

Waves

Polina Kukar

University of Toronto

Samantha Deane’s essay, “A Corporeal Civics Education,” invites readers to consider the waves made at the intersection of education, agency, and embodiment. Thinking about the question, “What to do with the body, our body, in a society marred by colonial, racist, and patriarchal histories?”¹ several trajectories of possible answers come to mind. The one I would like to explore is that colonial, racist, and patriarchal histories do not merely mar societies; they shape every aspect of them, and of us. Since my first reading of Plato, I’ve struggled with the idea that there can be a binary divide between the material and abstract. Taking for granted that there is a version of life unencumbered by the mess of materiality allows for the option that there is, somewhere, a parallel reality where societies may be unmarred (or unshaped) by violent histories. How? Where?

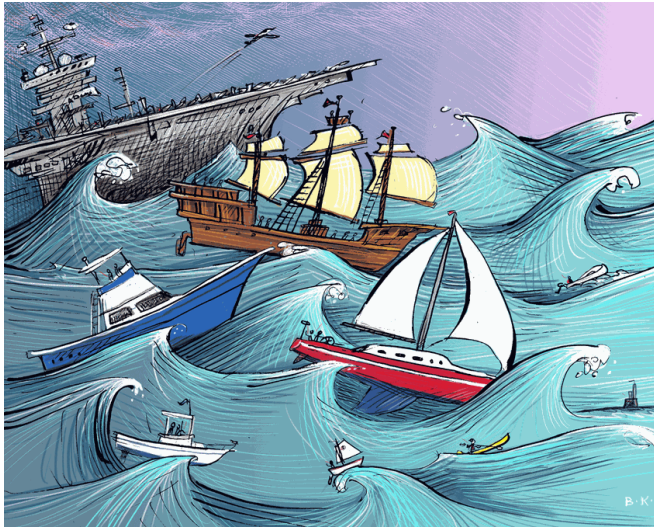
That parallel reality is certainly not to be found in schools. This year I will have spent 15 uninterrupted years in high school classrooms at a large Canadian public-school board. For most of those years, I have taught English. I will indulge my love of extended metaphor and ask readers to imagine a large body of water. Now imagine large heavy objects travelling on trajectories, leaving wakes in that water. Imagine the interplay of the Earth, sun and moon’s gravitational pull causing tidal waves. And imagine all those parts of our embodied identities boat-like on the surface, both contained within and unrelentingly shaped by these factors. In this metaphor, I am deeply indebted to Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, which outlines the “orthography of the wake” and reiterates that no one can ever be outside of historical forces that shape societies, and, in turn, lives. Sharpe reminds us that “waves that occur in the wake of the ship move at the same speed as the ship.”² Colonial, racist, and patriarchal structures — those large, heavy things with mass — have been moving through and shaping societies for centuries. How can anyone imagine that the aftereffects of these structures do not resonate with the same violence

and duration?

All my work as a teacher has, in some ways, been concerned with aspects of civics education. I have yet to encounter students or colleagues needing to be informed that they are marginalized by violent histories and social structures. They know this in their bodies. There are also students and educators who do not believe that they are affected by those same forces. This, of course, is not true; that which marginalizes and subjugates some affects us all. To follow Sharpe, we are all caught up in the wake of violent histories. We are all implicated. The work of educators must make explicit how the structures that contain our bodies, our lives, have come to be and why this matters. In other words, all civics education is the project of tracing the effects of historical violence as something that shapes both being and knowing in dynamic and often unexpected ways.

How is this to be done? Samantha Deane suggests that civics educators need to “attend directly to the ways in which our bodies and social structures render each of us a political agent,” and we are generally in agreement on this point. Where we diverge is on the idea of curriculum and pedagogical approach. I wonder how exactly teachers might go about “dedicate[ing] more time to puzzling over our obligations to accommodate and understand the complexity of embodied social life.” Who will trace these obligations? Who is supposed to be accommodating whom? And what is the success criteria for understanding the complexity of embodied social life?

Let’s return for a moment to water: a 2020 editorial cartoon by Barbara Kelly,³ first published as accompaniment to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, illustrates that we were not “all in the same boat” in relation to experiencing the covid-19 pandemic. The image is powerful not only in its depiction of the wildly tossing waves (of pandemic, specifically or, more generally, events present and past), but also the clear illustration of how one’s boat (embodiment) shapes the experience.



The illustration suggests with urgency that not all vessels will be successful in navigating the depicted waves without harm. While some of the vessels would not even feel a wake, and, indeed, due to their own mass, would leave their own, others would be in danger of being upended. This image helps visualize how embodiment can be dynamic in ways that are unexpected and unpredictable at the intersection of historical wakes, immediate events, and our material situation. As I was revising this response essay, a friend reminded me that waves generated by storms can, and often do, obscure wake patterns. Temporarily unperceivable among the bigger surface disruption, the wake is nevertheless still there, under the waves. The suddenness of waves can also create the illusion of an isolated storm instead of a vast body of water. As just one example, the current pandemic has seen the emergence of an ahistorical narrative of everyone being in “this” together. But the only thing we’re ever actually “in together” is the complexity of embodied social life.

“WHAT IS IT LIKE FOR YOU TO INHABIT THAT BODY? WHAT IS IT LIKE FOR ME TO INHABIT THIS ONE?”

Imagine the warship in the picture above asks the sailboat, “What is it like for you to inhabit that body?” In this storm? In general? Can there be one answer? And if the warship plows past, leaving everyone in a whole new layer

of wake, how would it answer the question, “What is it like for me to inhabit this [body]?” After all, its ability to not sink in a storm does not define a kayak in all its complexity and potential any more than it would the warship. And the limitations of a sailboat without wind also do not do justice to what it means to be a sailboat. All this to say, essentializing narratives are always limited and harmful even if well-intentioned. The only possible answer to the question, “What is it like for you to inhabit that body?” is “It can be like anything.” And what do we do with that? As a curricular piece, this level of ambiguity can be unfulfilling, not to mention difficult to operationalize. As a pedagogical approach, though, it must be foundational and will work with any curriculum.

To accept that embodiment is dynamic is to accept that the same forces that shape us do not necessarily label us, especially when some bodies can be read as more vulnerable to those forces. To briefly return to curriculum, I have seen suggestions to introduce Indigenous knowledges to students by starting with residential schools. I have worked in schools where the entry point to Black history was through stories of enslavement. Such curricular projects run the risk of operating as reductionism in the guise of inclusion. Of course, educators must address residential schools and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. But this must be done consistently, not only at specific times of year, and with the explicit awareness that such violence implicates us all in dynamic, if achingly disproportional ways.

Especially in cases where historical violence shapes personal identity and embodiment (and perhaps most specifically how bodies are read by others), there can never be one answer to the question of “what it’s like” to be in one’s body. As Sharpe emphasizes repeatedly in relation to anti-Black racism, “we are constituted through and by continued vulnerability to this overwhelming force, we are not only known to ourselves and to each other by that force.”⁴ In my experience, there is significant danger in reducing embodied identity to violent socio-historical forces as an educational project. Asking students to consider what it means for us all to live in a society shaped by white supremacy, for example, is very different from asking “what it’s like” to inhabit a body that is racialized or read as white. While the former has the potential to open up the discussion

of materiality and embodiment in all its complexity, the latter has the potential to reduce identity to that moment in time and space. If there's anything that students should be learning from the project of civics education, it is that while all our embodied identities are shaped by history, violence, time, and space, they cannot be reduced to them. The best thing we can do as educators — and again, this is pedagogy and not curriculum — is to be as exact and honest as we can in naming the forces that shape us all. It's not racism that "mars" society — racism is what happens in the wake of white supremacy, and white supremacy affects and shapes us all.

Inevitably, much as I will never have a direct understanding of what it is like to be someone else, I will also never fully know what others see when they look at me. When it comes to educational projects, what educators can and must do is address openly that bodies are shaped by histories in ways that create significant tension between agency and historical violence. It is critical to do the work of naming those structures, of articulating the myriad ways they affect embodiment as we move through the world. Indeed, before we encourage students to go out and "affect their school and community," students need to understand that we all come pre-affected in potentially unknowable yet interconnected ways. After all, while we can name what shapes us, we can never know or anticipate all the dynamic combinations of embodied social life, and that is as liberating as it is daunting. Students need to know that just as their understanding of others shifts depending on specific events, their material embodiment, and the constellation of (violent) histories, so, too, will their understanding of themselves. And this is a process that will, and should, repeat indefinitely. To put it another way, the stability of the horizon is no doubt an illusion, but it still helps us navigate in the moment.

1 Samantha Deane, "A Corporeal Civics Education," *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 2 (2022).

2 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 40.

3 Image by Barbara Kelley in Peggy Noonan, “What Comes After the Coronavirus Storm?,” *The Wall Street Journal* (2020).

4 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 134.