Two Grandmothers: On Generational Trauma, Politicized Identities During a Pandemic, and Why I Can’t Shake the Instinct to Coddle My Alt-Right Students

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Cover Page Footnote
Chi Miigwech to my Grandmothers, and to my Dad, who told me all these stories. Miigwech to Sarah Davidoff, who helped me fix my own ones.

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Two Grandmothers: On Generational Trauma, Politicized Identities During a Pandemic, and Why I Can’t Shake the Instinct to Coddle My Alt-Right Students

Madeline Jane Miigwan Johnson

When we get together in our Zoom meetings, we’re all smiles. We’re showing off our house plants, we’re saying “I’m sorry about this, guys,” when our cats cross in front of our camera, we’re telling our colleagues to make sure they are taking care of themselves and listing resources for coping with this rapid change. Those meetings give me the impression that the rest of the faculty are having an absolutely grand time. There are problems, sure, but we can deal with them! It’s all we can do to manage.

I feel like I’m being gaslit. Otherwise, maybe I’m actually the only person who has noticed the rising death count, or the increasingly dangerous political instability in this country. Maybe I’m the only person at this Zoom meeting who sometimes has to lay in bed and stare at the ceiling light for hours. Maybe I’m the only one who’s scared.

Rationally, I know that the smiles fade as soon as the call ends. People go back to writing assignments and answering emails. In-between, they browse the internet, and watch the news, and they see the same reality I see. They’re scared, too. But this is the world we’re living in— we have to deal with it somehow.

We are managing. It’s all we can do.

Right?

Just hang in there. You’ll be okay. Probably.

My Great Grandma was named Mary Toutlaff. She had an Ojibwe mother and a mostly absent white father. Like many Native American children, she was taken to a residential boarding school to be assimilated at a young age. Her family lived on Shagawa Lake in Minnesota, which isn’t too far away from the Government Indian School in Tower. Unlike some in her position, she got to go home on weekends and spend the summers with her family. I think about her a lot— when I am struggling through the basics of Ojibwe grammar and pronunciation, when I learn a piece of Ojibwe culture from reading it in a book, when I feel lost during a prayer or ceremony as I realize I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing the same way that others around me do— I think about her at the boarding school, and I think that that is where I lost these things.

The Indian Boarding Schools began when a missionary named Richard Henry Pratt claimed he had discovered a new way to deal with “the Indian problem” (Grover 225). Pratt is the originator of that famous quote: Kill the Indian, Save the Man.

Pratt certainly succeeded in killing plenty of Indians. Linda LeGarde Grover wrote an article for the Minnesota Historical Society, “From Assimilation to Termination: The Vermillion Lake Indian School.” Grover describes several humiliating punishments that misbehaving students were subjected to, stating that “tallies of the number of students who died there vary greatly, from very small in federal reports to much larger in the accounts of former students. Robert Gawboy recalled, ‘A lot of Indians died in that Indian school… I know. I was there.’” (Grover 230).

If Mary knew about any of these deaths, or if she was traumatized by her time at the school, she didn’t live her life drowning in the grief of it. She opened a resort. She became a well-known and well-loved fixture of the community— a beacon of hospitality, and the queen of her castle. She always had coffee for everyone stopping by on the road. Her house was always full of people visiting. Nobody ever left hungry; she made doughnuts fried in lard and coated in powdered sugar for all the kids that came through, and she would wake up at six in the morning every day just so she
could be ready to greet people stopping by. My Dad, who grew up with her, speaks of her with tremendous fondness:

“Any curveball that life threw my grandmother, she was always upbeat about it. She was always upbeat and happy and nice and funny, no matter where she was at, no matter what she was doing, or what she was going through. That’s what she was on the exterior, at least.”

She went to the Tower school until the eighth grade. She was identified as a good student, and was sent on to another boarding school, Pipestone, further away. This time, she wasn’t allowed to come home.

Mary’s father started writing letters to the school. He said that Mary’s mother was very ill, and that Mary needed to return home at once. The school did not see this as enough reason to allow Mary to leave—it was not an emergency, in their eyes. I wonder how many other parents had written letters like this, trying to get their daughters and sons back from the government? Mary’s father said that she was needed at home, since someone needed to take care of her two young brothers while her mother was sick. The school disagreed. Mary’s father hired a lawyer.

Eventually, my Dad thinks, they got her home. I asked him about this experience, wondering how it affects a person, being essentially held against their will while their family begs to have them back.

My Dad said that he didn’t learn about that story until he received documents, including those letters between Mary’s father and the school, which his mom had gotten ahold of. Mary probably didn’t think the story was worth telling, he said.

“A lot of people went through the experience (of the Boarding Schools) and came out very embittered by it. But I think that’s how you live to be 98 years old. She had a very positive character.”

I am curious about Mary’s experiences at the Boarding School. I am curious about how the many traumatic and earth-shattering events over the course of her life affected her, and I am curious about how she dealt with all the grief and change and uncertainty during the dawn of the 20th century. She lived through the Great Depression. She saw two world wars, and the war in Vietnam, and the Cold War from start to finish. However, when I ask about these things, any presence these traumas may have in her story are utterly dwarfed by the force of her sunny personality. He remembers the food she cooked for everyone, and a colorful cast of regulars at her resort who came for Mary more often than they came for the lakeside view.

I must not be very much like her.

I can’t get used to any of this. Armed insurgents stormed the U.S Capitol this week with Confederate flags and swastikas. I had to cancel a second date this October because the death rates from COVID-19 in Minnesota suddenly skyrocketed, and neither of us wanted to accidentally kill someone. Last semester, one of my students turned in her final essay from the hospital as she recovered from the Coronavirus. The Lysol company was among several that issued statements urging people not to use their products in the human body, because the President of the United States suggested applying disinfectant to the lungs to treat the virus (Calefati). Children are being held by the U.S. Government, away from their parents, in detention camps at the border (Shear). How can I do my job during all this? How is it that I can start up a new Zoom class and say “Hi everyone, welcome back!” and start talking about MLA and APA citation? One of my students recently wrote an essay about how he fled to the USA to escape a genocide that is happening in his home country:

“Every day I see on the news that more of my people are been slaughtered,” he wrote. Being slaughtered, I corrected.

I have to manage—that’s all I can do—but there are days when I feel like I’m stacking deck chairs on the Titanic.
I once had a student who held alt-right beliefs. He didn’t enjoy or appreciate my class. He all but accused me of being a socialist pushing an agenda. I was surprised that it wasn’t the novels I assigned, which dealt with topics surrounding race and privilege, that provoked him. The main thing he really, really didn’t like was the main premise of my Media Analysis unit, which was that messages in media should be criticized.

His argument was that media was purely entertainment, and that there is no reason for a creator to worry about whether their content is moral or socially acceptable. Critical analysis of a text’s social messages, he claimed, was stupid and useless to him because it was meant for people who need to be told whether it’s “okay” to like a text or not— not for people like him, who can decide for themselves what to think.

I am an English teacher. Analyzing texts is most of what I do, and most of what I teach, so I was pretty baffled by this response.

I know a lot of great teachers— inspirational figures in my mind, saints of the trade. Many of them would have gone the extra mile to try and help this student see the utility of textual analysis. I think that would have been the right thing to do. It would have been the best I could have done.

This student had previously written an essay expressing his glowing appreciation for a notorious racist in the gaming industry, Markus Persson. Just his career accomplishments, obviously— the student never mentioned his radical far-right beliefs, his hatred of gay people— he famously once wrote that anyone who was opposed to Heterosexual Pride day “deserves to be shot”— and his notoriety for these views (Ars Staff). Only that he thought it was sad that the industry now shuns him. He did a good job of just skating the line. Or at least, what I perceived as the line. It’s hard to tell where the line is these days.

I didn’t go any extra miles for this student. The truth is, talking to him made me anxious. It made me nauseous. I don’t really truck with people who are eager to throw their support behind a guy that says I ought to be shot.

A few years ago, I worked at a student writing center. One student came in with a book report he wanted help with. As I read through his piece, I realized with building horror that the book he’d chosen was Nazi sympathizer literature— its protagonist was a Nazi soldier who is portrayed as brave and courageous and just. The student never directly implied that he agreed with the Nazi’s beliefs or politics, but he never condemned them, and praised both his character and the writing of the book. He skated the line. I slowly noticed how much weapon imagery was on all of his clothes, his backpack. Assault rifles of all shapes and sizes adorned pins on his pack, his shirt, his jacket. I slowly noticed the mocking glint in his eyes as he saw that his writing was making me uncomfortable— he reveled in this. It was why he was here. I quickly wrapped up his session, the last of my day, and went home feeling ill. My mom told me to smudge with sage and bathe with cedar. Those are two of the sacred medicines of the Anishinaabe, and they are both used to cleanse the body.

How are you supposed to deal with something like that? When I asked my supervisor how to handle future situations like that, she suggested passing the client on to another consultant who would be more comfortable working with that student. It was one of the most disappointing answers I’d ever received to any question.

So, we’re expected to entertain the Nazis, I thought. We’re meant to help them make their essays nice.

In both of these situations, I wound up feeling like I was overreacting, and in the wrong. I imagined myself trying to take up some kind of complaint with somebody somewhere. A dean, maybe. Maybe that would have been the proper thing for me to do. What would they do? Give the student a formal warning for seeming vaguely alt-right? Neither student espoused any hate speech himself. Neither student made any threats. Both of them merely toed the line so as to have plausible deniability about their intentions.
Recently, I uploaded a lecture. I teach what we call “asynchronous” classes, meaning that nobody keeps track of whether you actually watch the lectures so hardly anyone does. Despite this, I was nervous. I was talking about politics. I was criticizing Fox News. I was criticizing MSNBC. It was the week after Joe Biden won the 2020 Presidential election, and I’d spent the past few days watching coverage on both Liberal and Conservative news outlets. I was furious, and apprehensive, about the clear manipulative rhetoric these networks were using to create two very controlled world views. I flipped to Fox News and I saw a professional, paid news commentator on live TV sneering derisively at the crowds in the streets celebrating Biden’s win, saying in an objective-sounding voice that he could smell the cannabis smoke from here. I flipped to MSNBC and I was seeing more professional, paid news commentators promising that Joe Biden was practically saintly, and uttering assurances over and over again that he would “heal America.” This was something we needed to be talking about. Desperately. I knew that, and I knew that, really, it wasn’t so political to point out manipulative rhetoric if it was an incontestable fact that the manipulative rhetoric was there. But at the same time, I was shaking as I uploaded that lecture. I was worried I’d get in trouble with someone for this. I wasn’t sure if this was allowed— I’m very new to the teaching game, and I’ve been in trouble before for criticizing people I wasn’t supposed to criticize.

I’m truly not sure what is and isn’t political these days. I’m aware, in a general sense, of what the official values of the Left and Right are. That knowledge doesn’t necessarily enlighten me in any useful way, however, to how I’m supposed to speak in a nonpartisan way to my classes. My other colleagues talk about Beyoncé’s Lemonade album and music video while they study rhetoric, which is shocking to me. Lemonade, to me, seems so overtly political— talking about black womanhood, or even race or feminism in any sense feels dangerously political to me. When I was in college, my friends and I were lounging in our Sci Fi club’s common space, casually talking about identity politics on campus. At the mention of “white privilege,” a boy nearby scoffed, stood up, and stormed out of the room, muttering about SJWs. Later on we got chided by other club members for creating a hostile environment for our conservative fellows.

During High School and Middle School, I had many LGBTQ teachers. I would have never known they were queer, because they weren’t allowed to talk about it. I always heard about these things second-hand from people who said things like “I saw Ms. B at a restaurant with another woman… they live together. Like… that.”

I heard about a lot of really bad things that happened to these teachers. I heard stories about teachers being persecuted and fired and getting death threats. I wonder now how my teachers dealt with that, emotionally. How were they able to accept that many of their students thought that being gay was a disease, or a sin? How were they able to teach their classes, knowing they couldn’t mention their wives or husbands without being accused of pushing an inappropriate agenda? How were they able to smile and chat with students who would go into the halls and sneer at kids they thought seemed queer?

It seemed normal to me. One Head of School was chased out of her position by recurring hate crime incidents and Board of Trustee members who saw her refusal to hide her “lifestyle” as enforcing a political agenda. Somebody vandalized her home with spray paint: DYKE.

My private school was small, divided into Middle and High school, all under one administration. Middle School students came to our GSA to talk to us about an increasingly toxic climate of bullying, particularly of LGBTQ and non-white students, and they asked us to help them plan an anti-bullying event on the Day of Silence. The Day of Silence is an event where students take a vow of silence for one day to raise awareness of discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ people (GLSEN). The administration would not allow the Middle School to observe this event, because the topics were too “mature.”

Every year, my friends and I in our school’s GSA met with this condescending blonde woman named Heather who wore a perpetual patronizing smile.
“We have to think of the parents,” she would always say. “Parents should be able to talk to their kids about these things before they hear about it from us. They will feel like we are taking the conversation out of their control.”

“The kids already know everything,” I’d argue. “They’re the ones getting called f*****s in the halls. They’re the ones doing the bullying. They’re the ones who want somebody to make it stop.”

We weren’t allowed to mention, during these conversations, the secret meetings we had with several queer tweens who had all suffered from harassment. Our club advisor could get in trouble for inviting kids deemed “too young” for the GSA into our group— it would be seen as indoctrination, and she was always on thin ice with the administration already.

Heather only smiled at us. “It’s really unfortunate. But there isn’t anything we can realistically do. We have to think about what’s best for everyone involved— and right now, this is a political hot topic. Bringing politics into school will get us into a lot of trouble down the road.”

Heather’s daughter was not allowed to read Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. Our English teacher had to offer her an alternative text to receive credit. Heather’s husband claimed that *Persepolis* was anti-conservative, anti-Christian propaganda, because it is by a Muslim author writing a Muslim coming-of-age story. It showed Islam in too positive a light, which, I imagine, was a threat to the worldview they wanted their daughter to cultivate. My school set the precedent that it was okay and acceptable for a student's parents to refuse to allow her to see Muslims as dynamic human beings.

We did the Day of Silence dance for four years. Heather never budged— she wouldn’t even let us host a general anti-bullying event where we never mentioned the word “gay” or acknowledged queerness in any way.

“The Board of Trustees will say you have a political agenda,” she explained.

One by one, the queer kids who came to us for help left our school. Some were bullied into transferring, some had to spend time in teen mental health institutions due to self-harm.

I understood this as normal. This targeted harassment was not political. Bullying was not political. The GSA was political. Help for queer kids was political. Teen suicides were not political. Talking about them was political. Saying “queer and minority people experience discrimination here” was political. Shutting up was not.

It didn’t even make me angry at the time. It was just the way things were. Some people were simply too political to talk about.

The boy who stormed out during the discussion about white privilege was later investigated by the college for handing out Neo-Nazi paraphernalia around the school. He was not punished and allowed to remain.

When COVID-19 hit the US, community colleges faced a surge in online enrollments, and administrators were forced to create many new positions for temporary faculty in a big rush. Many people lost their jobs to pandemic lay-offs, but I have my position because of COVID. I was hurried through the on-boarding procedures with about two weeks to get my whole curriculum prepared, uncertain even of how many classes I would teach, or what they would be.

I assigned Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* to one of my Composition classes. I worried I’d get backlash for this, but with such a limited window to plan a course, I had to choose texts that I knew backwards and forwards, and I’d done most of my Graduate work on Indigenous fiction.

“There’s nothing overtly political in these books,” I assured myself, even though I wasn’t completely sure if it was true. Both texts were about Native Americans. Both texts dealt with racism, and poverty, and the systemic abuse of Indigenous peoples by the US Government, which are all topics that could make conservative students feel accused. Still, I needed a curriculum.

That’s what I told myself. But the truth is, I do have political motivations here. I am, after all, an Indigenous person. It is self-serving for me to ask students to empathize with Indigenous people.
There is currently a proposed Enbridge project, called Line 3, which would pipe tar sands through Anishinaabe treaty territory, threatening the wetlands and our wild rice lakes (“Stop Line 3”). There is another proposed PolyMet copper sulfide mining project which would, similarly, pollute the Boundary Waters and the lakes near my ancestral home, occupied by the Bois Forte band of Ojibwe (“The Threat of Sulfide Mining). In my mind, there is no distinction between political support for these projects and approval of the ongoing genocide of my people. Since this is a political issue, so too must be any empathy for Indigenous people and their historic plights.

Teaching empathy, I think, is inherently political. Teaching empathy and sharing diverse stories is central to my politics. I can’t toe any lines. There is no line there for me. I am overtly political. I am pushing my politics every time I assign a work by a Black author, a Native author, a queer author. I am pushing my politics every time I ask my class to analyze the messages in media. I am pushing my politics all the time.

Mary had a daughter, Norma, who grew up Ojibwe in a predominantly white region during the Great Depression. Like Mary, she saw her country enter many wars. During her life, she suffered many, many losses. Some things I know about, and others she surely kept secret. If her grief weighed on her, she never showed it. She was all laughs and smiles all the time that I knew her. She was polite. She was bubbly. She never talked about pain in her life— she just lived it. She made jokes and baked cookies and volunteered in her community. There’s a strength in that resilience that I admire, and covet, and fear.

I didn’t know Mary, but I did know my Grandma Norma. She was adamant that all her grandparents had been officially married by a Catholic priest, despite living deep in the woods on the edge of the frontier. She liked to change details of stories that she didn’t like, in that way. She liked to ignore things that were troublesome, and suggest an alternative version that was nicer. A few weeks before she died, when she was nearly bedridden from terminal cancer, she called me and let me know that she’d like to treat me to dinner at Red Lobster sometime soon. She wasn’t suffering from dementia or anything like that— she was lucid until the end. She was simply offering me a much happier story than the one we were in. She was in no condition to go to Red Lobster or anywhere else, and both of us knew it. I asked my family to take me there after her funeral.

She was smart. And she lived a long life, like Mary. More than that— she seemed to have a good time of it. She was okay.

I wonder if I have it in me to do that, too. What does it mean to be okay in this day and age?

As a teacher and as a writer and as a millennial, it is one of my fundamental beliefs that the process of airing out our darkest moments has intrinsic value to both ourselves and others. I want my students to talk about racism and historical trauma. I want my fiction to say something truthful about my own struggles. I want my friends and family to know not only that I’m hurting, but precisely how I’m hurting. I want to know what my loved ones are feeling— what shades of grief and anger and hope are running through their heads?

My Grandma didn’t share her pain. She didn’t linger on it. She lived well into her 90’s, like Mary, and she seemed happy. Both of my grandparents were happy. They were both okay.

Is that the answer? When we understand that we’re living in an unjust and dangerous world, maybe the best thing we can do is to just hope that the work we do is valuable. We teach citations so that students learn to do good research. We teach people to challenge their biases. We teach fact-checking, and rhetorical analysis, in the hopes that our students use those skills to separate out misinformation. We take baby steps every day to gently encourage critical thinking. We do our best to help the students that we can help. We carry on, because before all of this, we believed that it was important— we have to keep believing it’s important. We have to keep believing that what we do is a net good.

Knowing that my students can identify Ethos, Pathos, and Logos is cold comfort when I’m staring into the storm of worst case scenarios circling the light on my ceiling. Telling people to ask
“who is the intended audience of this piece?” won’t get the vaccine out any faster, or put a hard stop to police brutality, or stop pipelines from going through Ojibwe land, or slow the rising tide of extremism in the U.S..

But at the same time— this is the best that I can do. This is how I manage.

“I’m trying to understand,” I told my Dad. “People who live through constant cultural trauma. I’m trying to understand how people have dealt with that. Your Grandma had to deal with it somehow. Your mom had to deal with it. I want to know how.”

“When I was about 15 or 16, they started noticing something called Reserve Mining in Silver Bay,” my Dad said. “They used to dump taconite tailings directly into Superior. There was a lawsuit. Walter Kronkite reported on the evening news that if this were a mountain, it would have a 1 mile wide base and be a mile high. There was a doctor, Irving Selikoff, who said the fibers from taconite looked exactly like asbestos.” I was surprised that he remembered the doctor’s name so readily, like he was pulling it off a headline in front of him. This story seemed to trouble him more than anything else he’d spoken about since I asked him about his Grandma and his Mom, even though neither were in it, and in the end, they were all okay. “Obviously, everyone got worried about drinking Asbestos. Most of my friends told me they just kept drinking the water. Reserve Mining eventually somehow settled everything. There was a scare for awhile—are we drinking something that’s going to give us all cancer? But,” he said, “people will eventually adapt to everything.”

He went on to describe the cloud of dread that hung over the culture during the beginning of the Cold War. “We’d joke about it,” he said. “When I was a kid you’d start a sentence like, ‘well if we get a chance to grow up and everyone doesn’t die in a nuclear explosion, I’d like to be a lawyer.’ ‘If a bomb doesn’t drop on us I’d like to go to college here.’ It was always on our minds. We were only half-joking, because there wasn’t anything we could do about it. The Cold War was omnipresent. There would be disco songs about the cold war. Ninety-nine balloons are going by, and people are thinking about a nuclear explosion. People just…kind of lived through things, and accepted them,” he said.

“My Grandma told me when they bombed Pearl Harbor, she cried. She knew that two of her boys would have to go fight in the war. Back then, they expected World War II to go on until 1950. They thought they’d have to invade Japan, until they invented nuclear weapon. They were all aware of what was going on, but they thought, ‘well, we just have to live with this. We don’t have much choice.’”

When Mary Toutlaff was growing up, being a political person meant that the government was openly musing about the most efficient way to kill you and your family. They had only very recently decided that it was probably better not to seem too much like that’s what they were doing. You can kill a culture without killing individuals. That was better for optics.

My Grandma Norma did her best not to be a political person. She was a social climber and she believed, probably correctly, that the best way to get treated as a human being worthy of respect was to blend in with white culture. She told me a story once where, when she was a little girl, some boys were harassing her and yelling at her, calling her an Indian. Another little girl, her friend, ran to her defense.

“She’s not an Indian,” she shouted.

Deep down, we are resilient. We can weather any hurt when we don’t have a choice. When we accept that it’s enough to do the best we can do—to manage, which is all we can do—we can try to build a little piece of the world that is better than the rest of it. But I worry sometimes. I worry that our ability to tolerate dangerous times sets a precedent for what we are obligated to handle without complaint. I worry that dangerous people see how much we can all put up with and realize how much we will allow to be done to us. I worry that our resilience is part of why things can get so bad.
I’d like to live into my nineties. I’d like my grandchildren to remember me as a source of good in people’s lives. I’d like to find contentment in doing the best I can. I’d like to accept what I can’t change. I’d like to gently encourage empathy and critical thinking. I’d like to be a beacon of warmth in my community.

But I also want to scream. And kick. And bite.

Am I going to be okay?

My grandmothers had to conform to a racist standard to survive, and the possibility that I will be another in that line—when here I am, with a platform to promote change— is, frankly, bullshit, and I’m not doing it. Academic spaces have always been political. Academic spaces have always been politically compromised in favor of protecting the comfort of oppressors. And, I think, we have reached an impasse where the discussion of any ideas is inherently political. Or, at least, I have. There’s a little Heather that lives rent-free in my head— How might this subject alienate white people? How might it alienate conservatives? Will they stop listening if I bring up queerness? Or privilege? Will I get in trouble for this? — and I think it’s time to evict her. It’s my turn to dictate what’s appropriate.

Am I going to be okay?

It is impossible to look around at America right now and see something that I’m willing to leave to my kids. I can’t keep entertaining the notion that creating a polite, comfortable space for people who want to legislate my marriage rights away— and who support white supremacy, who throw their weight behind violent police officers who beat and kill unarmed civilians, who say things like “you should be shot”— is anything but immoral. I think that my own inability to address these issues as directly as my peers makes me complicit in my own oppression, and in the oppression of others. I think that the time for mere resilience— for simply managing— in the face of terror is over. I think the best I can do is not enough for me.

Are we going to be okay?

The vaccines will come out and the masks will come off. Maybe we’ll forget how we felt during this time. Maybe things will never go back to normal. Maybe there will be more violence, more extremism. We will manage. The frog in the boiling pot is managing, too. As the water grows hotter around him, he is doing the best he can. He doesn’t have a choice.
Works Cited


*Stop Line 3*, www.stopline3.org/#intro.