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Nadia Khan-Roopnarine
Molloy University, nkhan-roopnarine@lions.molloy.edu

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Decolonizing Classrooms in Remote Learning: Rehumanizing Ourselves and Our Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Nadia Khan-Roopnarine

Introduction

"To glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie." (Freire, 2005, p. 91)

American institutions are built around a colonial center, maintained by a rigid class structure within a capitalist system. Revolving around this colonial center, the institution of American schooling continues to exist as a function of capitalism and racism intent upon the maintenance of the unyielding class system (Battiste, 2013). Because the institution of school was built to serve the ultimate goals of building colonial power and wealth through control of land, people of color have been firmly positioned on the outside of the colonial center (Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014). Through systematic exploitation and dehumanization, American institutions functioned to maintain colonial economic and social control through an assertion of white supremacy. The institutions are interconnected with, "all forms of oppression, including patriarchy, homophobia, ableism, and classism, for in each will be found the core social constructions of superiority and inferiority, of perceived normal and abnormal, and the diminishment of the 'other' they appear to represent" (Battiste, 2013, p. 130). This dehumanization is built into the institutions of America, including the institution of schooling. Schools, and those who participate in them, are both purposeful and accidental supporters of the maintenance of the colonial center. In other words, by participating in the practice of American schooling, all members of a school community are serving a colonial agenda by upholding and aligning themselves with white supremacy. These values can be seen in the practice of standardized testing, racial disparities in school discipline, and the ongoing policing of school curriculum. This hierarchical and oppressive structure also endured throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and was evident in the nationwide struggle to create equitable and democratic virtual classroom spaces.

My work as an English teacher exists in the tensions between compliance and resistance, conformity and liberation. As a public school teacher and teacher-leader in a large bureaucratic system, I am held accountable for adhering to mandated policies and procedures. In turn, I establish and maintain expectations for the conduct of my students and colleagues in the professional school setting. I engage with the institution of schooling by challenging the white supremacist ideologies that inform my interpersonal relationships and internal reflections. As a critical educator, I recognize the systems of oppression that form the social and cultural norms of schooling as

manifestations of white supremacy. These norms perpetuate inequities which shape the policies with which I am forced to contend, both within and outside of myself. In my roles as classroom teacher and department leader, I create space for resistance, both on my own part, and for colleagues and students. An integral aspect of my pedagogical practice is conscientization (Freire, 1970), wherein I work to develop my critical consciousness. This development is facilitated through a process of purposeful and structured reflection leading to deliberate action. In the sudden shift to remote learning, I relied heavily on my journaling process to sustain my reflective practice during the most challenging teaching circumstances of my career. Though I adopt a diverse set of critical lenses in my personal and professional reflections, I most naturally and therefore frequently utilize a coolie feminist lens.

As a twice removed Indian, my parents were born into a thoroughly colonized Guyana. Though my mother was raised by her Hindi speaking great grandmother, English was the only acceptable language for the indentured servants on the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Control of the indentured laborers' language practice enabled the British and Dutch to monitor the communication between the indentured Indians, thereby removing their ability to organize and unify. Therefore, Hindi was spoken sparingly, out of earshot of British and Dutch overseers, and only when older folks wanted to conceal what they were saying from children. Children in schools were punished for speaking any language but English, and the linguistic practice of my Indian ancestors was quickly erased. Thus, I am a first-generation American whose only language is English. My language practice in the colonial context carries with it the stark reminder that my family was severed from their linguistic practice and, as a result, their cultural values and traditions in India. Forced to speak in the tongues of their British and Dutch plantation owners, my ancestors took on the pejorative mantle of "coolies", which even to this day, connotes certain negative traits such as intellectual inferiority within the Indo-Caribbean community. The term "coolie" was meant to dehumanize the indentured Indian laborers by reducing them to a single identity. In her blog *The Brown Girl Diary*, Anusuya Singh writes:

As a little girl, I was taught to associate coolie with dirty, uneducated, and low-caste. Within my social circles, coolie alluded to someone who was in an 'unskilled' profession, dark-skinned, or did not have high educational attainment. Taking a step back, I now realize that coolie was used to shame those who did not assimilate to the white supremacist standard of a respectable society member.

The term "coolie", although previously used as a derogatory term to refer to Indo-Caribbean people, is being reimaged by scholars, writers, and activists (Hosein & Outar, 2019). It is a term that I will use in this chapter to position my work as an Indo-Caribbean scholar in direct connection with the ancestral legacy of colonialism. My reappropriation of the term involves a reclamation of the word "coolie" and characterizing it as distinctly feminist. Therefore, when I refer to myself and approach this work as a coolie feminist, I mean to situate my personal definition of feminism as an authentic reflection of my ancestral legacy. As a coolie feminist, I am asserting a necessary effort toward equality of the genders, while also rejecting the classist, racist, and capitalist society in which the term coolie originated.

Our daily language practices contain both explicit and implicit aspects of identity. The discourses with which we choose to engage can carry our historical legacies, reveal our values and biases, and can immediately situate us as inclusive or exclusive of certain communities. Power dynamics in relationships become apparent through a close examination of language practices. Control of people's linguistic expression also shapes the ways people think about themselves, especially in relation to their colonial oppressors. In his 2017 lecture titled "Secure the Base, Decolonise the Mind" delivered at Wits University, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o stated "In colonial conquest, language did to the mind what the sword did to the bodies of the colonised" (Thiong'o, 2017, para. 12). For Thiong'o and generations of colonized peoples, the control of language directly translated to social and political power. This is evident within my own personal linguistic heritage as a coolie feminist and in my professional practice as a critical educator. The linguistic exchanges in a classroom also shed light on the values and power dynamics between and among the diverse members of a classroom community. How I navigated acts of linguistic compliance and resistance during the shift to remote learning in the COVID-19 pandemic is captured wholly in the discourse of the critical reflections and personal journals I kept at the pandemic's height. In this chapter, I will analyze one of my journal entries using Lyiscott's (2019) fugitive literacies framework, in an effort to examine the pedagogical possibilities for decolonizing virtual classroom spaces. This analysis is guided by the following questions:

(1) How do ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of colonialism shape my efforts to decolonize my classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic?

(2) In what ways do I attempt to maintain epistemological and material control over students during remote instruction?

(3) How do I work to humanize myself, colleagues, students and families within dehumanizing circumstances through a decolonizing process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy?

In the following excerpt, I detail an interaction I had with a student in my Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition class, regarding her language in class. Below, I give the details of the incident. Names have been changed for the protection of student identities.

Instructional Journal Entry 6: March 7th, 2021

This week included...so much. It was a lot. I'm sitting down to write this on a Sunday night wondering why I didn't do it sooner. I pulled up my notes and reflections and was like "oh yea, that's why". The only way I was able to navigate this week successfully was by accessing my deep well of compassion, scraping drips of grace from the muddy bottom to extend to myself and others. My 10th grade classes actually went pretty smoothly this week, and I'm happy with the progress kids are making. Students focused on their monologues, everyone is participating and speaking the words of August Wilson to life! We have a solid lineup of kids who are interested in competing, and that makes me excited. It was, surprisingly, AP Lit and other colleagues that caused me distress this week.

On Tuesday I was reviewing my AP Lit lesson with students at the start of the period, as usual. Since we've come back from break, I've ramped up the pace of the tasks. Students usually don't do well on the AP Lit exam because they run out of time, and not because they lack the skills. I've been trying to help them get used to the increased pace. So I was reviewing responses in the chat to our opening thoughts question. The question was "When people from different racial backgrounds, cultures, or classes get married, what challenges do you think they may face?" I had one student that I've known since she was in 6th grade, write "getting support". As I waited for the other students to type their answers in, I called her name and said 'Hey, Tamara. What does getting support mean? That's not enough. I'm looking for some AP level answers in the chat. She responded by shouting loudly, 'you doin all that with this fuckin AP level answers'. I was immediately shocked. A student has not used language like that in my classroom context at all since I was a student teacher. And, this student is not a student who usually talks like that at all. She is very polite, respectful,

and sweet. Even when she dislikes a teacher or class content, she conducts mature and professional conversations to advocate for herself. I was extremely surprised.

But also, I was PISSED. I had not been spoken to/at like that by anyone since an 8th grader called me a bitch when I was student teaching. I had no idea how to handle it in the initial moments after. I was flustered. And, I was on camera. All the kids could see my face. I audibly admonished her by saying her name and asking "what is going on?" I hovered over her icon on the Google Meet to see if I could remove her, but I couldn't. In hindsight, I'm really glad I didn't have that option because in my anger, I may have just kicked her out as a punitive response instead of working with her. What I chose to do, after collecting myself for a moment, was tell the class to continue working on their opening thoughts and send her a private chat on the side. I wrote "Tamara., what's going on with you?" She didn't respond. I waited another minute. Still no response. So I jumped back into the class meet and asked her to meet me in a video call outside of class. She (thankfully) obliged. She did not unmute herself at all and chose to type. I asked her what was up. She said, "I'm just so stressed!" I said "Okay, what about? AP-related, or other things?" She said "Other things." I said, "Is it anything I can support you with?" She said no. I said "Okay, I understand that you may be feeling stressed, but Tamara. you cannot speak to me like that. That was incredibly disrespectful, and I'm actually very surprised." I couldn't finish my sentence before she was typing "i'm so sorry." I said it's ok. I said, take this period off. You're not coming back into class right now. Do what you need to do to get your head and your heart right. Take a break. And I will see you at 2:30 for office hours and I can do the lesson with you then. She thanked me and said ok.

I went back into my usual class and taught it with no problem. But, it was really bothering me because it was so out of character for her. I ended up in a late meeting, and she actually sent me a Google Meet invite at 2:45pm so I jumped in to talk with her. We reviewed the lesson together. And I asked her, "Tamara, I was thinking about it all day, and I want to know, did you know your mic was on when you were shouting?" She said no. I said "I figured." I told her that I sometimes yell at the computer too when I'm upset or frustrated and it was fine to do that. But, for future reference, always check that your mic is muted. We laughed together and ended the call.

Ideological

White Supremacy has an insidious placement at the ideological center of our society. It determines what language we deem acceptable and appropriate, and it

informs our reactions in different circumstances. In the above instance, I was faced with a student who used language that is deemed offensive or not classroom appropriate by white, upper-middle class behavioral standards (Padia & Traxler, 2021). Though I use that language in my personal life when speaking with friends or family, in a student to teacher relationship, or traditional classroom setting it is usually not acceptable. I acknowledge that a classroom space needs to be a safe environment where students feel respected and comfortable. The use of profane language can create circumstances that make students feel uncomfortable. However, my students and I exist in communities where profanity is commonly used as a form of expression. Unless the profanity is directly at someone in anger, aggression, or frustration, the use of profanity can increase feelings of safety and belonging. I believe that the use of profane language does not necessarily detract from feelings of safety or belonging and can even indicate inclusiveness and trust.

Additionally, white Supremacy asserts control by setting ideals for feminine language, behavior, and beauty (CodeSwitch, 2019). Shaped by patriarchal expectations in a culture plagued with toxic masculinity, being quiet, obedient, and accepting are traits that are archaically ascribed to an ideal woman. In schools, this value is inherent in notions of grit and gratitude, as students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are continually expected to endure and overcome challenges disproportionately (Bono, Riel, & Hescox, 2021). The ideal modern American woman archetype is one who is resourceful and resilient, especially in times of stress. A term first coined in 1984, "superwoman syndrome" continues to plague our society's understanding of modern womanhood. Especially in the pandemic, women were expected even more to navigate increasingly challenging duties as caretakers and full-time workers. The "superwoman syndrome" (Shaevitz, 1984), i.e., successfully managing a household while also maintaining a full-time career is continually elevated as the epitome of modern womanhood (Davis, 2021; Elliot, 1980). One need only examine the multitude of stories about super teachers who went above and beyond during the pandemic to care for their own families, in addition to their students, throughout the challenges of remote learning (Aguilera, Carlisle, & Reilly, 2021). Popular television shows elevate empowered female characters who are lauded for their ability to "do it all", such as Doctor Meredith Grey on the long-running show *Grey's Anatomy*. This notion holds true for Black women in America also, as the embodiment of strength is the ideal (Carter & Rossi, 2019). In this instance, although Tamara was experiencing the significant and particular trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, she, like all the other

students, was expected to endure the upheaval to her education with strength and gratitude. Her use of profanity in this moment may have been an indicator of stress, grief, anger, or frustration. But in the classroom environment, pushing against the expectations set by the teacher in this way is unacceptable.

The values of obedience and acceptance have also been reified in the Indo-Caribbean ideological approach to parenting girls. During the British colonial period of indentured servitude in the Caribbean, Indian women who were brought to Trinidad and Guyana faced two major sets of stereotypes in the eyes of colonial authorities: (1) they were morally loose, or childlike and in need of protection from their men and (2) they were "submissive, passive, non-confrontational, collusive and cowed by an Indian patriarchy" (Mohammed, 2012, p. 3). These stereotypes endure in modern Indo-Caribbean households as well. Indo-Caribbean girls are regularly trained in the art of keeping a house, cooking traditional meals, and are expected to participate in a collective raising of the children in a family, while dutifully accepting the expectations their parents place upon them for their life-determining choices such as career and partner selection. Although I was fiercely independent, being obedient, submissive, and non-combative to authority figures were important factors that shaped how I was raised. My self-worth and understanding of relationships with older family members, teachers, and adults in general became exercises in my helpfulness, willingness, and compliance. Thus, my internalized ideologies remain a direct result of the white supremacist, patriarchal expectations of a colonized British Guyana. As a coolie feminist, it is my obligation to identify and acknowledge how my internalized ideologies shape my interpersonal relationships.

In the instance described in this vignette, a young woman of color is expressing herself in ways that directly contradicts society's modern expectations for women. She was not obedient, accepting, or showing grit, perseverance and strength. Instead, she audibly demonstrated her frustration, and dissatisfaction around an expectation of her during remote learning. In this moment, I was confronted with my own white supremacist aligned expectations for female student conduct. Her reaction to my comments pushed against all expectations for a young female student, including my own upbringing and I wonder how my reactions would have been different if the student in this scenario identified as male.

Institutional

Institutional standards for student conduct are codified in regulations set forth by the city's Department of

Education. Schools have some degree of autonomy when it comes to the implementation of the policy, depending on the preference of the school administration. According to the discipline code, "Using profane, obscene, vulgar, or lewd language, gestures, or behavior" is a level 2 infraction labelled "disorderly behavior". In the discipline code, administrators can select from an array of consequences for such behavior including a meeting with the teacher and student, a student meeting with supervisory staff such as a principal, a parent conference, lunch detention, exclusion from extra-curricular activities, classroom removal, and potentially a suspension after 5 or more removals from the classroom. In my in-person classroom, I rarely encounter student misconduct, especially around the use of profane language. I do not have intimate knowledge of the discipline code. Additionally, in a remote teaching environment, the purpose for consequences such as a classroom removal becomes obsolete. If this interaction had occurred in the physical classroom setting, I believe my reaction would have been similar. I would have asked the student for a private conference in the hallway, out of earshot of other students, to gather more information about what caused such a reaction. If I was feeling angry, or unable to productively engage with the student, it is likely that I would have relied on a trusted colleague to host the student in her classroom for the duration of that class period before attempting to remedy the situation. Though I have never had a need to do so, I have two colleagues nearby, with whom I share values regarding classroom management and relationship building. We all generally believe that addressing student behavior in our classrooms should remain at the classroom level, unless students are creating grossly unsafe circumstances for themselves or others. I would be extremely wary of involving staff members associated with disciplinary consequences, such as a dean, or administrator, and would do everything possible to address the issue at a classroom level, rather than invoking the institutional structures. In my experience, institutional consequences follow a tiered set of responses to student misconduct that do not always take context into consideration. My instinct is to always pause before engaging with students around disciplinary measures, first to temper my own emotions and avoid reliance on punitive measures, and second to reflect on what I know about the student's experiences that may be impacting their choices in the moment. In the virtual setting, however, I did not have access to my usual network of supportive colleagues, or the benefit of nonverbal communication and cues to better understand the student to teacher interaction, or see and hear the reactions of other students. Thus, it was challenging for me to quickly decide how best to address the issue. In the moment, I did not consider the discipline code, think about the level two infraction, or examine the disorderly conduct.

My immediate responses did not rely on the institutional structures. Instead, I interpreted the interaction from an interpersonal standpoint, and actively worked to challenge my internal reaction to best meet the needs of the student.

Interpersonal

The interpersonal dynamics in this interaction are rich. In an examination of this instance, I am reminded of the first time I met Tamara, as a rising fifth grader. Our school was opened in 2012 and in our early years, we worked to actively recruit students from our district's elementary schools to apply for seats in our middle school. For many parents, sending their twelve-year-olds to a relatively new school with a relatively young and inexperienced staff was not something they were interested in being a part of. But for some families, having the opportunity to shape a new community and build school culture in our brand new, state-of-the-art facilities was exciting. It was the Spring of 2014, and I was one of the teacher representatives at our school's open house. My job was to stay in the lobby, greet families and prospective students, have them sign in, give them promotional materials, and direct them toward a tour guide. I stepped away every 15 minutes or so to add my presentation to the touring groups as the English department leader, sixth grade teacher, and director of the drama club. The evening had been going well, as many families were eager to tour our building and meet potential teachers for their students. I distinctly remember Tamara's mother walking in with a big smile on her face, holding Tamara's shoulders and guiding her in towards me. Tamara was a small child with a big personality, and as she approached I stuck my hand out to greet her. She shook it and smiled as her mom beamed beside her. I asked her to tell me her name and asked her what elementary school she attended. I quickly got her set up with a tour and sent her and her mother along. One hour later, I continued to work the lobby floor, directing families toward refreshments before they left. Tamara's mother tapped me on the shoulder and thanked me for the evening. I told her that I hoped to see Tamara at our school next year and assumed that would be the end of the interaction. But Tamara's mom was an eager conversationalist. She began to tell me about Tamara's great skill as a young dancer. She told me she could see Tamara thriving in our drama department and began to encourage Tamara to begin dancing to show me her talent. Tamara shyly smiled and I assured her there was no need for the demonstration. I talked with Tamara's mother for a few more minutes before needing to attend to a larger group of families that were completing a tour. A few months later, in the fall at our open school night, I was greeting families when I heard a loud, "Hey Ms.

Khan!" from down the hallway. Tamara's mother was coming quickly toward me with an excited look on her face. She said, "I told you we'd see you again!" and then took a seat in my classroom to hear about her daughter's English class. I had the pleasure of teaching Tamara and working with her mom as a 6th grader. As Tamara progressed through middle school, though I was no longer her teacher, Tamara's mom always made a point to say hello to me and update me on Tamara's progress in her classes. She was always so joyful about sharing in the pride of her daughter's successes. At the time of this interaction, Tamara was a senior and was enrolled in my advanced placement English literature and composition class. I had the unique pleasure of teaching Tamara at the very start and the very end of her academic career at our school. I have a longstanding relationship with her and with her mom. I have always found Tamara a delightful, engaged, curious student. Additionally, her favorite teacher at our school happens to be one of my closest friends. In light of the pandemic, Tamara opted to take my advanced English class instead of the advanced science class with my friend, to whom she affectionately refers as 'best friend'. Thus, I have lengthy and strong relationships with Tamara and with the influential and supportive women in her life.

In the moment of her use of the word "fuckin", I did not consciously think about the many years of positive experiences I have had with Tamara. I did not consider her joyful mother, my supportive colleague, or even what Tamara was attempting to express. My reaction was almost entirely one of anger, heightened by a sense of betrayal in our usually respectful relationship. The use of the profane term, directed at me in our virtual classroom space invoked feelings of rage, embarrassment, disrespect, and hurt. My immediate response was to rely on a punitive reaction. I looked to remove her from the virtual space. Upon further reflection on why I wanted to remove her, I believe that the primary driver for that response was embarrassment. My ability to remove her from the classroom space was an opportunity to assert control over the space as a direct response to my inability to control her language. I experienced her use of the term as disrespectful. Nevermind that the actual word "fuck" is not offensive to me. But because I experienced her use of the word in the context of the virtual classroom space, the interpretation of the word carries with it an implied offense. In the moment, it was also important to me to assert dominance over the classroom space in front of the other students to protect my own authority in their eyes. My inability to remove her from the virtual classroom space was by my own design. I had previously disabled the ability to remove someone from a meeting with one-click out of fear that I would accidentally do so while clicking through the many tabs I use during any given

class period. Even though I knew that I had the feature disabled, my angry reaction first led me to explore this option by hovering my digital mouse over her name. Thankfully, the fact that the feature was disabled gave me enough time—approximately 30 seconds—to collect my emotions and thoughts, and respond in the virtual space more closely to how I would have responded in a physical classroom setting. But, my immediate reaction reveals that my initial choice was to rely on an imbalanced power structure; one where I controlled the material world of the virtual space, and the epistemologies of those within it to retain my own authority. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith details the framework of colonial conquest: The line, the center, and the outside (1999) wherein the center refers to the "mother" country or colonial power, everything within the line revolves around the colonial center and exists to protect it, and anything that threatens that colonial power is relegated to the outside. In my classroom, I inadvertently remade this structure, placing myself as the empowered center and forcibly removing a threat to my authority. In a physical classroom setting, I would almost never remove a student from the space for using curse words, but would instead engage in reflective conversation about their needs in the moment. However, in a time of heightened stress for everyone, my ability to navigate challenges to my authority in the classroom was severely limited. Because I know my understanding of power in the classroom is a manifestation of white supremacy, I actively work against it. In this instance, I was lucky that my first reactionary response did not occur, and instead I was able to talk with Tamara when we both felt calmer and did not have an audience of other students.

In our one-on-one meeting, Tamara did not speak at all, but chose to type her responses instead. The added buffer of increased response time between what I said, and her responses was also another method of built-in reflection time. In our voice and text-based conversation, Tamara shared that she was feeling "stressed". When she said her stress was related to "other things" outside of class, and that I would not be helpful to her in problem solving around the stress, I decided to create more space for reflection and grace. After agreeing to check in at the end of the day, I dismissed Tamara from the class period to de-stress and so I could attend to the other students. Throughout the course of the day, I thought deeply about what Tamara's stresses could be and how best to support her. I also took the opportunity to reflect on my own feelings about the interaction. I rely heavily on my community, especially in times of tumult. I considered calling on my colleague to gather more information about what could be happening in Tamara's life outside of school. I considered talking with a different critical friend to come up with potential action steps. I also thought

about checking in with the school counselor to see if she had any insight on Tamara's behavior. However, my close community of trusted colleagues also intersects with the institutional power structures, therefore I chose not to do any of these things, as it could have triggered automatic institutional responses to the incident. Because I was not comfortable looking to my usual community for support, I spent time centering Tamara in my reflections while I considered my next steps. This approach to remedying instances of misconduct stems from my commitment as a coolie feminist to subverting the dominant disciplinary power structures that work to dehumanize those within it.

On my lunch break, I took time to consider what Tamara's daily school life was like. As a senior in high school, Tamara was a fully remote student, taking multiple advanced placement classes. She had a six-period-a-day schedule, with each period lasting approximately one hour. In her virtual classroom spaces, she had little to no opportunities to engage with teachers or colleagues in less formal ways. Pre-COVID-19, she was a student who would usually spend her lunch and free periods hanging out in my colleague's classroom, helping her grade multiple choice assignments for underclassmen, helping to organize lab equipment and materials, or just talking with friends over snacks. The COVID-19 pandemic brought on a slew of new stresses while removing the normally freeing and stress-relieving aspects of a school day for K-12 students across the country (Hamilton & Gross, 2021). Tamara's senior year was devoid of any non-academic activities, including the senior overnight weekend. She did not have access to school-based extracurricular activities like drama, dance, or track. She was also missing all the subtle and informal ways a student is affirmed, encouraged, and supported in a school setting: there were no warm greetings in the hallways from staff, no visits with favorite teachers during study hall and lunch periods, no cheering spectators at track meets, no flexing of senior privileges in the informal school spaces. The remote learning environment was an austere and sterilized shadow of the usual vibrancy and vitality of school. Before meeting with Tamara at the end of the day, I considered all of these missing pieces from her daily school life. Coupled with my knowledge of her desire for acceptance, her budding self-esteem, and her dedication to her academic career, I approached our conversation with an empathetic lens.

Tamara was actually the responsible initiator of our conversation. Because I was in a late-running meeting, Tamara was the one to email me with a video link for us to talk almost fifteen minutes after our scheduled time. I began by asking her if she was okay and inquired about how she spent her "period off". She told me she took a nap and was feeling better than she had earlier. I

reviewed the lesson she missed with her and answered any additional questions she had. At the end of the review, I told her I was glad she was feeling okay and that if she needed support in the future, I would be happy to help. As we signed off, I was struck by a moment of reflection. As someone who was spending a lot of time in virtual meetings, often feeling disconnected and weary of additional "asks" in an already overwhelming work environment, I sometimes speak out loud to the computer screen, responding in ways I would rather speak than in more formal, professionally appropriate ways. I asked Tamara if she knew her mic was unmuted and if she meant to direct her comments at me. She was sheepish in her response, but she did confirm what I thought. She was unaware that her microphone was on when she shouted. Having spent the last seven years cultivating a relationship built on trust and mutual respect, I was able to call upon my wealth of positive experiences with Tamara to navigate a moment of conflict.

Tamara and I both exist as women of color within a bureaucratic system that maintains centralized power. The seat of that power often institutes policies that perpetuate racist, classist, and sexist norms impacting each of us in unique ways. As the teacher in the virtual space, I am the manifestation of the existing power structure; despite my own marginalized racial identity and ancestral oppression, I represent an authority aligned with white supremacist values. Negotiating this moment of conflict required active choices on both our parts: we chose to trust one another and take each other at her word, we chose to create mental and virtual space between ourselves in recognition of our mutual need for grace, and we chose to move forward with openness and understanding. In a moment of tension, Tamara and I both made active decisions to de-escalate the space and approach each other by centering each other's needs. Tamara recognized I needed to understand why she spoke the way she did and that I needed to express that I felt disrespected. I recognized that Tamara needed me—her adult teacher—to understand and validate that she was struggling to cope with the heightened stress of remote schooling.

Internal

The choices made in this circumstance do not only reflect my personal agency and values, but also showcase Tamara's. In my writing of this analysis, I am reflecting on the context informing our interaction throughout this day. In the moment, I acted from a place of compassion, despite my anger and embarrassment because I was able to draw upon years of positive experiences with her. However, if this circumstance was to occur with a student

I was less familiar or comfortable with, I imagine I may have acted differently. I would like to believe that I use the same principles to regulate my reactions with students in disciplinary situations; however, the dynamics and expectations shaped by white Supremacy continue to shape my beliefs. I do believe that students and teachers should establish mutually respectful relationships, but how that respect is demonstrated is determined by an alignment with patriarchal, Eurocentric values. Modern schools are continually shaped using the banking model (Freire, 1970), where students are vessels meant to receive their teacher's content knowledge and expertise. Though I do not subscribe to this model in my traditional classroom, the lesson model I repeated often during remote learning relied more heavily on a one-way exchange of knowledge. My ability to use interactive and collaborative tools in the remote setting was severely limited at the start of the pandemic, as I had been unfamiliar with them previously. Therefore, I unsuccessfully attempted to recreate the authentic collaborations of an in-person classroom using video and chat box functions only. Tamara, as a student I have worked with before, was forced to conform to a lecture style learning environment with a teacher who had not previously styled her classroom as a one-way street. All the ways I would normally establish a culture of mutual respect and trust were not routinely built into my remote learning classroom. Additionally, as a female teacher, I was particularly incensed by her perceived disrespect. As a woman, my ability to maintain a stable classroom environment is challenged more often than that of a man's. I am careful to not appear overly-emotional, too aggressive, or extra-expressive with students in order to avoid being stereotyped. Because I typically feel in control and empowered in my classroom spaces, any slight challenge to that delicate balance between trusted nurturer and authoritative teacher can disrupt it. In order to actively work against this, it was necessary for me to push against my ego, create space between myself and the student, and draw upon my empathetic abilities.

Research, like teaching, is relational and the process by which I examined my internal thinking is necessarily situated within the context of coolie feminism. Because my usual teaching style is one that purposefully rejects stereotypical notions of power structures, the shift to a banking system style of teaching did not align with my personal or professional values. I typically work to center the needs of those around me in my approach to cultivating relationships. At the height of the pandemic, I prioritized content delivery over the socio-emotional well-being of myself and my students which resulted in an environment of heightened stress for everyone. Being honest with myself in the moment by acknowledging my natural reaction of anger and embarrassment while

simultaneously extending grace to the student throughout the day by working to consider her experiences was a necessary act of rehumanization. It enabled me to move successfully through the interaction and evokes Audre Lorde (1984) as follows:

If I participate, knowingly or otherwise, in my sister's oppression and she calls me on it, to answer her anger with my own only blankets the substance of our exchange with reaction. It wastes energy. And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I myself have contributed. (p. 128).

As a principle, it became necessary to question what I chose to do and say, and why I chose to say it. By reflecting before reacting, we were able to navigate a moment of tension by leaning on our well-built trust and communication. Tamara ended the school year receiving high academic awards and I helped her write her final speech to recite at the end of the year.

Ultimately, "how we make meaning of material conditions and our actions, study them, and communicate those findings is inextricably bound up with the ongoing project of coloniality as well as potentials to interrupt it and other ways of knowing and learning" (Patel, 2016, p. 14). Though the legacy of colonialism impacts mine and Tamara's lives differently, we both contend with the ideological and institutional forces from our unique positions. Because the ultimate tool of colonization was dehumanization, our choice to center each other's humanity is one that subverts the legacy of colonialism. We exist in a teacher-student relationship determined by a bureaucratic space defined by white supremacy. But we necessarily cultivated and relied on our shared humanity. We connected with one another over a foundation of trust that enabled me to serve as a nurturing teacher who offered guidance and support to a student in a time of need. The institution is built to remove the agency and humanity of both teachers and students, and will decontextualize instances of misconduct in order to exact punishment. When teachers and students choose to center one another's humanity they can more successfully negotiate challenges in ways that can subvert institutional power structures aligned with white supremacy.

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