

**Reflective piece****“Untitled XI”****Clelia O. Rodríguez**

El Salvador/Canada

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I write this piece from a place of chronic pain: the colonized world. Teaching in this system does nothing to the possibilities of healing cultural and historical wounds. I operate dancing around, in between, back and forth, and to the beat of broken pedagogies, incomplete curriculums, haunted spirits, torn-apart bodies and superficial intentions to crawl through the cracks of institutional reparations. When I say operate, I refer to how I stand silent in the house of the masters who never go away even though they have already died. The house is still standing, making sure the treaties left behind continue to displace everyone who is meant to be displaced: non-white people. I write this piece from a city that claims to be diverse and is known to have a reputation to welcome everyone: Toronto. A Canadian city where brown bodies are surveyed by radars and cameras. State-of-the-art radars that designate concepts, ideas, questions, doubts, accusations, and destinies to individuals that are only equal based on written decrees about Human Rights. Yes, I write this piece from a space where breaking, pedagogy, inequality, social hierarchies, power, racial diversity, loss, melancholia, indigenous history, connections, land, territories, class and borders shape how I approach teaching despite an agonizing pain. I write this text with: a sense of urgency, contemplating vacancy in my eyes as I witness the destruction of the planet; the knowledge of a trembling heart rather than a palpitating one; the sounds of the thunder of acid rain as the result of the expanding cattle industry in a once-upon-a-time Amazonian forest; the curiosity of questions about dying insects as they chirp in the darkest of times; the effect of interrupted happiness that accumulates in something called depression when it is really about oppression; the desire to stop the time vault crushing the tired feet as they drag waves of plastic; inaudible sounds of non-flying birds in the middle of a hot winter; the desire to see one more time the smile of my dead grandmother; a silken cushion harnessing the toughness of my skull; the bottled-up tunes drifting ashore; the need to fail as a basic necessity, and the hope of imagining a formula to disable colliding pain.

**Lesson #1: The A, B, Cs of Violence**

In the depths of my memory, there is an archive of my childhood. There is a lesson I will share that has never been oralized, written, digitized and it will not be monopolized so long as I breathe. I do this in the spirit of gratitude for your presence in the act of reading. This lesson is on what it means to respect

living things with dignity. Copyrights? Well, it's worth stating that the political meaning of not releasing it carries the weight of generations and generations of information that sometimes arrives once or twice in the voice of a dying grandfather. Not like a confession or a burden but a practical possibility of secrecy that was meant to be approved by my own fingerprints and nothing else.

I write from a territory where indigenous peoples are getting killed because they are defending water, life. I often tell myself that in order to engage profoundly with knowledge, one must dance between a narrow and a broad spectrum to contest it and to challenge it. It's a delicate movement because one deals with interruption noises of KNOW on EDGES. The ones that are forced to be silenced and contained in colonialist boxes. I remind my skin that, in the timespan and the spam of answering emails, scrolling through social media or replying to text messages, around 400 to 600 humans would be most likely uprooted from their homeland. And when I say this, in my voice I have the memories of ancestors whose stories are being weaved simultaneously in each step of those who are also escaping hunger, war, terror. Some of you, depending the region or the country of origin, can relate to this fabric. Others have only seen it in movies. And the latter usually speak about it as if they own the stories when they do not. This is when an intervention needs to happen because the ones that remained silent need to speak up and take up space.

I tell students that we each represent a different tree. Maybe someone comes from a pine forest, or another person grew up by the shadow of a eucalyptus, or an African baobab, or a mahogany population in the Amazon or even a cedar from Lebanon or an olive tree in Palestine ... Truth is that we, humanity, sustain ourselves through the connection of roots. I often share with students a story of mine, hoping for theirs (because if, as educators, we give participation marks for students' contributions, isn't it only fair to also exchange a part of us as well?):

We began going to the river to get water because bombs destroyed the sewerage. I was given a *cántaro*, a mid-size clay pitcher, to carry water. I was instructed to care for it. I was annoyed with the task and instead of doing what I was told, I wasted the water, not caring for it as I should have. My grandfather only observed. The following day, he woke me up around 5 o'clock in the morning. He asked me to get dressed and get my *cántaro* ready. We walked in silence towards the river. "Do as I do," he said. We filled the *cántaros* and returned home. He emptied them and started walking back again. "Follow me," he said. In silence we did the trip at least 10 times never saying a word. We had breakfast and when my grandmother and brother started preparing to join us he said, "No, we are in charge today." My grandmother said it was going to take us ages. With no response from him, we carried on. I don't remember how many trips we did that day but caring for animals was delayed, cooking was delayed, washing the clothes was delayed, all because we couldn't carry enough. When we finally finished, I sat down exhausted, enjoying a glass of water like it was the most precious drink I've ever had. My grandfather, who had been silent all day, finally told me before going to bed, "Water must be respected. The community depends on it. I grew up without a faucet. You were given the privilege of access to the water and wasted it."

No one discussed these interactions afterwards. There was no debriefings or time to process. This was the lesson I remember when I hear the notion of opening up pedagogical spaces. The deeper issues in higher education, as suggested in the mission statements on many universities' websites, are related to when, how, where and why. I thought about my access to the river. It was measured in kilometers,

a little bit more than 5km to the source of life. The civil war in El Salvador destroyed the modern water sewerage to our house, altering established routines dependent on having instant access through the faucet. I had to pay attention to that lesson in motion curated by a memory in constant movement.

The walk towards the river that day burst into realities I hadn't seen before. An ox-cart disturbed sleepy rocks crushing them as they became smaller entities in a dusty road. The side of the road looked less alive. The grass seemed drier as if a giant brush had passed by striking it with shades of brown and yellow. I noticed the sound of the sun frying the carcasses of dead insects or birds or perhaps my own skin. The heat was enhancing my senses clearing my vision towards something old that was new to me for the first time. My nostrils turned into a conduit leading me into an entry point to a vast knowledge coming from all directions from the land around me.

Here's what I smelled: scarcity, drought, dying algae. The walk became a pilgrimage that is now part of how I understand sentences where open + education + resources appear in the same paragraph. A journey where I got to see how the life of creatures is denied and how they easily turned into a code to signify death. The borders between the United States and Mexico are a vivid reminder of that. One is a click away from seeing images of children in cages separated from their parents. Education has meant death for me. My father was a teacher and was killed for that, teaching. It wasn't an opening but an ending. My educational consciousness, if I can call it that, is born out of a lineage that has been alive because resistance outlives the invention of the press.

**“Next to money and guns, the third largest North American export is the U.S. idealist, who turns up in every theater of the world: the teacher, the volunteer, the missionary, the community organizer, the economic developer, and the vacationing do-good-ers.”**

Ivan Illich, *To hell with good intentions* (1968).

As part of a historical oppressed group in El Salvador, sustaining resources like water meant relying on each other. If someone stayed behind because oppression suffocated their lungs when walking, the other turned back, remained, defying the forceful threats to destroy a kind of tenacity that's very, very difficult to put into words. Some knowledge remains the property of helping someone how to breathe again.

The shallow perception of the “amazingness” of our resilience, as noted by foreigners, provides them that, superficiality. The experiences tattooed in our copper-brown skin provided opportunities to be packed into projects in other countries. People wrote about counternarratives in relation to our struggles, assaulting with writing the spirit of what some in the ‘global North’ know as solidarity. I think educational racism is open for business, namely because we have been pushed and rushed to produce to ‘keep up with the times’. I say educational racism because I don't see many non-white educators going into white or white-passing homes to do this. Emphasis on the quantity, of course. And it's important to slow down to think about this, to reflect, to fight with it, to ponder upon, to digest it, to live it. Otherwise, ‘open’ wouldn't denote the idea of access but of a repository point like those found in borders with restrictions and approval. Let's keep in mind how oppressed groups respond to the condition of access for a moment. Who has it?

It presents, beyond multilayered challenges, projections of unaccountable social injustices we are directly or indirectly responsible for. Is it possible to conceptualize the control of access as an undeniable process determined by the idea of what counts as white and what doesn't? Who is in and who is out? Who has been erased but most importantly why? Fenced-in territories give us a clue.

Settlements, refugee camps, detentions centers, prisons, barbed-wired juvenile shelters – just to mention a few – subscribe to surveillance paid for by an industry that values human lives based on worthy and unworthy citizenship. The acquisition of stories from these so-called unworthy bodies must not only comply with the guilt of filling empty spaces in the back corner of library shelves, but to be consolidated as the powerful references they truly are. Are we, as educators and scholars, compelled to address notions of accountability for the sake of following a syllabus that spells out the commodification of intersectionality, among other axes?

### **Lesson #2: Openly Playing within Cages**

Playing with cages is the only way to feel a sense of freedom at times. Stepping into landmines didn't necessarily get you killed in El Salvador but it blew any chances of staying away from statistical reports of collateral damage. I played in fields contemplating my unspoken 50/50 chances. In these contained spaces of cages, we contemplate the eyes of a heartless humanity. The confinement of dancing wings delineates figures of sadness tattooed on the foreheads of innocence. When one is born in a cage, physical or tangible, the wind never picks up fallen pollen. Lessons on democracy are somewhat useless and testing what we know about it is insulting. Walking inside the cage smells like rusted, worn iron. It is printed in every inch as a reminder of a history that is on repeat mode. After many steps inside the cage, the floor develops the gift of remembering sequences. The slow tapping opens a new folder under the name 'captivity.' No! No! Not on the Desktop. Does this captivity matter when we think of the high cost of textbooks and access to journals? I can't help but wonder at how we are trained to consume knowledge strictly tied to unreasonable prices, in the same way that modern states benefit from non-white people in the industrial prison complex. C'mon, it's a business.

### **Lesson #3: Numbers**

Underage occupants of cages are not accepted as humans. These semi-individuals are cursed to remain as such to pay for those whose actions contributed to creating them in the first place. They do not get to live the happily-ever-after life story sold in consolidated newsstands or the rapid check-out service from online bookstores. Children are presently caged as democracy advances in open-floor plans in governments and in the United Nations headquarters, where the pedagogical binder gets thicker and thicker because that's where the funding is. Without an upfront, transparent and demanding anti-blackness and anti-racist liberation position, actions outlined in curriculums remain an affiliation to colonialism. Nothing else. Dying in shackles at the age of five years old is an accepted anomaly that will be engraved in a hall of shame in some unknown museum in the near future funded by a charismatic philanthropist and alumnus from an Ivy League university not far from the border.

A four-year old shows up alone in court. The Judge looks down and the minor has absolutely nothing to say. In the graduating law class of 2020, the boy becomes a case study turning him into a demonstrative adjective "this". The only thing missing is the muffled consonant "U", for 'unknown',

which is not necessarily a correlation to the Monument of the Unknown in the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

A student raises their hand to ask: “What would a curriculum with the known look like? Would it have sounds? Faces? First and last names? Places of belonging? Favourite recipes? Through the work of designing the syllabus to be co-developed with input from a real diverse body of voices and not merely reduced to politics of tokenism, would this be shaped in partnerships? Is the hierarchy of relevant teaching going to disappear? How would the integration of students’ experiences be respected?”

Perhaps humans were designed to sit around pots of tea to follow the intricacies of our insignificances and how isolated we are in the universe. Prior to the existence of a Web that was Wide in the World, the www, I existed within the gravitational force of collective memory. Each day, this memory is erased when our names are forgotten seeing how the Milky Way passes over without visiting our universes. We flip pages, open tags, click URLs in blue shades, and place the cursor dividing realities into virtual moving subjects as the zoom-in setting is maximized because the illusion of liberty grants us that.

#### Lesson #4: The Past

I grab a globe and head south. The Atacama Desert is a place that comes to mind. In the documentary *Nostalgia de la Luz* (2010) by Patricio Guzmán, astronomers look for the past in the universe. If your daughter or son or partner were tortured and killed during the Pinochet regime, then you look for the past in the desert as it’s the place where their bones are scattered. Astronomy and archeology sharing a point of departure to find answers in a living library measured by infinite possibilities. What would happen if our own bones contain a way to connect with that? If we borrowed this reading, we wouldn’t have to return it because the expiry date is death itself. Pushing boundaries in scholarship perhaps also requires an initial journey inwards because we already know that financial rates outside are high and not thought to be affordable to most humans.

An agonizing teacher asks: where is the place of liberation in the Open + Pedagogy + Education equation? To speak of resistance is not the same as actively resisting. To resist closure, the action in opening must be to create a space with no doors or locks because knocking sometimes leads you to be shot, depending on what one looks like. Those of us working in educational consciousness have to escalate unlearning to scavenge in the search of lost stories because the ‘ages of discovery’ have rotten systems of knowledge. Would there be episodes of wokeness in the curriculum design? Would you stop the antagonistic assault on the minds of the best students in opposition to the worse ones – to As, as opposed to Bs or Cs? Would you consider the idea of removing grades altogether in order to morph education so that we can free up students from the mental prisons the majority operate in?

#### Lesson Without Numbers

#4506 had its origins in a genetically modified seed  
conceived by the cold hands of a machine  
in a laboratory with a name that is too complicated to pronounce.  
No one in the history of the history of the history of this world  
would have anything to say about him.

Anonymity swirls and no one cares, except ICE.  
 The significance of holding your breath  
 as if it was your last lifeline.  
 Thinking of the minute-to-minute disappearances of  
 brown,  
 black, and  
 indigenous bodies in the world,  
 forces me to put to rest  
 any desire to think of grading  
 as a form of measuring education.  
 It's an assault on freedom.

### Lesson #6: Respect

My grandfather was taught by his mother and aunties to love in resilience. Every animal, plant, insect, wind direction was a revelation. He petrified fish in salt to preserve their memory, letting us know what river they came from. Each fish bone taught us that we each lived in a cycle where one day someone else would be caring for our bones. Perhaps reading the bones was a lesson on understanding absence. We knew the fish, if it was fast or slow, where it lived, who captured it, how it was carried, the methods of cleaning, preparation, and cooking. It was cared for to be the core of a celebration of life. If there was someone sick in the community, this person would get a bigger portion to help with the healing. Our living cycles, through the sustaining power of what was around us, situated and enabled a supporting system that was synchronized by pillars of what we can call love, for a lack of another word I can translate. Respect is a daily currency constantly being corrupted by hate and disease.

This combination, hate and disease, is been furiously exploding since 1492 in the Americas. It hasn't stopped. Yet, here we are, trying to figure out ways to mount resistance to be informed by you, the reader. We know indigenous land is saturated with concrete and we also know that we are walking on unknown remains just like those found in the Atacama Desert. This flow of information can turn into knowledge in relation to our own bones, and when it's transmitted as acknowledging stories then it becomes wisdom, as long as it becomes part of a way of life and learning. This way of life and learning is for life. This is a not a to-do list, or a checkbox, or based on what you may be accustomed to, such as goals, milestones, or objectives.

As we relate to decolonizing work, anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-blackness, anti-indigenous, anti-fill-in-your-blank, we will not discover anything. The way through a life committed to unlearning stays with us until we take the last breath. It is paved with engagement with the inter-being as it finds lost connections with what was part of you when we cry for the first time. Instead of taking up space, let's move out of the way. Instead of speaking, let's surprise our growth with silence. Instead of forcing change because the alter ego kicks our gut, let's allow our intestines to digest because that's literally where shit goes wrong.

Warning: I have no concluding anything at the end of this text because we have been called to co-exist in relation to what I call inverted intersections of educational consciousness.

**“We must not be anything other than what we are.”**

**Maaza Mengiste, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010).**

Life at the inverted intersection of educational consciousness is determined by the need to survive and thrive as community. Here's how that is visualized: at checkpoints in the borders, officers are not interested in one's history. I worked at the University of Michigan in 2017 for a semester. Trump won and that materialized in a straightforward negation of the myth of equality for anyone who is not white and “American.” I would often take the bus to go back home in Toronto, Canada along with asylum seekers from all corners of the world at the U.S.-Canadian border, every other Friday. Every time I saw non-white people, I felt a sense of relief after having spent time in a campus predominantly attended by white students, white administrators and white professors. I crossed the border more easily because I held a Canadian passport. And this is the point where I was separated from the rest of the passengers who were also people of color without that citizenship. That is how I see and understand the inverted intersection. The anti-blackness, anti-indigenous, anti-Muslim, anti-human, really, was deemed natural by Canadian officers when they approached passengers in the bus.

Truth be told about notions of citizenship in the context of Canadian history: the Crown Title in Canada is a lie. As Sharon Venne (2017:15) explains, “Most Canadians assume that somehow Canada acquired formal title to the land 150 years ago in the British North America Act, the country's founding document”. Many Canadians, and those that guard the borders, do not seem to acknowledge how Canadian European settlers stole the land of indigenous peoples in that territory. Crossing that border, Windsor-Detroit, meant verbalizing as often as I could the history that those officers were forgetting. If they were not interested in listening to the history they had not been taught, how could they be interested in someone else's story of migration? Venne (2017:15) reveals that “Canada, today, is still trying to desperately negotiate with hundreds of First Nations to have them surrender, once and for all, their title to the lands”. Next time you meet a Canadian, who does not necessarily have to look white, ask them directly about the situation of indigenous peoples and how their parents and ancestors have benefitted from the genocide that has taken place there.

For example, Robert Maynard (2018) argues that “The injustices happening at the U.S.-Canada border [...] cannot be understood outside of Canada's broader history of anti-Black border regulations as well as Black resistance to these regulations”. The least we can do, out of respect, is to re-visit what we understand by Canada today.

### **Why Disobedience Matters**

I asked my mother once if she ever dreamt of leaving El Salvador when she was a child. She told me she would daydream of studying in a nearby town because her favorite aunt lived there. She worked hard with my grandparents to save money to buy floral-print dresses. It was the end of the 1950s so her eyes were filled with color. At that time, wearing something new every once in a while allowed her to invent stories about where she would wear them. I have often felt that the only way to repair my broken childhood is through hers. Picking up on the pieces where she was safe, happy, and whole.

Asking my mother these questions lasted barely five minutes, yet somehow it felt enough to fill a gap greater than a canyon. I realized that it was the first time I had marched into her childhood memories.

I don't think I had ever thought of my mother as a child until that point. I felt like I was sitting in a front-row seat of the best movie I had ever seen. I pictured her skipping without a worry in the world.

Some days later I talked to my grandmother and asked her what my mother was like as a child and why she wasn't allowed to pursue the career of her choice. She used adjectives like 'because she was good,' 'efficient,' 'helpful,' 'obedient.' I didn't dare interrupt her. Was she a happy child, a happy student, I finally decided to ask? Her vague answer of "I don't know, I guess," left my thoughts in a foggy state-of-mind. When I asked my grandfather to give me his impressions of my mother as a child, he looked at me as if I had asked him to show me an alien. "Why do you want to know?" he answered as if this question was enough. "I don't know," I responded, "because I want to." "Go ask your grandmother," he replied at last. So I was back to the adjectives: good, efficient, helpful and obedient.

I was not trained to disobey. I learned it on my own. Disobedience needs to be included as a pillar in curricular activities if we expect students to unpack layers of colonialism. The built-in environment shapes what we will be and how. Including unconventional texts as legitimate sources help us understand, for example, that when a river is strong enough it is unstoppable. Teaching students how to disobey the norms of Eurocentric ways of writing, reading, thinking, performing professionally, and talking helps them explore other ways of creating and active learning. My mother wanted to study chemistry. She obeyed and did not. She tells me all the time now that if she could have been taught to be just a little bit disobedient perhaps her life could have been different.

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