

The Politics of Trauma

with Denise Nadeau

Keywords: Trauma or social suffering, Victim narratives, White body supremacy, Embodiment, Decoloniality, Indigenous and Black resilience, Medicalization, PTSD, Sovereignty

Related Course Subjects: Religion, Psychology, Neurobiology, Psychiatry, Medicine History, Anthropology, Social Work, Education, Journalism

Denise argues that the language of trauma is often used for political ends. The related discourse in therapy, social work, and other helping professions focus on pathologizing trauma, placing it as an individual medical issue instead of recognizing trauma as being a product of social suffering created by larger structures in place. Denise talks about notions of embodiment and white body supremacy and ways to implement those topics in our classrooms.

Video URL

https://youtu.be/T_RJqAVGpLM

Goals/Objectives

After watching the video, students will be able to:

- Give examples of ways trauma has been medicalized, individualized and pathologized.
- Describe what the “Christian mission is” and how it relates to the helping professions
- Describe the difference between a “hypo-response” and a “hyper-response” to trauma
- Describe the difference between “life and death” trauma and “relational” trauma
- Give examples of ways trauma is used for a political agenda
- Give a brief description of “post-apocalyptic stress syndrome” and “post-traumatic slave syndrome.”
- Give examples of instances where the media used the “victim narrative” when talking about certain minorities (individuals)



About The Decolonial Perspectives & Practices Hub

The Decolonial Perspectives & Practices Hub is a student-led initiative to provide a platform for the community to collaborate and develop meaningful solutions to the systemic issues faced by underserved groups in academia. Our mission is to advance knowledge and understanding of these issues and provide a space to engage in research and learning that is open to all experiences each individual brings.

About the Anti-Racist Pedagogy Project

The Anti-Racist Pedagogy Project is a video library that showcases pre-recorded talks by local community activists, students and educators in Montreal and Canada and transforms them into anti-racist educational resources for the classroom. Undergraduate and graduate students from Concordia and McGill University created the content for these course packages. These resources exemplify the power of student leadership and their contribution to advancing antiracist education.

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- Give examples of ways we abide by the white body supremacy narrative and examples of the characteristics of white supremacy culture
 - State ideas on how to implement these topics in a classroom/educational setting
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Pre-Class Self-Reflection Exercise (Educators)

Fully engaging with antiracist pedagogy starts with self-reflection and accountability. **If you are familiar with antiracist education, you know that the best way to teach antiracist pedagogy is to model antiracist praxis and thought.** As such, we have developed a series of self-reflection questions for you to consider before integrating anti-racist educational materials into your classroom. The night before class or at least a few hours before class, give yourself time, without distractions, to reflect on the questions below - you can write them down or reflect on them with yourself paper free!

Be reflexive

- What does antiracist pedagogy or education mean to you?
- What is the relationship between your identity and antiracist work? How would you describe your role in antiracist work?
- How do you view the mutualistic exchange between yourself and your students? Do you adjust your teaching style accordingly?
- What is the difference between engaging with our repository as a knowledge exchange versus a knowledge extraction?

Be accountable

- To what extent have you engaged with antiracist or anti-oppressive education or philosophies within your life/work? Why or why not?
 - What has the silencing or exclusion of another person or group looked like in the environments that you frequent? What have you done, or what could you have done to remedy it?
 - Reflect on how you have engaged with literature, presentations and other forms of knowledge led by Queer, Trans, Indigenous, Black, Asian, and other POC in your academic, personal, or professional lives.
 - What has been your role in disrupting and mobilizing against racism and oppression interpersonally or in the environments you frequent?
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Guiding Questions

Before watching the video

Pre-Video Questions -Students

- Do you embody white supremacy culture?
- What is trauma?
- What are some physiological and psychological responses to trauma?
- What is intergenerational or historical trauma?
- What is medicalization?
- What is the “Christian mission”?

While watching the video

As you watch the video, take note of the following:

- What characteristics of white supremacy behaviour/thinking can you relate to?
- What words/language does Denise use instead of trauma?

After watching the video

Post-video Questions

- How do some discourses about trauma perpetuate racism and colonial structures?
- What does the current medical pathologizing model of illness/trauma focus on?
- How are innate and embodied characteristics of white supremacy a form of chronic microaggressions?

Assignments / Writing topics

- Pick an instance of intergenerational or historical trauma (e.g., "The intergenerational effects of Indian Residential Schools: Implications for the concept of historical trauma by Amy Bombay, Kimberly Matheson and Hymie Anisman") and identify its effects on behaviour, cognition, health, biology, or neurobiology as well as its colonial roots and current proposed interventions. Propose a different way to address the trauma in textbooks and present it to the class.
- Make a pros/cons list of the “social model” of trauma that Denise suggests and the “medical model” of trauma, which is the currently dominant model in medicine/psychology. Present to class.
- Make a comparative presentation about how the term resilience is defined within mainstream psychological and medical discourses, the way this paper proposes to identify it: Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture (Ungar, M. 2013), and the way Denise spoke about it. Unpack the repercussions & benefits of each definition.
- Pick one characteristic of white supremacy that Dr. Tema Okun has identified, which was mentioned in Denise’s video. Research and identify its historical, religious, and colonial roots.



Expand and unpack how it was implemented and normalized in our daily lives and your field of study. (e.g., Dialectical thinking-eastern norm vs Dichotomous thinking-western norm--> related to “either/or, one right way”; Rise of capitalism- related to “sense of urgency”). Present to class.

- Explore the notion of an “Autonomous boundary body” by researching whether the concept of the person varies cross-culturally? Is it a concept influenced by religion? How did illness become solely located within the body that carries it?
- Make a list of resources and debriefing techniques to responsibly implement trauma in the classroom (e.g., presentation of trauma concept should be followed by presentation of “social suffering”)
- Make a list of symptoms that relate to PTSD that aren’t typically western and are therefore not included in medical discourse (e.g., Asian showing mainly somatic symptoms when it comes to depression/anxiety- those symptoms are not present in the DSM-5, or Cambodian genocide survivors’ neck-centred panic attacks) Present to class
- Give an example of healthy and adaptive behaviour that has been pathologized by western medicine.
- Talk about the importance of being culturally sensitive when conducting research in medical fields. Present to class.
- Do comparative research on how PTSD is treated with pharmaceuticals/individual therapy and how it is addressed in non-western countries. (e.g., Movie- Afflictions: Culture and mental illness in Indonesia)

Taking Action

- If you have a course topic about trauma that does not address the systemic framework from which trauma emerges as social suffering, write a letter to the professor explaining the necessity to include a debriefing section in the curriculum.
- If you present some disturbing material related to racialized trauma as a part of your curriculum, instead of just giving the material, look for a person that can speak on it as well, invite them to the class and ask for ways in which it would be appropriate to sit, honour or feel that trauma in the classroom. (e.g., ceremonial container)
- Practice staying in the present moment or embodied state.

Student Group Reflection

1. What is something new that your group learned or began to consider from watching the video?
2. What type of educational videos on systemic racism would you like to see more of?
3. How can you combat systems of oppression and exclusion in your individual lives?
4. Why is having an anti-racist approach to your work/studies important?
5. After today’s exercise, write down two suggestions for your professor on making your class more inclusive.



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Thank you for implementing our resources and supporting anti-racism efforts in education. If you have any questions or feedback, please email us!



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