found myself thinking about how I can change the language I use with future teachers to not divide the body from the mind.

The revelation that Western society has put such overemphasis on mind-intellect and has established strict definitions of what constitutes intelligence encouraged me to reflect on what other definitions Western society has established. Ferguson's chapter expands upon how pain is defined and how embodied writing is a method of exploring the ways

medical practices limit pain as a subjective and private experience with a singular source. She elaborates on the notion that pain is really a process with multiple pathways throughout the body. Her definition of pain leads to her conclusion that the experience of the body is socially produced. This struck me as a powerful idea that subsequently led to several introspective, rhetorical questions. If the experience of the body is socially produced, and society specifies what types of intellect are valued and tell us the “right” way to think and learn, then it would appear that our minds are also socially produced. This notion left me with a feeling of despair. What is left that is truly my own? I decided that my spirit must truly be my own, but spiritual intelligence, as the editors state in their introduction, has been rejected by society ever since the Enlightenment. Spirituality that connects to religion in any way, in fact, is sometimes considered illegal when included in public education in the United States. Even basic yoga practices conducted in schools have caused uproars in some communities, with parents claiming that the practice is too religious or spiritual to be part of public education due to separation of church and state.

As I try and conceptualize what facets of myself are truly my own, I think about my racial and ethnic heritage and the role that decolonization plays in embodied learning. If Western society has limited how we define our learning, bodies, minds, and spirits through the values it places and the status quo it establishes, how does this translate into how we see our heritages? Authors in *Sharing Breath*, like Adefarakan and Brunette-Debassige, write in their chapters that different racial and ethnic groups are more than the definitions that society provides in the popular narrative and ask “educators to ethically and respectfully consider using Indigenous knowledges to inform their pedagogical practice” (p. 247). Adefarakan highlights the unique qualities of the Yoruba people not only to describe a specific ethnic group that Western society would simply label as “Black” without further thought, but to explore also how Yoruba cosmology reconceptualizes the self as an equal combination of body, mind, and spirit. Yoruba spirituality is reliant on the non-material that cannot be viewed because “spiritual forces are inaccessible to the human eye” (p. 232). When reading this chapter, I realized how unlike the Yoruba we are

in Western society. In Western society, there is an inherent understanding that people construct their identity through the views and opinions of themselves and others. Adefarakan explains in detail the Yoruba concept of *ori*—a person’s innate purpose, destiny, or essence—and offers suggestions for learning about identity as an integrated process that emphasizes practicing embodiment as a core aspect of pedagogy.

In my own educational journey and in my practice of teaching future teachers, I have rarely thought about a teacher’s job as one that involves dismantling already-established knowledge. Rather, I typically thought of a teacher as one who tries to build knowledge. The exception to this is when I realized I would need to facilitate the dismantling of already-established biases and prejudices to foster my students’ increased multicultural understanding. If education were to regularly value unlearning and relearning, then decolonization of education may be more practical and, as Adefarakan advocates, decolonization of the classroom needs to be a single piece with decolonization of life as a whole. For example, students need to unlearn that all Black people are African Americans and recognize the ancestral variety that Western society is too quick to obscure with a label.

Brunette-Debassige and Adefarakan both describe ways that learning and relearning allows learners to think about how they view others and themselves. In her chapter, Brunette-Debassige discusses how practices of unlearning and relearning can help heal aspects of post-colonial oppression affecting Indigenous people. She writes of her personal experience as a Cree woman and being treated as though she was “not Indian enough” due in part to her fairer complexion and lack of a government-issued “Status Indian” card, thus perpetuating the idea that certain qualifications in Western society define people’s heritage and identity. She used her rejection as a means toward redefining what it meant to be Cree: “By learning to be in my own presence and sit with difficult emotions, I began to understand and disassociate from the colonial messages I had internalized and the years of tension absorbed by my body unraveled” (p. 204). Embodied learning through yoga and creative expression through playwriting combined to form her Indigenous decolonizing and embodied pedagogical approach. Similar to the emphasis of

Adefarakan (and Freire, 1970), Brunette-Debassige writes that in order to implement critical pedagogy, reflective inquiry must lead to unlearning, learning, relearning, and evaluating. Critical pedagogy, when following her framework, involves sharing understandings of the body, embodiment, self-awareness, and rejecting past oppression.

In “Class and Embodiment: Making Space for Complex Capacity,” Moynagh reconceptualizes the society-produced definition of class and conventional ideas of achievement through an exploration of embodiment to uncover that the trauma of surviving poverty may bring out positive qualities such as resilience and creativity in people. If society valued capacities like resilient-intelligence as much as mind-intellect, then those living in impoverished conditions may have a greater sense of validation and self-worth: “our education systems in particular need to make more space for forms of knowledge that reflect the full spectrum of lived realities” (pp. 366-367).

What all of these authors share, in their redefinitions of various terms and labels that describe different facets of people and their lives, is an emphasis on intersectionality: the idea that almost every person, even one with privilege, has overlapping aspects of vulnerability with regard to colonization and oppression. By redefining pedagogy as involving the body, mind, and spirit in conjunction with each other, each author contributes to unsettling the Western epistemological frameworks that contribute to the colonial relations of power.

The chapter by Rice, “Volatile Bodies and Vulnerable Researchers,” adds that intersectionality can contribute to redefining perceptions of disability as beautiful variances from the norm and to question the other characteristics that contribute to what defines disability in Western society. For example, a poor Black disabled woman, according to Western societal status quo, would surely suffer, but would a rich White disabled woman? When unlearning and relearning, intersectionality needs to influence the ideas that are perpetuated when aiming toward decolonization. For example, by unpacking a person’s stereotypical views of others when looking at a label and discussing how those generalizations are incredibly limiting, the person then has the opportunity to learn that the label was incorrectly leaving out so much.

In turn, the authors agree, by frequently citing Tuck and Wayne (2012), that decolonization is not abstract or a process of undoing. It is not a metaphor, but rather an experience that people see, hear, and feel. The experience moves society forward without forgetting the past. Decolonization is a process that should be led by the knowledge and insights of Indigenous peoples. Adefarakan argues that embodied units on Indigenous knowledge and experience should be co-taught with Indigenous elders. This is not to say that non-Indigenous instructors cannot teach embodied pedagogy by themselves. Rather, Adefarakan recommends that non-Indigenous instructors take the time to teach units on Indigenous wisdom and experience with an Indigenous elder at their side rather than assuming that they can embody this pedagogy on their own. As Young Leon and Nadeau contribute in their chapter, "Embodying Indigenous Resurgence: 'All Our Relations' Pedagogy,"

Relationship with lands is the foundation of this pedagogy, and decolonization means placing Indigenous resurgence at the centre of the endeavour. Resurgence, for me, means restoring Indigenous knowledge perspectives and articulating self-determined expression while maintaining responsibilities for the well-being of the collective. (p. 79)

This is not a process of simply changing learning, but improving learning to dismantle the colonized idea that mind, body, and spirit are separate facets.

In all, *Sharing Breath*, while published two years ago, still has an incredibly relevant message carried throughout. As an academic, it pushed me to think about my own pedagogy and commit to future reflection when considering how to integrate a more embodied approach. When reflecting upon the most recent political uprisings in response to calls for social justice, I felt myself refocusing on the process of decolonization on behalf of Indigenous people, a concept that I felt as though I had not thought about in quite some time, sadly. The current increase in attention on the need for equality and addressing biases and privilege will hopefully be a step toward wider decolonization.

This book inspired me to further identify ideas I need to unlearn and relearn, and deepened my understanding of privilege: some in Western society with substantial social privilege may see the decolonization process as onerous. To them, equality means that they will need to sacrifice their privileges and risk falling into oppression. If privileged people understand that they do not need to face suffering for others to benefit, changes can truly take effect. The editors summarize the role of privilege when culminating the book's common themes by writing that the authors felt "the need to unsettle privileged subjectivities and interrogate the intertwined relations of colonialism and capitalism" (p. 391). By unsettling and revising privileged people's misconceptions, progress is possible. Some privileged White people, however, who only see themselves losing and others gaining, are blinded by their misunderstanding, leading them to resist movements for equality that are in the news on a daily basis.

Decolonization, as a means of rewriting the way Western society groups people with such limited views of who they are as individuals, is extremely relevant to recent discussions of social justice. Western society functions on the basis of stereotyping and rigid definitions. This is because it is much easier to see one quality of a person and assume that they fit a mold than to take the time to understand all of their unique qualities and features. Members of Western society are reliant upon their eyes, which limits their view of who people are. To diminish such a superficial reliance, unlearning and relearning may be the most poignant recommendation that I aspire to implement into my newly revised, embodied pedagogical approach.

An unlearning and relearning process has already inspired me to be more reflective about language. From how I define the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit, to defining pain and describing different affinity groups, this book encouraged me to think about how I use and understand my language. While writing this review, I felt as though this book pushed me to think more critically about the oversimplification of labels. Even though the book emphasizes that oversimplification of labels needs to be remedied, there are still examples of such language throughout the book and, as a result, within this review. It was a chal-

lenge for me, and seemingly from the authors of *Sharing Breath*, to address the complexity of intersectionality through our language. Assumptions and biases still creep their way into the messages we communicate, even when unintended or unconscious. I am left feeling like the chapters increased my awareness of the labels that I use, while recognizing that, as a society, our terms and definitions need to become more inclusive as a means of diminishing the unconscious perpetuation of stereotypes. The English language itself needs to experience decolonization.

As I relearn the language I use, *Sharing Breath* has allowed me to begin to relearn and redefine education through an embodied learning lens. I find myself committed to being more thoughtful in the ways I discuss and practice embodied learning. In all, I commend Sheila Batacharya and Yuk-Lin Renita Wong on seamlessly compiling 14 chapters with unique voices and messages to contribute to the main goal of addressing embodiment and embodied learning as an integral, counter-hegemonic aspect of decolonization and critical pedagogy.

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