



Battles for Occupied Academic Space

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ABSTRACT

For women, sharing space, being acknowledged in that space, is a battle of trust and spirit. Academic spaces have previously been colonised, either by the leader in charge, or a previous 'owner' of that space. This paper describes three common intersectional narratives of Williams' (1991) 'spirit murder'; and the 'protectors and restorers' (Revilla, 2021) of womyn's spaces in the academy. This includes the intersectional spaces of the Institution, the language [metaphors] we occupy, and how we re-dress the physical spaces of our academic work places. Women are battling, breaking the barriers, to occupy their work spaces on a daily basis: trying to speak, teach, research in ways they have organically invented and conceived in their service. They are the caretakers of diverse and different languages, and innovative methods to research and teachings; yet these divergent pathways are often blocked by colonised, 'expected' practices within the institution. Even the physical grey and white walls are concrete signs of ownership. The Academy is a place we *are* in; where we have a *right* to be in (Sefa Dei, 2021). Trusting and accepting these unique differences is at the heart of moving forward to a more inclusive, rich research and teaching space. Just because a pathway or method is distinct, does not mean it is deficient. For educational leaders, acknowledging shared ownership in the academic space involves sharing and projecting one's self into the space (Kreger, 1999); trusting that, while an approach is unknown, can be successful. To redress space in the academy, educators must be at ease with the discomfort of sharing space in what has yet to be experienced and institutionalised.

Keywords: women, academia, colonized space, institutional racism, intersectionality, women's studies, critical race theory, CRT, institutional frameworks, mentoring, leadership

Preamble

In 2022, Director Uisdean Murray released the short film, *Mara: The Seal Wife* and it was shown in the 2022 Fèis Fiadh-Bheatha film festival. I have heard the tale of 'a selkie shedding her skin to become human' told many times over the years, and certainly the story has been around for centuries, yet it was enlightening watching it during the year where women's rights over their own bodies were removed in the United States of America (USA). It allowed me to view the tale as a metaphor, through a lens of intersectionality. 'The seal wife', the selkie, has no name. She merely occupies the post of wife. She is not [truly] herself. To occupy the post of wife, in a space occupied by another being, she must transform. She must take off *her* skin; she must give up ownership of her body, her self. In essence, she needs to become something she is not if she hopes to remain in that space. She does this, yet she longs to return to her original self. The man, the overseer of the space, does not want things to change. To avoid change, he steals and hides her coat, what 'could be'. This deception and strict control over the space always has detrimental consequences for both parties. Because the man enforces conformity, he is in a constant state of battle. Because the woman, the selkie, is unable to be her true self, she slips into a deep depression, 'spirit murder' (Williams, 1991). It struck me re-watching this Hebridean tale that this could be a metaphor for my own, and many others' experiences within higher education – to exist in a post, you need to shed your true skin and become something you are not [wholly]. Physical space, in the context of this paper, is the behaviour of those who occupy the space and claim ownership of the space, including those who occupy it through language and action (Singh & Sherchan, 2019). This paper seeks to describe a few of these examples, and how trust, acceptance of the unknown, can help redress some of the spaces we occupy as educators and leaders.

The Space of the Institution

Re-dressing the physical spaces we occupy as academics not only breaks down barriers for women, but helps to include all intersectional groups affected by prior colonisation and declared ownership of the buildings in which we teach and research. In Canada, New Zealand, and many countries where institutions occupy Indigenous spaces, there is an effort to acknowledge where traditional space is. Publicly acknowledging that the land is borrowed, or occupied for a time, is a method of including historical knowledge of colonised spaces into the language of the institution. For example, in Windsor, Ontario, a Land Acknowledgment is read before each committee, class, departmental or senate meeting at the University. The Land Acknowledgement is written by a council of elders from that area, and provided on the home page of the university's website (URL), as follows:

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The University of Windsor sits on the traditional territory of the Three Fires Confederacy of First Nations, which includes the Ojibwa, the Odawa and the Potawatomie.

This acknowledges the space as originally belonging to others. That is, a recognition of the people who were first documented on the physical space, or land, through oral and/or written historical records. It is also an appreciation that the space we occupy as educators was colonised; a recognition that we are the colonisers of this space.

Bishara and Ashai take this acknowledgement of colonisation one step further adapting a traditional Somali reckoning (2015, pp.25-30):

'The land was stolen from Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans were brought en masse to build these cities. The occupied Indigenous territories of many nations and cities are built with stolen African labour and resources. One cannot be remembered without the other. We invite you into a tradition with us of acknowledging and remembering whose territory you are on wherever you are in the Americas (from the North to the Caribbean and to the South), and also remembering and acknowledging that it was built with stolen African & Black labour and resources as well.'

Ownership is at the very centre of the spaces we occupy. Our institutions are built upon the premise of 'who owns this' rather than a collective diversity and belonging. And it is in this former mindset that we have difficulty as educational leaders; we have difficulty owning, acknowledging a contested beginning with words and phrases such as, 'this was stolen, taken, belonged to another'. It is about control, or feeling out of control in a world we thought we knew.

Despite the Land Acknowledgement being accepted policy and practice, educators and leaders I meet today often relay their discomfort with providing the Land Acknowledgement at the beginning of meetings. For instance, either they feel stolen, colonised land has 'nothing to do with them', or, they 'do not feel comfortable saying it because they themselves are not Indigenous'. This reluctance and fear [of a practice unfamiliar] simply reinforces colonised spaces.

When I first started teaching decades ago, a teacher was let go if s/he could not 'control the class'. The learning mindset in the last century was that students sat individually in rows. They listened. They did not speak. They did not get up or leave the classroom without permission. Today, teachers use co-constructed learning, designing lessons *with* the students (Beckford et al., 2017). Teachers and students learn from each other, *sharing* their worlds' changing knowledge and methods of representing and disseminating *shared* voices and knowledge (Dweck, 2006). Yet, in some ways, our higher academic spaces and frameworks are still based upon a historic colonialist hierarchy of leadership. Instead of adopting an open, learning mindset as university leaders, we do tend to re-assert the hierarchy of power when it re-shifts to inclusion.

This paper will attempt to describe several types of [colonised] space, and ways that space is used to bar, exclude, or make someone feel external to the space. In doing so, it will also signal small ways that we can change as educators to make each other feel included within the spaces of our learning and employment.

Language in and of Space

One such space is language. The introduction here describes some of the language used to acknowledge the space that we are in. Acknowledging that the spaces in which we live and work demonstrates an understanding of the racism or difficulties marginalised groups have had with institutions founded in colonialism. It is language that seeks to appreciate the need people may feel to belong to a space, and the pain one feels at being dismissed.

Take, for example, the experience of academic and educational researcher Dr. Rosalind Hampton (Hampton, 2022). Dr. Hampton was the successful applicant for a senior lecturer's post in anti-racism education at the University of Toronto. Before taking up the place, she was told by the vice-president, in address to new permanent researchers, '*We know you are an excellent scholar because you have been hired by us. You are the U of T brand*' (Hampton, 2022).

The language of ownership in Hampton's account of her introduction to the new working space is loaded. I can only imagine, as a woman, what critical questions she was asking at that point as the new chair *in anti-racist education*. 'Am I only excellent because I am owned by you? Because you paid for me, hired me? Have you paid for my brand, my skin? The [white] institution has branded my scholarship?' This was an address to those new senior lecturers, professors and chairs hired, yet the language chosen was clearly centred in ownership. It was probably a phrase chosen to instill pride, that they belong to families of like-minded researchers, yet the affect on Hampton was something very different.

I appreciate Hampton sharing this account publicly through social media, because I am not sure many others would. Some language is so common in our institutions that we never give pause to question it. How could that be perceived? Could another interpret that differently? What are the long-term implications of the words chosen on ownership over the space? Who owns the space, the work here? What voices are missing?

Another example of unfortunate choice of language came to me in 2021. A new department leader, a respected researcher and womyn with many new ideas to aid faculty, was at one point told by her [white] male dean, '*Slow down, I am going to have to rein you in.*' At first, she was not surprised, often university processes take time. However, what did surprise her was why the statement, the words chosen, had bothered her so much; caused her pain. 'Rein me in?' she thought, '*Am I a horse, a dog? You have me on a rein? You have me in bondage?*'

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The dean probably did not mean to express the violence that the new leader heard. Perhaps he did just mean that committees and university processes take time. Yet, he did not say that. What he and the leader inferred was, 'I control this space and you.' It is language that makes it clear that the space is owned and controlled by another, and this will not be shared. The leader was, probably rightly so, attempting to share, or colonise, a portion of the space that was previously 'owned' by her dean. The dean, in turn, perhaps on some level, recognized this, and re-asserted his control over the space. This previously colonised space was not for sale or lease.

Another space that is often used to exert dominance through language is at conferences and in question and answer (Q&A) sessions following presentations. Dr. Becky Farbstein reported that a senior antagonistic male professor said to her following a series of hostile comments of her presentation, *'Well, that's all well and good sweetie, but it's just kid's stuff you're doing there'*; and he walked out (25/1/2022). As academics, we do expect critical feedback. We also expect disagreements about research outcomes (Kreger, 1999). What we do not expect are personal attacks about our age or dress or gender or race. We do not expect to be called, *'kids'*, implying that the work is only something a child would produce. Again, this is a re-assertion of colonised space through language choice. Recognising this aids scholars and learners who experience it, so they might make more inclusive choices as teachers.

There are many examples of how language is used to reinforce colonised spaces; these are just a few, and I encourage colleagues to share theirs. It helps attest to barriers, and in turn breaks them down. Examples of re-establishing colonised space through languages provide an illustration of how we need to choose our words carefully, with inclusion and belonging. Language is one way that scholars can re-dress space to allow colleagues to feel included, to feel as if they belong and are welcome. Imagine if you heard similar statements every day at work in your efforts to 'gain ground' and learning? American author Patricia Williams described this as 'spirit murder' (1991). For a time, we all have the inner resilience to withstand slurs or verbal attacks on our spaces, our efforts to be better, yet each day, each week, they add up until the weight on one's self-confidence, one's spirit, breaks. Then, there is no longer any hope that we might belong. And belonging to a place is a critical need in all human beings.

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework posits language as one of the cornerstones of success. That is, if an institution or a person has a rich community culture, the individual has the linguistic capital to support their development. They also have familial and social capital, and the physical space goes a long way in establishing a culture of community as well. By recognizing that academic spaces belong to all; and by being respectful of the words we choose in public spaces, womyn and other intersectional groups may begin to feel they belong.

Re-dressing Physical Space

There are restorers of our space that seek to include the voices all (Revilla, 2021). One of the ways institutions welcome individuals and allow them to feel that they belong is through the physical space (of the rooms and buildings) they see. Do they see themselves in the space they are entering? That is, do they see people like them? Do they see a family, a community of culture as they are, somewhere in the space (Yosso, 2005; Revilla, 2021)? This section will share three examples of attempts at re-dressing the physical space, attempts to make others feel welcome into a space, and the resulting re-claiming of the space by the occupied.

As a Hebridean and Canadian, making others feel welcome, feel comfortable, in a space that I am [temporarily] occupying is a default in my nature. I will do almost anything to avoid conflict; I want people to feel at ease, to feel they belong to the space I am in. That is why retelling the following two stories, one of them mine, was so difficult at the time of writing.

The first was given to me by a colleague in an English college of further education (FE). She was putting up posters, in her hallways, for Pride week. In the community where she lived, there was going to be one of the first Pride parades, and the rainbow-coloured posters provided LGBTQ+ students, and the community, with the information. The posters also served as a visible indicator to LGBTQ+ students in the building, the institution, that 'you belong'; 'you are welcome here' (Revilla, 2021). There had never been a club or any visible materials for LGBTQ+ students in the college. Here was one of the first signs that they were a part of the college.

The principal of the college at the time was opposed. As a result, the next day, in front of students walking by, the posters were ripped down, and the white walls were restored. Although there was no physical violence involved, tearing the visible signs of belonging from the building were interpreted by the colleague as a minor act of assault. Faculty needed permission to post, perhaps to prevent hate speech or commercialisation, but the colleague had not simply seen the act of assertion as process, but as exclusion. She felt she was being censured for assisting LGBTQ+ students; she felt her job, her belonging to the institution was under threat. Eventually, she did leave the organization. She had the choice of other employment options; not all can leave their employment if they are under the stress of exclusion.

A similar narrative occurred in a university in Canada. The department head was asked to decorate a new graduate student lounge, the space the size of a living room, for post graduate research students. A mandate from the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Sinclair, 2015) at the time was to Indigenize spaces so that Indigenous communities and students felt welcome in formerly colonised institutions. With input from an Indigenous elder, the white walls were covered with textured paper patterned like a forest, and wooden chairs were set in circles around a table to look like a fire in the areas of the medicine wheel. With volunteer students, this was all reportedly done for a fraction of the cost [Figure 1 below].

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Similar to the first narrative, upon seeing the completed 'forest wall', the dean had the wallpaper torn down and the walls restored to their former white wash [Figure 1]. Again, like the first narrative, this was done without the consultation of the department head or the elder. The reason given was, 'the walls were meant to be white, and this was not done by the union so it is a union issue.'

Again, the established occupier of the space re-asserted his ownership by physically re-dressing the space and occupation of it under his authority. It may have been the case that due processes should have been followed to include the union or seek their permission. This is reasonable. Union workers are a part of the space too, and their livings require the work. The department head, and the elder, were hurt. Not only had their efforts to include indigenous students and the government mandate been violently erased, but the trust that they had that they would ever belong was gone as well.



Figure 1.

Aboagye and Dlamini (2021) state that, 'to become aware of invisibility, one must know how to identify invisibility and its effects. The University as a space is not a neutral container; it plays an active role in determining one's ability to learn and thrive in the World.'

Ergo, the physical space needs to display belonging, community. Students, staff, lecturers entering this language and physical space need to feel as if they occupy it as co-creators and owners of the space. To redress space in the academy, educators must be at ease with the discomfort of sharing space in what has yet to be experienced and institutionalised.

Dlamini (2021) also describes a conference she was at in 2019. Speaking with a colleague, the presenter, at the front of the lecture hall afterwards, the colleague stopped her, and said, 'just a minute, I will be right back.' The colleague had seen a Black scholar at the back who was alone; no one was speaking to her. She invited her down to the front, and introduced them. The colleague said to Dlamini afterwards, 'I just wanted her to know she belonged in this space; that it is hers to occupy as well as mine.'

This raises a few questions: Is a space gendered, or can there be recognition of temporary ownership over a space? Recognising colonised spaces in our institutions, and asking key questions of ourselves and our work lives, I believe, is key to sharing occupied spaces, and allowing the diaspora of learners, students and scholars alike, the opportunity to contribute and belong. Part of this belonging involves becoming comfortable with discomfort. We must ask ourselves, 'Who is perceived as [metaphorically] occupying this space?' 'Who is absent from the space?' 'How can language re-dress occupation of the space?' 'How does this language, this physical setting hurt?' These are queries for future research and work for educational leaders.

Open, thoughtful communication with our varied academic communities helps answer these questions. It also helps us, as educators, to become more self-aware of our actions and language to ensure that womyn, and all intersectional groups, feel they do belong. They have a voice and ownership of the constructed space as well.

Conclusion

This Special Issue of JPAAP is about breaking gender bias, but perceived ownership of the language and spaces of an academic institution affects many marginalised groups, including women. A key international component of academic work and research is the contribution of novel ideas, formulae, innovative ways to perceive our worlds. If, as academics, we feel we must 'shed our skin'

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to fit in to the established norm (Murray, 2021), or if the diverse, colourful ownership of our ideas are stripped from us (Hampton, 2022), then our missives as researchers and academics of new knowledge have failed. Acknowledging or re-dressing metaphorically shared ownership in our institutions (Revilla, 2022), like land reform, will take time. Yet, un-learning our preconceived notions of the college or university space will support new ideas, new scholars, new movement in education. This, I hope, will create a Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) where we may all belong. It begins with, 'Fáilte, you are home.'

Biography

Kara Smith is a lecturer, writer and educational researcher at the University of Highlands and Islands Outer Hebrides and the University of Windsor, Canada.

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