**In our world**

The grief of the world may feel like too much to bear. This chapter in human history is sharply marked by violence and alienation, brought down upon the natural world as it is upon the vulnerable members of the human family.

Earth and air and water are subject to devastation by late capitalism—the pollution emitted to support it and the bombs detonated to enforce it. They bear witness to old growth rainforests clear-cut for exports, underwater moonscapes, and all the vast, incomprehensibly diverse and delicate ecosystems blown away or contaminated by decisions made in greed, ignorance or desperation.

Human beings and other animals in turn bear witness to the struggle of the elements. Climate change, for example, brings extreme weather, melting icebergs, and rising water levels affecting humans and animals around the world, but impacting the poor who live in precarious places most acutely. Air, water, food, and right relations among people – all are contaminated in ways we are only beginning to understand.

At a basic level, all kinds of toxicity affect learning. Fluorescent lights in most classrooms, emissions from computers, recycled air in institutions, and the chemicals and other pollutants in homes and neighbourhoods (particularly those inhabited by people with few choices) all tax our bodies and detract from our ability to be truly present in learning environments. For example, even low levels of lead exposure in children “causes reduced IQ and attention span, hyperactivity, impaired growth, reading and learning disabilities, hearing loss, insomnia, and a range of other health, intellectual, and behavioural problems”.

Damage to the physical world and its inhabitants, however, is only one way hyper-consumerism affects learning. Our relationships to our surroundings often range from the disconnected to the adversarial; the tone and pace of survival encourages us to shut ourselves off from those surroundings. Hearts, minds, and bodies are out of step with the inherent rhythms of day and night, of seasons, of years, even as we are alienated from the sources of knowledges we carried until very recently: how to heal, to birth babies, to rest, and to die. And those knowledges themselves are dismissed and undermined as we are taught to refer exclusively to experts and professionals.

Re-learning how to listen to our bodies, and becoming more in tune with our environments, will support learning and teaching practices that both address violence adequately, and introduce possibilities of a more non-violent way of being together in the world.

Though so generalized and pervasive, forms violence on a geopolitical level can be clearly observed as it operates against Indigenous peoples, among and within nations, and against migrants outside of their borders.

**Indigenous Peoples**

The histories of many nations include the attempted genocide and systemic marginalization of Indigenous populations. The forced removal from and theft of land in many countries, the biological warfare of intentionally disseminated disease in Canada, the head hunting in Australia and New Zealand, the brutal denial of water in the Americas, the systematic rape of Indigenous women through the ages… the list of atrocities goes on and on. Currently, communities cope with a dearth of healthcare, housing, education, political power, countered by an abundance of substance use, poverty, disease, and self/other harm. The suicide rate of Indigenous youth in Canada, for example, is at epidemic levels, and lack of political will even to gather accurate data on the rates speaks to that government’s continued apathy.

State-sanctioned violence against Indigenous peoples has often taken the form of discriminatory and violent political legislation, such as Canada’s *Indian Act* (passed in 1876 and *still in force*, with amendments). Legislation can have the power to decimate traditional social structures, introducing interpersonal, often gender-based violence. The horrific legacy of the residential schools in Canada are a particularly egregious example, and that violence has continued to resonate in complex ways up to the present – echoes of trauma crossing individual and generational barriers, most certainly complicating the experience of schooling for Indigenous people.

Anti-Indigenous policies have been created at the highest levels, by historical figures that by and large enjoy impunity and admiration. For example, the first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. MacDonald, said of the Métis people in 1870, "These impulsive half-breeds have got spoiled by this uprising and must be kept down by a strong hand until they are swamped by the influx of settlers." (The French language in which this was uttered actually has the Métis being “crushed with an iron fist.”) His is the face we all must continue to see on our currency’s ten dollar bill.

**Nations**

State-sanctioned violence through internal policy often has to do with labour. Japanese internment camps in mid-20th century Canada, and of course the slavery of African people all over the Americas that provided the foundation for the prosperity of the Americas, are both instances of indentured labour, of which the dominant colonial forces continue to reap the benefits. Slavery persists to this day in many places, along with child labour and other forms of forced, coerced, and bonded labour. In fact, there are more people in slavery now than at any other time in human history.

All over the world, violence within nations also takes the forms of civil war, regional strife, and internal displacement. Among nations we see endless wars, small and large; some wars enjoy international media scrutiny and interest, even as others are almost invisible (usually when there are no commodities valued by the world economy at stake). While many forms of political oppression are used to coerce, humiliate, torture and control, sexual violence is often used within wartime. Much research has been done on systemic/mass rape as a weapon of physical and cultural annihilation.

Another form of a nation’s violence against its people is indifference and inequitable responses to “natural” phenomena such as weather disasters and disease. For example, the presence of HIV/AIDS has a profound impact on learning throughout the world. It is a pandemic that is spread through, and allowed unchecked by, cultures of violence. Those infected or affected by the disease are often treated violently and discriminated against.

**Forced Migration**

Refugees and asylum seekers are not immigrants; they did not voluntarily leave their countries to pursue a better life, or greater opportunity. They are fleeing war, genocide, and/or are politically hounded and hunted. The 1951 Geneva Convention defines a refugee as one “who, by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside their country of nationality and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country.” 80% of the world’s refugees are women and children.

Of the many countries that swore to honour the Convention and accept refugees into their borders, some have added or expanded the grounds for being considered a refugee (such as fear of torture, or cruel and unusual treatment, in the case of Canada, which has also recognized homosexuality as a “particular social group”). But no countries uphold this international law unequivocally: most places asylum seekers go, they are faced with protectionist and “security” policies that often see them illegally returned to danger.

Environmental migration is gaining increasing currency as grounds to consider migration “forced.” Whether a nation state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens from environmental disaster such as starvation through drought, tsunami, or earthquake (consider Burma in 2008), or is the cause of that disaster itself (as with the Three Gorges Dam in China), these situations should be recognized as displacing people.

In any event, the violence and danger that force people to move are beyond their control. What could be so grave as to make you leave everything you know—your community, your language, your possessions, your *home*? No one chooses this, nor such risky routes and methods of travel as are usually necessary. And if transit is survived, upon arrival in a potential host country, most refugees are met with suspicion and interrogation, are derided as freeloaders and queue-jumpers—and again, often turned away.

When permission to remain is granted, it is often conditional or temporary, leaving newcomers in a continued climate of extreme insecurity. Some are detained for appalling periods at immigration holding centres due to missing or inappropriate documentation. Others wait on applications that they hope will stay their deportation. Still others who have been recognized as refugees at their hearing, and are, in principle, protected persons, are nevertheless waiting on national identification documents, work permits, or travel documents. The most heartrending insecurities belong to those doing battle with family reunification mechanisms, trying to sponsor loved ones to join them, separated from children for whom they have been asked to submit DNA evidence.

For a long stretch, many newcomers live in limbo. Their adjustment is a very stressful time, fraught with tensions over resources: making sure children settle in school, coping with endless bureaucracy and paperwork (usually not in one’s first language), finding palatable food—all the while dealing with different stages and degrees of culture shock.

This is exactly the time when educators encounter newcomers, especially in, but not limited to, language instruction classes. It is here, in the aftermath of violence and among all this stress and pressure that people are learning. Understanding more about the contexts of forced migration may help guide us as we engage in learning with newcomers.