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Christine Rogers Stanton

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MEDIA REVIEW

Survivance storywork: Expecting more from ourselves

Indigenous children's survivance in public schools, by Leilani Sabzalian, New York, NY, Routledge, 2019, 245 pp., $47.95 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-1-138-38459-7; $150.00 (hardback), ISBN-13: 978-1-138-38451-4

Although social studies education seems a logical place to teach about the history and continued influence of settler colonialism, the field has largely avoided the topic by excluding Indigenous[1] histories, experiences, and perspectives (Calderon, 2014; Journell, 2009; Loewen, 1995; Sanchez, 2007; Shear, Knowles, Soden, & Castro, 2015; Stanton, 2014; Stoddard, Marcus, & Hicks, 2014). On the rare occasions when Indigenous counter-narratives are included in curriculum and classrooms, they are marginalized and/or "damage-centered" (Tuck, 2009). Similarly, educational research tends to focus on perceived deficits of Indigenous students instead of describing and envisioning "desire-centered" (Tuck, 2009) education. In other words, Indigenous peoples and experiences tend to be positioned—in curriculum, classrooms, and research—in ways that emphasize otherness, stereotypes, and problems (i.e., "damage"), instead of recognizing the long-standing, future-oriented, and culturally-grounded strengths and goals (i.e., "desires") of Indigenous communities.

Alutiiq scholar Leilani Sabzalian's book, *Indigenous Children's Survivance in Public Schools*, is a call for teachers and scholars to resist the "violence of normative coloniality" (p. 8) endemic to our society and particularly resilient within social studies education by listening to and learning from stories of survivance. Anishinaabe scholar Vizenor (2008) is most often credited with expanding understanding of *survivance*—a concept that has always existed within Indigenous communities—to education and scholarship. Sabzalian elaborates, explaining that *survivance* is a "semantic combination of the words survival and resistance" (p. xv), which simultaneously illuminates real challenges experienced by Indigenous students and communities *and* seeks to maintain "hope despite hardship" (p. 225).

Sabzalian organizes her text around a series of "survivance stories" to deconstruct pervasive Eurocentric myths within social studies education. Throughout the book, she emphasizes the present and continued influence of "colonial violence," teacher ignorance, and assimilative schooling on Indigenous students and communities (p. 2). To confront these legacies of violence, Sabzalian advocates for teaching that advances *anticolonial literacy*, or "the ability to critically read and counter Eurocentric and colonizing educational discourses and practices" (p. 201).

The book is itself an example of survivance, anticolonial literacies, and "culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogy" (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103), given its focus on counter narratives that have been purposefully and previously silenced. Through sharing these stories, Sabzalian elevates attention to and (re)centers Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. As a result, her book embodies hope, possibility, agency, and responsibility. A recurring question throughout the book—"*What if?*"—encourages a view of survivance that is forward-thinking, desire-centered, and action-oriented, as opposed to deficit-focused and fatalistic.

Although I have over 20 years of experience working in schools that serve Indigenous children, as a non-Indigenous *settler* it is counterproductive and inappropriate for me to review this text in a traditional sense (i.e., a summary, integration with existing scholarship, and critique). I am the descendent of white[2] farmers who settled on land taken from the Piikani (Blackfeet) nation, and I continue to live, teach, and research in settler-occupied spaces

stolen from multiple nations. Given my positionality as a settler scholar and educator, perhaps the best I can offer in terms of a review of Sabzalian's text is to participate with the work as an active listener and commit to critical reflection and change within my own practice. To attend to these goals, I organize this review around *What if*? questions to guide my own conversation with the text.

What if we turn toward our own discomfort?

If, as Tuck (2009) has suggested, we truly care about "desire-centered" decisions, we need to ask *whose* desires are popularized within social studies education? Sabzalian argues that the primary desire upheld in classrooms is the Eurocentric desire to observe the Other. As she explains, many common approaches to teaching about Indigenous peoples are superficial, thereby eliciting false empathy by enacting a "tourist" or "little anthropologist" orientation, "playing Indian" (p. 148), and/or reinforcing the "4 Ds" of stereotyped Indianness (drumming, drinking, dancing, or dead) (p. 160). In these cases, as Sabzalian argues, white teachers benefit most, as they seek uncritical, non-threatening, and even "fun" opportunities for their students, who they perceive to be largely non-Indigenous.

Despite our claim to support life-long learning, teachers are sometimes the most reluctant students. To enact anticolonial education, Sabzalian notes, "We have to be willing to critique ourselves as teachers … " (p. 101). Unfortunately, as Sabzalian explains, avoidance of discomfort is "perhaps why curricular activities for Native Heritage Month more often involve invitations to Indigenous dancers to perform, rather than invitations to tribal chairwomen who might remind students and teachers of their tenuous claims to place" (p. 165). Even in places like my home state of Montana where there are state-level expectations for teaching about Indigenous experiences, discomfort often leads to inaction or superficiality. For example, it is common for Montana elementary students to attend dance demonstrations for "Native American Heritage Day," much like the students in one of Sabzalian's survivance stories.

While Sabzalian expects teachers to go beyond superficial connections, she acknowledges that given the "momentum behind these myths" (p. 59), substantial vulnerability, humility, and courage is needed, and she expresses the complexity of change—even for Indigenous teachers and leaders. For example, she emphasizes, "As an Indigenous educator and researcher, I am not immune to this entanglement with coloniality, even as I set out intentionally to disrupt colonial practices and relations" (p. 8). Sabzalian argues that perpetuation of settler colonial myths is not the result of an "explicit or intentional orientation, but an inherited and taken-for-granted framing" (p. 89). We automatically turn to these familiar framings unless we make "an effort to turn toward [our] own discomfort" (p. 76).

However, critical and purposeful planning and reflection is not enough—in and of itself—to advance anticolonial education. As a teacher in a reservation bordertown, I regularly made decisions that I believed were based on research, practice, and community protocol. For example, I worked closely with Eastern Shoshone elders and leaders to develop a lesson about creation stories. Like teachers in Sabzalian's text, I shared creation stories and then encouraged my students to create their own creation stories. I believed I was purposeful in terms of my decisions, and my students responded largely with enthusiasm and creativity. Years later, after I described this lesson to a Northern Arapaho friend, I was told that not all Indigenous Nations are open to sharing their creation stories in classroom settings. I was mortified at the thought that Northern Arapaho students might have felt uncomfortable with the lesson, and I was angry at myself for assuming that collaboration with a few members of one Nation permitted me to use the stories in the way I had.

Almost two decades later, I am still embarrassed by this lesson, and while I have thought about this experience frequently during my own planning, I wonder about ways I might turn *toward* my discomfort within broader public and academic space—the very space where

simultaneously I have extensive privilege and where the stakes are highest for me as a professional. For example, what will happen if I openly write and/or speak about my discomfort in journals, at conferences, in my classrooms, or in public or community settings? How might such efforts advance anticolonial learning for myself and for others?

What if we prioritize relationality in our learning?

For most teachers, advancing anticolonial education means engaging in personal and sometimes painful self-location work, and many of us need "thoughtful guidance to learn to critically read and evaluate Indigenous representations" (p. 81). In particular, Sabazlian and other scholars emphasize that teachers should prioritize learning *from* (rather than about) Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, as Sabzalian emphasizes, while teachers can demonstrate "individual illiteracy or ignorance of these issues, such ignorance can also be systemic and collective" (p. 50). Therefore, she encourages schools to "lift up tribal consultation as an educational intervention" (p. 195) by partnering with tribes in meaningful and sustained ways. However, teachers, leaders, and scholars must acknowledge that since consultation processes generate "new relations, understandings, and ways of being," as well as new responsibilities, they are complex (p. 194). For example, Sabzalian wonders how tribes, schools, and teachers (and universities and researchers) will respond if/when disagreements arise.

In addition to emphasizing relationships between people, Sabzalian explains that the survivance stories are also "designed to place teachers in relationship with institutions and practices that reproduce erasure" (p. 200). Other Indigenous scholars emphasize the importance of relationality, not just between people, but also between people and ideas (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Sabzalian has very real, personal connections to these survivance stories. She is transparent about seeing herself, her students, and her own children in them. For Sabzalian, sharing these stories provides an opportunity to articulate her resistance to repeated attempts to erase, marginalize, or assimilate within her own life.

Sabzalian also draws attention to relationality with place. In particular, she notes that "places are pedagogical" (p. 130) and can elicit deep thinking and learning about geography and government as connected to Indigenous history and sovereignty. In this way, places take on an active role, as opposed to serving as a passive objects for settler control. Sabzalian encourages educators to begin their own learning—and their teaching—with recognition of place and presence. Within academia, we are beginning to see more examples of land acknowledgments, which recognize long-standing relationships between places and Indigenous peoples. However, scholars caution against superficial or fleeting land acknowledgments (Indigenous Education Network, 2019).

Despite the fact that I have a degree in geography and draw upon "place-conscious" theory, methodology, and pedagogy in my own scholarship (Gruenewald, 2008), reading Sabzalian's text has helped me realize how much more I need to do in order to advance place-conscious education and scholarship that is also anticolonial. For example, instead of simply asking the pre-service teachers in my methods courses to provide land acknowledgments in the introductions of lessons they develop (thereby marginalizing those acknowledgments), I could ask them to recognize continued Indigenous claims to, presence within, and relationality with place during the body of the lesson. *What if* students learn the difference between relationships (as a potentially static thing) and relationality (as a process that needs active attention and participation)? *What if* relationality and Indigeneity are made central, instead of marginal?

What if we take responsibility for change?

Perhaps the most prominent theme of Sabzalian's text is that of commitment to responsibility. Sabzalian notes that recognizing the continued influence of settler colonialism is not always

straightforward for teachers: There are "blurred lines between appreciation and appropriation" (p. 187). However, she argues that given increased mainstream attention to commodification and misappropriation, "teachers should no longer feel comfortable teaching about Pilgrims and 'generic' Indians" (p. 204) and other blatant misrepresentations.

Instead of viewing Indigenous art, culture, and artists as "objects of analysis," Sabzalian encourages educators and scholars to position "Indigenous peoples as subjects in relation to their own art, defined in their own aesthetic and political terms" (p. 189). However, she argues that simply including Indigenous histories, experiences, and perspectives is not enough to advance anticolonial education: Inclusion must also include critical interrogation of Eurocentric "gestures" of inclusion (p. 160). For example, focusing on Chief Joseph's "surrender" speech, while excluding or ignoring his continued, life-long resistance efforts, merely perpetuates settler colonial desires and a "benign portrayal of mutually helpful relationships" (p. 51). Furthermore, teachers and scholars should be aware of the potential for inclusion of Indigenous counternarratives to generate false empathy and/or new opportunities for racial microaggressions (Stanton & Morrison, 2018). As Sabzalian argues, "Anticipating, interrupting, and responding to such microaggressions becomes an unfortunate, yet necessary, aspect of supporting Indigenous students" (p. 71).

Therefore, anticolonial education requires *"all* educators to see themselves as responsible for this work" and committed to action (p. 29, emphasis in original). That said, Sabzalian emphasizes that social studies teachers, in particular, have a "responsibility to understand the dark history of schooling and the intentionally assimilative practices of educators" (p. 19). In keeping with a desire-centered, action-oriented pedagogy of possibility, Sabzalian asks, "*What if* schools and school districts took seriously the notion of trust responsibility for Native students and institutionalized that trust responsibility?" (p. 191). Many educators are unfamiliar with—or claim unfamiliarity in order to justify inaction—these "trust responsibilities." In actuality, all schools, teachers, and school leaders are legally obligated to provide education for Indigenous children that reflects the cultures, histories, and languages of those children (Reinhardt, 2004).

As a teacher educator and scholar, I frequently emphasize the necessity of sustained and meaningful collaboration with Indigenous partners, although I constantly worry about how that collaboration is realized in terms of equity and respect. While Sabzalian emphasizes relationships with Indigenous partners are vital, she also cautions readers about the tendency for non-Indigenous teachers and scholars to rely on Indigenous peoples to create change, instead of taking responsibility for our own learning. *What if* we imagine the potential for an anticolonial relationship between Indigenous mentors and non-Indigenous educators? How can we simultaneously turn toward our discomfort (i.e., by acknowledging that we need guidance from Indigenous mentors) *and* our responsibility (i.e., by leading change within ourselves and our classrooms)?

Conclusion: What if we center indigenous survivance in social studies?

Sabzalian's text is unique and transformative in many ways. It is part of a limited—but ever-expanding—body of Indigenous-authored scholarship. As an Indigenous woman, Sabzalian is able to braid her own experiences with those of other Indigenous scholars, students, and colleagues using a "restorative process" (p. 168). Throughout the book, readers learn about how stories themselves can serve as teachers and healers, particularly in terms of confronting trauma caused by settler colonialism. Specifically, Sabzalian expresses her hope that the survivance stories offer a "*space* to think, to feel, to reflect, to imagine, and to act" (p. 23, emphasis in original). She also explains that in addition to acting, Indigenous peoples may choose resistance, since "refusal, as a theory and method, is generative, an analytic that can make, through its focus, particular

structures and sets of relations visible" (p. 189). Similarly, Sabzalian interrogates the mainstream educational system's fascination with "grit," wondering if resistance, refusal, and silence—instead of being indicative of a lack of "grit"—can demonstrate a personal commitment to anticolonial education. Other scholars have suggested that "silence" can be a form of purposeful "not learning" or resistance in order to advance or affirm educational sovereignty (San Pedro, 2015). *What if* teachers, teacher educators, and scholars embraced and engaged with resistance and refusal more completely and courageously? *What if* instead of lamenting those students who refuse to learn from us, we strive to learn from and with our students?

Throughout the text, it is clear Sabzalian expects teachers to be courageous, committed, and connected in order to learn from and lift up survivance stories of Indigenous students, families, and communities. Most importantly, she expects teachers to *care*. As I read this work, I found myself wondering if the predominantly white teachers I know to care *enough* to do the hard work needed to include survivance stories with respect and purpose, especially if they believe such stories hold little relevance for (their perceived) majority non-Indigenous students. While the "stakes are higher" for Indigenous children, non-Indigenous students also deserve the truth (p. 52). Perhaps the most important message from Sabzalian's text is that we should all care—Indigenous and non-Indigenous, teachers and students, scholars and readers, since, as Brayboy and Castagno (2009) suggested, we are all potential "agents for change" (p. 49).

While Sabzalian argues that "providing teachers with lists of content to avoid doesn't necessarily explain or intervene into the persistent and troubling dynamic of routinely framing Native people and cultures as objects of study and inquiry" (p. 117), she also notes that "in the current context of educational reform, providing direct recommendations—even if they risk being decontextualized—can be useful" (p. 203). In the book's conclusion, Sabzalian shares some specific ideas that can contribute to efforts to elevate survivance within education. For example, she recommends that teachers seek out resources; develop a "working knowledge base of Native citizenship, nationhood, and sovereignty" (p. 204); understand and disrupt stereotypes; and start with current and local connections. She encourages teacher education programs to require a foundational knowledge of genocide and colonization, use case studies and counternarratives in curriculum, and partner in meaningful ways with Indigenous programs and nations. In terms of research, Sabzalian suggests efforts that foreground knowledge, theory, and experiences of Indigenous communities and teacher-researcher collaborations. She also notes the need for statistics that are attuned to "erasures embedded in demographic data collection and reports" (p. 224).

My greatest struggle with Sabzalian's book actually reflects my own discomfort and the pervasiveness of settler colonialism. As a product of the Academy, I have been well trained to read for efficiency and solutions, and I found myself easily distracted by the text's many parenthetical citations and complicated explanations. I was *relieved* when I reached the conclusion, where Sabzalian offers practical suggestions. Reflecting back on my reading, it became clear to me that Sabzalian's chosen style is, in and of itself, a manifestation of survivance, as it both resists standard academic and practitioner writing (e.g., there are no checklists of "to do" or "not to do" practices) and survives/thrives despite such expectations (e.g., lifting up the work of Indigenous scholars and using real examples from practice to illustrate relevance). Furthermore, through complex integration of story and scholarship, Sabzalian encourages deep listening to/with survivors, and she demands her readers stay present, patient, and active instead of passively "observing" or seeking to "know" the Other (p. 135). Archibald (2008) referred to this interactive engagement with story as "Indigenous storywork" and notes its potential as both pedagogy and research method. While the settler-colonial emphasis is often on the product—the curriculum, the resource, the test scores—survivance storywork demands attention to the process—and to the discomfort, relationality, and responsibility vital to anticolonial education.

Overall, Sabzalian encourages teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers to "recognize and nurture Native survivance" throughout their work (p. 214). These survivance

stories—and the analysis that Sabzalian provides—not only fulfill this hope, but they also provide modeling of the "care, commitment, courage, and connectedness" vital for anticolonial teacher (and researcher) practice (p. 216). Sabzalian ends her book describing a story that left her "humbled" and "troubled" (p. 228). While this book provides hope, it should leave us all "humbled" and "troubled" in a way that encourages us to take up new responsibilities in our own classrooms, research, policy circles, and communities.

Notes

1. As Sabzalian and other Indigenous scholars note, the definition of who is "Indigenous" and what terminology to use in describing them is best answered by community members themselves. Individuals may prefer to be identified by specific Nation names, particularly if those names reflect the traditional way the Nations referred to themselves (e.g., Apsáalooke); they may choose more familiar Nation names (e.g., Crow); or they may choose a more general term (e.g., Native American). In this review, I use *Indigenous* to align with Sabzalian's title terminology, to describe connections to scholarship across multiple sovereign Nations, and to express solidarity with groups and scholars both within and beyond the United States. For additional information regarding terminology, see Shear and Stanton (2018).
2. While APA style guidelines encourage capitalization of the term "White" when referring to racial groups, I have chosen to use the lower case version of this term and the upper case version of "Indigenous" (which historically has often been written in lower case, even when referring to peoples), in order to challenge the ways academic writing has reinforced settler colonial hierarchies. This decision aligns with calls from Indigenous scholars, including Sabzalian.

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Christine Rogers Stanton
Montana State University
christine.rogers1@montana.edu

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