

Learning in Social Action: Students of Color and the Québec Student Movement

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THIS PAPER OFFERS OUR CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND STORIES as active participants within the 2012 Québec student movement, in relation to our diverse social locations and the various Indigenous, racial and migrant justice movements that are at the heart of our activist scholarship. Through this collaborative project we seek to emphasize the importance of teaching and learning that takes place away from the traditional academic classroom and specifically, “the widespread and powerful informal and incidental education and learning that occur around social and political struggle” (Foley, 1999, p.7). Our commitment to learning in social action and documenting the complex and contradictory processes involved in social movement building is intended as part of a collective ongoing project of challenging the neocolonial assumptions and institutions of the Canadian and Québécois settler states.

Our collaborative work serves as an alternative to the isolating and individualizing model of academic knowledge production. As activist-scholars, our research offers examples of knowledge production and pedagogical practices that are actively engaged with, and in the service of, grassroots social movements (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009). We reject the

tendency to separate activism from scholarship, and instead, like many women of color feminists who have served as “radical bridge builders” (Sudbury, 2003, p. 135; see also Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983), we argue for activist scholarship as a model of active engagement between the institutions and the many movements we tactically move within.

The academic system does not consist of neutral or benevolent institutions that simply require adjustments to their policies and procedures. Rather, there must be a concerted effort to challenge the myth of meritocracy and uproot the academy’s colonial and capitalist logics (Smith, 2007). Andrea Smith (2009) encourages activist-scholars—whether within academic institutions or community organizations—to focus on social movement building outside of the individualist, hierarchical system of academia:

To foster oppositional work, it is important to examine to whom we are structurally accountable. ‘Decolonization’ is a political practice that is rooted in building mass-based movements for social change. The implications of this conceptualization are that those in the academy who are committed to decolonization would actually need to be part of or develop relationships of accountability to movement-building work. By movement-building work, I mean work that is focused on organizing people who are not already activists for the purpose of building a sufficiently large base of resistance that can challenge the status quo. (Smith, 2009, p. 41)

Our collaborative project is inspired by Smith’s call for “relationships built on mutual responsibility and accountability” (2009, p. 41). By providing our own oppositional counter-stories in this essay, we situate ourselves centrally within the Québec student movement.

Context: A brief chronology of the Québec Student Movement

Since the 1960s, the Québec student movement has been able to assert significant political power. Organized pressure tactics, including student strikes, have led to access to higher education for working class Francophone students through the creation of the Québec University network; improvements to the loans and bursaries system; the cancellation of planned tuition hikes, and a decade-long tuition freeze from 1996 to 2007 (ASSÉ, 2012; Ayotte-Thomson & Freeman, 2012; Brett, 2012; CLASSE, 2012; Mills, 2010). These struggles have earned student federations seats at decision-making tables alongside administrators and politicians and lay the foundations for the *Québec Spring*¹ of 2012, the largest student mobilization in Canada’s history.

In early 2010, in response to the Québec Liberal government’s announcement of their plan for tuition increases, 30,000 students signed a petition against the hikes and began organizing a series of one-day strikes and massive demonstrations (Sorochan, 2012). The Coalition large de l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale (CLASSE) staged sit-ins and organized activities aimed at mobilizing students, including a one day strike on November 10th 2011, that brought tens of thousands of students from all over Québec to the streets of Montreal to protest the proposed tuition increases. The end of the demonstration coincided with an occupation by fourteen students of a McGill University administration building (see The Fifth Floor Fifteen, 2011). Foreshadowing the *Québec Spring* that was to come, student protesters

from the demonstration flooded onto McGill's downtown campus in solidarity, followed closely by baton and chemical weapon wielding riot police who would clear the campus using indiscriminate and excessive violence (McGill Faculty Labour Action Group, 2011).

In February 2012, the Québec student movement erupted against the Liberal government's planned tuition hike of \$1,626 over five years to bring Québec's tuition in line with that of other Canadian provinces. After years of planning within the leadership of the CLASSE and on-the-ground organizing by thousands of students, student unions across Québec began to mobilize general assemblies in order to hold strike votes. One after the other, CEGEP² and university student associations began to vote in favor of strikes of varying durations, including for an unlimited strike until the proposed tuition hike was retracted. Within the span of a couple of weeks, 175,000 students had joined the unlimited general strike, representing over half of Québec's 342,000 post-secondary students (Sorochan, 2012). By March, thousands of striking students had begun to picket their classrooms and schools and take to the streets. By May 22nd 2012, the 100th day of what was rapidly becoming a broader protest movement, 400,000 people strong marched through the streets of downtown Montreal. By the end of June, the student strike had become the longest in Québec's history and showed no signs of retreat.

For months, students and their supporters also gathered nightly and marched through the city, each one of them donning their *carré rouge* (red square), the symbol of the movement. The night demonstrations gained momentum and broader support in May, after the government passed a special law designed to crush the strike, one that many quickly deemed unconstitutional and a breach of Charter rights (CBC News, 2012; Marshall, 2012). Defying this law and its punitive fines, people throughout the province engaged in civil disobedience and risked arrest by taking to the streets in nightly *casserolazo* demonstrations, banging pots and pans in the spirit of the *cacerolazo*, a form of popular protest practiced throughout Latin America in open defiance of fascist dictatorships and neoliberal austerity measures (Lukacs, 2012).

While Québec police forces have a well established reputation for violence, especially toward racialized, immigrant and Indigenous communities, there was a marked increase in police profiling and brutality against student protestors following violent clashes between protesters and provincial police outside of the Québec Liberal Party general council meeting in Victoriaville on May 4th (Christoff, 2012) and the passage of Bill 78 into law on May 18th. Several students were hospitalized due to serious injuries caused by police and their weapons, and protester arrests surpassed those during the 1970 Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) crisis when martial law was declared in Québec (Lukacs, 2012). Over three months, thousands of protesters were arrested, many through kettling, a widely condemned police tactic of encircling protesters (and bystanders who happen to be near them) and pursuing mass arrests.

As the movement began to involve more and more non-students outraged by the Liberal government's handling of the student strike and draconian measures to squash dissent, an election was forced. Through a tense September 2012 election, the Parti Québécois (PQ) won a minority government. Notwithstanding the apparent immediate successes of the student-led movement in cancelling of the tuition hike (a primary PQ platform promise) and overturning parts of Law 12, the ideal of accessible and independent academic institutions remains under threat in Québec. Despite having worn the red square signifying support for the student movement throughout their campaign and suspending the tuition hikes upon their election, in early December 2012, the PQ government outraged many when it announced an immediate cut-back of \$140 million from CEGEP and university budgets for the 2012-2013 school year,

revealing their “back room” austerity agenda for higher public education and complicity with furthering neoliberal ideals.

Locating people of color within the Québec student strike

This section briefly explores the role of prevailing Québécois nationalism in shaping the larger contours of the student movement, highlighting “the racialized context from within which the movement emerged” (Hampton, 2012a) and the contributions and challenges to the movement made by students of colour. Over the course of the student strike, there was a consistent mobilization of Québec nationalist symbolism and rhetoric from the 1960s movement for sovereignty amongst White working class francophones. Placards, chants and actions recalled well-known Québécois phrases such as “Maîtres chez nous” (masters of our own house) and “A qui le Québec? A NOUS le Québec!” (Whose Québec? OUR Québec!), as well as the idea of the Québécois as *Nègres blancs* (“White niggers,” made famous by Québécois writer and activist Pierre Vallières with his autobiographical 1968 *Nègres blancs d’Amérique*). These terms were inherited by Québec students and often used unselfconsciously in the absence of anti-colonial and anti-racist critique (Cooper, 2012; Hampton, 2012a).

Québec nationalism developed as a response to the oppression of the French-speaking Québécois by Anglophone Canada (and the Francophone elite), however its discourses tend to perpetuate the myth of Canada (and Québec) as a White settler society whereby the colonization of Indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans are conveniently forgotten through a “disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery and the exploitation of the labour of peoples of color (Razack, 2002, p.2). This historical amnesia obscures the historical presence and contributions as well as the ongoing struggles of Indigenous and racialized communities in Québec and Canada (Alfred, 2010; Austin, 2010; Chan & Chan, 1991).

Although the charges of racism within the student movement by some people of colour reflected poignant truths, calling the student movement a White-only movement also served to erase long-term involvement of many activists and students of colour before and during the 2012 strike (Hampton, 2012a). In response, racialized students and community members challenged dominant narratives within and about the movement by organizing initiatives such as anti-racist contingents for demonstrations and an arts-based migrant justice-student solidarity event, and participating in the People’s Assembly organized by CLASSE. In turn, increasing numbers of White student activists began to make the links between the neoliberalization of higher education and the role of colonial capital in expropriating Indigenous land and displacing racialized migrants. CLASSE, particularly through its Social Struggles Committee, fostered supportive relationships with migrant justice leaders and groups and acted in solidarity with Indigenous communities resisting the government’s *Plan Nord* (see Lakoff, 2013).

Students of Colour Montreal

Students of Colour Montreal (SoCM) was formed in January 2012 by a group of racialized students who were inspired by the liberating potential of the student movement, if cautious of its prevailing settler and nationalist undertones. From the start we were a

multilingual collective of students and activists, many of whom are from poor and working-class backgrounds and the first in their families to access public higher education. Many of us are queer, trans or gender non-conforming and/or allies to queer and trans people of color.

SoCM made important contributions during the student strike, to the movement itself, in support of one another and out of commitment to the communities with which we identify. SoCM members wrote an anti-colonial, anti-racist motion to CLASSE and submitted it through our allies in the Concordia University Geography, Planning and Environment Graduate Students Association. The motion passed with widespread support at the CLASSE congress on April 20th, 2012, mandating CLASSE to adopt a public position of anti-colonialism and anti-racism in education, and to use anti-racist and anti-colonial discourse in its communications “including but not limited to publications, media relations, speeches and congress proceedings” (SoCM, 2012). Over the course of the student strike, we participated in countless student demos, pickets and protests; led teach-ins and workshops, encouraged people of color to make the link between the student movement and our communities’ struggles; engaged in critical dialogue with queer/trans migrants and ex-prisoners in order to build the seeds of mutual solidarity albeit on unequal terrain; and created opportunities for other student activists to become involved in various cross-sector struggles.

The following series of reflections by some members of SoCM both inform and contradict each other, as our experiences working within and alongside the student movement mirror our own particular intellectual positions and activist commitments. Elma Moses begins with a story that reflects a trickster discourse (Vizenor, 2008) or Coyote style of writing. As an Eeyou storyteller and activist-academic, she understands her writing as part of decolonization; exposing people to styles of writing other than essays and making the Indigenous oral tradition acceptable in academia is what her work is about. Her work forces open a space from which we can make the marginal less marginal and push it into the center.

Coyotes Goes to University and Tries to Teach Indigenous Studies

Elma Moses

I recently completed my PhD at McGill University. My research involves Eeyou /Cree storytelling. As a former Indian Residential School survivor I am familiar with assimilation and oppression as a lived experience. Resistance to the Residential School System and assimilative Canadian policies made me into an activist at a very young age and I speak Eeyou Iyemuin today as part of my resistance (Moses, 2012). How do I live my Eeyouness in an urban area? By keeping Eeyou oral traditions through storytelling: How? My resistance and activism is through keeping these stories alive and transmitting them in a university setting.

Coyotes Goes to University and Tries to Teach Indigenous Studies

“What is decolonization?” says Coyote.

“Don’t know,” says Raven looking very perplexed.

“Well, I go and visit my relations whenever I please but I knew a time when it wasn’t the case, those were very difficult times when you had to sneak around at night so the Indian agent

wouldn't see you and you had to make sure people who'd tell on you didn't see you either." continues Coyote.

"But what does your story have to do with decolonization and student movements?" asks Raven.

"This is precisely why we have to tell our stories even if people are not keen and don't like them—so people know about them."

"As Thomas King writes, '... don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now.'" ³

"Aah, you and your Thomas King quotes!" says Raven, annoyed at Coyote.

"And what do you mean by sneaking around at night?" asks Raven.

"Well, back in those days you needed a special permission slip signed by the Indian agent to leave your reserve, you had to say the reason, where and how long you'd be gone. Now I don't think the Indian agent would've signed it for you to go protest, he'd say it promotes "Idleness" just like the dancing and the drumming or anything to do with 'Indian' customs."

"Why do you support the student protest? What does it have to with us?"

"Well, with the tuition hikes my thinking is that it will be even more difficult for 'Indian' students to get funding from their bands. Many already do not have access to university. Many 'Indian' children have to leave their communities to go school because they do not have schools in their community. That was the dream of a young girl, Shannen, and she marched to Ottawa to bring awareness that her community needed and still needs a school so the children can go to school." Coyote takes a sip from her tea.

"You know what? I learn so much by listening to your stories... where do you get your stories?" asks Raven.

"Visiting my family and friends across the country and listening to their stories, that's how I know these things," answers Coyote.

"But, but, but, that's not..." says Raven.

"Not? what?" asks Coyote.

"But that's not very academic, that's not scholarly work, that's just plain old simple stories; some would call them dumb and stupid stories. Stories that go off in tangent and we don't know where they're going..." Raven is very confused and fully not understanding where Coyote's story is going.

Explanation of Coyote story.

Now let me explain the story and some of the issues that Coyote is talking about in this segment of story. First, the part where Coyote mentions needing a permission slip signed by an agent from the Department of Indian Affairs. As part of assimilation policy of the Federal government, "Indians" were required to have a signed permission slip to leave their reserve and this practice remained in place well into the 1960s. Can you imagine if this policy was still in place today? This colonial practice would create havoc in our participation in the student movement and the Idle No More movement.⁴ The conversation between Coyote and Raven helps us think about important links between colonialism, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and education.

Cherokee writer Thomas King (2003) uses ways of writing that challenge Western European-American academic norms of writing and thinking. Without his work it would be very hard for me as an Indigenous scholar to write and teach in a different way and still have my work accepted in a university setting. Using and building on King's works in the university is a way of introducing Indigenous knowledge and knowledge creation to undergraduate students.

The invisibility of Indigenous students in Québec was very apparent during spring 2012 student strike. Where were they? They were, perhaps, struggling and trying to maintain their Indigeneity in a sea of mainstream ideas. I know I was. Where did I fit in the cacophony of student voices? What were the implications of the announced tuition increases to Indigenous students in Québec and Canada? I participated in the student movement to add an Indigenous voice and perspective and bring awareness to the legacy of the policies of assimilation in dealing with Indigenous peoples. I wanted to bring the attention the issues of access to education in remote Indigenous communities and the colonial history of Indigenous peoples-settler relations (also known as Indian-White relations) in Canada. This lack of knowledge of the colonial history of "Indian and White" relations would be one of the biggest motivations for the Idle No More movement that would sweep across Canada on the heels of the Québec student strike.

The Idle No More movement.

How do you retrieve and sum up over 500 years of suppressed and denied colonial history within the Canadian and Québec contexts? One way this lack of knowledge plays out is in the unilateral colonial and paternalistic attitudes of the Canadian government in their dealing with issues affecting the various Indigenous groups of Canada. Through the use of social media and non-violent direct action Indigenous peoples and their allies in the Idle No More movement have been able to force these issues into the attention of the mainstream.

An overwhelming task as an Indigenous person is the need to summarize over 500 years of colonial history and to identify and cope with the consequences of the ongoing neglect of that history. As an Indigenous person there is a sense that the responsibility for teaching the colonial history to the average Canadian is on your shoulders. That responsibility is an enormous and overwhelming task, especially for those of us who have had the additional trauma of Indian Residential School experiences. All that burden of responsibility rests on our shoulders as Indigenous people.

Indigenous students who are already struggling with their academic studies are sought after to do the additional work of giving lectures and teach-ins. Where to begin? What do you focus on? You protest the colonial paternalistic attitudes of the federal government and at the same time, you have to educate the general public. How do you sum up over 500 years of colonial history in a few pages? What are the issues? Where do you begin? The Idle No More movement re-raises these questions, as have the other stand-offs between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian government (for example, see Alfred, 2010). In using today's social media networks to raise awareness and make more resources for decolonizing teaching and learning widely available, Idle No More is making historical amnesia increasingly difficult; making it harder for Canadians and Québécois to continue to turn a blind eye.

Be realistic: Demand the impossible⁵

rosalind hampton

Allying with a diverse group of workers, community-based activists, undergraduate students, graduate students, and professors in the context of the 2011-2012 Québec movement provided a rich opportunity for critical exchange, learning, and cultural cross-pollination. While initiated and led by students, the movement involved many non-students in protesting a number of issues that extended beyond tuition hikes to a broader critique of neoliberalism. For the activists I work with and me, the movement provided an opportunity to raise awareness of pervasive race-, class-, and gender-based oppression and to mobilize against its further entrenchment in our society. Our activism was informed by lived experiences of marginalization, oppression and resistance, and driven by a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to working for social change.

Prior to 2011, my work in Montreal's Black community had involved various forms of organizing, advocacy, lobbying and protest. Rarely framed as "activism," these were and are strategies for group survival in the face of the widespread systemic racism that Black and other communities of color face daily. In what follows I reflect on what I have learned through 'becoming a student activist' and allying across differences to address issues including but not limited to racism.

Non-formal Learning and Engaged Citizenship

Student activism has a long, rich history in Québec and has significantly contributed to the creation of the publicly subsidized post-secondary school system including the lowest university tuition fees in Canada and the U.S. (ASSÉ, 2012). Despite being an educator and benefiting from these systems as a student, before 2011 when I began a PhD program in my mid-forties I knew very little about this history and had not been involved in student organizing or activism. Growing up in majority Anglophone communities and attending English schools, I rarely felt connected to the "Francophone side" of the city or to a Québec historical inheritance. As an adult, studying Québec Black histories and collaborating with French-speaking Blacks in community work helped me to develop a sense of a collective historical presence and presentness, but being in Québec is not quite the same as being *of* Québec and I had internalized a common understanding of Québécois/e as White Francophones.

Non-formal education gained through engagement in activism can fill in knowledge gaps caused by the political agendas, bureaucracies and curricular limitations of formal education systems. White supremacy had dictated that I learn about Québec Black histories not in school, but through Black community engagement and personally pursuing the work of Black scholars (Austin, 2007, 2010; Cooper, 2006). Likewise, learning about and understanding the histories of (largely Francophone) Québec educational activism required stepping outside of Anglophone educational institutions and into the streets and a movement that did not respect the long-term divide between French- and English Montreal. For the first time in my life, during the student movement I read French language newspapers and watched Francophone news broadcasts. I struggled alongside White, Francophone Québécois/es and, while I was never under any illusions that issues of race and racism had simply vanished, my experiences suggested—and at times

confirmed—the potential for French and English, White and non-White acts of solidarity based on a mutual interest in resisting neoliberalism for the better of Québec society.

Neoliberalism posits education largely as a matter of economic exchange within a global information economy, perceiving it as a financial investment made by an individual student in order to secure the future benefits. Neoliberalism promotes education as a way to increase levels of individual and corporate productivity, implying that “education does not have any intrinsic ends as such, but must always be linked to the instrumental purposes of human capital development and economic self-maximization” (Rizvi, 2007, p. 123). Popular education and academic activism can be used to resist these trends; to build the capacity to critically assess, disrupt and rethink education in ways that are not trapped within and subservient to the neoliberal imaginary (Rizvi, 2007). For me, activism in the Québec movement has involved cross-disciplinary, embodied learning that has built on and challenged my previous knowledge and ways of being both a learner and a teacher.

Community contacts.

Given such empowering experiences of the student movement in the heart of the *Québec Spring*, I was deeply affected when Black Montrealers began to speak out and write against “the students,” dismissing them (us) as self-interested, privileged White kids. A justified bitterness simmered in racialized communities as the movement grew and continued to gain momentum; as the province and then the world began to express interest and outrage about police violence against striking students and the threat to accessible education in Québec—issues with which Indigenous, Black and other communities of colour had long been grappling in relative isolation.

I found that many Black students referred to the striking students as “them” and to the movement as “theirs.” Some demanded to know what “they” (White students) were going to do for “us” (Black people) in return for our solidarity. In response I encouraged ownership of and involvement in the movement and a sense of responsibility to a Black *and* Québécois/e inheritance of social activism. Racist incidents in the Québec movement were disappointing, but not surprising, given the issues of race entrenched in the broader societies from which the movement arose (Hampton, 2012a).

In June 2012 the student movement as it related to the Black community was raised in an article in the English language Black community newspaper *Montreal Community Contact*. Novel Thomas called on readers to imagine if the largely White student movement taking to the streets every night was predominantly Black, suggesting that in that case we likely would have seen violent state responses such as those in the American South during the Civil Rights Movement (Thomas, 2012). While supportive of “those who can sacrifice” taking to the streets and demanding their rights, Thomas argued that Black people in Québec society are “tolerated [only] as long as we adhere to the limits of our confined physical and mental space” and that we are “afraid of the police, with good reason” (Thomas, 2012, para. 37). Certainly I did not disagree with many important points made by Thomas, and in my response I sought to build on his article through sharing my experience of the empowering difference between protesting with a few dozen Black community members and protesting with a few hundred thousand allies. I asserted the value in claiming space in a broader social movement that builds national and international support and cross-sector solidarity, and noted that through their activism White

middle-class students were learning first hand of the realities of systemic repression, police violence and profiling (Hampton, 2012b).

Does access to education (and state repression) need to be framed and addressed as solely a Black community issue, or a White Francophone working class issue? Or can it be understood as a broader social issue that has affected and continues to affect various communities in different ways? In a subsequent article titled “We ain’t beating no damn pot bottom for the entitled privileged few” and addressed by way of subtitle to both Novel Thomas and myself, John Molson School of Business Associate Professor Clarence Bayne adamantly advocated the former. Bayne insisted that Black people are “still negotiating the terms of [our] inclusion” in Québec society (2012, para. 42), and that Black communities have never been and still are not part of the better future for which the Québécois fight. “When we struggle from within a diverse population and among many subcultures,” he argued, “we cannot assume that solidarity of action means the equitable distribution among groups of the benefits that may follow from joint action, no matter how socialistic the process. The selfish gene doesn’t understand scientific socialism” (Bayne, 2012, para. 42). Accusing me of using “ideologically derived marketing clichés” in defense of the movement, Bayne asserted that: “the case for more sustainable and socially cohesive and empathic civilizations is much larger than ‘bitching’ about market price adjustments to educational products sold to the fortunate few” (Bayne, 2012, para. 18). An overall tone of patriarchal and personalized browbeating in Bayne’s article caused me to disengage from that particular public exchange. It left me disappointed but not discouraged.

Imagining the impossible.

The social imaginary theorized by Charles Taylor refers to the common sense of a society; “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004 quoted in Rizvi, 2007, p. 122). In Black communities, the social imaginary is deeply informed by lived experiences (reflected in and confirmed by research) of individual and systemic racism, but our rage against racism must be transformed into hope if we are to take action for social change.

Resistance requires that we break out of the compartments into which we are socially slotted by a (White supremacist, neocolonial, hetero-patriarchal) society that would have us believe that what is...is all that is possible. “A social imaginary is not simply inherited and already determined for us; it is rather in a constant state of flux” (Rizvi, 2007, p. 122). We must find ways to challenge and expand our thinking to imagine a better world, even (and especially) when that seems to require hoping for the impossible. As James Baldwin famously stated, “in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand,” and we should be emboldened by history, especially Black history, because indeed it “testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible” (Baldwin, 1963/1993, p.104). For me, becoming a student activist has led to profound developments in my sense of Black Québec identity and in my understanding and belief in education as a right for all; it has increased my capacity for hope and consequently my commitment to (Black community, student, and especially cross-sector/inter-community) direct action for social change.

‘Something hasn’t changed’: Reflections from the ‘Beyond Tuition’ teach-in

Ilyan Ferrer *with Elma Moses, Jillian Sudayan, Ryan Thom, and Myriam Zaidi*

As a person of color who has engaged in community organizing and activism with Filipino-Canadian youth, I have witnessed first-hand the impact of im/migration, the traumas of family separation and reunification, and the alienation and despair of our youth leaving school because the financial survival of the family was dependent on their participation in the low-paid, service sector labor market. It was clear to me, and other community organizers within our community that the Québec student strike was an important movement to take part in. The opportunity to mobilize and organize around education within the Filipino community was especially salient since Filipino youth are highly at-risk for high school drop-out.

While I initially joined the hundreds of thousands students who took to the streets in monthly protests, nightly casserole demonstrations, and various teach-ins which fostered critical understandings of the strike and its relationship to neoliberalism, I later became dismayed and disappointed that members of my community did not participate in the strike given its historic relevance. In a mobilization event meant to drum up support for the social movement, fellow Filipino-Canadian organizers went to the heart of the Filipino diaspora in Montreal where they distributed red squares, and managed to receive the support and encouragement of both parents and Filipino youth who were initially unaware of the social movement, and its relevance to their daily lives. Though most agreed that tuition hikes were detrimental to the collective future of the Filipino community, they could not afford to miss work or skip school in order to participate in the demonstrations. Responses such as these made it clear that while the wider social movement made claims to universal accessibility (highlighting the potential benefits and implications for the most marginalized) it failed to take into account the lived experiences of poor and working class racialized communities; a missed opportunity which would have encouraged their participation and inclusion within the broader social movement. In a sense, the voices of people most impacted by access to education remained silent. In an attempt to address this issue, members of SoCM organized a teach-in led by students who self-identified as Indigenous, racialized and/or from low-income backgrounds. Titled "Beyond Tuition: Barriers to education among marginalized communities", the teach-in was an opportunity to address access to education for low-income, racialized and indigenous communities. The discussion was centered, moreover, on issues and experiences that are seldom discussed within the Québec student strike, including the impact of institutional racism and the racialization of poverty.

What follows are reflections and quotes from the Beyond Tuition teach-in where racialized and Indigenous students expressed their critique of and active participation in the movement without being dismissed or being accused of being divisive. Though the discussions identified a plethora of issues (K-12 education, assimilation, and labor policy), they all spoke to the lived experiences of racialized and marginalized communities, and the challenges of having these realities heard. The goal of this section is not to analyze or contest the reflections shared during the teach-in, but rather to amplify our voices.

“We're Here because Our Parents Aren't”: Traumas of Assimilation

The teach-in first offered a space where students of color could express the complexities and intersections of their social locations, and how these realities and histories contributed to the inaccessibility of education for people of color.

Ryan: I identify myself as a person of color. I'm also queer. [...] I grew up in [...] a predominantly Asian migrant neighborhood and my experience around education was that there was no question that I had to get it, and there was no question that I was going to go. Being upwardly mobile in that way, my family started off as hard labor workers in the Canadian Pacific Railway and grew to where we are today, which is very upwardly mobile. [...] There was a narrative of merit whereby everyone in my neighborhood was going to get some kind of post-secondary education, but how smart you were or how able you were to manipulate, assimilate, integrate into the system would determine how far and what kind of post-secondary education [you were] going to [get]. And a large part of that narrative was tied to survival and silence that was built into multiple generations of migrancy and alienation. [...] And to see the student strike occur is a really interesting, terrifying, painful, and tortuous [...] because to do so is to navigate, interact with, and in some ways move against, a lot of what brought me here over multiple generations.

Elma: My assimilation started at the age of 5 so I got used to it. I think that's why I do volunteer work in the elementary school so that the minority students have a chance [...] to see a person that is racialized. [...] I do tell [the elementary students] when they talk to me that I'm in university because I came from the same place as them; from [a] low-income class, and my parents barely went to school, and they only [speak] an Indigenous language, and for them to find out that I speak an Indigenous language too is very important. In terms of where I come from, in the Northern regions, [...] the history of Canada within the Indigenous people, Canada practiced segregation within the regions and the Northern communities where some of those Northern towns [...] 50 years ago, they didn't allow Indians to go in the shops [and] restaurants, and this is part of the Canadian history that not many people are familiar with. [...] And Canada has been practicing, and even here in Québec, segregation and the racism is still like that. Many of the Northern communities don't have the basic buildings to even go to school. They have to leave their own communities to even attend school. [...] So the accessibility starts way in the elementary and the pre-K for many of the Indigenous, First Nations across Canada.

The complexities and intersections of social locations are often received negatively within the education system, which tends to uphold and enforce a strict standard of education. In the following conversation, Jillian and Ryan discuss the implications of being a racialized student within the education system:

Jillian: Teachers often underestimate the ability of students who are (1) physically unattractive (2) misbehave frequently in class (3) speak dialects other than English or French (4) are members of ethnic minority groups (5) are recent immigrants and (6) come from low income backgrounds.

Ryan: It struck me that they all mean the same thing. [...] If you're racialized you're also probably low-income. [...] I would say that issues of accessibility in elementary schools here that are tied to race are at least universal in Canada. [...] Where I grew up there were two types of people: Those who spoke Chinese and those who spoke English. I learned to call things at a young age [...] 'English or Chinese'. English was White. Like McDonalds was English food; what our parents served us was Chinese food. And you could choose these things I soon

discovered. [...]. Only some people got to choose more than others. [...] And while my parents would always say ‘*You need to learn Chinese, you need to remember how to speak it*’ [...] I didn’t want to be Chinese because I knew that meant being poor. [...] And you had to switch in between these spaces instantly and perfectly depending on where you were. [...] And I had to be better at being English than the kids I grew up with because we were all competing for the few slots in the English places where colored people could fit in. [...] And as we were moving to post-secondary education, all of us knew we had to have it. This is something you just do or you fall off face of the earth. You become a cautionary tale that your parents and their neighbors talked about. You joined a gang ... became a steel worker. The horror!

Beyond Tuition: Towards a more inclusive movement.

Finally, an important discussion centered on what could be considered an inclusive movement for racialized students. In the following discussion, Myriam, Jillian, and Ryan spoke about the ways in which leaders within revolutionary social movements must listen and work with racialized communities rather than speak for them:

Myriam: If you were a White person who came into this room here, and had said to all these racialized people, “*what is there to do?*” That’s fucked. [...] There’s a problem in the student movement, where there are those who come into spaces where racialized students talk about what they want to say; [White activists] come and say “*why focus on differences? Are you trying to divide the movement? Why are we not all united?*” [...]

It’s because you’re not united with us ... we live in a different daily reality. And what we’re asking is that you acknowledge our reality. [...] we’re already divided. If you can’t see that, then you have a problem. [...] White student activists need to stop telling us what to fucking do. It’s like I went to a meeting earlier this semester, and there was a bunch of White people who were feeling really awkward because they went to a CLASSE meeting and most people were White; [...] they were feeling awkward because they wanted to speak to us people of color [...]. We don’t need you because we need our safe space; [that’s why] we’ve been meeting without you. [There’s] this other idea of the White savior on his horse -- No, no, no! We’re capable of saving ourselves.

Jillian: I think we need to step back and realize we are still living in genocide management. [...] Where there are White spaces, we still have people [...] who are still fearful of expressing themselves. It’s important to recognize this. [...] Our existence as people of color in a White education institution is our resistance.

Ryan: People are searching for this correct set of words - if only we could get it right, we could bring people of color into White movements, White spaces, and help the revolution come about. [...] what I would love to hear that would really throw my spirit behind this student movement [is] a rhetoric that promised: *the fight won’t stop once we’ve achieved our goals*. So once the [fight against] the tuition hike is achieved ... we won’t forget about you. Because this happens all the time! And that’s why I exist in extreme discomfort, torture over the student movement, because I don’t know once the tuition hike has been frozen, that they’re not going to forget everything else ... which is my entire life.

The ‘Beyond Tuition’ teach-in was an opportunity for students of color to situate ourselves within the Québec student strike and to critically reflect on how the conditions of our

communities continue to reap the least benefits from a social movement that was meant to speak to our realities of education and accessibility. The stories selected highlight the need to first understand the conditions of racialized and Indigenous communities rather than speak at and/or for us. Hearing such stories are an important starting point in building alliances, and forging relationships of solidarity. Our teach-in began and ended with suggestions on how to build from the ground up; a crucial step in including marginalized communities, many of whom were excluded from the wider student movement.

“The place we live now is an idea”⁶: Personal sketches from the Québec Maple Spring

Lena Palacios

As a queer woman of color from a working-class background who is the first in my family to access higher education, a member of the SoCM group, a doctoral student and educator, a community activist who works with currently and formerly incarcerated girls and women, and the sole caretaker of unemployed parents, I experienced the student protests quite differently than the entitled children of the White Anglophone and Francophone elite and middle-class. For me, and other working-class and working poor students who actively participated in the strike, the proposed tuition hike was always just one minor challenge. Under the neoconservative Harper administration, Canadians are being faced with the destruction of the public sector, a new draconian crime bill, and new policies criminalizing im/migrants and refugees.

We are being hit left and right with policies that make it nearly impossible for us to even get to a place of accessing what we need in order to survive. I come from a family where the stakes are high. I’ve seen my parents’ lives go under, and I mean really crushed by neoliberalism. I’ve had my community say to me “Don’t fuck around girl! You have to make it because there’s no choice, there’s no one going to save you. You’ve got to succeed and push because we are poor people and we’ve lost to the rich who are currently gentrifying us out of existence.” While I’ve been traumatized by hearing this message for most of my adolescence growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, it has aided me in surviving as long as I have.

Due to my own experience of collective trauma, the Québec student movement inspired, humbled, energized, enraged, disappointed and often times left me depressed, confused, and in a bad funk. Beyond my own haphazard lifestyle of late work nights and bad dietary habits, what else induced this manic and conflicted reaction of simultaneous joy and pain to a student-led movement against tuition hikes?

Ronald McDonald and James McGill

I couldn’t afford to strike and I couldn’t afford not to. A self-certified hustler driven by a lifetime of property-less necessity, I’ve been piecing together a precarious existence on part-time teaching and short-term contract jobs. My grandparents and parents—solidly agricultural, blue-collar factory and pink-collar workers—did not want this for me or my generation. Our communities still suffer from the most precarious, non-unionized jobs. While I’ve “moved on up”, I find myself stressing out about working all of my life as a part-time contract course lecturer with no benefits, no security, no retirement savings plan; *nada*.

I might get some flak for this by my activist comrades but the reality of living a financially precarious past, present and future left me relating more to those who did not directly participate in the student movement than to those that did. One of the more honest conversations I had about the strike happened with a young Haitian retail store clerk who would have loved to protest with the students if she wasn't working two part-time jobs, going to school full-time to become a nurse, and raising a child on her own. She understood the need for the strike but didn't have the time to participate in direct democracy. Like me, she was also deathly afraid of being targeted by the riot police—a militarized phalanx of cops ever-present in the streets of downtown Montreal during the day and nighttime marches. Of course, she was doing her part—broaching the topic of the student protests with paying customers, many who were irate with what they perceived as “wilding, entitled, bourgeois youth smashing store windows at any given chance” along Sainte-Catherine street (the primary commercial artery of Downtown Montreal). This young woman startled me by asking what I thought about the strike while I paid for my new red undies (to match my red felt carré rouge displayed prominently on my purse), bought at a bargain-bin rate.

Within earshot of customers lining up behind me, we spoke loudly and animatedly about how we were in support of accessible and affordable (if not actual free) education and why youth shouldn't be hit with tear gas canisters and batons for exercising their right to protest and organize. For a couple of minutes, she spoke freely to the obvious chagrin of her primarily White co-workers and customers. Sadly, that was the last time I ever saw her at *Additionelle* (Canada's answer to Lane Bryant for the plus-size gal). Maybe, she was summarily fired for educating the masses; a fallen, unsung heroine of the movement. I recently bumped into her behind the counter at McDonalds where I ordered mad cow and poutine before heading up the hill to McGill University to research the increasing incidence of racialized and gendered poverty in Canada.

Ronald McDonald and James McGill—two White men—one a corporate clown slinging bad food that will kill you with arterial disease and the other a dead slave-owner pimping—from the hereafter—a less-than-wholesome education chock-full of business and engineering programs for the majority elite, Anglo-dominant populace of Canada. If the racist, White supremacist ghosts haunting the hallowed halls at McGill don't get me, my exorbitant student loan debt and inability to find gainful employment upon graduation will!

Later that week, on May 22nd 2012, I made it my official duty to don my carré rouge and red and black boxing gloves emblazoned with incendiary phrases against racism and neo-liberalism and take to the streets with 400,000 other marching students and allies chanting alternatively in English, French, and Spanish “Racist, classist, sexist shit. Fuck your hikes: strike, resist!” “We are young! We are poor! We won't pay anymore!” and, finally, “I put a 187 [police code for homicide] on your 78, we don't need your law to demonstrate!” The newly formed SoCM made our first coordinated appearance on this historical date. Our contingent was created specifically to respond to the widening racial, class and gender inequities in higher education and the job market, and to address the negative impact of zero-tolerance policies that disproportionately criminalize and increase the push-out rate of high school-aged youth of color throughout Canada.

Schools are prisons.

Students in the Québec student movement, unlike the students breathing prison air in the United States, haven't yet heard the "good" news: public university education is bankrupt for anyone but the transnational upper classes, so quit your defunded double major in women and gender studies/history and switch over to well-funded departments of criminology, criminal law, and penology so that you'll always be guaranteed a "stable" job locking-up future generations behind bars! But then again, the overwhelming majority of Canadian provincial and federal prisoners/parolees are poor, young, Black and Aboriginal—precisely the two most under-represented groups in Canadian institutions of higher learning, whether we are talking about students, office staff, faculty or administration—even ground-keepers and custodians. I can't totally fault the Québec striking students for not connecting the dots or making the links between the accelerating privatization of the public universities and the increase of privatized prisons across Canada. For the majority of them who are the descendants of White Anglo and Francophone settlers—particularly those living outside of major metropolitan areas—a Black person exists in the fantasy realm of "a friend of a friend of a friend..." not in the so-called real world of university campuses.

North America's ever-expanding prison regime is a systematic arrangement of social power that is inherently oppressive. The cultural and institutional site of prison is no longer a place "outside and apart from our everyday lives, but instead shape[s] and deform[s] our identities, communities, and modes of social interaction" (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 8-9). The same can be said for academic institutions. The racist, classist, patriarchal, and ableist frameworks that undergird the idea of imprisonment are also part of the consciousness of people who live in a culture of violence and retribution. These very same frameworks undergird the myth of meritocracy and capitalist logics of the academy, which is a major re/producer of carceral logics since it is the university that "educates the global knowledge elite who will become the 'prison wardens' of the non-universitied majority" (Sudbury, 2009, p. 23). These frameworks have to be transformed within our hearts and our minds before we even think about revolutionizing our institutions.

The place we live now is an idea.

We in the Québec student movement had the ball in our court and we fumbled and dropped it. We won one battle and temporarily lost the war. If we stop now after winning a short-term tuition freeze then we have truly failed. But if we continue to mobilize to create a transnational student movement, then we have effectively won (Palacios, 2013). Then again, all this talk about winning and losing, success and failure, short-term gains versus organizing for the long haul, misses the entire point. Historian Robin Kelley reminds us that "too often, our standards for evaluating social movements pivot around whether or not they 'succeeded' in realizing their visions rather than on their merits or power of the visions themselves" (Kelley, 2002, p. ix). By engaging in social struggle, we have generated new knowledge, questions, and theory and have learned in social action how to build a movement that has the potential to outlive, outlast, and outplay the neoliberal austerity agenda of the settler colonial state. As Native American activist-scholar Paula Gunn Allen put it, so much has been taken away by colonialism, racism and state violence that "the place we live now is an idea" (Allen, 1986, p. 9). Our ideas must rise to the occasion that this time of crisis calls for. There is no time like the present.

Conclusion

Our participation within the student movement offered an unprecedented opportunity to link the fight against capitalism with movements for Indigenous, im/migrant and racial justice. The stories, testimonies and reflections presented in this article are meant to highlight the realities, contradictions, and possibilities of Indigenous and racialized participation within the Québec student movement. In many ways, this collaborative project serves to amplify the mostly hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990) of students of colour who actively participated in the Québec student movement, while also working to mobilize their poor and working class communities of colour. Our mobilizing strategies, both within and outside of the student movement, reveal the tensions that surfaced for those of us who participated in the student strike while at the same time being structurally accountable to our poor and working class, queer and trans communities of colour. We operate with the assumption that our work is imperfect, that we are likely to have unintentionally overlooked or excluded marginalized and vulnerable groups, and that our strategies and structures require perpetual re-evaluation and adjustment. However, our experiences also point to the possibilities for mass mobilization against the neoliberal elite when forging even temporary alliances between a White-dominant student movement and poor and working class racialized communities.

This collaborative project has also inspired us to think about the ways in which movement participation requires and allows us to move outside of the geographic and psychological boundaries set for us by the neoliberal, White settler state. The international struggle for decolonization under the banner of the Idle No More movement, has forced us ask hard questions about the degree to which the student movement against neoliberalism can and will join Indigenous communities' ongoing resistance to cultural genocide, colonial-capitalist exploitation, and social death.

Bringing our individual and collective stories into conversation with each other through this collaborative project serves as an imperfect example of our struggle for decolonization and collective freedom. This collective production of knowledge filled with contradictions and inspiration, shifts our gaze away from the Canadian settler-state, echoing what Indigenous activist scholar Glen Coulthard (2007), identifies as a politics “fashioned toward our own on-the-ground practices of freedom” (p. 456). We aim to think beyond the neoliberal settler state in order to imagine the impossible. In solidarity, we promise to be in the streets with you.

Notes

¹ In French, the movement was dubbed the *Printemps d'érable*, literally the *maple spring*, linking Québec (the world's largest producer of maple syrup) phonetically to the movements known as the Arab Spring (*printemps Arabe*)

² CEGEP is an acronym for Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel, the system of public colleges in Québec

³ King, 2003, p. 29

⁴ The Idle No More Movement emerged in December 2012, in opposition to the Conservative federal governmental policies that perpetuate neo-colonial relations. The movement represents an Indigenous-led call to build a more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable society. See <http://idlenomore.ca>; and <http://idlenomore.tumblr.com>

⁵ This slogan, also attributed to Che Guevara, appeared in both the French and Black American student movements of the 1960s (Harding, 1970, p. 93)

⁶ Allen, 1986, p.9

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