

Revisiting Bucket Truck: Locally Engaged Public Intellectuals

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Abstract: In this essay, the author argues that given current shifts in the axiological imperatives which inform research, local manifestations of the global political trend toward post-truth populism, and the saturation of the university in settler colonial, patriarchal, hegemonic ideology, there is a dire need for an alternative model of scholarly engagement—what the author calls locally engaged public intellectuals. Through the lyrics of Canadian rock band Bucket Truck, the author gestures toward the way local critiques can contextualize local issues and disrupt the post-truth narrativizing which often paints Indigenous and other marginalized groups as dissidents. Bucket Truck, the author argues, were an example of such locally engaged public intellectuals. The group thus deserves our consideration not just as a now defunct Canadian rock band, but as an example of local critique made accessible to affected communities.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Public Intellectuals, Local Music, Post-Truth, Research

Introducing Bucket Truck

My first encounter with the Atlantic Canadian hard rock band, Bucket Truck, was at a punk concert in an all-ages venue in Halifax during the 2004–2005 school year. The bands performing that night played a recorded version of the Bucket Truck song *I am the New York Times* (2005) between sets. At the time, I was in ninth grade and thinking about local politics, scholarship, and history was the farthest thing from my mind; I was taken with the song because it was loud, angry, and, as I later discovered, local.

Most readers will not be familiar with Bucket Truck unless they followed the local heavy music scenes in St. John's, Newfoundland from 1996 to 2003 or in Halifax, Nova Scotia between 2003 and 2007. There is a chance, however, that some may have encountered their music videos on *Much Music* in the band's later years. Written details about Bucket Truck are hard to come by, but they began sometime in 1996 and experienced only minor success for many years (MapleMusic, n.d.). In 2000, they managed to get on *Warped Tour* and gain national exposure. Despite being courted by several major record companies, the band was steadfast in the do it yourself (DIY) mentality and opted to self-produce their albums (MapleMusic, n.d.). Even after their breakthrough album, *Favour the Bull* (2006), the band had trouble making enough money to finance their endeavor. Eventually, the band retired in 2007, but its members went on to have various roles in the Canadian entertainment industry (Bradbury, 2011, 2016).

I forgot about Bucket Truck for almost a decade until a few years ago when, on the impulse of nostalgia, I went through my old files and found a digital copy of *Favour the Bull* (2006). Apart from bringing back all sorts of emotions and memories from my teenage years, revisiting Bucket Truck through the eyes of an emerging artistic, Indigenous² scholar gave me a renewed appreciation for the complexity and the rigour of the critique offered in their lyrics. Not only was this music loud, angry, and local, but it was also informed by the local history and the socio-economic realities of Atlantic Canadians living under or around the poverty line.

Through listening to Bucket Truck over the past few years, I have come to appreciate the crucial role of locally engaged public intellectuals in helping us think through the various ideologies at work in local issues. This appreciation has been bolstered by a shift in my own thinking from being grounded in the national conversations around Indigenous research (e.g., Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) to being rooted in the conversations around local Wabanaki knowledges, particularly the Mi'kmaw humanities (Battiste, 2016), and the beauty, brilliance, and complexity of that local knowledge (Simpson, 2017). Where Indigenous knowledges are concerned, national discourses are useful in helping us to frame our thinking, but the answers to the problems that face us today—to the questions of who we are, where we come from,

¹ The University of New Brunswick exists in the traditional unceded territory of the Wolastoqiyik and Mi'kmaq Peoples. This territory is covered by the "Treaties of Peace and Friendship" which Wolastoqiyik and Mi'kmaq Peoples first signed with the British crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations. The omission of "Canada" from the authorial affiliations was, thus, intentional.

² I am Mi'kmaw, CIS male, white, and relatively "able" as it is defined by Western society. I have discussed the privileged intersection of my identity position more fully elsewhere (Downey, 2017, 2018).

and where we are going (Talaga, 2018)—are more readily found in local histories and local languages. I hold that the same is true for a wide host of issues, Indigenous or otherwise, that present themselves at the local level.

Public Intellectuals

The idea of the locally engaged public intellectual is not new. Edward Said (1994) called for the public intellectual as someone not engaged in scholarly expertise for its own sake, but someone who speaks truth to power. Said also articulated the difference between amateurs and professionals—that professionals have a sort of monopoly on expertise which alienates knowledge of issues from the people to whom those issues actually matter. Professionals commodify knowledge by using jargon and exclusionary publishing practices, and they make themselves indispensable within an unjust system rather than critiquing that system, as intellectuals should. Said's professional is at home in the corporatized university of the present era (Brownlee, 2015) and in paradigms of research which create a barrier of supposed objectivity between researcher and participant. In recent years, however, these paradigms of research have been changing. In particular, recent work has emphasized both a demand for the acknowledgement of place in social sciences research (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015) and a growing expectation that research be made accessible to those whom it concerns (e.g., Cole, 2004). Both these trends stem from the same axiological shift away from supposed attempts at objectivity and toward the idea of praxis, or theory into action.

The saturation of the university in settler colonial, corporate hegemonic ideology (Brownlee, 2015), the aforementioned shifts in the axiological imperatives of research, as well as the present global political trend toward post-truth populism discussed below, point toward a dire need for a new model of academic engagement—a model responsive to the needs and ethical standards of the time. David Orr (1994) famously noted,

The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. *It needs people who live well in their places.* It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture has defined it [emphasis added] (p. 12)

I would further this to say that we do not need scholars who are successful in the traditional sense. I hope to make clear that what we need now are community organizers, artists, and what I would call locally engaged public intellectuals.

It is my position that Bucket Truck were brilliant examples of such locally engaged public intellectuals. Though they, to my knowledge, did not hold advanced degrees in sociology, history, or education, they were able to offer a precise, accurate, and thought-provoking critique based on their lived experiences. Through their music, their critique was made accessible to some of the communities it represented. In this way, Bucket Truck were amateurish as intellectuals, not in the derogatory sense of the word, but rather in the way Said (1994) described as: “fueled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization” (p. 82). Here, I hope to gesture toward an alternative model of intellectual engagement—one more in tune with the axiological imperatives of our time. My overall intent in this paper is to showcase the ways in which locally engaged public intellectuals, especially those engaged in artistic forms of representation, can encourage the local communities of which they are a part to think and re-think the issues closest to them.

Toward that goal, in the remainder of this paper I first discuss the global and local socio-political contexts in which I write, thus further highlighting the need for locally engaged public intellectuals. Second, I discuss the significance of historical contextualization in understanding local issues and highlight several examples of such contextualization. Third, I bring the conversation into the context of education, drawing on examples of teachers in my own territory who are doing work as public intellectuals within their own classrooms and research. Finally, I conclude this paper by reiterating the need for alternative models of scholarly engagement and the ways in which Bucket Truck serves as an example of such an alternative.

I am the New York Times: The Global and Local Context

Our society is standing at the precipice of dystopia.³ With the rise of political populism and economic and environmental deregulation in countries like the United States (Graham, 2018; Haeder & Yackee, 2018) and Brazil (Cowie & Child, 2018), we are seeing a gradual sharpening of the teeth of neoliberalism and exploitive globalized capitalism. This trend is not new. Since the era of the New Deal in the United States, which favored Keynesian economic models and, more tangibly, government intervention in the economy, there has been, in North America and globally, a strong contingent of the population that has tried to remove such regulation in order to maximize their personal, and perhaps collective, profit (Kumar, 2019; McLaren, 2007). This move toward deregulation has been particularly problematic where the environment is concerned because without government intervention, big business seems not to take too much notice of the environmental destruction caused by its practices (Hensley, 2011; Orr, 1994).

Environmental neglect is precisely what has brought us to the precipice of dystopia. Though we have known for more than three decades about climate change and global warming, public and political denial, a lack of government action, and the unmatched cultural, social, and economic capital of the oil industry have perpetuated the model of profit at the expense of environmental well-being (Orr, 1994). In the Canadian context, the Trudeau government has practiced something akin to a politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014) where the environment is concerned. On one hand, they have made discursive shifts toward acknowledging climate change, such as the changes made to the title of the government ministry associated with the environment (Dyer, 2015). On the other hand, they have continued to favour economic growth through pipeline projects and a reliance on fossil fuels (McKibben, 2018). Political duplicity is nothing new, but it has become more pronounced in what some have called the era of post-truth (Rose, 2018).

Post-truth refers to the idea that in the current era, fact and empirical evidence matter less than believability, often based in emotional and intuitive reaction. In short, truth matters less than narrative. The comparison often used to try and explain this notion of post-truth is that of professional wrestling: the people watching understand that the conflict is not real, but there is a collective willingness to suspend disbelief in favour of the emotionally satisfying narrative. Many people attribute this rise of this post-truth reality to the current president of the United States, Donald Trump:

To really understand post-truth, you have to understand that [Donald] Trump's very disregard of truth was a large part of his appeal for thousands of Americans who felt that scholarly and scientific knowledge were tools that the wealthy elite use to manipulate, disenfranchise, and silence them. Trump's words may have played fast and loose with the truth, but they were exactly what a disaffected populace wanted to hear (Rose, 2018, p. 67)

As alluded to earlier, however, Indigenous scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) has elucidated the Canadian government's willingness to stretch the truth, particularly where Indigenous issues are concerned, for generations. Likewise, Bucket Truck's *I am the New York Times* (2005), written from the first-person perspective of a newspaper, highlights the ways in which the news media showcases particular versions of the truth toward tacitly communicating political ideology. Lines like "Forecast your little white lies" hint at the duplicity involved in news media and post-truth nature of news rhetoric more generally, while "I say everybody get behind the leader of your country" gesture toward the banality of nationalism in political discourse.⁴ Further, naming oneself as "Just a daily transcript of massive social failure," the newspaper-narrator perhaps gestures toward the failure of society to see through the ideological agenda or actively resist its implications. These lyrics are followed closely by the descriptive statement "Everybody stands in line to stay current" highlighting the ubiquity and saturation of these news narrative and our complacency in absorbing them. Finally, the line "Three quarters for your mind" evokes a sense of our active participation in the ideological project of the media through its commodification.

³ I owe the notion of dystopia here to a presentation given by two faculty members at UNB: Drs. Roger Saul & Casey Burkholder. They are currently working on a manuscript around the topic. Dr. Ashwani Kumar's book *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry*, which begins "our world is in crisis" (Kumar, 2013, p. 1) also provides a reference here.

⁴ All lyrics are transcriptions as heard by the author. Any mistakes are his alone. After numerous internet searches, official lyrics were impossible to locate.

Post-truth, then, is not a new phenomenon. People in subordinate and counter cultural position have been aware of it for some time. It is only recently, however, that privileged white settler society has taken notice of the ways in which truth matters less than narrative to those in power and given it the name post-truth.

In Canadian politics, the current shift toward post-truth populism is perhaps best showcased by the Ford Government in Ontario which has moved toward a draconian sex-education curriculum and the official acknowledgement of only two genders, to mention only one manifestation of their particular brand of egregious conservatism (Canadian Broadcast Corporation, 2018). In my own locality, New Brunswick, this post-truth populism is represented by the People's Alliance party whose slogan, "bring common sense back to government," seems a clear statement of the party's intention to disengage from careful thought and research findings in favour of an intuitive commonsensical understanding of political issues.

Here, I have discussed the current dystopic socio-enviro-political reality of our times through Bucket Truck's *I am the New York Times*, which highlighted the saturation of the news media in ideology. The ideological biases of news media seem, to me, a precursor to the current political moment of blatant disregard for fact in favour of intuitive understanding. In this way, *I am the New York Times* is more relevant today than when it was released in 2005, and the capacity of locally engaged public intellectuals to help us see through the political post-truth narrativizing threatening our social ideals, and more importantly the well-being of our planet, is more important than ever.

Nourishment by Neglect: Local Histories, Local Issues

Just as global issues are sometimes read as ahistorical or with vague, inaccurate readings of history, so too is the narrativizing of local issues a product of short sightedness in historical memory. The contextualization and recontextualization of issues and debates within their histories is perhaps one of the most effective disruptions of the anti-intellectual post-truth narrativizing prominent in populist politics. Foucault and Nietzsche are both prime examples of the ways in which conventional understandings of sexuality (Foucault, 1990), madness (Foucault, 1988), or morality (Nietzsche, 1994) are oftentimes understood ahistorically, but are in fact constructions of particular ideologies manifest throughout our collective human history. This is equally true in the local context as in the global, as is the need for locally engaged public intellectuals to do the work of historically contextualizing local issues. Below, I provide several examples of such historical contextualization and why it is needed.

In my own context, the Wabanaki confederacy, settler literary scholar Rachel Bryant (2017) has contextualized the psychological and physical borders between the Canadian and American nation states and the region's Indigenous people. When the Peace and Friendship Treaties of 1725, 1751, and 1761 were upheld in the Donald Mashall Jr. decision of 1999 and fishing rights for Mi'kmaw people were honoured, the Passamaquoddy, an Indigenous group whose traditional territory straddles the border between New Brunswick and Maine, were denied access to the same rights despite having signed the same Peace and Friendship Treaties. The justification given for the denial of their treaty rights was that they were "American." Through a close reading of history, Bryant disrupts this notion and shows that the Passamaquoddy were pushed out of Canada through an all too familiar pattern of dispossession. Further, she highlights that the Passamaquoddy have maintained a hunting presence in their Canadian territories, thus debunking the ahistorical understandings upon which their dispossession and their exclusion from the terms of the Marshall decision were justified. Through this, Bryant's text is an example of the potential of locally situated intellectual work to disrupt colonial ideology on a local level.

Another example of the importance of historical contextualization was the debate in Halifax leading to the removal of a statue of Edward Cornwallis. From a Western historical perspective, Cornwallis was Halifax's founding governor, but from an Indigenous perspective he was a vicious butcher of Mi'kmaw people and liar who breeched treaty and enacted violent scalping laws against the Mi'kmaq (Paul, 2006). This issue is not as much an example of ahistorical narrative being pushed in order to achieve a particular politic aim as it is an example of competing historical narratives. Regardless, the importance of local scholarship in informing this debate was and is paramount. Without scholars like John Reid and Elder Daniel Paul to debate publicly and contextualize the issue historically, the issue becomes susceptible to post-truth narrativizing, and First Nations people can be, and often are, painted with the label of being dissidents or terrorists (Zilio, 2015).

Bucket Truck was, I think, keenly aware of the importance of understanding historical injustice and the way it can contribute to current political, social, economic, and environmental realities. In their song, *Nourishment by Neglect* (2006), the group artistically represents the story of Africville. Africville was an African Nova Scotian community dating back to the late 1800s and founded by escaped loyalist slaves from the United States. Africville was eventually demolished, its residents forcibly relocated in order to industrialize that portion of the city and make way for a bridge between the city of Halifax and the neighboring city of Dartmouth. Bucket Truck makes explicit reference to this historical context in the song's music video, which begins with a lengthy citation about the history of Africville, and ends by stating the fact that the descendants have never been financially compensated for the trauma they endured. Evidence of the context is also clear in lines like "Developed roads but torn down homes, and don't forget the harbor expansion all for the love of economic growth: a nourishment by neglect." The metaphor of a nourishment by neglect is a powerful statement about the interrelationship of economic development at the expense of marginalized peoples. Indeed, Tuck and McKenzie's (2015) three structured antagonisms of settler colonialism point to the fact that white ascension (nourishment) is only possible through Indigenous erasure (neglect of presence) and black containment (neglect of humanity). Based on this particular historical moment, as well as the much longer and traumatic history of black containment and marginalization in North America, some of the issues facing African Nova Scotian communities today, such as those issues in schooling articulated by Dr. Mary Jane Harkins and her colleagues (Harkins, Hamilton-Hinch, & Seselja, 2017), as well as those issues related to political, environmental, and broader social well-being (Madden, 2014) can begin to be contextualized. Ahistorical understandings of these and related issues often result in a reductive analysis and an all too common victim blaming (Razack, 1998) or movement to innocence (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Vowel, 2016) on the part of populist politicians, both global and local.

Separate, Silence: Implications for Education

Education is in no way immune to the trends of our era; as noted by curriculum theorist James B. Macdonald (Macdonald & Macdonald, 1995), the school is a microcosm of society. Schools reflect the values and policies of the times in which they exist. In this regard, the international trends in education have mirrored the trends in broader global society over the last century. A recent text by curriculum theorist Ashwani Kumar (2019) examined the intellectual trajectory of curriculum studies in a variety of countries. Kumar also localized those intellectual trends through discussions of local scholarly reactions to educational policy. In Kumar's introduction, he names three persistent forces which have historically held sway in curriculum policy and dominated educational discourse: the neoliberal, the colonial, and the ideological. Though he also lists intellectual responses to these trends, for the purposes of this essay, it is enough to note that the global trend in education has been precisely toward standardization (Kumar, 2014; McLaren, 2007), accountability based-funding (Kumar, 2019; McLaren, 2007), the degradation of teacher autonomy (Pinar, 2012), cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2013), and the transmission of dominant cultural values, which usually support nationalism and capitalism.

In my own local context, Pamela Rogers's (2018) doctoral dissertation clearly showed that over the last 20 years in Nova Scotia, regardless of the political party that has been in power, the direction of the education system and curriculum has been toward neoliberalism, standardization, and accountability measures for teachers and students. I can estimate that the same holds true in New Brunswick based on my cursory engagement with the New Brunswick curriculum. The guiding curricular document in New Brunswick—the 10-year plan—explicitly states as one of its nine objectives that it would like for its students to have "an entrepreneurial mindset" (GNB, 2016). As Glen Coulthard (2014) has pointed out in the context of national politics and as others have discussed in the context of curriculum (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995), the discursive practices of the government do not often match what actually happens in the lived realities of people affected by policy. That GNB officially states its objective to favour entrepreneurial mindsets is a blatant, direct statement of political ideology, and despite the mounting evidence that entrepreneurs face uncertain and precarious employment (Benjamin, Crymble, & Haines, 2017), the government persists in its notion that this unfettered, unmediated capitalism is healthy for the province. As noted above, however, the degree to which individual teachers actually enact and teach toward these values remains to be seen. As noted in the previous issue of the Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education, washback and alignment studies clearly show that what is stated in the curriculum is not necessarily what happens in the classroom, even when it is being tested (Sultana, 2018).

Bucket Truck had a number of lines throughout their catalogue focused on offering critique of education from a personal perspective. In *Separate, Silence* (2006), for example, the band notes: "I can't remember education; I feel

bad for so many wasted years of my youth.” This line showcases the perceived irrelevance of the education system, as well as an apathetic engagement in schooling and the perception of school as a waste of time. Likewise, the lament in the second verse, “Can I try to be a kid again?” and the response that, “That won’t help the situation. Have I lost my mind?” seems to speak, at least tangentially, to the perception of a youth wasted in preparation for adulthood. In another song, *These Four Corners* (2006), the band notes, “I’m afraid of medieval education, can you agree this is not with the times?” expressing a dissatisfaction with the disconnect between the world of present day and the archaic industrial model of education. Though Bucket Truck is never specific about what practices and policies aggravate their discontent with the education system, the symptoms to which they reacted are well documented as the cause of centralized education systems and standardized curricula (e.g., Hensley, 2011; Kumar, 2014; Pinar, 2012; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005), both of which are markers of colonial neoliberal ideology’s percolation and penetration into the education system (Kumar, 2019; McLaren, 2007; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Though perhaps less contextually specific than some of their other critiques such as *Nourishment by Neglect*, *The Cost* (which looks at working class life in Atlantic Canada), and *I am the New York Times*, Bucket Truck’s critique of education speaks to a lived reality of being a student within a neoliberal education system dominated by Tylerian rationality (Kumar, 2014; Pinar, 2012). In this way, they effectively speak back to the dominant power structures by sharing their own experience—their personal narratives disrupt the dominant narrative (see also Downey & Sagy, 2018).

This critique of the school system in my locality is not aimed at further degrading the professionalism of teachers, nor at painting an overly bleak picture of education in Wabanaki territory. Rather, my intent here is to highlight that education moves in the direction of our society, and the trend in our society both globally and locally is toward neoliberalism and post-truth populism. In education, however, the local rules. As noted above, no matter what the government discourse, the teacher has some degree of autonomy over what happens in their classroom, and thus has the potential to function as a public intellectual within that space. Many have called for teachers to become public intellectuals (e.g., Kinchloe, 1991; Pinar, 2001; Woodford, 2005), and many have taken up the call. At my local level, for example, Casey Burkholder’s work with pre-service elementary teachers engages students in graphic disruptions of normative historical narratives (Burkholder, 2018). Matthew Rogers’ work with critical filmmaking pedagogies (2017) “generate[s] counter-hegemonic discourse that challenge systems of oppression” (p. 229) through student filmmaking. The current trend toward honouring reconciliation and Indigenous resurgence in education is also an example of the capacity of local intellectuals and teachers (i.e., Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers) to speak back to the systems which have oppressed Indigenous people for centuries. Finally, the RAVEN project (<https://raven-research.org>), housed at UNB and focused on facilitating rural action around environmental issues, is yet another example of a new model of research in education and beyond which takes on the ethical imperatives of this generation and mobilizes them toward local engagement.

Conclusion

The point of this essay is not to say that scholarship is too globally directed, nor to suggest that quality local scholarship does not exist. Indeed, throughout this essay I have attempted to draw on those scholars whose work is situated within my own context. Rather, my purpose here has been to showcase the potential and importance of locally engaged public intellectuals in shaping and challenging local conversations. The locally engaged public intellectual, I think, is the necessary and emerging scholarly model of the 21st century. It is suggested through the work of arts-based researchers who demand accessibility from research, as well as through the emerging trend in the social sciences toward centering place in inquiry. This is, I think, a move away from the generalizable finding and toward complex and nuanced understandings of local phenomenon as the holy grail of the academic endeavor.

For my adolescent self, Bucket Truck was a group of aggressive, dissident, DIY rockers. In that, they were my role models. Now, for myself as an emerging scholar, I see the band as a group of locally engaged public intellectuals: still dissident, still aggressive, still imbibing the DIY ethic, and still to a certain degree worthy of modeling—though today I am less inclined toward aggression and prefer a gentle approach to resistance as modeled by Wabanaki Elders. What has changed is my appreciation of their critique and its importance in the current climate of populist post-truth politics and neoliberal globalization in education and beyond. As I have argued throughout this piece, Bucket Truck’s music is still thoughtful, poignant, and informative in our local context, and perhaps in the context of our global village which sits on the precipice of dystopia. Given the complacency of the academic publishing world with the unbridled neoliberal economic order of the day and the numerous critiques of the university as a cog in the economic machine of white settler heteronormativity (Brownlee, 2015), I, like many

before me, do not think we need more scholars in the traditional sense (Orr, 1994). I think our society, at the precipice of dystopia, would benefit considerably from more locally engaged public intellectuals; people who are willing to sit next to those with whom they do not agree and have conversations, both in public and in private. Because our supervisors have been so successful in the traditional academic model, I am not sure they will be able to tell us how to do it. My suggestions, then, for a model of locally engaged public intellectual is to turn to those in uncommon places, those like Bucket Truck, who engage as passionate amateurs in local issues.⁵

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⁵ I have used Bucket Truck here because of their importance to me personally, but there are many artists worth engaging with seriously. I would recommend War Against Women as a starting point given the blatantly sexist project of the recording industry and the implicit and explicit ways in which they speak back to it.

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