

# Narrative Metaphors as a Qualitative Analytical Tool: Networked Webs of Oppression and Pedagogical Care for People of Colour in Academia

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ijq)**Anson Cheuk-Ho Au, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>**

## Abstract

Reflecting on an (auto)ethnographic study from the standpoint of a person of colour, this article uses the narrative myth of Gaia to analyze and structure the recollection of over 5 years of teaching people of colour at a large Canadian university and distill from them the character of pedagogical care. This article demonstrates how narrative metaphors offered the qualitative researcher an analytical tool to examine the networked webs of oppression conjoining personal lived experiences and experiences of students as a rich source of data for people of colour, excavating the nuanced socioemotional modalities that complicate marginalized instructors' ability to provide pedagogical care for fellow marginalized students and the emotional labour required to resolve these tensions.

## Keywords

Autoethnography, ethnography, narrative research, methods in qualitative inquiry, interpretive description, social justice, arts based methods

## From Chaos to Order

From chaos, came Gaia – the beginning of order from the blankest nothingness that imagination can fathom. Tireless, noble, wanting for a world of beauty when beauty had yet a name, Gaia birthed Ouranos, the Heavenly shawl that would veil her with stars and sky and dust and colour. And laying with Ouranos after, she birthed Ourea, the mountains that pierced the clouds; Pontus, the sea that traced her outline and split the clouds from the soil; and Cronus, the cycle of time that ordered all that would breathe. Broad-chested Gaia – her breast the foundation of the immortal imperium and the mortal common-world; her womb the life that breathes into all life. A personage of gentle power.

Rows of wide-eyed, hungry undergraduates focused on me, I smiled. “I am committed to helping you do well,” I ended our first class for the nameless hundreds enrolled in my freshman sociology course. “And just as we will be reading about issues of social justice, we are committed to creating a socially just environment. Not only will we be talking about issues of

social justice, but we'll be committed to a tolerant learning environment – for ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities.”

More and more minorities from historically marginalized communities have been enrolling (people-of-colour, Indigenous people, LGBTQ minorities) in the academy in North America in record numbers over the past decade (Kaomea, 2016), especially in Ontario, Canada, where I taught. The R1 status of my university and local public funding cuts by a newly elected provincial government meant the gates to a flood of new international and domestic students had been opened. Enrolment size skyrocketed.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

## Corresponding Author:

Anson Cheuk-Ho Au, Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China.  
Email: [anson-ch.au@polyu.edu.hk](mailto:anson-ch.au@polyu.edu.hk)



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With the amount of diversity coming in, taking the initiative to signpost my availability and support was a targeted response to mental health problems growing in severity and frequency on the whole among North American student populations (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Signposting my support would also reach international students hailing from cultures where seeking support was stigmatized, evinced by disproportionately low numbers of mental health service-seeking behaviours among East Asians and other collectivistic cultures (Au, 2017a; Li et al., 2014).

Mental health statistics took on new life at our campus, in particular. A string of student suicides over the past 5 years, all from among racial and ethnic minorities, had charged the air with morose and silent resignation. I peered past the window behind rows of students to one of our student centres, its roof, the dark-iron railing on its crown. It was the perch from which several international students from China had leapt without wings—out of their unacknowledged stress and into a statistic. Statistics were felt here.

Greater attention to social justice and empathy was sorely needed. Greater sensitivity to ensuring increasing numbers of minorities had their particular pedagogical needs met in teaching (Chen, 2015). I am an East Asian, working-class man — one of the very, very few at the time in a department of over two hundred faculty and graduate students. The sheer diversity and size of class sizes and the rarity of minorities among teachers placed special emphasis on the role I had to play and which no one else in the department in particular and the university at large could.

Pedagogy, after all, is a key site for the reproduction of — and challenge against — inequality, most of all for minorities, who face disproportionate problems of invisibility and silencing (Hsiung, 2016). My very person thus offered empowerment to minorities. My visibility let students see a marginalized person in a place of authority and helped minorities feel related and relatable throughout the course of their education in sociology, social justice, and qualitative methodology (Takacs, 2002; Wilson, 2011). I felt the stars pivot around me and mountains and seas swarm at my feet. Our classroom was its own world blossoming with potential for beauty, and I was the foundation on which so much of it depended.

“I encourage you to reach out should you need anything. My door will always be open to you.”

*It's because I care, I thought.*

That was the word I meant. But the alien nature of the word pressed upon me and a wisp of doubt flickered into life.

*Care?*

The world stilled.

The practice of pedagogical care is hardly broached in the qualitative epistemology and pedagogy literature. For many scholars working in this area, care means attention. Attention takes the forms of designing elaborations in teaching materials, creating inclusive accommodations for students with disabilities (Leo & Goodwin, 2013), devising new interactive

media and strategies to improve uptake of course material and critical inquiry (Braidotti, 2019; Chen, 2015; Hsiung, 2016), curating material to inspire creativity, emancipation, and paradigm shifts (Denzin, 2010; Kovach, 2013), to impart upon them skills and toolkits for taking the torch and producing knowledge of their own (Mehra, 2002; Ulmer et al., 2020; Waite, 2013).

These many faces of attention are well-poised to deepen and broaden the intellectual capacities of our students. Yet, these invocations of care are sterile of how students are affected by their personal lives — not just as reflexive toolkits to be added to the research process (Denzin, 2010; Hsiung, 2008), but as lived emotional and social dilemmas that concern their well-being. As teachers, we are tasked to address this for the fact that these dilemmas impede their learning and participation, as well as the recognition that our relationship with students is a bond of mentorship through which more than academic ideas flow.

Thus, caring for student well-being is an unofficial, but crucial part of the invisible work of being a teacher. I knew this in my bones, in my DNA, in the very fabric of my commitment to the craft. It was instinct. So, *how* do we go about practicing it?

My (auto)ethnographic experiences from over 5 years in this department show that my instincts were not enough. They show a tale of searching, with a conclusion that there is more searching — and caring — to be done on our part. Using the narrative myth of Gaia as a tool for reflexivity, introspection, and cultural analysis, I make sense of key encounters with people of colour students to construct the character of pedagogical care. I document my internal progression through experiential socioemotional modalities with which to recognize and empathize with racialized struggles experienced by students and myself, and a delicate calculus for budgeting emotional energy to do so.

I should have thought about this before I forced my vision of pedagogical care onto my students.

I did not.

The world began to move again.

*Care?*

I tightened my clamp on the wooden lectern, ore fashioned from Gaia's flesh.

*Care.*

## Narrative Metaphors as a Qualitative Analytical Tool

Narrative metaphors have a brief history in qualitative research methodology, but a much longer one in practical fields like social work and family therapy. The use of narrative metaphors has been a provocative tool for practitioners to elicit nuance in the struggles of their clients. Contributions of the tool have included the ability to identify the temporal sequence of major life events that anticipate mental health problems, as well as the emotive themes that cohere these

events to inform subjective trauma (Denham, 2008; Haen, 2020; Seligman & Kirmayer, 2008). Recent scholarship has gone further to use narratives to help practitioners themselves process traumatic experiences of client deaths and construct them as part of their sense of professional identity (Hung et al., 2022).

Narrative metaphors have the added benefits of relinquishing the primary voice for trauma arising from situations of extreme subjugation, making narratives easier to depict for individuals and easier to read for audiences (Bruner, 1990). Personal narratives, after all, are not neutral and memories are not objective. The act of recollection of experience, evoked through narratives, is thus shaped through the lens of its formative emotions (Ricoeur, 1991). Active recollection is also greatly influential on the trajectory of an individual's future experiences (Schultz & Hernes, 2013), often allowing an individual to articulate and construct an ideal future identity that maintains some continuity with a past identity while revising its pains (Ybema, 2010).

In a similar fashion, I theorize and demonstrate that narrative metaphors constitute a powerful analytical tool for understanding ethnographic and autoethnographic experiences. All autoethnographic experience is to some degree ethnographic in nature through the actor's embeddedness in a fixed social setting (Au, 2017b). This contextual dimension is important for identifying the social structures that operate in a given study setting. My chosen research setting was the classroom, through which higher education educators like myself are exposed to a battery of lived experiences. In a globalized world, encounters with students and their lived experiences are often the object of transnational social structures (Au, 2021). The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the encroachment of such deleterious experiences as cases of racism, xenophobia, violence, and disease-related ailments and deaths proliferate across the globe (Elias et al., 2021).

The sources of mental stress, emotional complexity, and grief are thus myriad for people of colour educators and students alike in an age of COVID-19 pandemic (Feng et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). The rise of stress and mental health disorders for people of colour conjures forth a renewed challenge and demand for pedagogical care in higher education settings. To this end, I theorize that narrative metaphors offer a powerful qualitative analytical tool for educators to cope with their first-hand experiences of trauma and second-hand experiences of stress from their students, as well as process both to inform renewed efforts at enacting a sustainable model of pedagogical care that attends to the needs of both.

The porous boundaries between first- and second-hand experiences in question are imperative to addressing classical questions about oppression that qualitative research methods (as both a research and pedagogical tool) are attuned to address (Au, 2022; Denzin, 2010). People of colour are subject to multiplying experiences of oppression that transcend

boundaries across social life, spilling across work to family to daily life (Morrison, 1983; Ragins et al., 2012). That people of colour educators and students alike are empirically found to have the same levels of excess stress (Eagan & Garvey, 2015; Halsey et al., 2020; Perry, 2010), irrespective of their role differences, speaks to networked webs of relations, meanings, and social structures at work that oppress people of colour in general. In his classic *Conflict and the web of group-affiliations*, sociologist Georg Simmel theorized that people are often treated as "a member of a group rather than as an individual" (1955, p.139) because of the sedimented meanings that people assign to group identities and share within their own. So powerful are these networked meanings that the constitution of social networks themselves is cleaved across groups, with homophilous groups typically forming within demographic categories like race and gender (Au, 2019; Laumann & Youm, 1999; McFarland et al., 2014; McPherson et al., 2001).

In light of these racialized patterns of networked exclusion, narrative metaphors are an anti-racist tool because they uncover these unwritten webs of oppression and oppressive meanings. They invite educators to reflect on the sources of oppression that conjoin their students' lived experiences with their own. As Zimmerman and Dickerson (1994) wrote of narrative metaphors, they are "personal stories that persons have created" that allow them "to make meaning out of their experience as they interact with one another in a reciprocal meaning-making process" (p.233). By reflexively recounting the relational connections between educator and student as well as personal experience and "larger cultural stories" (ibid; Maclean et al., 2017), narrative metaphors tap into the webs of meaning not only as a therapeutic device, but as a vindication as much as an excavation of the authority of personal experience from the standpoint of a person of colour (Budgeon, 2021).

## From Order to Struggle

From Cronus, came Gaia's grandchildren: the roster of powerful Olympians whose powers and legacies would govern the Classical world, including Zeus, mighty, thunderbolt-wielding lord who thirsted for the world that lay atop Gaia. And in his thirst, Zeus joined his sibling Olympians in a protracted war with his Titan father and uncles. The world, as we know it, was born from the war. Every river was a scar on Gaia's body, every valley a bruise, every continent an appendage of torn flesh.

This course was my holy ground. The world of my design. I showed my care with the design of the course. Everything, I thought, had been accounted for.

Karoline Achebe entered my office, eyes screaming wildness. She was an honours student enrolled in her third year at the university. Her dream was to become a teacher, like her mother from Nigeria. Sociology was a little more than a check-in-the-box, but a little less than a passion. It helped her

understand the importance of race in Canada, and better prepared her for how to think through experiences of discrimination.

Grades for a midterm essay on political sociology had just been released and the class had not performed well as a whole, with a normal distribution around 68% – typical at our university, but anomalously low for universities in the province. So, with smug calmness, I decided that I knew what her concerns were about – and how I should respond.

*I encourage you to reach out should you need anything.* The words blared in my mind like a mantra. Devout and still-noble, I smiled. Care was still a raw instinct. It growled in anticipation, ready to smother the student in consolation over a bad grade like I would with a friend going through a bad breakup.

“Can you tell me what I did wrong?” Karoline asked in soft soprano – a tone betraying her impatience.

“Of course,” I explained her mistakes. Her essay was deprived of a coherent argument that linked together her otherwise disparate discussions. While her ideas were innovative, they lacked grounding in course readings. Grammatical, syntactical, and spelling errors were dotted throughout the essay.

Karoline quickly agreed.

I was almost surprised.

I expected her to be off on her way.

“I’m sorry if I seemed pushy. This grade is just very difficult to see. School is just very hard, right now.” Her voice shook and she quickly began to tear up, as if her trembling shook the tears out. “My father and my mother ...” her voice quieted to a whisper. “*Fight a lot.*”

Though her voice quieted into a whisper, the deliberate intonation of each word sliced the air. Vivid imagery sprang to life in my mind.

The care in me panicked, as the continents of my earth began to pull apart. Imagine Gaia’s horror at how the earth she had created had become a sanctuary to pain.

I asked, as one might to a friend who had just spilled a coffee, “Is everything OK?”

“I don’t want to go home. Things changed ... after we came to this country. My father could not find work, and it caused a lot of problems. Sometimes, things can get serious between them.”

This was shaky ground that I did not know how to broach. Before I could respond, she said as a matter-of-factly, “So, I really want to do well in school.”

I told her I understood.

I do not think I really did.

*My door will always be open to you,* I had told students. Unknowingly, the invitation to share snippets of personal life had become a conduit for the messier parts of lived experiences that I recognized in qualitative research, but which I had overlooked in the everyday practice of care as a teacher. Quickly, my encounters became a labour of caring for the student’s trauma triggered by coursework, even if not entirely related to it. I did not foresee this.

Teachers know that coursework, particularly at the intersection of social justice and qualitative research methodology, is a deeply personal affair. It calls on students to reflect on the social bases of their racial, class, and gender identities (Wilson, 2011). It calls on them to integrate personal experiences into their work; to use them as sources of data for analysis (Fine & Wohl, 2018; Marx, 2018; Ulmer et al., 2020).

Karoline, one of many cases, shows that coursework remains a highly personal affair even when it does *not* concern personal details. Many in-course assignments I assigned and graded did not explicitly draw on personal experience, such as Karoline’s essay – a position paper on sociological readings about nationhood.

But it was the prospect of evaluation by myself, an academic gatekeeper and a teacher, that held a special power over Karoline. I thought that depersonalizing assignments could make them an emotive reprieve from the abrasion of challenges from students’ personal lives. But the content of coursework mattered little, here. It was the fact that evaluation is *sui generis* an externalization of self-worth that made it a well-timed attack that unstitched the wounds from their personal lives that have not yet healed.

I followed up with Karoline 2 weeks later by e-mail. She apologized profusely for losing her composure and thanked me for my patience.

*Patience?* I frowned at her response. *What about care?*

These moments helped disabuse my vision of pedagogical care of its illusions, though I did not understand them fully at the time. The emotional complexity of people of colour’s lives defied the simple generalizations I was making. They defied treatment by care as consolation. They did not demand attention to their academic performance, but nuance to their identities; to the fact that these nuanced problems are rooted in personal spaces, which bar them from flourishing academically and adds disproportionate weight to the cognization of academic work as a source of self-worth.

Karoline’s example reappeared, in different forms and different names.

Hasan Gayed messaged me late at night on a nameless Tuesday. At 1:10a.m., my phone lit up with an avalanche of notifications from the messaging system in our course system. The assignment, a quiz on the bare basics of the week’s material, had been due an hour ago.

“I apologize for this late request,” Hasan said. “But I’d like to request an extension for the assignment for personal reasons.”

“What *personal* reasons?” I tapped in return.

“I feel stressed.” He replied.

*So does every student,* I thought. Everything he said read as a generic excuse, and those were frustrating. They were a dance around facts, I believed. I showed my care with the design of the course. When a student defied the rules, it meant that they did not show the same care.

“There are ... other things going on back at home.”

Home?

“Could I ask what’s going on at home?”

“There are protests going on in Egypt. My family ... some of them attended the protests and have now been thrown in prison. I am just very anxious about them, and find it hard to focus on work.”

Egypt. Protests. Prison. Persecution. Wars were being waged in real-time by Olympian-like figures and forces, all of them elsewhere, but through the bodies of my students, they reached my shores. The world that I created out of an innocuous, single word of *care* twisted into bruised valleys and continents torn from limbs. Or rather, it had always been that way, and it was naïve of me to think otherwise; naïve like Gaia was to believe that (s)mothering care would sterilize her earth of strife, not knowing that the law of continental drift was itself an uncontrollable process of dismemberment.

Battered but not defeated, I gripped the splinters of my *care* and reconstructed them in *kintsugi* fashion, lining the broken edges with gold to meld them together into transfigured art, a newfound mental readiness. I abandoned the fixed script I had written out of expectations born within a North American lifestyle – to move beyond trite words of coaxing – to prepare for the sprawling complexities that ordered people of colour’s lives, whose unique subjectivities place them at the mercy of social transformations both domestically (through their marginalized position in North American society) and abroad (through pre-diasporic connections to subalterns in the Global South). I no longer whimpered helplessly. I sought to act.

### *From Struggle to Pain*

After the world had acquired its form, Gaia and Ouranos birthed many children, the Cyclopes, Hecatonchires, and Titans, each inheriting the strength of Earth and Heaven. Imagine Gaia’s delight as she watched children of her own blood breathe the air of a world from her own flesh. But Ouranos, envious of their power and fearful for his dominion, sought to erase them all. And so, by Heaven’s own hand, every child was bored into a hidden place in Gaia’s body, where they would fester into wounds.

That was how the newborn world first came to witness suffering; that was how it was known that the creation of beauty was an invitation for pain.

By the fourth offering of the course, I was perpetually vigilant; I was looked at by dozens and dozens of glass-splinter eyes, peering out from personal lives crumbling under the solitude and pressure of immigrating to Canada and suffering back home – “home,” a mystified abstraction with a thousand faces, each different than the other when students told me about their families. They pilgrimaged from distant lands to attune themselves to sermons in my classroom, the classroom, a space where knowledge has been born and shared for a thousand years since Aristotle’s Lyceum. They, acolytes on pews, and I, teacher, mother, shepherd, Earth, stood at the lectern, fretting about their salvation.

The Muses of Olympus sang of Gaia as mother. But they did not sing of *motherhood*; of how Gaia groaned, writhed, anguished to mend her wounds. I had laid down my preconceptions about students. I vowed to never let another student suffer as Hasan or Karoline did at my initial indifference.

I did.

Or I tried. The preconceptions I had faded into the fog of memory. In its place, shame – with the permanence of nectar on my hands. Wipe one with the other, and it all but spills from nailed palm to nailed palm.

*The brain remembers shame because it rewards it, along with pride and guilt*, snippets of a neuroscientist’s ramblings on the Morning Herald surface. That the boundaries between the trinity of despairs are porous, that failures motivate a subconscious satisfaction, an almost masochistic satisfaction that there is room to be better – how better to describe the altruism of motherhood?

I had donned a different mantle, but each fresh encounter bored a hole in my own flesh.

My soil was sloshed into chasms split open by a letter from the Unit of Sexual Violence Support on behalf of a student. Crimson dye inked on white, the letter noted an incidence of sexual violence experienced by one of my students that had prevented their ability to perform in class. Their request – a mere extension.

*Was an extension really enough? Was I?*

I fired back my assent and invited the student to my office. I couldn’t tell if pride or guilt was the lever pulling this. In the meeting, they bled tears at their pain, and I with them. I called the mental health clinic on campus to connect them with some source of support. I walked them myself to the clinic at their counsellor’s request, for fear of the worst.

My rivers were dried by Mary, who was struck with depression and wanted to cast herself from the rooftop of a lecture hall where historically, one student has done so almost every year. But depression was an afterthought, in her case, as I imagine it may have been for the others I never met – an echo of the cancer that her mother had that had metastasized into her personal life. Like a weed, the stress of losing her mother spread and drained every domain of her life – and me.

Depressive disorders, suicide ideation, trips to the emergency room, deaths, illnesses I knew, illnesses I knew not, ailment after ailment knocked on my door at all sun and sunless hours.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, such disruptions became legion. Asian students were bullied on campus. Off-campus, the harassment only grew worse. Reports flooded in of Asian students being confronted by strangers about their race and ethnicity, called all manners of Asian racial slurs on the sidewalk, told to go back to China in grocery stores, coughed and spit on in hotel elevators, pushed when getting off the bus; the wrath of Ouranos is legion.

With the rising tide of disruption, my calls to students, counsellors, community organizers, and support groups rose in kind.

I became known by students as the compassionate teacher, the go-to resource for social support and academic counseling. My responsibilities grew as more students wanted to seek me out than other instructors. I never resented my position. On the contrary, I felt horrible that they had to experience this, young as they were, and I saw it as my job to soften the blow.

What neural pathways exist that allow their pain to become my own?

Ask any gunshot victim, and you will learn it is never the impact of the bullet that hurts the most, but the wounds it leaves after. The hostility that my students suffered, victims of racial targeting, became spectres that lingered in mind. And ghosts, as Toni Morrison (1987, p.2) pointed out evocatively, have haunted the collective memories of people of colour for hundreds of years, bound to legacies of suffering as subalterns on the very land they reside.

"124 was spiteful," *Beloved* began, "full of a baby's venom." The narrative lesson was that the ghost was named after the house number; it was also that every set of traumatic lived experiences is a spectre and that the patchwork of calls I received from students and made on their behalf was a graveyard full of spectres. They forced me to realize the ugliness of my own campus and city through the bodies of my racialized students, the most vulnerable; to realize that I was vulnerable to the same struggles they faced, as a person of colour myself.

Through it, I learned that pain does not add; it multiplies.

## From Pain to Care

Gaia tempered out of pain conviction – enough to solicit help from the sole child she rescued from Ouranos' wrath, Cronus. Youngest and most terrible of the Titans, Cronus armed himself with an adamantine sickle forged by Gaia's hand and castrated Ouranos, with it, ending his father's rule. But to inherit dominion is to inherit its shadow as much as its shape. Cronus feared for his own rule and turned on his own children, as his father once did him. The one child who survived Cronus, Zeus, came to age under Gaia's protection. With the gift of her wisdom, Zeus slew Cronus and usurped his role. Hers was a legacy of tyranny and overthrow, of pain and conviction, locked in a perpetual cycle of rise and fall. "Some people say history moves in a spiral, not the line we have come to expect," Ocean Vuong wrote in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019, p.19), "We travel through time in a circular trajectory, our distance increasing from an epicenter only to return again, one circle removed." Life moved in circles for Gaia. When the world flowered into rot, Gaia offered instrument for its remedy to chosen bearer.

Like Gaia, I fatigued. Like Gaia, I was awash in the tides of strife. Like Gaia, I moved from one sets of mistakes to the next.

At the end, like Gaia, I chose to seek help.

During a call with a counsellor at the mental health clinic, I let slip that I was feeling burnt out and asked if they had a spot

for myself. I attended sessions regularly, even on weeks that were manageable. Rather than just making calls to counsellors for students, I invited counsellors to the classroom itself to speak to students about coping strategies for stress, the significance of social support, and services available at the clinic. This lessened the drain on my time and by resigning as the liaison between the two.

I connected with community groups for people of colour on campus and in the city. This included community health services, mental health help hotlines, and cultural centres and associations for ethnic minorities, which quickly took up antiracist campaigning and outreach efforts in the COVID-19 pandemic.

After several months, my burnout started lightening. My world regained colour from the anemic daze of stress. Like Gaia, the rot of worldly strife had afflicted my progeny, and through them, myself. Now, the rot had begun to fade, in no small part from the help of champions.

I moved from a receptacle for spectres of pain to building within me a temple to lay them to rest, for myself as much as my students.

To care for people of colour as a person of colour is an endangered art.

Offer too little and you leave your canvas an empty tundra of detachment from all the things that matter.

Invest too much and yours will be a kaleidoscope of colours collapsed into the space of an atom; a fevering intensity set alight within you with no space for the exhaust to travel.

Balancing the two demands a delicate calculus of emotional labour.

It means to have people of colour take on meaningful leadership roles and position an institutional network around them to absorb the blows when they land. It means to not merely have this network as a place to fall back onto when times are challenging, but to activate it from the very start; to have allies run with you, rather than merely appearing to receive the baton only after your stamina dries. My positionality was an indelible boon for the task of supporting these beautiful, rich identities, but it also forged new emotional conduits that drained emotional energy from me in a bandwidth no less than I was trying to discharge out.

It means to recognize the singularity of people of colour, including those from within in the Global North and from beyond in the Global South; to recognize that the rule of law and absence of war we thrive under everyday are privileges not extended to those beyond our borders; to recognize that the same law of this land has cracks into which people of colour fall, who, no matter how many times their feet have kissed its soil will forever remain strangers.

Narrative metaphors like Gaia are a highly evocative analytical tool for educators and researchers to draw out the emotional and interpretive depths of personal experiences. As this article has demonstrated, these experiences do not come from the lives of the writer alone, but from the lives of their students as well. The porousness of these boundaries

explains the real and multiplying mental health toll that members of academia are facing in an age of COVID-19. Narrative metaphors filter these experiences into a reflexive story-telling process that draws out the interpretive mechanisms that researchers and educators rely on to make sense of them, their manifestations in mental health consequences, such as burnout, and consequences for how educators approach students. Ultimately, then, narrative metaphors allow researchers and educators to cope with the emotional abrasion of traumatic experiences and process them into a sustainable model of pedagogical care.

To illustrate, the racially-motivated confrontations that my students faced and shared with me were deeply unsettling to me. Recasting this experience into the language of a narrative metaphor allowed me to bring order into originally disoriented thoughts and feelings, enough to identify the source of discomfort I initially felt: that their story was my own; that the networked meanings of group identities that precluded my people of colour students from white, mainstream Canadian society did not stop with them, but extended to myself as well. In sharing a marginalized identity with my students, I also shared an ancestry of victimhood and vulnerability to future oppression (Morrison, 1983).

The storied structure of a narrative metaphor gave sequence to this interpretive mechanism that enabled me to make this realization and adjust my approach to pedagogical care accordingly. Indeed, my initial ideas of pedagogical care did not work well perhaps because I had erroneously discounted the influence of a racialized world beyond the classroom, in which I, like my students, was marginalized.

Developing a sustainable model of pedagogical care is thus doubly important. It matters on a personal level for sharpening the precision with which a teacher reflects on their craft and for improving the lived experiences of their selves and their students. It also matters tremendously on a structural level by empowering the role of qualitative research methods in facilitating social justice enterprises like decolonization (Au, 2022). As a practical vehicle for voicing and lending ear to complex marginalized experiences, narrative metaphors tease out the unspoken webs of influence that systemically repress minorities and transform educators and students into more resilient and critical responders to oppression.

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## ORCID iD

Anson Cheuk-Ho Au  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8180-5104>

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