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Reflections on Repair Praxis in Academic Spaces

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ABSTRACT *Having conducted research and taught courses in political anthropology for several decades, particularly on nationalism, populism, and ethnonational conflict, I have initiated, facilitated and been caught up in many difficult conversations on issues including identity (politics), rights, conflict and justice with my students and colleagues. My research on the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the Kitchener-Waterloo Mennonite Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program has taught me valuable lessons on how practices of repair have been embedded or emerged in response to tensions, conflict and trauma-induced experiences, histories and lived realities. These lessons have become especially relevant in the context of recent challenges to academic freedom that have emerged in response to the ongoing war in Palestine/Israel. Suspensions, censure and surveillance are some of the troubling consequences, which combined have had an enormous impact on pedagogy and scholarship, affecting faculty and students alike. In this context, I argue that practices reflecting the centrality of (and urgent need for attention to) academic freedom are enhanced through pedagogical instruction and illustrate several strategies I use in classroom settings. I also discuss how despite the fractious environment created, and in some cases inflamed by the ongoing conflict, faculty and student groups are endeavouring to create and test out safe and respectful spaces for critical thinking, vigorous debate, as well as sharing and listening. These and other locally inspired initiatives are important to building networks based on thoughtful discussion and analysis, allyship, activism and more. I conclude by reflecting on anthropological research on the ethics of repair and its potential to inform pedagogical strategies aimed at navigating increasingly fraught and vulnerable academic spaces.*

KEYWORDS critical pedagogy; academic freedom; politics of repair

Introduction: A Bosnian War Zone, Up Close

In 1998, I showed Debbie Christie's (1993) acclaimed documentary film, *We are all Neighbors,* to a third-year undergraduate class in anthropology. The 1993 film about the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina portrays the conflict as

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experienced by the Bosnian Muslim and Catholic inhabitants of a village in central Bosnia. The anthropologist, Tone Bringa, who collaborated on the film, had done extensive fieldwork in the central Bosnian village of Kiseljak before and during the Yugoslav Wars of Succession which broke out in 1992. The film chronicled the impacts of war on social relationships among people who, for generations, had lived side by side in relative harmony. The decision to show the film was motivated by my desire to generate discussion on ethnic and religious nationalism and its impacts on intercommunal and interpersonal relations in situations of political conflict. As Nusreta, a Bosnian participant in the film states: "we're all neighbours and we'll have to live together afterwards" (Christie, 1993). Through conversations and the everyday lives of Bosnians represented, students learned about the thoughts, fears and emotions of the main characters in the film, in real time during the war. Having been engaged in ethnographic research with diaspora and homeland Croatian and Bosnian communities in Canada since 1992 and fieldwork in Croatia since 1996, I felt I was equipped to address questions and reactions that the film might elicit.

When the film ended, I asked students to share their thoughts and impressions. A clearly irritated student immediately raised her hand, identified herself as Croat and objected strongly to the subtitles in the film, particularly the translation of the Croatian expression for "friendly" or "neighbourly." She insisted that what a Croat woman being interviewed in the film had really meant was that she, in the student's words, merely "tolerated" her Bosnian Muslim neighbour and that this did not indicate friendship or neighbourliness. Other students who had their hands raised lowered them and fell silent, perhaps anticipating an uncomfortable exchange. Although I knew that the subtitles were accurate, I felt that challenging the student in this large class would introduce an uncomfortable and unproductive dynamic into what I had hoped was a learning opportunity. When I met with her after class, we discussed the issue of the subtitles, and I learned that she had limited ability to speak or understand the language and furthermore was not correct in her assessment. And yet, she remained adamant that both of the film's translators were mistaken. More to the point, she asserted that the film impugned the integrity of Croatians, ignored their suffering and that this must be acknowledged irrespective of the conclusions to be drawn from literal interpretations in subtitles and the events that transpired on screen. What mattered then, I learned, was not the accuracy of the translations but the emotions they elicited and the experiences that underly reactions to them. This was one of my first introductions to the challenging and potentially promising affordances of academic spaces and has since become foundational to my pedagogical practices.

In this paper, I discuss my experience as a political anthropologist navigating difficult experiences and conversations about issues such as freedom of speech, which have evolved over time to a focus on pedagogical strategies incorporating an ethics of care and repair as learned and shared in the

classroom. The concept of repair refers to the practices and theoretical frameworks that focus on restoring and reconstituting social relationships, institutions, and communities. It emerges at the intersection of social theory and practices of social justice, emphasizing the need to address repair in relationships (Bornstein & Redfield, 2011; Rapp, 2020; Thomas, 2024; Ticktin, 2019). Several baseline principles in guiding these approaches involve recognising steps in repair processes, such as the recognition of harm, whether it stems from historical injustices, systemic inequalities or interpersonal conflicts. Deborah Thomas (2024) discusses the importance of relationality in their exploration of how repair is not only about healing but fostering resilience in the context of dispossession and trauma. I argue that classroom spaces are one of the few remaining refuges for productive and necessary pedagogical dialogue and debate where repair can be taught, promoted and actualized.

Lessons from the Field

Politics as experienced in everyday life involves investigating the ways in which people explain, understand, cope with, negotiate and even, at times, instigate or exacerbate conflicts both within and outside their communities (however defined). My research has entailed working with those experiencing or having experienced war, conflict and forced migration as well as those who have provided support for victims of war. It informs how I research and teach subjects including nationalism and populism, addressing political and other forms of polarization, racism, fascism, mis- or disinformation, from an anthropological perspective. This means not only understanding the causes and consequences of conflict but their manifestations in everyday life. While there is a large body of literature on negotiating difficult topics, I have found that most of the lessons I have learned come from within the communities where I have worked. In the following, I reflect on research and teaching experiences that reinforce the value of repair as pedagogical praxis.

Since the mid-1980s, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork with diverse groups for whom repair – although not framed as such – has been embedded or emerged in response to tensions, conflict and trauma-induced experiences, histories and lived realities. These have included Mennonites and Laotian Hmong refugees in Kitchener-Waterloo, Croatians both in Canada and in Croatia during and after the war in the former Yugoslavia (and to a lesser extent in Bosnia and Herzegovina), ongoing research with diaspora Ukrainians since the most recent invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and archival research on the beginnings of the State of Israel. In each of these contexts, I have encountered profound efforts on the part of many research participants to engage in reparative processes in their communities and beyond.

For example, for my doctoral research in the 1980s on Mennonite refugee sponsorship during the Vietnamese "Boat People Crisis" of the late 1970s, I worked with the Mennonite community, which was the first in Canada to

advocate on behalf of "hard-to-sponsor" Hmong refugees from refugee camps in Laos and Thailand. Aside from providing extensive support and efforts in sponsoring refugees, Mennonites ran a Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP), part of the Mennonite Central Committee's "Community Justice Ministries," actively engaged in a program of their own devising which has since become a model for Canadian federal restorative justice initiatives. According to Brender (2020, para. 20):

> VORP identifies crimes that would normally lead offenders into the criminal justice system but can successfully be dealt with in the community. Once people in the community are involved, VORP seeks to effect reconciliation and understanding between victim and offender and facilitate an agreement for restitution.

The guiding principles of both the sponsorship program and VORP were informed by Christian ethics of forgiveness and focused on the goal of reconciliation, but mainly on repairing relationships between victims and offenders to promote community and strengthen the foundations of acceptance. A framework of restorative justice that emphasizes repair through dialogue and community involvement rather than punitive measures brings together victims and offenders to discuss the impact of what has initiated the need for repair and to come to an agreement on reparative actions grounded in accountability, as in the case of the VORP. Thomas (2024) too argues in this vein that accountability, central to repair praxis, demands "active listening and mutual recognition of complicity" (p. 103), which is central to VORP's praxis.

My research in and on Croatia beginning in the early 1990s focused mainly on the fraught transnational relationships between diaspora and homeland Croats, many of whom had different stakes in and visions for Croatian independence.[1] The wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and its aftermath produced an enormous body of scholarship on ethnic nationalism, conflict, war crimes and the efforts of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). There has, however, been limited attention to local level or community initiatives to mitigate the horrific consequences of the conflict, with the exception of a small body of research (see Dragojević, 2019; Otmačić, 2025). The efforts of many local-level civil society organizations from every so-called ethnonational group in the nation-states of the former Yugoslavia have worked exhaustively to promote an ethics of care and repair. So too have small groups of people working to generate and maintain trust through local-level and transnational initiatives and partnerships (Winland, forthcoming).

The cumulative impacts of research in the above-mentioned research contexts have contributed significantly to the formulation of strategies that reflect not only an awareness of and engagement with the ethics of care and

[1] My research experience was punctuated by the efforts of some influential opinion makers both in Canada and in Croatia, who had a stake in propagating certain (ethnic) nationalist narratives in the public sphere, to limit my research access and influence my findings.

repair but became more urgent in my teaching practice especially since the war in Gaza following the attacks in the State of Israel on October 7, 2023.

October 7, 2023, and its Aftermath

Anger, frustration, anxiety and despair over the war in Gaza has gripped many university campuses. Protests, rallies, statements by university administrations, departments, faculties and unions, and the presence of student encampments, became regular features of university life. The increasing securitization of campuses is being felt across the United States as well as in Canada and has created an environment where the consequences can be severe for those caught up in the political tumult. Although many of the large campus rallies and protests have subsided since 2024, the increasing reliance on restrictive regulations and the omnipresence of surveillance technologies and security personnel (e.g., "special constables" where I teach) has become part of everyday campus life. Reporting mechanisms for students and training programs for faculty have been introduced with attention mainly to complaints about antisemitic but also Islamophobic behaviour. Tent encampments have been forcibly dismantled and student protesters – most of whom protest Israel's occupation of Gaza – were arrested, mainly on spurious grounds. In some cases, this has resulted in sanction, careers being disrupted or damaged, as well as in dismissal and deportation (Pappé et al., 2024).[2]

Online discussion and debate has resulted in cases of faculty and students being blocked or removed from various online groups and platforms, and in some cases harassment or censure. Most recently, I have been translating and analyzing a family member's archives which span the period of his diplomatic service in pre- and post-independence 1948 State of Israel. The insights I have shared from my preliminary findings, in particular, critical analysis of early Israeli diplomacy, have drawn sometimes harsh criticism from those who question my loyalties as a Jew, especially since October 7, 2023. These have been my first sometimes painful encounters with the seemingly unassailable notion of academic freedom, hitting close to home.

After the October 7th attack, a colleague who knows about my work on early Israeli diplomacy recommended me to a Jewish faculty support group comprised of what I later learned were staunchly pro-Israel supporters. Although I wasn't asked about my stand on the war in Gaza, I was blocked from that faculty support group soon after joining without warning or explanation. I imagine that someone in the group learned of or saw my

[2] There is a long legacy of silencing Palestinian scholars, for example, the anthropologist, Nadia Abu El-Haj (Columbia University) whose publication, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (2001), resulted in the challenges to awarding her tenure. Others include Rashid Khalidi (2020) and Joseph Massad (2006). These punitive and discriminatory measures have risen exponentially since the election of Donald J. Trump and the detainment and deportation of international students protesting the War in Gaza.

signature on letters of protest against the treatment of Palestinian students, scholars and their allies. In another case, a Palestinian scholar and tenured professor at a Canadian university was invited by my program's graduate students to give a lecture on his research. Before he began his presentation, several uniformed police officers entered the venue and reported that they had received a call about a "major event" and "possible protest" – neither of which had materialized. The scene was upsetting and intimidating; it enraged those assembled on campus and online including myself, as the officers were armed. Moreover, they had not received permission from the university security services, as required, to come onto campus. A formal letter of apology to the university community by the university president did little to assuage our concerns.

The seemingly immutable principle of "institutional neutrality," as evidenced in university policies that maintain, or profess to uphold, an impartial stance in the academic environment, should allow for the expression of an open and diverse range of views on the part of faculty and students. Nonetheless, student activism and campus protests have increasingly tested the resolve of university administrations committed to a policy or practice of neutrality (in the service of academic freedom) on political and social issues. Most troubling, though, have been political pressures and their impacts on university governing boards, where concerns over financial and reputational damage in the form of, for example, the withholding of funds, have complicated the time-honoured mission of universities to academic freedom, and to encourage meaningful discourse and engagement while maintaining institutional autonomy. Witness the recent rapid escalation of threats to federal and donor funding cuts to colleges and universities in the United States,[3] as well as restrictions including bans on programs such as Gender Studies in Hungarian universities, and political interference in some EU states such as Croatia and others (European Parliament Report, 2023).

The historical commitment to intellectual and academic freedom embodied in the principle of freedom to teach – *lehrfreihei* and *lernfreihet* – the freedom to learn – discussed in the following section, is foundational to the mission of universities. It has been raised as an urgent priority in the face of politically motivated threats or intimidation directed against institutions of higher learning, their faculty and students.

Lehrfreiheit – The Freedom to Teach

Debates over academic freedom have been vigorously defended for generations if not centuries by scholars including Voltaire, Alexander von

[3] See declarations by the AAUP: https://www.aaup.org/.

Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, John Milton and Richard Rorty.[4] And yet, confidence in the power, principles and integrity of academic freedom has diminished significantly as universities embrace ever stricter regimes of discipline and audit. Pedagogy and politics have always intersected in educational spaces, and theorists such as Henri Giroux (2011, 2014a, 2014b), Paulo Freire (2018) and bell hooks (1994) among many others have addressed this issue in their scholarship. Much of what has transpired and accelerated over the past decade challenges what now appears by scholars such as Richard Rorty (1999) to be the chimera of academic freedom:

> Students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings… Teachers setting their own agendas… without regard to any larger end, much less any institutional plan – is what non-vocational higher education is all about. (p. 125)

Similarly, according to Giroux, a pedagogy central to a reformulated politics is one that reclaims the university as a democratic public sphere. And yet, he argues, academic freedom is increasingly defined "through a privatized or individualized notion of freedom… substituting conformity for dialogue and ideological inflexibility for critical engagement" (Giroux, 2011, p. 35). He further argues that pedagogical approaches that discourage critical thinking and confuse training for education is a trend that can be identified in a number of Canadian universities and programs moving towards investing in or enhancing professionalization programs and faculties (Giroux, 2014a). According to Giroux (2014b), the university setting should be a place where students are given the research knowledge and training in critical thinking to develop informed opinions, confront unsettling knowledge, and engage in pedagogical practices focused on ethical and social responsibility.

A recent opinion piece by the historian Louis Menand (2024) echoes these concerns in his discussion of the German philosophical concepts of *lehrfreiheit* and *lernfreiheit,* translated as "freedom to teach" and "freedom to learn,"[5] arguing that academic freedom is essential for the pursuit of knowledge and the integrity of educational institutions. He emphasizes that academic freedom should not only protect the rights of scholars to express ideas, but also that universities should be free to operate without threat of censure or intervention by external political or economic forces (see Mintz, 2024). The practice of tenure for faculty is inextricably linked to this principle, and proof for its critical importance is that it has been consistently and increasingly challenged over the course of the last century. According to Menand (2024) the principles of free speech connected with Western liberal philosophy have guided

[4] According to scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1986), reflections on "free speech" cross-culturally are not "derivative discourses" of Euro-American political thought.

[5] These principles were foundational to the early 19th century scholar Willem von Humboldt, who established the Humboldt University in Berlin.

European and North American institutions of higher learning for generations. One of the more important contributions of Menand's (2024) article for my approach to pedagogy, is the effort he makes to differentiate "academic freedom" and "freedom of speech." According to Menand (2024), free speech is the right to "say or publish ignorant things, hateful things, in many cases false things, and the state cannot touch you" (para. 6). Academic freedom differs, because it is "rigorously policed" through peer review and respect for the "norms of academic inquiry" that prioritize evidence-based research and argument (paras. 6-7). As Menard (2024) notes, "the scholarship that academics publish has to be approved by their peers. The protocols of citation must be observed, ad-hominem arguments are not tolerated, unsubstantiated claims are dismissed" (para. 8). The significance of the distinction between academic freedom and freedom of speech is critical to setting the foundations of pedagogical practice.

Pedagogy and Political Engagement

Over the past few decades, a large body of scholarship on critical pedagogies has emerged, as reflected in feminist, antiracist and anti- and decolonial methods and toolkits. These range from suggestions on how to frame discussions at the start of each class – setting the tone – to active learning and critical thinking exercises that provide a safe and supportive environment for participants to express their views. Paolo Freire, for example, argued for a series of methodological priorities that emphasize a participatory approach to incorporating native voice, cultural analysis, ethnographic research, epistemological critique, and the co-creation of knowledge through interaction. Freire's goal was to empower through education using strategies of critical thinking (Freire, 2018).

Anthropological methods are grounded in lessons learned from a history of problematic ethnographic practices that raised profound moral and ethical questions focused on ethnocentrism, Othering, "speaking for" versus "speaking to" (Spivak, 1988) and more. This is reflected in training in methodology and theories that address the challenges of diverse cultural, socio-economic, political and historical contexts and most importantly, people's daily lives and experiences. As there is no clear wall of disengagement between pedagogy and political engagement, the goal then is to lead discussion with a stated commitment to exploring diverse views in a safe and respectful space without judgement. An important guiding principle in teaching difficult subjects in my experience requires the presence of mind not to assume that students share similar views with one another (or with the course director). In what follows, I share several strategies that I use to teach about difficult topics related to populism, authoritarianism and nationalism.

In most of the courses I teach at both undergraduate and graduate levels, controversial issues are tackled on a regular basis. Course materials, including

scholarly articles, opinion pieces and editorials, media and visual content that represent a variety of perspectives that confirm, challenge and hopefully inspire students to think critically. For example, in the course of teaching about conspiracy theories, populist media and the discourses they disseminate, mis- and disinformation, fascism and neonationalism, students are provided with the conceptual frameworks to explore the foundations of statements and views that are often uncomfortable to discuss or are dismissed as purely prejudicial, ignorant, racist and worse. In thinking anthropologically, they are encouraged to reflect on our conversations, assignments and materials in relation to their day-to-day encounters and experiences. The objective is to provide opportunities to explore intellectual and experiential worlds and come to informed opinions or positions, irrespective of beliefs or allegiances. This then means that students are not expected to come to the same conclusions, but rather to navigate differences in a comprehensive, informed and respectful manner.

Inspired in part by Louis Menand's (2024) discussion of academic freedom, I have also developed several critical thinking exercises involving drilling down to the meaning of the increasingly controversial and weaponized term "free speech," where students are asked to reflect on the ways in which simple terms such as "free" can be used. Developing class exercises involves, for example, dissecting populist messages, many of which capitalize on accusations of assaults on freedom of expression and the right to free speech, to examine how discursive tactics work to undermine, divide, promote, influence and validate views, and to manipulate and harness powerful emotional responses and grievances. In one exercise, students are asked to list all the uses of the term "free" they can think of, and importantly how they themselves use it in their daily lives – descriptively and metaphorically – everything from "free WIFI," "free samples" to more high-minded and conceptual uses such as "free and fair elections" and "free speech." Students are asked to consider how they can distinguish between the varied uses of the term, its linguistic and symbolic, cultural and other connotations. The concept of *binaries* is then introduced to illustrate the ways in which definitions of terms such as "freedom" and its antipode, communicate meanings that can be politicized and distorted. Most come up with synonyms for the *lack of* freedom including "subordinate," "inferior," "constrained," "powerless," "silenced" and others, all of which refer to highly undesirable states of existence. This often draws attention to the ways in which "freedom" takes on different meanings when placed in varied contexts. Students then analyse their findings on its usages using theoretical approaches to "think with" the uses (and abuses) and meanings of commonly used terms. By exploring the use of an otherwise ubiquitous and multivalent word, students are given the opportunity to explore their participation in exercising "academic freedom," a principle and process in which, as students, they are active and full participants. Students are also encouraged through mock debates and presentations to engage respectfully when confronted with challenges to their views and opinions (framed as "rights

to free speech" for in-class debate exercises). This is central to developing a pedagogy that encourages explorations of discursive tactics that lead less to condemnation, complaint and accusation, and more towards nurturing a process that places emphasis on practices of care and repair.

Steps towards encouraging the ethics of repair include a growing list of groups, associations, advocates, activists and others who have emerged or intensified their activities as a result of the war in Gaza, and which are dedicated not only to protest and resistance but to repair and collaboration. The following groups have been featured in class discussions as examples of political engagement that incorporate principles of repair (albeit not framed explicitly as such) into their messages and practice:

1) *Atidna International* (n.d.) is a grassroots campus-based organization in the U.S. (with chapters in North America and Europe) that takes the position that; "Jews/Israelis and Arabs/Palestinians are one family, not inherent enemies, and we believe that such a humanizing notion can be revealed by creating joint and civil spaces for interaction between our two peoples" (para. 1). The portmanteau *Atidna* combines the Hebrew word for "future" with the Arabic suffix for "our."
2) *Bridging the Gap*, a York University initiative begun in 2019, is also a grassroots and campus-based group "fostering respectful dialogue on Israel-Palestine" (Temple Sinai, n.d.). It brings together students of Muslim and Jewish faiths to discuss the war in Gaza and the region, Islamophobia and antisemitism, modelling often difficult conversations that promote listening, dialogue and respect.
3) *Standing Together* (n.d.) is an advocacy group established in the State of Israel which brings together, "Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel against the occupation and for peace, equality, and social justice" (para. 1).[6] It too is a grassroots international social movement with a long history of collaboration and initiatives aimed at promoting trust and dialogue. University and college campuses are where different groups in Israeli society come together, often for the first time. The goal of our student chapters is to organize these students and build power to drive positive change in student life.[7]

Concluding Thoughts

The classroom provides enormous potential to create spaces for safe, respectful and collaborative opportunities where students and teachers explore the sometimes-challenging possibilities of informed and constructive dialogue.

[6] This organization is not to be confused with another *Standing Together* "non-profit organization that started by sending pizzas to IDF (Israel Defense Force) soldiers guarding checkpoints" (n.d.a, para. 1).

[7] The Student Department at *Standing Together* (n.d.c) "coordinates the development and mentorship of the movement's student chapters" (para. 1).

These are increasingly critical spaces to reinforce the intersections between the historic commitments of higher education institutions to academic freedom and explorations of free speech in a pedagogical setting. Approaches that incorporate the principle of repair have the potential to inform some of the most consequential and future-oriented responses to the ongoing global conflicts and also, importantly, point to the need to consider repair in the context of intensified efforts to target academics, students and higher education in general. In the current political moment, a rapidly evolving context where academics and students have become increasingly singled out for censure, intimidation and worse, a pedagogy of the future demands approaches that demonstrate, model and celebrate the value of robust, respectful discussion focused on forward-thinking strategies of care and repair.

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