Between Discomfort and Comfort: Towards Language That Creates Space for Social Change

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Setting the Context

In June 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released its ninety-four calls to action as, in the language of Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, a "first step toward redressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and advancing the process of reconciliation" (para. 2). Across Canada, conversations about responding meaningfully and respectfully to the calls to action began. Perhaps especially for those of us embedded in educational institutions, and reading for the range of actions that invoke education, the conversations had (and continue to have) a sense of urgency and great significance.

The TRC's calls to action imply changes for and by non-Indigenous Canadian institutions and citizens. That is, the person who is increasingly being termed the "settler" is called upon to change. Or, as Paulette Regan asks in her *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010), "How can we, as non-Indigenous people, unsettle ourselves to name and then transform the settler—the colonizer who lurks within—not just in words but by our actions, as we confront the history of colonization, violence, racism, and injustice that remains part of the IRS [Indian Residential Schools] legacy today?" (p. 11).

In this paper, I examine the potential of the term "settler ally" to create productive discomfort alongside productive comfort, thereby creating space for positive social change. My setting is Canada—Alberta in particular, Treaty 6 territory specifically—following the release of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015. This dialogue is informed by Megan Boler's "pedagogy of discomfort" and the work of scholars who've considered the potential and limitations of this theoretical framework. I argue that discomfort alone may be insufficient when the aim is to create positive social change and that comfort, offered through careful and care-filled language, may support the intended outcomes.

Towards Discomforting Language

Following the release of the recommendations, as conversations began within my own institution and my own communities, I noticed a willingness to create and explore the experience of discomfort through the

process of learning, particularly among my colleagues who had been long engaged in Indigenous-centered work. Learning about violent histories, especially ones in which one's ancestors may be implicated as perpetrators of violence, isn't supposed to be comfortable. As in other nations where similar questions have been addressed, "settler" language is being deliberately used, helping to intentionally and appropriately create discomfort and thereby play a small role in acknowledging the truth of our shared histories.

At the same time, among some colleagues and within my own wider communities, I have noticed a direct and disconcerting rejection of and resistance to the use of the term "settler." At times, the conversation has turned away from the recommendations and towards an interrogation of the term and statements that might be summarized as, "*But it wasn't me.*" While acknowledging truths of the TRC, feelings of *"I would never"* and *"I wouldn't have"* are expressed. Between the paired landscapes of guilt and responsibility, it has seemed, at times, that a threshold of "too much discomfort" has been crossed.

It was within this context and experience that I took notice of the term "settler ally," introduced to me by colleagues Pat Makokis and Fay Fletcher as part of their speaker series "The TRC and You," launched in January 2016 at the University of Alberta. Regan (2010) is credited with introducing the term as she reaches towards the possibilities for creating a culture of peace:

> As a settler ally, I must continuously confront the colonizer-perpetrator in myself, interrogating my own position as a beneficiary of colonial injustice. … As settler allies, we might ask ourselves additional questions as we go about our everyday work. Does the action I am about to take, or the words I am about to speak or write, come from the head, heart, and hands of a colonizer-perpetrator or from a settler ally? How am I working in decolonizing ways? What am I doing on a daily basis within myself and my relationships with my family, my community, my school, or my workplace that keeps me living in truth? Are my actions leading toward more just and peaceful relations with Indigenous people? It is my critical hope that, in answering these questions, we will be deeply unsettled in our minds, our hearts, and our spirits, and know that this is a good thing. The transformative pathways in our garden are rich and fertile but need our time, attention, love, and energy to flourish. This is the work of the settler ally. (p. 236)

Reflecting on my own experience of witnessing resistance to the use of the word "settler," I began to worry about the would-be formal learners—be they in primary, secondary, postsecondary or lifelong learning settings—as well as members of our broader communities for whom encountering discomfort has the very real effect of ending dialogue, conversation, and learning. (Perhaps my worry is greater for those not connected to a formal education setting where a teacher-guide brings intentional pedagogy to the discomfort.) For this reason, I see the possibility and the potential for "settler ally" language. "Settler ally" language does not deny the productive discomfort of learning about settler violence and the ongoing impact of Indian Residential Schools in Canada. Rather, the term introduces the possibility of an emerging or future ally relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.

As I consider the term "settler ally" and its emotional and psychic effects in this paper, I also explore the possibilities it creates. I do not aim to provide a history of allyship or the term ally itself; similarly I do not explicitly address how *to be* a settler ally. Rather, informed by Megan Boler's "pedagogy of discomfort," drawing from Sara Ahmed's work on affective economies, and reflecting on Hannah Arendt's notions of irreversibility, I consider the tension between discomfort and comfort implicit in the term "settler ally," arguing that discomfort alone may be insufficient when the aim is to create positive social change. Like Regan, I come to these concerns and questions as a settler ally.

Discomforting Pedagogies

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of writing on "the pedagogy of discomfort" following Megan Boler's exploration in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (1999) and her subsequent work with Michalinos Zembylas on the subject (e.g., Boler & Zembylas, 2003). The emphasis on social transformation through experiences of discomfort can be attributed to Boler's influence. Essentially, Boler introduces the possibility of seeking change and "learning to see differently" (Boler, 1999, p. 198) through discomfort—through emotionally uncomfortable content, learning experiences, and learner reflection.

Perhaps not surprisingly, educating in post-conflict settings, or in a time of explicitly-intended reconciliation within a region or a country, is frequently a source of "pedagogy of discomfort" explorations and studies. For instance, Helen Mary MacDonald (2013) considers the potential and limitations of a "pedagogy of discomfort" in a "post-apartheid yet heavily racialised South Africa" (p. 670); Zembylas, Charalambous and Charalambous (2012) examine Greek-Cypriot teachers' own experiences working with discomfort in the classroom; and Zembylas and McGlynn (2012) study a discomforting pedagogical activity in a classroom of 10- and 11-year-old students in Northern Ireland. In each case,

> a pedagogy of discomfort, as an educational approach, emphasises the need for educators and students alike to move outside their "comfort zones." Pedagogically, this approach assumes that discomforting emotions play a constitutive role in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities and in creating possibilities for individual and social transformation. (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012, p. 41)

Connections to these post-conflict and reconciling pedagogies of discomfort suggest, to me, that considering pedagogies of discomfort in a post-TRC Canada may be similarly productive. For this reason, I do not suggest that we abandon the use of the word "settler" and the critical, difficult, discomforting dialogues that the word demands. Like Regan (2010),

> I agree with transitional justice experts who argue that history education in the wake of systemic violence and deeply rooted identity-based conflict must focus not only on curricula reform but on pedagogical reform as an effective means of transforming diverse histories and identities, and shifting negative perceptions of marginalized groups. (p. 31)

And like MacDonald (2013), I recognize that we ought to push ourselves beyond a "system where the dominant discourses construct education as neutral" (p. 671).

"Settler Ally" Language

The addition of the term "ally" to "settler" introduces the idea of a (new kind of) relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. In this context, the idea of "ally" language creates

space for a relationship, meshing well with Nel Noddings' care theory, as explored in her *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education* (2002). She explains: "Care theory … is relation-centered rather than agent-centered, and it is more concerned with the caring relation than with caring as a virtue" (p. 2). In other words, "allyship" helps to move us away from the agents we are and towards imagining each other in relation with one another.

It's instructive, here, to consider and compare the language of the "ally" in another contemporary and actively-engaged Canadian context. Within the LGBTQ context in Canada, especially in educational settings, we have observed the emergence of Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs). In this sphere, the "allies" are "straight allies," "heterosexual allies," or "cis allies," but are more commonly simply known as "allies." The work of the word "ally" helps to create space for supportive and caring non-LGBTQ individuals to contribute positively to the needs and lives of LGBTQ individuals. Allies are not defining the needs (or setting an agenda), but have the language to individually and collectively express their support and their relationships with the LGBTQ community. By creating "beneficial interpersonal relationships and community belonging" (Rostosky, Black, Riggle, & Rosenkrantz, 2015, p. 333), allyship moves individuals away from agent-centeredness and towards relation-centeredness.

I find the connection and comparison of these two uses of "ally" productive for two reasons. First, use of the word "ally" helps to answer the question, "How can I make a positive difference in the lives of marginalized people if I cannot claim identification with the group?" Second, allyship can say, "I stand with you and walk beside you" while leaving room for groups' self-determination. In the LGBTQ context, allies have created safe spaces in schools and supported changes to harmful policies and laws. Similar questions are present for non-Indigenous people in relation to Indigenous people, as well. For instance, one might ask, "If I'm not Indigenous, what can I do to support Indigenous self-determination and rights?" I imagine the use and embracing of the term "settler ally" as a partial answer to these difficult, even discomforting questions.

When Discomfort Is Insufficient

I've advocated above for a willingness to recognize that a pedagogy of discomfort may be insufficient if the discomfort permanently disrupts the possibility of dialogue and progress. With this in mind, I'm moving towards an argument, navigated through care (in Noddings' sense), that a pedagogy of discomfort and a pedagogy of comfort can coexist and, indeed, may need to occupy the same space in order to realize positive social change, both inside and outside of educational settings. As Choi (2006) suggests, "[t]he notions of caring and concern do not necessarily require constant comfort, but discomfort may be necessary occasionally" (p. 244). Adopting the language of "settler ally" therefore provides both an example of how discomfort and comfort may coexist—I am of settlers *and* I am an ally—and an opportunity to further explore the work of the literal space between the two words.

I see the space between these two words as critical to the *work* of the phrase. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's (2004) work on affective economies, I see the space between the words as *affective space*. As Ahmed notes, "[a]ffect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time)" (p. 120). The affective space of "settler ally" becomes the space between not only the words, but between the emotional experiences of discomfort and comfort. The circulation of discomfort and comfort between the settler and the ally aligns

itself to both a past and a future, to a truth-telling and a healing. This affective space does emotional work, becoming an affective economy in the process. "In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (p. 119). The work of the literal space between the words creates an affective space for social change.

It's worth clarifying in this discussion that seeing this affective space as productive and perhaps even necessary doesn't limit the discomfort one might experience by accepting and using the term "settler" as part of the "settler ally" word pair. (I'm again reflecting on and supporting Regan's core argument: The settler must be unsettled.) At the same time, my argument is one that rejects an either/or notion of discomfort or comfort, seeking a both/and model, in parallel to the both/and of settler and ally—literally and figuratively, a model of *bonded together betweenness*.

Irreversibility, Discomfort, and Comfort

As comfort emerges from and through this particular discomfort, between "settler" and "ally," additional difficult questions arise: How do we move beyond these histories and towards a future filled with compassion in relation with one another? And, embedded within this question, can the settler history be forgiven? In many ways, as a settler ally, I do not feel well-suited to ask or answer these questions. Or perhaps such questions are and will remain unanswerable, much as Derrida might assert: "The impossibility of forgiveness offers itself to thought, in truth, as its sole possibility. Why is forgiveness impossible? Not merely difficult for a thousand psychological reasons, but absolutely impossible? Simply because what there is to forgive must be, and must remain, unforgivable" (2002, p. 385).

Perhaps, despite the performance of the apology, the impossibility of forgiveness is why "forgiveness" has not been part of the language of reconciliation. Yet time travels only forward, and so we are stuck with the irreversibility of our collective pasts. How do we accept (and learn from) these pasts? As Hannah Arendt understands in her reflections on "Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive," in *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), *promises* are a remedy:

> Here the remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities of action itself. The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. *The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises.* (pp. 236–237, emphasis added)

In Arendt's view, the *promise* is one of un-repetition of a particular act. Such a promise creates a different future, despite the uncertainty of the future. In this way, "[w]ithout being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover" (p. 237).

I do struggle to see acts of forgiveness as necessary or even possible in the context of the histories of Indigenous people in Canada at this time. I'm especially uncomfortable with the idea of the settler or even the settler ally asking for forgiveness. And yet, as Arendt (1958/1998) articulates,

> [f]orgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. (p. 241)

As a country, I do believe that Canada is seeking to recover from deeds of the past, and to work collaboratively to create a future through the making and keeping of promises.

Irreversibility, then, holds within it both discomfort and comfort, questions of "How could we have done that?" and sincere promises of "Never again." Irreversibility looks to the past with learning and to the future with change. At its core, the term "settler ally" recognizes and relies upon irreversibility and, perhaps, the power of making and keeping promises. In this way, we might see the space between "settler" and "ally" as the promise; it is this *space* that holds the promise.

Conclusion

Over the past several months, I've adopted the language of "settler ally" as I describe my connection to a sincere desire to do the work of responding meaningfully and thoughtfully to the TRC's calls to action, in collaboration with and with direction from Indigenous people, scholars, and colleagues. I have noticed that the word "settler" is still significantly disruptive for some, disruptive enough to become the focus of the conversation.

What I've argued—and what I'm beginning to bring to my own conversations—is that it's in combination with the word "ally" that "settler" can do real work of discomforting productively. In other words, "ally" creates productive comfort where "settler" creates productive discomfort. When I use the phrase "settler ally," and when I engage in a conversation about the words, I have the tools for creating balance, allowing the conversation to continue and to be about more than the initial discomfort. Though discomfort may be a condition for some learning and transformation, I do not see it as a condition for all learning nor the only path to transformation. The possibility of becoming comfortable with discomfort, for its productive (transformative) value, can be helped along with comfort and care. Between and through discomfort and comfort, affective work takes place and, I believe, is shifting the conversation and moving us forward, creating space for social change, relationships, and learning.

Acknowledgments

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