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Decolonizing my Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Autoethnographic Study

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Decolonizing my Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

American schooling is a colonized construct that seeks to maintain white patriarchal hegemony (Battiste, 2013). As a critical educator whose personal epistemologies are shaped by Indo-Caribbean feminism and Coolie feminism, I continually grapple with a large bureaucratic system that thrives on the perpetual dehumanization of teachers, families, and students. The sudden shift to remote learning surfaced the particular cognitive dissonance I navigate, both within myself and in my professional spaces, as I work to decolonize my classroom spaces while inadvertently perpetuating them.

As a high school English teacher serving a population of exclusively BIPOC students in a small urban school, I took the shift to remote learning as an opportunity to engage in an autoethnographic study aimed at examining the decolonization of virtual classroom spaces. Utilizing Smith's concept of the line, the center, and the outside (2012), I interrogated the process of decolonizing schooling both in my English literature courses and in my leadership of the English department. Using Lyiscott's fugitive literacies framework (2019) as a lens, I examined ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy in the decolonizing process. As a result, I crafted a unique tool for critical reflection and analysis called "the decolonial compass." This tool was used to situate my personal identity within relevant socio-political and historical contexts. This was achieved by integrating the larger frameworks of decolonizing theory and critical constructivism with my personal epistemologies. This study documents my authentic decolonizing process during the tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic with two major findings: (1) relinquishing epistemological control is central to decolonizing classrooms and (2) critical love is a tool for combatting dehumanization. Recommendations for teacher education and professional development are included.

Acknowledgments

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Personal Journal Excerpt

07.19.2020

8:27 p.m.

Home

I spent the day at my aunty's house in Copiague. My little sister's birthday was yesterday and our tradition is to spend the day on the beach. We couldn't make it yesterday, so we attempted to today. Due to the pandemic, however, the beaches were at lower capacity and all of them were full. We tried to get into the private Town of Babylon beaches (my cousin was with us and she is a resident of the town), but we were not allowed because we needed some sort of special permit. It was maddening. As soon as we pulled up to the gate, the 5 or 6 white teenagers tending the booth immediately said, "This is for residents only," clearly making an assumption that we were not residents. It's possible that they looked at a car full of Brown women and decided we didn't fit their image of a Babylon resident. It is also possible, though, that there is some special sticker or marker that cars receive after obtaining the permit for the private beaches and it was immediately evident to them that we didn't have one. But it still felt like they were quick to decide that we didn't belong. After our failed attempts at beaching, we went back to my aunty's house and ended up in a typical game of *chup chhal* (Americans call it Hearts I think). It's a card game that is a staple in Guyanese homes—ones that aren't superstitious at least—and it is common for us to play when we're together. As we played, my mom and my aunt (her sister) versus me and my sister, they shared stories about their childhood in Guyana, talked about their great-grandmother (Ma) who raised

them, and shared details about their sisters and family life growing up. The stories, of course, were fascinating and I always enjoy hearing my mom and her "patna" talk smack in Guyanes patois—which, in our family, is the only way to do it. They smacked card after card down on the table, goading us with playful taunts of "come again gyal" and "wah kind coat yuh want?"

They talked about their Ma and how, when she wanted to discuss things without them knowing, would do so in Hindi, and her Indo-Grandma quirks—how she untied her coins from a handkerchief so they could buy ice cream, protecting the house full of young women from a "tief-man" with a cutlass, and occasionally smoking her cigarette with some brandy. As we played and talked, my cousin's 7-year-old daughter Rose flitted about, purporting to know who would win by peeking at everyone's cards. My cousin Davika, mother to Rose, allowed her to place the next card she wanted to play. Davika encouraged her saying, "Show them what you've got, Ro!" Rose, caught up in the fervor of the game, and excited to participate, slammed the card down with considerable zeal and exclaimed, "80 dolla sheet!" I laughed, not understanding why she said it. And my cousin proceeded to explain; she had recently purchased what she thought was an outdoor movie screen set for $80 but turned out to be only a heavy-duty sheet. Her mother, upon seeing the purchase, exclaimed, "Yuh buy an 80 dolla sheet?!" in a pronounced Guyanese accent. In the context of our card game, Rose, wanting to participate, understood that speaking in Guyanese patois and with an accent was how you were supposed to play the game; thus, she spoke a Guyanese phrase she had heard her grandmother use recently.

On the drive home, I couldn't stop thinking about this. My mother and her sister, raised by Ma, an Indian woman who, although was Guyanese by birth, was raised by

parents who were born and raised in India. She lived in Guyana as an Indian woman, spoke Hindi, and had traditions that were clearly very Indian. My mother and her sister, born and raised in Guyana, speak with more pronounced accents when they are in one another's company but can sound perfectly Eurocentric when they are at work. My sister and I, although American by birth, can understand our Guyanese traditions, can understand the way our elder family members speak, and can appreciate the culture. Rose, a second-generation American, is living a different experience that me, her mom, my mom and aunt, and Ma could not understand.

In "Decolonizing the Mind," Ngugi wa Thiong'o defines *language* as a carrier and indicator of culture. In other words, language carries with it the history of the people who use it. With this definition, the language individuals use bears the weight of a people's history, but so does the language not used. Just like my parents' loss of Hindi shaped by their attendance at Guyanese schools built in the British colonial system, my American niece Rose has lost context and application for Guyanese patois as a result of her lack of exposure and usage. This is part of the ongoing legacy of colonialism. The concept of *settler colonialism*, upon which Indigenous genocide was predicated, continues as an effort to control and exploit Indigenous lands. This process of erasure functions mainly through land deprival but endures as a result of systemic and purposeful dehumanization through forced acculturation (Cromer et al., 2018). This also includes a severance from cultural and linguistic heritage. In my own ancestral legacy, Indians indentured to the Caribbean were explicitly denied or strongly discouraged from speaking in their native tongues and could only use English on the sugar plantations of Guyana (Hergash, 2021). Colonialism formed a gap that created a sort of culture lag, diluting people's language, traditions,

and culture over time, until it became unrecognizable over multiple generations, while morphing into its own new form of culture (Bahadur, 2013).

Upon reflection, I recognize moments in this journal entry in which I experienced dehumanization and reaffirmation that upheld and challenged my own beliefs about myself and others. When it comes to my language, or engagement with my own culture, I often consider my patterns of behavior that are a result of descending from and currently living in a colonized culture. In my personal life, I make efforts to decenter whiteness and seek out opportunities to engage in art and media with an emphasis on criticality: although I am a huge theater nerd, I see only a few shows a year now, due to a commitment to only consume art and media that centers on marginalized voices. When I go to the bookstore, I look for new authors of color to buy. When I listen to music, I inundate my playlists with music made by those from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) backgrounds. In my personal life, I work to push against the legacy of colonialism. In my professional life as a public school English teacher, however, I am less confident making that assertion. I wonder if the action steps I take in my personal life to engage with the world as a critical individual are reflected in my practice as an educator. I think often about the legacy of colonialism in my personal language and cultural expression. But how does coloniality live in my classroom practice? And, like the personal steps I take to push against white supremacist hegemony, in what ways do I engage students to think critically and take steps in their own lives to subvert the manifestations of colonialism?

Context of the Problem

Although America is no longer a British colony, the legacy of colonialism continues to shape national institutions and policies. The racialized capitalism of the United States of America emerged from the plantation economies that depended on slavery. Before the institution of

chattel slavery to fuel plantation economies, there was the genocide of Indigenous peoples in order to stake claims on lands. All institutions in modern America are built within this settler–native–slave dynamic (Tuck & Yang, 2012) that continues to shape the institution of schooling today. Those who fall within the native and slave categories are those deemed incapable of self-actualization, resulting in an ideological dehumanization of non-European peoples (Battiste, 2013). These undergirding racist ideas impact Americans daily, from day-to-day interpersonal interactions, representation in media, leadership, up through research and policy formations. For example, the now-debunked field of eugenics was used in the early 20th century to maintain the oppression of BIPOC people by perpetuating ideas about European traits as most desirable, good, or attractive. It was in 1900 when Dr. Paul Brandon Barringer presented at the Tri-State Medical Association of Virginia and the Carolinas that "African Americans' genetic tendency to savagery doomed them to revert to their primitive and barbaric status of their African ancestors" (Dorr, 2008, p. 21). He used his findings as an argument to support the idea that people of African descent should not be afforded the same rights as those of European descent. This social hierarchy was enforced and people continued to cling to these ideas in defense of white supremacy and superiority over others (Dorr, 2008).

Even today, empirical studies continue to build on the settler–native–slave foundation without a critical stance from which to analyze. For example, in a 2020 French study on trustworthiness in facial cues of European portraits, researchers coded features such as lower inner eyebrows, deeper indentations at the bridge of the nose, and shallow cheekbones as those characteristic of less trustworthy individuals (Safra et al., 2020). This research, published in a prestigious academic journal, perpetuates racist notions of features considered desirable by coding typically Eurocentric features as more trustworthy. Although these seem to be ideological

manifestations of colonialism, they continue to impact people of color in tangible ways. Modern racial bias as a form of dehumanization becomes obviously apparent with the growth of technology. This trustworthiness study could be used as a foundation for programmers writing algorithms for facial recognition software with applications from smartphones to police line-ups. The lack of representation in technological fields means that programmers do not examine their own bias when writing programs and algorithms. For example, in a 2008 viral video Chukwuemeka Afigbo documents an automatic soap dispenser that will not dispense soap to the hand of a Black person but will dispense to a white hand and a white paper towel. Denying humanity to those without Eurocentric physical attributes is increasingly well documented, especially with the advent of the smartphone.

The smartphone has also contributed to the rise in documentation of police brutality, an issue that exists at the intersection of colonialism, capitalism, and racism. The use of cell phones to video-record interactions with law enforcement has allowed an elevation in the national conversation around the disproportionately brutal treatment of Black people at the hands of police officers. In a 2016 study of 812 deaths resulting from lethal force from police from 2009 to 2012, Black people were killed at a rate 2.8 times higher than whites (DeGue, Fowler, & Calkins, 2016). Even with video evidence of race-based violence and continued protests, it is difficult to see colonization as the parent of American racism. BIPOC people are dehumanized in their daily lives, and though we no longer have Carlisle schools meant to forcibly assimilate and erase the Native identities of Indigenous peoples or the explicit denial of literacy instruction to Black slaves, students of color still contend with the less overt instantiations of colonialism and racism today.

One clear example is the daily walk-through metal detectors over 90,000 students in New York City schools take (Aaron & Ye, 2015). The manifestation of institutional racism is a complex concept: The use of metal detectors in urban schools is much more sinister than a mere safety concern. Of the more than 90,000 students who comply with this policy each day, 48% are Black and 38% are Hispanic (Aaron & Ye, 2015). Students scanned by metal detectors in NYC are forced through these literal barriers to their education, stripping them of their innocence, suggesting they are more dangerous, while denoting an inherent criminality in their existence. Just like in arguments following police brutality, or videos of Black students facing disproportionate disciplinary consequences in school, Black people are reduced to stereotypes or shallow representations of themselves to justify the unequal and brutal treatment they receive. It is the commitment to social hierarchy that creates a system of labeling and sorting that explicitly and implicitly privileges Eurocentric qualities and ideals (Battiste, 2013).

As educators, individual teachers play a significant role in upholding or challenging colonialism and racism in their classrooms through their interpersonal relationships. Teachers can offer pathways for students to engage critically with the status quo and empower them to ask questions about the world around them. I am reminded of an experience I had in an English class I taught as a newer teacher at a school with no metal detectors. That morning, a week or so before Halloween, the students were subjected to surprise metal detectors at the main entrance to the building. As the sixth-grade students in my first-period English class trickled in, I delayed the start of my lesson due to the significant delays caused by the long lines of kids waiting to enter the building. Students were visibly and audibly upset and my co-teacher and I opted to use the period to have kids express their thoughts and feelings. We spent the 40-minute period discussing metal detectors and listening to students share their opinions on the pros and cons of this safety

procedure. We ended the class commiserating with the students and commending them for sharing their thoughts and feelings with clarity. Some students even thanked us as they left for giving them an opportunity to share. Looking back on this day, I see all the ways I missed an opportunity to have students think about what exactly was happening, why it happened, and ways they could take action around the policy of random metal detection. In this way, I thought I was being a responsive critical educator. But I provided no pathway for students to work toward deconstructing, naming, and dismantling an event rooted in colonial practice.

Statement of the Problem

At the time of writing this dissertation**,** I am a high school English teacher. I am a founding member of a grade 6-12 school that serves a population almost exclusively made up of students from BIPOC backgrounds. I also serve in a formal teacher leadership role as the English Department leader and help shape the curricular and disciplinary initiatives in our school community. I have spent the last nine years grappling with my teacher practice and am always looking for the most effective ways to support the students and families I serve. As an English teacher and the department leader, I have a unique role in shaping not only the pedagogy of my own classroom but also in helping to impact the formalized practices in the school. Our school is made up of a diverse staff, coming from varied ethnic, racial, cultural, sexual, social, religious, and generational backgrounds. Because the culture and practices of the staff are shaped by individual experiences within the larger institution of schooling, it is necessary to establish the enduring ideologies of colonialism.

To situate racism as a manifestation of colonialism, I would first like to explore the context of the term *decolonizing* as I am using it. I want first to assert that decolonizing work exists in opposition to and as a result of colonization. The major function of colonization was to

own and occupy land in order to build European wealth. Settlers were active participants in the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of North America and subsequent enslavement of peoples of African descent. The waves of immigrants that flowed into North America over many decades are also forms of settlers in their occupation of land, albeit receiving varying degrees of access and opportunity. This settler–native–slave dynamic endures in the social and economic structures of today, which shapes the racism and classism of our current society:

> The settler positions himself as both superior and normal; the settler is natural, whereas the Indigenous inhabitant and the chattel slave are unnatural, even supernatural. Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6)

Decolonizing, though it can be aligned with, is not another term for social justice–focused or critical research. As asserted in Tuck and Yang (2012),

> Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym. (p. 3)

Decolonization is mainly concerned with "the abolition of land as property and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 26). In this study, the term

decolonize is used to establish my position as an anti-colonial educator who works to subvert the racism and capitalism that emerged as a result of the settler–native–slave dynamic.

U.S. institutions are built to concentrate and centralize colonial power, which is 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. 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. Among others, participating members in the schooling system include families, school-based staff, teachers, administrators, researchers, policy makers, and most importantly, students. In a traditional schooling model, on a typical school day, high school students come into contact most frequently with teachers, usually seeing anywhere from 5 to 10 teachers in a day. Teachers, whether they recognize it or not, have a significant impact on students' experiences in schools. In the academic literature of the past 20 years especially, there

continues to be an ongoing effort to push against the hegemonic assumptions that pervade education: In 2000, Gay offered culturally responsive pedagogy as a way forward in teacher training; Yosso (2005) used a critical race analysis to provide a new paradigm for teachers to think about their students' home lives with community cultural wealth theory; and Paris (2012) took a new approach to culturally responsive pedagogy with culturally sustaining pedagogy, which has become the standard against which new teaching and learning frameworks have been developed in states like New York. Although decolonizing work has necessary structural components that require addressing Indigenous sovereignty and rights, teachers have the capacity for individual changes in their classrooms that can lead to the larger dismantling of oppressive systems. As outlined by the global solidarity local action site,

> Decolonization can start in many places. This is largely because colonialism's influence spans across so many different aspects of our lives. Capitalism, racism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and Eurocentric forms of knowledge production are all things that perpetuate colonial power dynamics and structures that determine the distribution of power among people. By deconstructing each of these aspects of colonialism—among others—we can begin to decolonize. (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021)

These individual and smaller changes can help further the ultimate decolonizing goals of repatriation of Indigenous land and life as outlined by Indigenous scholars Tuck and Yang in 2012. Because teachers have such an enormous capacity for shaping student outcomes, it is necessary to examine the ways in which teachers uphold and push against racism as the legacy of colonialism in their own classrooms.

As established in the work of Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nişancıoğlu (2018), "the significance of Empire in shaping institutions of knowledge production and disciplinary canons

spans the entire academy; every discipline carries with it colonial modalities of thinking that have eluded adequate scrutiny" (p. 26). While all content areas are shaped by the racist legacy of colonialism, there is an added necessity to decolonizing work in humanities courses (Sinclair, 2019). Modern efforts to teach history from more diverse perspectives include a push to center non-white voices and experiences. However, the decolonization of the history classroom falls short with either a complete rejection of Western knowledge or an integrative comparative approach (Meda, 2019; Smith, 1999). This lack of criticality in history teachers' execution of historical examinations perpetuates oppressive ideals instead of enacting revolutionary pedagogy. Thus, the start of decolonizing classrooms becomes most logically the work of English teachers. The discipline of English is one of literacy and critical thinking where there are fewer mandates on curriculum and content of the courses. A key component of decolonization is deconstruction. In other words, to understand racism as a legacy of colonialism, we first must be able to deconstruct and trace the enduring notions of the settler–native–slave dynamic. Instruction in literacy and literature is, at its core, the teaching of deconstruction. English teachers ask students to deconstruct sentences and phrases, deconstruct patterns in texts, and deconstruct overarching concepts and themes. The approach to decolonizing through deconstruction is outlined by Gurminder Bhambra as follows:

> a **deconstruct-reconnect-reconstruct** approach to create a history that not only critically examines the role of enslavement and oppression, but also gives space to incorporate overlooked histories — the people written *out* of history, many of whom had expansive societies before colonization. The reconnect and reconstruct aspects make an effort to acknowledge marginalized cultures in their resilience and complexity beyond their classification as colonized subjects. Bhambra argues that the reworking of incomplete

> histories will help us destabilize Western/European exceptionalism and dominance and gain a better understanding of the world from multiple perspectives. Looking back to understand the globe and vastly different cultures on it is also key to creating space for those cultures to continue to exist and flourish. (Belfi & Sandiford, 2021).

The development of critical literacies in an English class are the critical literacies necessary to engage in decolonizing work. If students cannot interrogate and understand the systems in which they exist, they cannot work toward the ultimate decolonizing goal of establishing Indigenous sovereignty.

English teachers have an immense influence on the ways students think, learn, and engage with the world around them. Literature provides a venue for students to learn about experiences that are different from their own, develop empathy, and interrogate the nature of the human condition. High-quality literacy instruction allows students to access not only physical literature but also gives them an increased ability to identify and analyze epistemological patterns in their lives. In their individual classrooms, English teachers have an incredible capacity to transform systems of oppression by providing students with opportunities to engage critically with the larger world. But, just as English teachers can support students in the subversion and transformation of oppressive systems, they can also reproduce them. English teachers may place increased emphasis on studying canonical works of literature, which are disproportionately written by white men, thus denying students opportunities to engage with written content from more diverse perspectives. This perpetuates a hierarchy modeled after the settler–native–slave social classifications formed in the image of colonial values in which students are dehumanized and treated as mechanisms within the larger capitalist colonial machine. As an individual English teacher and critical pedagogue working with the colonized

schooling system, it becomes my obligation to humanize students in the curricular and pedagogical decisions I make.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

In education, there exists ongoing efforts in the anti-colonial spirit: Attempts have been made to include more diverse authors (Boyd et al., 2014), statues glorifying perpetrators of race-based violence are being removed from public places (Taylor, 2020), and cultures and language from BIPOC groups continue to gain recognition in the American classroom (Fuhrman, 2020). However, most of these reforms do not actively shift policy and practice for long-term change that establishes Indigenous sovereignty. In the current political climate, it is easy to make changes under the guise of respectability politics without considering more profound and impactful means of deconstructing and dismantling a pervasive system. In efforts to re-shape or reform schooling outside of the image of colonialism, there has always existed the need for large structural change.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 has provided a catalyst for long-needed, large-scale structural changes in schools. As an English teacher in an urban high school, I am forced to straddle the boundaries between educating, affirming, loving, and supporting students while also equipping them with the tools necessary to successfully navigate a world outside of high school. I also want to note the complexity of teaching BIPOC students to navigate the conventions and styles of inductive and deductive reasoning in English, which in itself was a tool for settler control. In the teaching and learning world of the COVID-19 pandemic, I am doing so during a massive reimagination of what schooling is and how it functions in the daily lives of students. The reimagination of schooling provides a unique opportunity for transformation. Schools and teachers are at a moment where the choices they make can set precedent and

become permanent policy in the new world of hybrid and remote learning in K-12 schools. With the consequences of such decisions being so steep, teachers at the crossroads between status quo schooling and the new frontier of remote schooling have two ways forward. They can choose to reinscribe what has been, taking with them all the vestiges of colonial oppression that pervade the educational system, or they can forge ahead, blazing a new pathway toward transformative change by unmaking colonial practice and creating new, equitable, democratic classrooms. Recently, a colleague from another school posted their syllabus in an online teacher forum, asking colleagues for feedback on book recommendations. They wrote that their syllabus needed to be "decolonized." What they were asking colleagues to suggest were more BIPOC authors they could include as major texts. The response from teachers across the country fell into three major categories: (1) colleagues who flooded the comments with suggestions for texts, (2) colleagues who complained about "respectability politics" and the loss of the literary canon, and (3) people like me who offered resources about "decolonizing" and explained the differences between diversifying reading lists and "decolonizing." After seeing my post, multiple colleagues reached out to me privately to ask for more resources, for clarification on the definitions I provided, or to share additional resources they had access to. In this current socio-political climate, it seems more and more teachers, especially teachers of English literature, are interested in decolonizing their classrooms but are not sure what that means or how to do it. Therefore, this study aims to showcase one teacher's authentic process working toward decolonization. This study examined how the actions of one English teacher, within a restructuring and reimagining of the institution of education, both reproduces and transforms a colonized classroom in a virtual space. This study illuminates for teachers the path of transformative change by reifying the

practices that support a dismantling of a colonized educational system and by critically examining to discard the practices that serve to maintain the colonial center.

Context of the Study

This study took place at Community School A, a grade 6-12 public, urban high school. The school serves more than 500 BIPOC students, all who receive free or reduced lunch. Families who qualify for free or reduced lunch have an annual income of less than $50,000 per family of four. I examined my own actions and meaning-making process as a high school English teacher and teacher leader. Courses examined in this study included two co-taught 10th-grade English courses and one 12th-grade advanced placement English literature and composition course. I also examined my experiences as the English department leader in an effort to decolonize my leadership choices.

Community School A was opened with a sixth-grade class of fewer than 100 students. Community School A was founded using principles of critical pedagogy. As it truly is a community school, most Community School A students live in the surrounding neighborhoods and district. There are currently over 20,000 public school students in the district being served in over 50 elementary, middle, and high schools. According to the school data, approximately 44% of students in the district identify as Black, approximately 44% of students identify as Hispanic, less than 8% of students identify as Asian, less than 2% of students identify as white, and less than 1% of students identify as multi-racial. More than 85% of students in the district are classified as economically disadvantaged. More than 20% of students are classified as students with disabilities, while 14% of students are designated as English Language Learners. Community School A's student population is generally comparable to the greater district, except for large differences in percentages for both the Black and Hispanic racial groups, and the

percentage of English Language Learners. The school sits on land that has a long history of dispossession. The land and neighborhood were deemed undesirable and in some ways uninhabitable for many reasons that I cannot further disclose due to confidentiality. This study followed my experiences in the 2020–2021 school year as I attempted to reimagine my own classroom within the parameters of the school district's evolving policies.

Research Questions

This study focused on the actions and decisions of one teacher during the 20202021 school year. More specifically, this study examined the ways in which colonial structures in instruction and leadership were made and unmade during a reimagination of schooling. The shift to hybrid/blended learning as a primary modality for most students offered an opportunity to examine the ways in which codified colonial structures are remade or subverted during the ongoing changes. This research was guided by the following questions:

> RQ1: How do ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of colonialism shape one teacher's efforts to decolonize their classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic? RQ2: In what ways does one teacher attempt to maintain epistemological and material control over students during remote instruction? RQ3: How does one teacher work to humanize themself, colleagues, students, and families within dehumanizing circumstances through a decolonizing process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy?

Research Methods and Design

This autoethnographic study took place during the 2020–2021 school year. From a macro standpoint, the research is grounded in decolonizing theory and uses the deconstructing, rehumanizing framework to examine my actions as one teacher within a larger colonized system.

I used the critical constructivist framework, both as theory and method, to situate my own reflection and critical analysis of my practice. To more closely examine the "why" of my decision-making process, I—in a mosaic approach and among other theories—grappled with my teacher identity through the theories of Indo-Caribbean feminism and coolie feminism. Presented through a narrative analysis of my personal journals, daily field notes, meeting notes, and teacher-created artifacts, I documented my own efforts to decolonize my English classroom, specifically in my pedagogical choices and leadership. The process of analysis was guided by my adaptation of Lyiscott's (2019) fugitive literacies framework applied to Smith's framework of the line, the center, and the outside wherein I examined my personal journal entries using my own decolonial compass.

Primary Theories

Decolonizing theory aims to deconstruct, name, and actively work against the institutional manifestations of colonialism. By dismantling the colonial concept of the line, the center, and the outside, the intention of decolonizing work is to create a society formed outside of the shadow of white supremacy: "Decolonizing, once viewed as the formal process of handling over the instruments of the government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic, and psychological divesting of colonial power" (Smith, 1999, p. 98). In schools, decolonizing classrooms involves an active deconstructing, naming, and subversion of colonial power. This involves schools working to decenter Eurocentric values in their pedagogy, including the content and execution of curriculum and discipline. Used as an overarching theory, decolonizing theory provided the backdrop for the analysis conducted in this study. To situate the social and political context of this study, I used critical constructivism, a theory that asserts that all knowledge is historically and socially

constructed. In *Teachers as Researchers*, Kincheloe (1991) wrote, “Research is an act which engages teachers in the dynamics of the educational process, as it brings to consciousness the creative tension between social and educational theory and classroom practice” (p. 17). As a critical constructivist researcher, I examined my actions as a teacher using the social and historical perspectives of colonization in a theoretical and methodological bricolage.

In addition, my analysis was informed by Indo-Caribbean feminism (Mohammed, 2016). As a twice-removed Indian American, much of my lived experience has been informed by notions of what it means to be Indian and what that means for my American identity. Interrogating the very personal experiences of my day as an educator required an intimate interrogation of the self. Decolonizing theory, critical constructivism, and Indo-Caribbean feminism taken together situated my perspective as a Brown woman serving BIPOC students in a large educational institution, shaped in the image of colonialism. Placed in conversation with one another, these theories form my decolonial compass and provide a tool for navigating the new geography of remote learning.

Conclusion

Although decolonizing the entire school system will take a larger, sweeping, more systematic approach, it is within the power of individual teachers and schools to begin dismantling pedagogical practices aligned with colonialism. This research contributes to the existing literature on decolonizing the classroom by examining how one teacher worked toward decolonization during an unprecedented national shift to remote learning that sought to remake the oppression of school in virtual spaces. This study was an authentic presentation of my experiences as a public school teacher working to decolonize my classroom during a massive redefinition of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020–2021 school year.

Key Terms

Colonize: The movement and migration of white Europeans to the North and South American continents wherein they developed enduring systems and structures to subjugate, dehumanize, and commodify Indigenous and African peoples and subsequent groups of Brown people.

Decolonize: The specific process of deconstructing, naming, and acting against ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy.

Deconstruction: An act of breaking an event or action down into smaller parts to analyze and expose internal assumptions and/or contradictions in order to subvert them.

White supremacy: The ideology that asserts white people are a race that is superior and should therefore dominate and/or subjugate all other races in society.

Dehumanize: A process of denying rights to individuals or groups. The process of dehumanization relies on an assertion that certain peoples or groups are undeserving or incapable of self-determination.

Institutional Racism: The laws, regulations, and policies that discriminate against people of color on the basis of race or privilege people who identify as white.

Respectability Politics: The use of similarities between dominant and oppressed groups to enact socio-political changes for the benefit of the oppressed group.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

How decolonizing research informs the decolonial compass

When the 2018 *Black Panther* movie was released, my entire school community was brimming with excitement. Local movie theaters were teeming with school-aged kids on field trips to enjoy the historical moment in American cinema. Kids fell in love with the different characters and imitated their favorite moments such as M'Baku's war cries, T'Challa's crossed arm salute, and General Okoye's fierce fighting moves. As I enjoyed the movie, one character remained a significant standout. From her first moment on screen, Princess Shuri was the only character I had eyes for. Not only was she portrayed by the Guyanese-born actress Letitia Wright, but she represented all the things I love about a hero: she was brave, intelligent, independent, and fought to protect the ones she loved. She remains my favorite character from the movie, especially due to her zinging one-liners. More than once throughout the movie, she refers to a white American character as "colonizer."

When I first watched the movie, these moments made me laugh. But as I reflected on the content of the movie with students, we continually returned to these instances in discussion. Kids asked over and over, what exactly is a "colonizer"? In these frequent classroom discussions, I explained the historical facts around colonialism to students and asked students what connections they saw between the historical facts I was sharing and the instances depicted in the movie. Conversations were interesting, but not rich, as students struggled to articulate their comparisons and contrasts between the movie and historical fact. Although students did not reach definitive conclusions, I considered myself lucky that students were able to pose these sorts of questions and begin to explore their own answers in my English classroom. In retrospect, I can now acknowledge that what I failed to examine with them was the legacy of colonialism, which is

why they could not connect what may have seemed like ancient history to the exciting and engaging plot of the movie. In this review, I would like to situate my own understandings and pose both philosophical and epistemological questions, to briefly recount the European colonization of the American continent, describe the colonial tools of oppression used to maintain control, and examine colonialism as the parent of modern racism and classism. I also examine the manifestations of colonialism in American schools, particularly in regards to the curriculum and disciplinary practices of the modern English teacher.

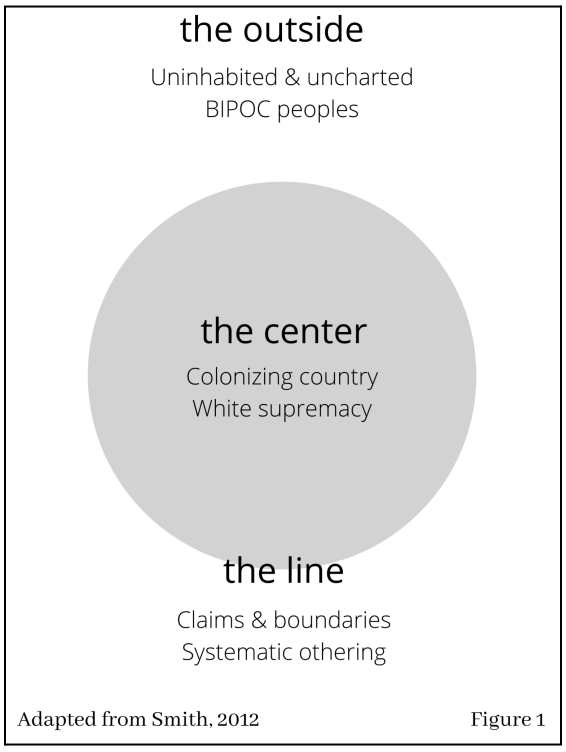
Defining Imperialism and Colonialism

Colonialism is the practice of imperialism, or a belief that a country has the right to extend its presence and influence through the use of military force or political control. In other words, imperialism is the ideology that drives the practice of colonialism (Thiong'o, 1986). Although mass colonization of the North American continent by Europeans began in the 17th century, its impact still resonates across the globe today: "Imperialism is total: it has economic, political, military, cultural, and psychological consequences for the people of the world" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 2). Today, with the rise of communication technologies and a worldwide trade economy, the effects of imperialism are viewed through a more global lens. Through a process of social classification, colonialism exists as the axis upon which Euro-centered capitalism rotates (Quijano, 2000). Thus, colonialism depends on the enduring legacy of social classification systems and capitalist ideals (Battiste, 2013). Because colonialism existed at the founding of the American experiment, the protection of a social hierarchy through economic control continues to pervade all aspects of American society.

The Line, the Center, and the Outside

To understand the long-lasting and deeply rooted consequences of the colonial system, it is first necessary to understand its framework. As outlined in her New Zealand–based work *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) states, "There is a very specific spatial vocabulary of colonialism which can be assembled around three concepts: (1) the line, (2) the center, and (3) the outside" (p. 55). The line represents the marked boundaries of colonial power both physically and symbolically. The center refers to a permanent orientation toward the colonial center. The outside is used to describe where Indigenous peoples and cultures were relegated and labeled as oppositional to colonial interests. The concepts of the line, the center, and the outside can be applied to an understanding of colonization on the North American continent as well (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Smith's line, center, and outside



In the 16th century, the major Imperial powers included the European countries of Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and England, whose leaders sent explorers to venture beyond their own lands in pursuit of wealth. In a desire to find and control the best trade routes between themselves and countries farther to the East, the five major colonizing countries expanded the scope of their exploration, heading West. Each of these colonizing powers made claims to various parts of North and South America, with the British ultimately occupying significant stretches of land on the East Coast of North America. Upon arrival to lands formerly unknown, the European colonizers were met with Indigenous communities already living on lands they chose to seize. To rationalize their actions, the colonizing powers engaged in a systematic and deliberate erasure and dehumanization of Indigenous peoples by positioning them as inherently inferior to European settlers (Battiste, 2013). With the ultimate goal of protecting their capitalist interests, European colonists justified their occupation of Indigenous spaces by denying the personhood of Indigenous peoples. Natives of the North American continent were labeled "savages" so they could be subjugated and exploited (Smith, Tuck, & Yang, 2019).

To maintain control of the newly established colonies, a concerted effort was made to preserve the Eurocentric identities of the colonists to protect the colonial center. The creation of an "Other" label and attachment of the moniker to anyone who was not fully European disallowed complex and united identities (Smith, 1999). Colonialism in all its consequential forms continues to permeate all aspects of American society. From its earliest inception, colonialism existed to sustain itself and constantly shifted to maintain its orientation as central. To keep its central orientation, the notion of who or what was on the "outside" continued to shift. A characteristic presupposed about Indigenous peoples is that they did not have the ability to use their minds or be self-determining (Smith, 2012). This belief allowed the colonizers to uphold

the European/Other dynamic by labeling Indigenous peoples as savages. Missionaries came to "civilize" the savages by teaching them the language of English and forcing Christian notions of God on them. There was a purposeful stripping of native identities and a denial of personhood to non-Europeans. The notion of "savagery" or non-European peoples as less than human also shaped the brutal practice of American slavery and continues to inform racist ideology today. Therefore, the systematic and purposeful dehumanization of peoples that were perceived to threaten the Eurocentric identity was essential to the perpetuation of the colonial center. This Eurocentric orientation continues to contribute to the systematic dehumanization of communities through social and political institutions, including schools.

Colonial Tools of Oppression

Coloniality is a systematic method used to concentrate European economic power and control: "The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth: what they produced, how they produced it and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life" (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16). For the purposes of this review, the major features of coloniality are organized according to a forcible seizing and control of people in both the epistemological and material sense. By "material control of people," I refer to their physical spaces, communities, and bodies (Tuck & Yang, 2012). The "epistemological control of people" refers to their personal and communal identities and minds. I briefly review the history of material and epistemological colonial control and examine the ways it manifests in American schooling today.

Epistemological Tools of Oppression

Epistemological manifestations of colonialism, including the legacy of race-based slavery, are in some ways more sinister than that of the material. The systematic dehumanization

of people—placing all peoples of non-European descent firmly on the outside of the colonial center—leads to a colonization of the mind (Thiong'o, 1986), wherein colonized peoples began to take up the mantle of their own oppression inadvertently but perpetually reproduced it. Because of its less tangible nature, it becomes less easy to name and identify and thus more difficult to combat. In this section, I review the history and current iterations of epistemological manifestations of colonialism.

Social Classification Through Dehumanization

The enduring concept of dehumanization, which in its original colonial form was more overt, has shifted. Upon arrival to new lands, European colonists rationalized their treatment of indigenous peoples by labeling them as savages, incapable of self-determination. Thus, colonizers attempted to justify forced conversions to Christianity, compulsory schooling for native children, and a rejection of non-European traditions. This allowed colonial powers to project an image of benevolence, when truly they were interested only in creating structures for managing wealth and maintaining power (Grande, 2004). From its initial establishment, the institution of schooling was inextricably linked to Christianity: "Saving souls and colonizing minds became part and parcel of the same colonialist project" (Grande, 2004, p. 12). Missionaries established schools with the support of the federal government and worked to assimilate the Natives by erasing their identities. Compulsory schooling for Natives in America was intended not to "civilize" the Indigenous population but to provide a means for control and labor exploitation (Grande, 2004).

Through a colonization of the young Indigenous minds at the Carlisle Indian Schools, the European establishment could continue to exist at the expense of non-European communities. In these compulsory schools, native children were kidnapped from their families; separated from

their linguistic, spiritual, and cultural traditions; and taught to value and believe only what their colonial teachers allowed (Grande, 2004). All the while, students at these schools would spend their time plowing fields, caring for crops, and performing other labor: “Indian education was never simply about the desire to ‘civilize’ or even deculturalize a people, but rather, from its very inception, it was a project designed to colonize Indian minds as a means of gaining access to Indian labor, land, and resources” (Grande, 2004, p. 19). Teachers focused on instruction in the English language, controlling the literacy practices and values Indigenous students developed. Colonizers profited from the exploited labor and resources gained from a forced control of native minds. This practice pervaded the institution of schooling, including through higher education:

> The foundation of European higher education institutions in colonized territories itself became an infrastructure of empire, an institution and actor through which the totalising logic of domination could be extended; European forms of knowledge were spread, local indigenous knowledge suppressed, and native informants trained. (Bhambra, Gabriel, Nişancıoğlu, 2018, p. 5)

In this systematic and purposeful erasure of Indigenous epistemologies, European knowledge was centered and lauded. Indigenous students were acculturated from the start of their schooling experiences to the end.

Natives, although the initial victims of this systematic dehumanization, were not the only group to be subjugated and devalued for colonial interests. In keeping with capitalist goals, African men, women, and children were stolen from their native lands, enslaved, and transported to colonial America for material wealth. Control of the education, language, cultural beliefs, and values of a peoples, which was already well established with the Indigenous peoples of America, was used to maintain the colonial center during the enslavement and oppression of African

peoples as well. Slave codes, which were laws written for the governance and control of enslaved peoples, denied almost all rights to those in bondage:

> Slaves had few legal rights: in court their testimony was inadmissible in any litigation involving whites; they could make no contract, nor could they own property; even if attacked, they could not strike a white person. There were numerous restrictions to enforce social control: slaves could not be away from their owner's premises without permission; they could not assemble unless a white person was present; they could not own firearms; they could not be taught to read or write, nor could they transmit or possess "inflammatory" literature; they were not permitted to marry. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020, paragraph 5)

Among the litany of rights denied to African slaves, particularly notable in this research, is the purposeful denial of access to literacy and "inflammatory" literature. This suggests that legislators recognized the potential for liberation through literacy and sought to control their minds in order to maintain physical control over slaves. Through these dehumanizing practices, Africans and Natives were relegated to lower social classes—a notion that is constantly reinforced by the roots of colonialism in our educational structure.

Materials Tools of Oppression

Colonial oppression in the material form, while more tangible than epistemological oppression, can be relegated to a forgotten historical past that seems to have little relevance in today's society. However, it is imperative to recognize that although colonial oppression in its material form no longer uses practices like chattel slavery of African peoples, colonial efforts to exert power through economic and physical control pervade the BIPOC communities in America. In this section, I review a few of the material tools of oppression used in Early America

while connecting them to current practices meant to deliberately disenfranchise and usurp the livelihoods of BIPOC communities.

Control of space and place

As previously established, the primary function of colonial capitalism was to obtain wealth and power through the subjugation and control of people outside of the colonial center. European colonists, who were sometimes welcomed and sometimes met with conflict by Indigenous peoples on the American continent, achieved this through a series of actions that ultimately consigned Indigenous peoples to reservations, without the representation or the full rights of citizens. One example is The Indian Removal Act of 1830 signed by President Andrew Jackson, which offered land West of the Mississippi River to Natives in exchange for the land they had lost due to the colonizing ambitions of manifest destiny. This duplicitous agreement resulted in the forcible mass movement of Native peoples, leading to the deaths of thousands of people in an already dwindling population (Stewart, 2007). The decades of disease—both literal and figurative—along with the systematic erasure of Native identity through schooling for the exploitation of Native knowledge and labor contributed to a significant reduction in the Native population, tantamount to a genocide. The Natives who survived the brutal travel, which was fraught with obstacles both natural and created by white settlers, ended their journey on reservations, which were a fraction of the larger American continent once previously occupied by hundreds of different tribes. The American government was able to force Natives into designated spaces within what was once their territory.

Colonial control depended on the dispossession and exploitation of Indigenous and African people's places, spaces, and physical bodies. During chattel enslavement of African peoples, in addition to the physical control of people's bodies, slave owners attempted to exert

power over their minds. Although the colonial approach to Natives was systematic identity erasure and forced assimilation to Eurocentric ways of being, in the colonial system, African slaves were not afforded the option of humanity. Stolen from their native homes, African peoples were traded, bought, and sold as property. Under the ownership of largely white slave masters, African peoples faced generations of enslavement and suffered horrific brutality: rape, murder, and whippings were commonly used as tools for control. Over hundreds of years, the transatlantic slave trade resulted in millions of Africans living and dying on the American continent. The descendants of slaves, although technically liberated from the bondage of physical slavery, continue to suffer the particular anti-Black racism that was born of American white supremacy (Hannah-Jones, Elliott, Hughes, & Silverstein, 2019).

The story of the American Dream is one perpetuated in popular media, books, schools, and policy. However, this myth of promised capitalist success if one can pull themselves up by their metaphorical bootstraps ignores the legacy of material oppression through colonialism. BIPOC people continue to navigate systems that are built to control their physical spaces and bodies and perpetually situate them on the outside of the colonial center (Smith, Tuck & Yang, 2019). To see modern evidence of this, one need only look at the policies of redlining that continue to shape the American housing market. Redlining was a policy of the purposeful segregation of America's housing, identifying predominantly white neighborhoods as desirable and low-risk places to live and predominantly Black neighborhoods as high-risk places to live. The labels of "high risk" on particular communities made it considerably more difficult for Black people to obtain the credit and mortgages necessary to purchase homes through overt denial or through predatory lending practices like inflated interest rates. Although this may seem unrelated to the manifestations of colonial control in schooling, it is important to consider the intersection

of school funding and real estate. Public schools are funded locally in part through property taxes, which, in segregated urban communities, are lower than those of the suburbs (Chingos & Blagg, 2017). This results in a plethora of issues that contribute to widening educational disparities between BIPOC students in urban communities and their white peers. In a 2003 report from the U.S. General Accounting Office, documented issues included higher enrollment leading to larger class sizes, lower teacher salaries resulting in more first-year and inexperienced teachers, lower spending per pupil, older school buildings, and less resource availability such as updated technology and libraries. The redlining practices were a strategic practice used to segregate white and Black communities and schools, and due to inequitable educational funding, this resulted in many BIPOC families being trapped in generational cycles of poverty.

Controlling the physical bodies and spaces of BIPOC people stems from colonial capitalism and is continually reproduced in American society. In American schooling, teachers are complicit in the reproduction of these systems of epistemological and material control of BIPOC students. In the next section, I examine how teachers reproduce and transform colonial schooling in terms of curriculum and discipline, which I argue are tools of material and epistemological control.

Colonizing: Teachers as Reproducers of Colonial Schooling

The original colonialism embedded in the structures of American schooling continues to pervade the practices of teachers today. Although Natives are no longer explicitly exploited for labor and denied access to their heritage in Carlisle schools, and African American children are no longer explicitly denied literacy instruction by law, a pervasive reproduction of colonial oppression and dehumanization continues in teacher practice. After reviewing the existing literature using keyword search terms such as the many forms of “colonial” and the many forms

of "school," I have organized the studies into two major categories: colonialism reproduced in curriculum and colonialism reproduced in discipline. Colonialism in both the epistemological and material sense involves the mental and physical control of peoples. Teachers as crafters and conductors of curriculum reproduce mental control, while teachers enforce classroom discipline in ways that subjugate and control student bodies. In this section, I review the role of the teacher in particular as the reproducer and transformer of colonial schooling in regards to curriculum and discipline.

Reproducing Colonialism in Curriculum

The K-12 curriculum is inextricably linked to the legacy of colonialism in the United States. What students have been exposed to and the ways they have been asked to acquire and demonstrate knowledge have been largely in keeping with Eurocentric ways of knowing and being (Chalmers, 2019; Conrad, 2018; Ware & Ware, 1996). To push against hegemony shaped by white, Christian, Eurocentric values, efforts have been made in the K-12 school curriculum of the past 30 years especially to create classroom spaces that are more reflective of the diverse student populations within them. One such movement was the push against the typical literary canon toward the use of more multicultural works. Emerging from the work by Sleeter and Grant (1987), multiculturalism was presented in the early 1990s as a way to provide more equal learning experiences for students from diverse backgrounds by affirming student identities in the larger schooling context (Nieto & Bode, 1992). In their 1987 study, Sleeter and Grant named a focus on education for people of color as a central goal of multicultural educators. James Banks (2019) documented the evolution of multicultural education and provided educators with the theories and methods for effective implementation in increasingly diverse classrooms. He named an inclusion of more diverse texts in standard instruction as a major focus of multicultural

educators. Although the movement toward multicultural texts is not explicitly framed in relation to colonialism, because it works to create more equitable classrooms by decentering white male hegemony and valuing diverse forms and expressions of knowledge, this push for curricular reform can be understood as an effort to decolonize the content of the English classroom.

Because teachers of English literature have the most curricular freedom of all the content areas, it seems the most logical place to begin instructional practices that can work to subvert colonized curriculum. For high school English teachers in particular, this means an examination and shifting of the texts students are asked to work with both because of and in spite of their designation in relation to the literary canon. Although there is no master list of what the Western literary canon is, what qualifies as a canonical work continues to evolve (Guillory, 1993). The evolution of the canon rests on the shoulders of teachers, who perpetuate literary values within their classrooms. The major debates around what qualifies as a work of the canon have largely been driven by institutional agendas and by what continues to be included and excluded on major syllabi (Guillory, 1993). Notions of what makes quality literature have historically been shaped by white, male, Christian sensibilities with authors like William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Charles Dickens continually topping the lists despite scholars like Kolbas pointing out that texts labeled as canon emerge from particular historical and material conditions and should be categorized as canon based on their aesthetic content (Kolbas, 2001).

Although some scholars support a more fluid understanding of what literary canon is and how it can be implemented in the classroom, many English teachers cite a need for the study of a "traditional" literary canon as a reason they cannot focus more on multicultural texts in their classrooms (Stallworth et al., 2006). Teachers of English literature at the high school level in particular may choose their classroom texts based on what books they were taught in school

while also teaching to prepare students for standardized tests. Using college entrance exams like the SAT as standards for curriculum in the English classroom is another way the legacy of colonialism lives in today's classroom. Standardized exams have roots in the racist eugenics movement of the 1920s and originated with Carl Brigham's effort to use standardized testing to support an ethnic social hierarchy within immigrant groups from Europe. Such tests unfairly disadvantage BIPOC students. In their curricular choices, teachers reinforce white hegemony, not only because the voices they elevate in their content are overwhelmingly those of white men but also because of the privileging of Eurocentric conventions of language and expression (Skerrett, 2010). Students can dutifully study texts spanning centuries that are considered "classics" while learning only one major narrative form. Students in English classrooms are using literature as windows to imagine complex experiences outside of their own. When the world is epistemologically represented through the narrow lens of white, male writers, students are imbibing the subliminal cultural and linguistic values connected to the content, inadvertently acculturating their identities through literary experience. Even well-intentioned teachers, in an effort to help students prepare for college admissions and standardized tests, are working to maintain the colonial center by inadvertently privileging Eurocentric epistemologies in their curriculum and classroom practice, resulting in a reproduction of colonial schooling through curriculum.

Reproducing Colonialism in Discipline

School discipline in its current form has been shaped out of a colonial effort to control and subjugate people through a systematic process of dehumanization (Smith, 1999). The Carlisle Indian School, the last of which closed in 1918, was created to "kill the Indian in him and save the man" (Pratt, 1892, p. 46) and informed institutionalized discipline and control in

American schools. After the mandatory integration of schools as a result of the federal supreme court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, in addition to Native American students, students of color came up against an integrated school system that was not built to support and sustain them, and instead continued the practices of subjugation, assimilation to Eurocentrism, and dehumanization.

Policies on regulating student behavior exist at the intersection of racism and classism as informed by capitalist colonialism (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). As individuals who exist and participate in a colonized society, teachers are not immune from perpetuating colonial oppression in their classrooms. The legacy of colonialism becomes evident upon closer inspection of any disciplinary policy. Take for example the citywide behavioral expectations of the New York City Department of Education. Within this disciplinary framework, there are five tiers of behavioral infractions: (1) Uncooperative/noncompliant behavior, (2) Disorderly behavior, (3) Disruptive behavior, (4) Aggressive or injurious/harmful behavior, and (5) Seriously dangerous or violent behavior. Within this framework, noncompliant behaviors include failing to provide school officials with required identification, failure to wear a required school uniform, or engaging in verbally rude or disrespectful behavior. With school uniform and identification policies, there is an implied power structure that contributes to the dehumanization of students. Student identities are viewed through deficit perspectives, reducing them to the information on their identification cards and their level of compliance with standardized attire. In every approach to discipline, policies intended to regulate student behavior have only exacerbated racist practices that disproportionately impact students of color (Berwick, 2015). Viewed from a critical standpoint, practices requiring students to wear uniforms and carry identification are informed by racist policies that are vestiges of colonial assimilation efforts.

Teachers attempting to maintain the least disruptive environment in their classrooms follow the standards set by behavioral policies and inadvertently also ascribe to colonial oppression. Discipline research within United States schools demonstrates significant disparities between students of color and white students. In a 2011 study, Skiba et al. found that despite racial variation in the frequency of infractions, Black students are suspended 54% of the time as compared to 29% of the time for their white peers (Skiba et al., 2011). Native American students are also over-referred for disciplinary consequences as compared to their white peers (Whitford & Levine-Donnerstein, 2014). When it comes to regulating student behavior, students of color are over-policed when compared to their white peers, regardless of the type of infraction. According to a 2008 study, Wallace et al. found that "racial and ethnic differences in the percentages of students who engage in these behaviors [drug use, alcohol use, gun possession] are relatively small" (p. 53). However, "American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students are consistently more likely than white youth to receive school discipline and Asian American youth are consistently less likely than all other groups of youth to be disciplined in school" (Wallace et al., 2008, p. 53). Students are disciplined for their failure to meet any classroom expectations from staying seated and silent during instruction, to turning in assignments by teacher-set deadlines. When teachers fail to examine the factors that shape the standards for classroom behavior, they ascribe to and perpetuate Eurocentric behaviors, further disenfranchising BIPOC students. Disproportionate disciplinary measures have been widely documented in the academic literature. Attributed in some part to teacher bias and lack of training, disparities in the discipline are a result of the intersections of a larger schooling system and individual teachers purposefully and/or inadvertently working to maintain the colonial center.

Decolonizing Work: Teachers as Transformers of Colonial Schooling

Studies show that teachers inadvertently or willingly reproduce colonial structures of oppression, but when teachers have agency or the drive to do so, their work can subvert colonial oppression and push against hegemony to create a more liberated and transformative space for themselves and their students. In their book *Teacher Leadership*, Lieberman and Miller (2004) stated,

> When teachers cast off the mantle of technical and managed worker and assume new roles as researchers, meaning makers, scholars, and inventors, they expand the vision of who they are and what they do. They come to view themselves and are viewed by others as intellectuals engaged in inquiry about teaching and learning. Central to this expanded vision of teaching is the idea that teachers are also leaders, educators who can make a difference in schools and schooling now and in the future. (p. 11)

Teachers at the center of the classroom are integral to efforts in decolonizing schooling. In this section, I examine the existing literature on teacher practices that work toward decolonizing their schooling both in terms of curriculum and discipline.

Transformation Through Curriculum

Because a major tool of colonial oppression was a process of dehumanization with the aim of social control through school curriculum (Apple, 2004), any efforts to humanize students within the context of curriculum are all aimed at decolonizing schooling. Humanizing schooling has long been documented in the academic literature. It was in 1970 when Paulo Freire first wrote,

> The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons would be meaningless. This struggle is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is

> not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed. (p. 44)

Here, Freire (1970) is recognizing that continued dehumanization negatively impacts both the oppressors and the oppressed, leading to violence—both epistemological and material—between the two groups. However, Freire's depiction of oppressors and the oppressed is abstract, with no characterization of colonization in his commentary. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (as cited in Tuck & Yang, 2012) "always positioned the work of liberation in the particularities of colonization, in the specific structural and interpersonal categories of Native and settler" (p. 20). Fanon described decolonial work as inherently violent and chaotic and a necessary break from the colonial condition (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In an examination of transformation through humanizing practices, it is necessary to couple Fanon's urgency with Freire's hopefulness. Freire's notion is an acknowledgement that dehumanization is not destiny, meaning it is not a foregone inevitability.

The spirit of hopefulness through teacher agency captured in Freire's writing seems to guide the decolonizing work of modern scholars, especially for literacy teachers and teachers of English. For example, culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000) began as an effort to reimagine teachers' approaches to curriculum: "Culturally responsive teachers know how to determine the multicultural strengths and weaknesses of curriculum designs and instructional materials and make the changes necessary to improve their overall quality" (Gay, 2000, p. 108). Gay established that although curriculum often does not serve students from marginalized backgrounds well, teachers have the power to enact revolutionary changes to the content and pedagogical methods they use. In her 2019 book *Black Appetite, White Food*, Lyiscott offered a framework for critically engaging in the work of dismantling white supremacy. Lyiscott

described using culture circles to cultivate humanizing spaces for teachers and students. Her framework, adapted from the four *I's of* oppression, supports teachers in building more equitable spaces with one another by dismantling oppression on multiple levels. This approach to classroom engagement places teachers and students on equal footing to engage with one another around classroom topics. This reimagining of the teacher–student dynamic pushes against systems of power in the classroom that are reflective of oppressive power structures in the world outside of school.

Another approach pedagogues take to decolonize their curriculum is one of critical engagement with history and student cultures. This approach is not limited to the discipline of history and has found a place among other disciplines in high school courses as well. In decolonizing work, when students are asked to engage critically with their own cultural history, it can be a vital first step toward dismantling oppressive structures. When students have an understanding of the foundation upon which they are educated, they can take more informed approaches to subvert those foundational systems. It is an emerging trend in the literature for teachers to invite students to situate their identities and engage with their own histories within the larger socio-political context and legacies of colonial oppression. Sealey-Ruiz (2007), although she works primarily with students after high school, emphasizes a need to address and center the cultures of students in classroom curriculum. In a description of her 2007 study with college students, she examined the use of culturally responsive curriculum as a tool for not only enhancing the learning experiences of students but also for reimagining the application of relevant curriculum. After a semester ‘wrapping the curriculum’ around the lives of her students, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) noted, “a curriculum that has the ability to validate students’ language, foster

a positive self and group identity, and help them work through a vision for their lives aids students' empowerment and increases the potential for them to do well" (p. 59).

While there have been ongoing neo-liberal trends in the standardization of schooling that encourage educators to "teach to the test," teachers continue to find imaginative and creative ways to use their classroom curriculum to engage students in critical thinking and transgress (hooks, 1994) in their teaching (Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Katsarou et al., 2010). The standardized test movement, rooted in classist and racist policies, originally intended to rank and separate students by ability. Teachers are increasingly recognizing that standardized testing is not an accurate measure of student achievement but is more directly correlated to factors outside of student control such as socio-economic status (Camara & Schmidt, 1999). Teachers are working to free themselves from the limits of standardized testing and are increasingly in support of movements such as the Opt-Out movement of 2015 (Sundstrom, 2019). As the collective awareness of teachers grows, so too does the national conversation around dehumanizing curriculum, leading to more progressive pedagogy in an effort to transgress: "To transgress in teaching is to go against the pedagogical grain, to teach in a way that is rigorous and meaningful for students and the teacher in ways that often challenge institutional norms" (Baker-Doyle & Gustavson, 2015, p. 53). This is especially true for teacher leaders, whether formally or informally supporting their colleagues by engaging in critical friendship to enact more transformative practices. In collaboration with graduate students, Vetter (2012) reviewed what she identified as one teacher's shift toward teacher leadership and her process for transformative change: (1) contemplating and imagining new positions, (2) enacting and solidifying a new position, (3) maintaining a new position in spite of resistance, and (4) realizing the results of her

new position. Within this framework, all teachers have the capacity to shift their crafting of curriculum in support of decolonized classrooms.

Transformation Through Discipline

Taken out of its colonial context, discipline in schools is intended to maintain learning environments that are safe for all participants in the classroom. However, policy makers and researchers are increasingly understanding the disproportionately negative impact traditional disciplinary policies have on BIPOC students. In recent years, disciplinary initiatives in schools have been aimed at shifting practices to mitigate the existing colonial frameworks for discipline. One such initiative gaining in popularity is restorative justice.

Drawn directly from Indigenous traditions, restorative justice practices use a collective approach to managing classroom conduct as a reimagining of how discipline in classrooms can look, sound, and feel (Zehr, 2002). With its roots in the criminal justice system, restorative justice practices have been implemented in schools as a tool that helps prevent student recidivism, honors the community values in schools, and helps students build and repair relationships with those around them. Additionally, restorative justice practices can provide spaces that center student voices with a structure that equalizes power across the classroom. Using set protocols, established norms, and mutual expectations between teachers and students in restorative justice circles, all members of the class community work toward building strong, positive relationships.

Using practices found in restorative justice can provide a potential pathway toward decolonization for school communities. Using collective approaches to change are necessary in the face of racist colonial policies that negatively impact all members of school communities. Unfortunately, restorative justice has not been taken as a whole approach to change in schools

and has succumbed to the pitfalls of programmatic changes implemented in a system not meant to support them. As stated by Maisha Winn (2018),

> Restorative justice, primarily situated in a criminal justice context, is a paradigm inviting stakeholders to address harm and wrongdoing through building community, consensus, and seeking justice that has been taken up in educational contexts. Like many imports into the field of education, restorative justice is often presented out of context as solely an alternative response to suspensions and expulsions rather than a culture that should permeate an entire school community. (p. 219)

Restorative justice practices originate in indigenous cultures of collectivism, meaning that all members of a community are responsible for it (Boyes-Watson, 2008). Schoolwide restorative justice practices include community-building circles, peacemaking circles, and re-entry circles. Peacemaking circles include peer mediation, whole-class community meetings, and healing circles (Pranis, 2005). In circles focused on healing, all members of a community impacted by harm sit together to engage in dialogue around problem solving and ways to address conflict. Using Native American practices such as utilizing a talking piece (an object symbolizing the power to speak) and a circle keeper (someone responsible for facilitating positive communication) ensures equitable communication that strengthens interpersonal connection. Restorative practices help members of school communities to uncover the catalysts to conflict, foster a greater sense of accountability, improve social and emotional skills, support academic outcomes, and contribute positively to the overall school culture (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2000; Karp & Breslin, 2001; MacReady, 2009; Morrison et al., 2006; Shaw, 2007; Varnham, 2005). Using a schoolwide approach to restorative justice can provide a way to transform school discipline and ultimately reduce disciplinary actions between teachers and students in classes of

all subject areas. Restorative justice practices, because they emerge from Native American culture, are appropriately placed in efforts to decolonize schools. While the potential for restorative justice for transformational relationship building is immense, it still places the responsibility of decolonization disproportionately on the individual teachers and students.

Theoretical Framework

To appropriately criticize and deconstruct the social constructs informed by colonialism, it is essential to first establish critical theories with which to analyze them:

> Theory enables us to deal with contradictions and uncertainties. Perhaps more significantly, it gives us space to plan, to strategize, to take greater control over our resistances. The language of a theory can also be used as a way of organizing and determining action. (Smith, 2012, p. 40)

It is through the use of these theories that this study aims to examine the role of a teacher as a reproducer or transformer of colonial schooling through their curricular and disciplinary practices. Although reflection on my pedagogy is a skill I have come to hone throughout my teaching career, the use of critical theories to examine, situate, problematize, and take action steps elevates my practice from mere reflection to an ongoing act of conscientization (Freire, 1970). Decolonizing theory provides the backdrop for the study. In my visualization, decolonizing theory is the overarching theory that guides my efforts. Critical constructivism offers a way to situate my teacher practice within necessary social, political, and historical context. Using Indo-Caribbean and coolie feminism provides a way for me to go within my own formative experiences and identities, uniting all of these theories in a bricolage approach. The use of these theories, taken together, provides a clearer lens—one that can examine my practice holistically, with a multi-dimensional view, looking forward and backward through time, place,

and space. In the following section, I define the theoretical and conceptual frameworks I used to examine the work of decolonizing schooling.

Decolonizing Theory

American schooling was built around a colonial center and continually perpetuates the disenfranchisement of BIPOC students. To more effectively examine the current iterations of colonialism in schooling, it is necessary to use an action-based critical theory that emphasizes practices that are purposefully working to oppose the status quo. In his foundational work *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1961) described decolonization as inextricably intertwined with colonization. Fanon was a psychologist of African descent born in the French colony of Martinique who wrote on colonial classism as a reinforcement of social hierarchy. Fanon is credited with elevating Black consciousness movements (Burki, 2019) and helping to shape modern anticolonial discourse. As an educator of Caribbean descent working toward liberation with a largely Black population of students, Fanon's decolonizing criticality matches my own sense of urgency. He argued that colonizing forces continue to shape decolonizing ones because they cannot exist independently of one another. Just as anti-racism exists in direct relation to racism, so too is decolonizing work formed by the ongoing legacy of colonization. His notion of decolonial work emphasized the empowerment of individuals to work at challenging the existing power structures that perpetuate their oppression in a colonial state. "It [Decolonization] transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's floodlights upon them (Fanon, 1961, p. 36). Fanon presented the particular abhorrence of American colonialism:

> Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the

> taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions. (p. 313)

Here, he presented American colonization as a monster and, through the personification of its 'appalling dimensions,' made colonization easier to identify and thus easier to actively work against. However, decolonizing work does not stop at naming and understanding the legacy of colonialism. Although he presented colonization and decolonization in binary terms, Frantz Fanon's definition of *decolonization* in relation to colonization shaped current iterations of decolonizing work. To recenter non-Eurocentric ways of knowing, being, and doing, decolonizing theory in education is also situated as a critical response to colonialism, including imperialist assumptions, motivations, and values (McGregor, 2012). The work of decolonizing is less symbolic and more concerned with far-reaching changes to societal structures, especially the institution of schooling.

Decolonizing theory only begins at naming and understanding the legacy of colonization. There is an urgency and necessity to the work, captured by Indigenous researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012):

> In a decolonizing framework, deconstruction is part of a much larger intent. Taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively does not help people to improve their current conditions. It provides words, perhaps, an insight that explains certain experiences—but it does not prevent someone from dying. (Smith, 2012, p. 3)

As defined by Fanon (1961) and Smith (2012), decolonization works in direct resistance to colonialism and the maintenance of the colonial center. Because colonization depended on and continues to exist as a result of socially constructed hierarchies, decolonization aspires to

dismantle the organizational structures of the line, the center, and the outside: “The focus on asserting humanity has to be seen within the anti-colonial analysis of imperialism and what were seen as imperialism’s dehumanizing imperatives, which were structured into the language, economy, social relations and cultural life of colonial societies” (Smith, 2012, p. 27). It is also important to note that “an anti-colonial critique is not the same as a decolonizing framework; anti-colonial critique often celebrates empowered postcolonial subjects who seize denied privileges from the metropole. This anti-to-post-colonial project doesn’t strive to undo colonialism but rather to remake it and subvert it” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19). Thus, decolonizing theory aims to humanize those living within a colonized system as the path toward a more democratic, equitable society that ultimately leads to Indigenous sovereignty.

Critical Constructivism

Because the crux of this study is a critical understanding of the legacy of colonialism, it is most fitting to use a research paradigm that recognizes the pervasive nature of the research topic. Critical constructivism offers a way to examine the manifestations of colonialism in structures that contribute to the dehumanization of oppressed peoples. To deconstruct and reconstruct my classroom practice with a decolonizing aim, critical constructivism became the vehicle through which I situated my knowledge about my classroom practice within its social and historical context. To challenge positivist notions of objective and decontextualized knowledge, Joe Kincheloe (1991) offered critical constructivism as a way to engage in a deeply holistic approach to research. Informed by Paulo Freire’s notions of critical pedagogy, critical constructivism aims to situate knowledge of the world within its social, cultural, and historical context. In his work, *Teachers as Researchers*, Kincheloe (1991) established critical constructivism as a way to better examine the intersections of a complex world: “The world in general, the social and educational

world in particular, is not an objective structure, but a constructed, dynamic interaction of men and women organized and shaped by their race, class, and gender" (p. 26). He particularly noted the importance of race, class, and gender as factors that shape not only the daily interactions in people's lives but also the ways in which researchers interact with and interpret information from researched communities.

For the purposes of this study, I engaged with critical constructivism both as theory and method (see Chapter 3 for additional details). Critical constructivism allowed me to move beyond the scope of positivism and work against the perpetuation of colonial hegemony. Using the dominant paradigm to research issues shaped by dominant ideologies is limiting because using the established and conventional methods of seeing denies me a new way to examine issues (Kincheloe, 1991). Critical constructivism is an active approach to research, wherein researchers engage critically with their work to push against dominant ideologies to become transformative intellectuals:

> Change is a fundamental goal of the teacher as a critical researcher. Henry Giroux develops this idea with the conception of what he calls the transformative intellectual. Transformative intellectuals treat students as active agents, render knowledge problematic, utilize dialogical methods of teaching, and seek to make learning a process where self-understanding and emancipation is possible. (Kincheloe, 1991, p. 24)

This notion of self-understanding as a pathway to emancipation is an expansion of Paulo Freire's work in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his seminal 1970 work, Freire stated, "dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed" (p. 44). This

critique of social hierarchy as a perpetrator of oppression was clearly established in both Freire's and Kincheloe's work.

In addition to a critical understanding of how historical and social factors shape knowledge, also essential to critical constructivism is a researcher's commitment to critically self-reflect. In an expansion of critical constructivist ideas, Kincheloe and Steinberg (1993) wrote:

> We are never independent of the social and historical forces that surround us — we are all caught at a particular point in the web of reality. The post-formal project is to understand what that point in the web is, how it constructs our vantage point, and the ways it insidiously restricts our vision. (p. 302)

Critical constructivism is the unity of human feeling and action. As a critical constructivist researcher, I recognize my position as the tool of research; I shape the information and interpretation of the research story. In this examination of the legacy of colonialism, critical constructivism allows me to consider my own thinking and unpack the ways in which colonialism has forced me to internalize ideas that shape my ability to engage critically with the world. For Freire, all participants in a society are perpetrators of oppression, but a liberation from that oppression relies on and emerges from an understanding of that oppression. Critical constructivism allows me to situate my research at the intersection of my own critical self-understanding to better examine the world around me.

Indo-Caribbean Feminism and the Bricolage

My practice as a teacher is shaped by my experiences as a person existing in the particular socio-political context of the years 2020 and 2021. The aspects of my identity that shape my decisions as an educator are innumerable: I am a woman, Brown, Indian, Caribbean,

Muslim, New Yorker, liberal, first-generation American, millenial, wife-sister-daughter-aunty, among countless other labels. These factors all shape my identity and in turn my teacher practice, coloring my decisions with particular knowledges. To engage in this process of conscientization and work toward decolonizing my classroom, I must examine my experiences on the micro level with my many labels in mind. This approach calls for a theoretical dexterity to better understand the patterns informing my choices.

To situate my own perspective, Indo-Caribbean feminism provides one lens from which to unite and examine my professional and personal identities. As a professional, I work first in the vein of a postformal, critical constructivist thinker (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993). In my personal life, I approach my relationships and engage critically in society most often, first as a woman, then as some form of Brown, whether it be Indian, Muslim, or Caribbean.

Indo-Caribbean feminism is underscored by two major concepts: feminist navigations and post-indentureship feminism (Hosein & Outar, 2016). Feminist navigations refers to the ways in which Indo-Caribbean women "strategize" within gendered ideologies shaped by a patriarchal society to both uphold the patriarchy and assert their own financial and sexual independence (Mohammed, 2002). Post-indentureship feminism aims to trace the development of feminist ideologies through pathways of indentureship rather than through geneaologies of descendents from India, further bolstering the intersectionality of Indo-Caribbean feminism. Using the concepts of *feminist navigations* (as Mohammed defines it) and *post-indentureship feminism*, *Indo-Caribbean feminism*:

> refers to intellectual trajectories that include gender analysis, both creative and scholarly…It is defined by analysis which draws on the Indo-Caribbean diasporic cosmologies, artifacts, archetypes, myths, symbols, engagements with embodiment,

> popular cultural expressions, the sacred and sexual, and intellectual traditions and concepts to articulate a feminist praxis. (Hosein & Outar, 2017, p. 2)

The ways in which I make sense of myself within the larger world cannot be contained to one theoretical approach. However, because Indo-Caribbean feminist analysis requires a holistic approach, I am able to incorporate artifacts beyond what are traditionally considered scholarly. The use of diverse methods of expression, including poetry and dramatized depictions of events, facilitates a more authentic framework for presenting my approach to meaning making.

As an Indo-Caribbean feminist, I further identify as a coolie feminist and work to challenge dominant ideologies and power structures:

> Indo-Caribbean feminist thought can...be understood overall as work that has advanced theorizing of the intersections of Indianness, Caribbeanness, gender, and feminism, with a view toward transforming gendered political, sexual, and knowledge economies and their implications for inequities in the region. (Hossein & Outar, 2017, p. 3)

Because Indo-Caribbean feminism has a necessary orientation toward an examination and deconstruction of dominant, patriarchal structures, it provides an internal approach to decolonizing work.

The nature of an autoethnographic study is one in which new patterns and understandings may emerge over time in unexpected ways. Because of this, I developed a tool for organizing my theories in conversation with one another, which is explained in the following section.

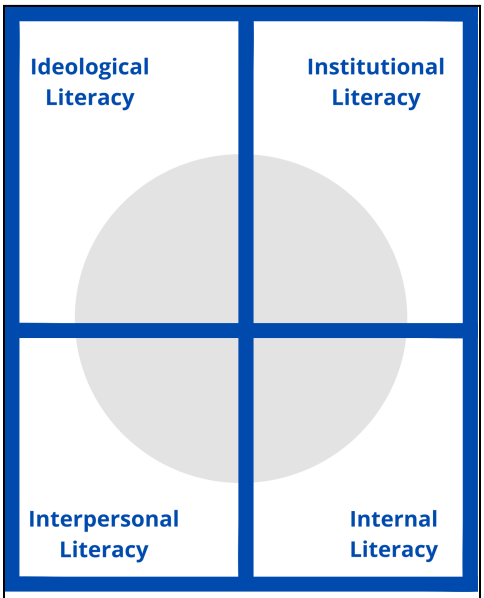
Theoretical bricolage using the decolonial compass

In this research study, I engaged in decolonizing my classroom space by placing various theories in conversation with one another. The relationship between these intersecting theories is best represented by what I call “the decolonial compass.” The compass was originally invented

by Chinese scientists in the 11th century. In one of its earliest functions, the compass aided in spiritual orienteering, which was the practice of harmonizing an environment with the laws of nature (Rodgers, 2022). At the end of the 12th century, Western Europeans also developed a compass, which was used primarily for navigation. The compass was a central tool for nautical explorers and was used by Europeans to navigate to North and South America. Because the compass was a vital aid to European colonization and systemic exploitation of non-European peoples, it is a fitting symbol to conceptualize decolonization and my efforts to rehumanize myself and the students with whom I work.

The decolonial compass was used as a tool to navigate the dehumanization of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic within the colonized construct of society. Smith's (2012) concept of the line, the center, and the outside was represented earlier in this chapter by Figure 1. To examine the manifestations of white supremacy within a colonized society, Lyiscott's fugitive literacies were applied as a window, which is graphically represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The Fugitive Literacies Window



Adapted from Lyiscott, 2019 Figure 2

Examining the line, the center, and the outside using the fugitive literacies window

In her book (*Black Appetite. White Food.*), Jamila Lyiscott (2019) devised a framework for identifying and acting against white supremacy, which she adapted from "the four I's of Oppression." Fugitive literacies decenter whiteness and white supremacy in its ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations. In this section, I explain how I used Lyiscott's (2019) fugitive literacies framework in the context of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) concept of the line, the center, and the outside. Smith's framework offers a way to understand and examine all aspects of a colonized society. With Lyiscott's fugitive literacies framework as a window, I examined the cross-sections between Smith's center, line, and outside, using Lyiscott's ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal fugitive literacies. This process establishes Lyiscott's concept as a decolonizing tool when applied within the context of Tuhiwai Smith's framework.

Ideological Literacy

Ideological literacy refers to both the collective and individualized norms that center white privilege. In other words, "what we accept as 'normal' and 'neutral' immediately casts the ways of knowing and of being people of color as delinquent" (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 76). Ideological literacies in Smith's framework exist at the center and shape our thoughts and actions on every level, ranging from the institutional to the internal. In a society that has been determined by the concept of the line, the center, and the outside (Smith, 1999), colonialism has woven capitalism and white supremacy into all aspects of our lives. Ideologies that allow white Supremacy to flourish included the treatment of all people as expendable, systematic dehumanization of BIPOC peoples, and the genocide of Natives, alongside the eradication of BIPOC cultures.

Ideologies such as white supremacy exist at the center and inform the power structures that exist within the line. This in turn is used to determine who and what is relegated to the outside.

Institutional Literacy

Lyiscott (2019) defined *institutional literacy* as the network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages and benefits for some, and discrimination, oppression, and disadvantages for others. In other words, institutional literacy refers to the policies, rules, and regulations that propel white supremacy. Institutional literacies impact all aspects of school life, including expectations for conduct, dress, and language practice. This also determines what content is privileged in classrooms and staff meetings. For example, at the middle school I attended, any students who wanted to participate in band class were required to pay a fee to rent their assigned band instrument. Students whose families could not afford the fee could have their students participate in chorus or take the general music appreciation class. Although my middle school was diverse, the students comprising the chorus and the band were socio-economically and de facto racially stratified, with a majority of the BIPOC students in chorus and music appreciation class, and a majority of the white students in band. In Smith's framework, institutional practices exist within the line but are shaped by the ideologies at the center. Policies and procedures are implemented to concentrate wealth and uphold a power structure that privileges the few while disadvantaging most people, the majority of which are people from BIPOC groups. Institutional literacies in Smith's framework also maintain a boundary limiting BIPOC people's access to social, political, and economic power; unless they can be commodified, they are firmly placed on the outside.

Interpersonal literacy

Interpersonal literacy refers to the day-to-day interactions between people from different privileged or oppressed groups. Ideological and institutional literacies shape the relationships and communication that takes place between individuals. These interactions are colored by power dynamics shaped by white supremacy, regardless of the identities of the people involved. Schooling, which at its most basic form is a series of interpersonal interactions, is no exception. Interpersonal literacy surfaces in the dynamics around privilege and oppression that inform every person-to-person interaction. By examining the line, the center, and the outside through the lens of interpersonal literacy, I can analyze the underlying ideologies, social norms, and historical context that pervade all interpersonal interactions.

Internal Literacy

Internal literacy refers to the manifestations of white supremacy that take place within ourselves. All people, regardless of their racial, gender, or socio-economic identity, exist in a society built around a colonial center. Eurocentric values and practices are the normalized ideal, especially for the American middle class. This especially includes people's cultural and linguistic practices. People ascribe certain value judgments to those whose speech obeys white, Eurocentric norms of language and syntax. As someone who identifies with American middle-class values, my internal literacy is in constant conflict. What I deem valuable within myself and others is shaped in alignment with and in opposition to white supremacy. As an individual, I exist in Smith's framework on the outside: I am a first-generation American muslim woman of Indian descent in a fast-shrinking middle class. My cultural and linguistic practice is from an Indo-Caribbean heritage. Linguistically, one's alignment with Anglo-American speech is used as an indicator of a person's intelligence and accomplishments. I constantly grapple with what it means to be my authentic self while rejecting ideologies that can perpetuate oppression.

Therefore, it is impossible to separate my internal discourse from the ideologies that shape it, the institutional policies with which I contend, and my interpersonal interactions.

Navigating remote learning with a decolonizing approach

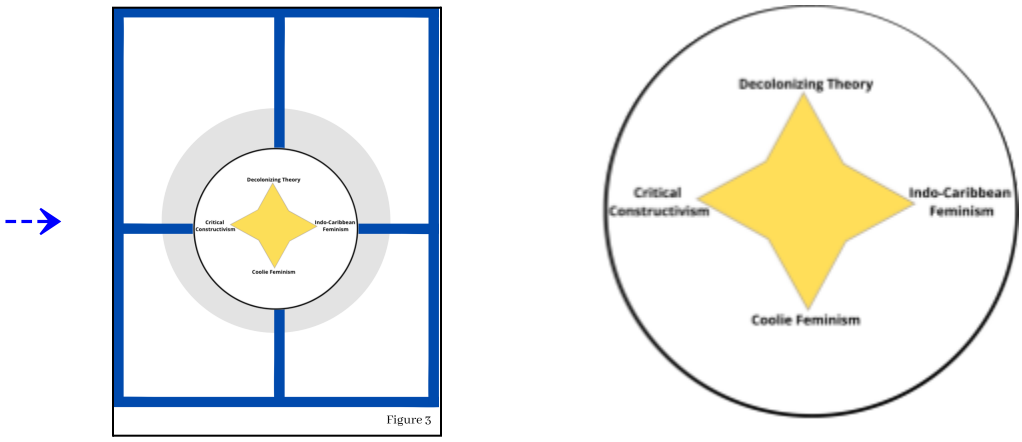
If one's aim is to subvert dominant power structures and create new, more equitable systems, it is first necessary to develop a solid foundation from which to build. However, the ideologies that shape our institutions also impact our own individual identity development. It colors the way we choose to connect with and relate to others. The process of teaching and learning is relational work and is a constant negotiation of ideas, values, and power between people. Decolonizing classroom spaces requires a deliberate process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy across macro, meso, and micro levels. In other words, decolonizing schooling means a rejection of white supremacist–aligned epistemologies in the ideologies that shape institutional policy with a simultaneous excavation and purging of white supremacy within our internal perspectives and interpersonal relationships. This cyclical process can become repetitive and lack purpose or resolution without theoretical frameworks. In this autoethnographic study, I situated the critical theories described above using the framework of a compass for two reasons: (1) to illustrate the interconnectedness of the theories by placing them in conversation with one another, and (2) to emphasize the need for a navigational tool in the abstract world of virtual learning. When applied in this context, the decolonial compass was used to examine the construct of colonization and analyze the internal, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological manifestations of white supremacy using the fugitive literacies window. I deliberately placed these frameworks into conversation using the tool of a compass. The compass actionalizes the frameworks as follows. In the North position is decolonizing theory. By positioning decolonizing theory as my true North, I can work from my

current condition to build the decolonized classroom space I am aiming for. In the West position is critical constructivism. This theory is used to represent how I make sense of the world as I engage with it both as theory and method. I also place critical constructivism in the West as an acknowledgment that much of my worldview has been constructed through typically Western epistemologies. Indo-Caribbean feminism is placed in the East as the balance to critical constructivism. It encompasses aspects of my identity that endure as a result of and despite my colonized heritage. Coolie feminism in the South is an actionalized branch of Indo-Caribbean feminsm. I use it as an acknowledgement of my internalized efforts to subvert white supremacy within myself:

> When I refer to coolie feminism, 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 (Khan-Roopnarine, in press).

My decolonial compass, pictured in Figure 3, became a tool for navigating my way through the tumultuous ocean of remote schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic and endures as I continue building decolonized spaces. The final figure is a graphic representation of how the compass was applied within Lyiscott's fugitive literacies as a window into Smith's concept of the line, the center, and the outside.

Figure 3: Compass Application



Conclusion: Decolonizing Teacher Identity and Practice with Autoethnography

Because we all exist in a colonized society, we are all complicit in participating in and thus perpetuating institutional oppression. Whether we recognize it or not, teachers also reproduce systems of epistemological and material control in their classrooms. The resulting dehumanization of students through curriculum and discipline continues the oppressor–oppressed dynamic in a reflection of the larger society. In a search through the academic literature, few studies discuss how teachers may go about decolonizing their classrooms. It is established that colonized classroom spaces are a significant impediment to liberated and equitable classrooms (Sinclair, 2018). However, the methods for teachers to decolonize schooling are less documented. Emerging from the literature is the necessity of critical literacy and conscientization as a center of decolonizing work (Cherry-McDaniel, 2016; De los rios, 2013; Sinclair, 2018; Strong-Wilson, 2007). For example, Yazan (2019) recommended that teacher educators "can utilize autoethnography to become more self-reflexive of their practices" (p. 50) to work toward more social justice–oriented pedagogies. Unpacking one's own identity and culture through autoethnography can create space for change by giving individuals opportunities for growth: "If teachers are afforded the agentive space to try out or enact the identity options available in these pedagogies, it is more likely that they will renegotiate their identities and teacher learning…" (Yazan, 2019, p. 48). Teachers who engage in the critical reflective work of autoethnography can more effectively examine, unpack, and critically situate their practice in order to transform their practice. Thus, a centering of teacher identity is integral to an examination of teacher practice.

Autoethnography is a qualitative method of research that uses reflection. Through a rigorous process of self-study, the autoethnographic story centers human experiences and

emotions as research. Autoethnographic work is often coupled with teacher-identity positions and used to situate and interrogate the teacher's place in the web of society (Yazan, 2019). An integral characteristic of autoethnographic research is the commitment to change, starting from a critical self-examination (Pourreau, 2014). Although autoethnographic research has the potential to be a powerful tool for enacting change, there are few studies that use an autoethnographic approach to decolonizing work in the K-12 classroom. It seems fitting that because critical literacy remains at the center of colonial power and control, decolonizing work should utilize the unique form of storytelling that is autoethnography. With the researcher as the center of the study, I became both the subject of study and the tool for analysis to examine emerging social, cultural, and political implications of decolonizing my classroom.

At the start of this study, I believed that I worked to create humanizing spaces for students by centering their identities and ways of knowing and being in my classroom. I crafted a student-centered curriculum and used a progressive and proactive approach to discipline through relationship building. I thought of myself as a successful teacher and had positive interactions with almost every student and family I worked with. However, despite my efforts, there were ways in which I was complicit in furthering capitalist colonial ideals in my classroom. This study examined how I worked to decolonize my classroom in a specific socio-political context. In the vein of excellence set by *Black Panther*'s Princess Shuri, "just because something works doesn't mean it can't be improved."

Chapter 3: An Autoethnographic Method

Personal Journal Excerpt

11.19.20

6:35 p.m.

Home

They decided to close schools yesterday. I spent my final prep period frantically packing up my classroom because we were not given a return to school date. It took me back to last Spring, when school initially closed and my classroom was abandoned. Hundreds of books lining the walls, doomed to gather dust over the summer. But, our school building is relatively new as far as buildings in our city's schools are concerned, and it housed a recreation site for the elementary school children of first responders. The particular odor in my classroom after the summer is usually a mix of paper, books, dust, floor wax, and the occasional forgotten ketchup packet. This September, however, the entire building had a dry, sterility to it—a sanitized look and feeling. When I returned to my classroom, it was clear that over the summer the books had been read, the colored pencils and crayons long swept up in past weeks of imagined arts and crafts.

This year, I was more prepared, and in the first weeks of school, I equipped all the 12th grade A.P. Lit students with all the physical materials they would need for the entire year: traditional novels, plays, test preparation books, poetry anthologies, and graphic novels. I gave them copies of everything I thought I may use this year, wanting to cover all the bases amid the uncertainty of school closures. Students made appointments and dutifully arrived with empty backpacks during 10 minute windows of carefully monitored, repeatedly sanitized meetings with me in the front of the building to collect

> their books. One student, a child I've worked with since 6th grade, was unable to come to the building. Her mother was recovering from a recent surgery and this student, her primary caregiver, was not comfortable taking the bus ride that would not only leave her mother alone but also potentially expose her to Covid-19 if the student contracted the virus while traveling. After handing out the books to all the students over the course of a week, I packed the remaining texts up and took my lunch period to drive them over to her house on a rainy October day. After exchanges about the health of her mom, and her general mental well-being, we briefly smiled and air-hugged one another outside of the apartment building. I sent her quickly back inside to avoid getting wet in the rain. My internal monologue at the time was something cringe-worthy like, "Go me. What a noble teacher you are, sacrificing your time to bring these texts over to a child with a sick mom." Though my own mother had admonished me for the decision to risk exposure to the virus, I was glad to do what I thought was supportive of a student…

The daily decisions I make as a teacher are driven by good intentions and the desire to love and support kids and families. But in my zeal for sharing curricular materials for my college-level literature class, I completely missed an important opportunity for criticality. I did not use the first few weeks of school to restructure my syllabus, pairing it down to a text and content load that would be more intellectually and physically manageable during schooling in the time of a pandemic. Instead, I made organized schedules to distribute the materials of the relatively successful curriculum I had used in the past during in-person learning. Herein lies the crux of what I propose in the following chapter.

Introduction of the Problem

In Chapter 2, I established that colonial control of BIPOC peoples, both in the material and epistemological sense, has an enduring legacy perpetuated by systematic and institutionalized oppression. As such, the American institution of schooling in its current form continually oscillates around a colonial center, especially in terms of curriculum and discipline. The content of school curriculum, particularly in English courses, centers on Eurocentric language and literacy practices, holding up an overwhelming majority of white male writers as worthy of study. This form of curricular control maintains an epistemological coloniality. By valuing, teaching, and assessing Eurocentric representations in and of literature, teachers are implicitly and explicitly devaluing other forms of literary expression in terms of genre and content. Students' experiences in literature are imbalanced, relying heavily on white, patriarchal, Christian narratives. Even when the writers are from BIPOC backgrounds, the literary traditions taught are almost exclusively Eurocentric. For example, on the New York City "Engage NY Common Core" curriculum map for 10th-grade English, the first unit of study is focused on how authors develop complex characters and ideas. The ability to write complex ideas and characters is not unique to American and European writers; however, the featured authors in the city sanctioned curriculum are Christopher Marlowe, Sir Walter Raleigh, William Carlos Williams, Ethan Canin, Amy Tan, and H. G. Bissinger. Of the six authors in this first unit on text complexity, only Amy Tan is representative of a BIPOC background as her parents were immigrants from China. She is also the only writer who is a woman featured in the unit. Teachers, for any number of reasons, including a desire to adequately prepare students for standardized tests, lack of training in curriculum writing, pressure from teacher evaluations, or even financial bonuses, may feel it necessary to dedicate their classroom instruction to teaching from this pre-scripted, New York City–approved curriculum. In doing so, they are inadvertently

elevating white male voices and experiences while denying the value of BIPOC voices and methods of storytelling in classrooms where the student populations are increasingly diverse (Birney & McNamara, 2017). Consequently, teachers maintain institutionalized oppression by teaching curriculum that places BIPOC content, culture, language practice, and experiences on the outside of the colonial center.

In terms of discipline, institutions are empowered to control students in the material sense, determining standardized methods of student dress, speech, and conduct firmly rooted in Eurocentrism. The language of disciplinary regulations is not all encompassing and can create situations in which conscious or unconscious teacher bias becomes an important determining factor in regulating student behavior. For example, in the 2019 New York City discipline code of conduct, there are five levels of infractions for which students can receive disciplinary consequences. Level 1, "uncooperative or noncompliant behavior," includes "engaging in verbally rude or disrespectful behavior," with the most severe consequence attached being "removal from classroom by teacher," which leads to suspension after five removals in one semester or four removals in one trimester. What constitutes "verbally rude or disrespectful behavior" is highly subjective across many intersectional aspects of identity such as cultures, language practices, age, gender, race, and sexuality. In the November 2019 Educator Diversity Report from the New York State Education Department, it was documented that of the current teaching force, 80% of educators are white, and 75% of the total teachers are female. In a teaching population of mostly white women with a student population represented by over 800 spoken languages and by extension cultures, there are innumerable opportunities for varying interpretations around what constitutes verbally rude or disrespectful behavior. Teachers who do not interrogate their own disciplinary expectations and attempt to situate their classroom practice

within the larger societal and cultural context continually perpetuate standardized rules of conduct aligned to Eurocentric ideals. Without a critical examination of the self, teachers cannot work to dismantle aspects of their practice that can perpetuate the oppression of BIPOC students. Therefore, it is the obligation of critical pedagogues to deconstruct and actively subvert colonized schooling.

In her work, *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Patel (2016) invited educational researchers to contend with their places in an iniquitous educational system. The fundamental shifts in schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have forced teachers and the educational system as a whole to contend with long-entrenched practices that both support and undermine student success. Trends in current research describe decolonizing classrooms as an important goal for critical educators and include steps such as using culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) when engaging students in learning. However, teachers who exist in colonized school systems have less agency to dismantle long-entrenched institutional practices that uphold colonial ideals. Therefore, the work of decolonizing schools begins with individual teachers in individual classrooms. As a teacher-researcher, I situated my practice within the colonized context of schooling as I worked to dismantle my own colonized teacher identity and practice during the shifts between remote and in-person learning. I examined my position through three major lenses: (1) my role as a classroom teacher, (2) my role as a department leader, and (3) my role as an advocate for parents and families. In this chapter, I demonstrate how educational research has historically served to perpetuate colonial hegemony. Decolonizing work follows the steps of naming, deconstructing, and working against the colonizing forces of oppression. To do this work within my own classroom spaces, I needed to use a research method that allowed me to follow the steps of deconstructing and naming the practices that perpetuate colonialism in order

to work against them. Colonialism is pervasive and touches all aspects of my personal and teacher identities. To better examine my own position as a colonized person, and perpetuator and potential transformer of colonization, I argue that I needed to take a critical autoethnographic bricolage approach.

Purpose and Research Questions

Teacher actions can both uphold and subvert colonialism, but working to decolonize classrooms requires a purposeful deconstruction, naming, and dismantling of oppressive practices. The purpose of this study was to examine my actions as an educator during a reimagining of schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study identified and analyzed practices that inadvertently perpetuated colonialism and practices that actively dismantled it in order to impact teacher curricular and disciplinary practice and work toward decolonizing classrooms. This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of colonialism shape one teacher's efforts to decolonize their classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic? RQ2: In what ways does one teacher attempt to maintain epistemological and material control over students during remote instruction? RQ3: How does one teacher work to humanize themself, colleagues, students and families within dehumanizing circumstances through a decolonizing process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy? These questions emerged over time throughout the course of the study and helped to frame the critical analysis of my personal narratives from a 10-week period of remote instruction at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020–2021 school year.

Design and Methods

Research as a field is not immune to perpetuating the colonial oppression of BIPOC peoples. In fact, colonialism created circumstances in which researchers objectify cultures and peoples perceived as outside of the colonial center. Patel (2016) explained, "...education research, through both meaning and matter, has played a deleterious role in perpetuating and refreshing colonial relationships among people, practices, and land" (p. 12). Even well-intentioned researchers who aim to research oppressed peoples for the purpose of supporting those communities are still ascribing objectivity to a group based on their cultural or linguistic practices. In her seminal work *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith (1999) stated:

> Research within late-modern and late-colonial conditions continues relentlessly and brings with it a new wave of exploration, discovery, exploitation and appropriation. Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets, they bring medicine into villages and extract blood for genetic analysis. No matter how appalling their behaviours, how insensitive and offensive their personal actions may be, their acts and intentions are always justified as being for the 'good of mankind'...Still others collect the intangibles: the belief systems and ideas about healing, about the universe, about relationships and ways of organizing, and the practices and rituals which go alongside such beliefs… (p. 26)

Smith, writing from the position of an Indigenous researcher, was stating the ways in which researchers exploit and appropriate Indigenous peoples with an "ends justify the means" rationale. Even when researchers are working toward a common good, they can inadvertently perpetuate harm to the communities they research.

As the instrument of analysis, qualitative researchers use their own ways of knowing and being to interpret the experiences of communities outside of their own. Examinations of

colonialism in classrooms can take many research forms and tap into the knowledges and experiences of diverse groups facing colonial oppression. However, because the aim of this study was to be actionable in decolonizing individual classrooms, it was necessary to use a research approach that looked inward at the teacher as an upholder and transformer of coloniality. Thus, in an effort to decolonize my own research practice, I used a critical autoethnographic approach to examine my teacher practice, looking through space, place, and time using three major frameworks.

In an autoethnographic research tradition, the researcher is both the authority and interpreter on the researched topic. As the center of the research story, I examined how I am both a perpetuator and subverter of colonial oppression for myself and my students within a colonized schooling system. In her work *Writing from the Margins*, Hill (1990) stated, "Writers require confidence that they have the right and the ability to read their own experience in the same way they read anything on a printed page: noticing the details and the patterns that connect those details to each other and to a larger picture" (p. 4). As a researcher and writer, the confidence I needed in order to examine my own experiences was built upon a critical constructivist foundation. An autoethnographic research tradition explicitly elevates my personal ways of knowing and being as methods of interpretation, which, as a research method is itself an act of decolonizing: "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). By examining my own actions around curriculum and discipline, I located my behaviors within the colonized socio-cultural web to examine the intersections of my individual actions and a colonized school system.

The overarching framework of decolonizing theory was used to examine my actions as they relate to the colonial center, addressing Research Questions 1 and 3. To analyze and interpret my actions and address Research Question 2, I use the framework of critical constructivism both as theory and method.

My interpretation of critical constructivism as theory is detailed in Chapter 2. Here, I elucidate the use of critical constructivism as a research method and connect it to the autoethnographic tradition for decolonizing work. Critical constructivism as a method is undergirded by an assumption that knowledge is a product of both academic knowledge and informal contextualized knowledge. It asks researchers to step back from the ways they are accustomed to perceiving the world (Kincheloe, 2005) and ask the *how* and *why* questions about the status quo. Therefore, a critical constructivist method is one that situates research and research findings within a larger web of social and political culture. As a method, critical constructivism is akin to the aims of decolonizing methodologies. Decolonizing aims to first identify and then deconstruct the ways in which peoples and places are colonized. After naming and deconstructing manifestations of colonialism, the next step is to act against them. With a critical constructivist method, not only is there deconstruction, but there is a necessary situating of colonized peoples and places amid a larger, interconnected, socio-political culture. By locating specific actions in terms of perpetuating or subverting colonialism, critical constructivism as a method provides a frame for the necessary action steps of decolonizing work. Bricolage can be described as research that spans multiple disciplines: “Ethnography, textual analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, historiography, discourse analysis combined with philosophical analysis, literary analysis, aesthetic criticism, and theatrical and dramatic ways of observing and making meaning constitute the methodological bricolage” (Kincheloe,

2005, p. 323). Using this multidisciplinary approach, a bricoleur can uncover the implied power structures that influence the way she interacts with and experiences the world. By locating experiences on the particular socio-cultural web of colonialism, I critically examined my actions as a teacher in a critical constructivist bricolage.

Site Selection and Participants

This study took place in the 2020–2021 school year during a reimagining of schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study took place at an urban public school in the Northeastern United States. According to the school demographic snapshot for the 2019–2020 school year, the school hosts a population where more than 98% of the student body identifies as a person from a BIPOC group and 85% of students are ascribed the "poverty" label. For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to establish the specific demographic data for the individual classes I taught within the school.

Because the study is autoethnographic in nature, I examined my practice within my own 10th-grade English classes, my Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition (AP Lit) class, and in my leadership role as the English department chairperson. The 10th-grade English classes were integrated co-taught classes of anywhere from 15 to 30 students, which included a mixture of students with disabilities, English-language learners, and general education students. Each 10th-grade class met twice a week for 60-minute periods. Classes were not tracked for ability or learning classification. As of November 2020, one class of 15 students met in person twice a week, while the other three classes met virtually twice a week. The AP Lit class was one class consisting of 14 students that met virtually three to four times a week, depending on the unit of study. Students in AP Lit were not tracked by ability and were admitted to the class based on their interest. The only prerequisite for entry into the class for the 2020–2021 school

year was that students take and pass the New York State English Regents Examination. All students in the AP Lit class were students I had previously worked with when they were middle schoolers and/or 10th graders.

In this autoethnographic examination of my efforts to decolonize my classroom, it is necessary to center my own experiences and identities. While this section does not offer a comprehensive unpacking of all my identities, here I offer the few central aspects of my identity that may contribute to my initial examination of my teacher practice as it relates to colonialism. I am an American Muslim woman, born to Guyanese immigrants. My ethnic ancestry can be traced to India, as my great-great-grandparents were born in Uttar Pradesh. Guyana was a British colony up until 1966, and the upbringing I received from my parents and grandparents was shaped by Guyanese culture, informed culturally and linguistically by British colonialism, African slaves, Indian and Chinese indentured servants, Portuguese and Dutch colonizers, and the South American Indigenous peoples. Guyana is often touted as the most diverse Caribbean country, although it is located on the South American continent. My native language is English, though, as detailed in Chapter 1, it is heavily infused with Guyanese patois, a dialect of English shaped by British, West African, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and South American Indigenous languages. As an example, I remember feeling frustrated as a high-achieving elementary school student when I would receive a red X-mark on my spelling tests for spelling words like “colour” and “humour” and “neighbour” the way I diligently practiced with my father. I have distinct memories in elementary school of being teased for sharing my favorite food as bhajji, dhal, and chicken curry, not knowing that the words I used for spinach and yellow split peas were foreign to my peers. These experiences helped shape my drive to become an English teacher, and honoring student identities has always been central to my practice.

Throughout the course of this study, my identity as an Indo-Caribbean woman was most influential in shaping my decision-making process.

Procedures and Data Sources

This study examined my actions as an English teacher and English department leader during the 2020–2021 school year in the second semester beginning in January 2021 and ending in June 2021 (see Appendix A for a calendar of data-collection procedures). I gathered, organized, and analyzed the following data sources:

- *Teaching journal*: Since the start of my teaching career, I have maintained an informal, personal journal where I capture reflections on my day and interactions I have with students. This has been a vital habit to build as I grow as an educator and served as documentation to support an analysis of my practice over time.
- *Reflective practice memos*: During the second semester, from February 2021 to April 2021, I wrote reflective memos at the end of each week over an 11-week period. Monday reflections focused primarily on my role as the department leader as Mondays do not have programmed instructional periods in my schedule. I wrote reflective memos on Mondays from February 1st, 2021, to April 26th, 2021, totalling 10 reflective memos on my facilitation of English department meetings. At the end of each week, I wrote a reflective memo focused on instruction, encompassing my curricular and disciplinary practices for the week across my 10th-grade and AP Lit classes, totalling 10 instructional reflective memos. Within this research time frame, I also engaged in parent–teacher conferences, and I wrote two reflective memos (one before and one after conferences). In each reflective memo, I wrote low-inference notes, anecdotals, and reflections on my

own conduct. In the 22 total reflective memos, I used the 4 guiding research questions as a frame for my reflections.

- *Teacher artifacts*: To supplement my reflective memos, I used my own teacher-created documents such as lesson plans, classroom materials, and department meeting agendas. No identifying information about students or colleagues on any of the data was used.
- *Other/Additional artifacts*: Because this study is ethnographic in nature, it was necessary to include additional documents and materials for context. Additional documents came from trends in popular culture and news sources particularly around the presidential transition and COVID-19. I also included less structured artifacts, personal writings, or reflections that emerged over the course of the study.

Each reflective memo was dated, time stamped, and typed. Although I had originally planned to upload documents into Dedoose for coding purposes, because I am a tactile and visual learner, thinker, and processor, it was necessary for me to code and analyze the data by hand. Because this study was conducted in my classroom as I was an ongoing teacher, I did not review the data until after the school year was over and the students were no longer in my charge.

Data Analysis

Because this study is autoethnographic in nature, it is imperative to provide space for me to effectively engage in and shift between my multiple roles. As an educator, I conducted my classroom instruction with pre-planned, and originally written units of study. Because of the hectic nature of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the anticipated difficulties, I conducted my classroom instruction much the same as I would have regardless of conducting a research study. But in order to examine my classroom practice as a researcher and not as an

educator, I waited to review, code, and analyze any data I collected until the school year ended, well after the initial 11-week period of data collection.

In the summer after the data-collection period, I reviewed the 22 transcripts and started to code according to Tesch's 8 steps in the coding process. As I attempted to organize the documents into larger patterns, it became challenging to separate them into distinct categories, as many excerpts and whole entries overlapped in ways that necessarily informed one another. After abandoning an attempt to physically cut and paste excerpts onto chart paper stuck up on my living room wall, I shifted to sitting with printed-out copies of the full documents. I read all of them in order multiple times in multiple sittings, taking notes on the documents and in a separate notepad as I read. For this process, I took an inductive approach to coding the data. I began with generalizations about my personal identity and teaching and learning from past experiences. I used Lyiscott's (2019) fugitive literacies framework as a qualitative theoretical perspective to code the data with "ideological," "institutional," "interpersonal," and "internal" to identify manifestations of white supremacy. Then, I used a spreadsheet method to collect excerpts that I felt best represented ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and/or internal manifestations of white supremacy. I also added additional codes to these excerpts with topic-oriented labels such as "parent engagement," "student conflict," and "leadership challenge" (see Appendix B for an excerpt of this spreadsheet). Each excerpt received at least two topics that connected it to others I had selected.

After coding the data through Lyiscott's (2019) fugitive literacies lenses, I then organized the excerpts according to my major theories. I considered each excerpt and examined how oppression was perpetuated or acted against. I coded these under decolonizing theory as "perpetuating oppression" or "subverting colonialism." I also considered the social, political, and

historical circumstances informing each excerpt and grouped them similarly. These excerpts were coded “CC” for critical constructivism, with a few bullet points of context. All excerpts that received a “internal” label were also coded with “Indo-Caribbean/coolie feminism.”

After reviewing the data and the multiple layers of codes, I struggled to identify how I would unite my analysis in one cohesive format. I created multiple sketches and doodles to represent the ways these theories interacted with one another. I considered controlling metaphors that could accurately depict how I was conceptualizing the theoretical mosaic. I created one graphic with multiple levels in a pyramid form but rejected the hierarchy implied by the model. I also created a flower graphic with each theory as a petal on the flower and my pedagogy as the blooming bud. However, this representation lacked the depth necessary to capture the complexity, activity, and urgency I wanted to convey. I also attempted a collage where decolonizing theory was a backdrop and the other three theories were in the foreground. This did not serve my analysis because although it successfully engaged decolonizing theory and depicted its encompassing nature, it failed to demonstrate how the other theories interacted with one another. One iteration of these drawings was built to look like a compass because I needed to more clearly see each theory on its own but also in connection with one another. As I thought more about the compass metaphor, I considered which theories might exist on opposite poles to one another. Decolonizing theory, as previously established, is a theory of action that aims to deconstruct and act against manifestations of white supremacy. I placed coolie feminism in the South to balance decolonizing theory and portray the personal nature of decolonizing work. Critical constructivism was placed in the West in acknowledgment of how Western epistemologies have shaped my academic experience. In opposition and rejection of a colonized upbringing, I placed Indo-Caribbean feminism in the East to emphasize my purposeful

engagement of Indian values and epistemologies. The decolonizing compass enabled me to activate each theory throughout my analysis process while also placing them in a concerted balance with one another.

Trustworthiness/Reliability/Validity

In 1990, Hill asserted, "Content cannot be separated from the way it is perceived and the way it moves between minds (and 'parts' of minds); knowledge is never any more given than it is made, over and over, across mental borders" (Hill, 1990, p. 5). In other words, any and all interpretation shapes all content because it exists within and across people's mental schemas. Although autoethnography is often disparaged as "navel gazing" and not representative of rigorous research, I argue that because autoethnography centers and acknowledges personal perspective, it allows for an in-depth, rigorous, and rich analysis. In the introduction to the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, the editors stated:

> Autoethnography emerged to account for the role of personal experience in research, to illustrate why the personal is important in our understanding of cultural life, and to more fully articulate the complex research and decision-making processes researchers engage in the conduct of their work. Again, autoethnography does not claim to produce better or more reliable, generalizable and / or valid research than other methods, but instead provides another approach for studying cultural experience. (Hollman Jones et al., p. 33)

Autoethnography can be thought of as a method for studying individual experiences within a larger socio-political context. While findings from the research are not necessarily generalizable, the emerging patterns and themes can be representative of transcendent social and cultural experiences in American schooling.

To support readers' understanding of this study and to work toward ensuring the trustworthiness of this study, I used triangulation to interpret themes and patterns in the data. In discussion of the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy, I provided more than three examples to examine each layer. I also used rich, thick descriptions to give the reader a strong sense of the context and circumstances informing the day-to-day interactions, further supporting the trustworthiness of the study. I also engaged in peer-to-peer auditing with colleagues to further bolster the trustworthiness of the study. Through peer-to-peer auditing, after I generated initial themes and patterns in the data, I reviewed transcripts with academic and work-based colleagues to compare their interpretations of the data with my own. Work colleagues offered suggestions and revisions in regards to how I depicted our school, the larger institution in which we work, and the larger school community. Academic colleagues offered revisions for clarity and contextualization of the content to enhance readability and provide a clear and concise portrayal of the overall themes of this study. This collaborative examination also offered opportunities for me to look beyond my own gaps and blindspots to avoid an echo chamber–style analysis.

Ethical Considerations

This study examined my actions as a teacher and teacher leader as related to decolonizing the classroom. Because it was a self-examination, it was important that I take steps to mitigate the impact of my own bias. This study reviewed my actions as I worked to reimagine my classroom during a shift to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I chose to locate the major data of this study within the first 11 weeks of the second semester so that I could work during the normal school day as a teacher and at the beginning and end of each week as a researcher. By locating these two roles in two specific and separate times, I was able to manage

the impact of my role as the researcher on my actions as a teacher. Situating my findings through three theoretical frameworks taken in tandem with Lyiscott's fugitive literacies framework was another way I sharpened my analysis when reviewing the data. In addition, because the research took place within my own classroom and within a school I helped to build, it was challenging to write about my classroom-based and school-based practices as perpetuators of oppression. However, I presented decolonizing work in multiple steps: identifying colonialism, deconstructing it, and acting against it. I wrote honestly about my teacher practice and my internal thoughts and feelings. Through this process, I began decolonizing my classroom space and my own life by naming, deconstructing, and/or acting against white supremacy within and around me.

Because this process was an authentic reflection of my decolonizing process, the events portrayed in the vignettes of this study include interactions with students, families, and colleagues. To protect the confidentiality of the students, colleagues, and families that were referenced in this study, I used pseudonyms and provided general descriptions that did not include significant characteristics that could make them easily identifiable. Some vignettes purposefully were excerpted to remove particularly identifiable details about colleagues, students, or families. Also, because the nature of this work was action based, there was an added ethical dimension not typically documented in research. Over the course of this study, I named and identified instances of oppression, and when possible, took steps to act against it. As an autoethnographic researcher, I aimed to excavate internalized colonial oppression while rooting it out from my surrounding virtual teaching and learning spaces. These interventions took the form of shifts in my leadership, teaching, and communication choices to positively impact those around me.

Conclusion

Colonialism endures in American classrooms. The oppression of BIPOC peoples is perpetuated in the epistemological and material sense through classroom curriculum and discipline. As a critical constructivist educational researcher, I examined my own teacher practice as one that both moves toward and actively resists the colonial center. To conduct humanized research, I used an autoethnographic approach. This allowed me to interpret my experiences and ultimately craft a bricolage, utilizing various theories, and moving between disciplines to situate my classroom experiences in a larger socio-cultural context.

Personal Journal Excerpt (continued…)

11.19.20

6:35 p.m.

Home

Last night, as I sat on my couch watching *The Polar Express* with my husband, I lost it, crying. Amid the school closure, I wasn't thinking about the AP kids, ready to learn with their many books for the year because of my foresight in handing out materials. (Go me, right?) I couldn't stop thinking about one particular student.

A few weeks ago, this student who opted for in-person learning was sitting in my classroom after instruction for AP Lit. He asked to stay in the room with me, as he had a free period and didn't want to return to a crowded room. I agreed, as I used to spend a lot of time with this student in after school clubs, and in the general informal hang-out time that buffers the end of the academic school day and the extracurricular activities. As we amiably chatted through masks, sitting about 10 feet apart, a lunch cart came around and he accepted the cold bagged lunch of a bologna sandwich, green beans in a plastic cup

> and milk. We ceased talking as he removed his mask and ate, so I could keep my own mask on and minimize potential exposure to COVID-19. I returned to my laptop to continue working, but couldn't stop glancing up at him as he methodically munched on every single bite of the cold, dry sandwich, drank every drop of the milk, and ate each green bean, even drinking the remaining putrid looking bean juices in the plastic cup. When I worked with him in earlier grades, he had experienced particular struggles with his mother, and my teacher-senses were tingling. I kept him from his next period class to ask about how it was going for him at home. He revealed to me that after being kicked out of his mom's house he was sleeping on a couch in a family member's home and experiencing many of the same neglectful abuses he had experienced previously. He cried as he told me of his many family stresses, lamented his grades (he's usually high achieving), and asked for support. I was able to refer him to in-house counseling services with one of my favorite social workers at our school. But schools are closed now. Which means, as I sit on the couch with my husband watching Christmas movies, he's sleeping on the couch of an abusive family member, potentially stressing about his next meal, his failing grades, or his access to counseling.

This entry, for me, demonstrates the necessary urgency of decolonizing work. While this study is meant to support educators in decolonizing their classroom practice, it is only one step on the longer road toward dismantling systems of oppression that BIPOC students are victimized by in harmful and life-threatening ways.

Virtual learning, though it was meant to create a space for students to engage in learning from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, magnified the inequities BIPOC students were already regularly experiencing. As an educator working to decolonize her classroom space, I

sought to subvert these manifestations of colonialism while also being aligned with the institution that upheld them. This particular cognitive dissonance was captured in my struggle to navigate the loss of material control with students. Like in the above excerpt, school provides a safe physical space for many students who can obtain meals, healthcare, and regular check-ins with trusted adults. In the switch to remote learning, not only did I lose my ability to create and cultivate these safe physical spaces with students; most times, I could not even see their faces. This challenge endured across my decisions in leadership, curriculum, and discipline. They are documented and analyzed in Chapter 4, where I discuss an increased reliance on epistemological control as a result of the loss of material control.

Chapter 4: Findings

Orienting the self in the virtual unknown: Relinquishing a need for epistemological control as liberation from colonialism

My first year of teaching was incredibly challenging. I made all the mistakes a novice teacher makes and frequently found myself feeling at sea. As a middle school English teacher, I failed at every curricular and disciplinary choice: I could not calibrate my understanding of relevant, developmentally appropriate content for sixth-grade minds; I could not navigate myself and students across a wide chasm of literacy needs to instruct students on the fundamentals of reading and writing; and I was unable to find my way through a chaotic classroom environment to successfully implement routines and procedures that fostered a comfortable and safe learning space. In a particularly revelatory coaching conversation with a trusted mentor that year, I expressed the difficulty I had remaining true to my values and desire to create a democratic, student-driven classroom, while also cultivating a safe, loving classroom environment. In response, I received two formative pieces of advice that I would use to successfully reinvent my teaching style in subsequent years. My mentor told me that a good teaching persona is like a sound board. The different aspects of my personality were like different channels on the board and I needed to turn the volume up or down depending on the needs of the students in front of me. I was also told that I needed to reconcile the differences between the teacher I wanted to be and the teacher that students needed me to be. This advice endured over many years as the North star for my disciplinary and curricular choices and led to my exponential growth as an educator who was considered successful: students rarely demonstrated behavioral issues in my classroom; more than 80% of students passed my courses each year; students were frequently engaged in real-world problem solving–based tasks; and students regularly provided positive feedback about

me, my course, and my teaching style. In the teaching world of remote learning, however, relying only on this guiding principle led me to fall short of my goals to decolonize my classroom space.

Teaching in a virtual world

Working as an educator in the remote learning world of the COVID-19 pandemic made me feel, in many ways, like a completely new teacher again. However, in the uncertainty of the pandemic, I was expected to support students through one of the most tumultuous periods in modern American history while struggling to maintain my own physical and emotional well-being. With the blurred boundaries between home and school, the remote teaching and learning environment quickly became overwhelming for me and the students I served. The enduring ideologies of traditional schooling continued to inform the institutional policies of remote teaching, directly impacting the interpersonal and internal interactions of teachers. The particular environment I endured at the start of remote learning is explored in my publication, *Illuminations, reflections, and projections: A dramatic rendering of schooling and support during the COVID-19 crisis* (Khan-Roopnarine, 2020), which is excerpted below:

SCENE THREE:

Ms. K is standing center stage with only the light from her cell phone illuminating her face. As each character speaks, a spotlight is trained rapidly on them. There is only one spotlight, moving rapidly to light each character as they speak. The characters deliver their lines with frantic energy as the pace of the exchanges increase over the course of the scene.

JACOB

They're still doin the test, ugh.

KAYLA

Yea. Smh.

AMBER

Ms. K., will there be multiple choice?

JACOB

How much of our grade is it?

NIYAH

Stares forward, looking shell shocked with phone in hand.

AMBER

Is it still the same day?

MS. K:

Hey guys, I'm still waiting on new information, but I will keep you posted. I should have some answers soon.

KAYLA

How many essays will there be?

JACOB

Do we gotta do it?

KAYLA

still 3 essays? And how many questions

TIANA

How much time we get? There's extra time?

NIYAH

Attempting to type, taking heaving breaths.

KYLE

What time is it at?

JACOB

Not doing it. Just fail me.

COREY

Will there still be multiple choice?

JACOB

How are we supposed to do this!!!

NATALIA

How many multiple choice will it be?

COREY

Can I use my phone to take it?

TIANA

Is it multiple choice?

KYLE

Is it on the computer?

NIYAH

hyperventilating.

SHAQ

Ms. K, I am extremely pleased that we will have the opportunity to receive college credit still, especially after all the hard work we have done in this tedious year. Could you please, on the occasion that you have a moment to spare, let me know what the content of the test will be? Thank you.

NIYAH

Panting. Ms. K, call me. It's happening again.

MS. K.

Everyone, I will let you know what I know when I know it. Jacob I'll call you in a bit, pick up the phone. N, calling you now.

Lights up on stage in the suburban living room. Ms. K is standing alone center stage. Ms. K. clicks on a stored number in her phone. It rings briefly before being picked up as the newscast continues in the background.

NEWSCASTER

In a concerted effort to combat COVID-19, General Motors has partnered with Ventec Life Systems to produce vital products for respiratory care, including ventilators.

MS. K.

Hello? Niyah, you're okay. Count your breaths like we practiced. Remember your anxiety management strategy. Crunch up in a ball or go against the wall. Breathe through the panic. You can breathe. I know you can. It's okay. I'll do it with you. In, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, out, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...

NEWSCASTER

Stated by Governor Cuomo today, New York has had a very late start. This has been the daily report with…

Ms. K. moves to center, picks up the remote and points it at the television to turn off the television as she continues talking inaudibly on the phone.

Lights out.

In the traditional school setting before the pandemic, I prided myself on my ability to create a safe, structured classroom environment. My classroom culture was built on a foundation of mutual respect and trust, and I almost never experienced significant disciplinary issues after

my disastrous first year of teaching. A key to my successful classroom included my ability to establish control over the physical classroom space, including the treatment of classroom materials and student bodies. Many of the students I work with come from home environments that are structured differently than the routines of school. In my physical classroom, students quickly understood and adapted to my expectations for the space, resulting in a classroom environment where students seemed to feel comfortable, loved, safe, and joyful. By creating expectations for physical conduct in the classroom space, I was able to cultivate a sense of safety, increasing students' willingness to take intellectual risks. A major barrier I experienced in the remote-teaching environment was an almost total loss of material control over the classroom space. The space of the virtual classroom felt abstract and was shaped by the varying circumstances and physical spaces of each of the students in my classroom. Some students logged into synchronous instruction from crowded and noisy shelters with iPads provided by the school, some from echoing stairwells or bathrooms with cell phones, while others were on personal computers in their private bedrooms. With the loss of my ability to control physical spaces, my need to control the epistemologies in my virtual classroom and professional spaces increased, resulting in instances of internal and external conflict:

> Education has its roots in a patriarchal, Eurocentric society, complicit with multiple forms of oppression of women, sometimes men, children, minorities, and Indigenous peoples. As a cultural manifestation of society, education in North America is hegemonically distributed within raced, classed, and gendered systems. (Battiste, 2013, p. 153)

As an educator, I am a participant in these oppressive systems. Although remote instruction presented an opportunity to unmake the raced, classed, and gendered systems of education, the loss of material control resulted in my acute reliance on systems of teaching and learning that

concentrated my power as a teacher and teacher leader by relying on white supremacist–aligned epistemologies.

In the sudden shift to remote learning, I found myself in uncharted waters in ways I had not experienced before. I was completely unmoored, drowning in the choppy and chaotic sea of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where before, my North stars of authenticity, student-centered learning, and equity had been sufficient guides to keep me afloat, each passing day of the pandemic brought another wave attempting to capsize me. Through the process of this autoethnographic study, I grappled again with the fundamental values guiding my practice as an educator. I deeply examined how my unwitting alignment with and purposeful rejection of white supremacist values shaped my choices and impacted myself and those around me. In this chapter, I analyze my attempts at establishing or relinquishing epistemological control during remote instruction by using the decolonial compass as a tool for navigating the cross-sections of Lyiscott's (2019) fugitive literacies framework and Smith's (1999) concept of the line, the center, and the outside as a way to examine how white supremacy asserts hierarchy and upholds classism, racism, and patriarchy across ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal interactions. The decolonial compass, as established in Chapter 2, is a unification of decolonizing theory, critical constructivism, Indo-Caribbean feminism, and coolie feminism, and is the analytical tool I used to navigate through various times and spaces to illuminate the instances documented by this autoethnographic research. In this way, I examine how establishing epistemological control and subsequently relinquishing epistemological control was central to decolonizing the virtual spaces of schooling.

Relinquishing epistemological control in leadership

Colonization relied on the systematic dehumanization of individuals and groups whose existence challenged the dominant ideologies. In Smith's framework, schooling is located within the line and in support of the colonial center. It exists to support the values, ideals, and ideologies of white supremacy. One major feature of this is the way capitalist and neo-liberal policies shape American beliefs about leadership. Hierarchical structures in leadership have been cultivated to concentrate power in a central figure, usually one who represents or perpetuates white supremacist, patriarchal structures. The literal or symbolic central figure maintains their power through a process of dehumanization. This process of dehumanization removes individual agency and prevents collective activism, especially of BIPOC peoples. One example is through a decades-long deliberate process of gerrymandering in order to disenfranchise the voting power of BIPOC people, severely limiting the group's political and social power and exacerbating neglect. Schooling also functions as a tool of the powerful to continue concentrating political, economic, and social power for white people at the expense of BIPOC peoples. "...[E]ducation is a culturally and socially constructed institution for an imagined context with purposes defined by those who are privileged to be the deciders, and their work has not always been for the benefit of the masses" (Battiste, 2013, p. 153). In my role as the English department leader, I inadvertently embraced the role of "decider" during remote learning by attempting to assert epistemological control over teachers' data and assessment practices.

Creating democratic and collaborative teams has always endured in my approach to leadership. As the department leader, I choose to drive the learning objectives and agendas of our team using recommendations from the team and offer multiple avenues and diverse choices for learning and professional development. However, in the shift to remote learning, I no longer had control of the physical learning spaces of my colleagues. I struggled to foster trust among

colleague groups and failed to create structures conducive to collaboration. In response to the loss of physical control, I instead relied heavily on epistemological control and compliance with institutional mandates, no longer soliciting input from team members in the English department to guide our professional learning. One such instance is detailed below in excerpt 10:

Department Cabinet Meeting Reflective Memo 10

Tuesday April 13th, 2021

> In our department meeting on Monday, we ended up having a tense, but rich conversation. We were supposed to shift to phase 2 of our data cycle in a review of schoolwide standards based data. I looked at the team's efforts in phase 1 and they weren't very strong. Some people didn't finish, some people only wrote a few sentences on something that should have taken up more than 1 page, some people made general statements without thinking deeply about the prompting questions. So, for the shift to phase 2, I mentioned that people would be getting a full period to work and that their products should indicate thoughtful effort. One team member visibly rolled their eyes. But, I plowed ahead, and provided some scaffolding questions that could be helpful. I said that the data analysis process is not a compliance task, but it is meant to support our instructional practice as teachers. My co-department leader paused us and opened up the floor for discussion. She asked the team what would be most useful and what their thoughts on the task were. Many things came up. People said that they felt this process wasn't useful to their practice. They didn't understand how looking at this data would change their practice. I provided examples of how I used data like this to drive my instruction. Another team member asked if the results of this data were different from what I already knew about students. I said not really and my co-lead jumped in to explain

that it still helped us confirm what we believed, and could help us make informed decisions, instead of relying on assumptions about students.

The conversation lasted over 30 minutes with people agreeing and disagreeing with one another. It was an illuminating moment for me. As a team leader, I had been sitting in a space where I was perpetuating a lot of top down practices. I would often just deliver information to colleagues and then release the team. Opening up the floor for discussion and inquiry is something that I used to do a lot more frequently. But, in recent years, team members have been resistant to that practice. I've always wanted to cultivate our professional learning community. But I have had to work with the wishes of the team. This moment of discussion that my co-lead opened up was humbling for me. We landed as a team on an agreement to table this data process, and instead, focus on student writing. We all agreed to bring writing samples with our feedback and student revision on it so we could look more closely at what kids are doing, the feedback we're providing, and how kids are implementing the feedback. I had to reiterate multiple times in the conversation that the purpose of this exercise was twofold- one to examine student writing and two to strengthen our feedback practices. I'm not sure how it will go in two weeks, but I'm hopeful.

As a department leader, I act as the "decider" who upholds white supremacist ideologies and patriarchal values. Involuntarily, I function as the primary decision maker and consequently the vessel for the institutional practices that are shaped by white supremacist ideologies. Despite my own internal identity as a marginalized person, my position as department leader afforded me a privileged position as "decider." Prior to the pandemic I acknowledged the privilege of this position and used it to cultivate democratic learning spaces with my colleagues. My leadership

choices were typically ones of discernment, where I acted as a filter or blocker for team members, advocating for opportunities or space for team members to flourish while removing barriers or pushing back against the dehumanizing bureaucracy of the institution when necessary. Much of this work was accomplished in cabinet meetings where I could use my interpersonal skills to navigate challenging conversations with supervisors and colleagues using my well-developed relationships. During remote learning, however, with the increase in accountability structures for teachers and the loss of face-to-face communication, my agency as a subversive leader was diminished. In addition to my work as a department leader, I worked as a full-time classroom teacher, mentor teacher to first- and second-year colleagues, and director of the drama club. In the isolation of the pandemic, I often felt metaphorically suffocated as I was drowning in the increased accountability measures for teachers while I did my best to support students' learning and our collective socio-emotional well-being through the trauma of the pandemic. My inability to set appropriate work/home boundaries during virtual learning clouded my ability to see and critically examine manifestations of white supremacy within myself. Therefore, I had little capacity for subverting white supremacist ideologies and navigating institutional requirements with my usual eye for equity and advocacy for the team. I worked only to survive within the dehumanizing context of remote learning, rather than thrive in ways I was used to. Bettina Love (2019) described her notion of thriving in her work *We Want to do More Than Survive*:

> For dark folx, thriving cannot happen without a community that is deeply invested in racial uplift, human and workers' rights, affordable housing, food and environmental justice, land rights, free or affordable healthcare, healing, joy, cooperative economic strategies, and high political participation that is free of heteropatriarchy, homophobia,

> Islamophobia, transphobia, sexism, ageism, and the politics of respectability. These structural ideologies police who is worthy of dignity within our communities. (p. 74)

Although I am used to leading an English department that is typically invested in the work of thriving, within the context of remote learning, I failed to center our collective need to thrive. This led to conflict in the interpersonal dynamics in our team meetings. Members of the team did not respond well to the shift in my leadership style and were visibly and audibly pushing against the manifestations of white supremacist–aligned leadership. In the midst of the pandemic, teachers were facing increased accountability measures because they were teaching remotely. As a leader, instead of streamlining the accountability measures for our team as I usually would, and instead of advocating for the team in the ways I could during an in-person cabinet meeting, I presented exactly what we were being expected to do with no qualifications or explanation. As a leader, it was more convenient and easier to reproduce the structures I was being expected to and enforce the policies of the institution because it required less energy and criticality from me at a time when I was physically, mentally, and emotionally depleted. However, "a true fight for racial justice requires those who benefit and find comfort in white privilege to give something up" (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 17). To remain a truly decolonizing leader, I needed to prioritize a more constructivist approach to the data-analysis procedure with my approach to leadership more as facilitator and co-learner rather than embodiment of the institution. I did not afford teachers opportunities to collaboratively shape the procedure the way they were used to. Because I was myself drowning in the remote-learning ocean, I had no way to craft a metaphorical ship to sail the team across the school year's rough seas. During the meeting, however, I was able to

navigate my way through the challenge with the decolonial compass by looking to the true North of decolonizing work.

Employing the decolonial compass: Heading North

Colonization endures at the intersections of racism, classism, and patriarchy, which are all upheld by an alignment to white supremacy. Therefore, decolonization is a humanizing process that requires deconstructing, naming, and acting against these manifestations of white supremacy. Darder (2015) described Freire's notion of decolonizing in order to live free:

> For Freire, our capacity to live free required a fundamental shift in how leaders, educators, and students define our lives and the conditions of our labor. This requires decolonizing of the mind, through ridding ourselves of colonizing ideologies of domination, the establishment of solidarity with others, the existence of meaningful choices in our lives, the recognition of ourselves as subjects of history, the courage to speak out when necessary, and a well-developed sense of empowerment, in order that we might name, critique, decolonize, and reinvent our world collectively, in the interest of social justice, human rights, and economic democracy. (p. 46)

In my work as a department leader, I engaged in this process by first interrogating the institutional requirement of assessment data. I recognized that this emerged from a neo-liberal ideological norm that prioritizes systems of labeling and sorting students using standardized assessments. When the members of the English department team resisted this requirement, we engaged in collaborative conversation to develop a plan that would more effectively support our work as remote teachers. It was Battiste (2013) who noted, "the educational significance and justification for respectful dialogues cannot be over-emphasized as a basis for arriving at a decolonized educational agenda" (p. 64). Although I encountered what I experienced as

interpersonal resistance to my leadership, instead of escalating the conflict, I chose to relinquish control of the meeting to create space for respectful dialogues. It was also necessary for me to suspend the internal frustration I was experiencing as a result of what I perceived as a challenge to my authority. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1961) described the psychological process of decolonization. He explained that when the people who are oppressed and those that oppress meld together, it becomes a tool for collective power:

> Individualism is the first to disappear. The native intellectual had learnt from his masters that the individual ought to express himself fully. The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. Now the native who has the opportunity to return to the people during the struggle for freedom will discover the falseness of this theory. The very forms of organization of the struggle will suggest to him a different vocabulary. Brother, sister, friend—these are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie, because for them my brother is my purse, my friend is part of my scheme for getting on. The native intellectual takes part, in a sort of auto-da-fé, in the destruction of all his idols: egoism, recrimination that springs from pride, and the childish stupidity of those who always want to have the last word. Such a colonized intellectual, dusted over by colonial culture, will in the same way discover the substance of village assemblies, the cohesion of people's committees, and the extraordinary fruitfulness of local meetings and groupments. Henceforward, the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact everyone will be discovered by the troops, everyone will be massacred—or everyone will be saved. (p. 47)

In this example, I as the team leader am the native intellectual. I am liberating myself from a colonized system of conduct wherein I am the "decider," holder of power, and representative of the institution. This repositions the interests of the team as central to the interests of the institution. The work of the English department team can remain decolonized by adhering to this model of teacher-driven professional learning, wherein teachers have opportunities to interrogate their practice with colleagues and reflect on their own alignment with oppressive pedagogy.

Using the decolonial compass: Heading West

Interrogating ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal literacies within Smith's (1999) framework is also illuminating when using a critical constructivist approach. Neo-liberal education reforms have relied heavily on standardized assessments and data-tracking policies that have enabled the excessive testing of students to measure teachers and schools against standardized norms that are heavily white norm referenced. Darder (2014) noted,

> The increasing tendency to eliminate differences within schools and society is in sync with the hegemonic apparatus of capitalist schooling that once openly drove the Americanization movement in the United States and persists in homogenized contortions of neoliberal multiculturalism—where cultural recognition on the surface belies the absence of power. (p. 61)

Allowing team members to discuss the policy also surfaced our understanding of the purpose of data tracking and assessment practices in our own community. Historically and socially, standardized testing only served to punish and perpetuate oppressive practices in our school. For example, based solely on our standardized testing data in middle school mathematics, we had previously been labeled an "at-risk school," which did not result in increased resources but could have resulted in a school closure. By opening space for members of the department to question

the institutional requirement, as a team, we were able to expand the notion of what information about student performance was valuable to us as practitioners. This resulted in a shift from what we collectively perceived as a useless measure of reading level to a more focused study on student writing. In mentioning that the data products merely confirm what teachers already knew and had classroom-based experience with, the team was asserting their position as skilled pedagogues whose professional opinions were valuable.

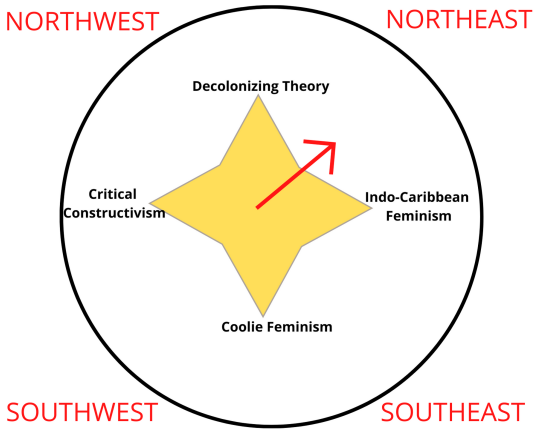
As a team leader, I used the moment as an opportunity to reposition the goals of the session to better meet the needs of the team while also complying with institutional mandates. The institutional requirement was the use of data to track student progress during remote learning. As a team, we identified our own learning target based on the patterns we were experiencing in our remote classrooms. Teachers opted for an examination of our writing instruction and the writing students were producing because teachers identified that it was a more effective way to support students' literacy development than tracking reading levels. In the moment, I was struggling with the opposition from the team and knew I would not be able to engage effectively as a team leader. Therefore, I spent a large part of the conversation listening to the grievances of the team and allowing my co-leader to facilitate the conversation. I participated in the conversation at the end to summarize the major points of the conversation and inform the team that I would bring their suggestions to the leadership for approval. This was a satisfactory conclusion and the English department team was able to engage in remote professional learning that was valued, impactful, and driven by the desires of the team, rather than institutional requirements.

My initial leadership of the department during remote learning was more closely aligned with dominant ideologies that shape leadership. I first engaged in an ideologically top-down

approach to leadership, wherein my role was to require team members to meet institutional obligations determined by the administration. I used my interpersonal relationships to compel team members to produce what the institution was asking of them, regardless of how valuable the product was to their own needs. In this excerpt, however, I took an opportune moment for introspection and responsiveness, in order to examine the impact of my leadership choices during remote learning. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that in remote learning, I performed notions of leadership that were aligned with bell hooks' (2004) concept of *benevolent patriarchy*. Although I am not an administrator, my role as department leader positioned me firmly on the side of the empowered "deciders" with the ability to require compliance. However, because I am not an administrator, I do not have access to accountability and compliance tools such as disciplinary measures. Instead, I leveraged the trust my team placed in me as their leader to facilitate their participation in a process that was not to their benefit. As a benevolent patriarch, I did not use force but was still able to exercise my power. Despite my alliance with a white supremacist power structure wherein decision making became the sole privilege of leadership, I was able to draw upon my previously established practices as a democratic facilitator and my commitment to being a responsive leader. When I was met with resistance from a team that was as overwhelmed as I was, I did not choose to double down on the institutional requirement. Instead, my co-leader and I created space for inquiry and discussion, allowing people to interrogate our collaborative learning process and collaboratively craft new goals and tasks more aligned with their professional goals. It was only through releasing epistemological control that the team was able to progress in a democratic and collaborative way that was more aligned with decolonizing work. Through this process, I was able to name and deconstruct the manifestations of white supremacy shaping my leadership choices. This led to a

successful navigation through the conflict that included the entire team and allowed us to act against dehumanizing policy during remote learning.

This excerpt represents my attempt to peer through the fugitive literacies window to examine the manifestations of white supremacy within the line of Smith's concept of the line, the center, and the outside. Navigating this instance required a Northwest orientation to activate both decolonizing theory and critical constructivism: It was necessary for the team to situate the oppressive history of standardized assessment in the context of our school and in the larger United States. This allowed us to deconstruct the policy requirement and craft a new pathway toward data compliance that was more practical and useful for us as virtual educators. Looking in a Northwesterly direction particularly illuminated the institutional and interpersonal manifestations of white supremacy in the interaction. The school wanted to produce assessment data to prove that our school was continuing to reproduce capitalist-aligned structures in virtual learning, and I relied on a more hierarchical and patriarchal leadership style to compel team members into compliance. My decision to relinquish epistemological control during a tense team meeting created the necessary space for team members to engage critically, collaboratively, and constructively with one another. Relinquishing epistemological control during team meetings with adults was a simpler task than doing so with high school students. However, opting to relinquish epistemological control with students during contentious moments was a necessary and effective pathway toward decolonizing virtual learning spaces. A Northeast heading on the decolonial compass provided a clear path to decolonizing disciplinary decisions with students, which is detailed in the next section.



Relinquishing epistemological control in disciplinary decisions

Relinquishing epistemological control during remote learning was the key to decolonizing my approach to discipline and accountability structures for students. Since the start of my teaching career, I have purposefully crafted a classroom space that rejects the banking model of education (Friere, 1970). I have always put student voices and needs at the forefront of my curricular and disciplinary decisions, both as a classroom teacher and teacher leader. This commitment to equitable and democratic learning spaces is evident in my choices around the physical classroom spaces. I cultivate a collaborative learning environment, by rarely lecturing to the whole class and instead instructing students through group activities or during independent learning tasks. In the shift to remote learning, however, just as I relied on epistemological control in leadership, I defaulted to one-way, lecture-style instruction in my English classroom, resulting in significant conflict between myself and students. One such instance is detailed below:

Instructional Reflective Memo 6

Sunday March 7th, 2021

...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, not because they lack the skill and I've been trying to help the kids 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 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, 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 from the meet, 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 meeting 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 ok, 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 ok, 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…

Because colonization relied heavily on the dehumanization of BIPOC peoples, a key component of decolonization is RE-humanization. Teaching and learning in the context of American public schooling is an intimate collaboration among minds requiring trust, openness, and empathy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) described a *revolutionary educator*:

> From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them. (p. 75)

Bettina Love (2019) also described the particular co-conspirator relationship necessary for liberation as distinct from previous notions of *allyship*:

> In many intersectional social justice groups, the language is shifting from needing allies to co conspirators. Ally-ship is working toward something that is mutually beneficial and supportive to all parties involved. Allies do not have to love dark people, question their privilege, decenter their voice, build meaningful relationships with folx working in the struggle, take risks, or be in solidarity with others. They just have to show up and mark the box present; thus, ally-ship is performance or self-glorifying. This type of allyship still centers Whiteness in dark spaces. Too often, though not always, our allies are eager White folx who have not questioned their Whiteness, White supremacy, White emotions of guilt and shame, the craving for admiration, or the structures that maintain White power. Also, how can allies work from the mindset of mutuality if they are the dominant group? (p. 126)

Although I am not white, as a teacher holding power over students in the virtual classroom spaces, I was working with students from the dominant position in ways that were aligned with white supremacy, regardless of my intention. Remote learning, although it was a vital modality during the height of the pandemic, created significant barriers to fostering the openness, trust, and creativity required in the virtual classroom spaces of a liberated, revolutionary educator.

In a traditional classroom setting, the power to control the classroom space lies almost exclusively with the teacher: I set the expectations for academic and behavioral conduct, I shape the content and curriculum that students have access to, and I determine necessary disciplinary measures in the classroom. I am the representative of the institutional values who is responsible for adhering to school policies and procedures. Therefore, "within the classroom, whether conscious of it or not, teachers perpetuate dominant values, beliefs, myths, and meanings through the authority they exert over students" (Darder, 2015, p. 49). The institutional rules are determined by ideological norms that standardized white, middle-class behavior (Lynch, 2018; Tanner, 2017). When students do not abide by the institutional expectations for conduct, forcing students to comply becomes an interpersonal interaction between the student and teacher. Fanon (1961) described in *Wretched of the Earth* the binary organization of the colonial world describing people in barracks versus people at the police station, implying the divide between those who wield power and those who are subjugated by it. He wrote:

> In capitalist societies the educational system, whether lay or clerical, the structure of moral reflexes handed down from father to son, the exemplary honesty of workers who are given a medal after fifty years of good and loyal service, and the affection which springs from harmonious relations and good behavior—all these aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order serve to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably. In the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, counselors and "bewilderers" separate the exploited from those in power. In the colonial countries, on the contrary, the policeman and the soldier, by their immediate presence and their frequent and direct action maintain contact with the native and advise him by means of rifle butts

> and napalm not to budge. It is obvious here that the agents of government speak the language of pure force. (Fanon, 1961, p. 37)

In this instance, I am the one in power, who by my presence and actions encourages compliance from the exploited people in service of colonial power. Because white supremacy is insidiously placed as the ideological center of our society, it also shapes the language we deem acceptable and appropriate. As an agent of the institution, I could have chosen to punish this student for using language that is deemed offensive by white, upper–middle-class standards (Padia & Traxler, 2021). Although I regularly use profanity in my personal life when speaking with friends or family, it is not usually acceptable to do so in a traditional classroom setting or in a teacher–student relationship. My students and I both exist in communities where common forms of expression include profanity and do not necessarily cause discomfort. I also believe that the use of profanity can even indicate trust and inclusiveness within certain communities, enhancing feelings of safety and belonging. Control of students' language in the classroom, however, is another way that institutions cultivate the atmosphere of submission that Fanon describes. This linguistic policing makes it easier for institutions to regulate students' physical bodies, demonstrating a school's alignment with the epistemological and material control that colonization makes necessary.

Although I served as Tamara's senior English teacher in remote learning, I had previously established a strong relationship with her over many years prior. I worked closely with her as her 6th-grade and 10th-grade English teacher and had countless positive interactions with her prior to the one documented here. I also had a long-standing relationship with her mom. I was one of the first teachers Tamara and her mother met when they arrived at our middle school open house, and her mother always made it a point to say hello to me over the years, even when I was not

Tamara's teacher. In this instance, my reactions were guided in a small part by my historical repudiation of punitive disciplinary measures and largely by my interpersonal values. How I relate to others in my personal and in my professional life is most significantly influenced by my Indo-Caribbean feminist sensibilities. In 2018, Outar described the unique Indo-Caribbean feminism faced by members of the diaspora: "In the area of Indo-Caribbean feminism especially, genealogies of violence and trauma are intricately tied to place and space" (p. 55). Outar went on to explain the disproportionate female to male ratio of indentured Indians, with men significantly outnumbering women on the sugar plantations of Guyana, resulting in excessive control of female bodies. Controlling female bodies endures as a guiding principle in Indo-Caribbean homes and has certainly impacted my understanding of what constitutes a good and virtuous woman. In my position as an Indo-Caribbean feminist, I actively work against the internalized and thoroughly colonized standards for women's behavior that exist in my mind and reject policies that seek to control women.

Students, just like teachers, should be expected to maintain safe learning and working spaces when in school. However, that does not necessarily mean the same thing when applied to children and adults. When students are a significant danger or distraction to those around them, it is reasonable to impose measures that will reduce the potential for harm. However, standards for policing student behavior rely on white supremacist–aligned expectations for conduct. Teachers in turn should not disrespect, humiliate, or disproportionately punish students. The way Tamara used profanity in the virtual learning space, though it hurt my feelings, did not pose any significant threat of danger. Because I have a long-standing relationship with Tamara, I had context for understanding her outburst and was able to spend the day rehumanizing her in my mind after a tense interaction. Throughout the day, and before I spoke with Tamara again, I

considered all the struggles she must be facing during her final year of high school. She was a bright, outgoing student who thrived on strong interpersonal relationships with her teachers and peers. She was an active member in our school clubs and enjoyed attending all of our school events. She was frequently elevated as a student leader, and she often helped out her favorite teachers during her lunch periods and after school. In the context of remote learning, however, she was denied access to all the usual ways she was affirmed as a valued member of our school community, and upheld as a capable, confident student leader. Although I believe in cultivating safe, open, and trusting classroom spaces between students and teachers, what that looks and sounds like in my classroom may not necessarily be aligned with the traditional expectations. My rebuke of Tamara's use of the term "fuckin" had less to do with my desire to uphold the school's policy on language use and more to do with my embarassment and the perceived challenge to my authority. Threats to my established power in the classroom space are directly tied to my need to assert control over my own physical and emotional spaces.

Relinquishing my desire for epistemological control, however, in my follow-up conversation with Tamara was the path toward decolonizing my approach to discipline:

> 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)

In the moment of the interaction, what I wanted to do was virtually remove Tamara from the space. This would have been the equivalent of kicking a student out of a classroom, which is something I have not done since my first disastrous year teaching. In the remote-learning environment, it became a habit for me to assert my control in the virtual classroom space, from

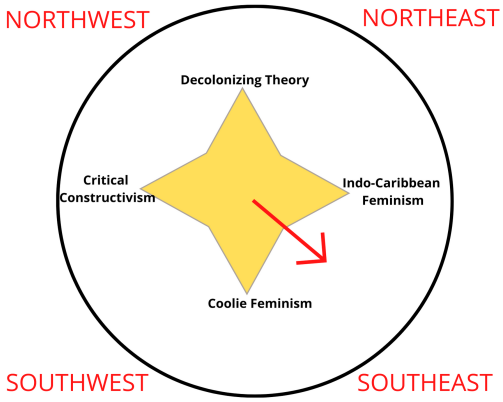
requiring responses in a chat box at a certain time, to quantifying and grading student participation in virtual discussion. These practices were all in alignment with a colonized classroom, wherein I was the center that maintained structures to concentrate my own power. Hosein (2011) described feminist educators as ones who teach their students to identify their experiences as knowledge while engaging in self-analysis and self-criticism. When Tamara and I opted to talk with one another at the end of the school day, we extended grace to one another, centered each other's humanity, and communicated our individual needs across the virtual space. Our interpersonal interaction 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)

Although our school's discipline code would have me respond to Tamara's behavior with punitive consequences such as classroom removal, I actively resisted my reactionary need for retribution. Instead, I released Tamara from the class period to give her time and space at a time when she was feeling overwhelmed and stressed. This small gesture allowed Tamara and me to come together across the virtual chasm and commiserate about the circumstances of virtual learning and assert our shared humanity during dehumanizing circumstances. This interaction also resulted in a shift in my virtual teaching choices, where students were offered multiple ways of engaging in virtual discussion with their peers beyond the chat box function.

Using decolonizing theory and Indo-Carribbean feminism on the decolonial compass magnified the institutional and interpersonal manifestations of white supremacy through

Lyiscott's fugitive literacies window. A Northeast heading on the decolonial compass placed decolonizing theory and Indo-Caribbean in concert with one another. This approach allowed me and my students to take a mutually humanizing approach with one another. Cultivating decolonized relationships like we did in this excerpt requires a collective commitment to center one another's needs while validating and working to understand one another's lived experiences. This approach also proved effective for me when collaborating with co-teachers to facilitate a virtual lesson on a controversial topic. In the next section, I detail a virtual lesson I facilitated with 10th graders during virtual learning while heading Southeast on the decolonial compass.



Relinquishing epistemological control in classroom content

The study of literature is inherently one that aligns with decolonizing frameworks. In literary analysis, students deconstruct texts by content and structure by contextualizing them using various lenses. Students engage in multi-level analysis from the basics of breaking down sentence structures to interrogating author bias. A common conversation in American high school English literature classes is the use of derogatory terms and hate speech. Teachers debate whether or not to censor the literature students have access to and do not agree on the use of

terms such as the N-word.[1] In my personal experience, I have been in classrooms with white female educators who do not say the word and instead say "N-word." I have also been in classrooms with Black male educators who use the term as it is written in whatever piece of literature the class was discussing. In my own experience as a teacher, my practice has evolved over many years. I no longer use the term, even when it is present in literature, and instead say "N-word" to avoid perpetuating racialized violence in my classes. Navigating the N-word conversation in my 10th-grade English courses during remote learning was a new challenge for me, but I was able to do so by relying on the expertise of trusted co-teachers instead of my previous experiences teaching with the N-word during in-person instruction. This experience was relatively successful during a potentially tense conversation regarding the N-word in my 10th-grade English class with a special education co-teacher and a guest teaching artist, which is detailed in the excerpt from my data below.

Instructional Reflective Memo 4

Sunday February 14th, 2021

> This week, I did my annual lesson on the N-word. Every year, I have my 10th graders participate in the August Wilson monologue competition. In this competition, students select monologues from one of the August Wilson plays in the century cycle. The plays are full of rich characters with vivid language, including the N-word. In person, I usually do a multi-period lesson on the N-word leading up to the distribution of

[1] "The N-word" refers to the term largely used to perpetuate and enact racial violence against Black people. Historically, the N-word is a derogatory term used to refer to Black people in a racist context with the sole purpose of dehumanizing and causing physical and/or emotional harm. It is used in literature that is regularly read in high school classrooms such as white author Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and the collected works of the noted Black American playwright August Wilson. It is sometimes contemporarily used in popular culture, as some creators have reclaimed the term in recent decades. The usage of the term is controversial as people do not agree on the groups that can use the term in a non-offensive way. My notions of navigating the N-word with students are largely shaped by the following texts:

1. *Straight talk about the N-Word* by Sean Price
2. *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* by Randall Kennedy

> the students' monologues to prepare them for seeing the N-word in their monologues. Students are sometimes uncomfortable with reciting monologues that use the N-word, and I never force them to. If a student receives a monologue with the N-word in it and doesn't feel comfortable, I always have 1 or 2 backup monologues that I know they will like. Now, because I only see my classes two days a week this year and due to other mitigating factors (teaching artist started late in the school year/time limitations), I couldn't devote my usual number of class periods to the N-word conversation. Instead, I condensed it into one half of a class period (30 minutes) right before I distributed the monologues. I didn't feel good about this shift, but my co-teacher who is an Afro-Latina from Brooklyn and who also taught our students as middle schoolers assured me that she thought the kids would be okay with the condensed conversation. We ended up having great conversations where the students led and discussed the history of the word, its current usage, and how it is used in current art and literature. Our teaching artist, a Black man from the U.S. South, explained why he chooses not to use the word and the legacy of the word in his family and heritage. My co-teacher explained that the word is decontextualized in her home country in Central America and how she first experienced and encountered the word as an American. As the teacher who is not Black, I took a back seat during the start of the conversation and let my teaching artist and co-teacher lead. Students shared their opinions and discussed…

The structure of co-teaching is one that requires collaboration, openness, and trust (Friend, 2008). However, having a general education teacher who is seen to be the subject expert working in collaboration with a special education teacher whose primary responsibility is to support students in achieving the goals on their individualized education plans, can be a source

of conflict instead of compromise in some partnerships (Friend et al., 2010). In my own classroom practice, I try to begin from a place of trust and confidence in a co-teacher's professional abilities and then adjust to supplement the needs within the partnership. As the general education teacher, it can be one's tendency to assert control over the classroom spaces, both in terms of the curriculum and disciplinary expectations (Campbell-Whatley et al., 1994). Institutional policies in our school handbook refer to general education and special education teachers as equal partners in the classroom who are both responsible for meeting the needs of all students in a class. However, when accountability measures are imposed, it is only the general educator's name that is attached to the curricular expectations, disciplinary anecdotes, standardized testing data, and general conduct of the classroom. Thus, an imbalanced power dynamic in co-teaching can often emerge (Conderman & Liberty, 2018). In my 10 years of teaching, however, I have engaged in co-teaching with special education teachers, teaching artists, and/or English as a New Language teachers every year, and I have developed a strong sense of collaboration with my colleagues. Part of this collaborative process has been developing a notion of whether I should lead or follow my co-teachers' examples. In the partnership described above, I am the most experienced teacher with more English content and pedagogical expertise. The special education co-teacher was also relatively new to the profession, as was the teaching artist we were working with. In this instance, however, the lived experiences of my co-teachers were central to facilitating rich, engaging, authentic discussions with our students and took priority over my pedagogical and content knowledge. I was reluctant to relinquish epistemological control of the lesson, but I trusted in the expertise of my colleagues, who assured me that they could effectively facilitate the conversation. Although I had previously navigated conversations about the N-word with students across a spectrum of ages, experiences, and

identities during in-person learning on my own, virtual learning created barriers to trust, openness, and discussion among our classes that could only be overcome through the personal and intimate stories of my co-teachers.

Reproducing social hierarchies is central to colonialism (Cansinos, 2021). Smith (1999) described the social constructs that established hierarchies in order to dehumanize Indigenous peoples:

> The European powers had by the nineteenth century already established systems of rule and forms of social relations which governed interaction with the indigenous peoples being colonized. These relations were gendered, hierarchical and supported by rules, some explicit and others masked or hidden. The principle of 'humanity' was one way in which the implicit or hidden rules could be shaped. To consider indigenous peoples as not fully human, or not human at all, enabled distance to be maintained and justified various policies of either extermination or domestication. (Smith, 1999, p. 26)

Although this was constructed in the 19th century and purposefully disenfranchised Indigenous peoples, the structure for dehumanization endures across modern institutions. In the micro sense, a colonized classroom space would have centered me as the content expert, asserting a dominant position over my co-teachers. As the more experienced teacher in the classroom, it would seem most logical that I lead the conversation around a potentially contentious topic.

During the in-person learning experiences I crafted in the past, students would engage in a multi-lesson series where they examine the use of the N-word in historical literature like the work of Mark Twain, and its use in popular culture like contemporary music and movies, finally leading to an examination of the word in August Wilson’s work. Due to the scheduling constraints and the limited time I had to work with students in synchronous remote learning,

however, I could not provide the usual experiences. Instead of a series of lessons where we named the use of the term, deconstructed it by categorizing its use as racist or reclamation, and then co-created action steps for our work in the class, we had only 30 minutes to engage in discussion with students. In the virtual discussion, both teachers who shared their personal experiences inadvertently modeled their lifelong process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against the use of the N-word as a manifestation of white supremacy. Their authentic sharing became a masterful demonstration of critical self-reflection in one's own life. The choice we made as a co-teaching group was one that sought to elevate the experiences of the Black educators in the virtual space. For this lesson, it was most important to create space for students to learn about people's unique experiences with the N-word and then go on to share in order to interrogate their own. This allowed students to determine how they wanted to engage with the N-word in our class discussions and more critically navigate their use of the term in their lives outside of school. Smith (1999) discussed the processes of colonization as "a stripping away of mana (our standing in our own eyes), and an undermining of rangatiratanga (our ability and right to determine our destinies)" (p. 173). In this lesson, we chose to humanize the Black educators in the virtual classroom while also leaving space for students to be self-determining in terms of how they engage with the N-word in their academic and personal lives. The decision on our part to center the experiences of Black teachers as an entry point for our entirely BIPOC student group's discussion was central to our focus as decolonizers.

Through the process of their sharing and discussion, both co-teachers situated their use and disuse of the N-word in important historical and socio-political contexts. Although they did not know it, they were asking students to examine the use of the N-word through a critical constructivist perspective. By sharing her experiences as an Afro-Latina who was raised outside

of the United States and first encountering the racialized term as a public school student in America, she helped students understand how social and historical contexts can shape the meaning and impact of a word. She was careful to highlight the particular anti-Black racism that was pervasive in countries beyond the United States but also noted how her initial formative experiences with the word emerged from a non-U.S. context. Likewise, our teaching artist discussed his experiences growing up in the U.S. South and shared stories of how the word was used to enact very tangible racial violence against his family. He also explained to the class how he chose to use the word when he was growing up in the emerging hip hop culture of the 1990s and how, as an adult Black man in 2020, he actively chooses not to. As the only teacher in the room who did not identify as Black, I recognized that it was not my place to constrain or control the conversation. The candid openings shared by my co-teachers helped cultivate an open and honest dialogue where students felt comfortable enough to ask questions and share their own experiences.

A key component of Indo-Caribbean feminism is a necessary contextualization of the trauma experienced during Indian indentureship to the Caribbean. Outar (2018) explained, "trauma and colonial era histories of injustice haunt Caribbean people even as we imagine diasporas as sites of freedom and greater opportunity" (p. 56). As an Indo-Caribbean feminist, it is my obligation to develop "a historical consciousness that is attuned to legacies of both resistance and persistent systems of oppression both in the Caribbean and in our new homes, wherever they may be" (Outar, 2018, p. 56). My critical and historical consciousness was continually developed during this class session, where I was afforded the opportunity to listen to my well-respected colleagues share aspects of their personal histories to support student learning. Indo-Caribbean feminists, although emerging from the historical context of post-Indenture in the

Caribbean, center a committment to liberation for all peoples in any social and historical context. Although I have my own experiences with the N-word, in the context of this class, mine were not the most important to center in the limited time we had to engage students in discussion. Therefore, I remained largely silent during the discussion and contributed at the end to summarize the major themes shared. Coolie feminism emerged as a branch of Indo-Caribbean feminism as an overt rejection of the historical and social circumstances that have allowed words like *coolie* and the *N-word* to become tools for oppression. Coolie, like the N-word, was used in the Caribbean to perpetuate violence against Indo-Caribbean laborers and is used pervasively across the Indo-Caribbean community today. Like the term *coolie*, the *N-word* is a function of a racist, classist, and patriarchal society. Modern linguistic practices around both of these terms are a result of the deeply embedded constructs of colonization that "lend themselves easily to binary oppositions, dualisms, and hierarchical orderings of the world" (Smith, 1999, p. 55). I identify as a coolie feminist in a reclamation of the term and with a purposeful orientation away from the white supremacist capitalism that have allowed such terms to thrive. Because I recognize the N-word as a violent tool for oppression, I chose to relinquish control during the discussion of the term to avoid perpetuating harm. I decentered my own beliefs as an experienced English teacher and trusted that my Black co-teacher and Black teaching artist would have expertise in navigating this discussion in ways that I could not. Therefore, my engagement with students and colleagues in a critical analysis of the N-word was in alignment with my coolie feminist values and my goals toward liberation as an Indo-Caribbean feminist.

The decolonial compass was an effective tool for successful navigation away from manifestations of white supremacy in virtual schooling, but as the trauma, isolation, and exhaustion of the pandemic wore on, I struggled to maintain a true North heading. The

progression of the pandemic directly affected my capacity as a decolonizing educator and I failed to relinquish epistemological control in leadership, discipline, and curriculum. Three excerpts demonstrating this struggle are detailed in the next section.

Reimagining assertions of epistemological control with the decolonial compass

The interactions documented in this study were not always aligned with decolonizing objectives. Although the above sections detailed my relatively successful attempts to decolonize my virtual learning spaces in leadership, discipline, and co-teaching, there were multiple instances where I reverted to white supremacist–aligned ideologies and institutional policies that impacted my interpersonal interactions and exacerbated my internal conflict. In the following section, I detail three such instances and reimagine them using the decolonial compass. The excerpt below describes a meeting I facilitated as the English department leader regarding mandates around grading policies during remote learning.

Navigating through epistemological control in leadership

Department Cabinet Meeting Reflective Memo 3

Sunday February 14th, 2021

> In cabinet this week, we discussed new developments with the NX resolution policy. The department of education has directed that we need to provide every opportunity possible to students to resolve their NX grades. An NX is the mark students received on their transcripts instead of a failing grade. Thus far, we have many students who have received NXs for the Spring 2020 semester. Those NXs were carried over into summer school, where students had the chance to make up the coursework in order to receive a grade. Very few students actually recovered their NX grade from the Spring during summer school. Those students who did not recover their NX grades were

programmed for a special NX resolution class for the fall of 2020. Some students did recover their grade during this semester. However, now the fall 2020 semester has ended, and not only are there students with outstanding NXs from the Spring of 2020, but now a fresh round of NXs have been assigned to students for the fall of 2020. At our cabinet meeting, we discussed the February break NX academy we would be offering. This new opportunity was a chance for students to not take their February break and instead complete assigned tasks on some digital platform to recover their grades.

While sitting in this meeting and listening to the presentation of a new opportunity, I could not help but feel angry. Many of the students who received NXs for the Spring of 2020 also received NXs for the Fall of 2020. Many of the students could not be reached, despite multiple contact and outreach attempts. I know for myself at least, the only way a student received an NX was if I had 0 contact with them from the switch to remote. And students that were not engaging in school received multiple phone calls, emails, and outreach referrals from me. What made me so upset about this new February break opportunity was that it doesn't actually address the real cause of the NX grades in the first place. Students are overwhelmed and at a loss. They have spent more than 10 years in an educational system that beat them into compliance, discouraged critical thinking and creativity, and forced them through narrow pathways of standardization. Now, students who are successful in remote learning are those that are becoming creative in their approach to learning, completing class assignments, engaging with teachers and peers, and being empowered to ask questions. There is a quote from *Utopia* (Moore, 1516) that I think about all the time:

> For if you suffer your people to be ill-educated, and their manners to be corrupted from their infancy, and then punish them for those crimes to which their first education disposed them, what else is to be concluded from this, but that you first make thieves and then punish them.

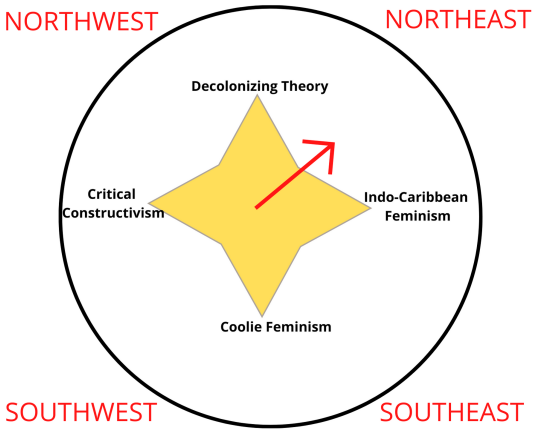
I believe this sentiment is relevant here. Students are receiving these NX grades because they are failing to demonstrate the compliance necessary to check a box on some paperwork.

When I pitched this new policy to my department team and asked for volunteers to work over February break, it was of course met with derision. My colleagues said things along the following lines:

- Why are we even grading kids anyway? It's a pandemic.
- The same kids who are failing now are the kids who get 65s every year and shouldn't have been passed along anyway.
- This is bullshit.

While I agreed with them, as the department leader who is responsible for getting people on board, I gritted my teeth and pitched the February Break academy as another opportunity to help kids get the credit they need for graduation. I am one of the teachers participating in this February Break academy because I want to try to help students. But I can also acknowledge that this is so fucked up.

I could have been more successful decolonizing my leadership by heading Northeast on the decolonial compass through Lyiscott's ideological and institutional window panes.



Examining this excerpt using the decolonizing compass, I want to first center the social and historical context that informed the institutional policy we were struggling with. I begin with a critical constructivist analysis to immediately surface the major challenges faced by our English department in a world of neoliberal education policies: mandated standardized testing in a larger number of grade levels and subject areas, tiered labeling of schools that exacerbated economic and racial segregation, privatized public schools, defunded schools with low scores on standardized assessments, and merit-based pay are a few of the issues that teachers have navigated in the past 40 years (Ali, 2019). Urban schools serving BIPOC students especially struggle to strike a balance between supporting authentic student learning and achievement while also meeting state and federal mandates that are largely built to serve white, middle- and upper-class families (Anyon et al., 2017; Battey & Leyva, 2016: Castagno, 2014). One perpetual issue faced by my school that is a result of these policies include the grading and assessment practices of teachers. Educators navigate an educational system that punishes teachers for low-performing students. In the school community I serve, the majority of the students are reading more than two grade levels below their assigned grade level according to standardized testing. Students come from elementary schools that suffer from overcrowded classes because of

the increasing teacher shortage, the aggressive school closures of the early 2000s, and overpopulation in our urban neighborhoods. Therefore, it is my belief that students do not receive the fundamental instruction in rudimentary literacy skills necessary to succeed on standardized tests. Thus, it becomes a cyclical process that perpetuates the oppression of BIPOC students. Middle and high school teachers are then faced with the challenge of grading and assessing student performance against state-mandated standards, while also measuring student progress. For example, in the past three years, approximately 20% of sixth-grade students arrive at our school reading at a first-grade or second-grade level. When they graduated middle school, these same students as rising eighth graders were reading at a sixth-grade level. Although they were two years below their grade level, they demonstrated four years of progress in only two years. Teachers in middle school are forced to adhere to the social-promotion model, wherein students are promoted through the grades in middle school regardless of their academic performance. Although this policy is built to prevent developmental detriments to students, it also exacerbates the challenges of equipping students academically. The statements made by teachers in this meeting ("This is bullshit" and "The same kids who are failing now are the kids who get 65s every year and shouldn't have been passed along anyway") are indicative of the teacher's dilemma during remote learning. Teachers, including myself, struggled to support students academically within a system that had already been failing students for many years prior—a system that all the teachers were involved in perpetuating. Grading students during a pandemic felt absurd to many teachers, as indicated by the statement, "Why are we even grading kids anyway? It's a pandemic." The additional request from the administration that teachers volunteer to work over the February break was yet another way that teachers were dehumanized during the pandemic, in direct alignment with neo-liberal education reforms. As the department

leader in this context, I was conflicted. I acknowledged that the policy of grading students during the pandemic, asking teachers and students to forego rest over February break for additional task completion, and prioritizing compliance over authentic learning was "so fucked up." However, I aligned myself with the institutional power structure and guided the team toward cowed acceptance of a policy we all understood to be wrong for all involved.

Contextualizing the social and historical circumstances surrounding the need for such a policy was also necessary. Most of the students who received NX grades did so because they were not attending school at all. Teachers offered various options, including virtual synchronous instruction, asynchronous tasks, virtual office hours for small group and individual help, pre-recorded videos, independent learning platforms such as CommonLit and ALEKS. Teachers instructed students over Facetime late at night, over Zoom on weekends, and on Google Meet during the school day. However, despite these many offerings and modalities, there was a significant number of students who were nowhere to be found during the start of remote learning. Many of these students had a number of issues including learning disabilities that made remote instruction additionally challenging, no access to devices, no access to safe or stable learning spaces, no access to support staff like paraprofessionals, increased family obligations around employment and child care, no wifi, and even no electricity. Students who increasingly required one-on-one teaching, small group support, or explicit instruction did not have access to it during remote learning, as teachers were facing the barrier of virtual teaching for the first time. Despite personal devices and hotspots being provided to students, parents preferred one-on-one support, especially for students with disabilities (Morgan, 2020). Also, many students in our school community who required additional support at home could not receive it from family members

for a number of issues, including an increase in parental work responsibilities and restrictions and parents' lack of virtual literacy.

If I had applied the decolonial compass at the time of this instance, I would have navigated in a Northeastern direction to peer through Lyiscott's (2019) ideological and institutional windows. This orientation would have impacted my leadership choices in a few vital ways. As a department, the English teachers are generally committed to liberating students from the cycle of poverty (Silva-Laya et al., 2020). However, Lyiscott stated in her book *Black Appetite. White Food.*

> We go sooo hard to get Black and Brown youth out of the physical violence of the streets without equipping them for the psychological and emotional violences they will have to navigate to survive within institutions that were originally built without them in mind. (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 70)

Knowing that decolonizing requires an act of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy, I may have instead invited team members to interrogate the policy being presented to us. I imagine I could have opened the virtual floor for discussion about the ways in which the policy did not serve students and instead upheld white supremacist hegemony. We as a united team may have dissected the ideologies informing the policy and generated alternatives that were more aligned with our authentic teaching goals during remote learning instead of an exercise in compliance. Just as the team was able to dissect the assessment expectations around schoolwide data, we might have been able to generate an alternative solution that would not have been a fix-all for every student but would have more effectively honored the academic needs of students and the humanity of teachers.

Creating space for dialogue remains central to decolonizing work. Building metaphorical bridges across marginalized communities can create opportunities for unified resistance to colonial oppression. Although I identify in many ways as a member of historically oppressed communities, as a member of the U.S. public school system, I am provided with a margin of power that is more aligned with the image of the oppressor. I have the ability to set and enforce expectations around curriculum and discipline. Aligning myself with the values associated with a banking model–style teacher perpetuates the structure of a colonized classroom. It effectively reinforces and concentrates my power to maintain epistemological control over students in terms of discipline. One excerpt demonstrating this is provided in the next section.

Navigating through epistemological control in discipline

In the excerpt below, I reflect on an interaction between myself, a student, and my co-teacher. In the opening of the excerpt, I discuss my annual lesson on the N-Word that I do with students in preparation for an exploration of August Wilson's work, which was included earlier in this chapter. After the lesson, I held a student after class to discuss his use of what I perceived as problematic language:

Instructional Reflective Memo 4

Sunday February 14th, 2021

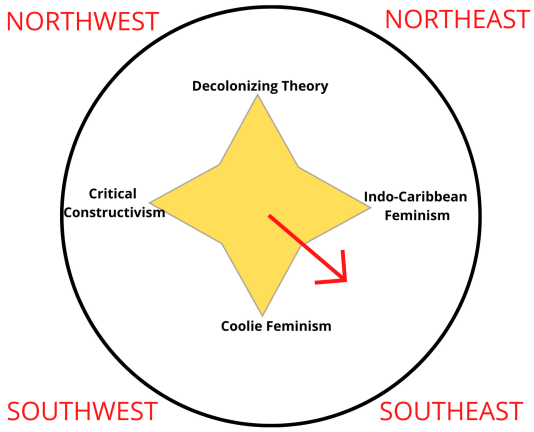
> …We let the students write in to tell us which characters they wanted to play so we could choose good monologues for them that they would be interested in. One student wrote that he wanted to play Turnbo from the play Jitney because he watched "those weirdos" on TV with his sister. I did not understand what he meant so I did some googling. Turnbo is the name of a drag queen performer from RuPaul's Drag Race. It seemed that the student thought the character Turnbo from "Jitney" was the same as the drag performer.

That mistake is not what I took issue with though. His use of the "those weirdos" language was not the first time he said or wrote something vaguely disrespectful about others. I clued my co-teacher in and we asked him to stay after class to discuss. I asked him to clarify what he meant by the statement, and he said he did mean the drag queens from RuPaul's drag race. I explained to him that it wasn't appropriate to use a term like "those weirdos" to describe anyone, let alone a historically oppressed group. He clarified by saying he meant that they were "dramatic." I told him it was important to be precise with what he meant. Saying that the performers on the show were dramatic was not the same as calling them weirdos. He said that we were doing "a bit" and my co-teacher cut him off to say that his response was again rude. Using a term like "a bit" to describe his teachers having an important conversation with him was disrespectful. He was then silent for more than a minute. My co-teacher and I attempted to engage him again by asking if he was thinking. He came back on the line and said he googled the definition of weirdos and triumphantly said it means, "a person whose dress or behavior seems strange or eccentric." I commended him for using his resources and backing up his choices. But then, I explained the difference between connotation and denotation to him…We explained that we wanted him to have successful relationships with others in the future, and precision in his language was important to make sure he wasn't being disrespectful by accident. We asked if he understood and he said "Sure." I said, "Even now, a response like 'sure' is rude. I'm sure we'll have more conversations like this in the future, but I'm OK with leaving it here for now."

What bothers me about this conversation is not his responses that were vaguely rude, or our attempts to support him in a difficult conversation without seeing his face.

This conversation came right after I spent time in class saying that I'm not "the language police," but I felt like I was policing his language. I should have been able to say, "You're being rude. What you say is offensive to others. Freedom of speech is not the same as freedom from consequences." But I didn't. This was the third conversation this year I've had with this student about his vaguely rude language. But I don't know how I could have handled it differently.

In the first excerpt about relinquishing epistemological control in discipline detailed in this chapter, I examined my efforts to decolonize my disciplinary practice, including creating space between myself and the student whose behavior I perceived as disrespectful. This was achieved by activating Indo-Caribbean feminism in tandem with decolonizing theory to examine Lyiscott's interpersonal fugitive literacy.



I was able to navigate myself and the student through a moment of conflict by centering our shared humanity. This was an effort that required purposeful rejection of punitive disciplinary measures that are traditionally upheld at the institutional level. In the above excerpt, however, I failed to center the shared humanity of myself and the student involved. If I had used the

decolonial compass in this moment, I may have chosen to navigate our conversation Southeast, toward Indo-Caribbean and Coolie feminism. East is the direction from which the sun rises, and navigating East toward an Indo-Caribbean approach would have been an opportunity to illuminate the interpersonal dynamics at play in this instance.

An Indo-Caribbean feminist educator is one who enacts curriculum that strongly links epistemological and ethical thinking while fostering openness toward different modes of knowledge production (Hossein, 2011). This includes teachers engaging students in opportunities to be self-reflective, self-critical, and self-analytical, while valuing their lived experiences and epistemologies as valid forms of knowledge. An orientation toward Indo-Caribbean feminism would have forced me to first value the experiences and knowledge forms of the individuals in the conversation. Although I perceived the student's comments as homophobic, instead of asking the student to engage critically with their language use, I opted for an approach that was more of a reprimand to the student than an opportunity to reflect openly. I imagine that this student could have been put on the defensive by the teachers immediately characterizing his use of the term "those weirdos" as inappropriate. In the conversation, he was cut off from speaking by my co-teacher and was told he was being "rude." As his teachers, we failed in this instance to honor the epistemologies of the student, which led to his disengagement from the conversation. In retrospect, it may have been more effective to ask the student to explain his thought process regarding the terminology he chose to use. Because my co-teacher and I had both experienced negative interactions with the student previously, we began the conversation making assumptions about the student's linguistic choices. Our past made it challenging for us as teachers to engage with the student in a productive way. We were less interested in understanding him and making more of an effort to repudiate his use of language we deemed problematic. Although our

intentions were to combat homophobia, we unintentionally dehumanized the student with an outright rejection of his verbiage.

Reflecting on this instance, if I were to navigate a situation similar to this one again, I would rely on the Indo-Caribbean feminist concept of uniting individual epistemologies and critical thinking with a purposeful orientation toward dismantling white supremacist ideologies. Because I had preconceived notions about the student, I may have instead chosen to send him an email prior to our virtual conversation. In the email, I may have explained what I read in his response, how I interpreted it, and invited him to engage in discussion around his terminology at a time that was comfortable for him. This would have helped balance the power dynamics present in the teacher–student relationship by allowing him to choose the time and day for the conversation or refusing to meet altogether. I may have also sent him a selected list of texts to read about the historical oppression of the LGBTQ community and invited him to share his own recommendations for my own critical thinking. Although this instance was a significant missed opportunity, the process of reflection afforded by this autoethnographic study is in itself a chance to decolonize my teaching practice through acting against these manifestations of white supremacy.

Using the decolonial compass to look through Lyiscott's interpersonal fugitive literacy window is an opportunity to "analyze your chosen situation for the interpersonal dynamics at play and try to see how they are legitimated by institutional norms and how those institutional norms are rotted in toxic white privilege ideologies" (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 78). Although ideological manifestations of white supremacy shape our daily experiences in a colonized society, we most often feel these through interpersonal interactions. The excerpt above examines an instance where I was not attuned to my decolonizing aims and Indo-Caribbean feminist

approach to discipline and instead attempted to maintain epistemological of the student through his linguistic choices. I allowed my anger at a student's perceived homophobia to ruin an opportunity for critical and equalizing dialogue between myself and a student. The next section is an examination of a similarly detrimental effect of maintaining epistemological control of curriculum in my co-teaching relationship.

Navigating through epistemological control in curriculum

Instructional Reflective Memo 10

Tuesday April 13th, 2021

> So, I don't really write lesson plans. I rarely write down what I plan to do. When I was a new teacher, I diligently wrote plans every day, trying to use the tool to think on paper. Over the years, I have developed a wide toolbox of strategies that I deploy during a lesson now, that sometimes are not what I had originally planned. But the more I work as a teacher, the more I think the process of writing out structured lesson plans is not always for the teacher. When I was a student teacher, I was directed to read the lesson plans of my cooperating teacher. I remember one teacher I worked with was a veteran teacher and when I asked to see her plans, she laughed heartily. She pulled me in close and said something to the effect of "real teachers don't do that." I remember feeling surprised, but now that I have some experience, I understand what she meant. I do plan my lessons in advance. I do make data-based and strategic decisions about what I plan to do in my classroom. But the process of writing down lesson plans is one that I think serves a more accountability purpose. My authentic lesson planning is more like hand written notes in my planner, rather than a typed-out lesson plan. I always have all parts of a lesson—a major objective, essential question, teaching moment, assessment moments, opportunities

for students to work together and independently, and opportunities for sustained reading and writing. I always know my pacing, my groupings, and the various tasks I plan to create and assign for students. I don't always write them down in a lesson plan template though.

But this week, I had a new experience with lesson planning. I am working with a new co-teacher this semester, and she is a very young teacher. She does not have a lot of experience in the classroom but she is eager to learn and serve the interests of kids. My administrator announced that they would begin conducting observations this week, so I made sure I had typed out lesson plans for the week. In my plan, I included full details about every move I would make, every question I would ask, and contingencies I planned to use if students did or didn't do what I anticipated. On Thursday evening, I mentioned the lesson plan to my co teacher and told her she may want to add to it. Our plan involved a parallel teaching model, and the lesson plan only reflected what I planned to do in my lesson (moments of stopping in the text, questions to be asked, etc.). She read the plan and added her own plan to it and then she asked me for feedback. I looked at the plan and helped her tweak it, because some of the questions she planned to ask weren't clear or specific enough. After we taught the full lesson, we were quickly debriefing the lesson. She thanked me for the detailed plan and said it actually helped her understand what to do. She said she used some of the things I wrote down in my plan in her own group, because she wouldn't have known what to do otherwise.

While I pride myself on my openness and collaboration as a co-teacher, it is evident in this excerpt how my possession of epistemological control inhibited the co-teaching partnership and limited the potential for successful instruction. Reimagining my practice as a co-teacher, I

engage the decolonial compass using a Southern orientation toward coolie feminism. I conceptualize coolie feminism as an actionized branch of Indo-Caribbean feminism. Emerging directly from the post-Indenture literature of scholars from the Indian diaspora, coolie feminism rejects the classist, patriarchal, capitalist, white supremacist, and racist society in which the term *coolie* emerged as a tool for oppression (Hosein & Outar, 2012). Coolie feminism requires deep introspection through self-reflexive questioning that enables one to examine one's own alignment with hegemony (Mohammed, 2018). Thus, in my role as a decolonizing educator, naming white supremacist power structures is the necessary start to subverting those instatiations. Asserting my control over the classroom curriculum through lesson planning is a direct result of the increased accountability measures general education teachers face. Because I am the certified content teacher in the classroom, the responsibility and accountability for students falls almost always on me. Therefore, the quality of lessons, whether they are or are not written by me, are attributed to me. Writing lesson plans down in a prescribed format is not something I regularly do, but upon closer examination of this excerpt, it is evident how typing plans in a standardized manner can help streamline communication between co-teachers and empower all teachers with agency and autonomy in their pedagogical decisions. Coolie feminism elevates the image of Indo-Carribean women as agents of their own self determination, with a particular emphasis on their resilience and strength (Hosein & Outar, 2012). In an extension of this, coolie feminists center the resilience and strength of all women as a direct resistance to patriarchy. My co-teacher, although my equal in the eyes of students in the classroom, had fewer years of experience than me and thus did not have as well developed an instructional and classroom management tool box as I. Because I wrote down a specific and detailed plan, my less-experienced co-teacher was able to examine the decisions I was making as the content

expert. This in turn empowered her with agency in the classroom to be self-determining in the choices she made when working with students. She could choose to adopt or adapt the practices I planned to implement, allowing her to develop her own pedagogical toolbox. Providing her access to my own internal thinking allowed her the opportunity to review my choices and interrogate them from her own personal lenses and as a special educator. This served to equalize the professional dynamics between us by creating virtual space for dialogue on the lesson prior to implementation. Because I did not regularly share my internal thinking with my co-teacher, she struggled to access more effective methods for supporting student literacy development. As a result of the lesson detailed in this excerpt and the reflection due to this autoethnographic study, we more regularly engaged in a cyclical process for co-teaching: I would draft a lesson in its entirety and share it many days in advance for review and critique. Then, we would discuss adaptations to the lesson that included additions, removals, or shifts in what I originally planned. Had I implemented this equalizing co-teaching process sooner, we would have more effectively engaged in our co-teaching practice toward decolonizing aims.

Conclusion

In a virtual learning environment, dehumanization was even more normalized and codified into institutional procedures than usual. Students were reduced to data and assessment points, teachers were treated like compliance-monitoring machines, and the meeting and working spaces usually designed for pedagogues to collaborate and think critically were obliterated. Although remote schooling offered great potential to shift toward more liberatory and equity-focused structures for teaching and learning, previously established ideologies aligned with white supremacy endured. Institutional policies were quickly shifted, not to support teachers and students, but to continue generating data points that could be measured, assessed, and

monetized. In some instances, I relinquished epistemological control for the collective benefit of myself, colleagues, and students. Although I was able to rely on co-leadership models as the English department leader to empower my fellow English teachers to engage in naming, deconstructing, and acting against a data policy that did not serve us well, I also perpetuated practices that sought to force students and teachers through compliance hoops. I also led some interpersonal interactions from an Indo-Caribbean feminist position, aiming to humanize students during disciplinary conversations. However, in some instances, I clung to epistemological control and aimed only to reprimand students for perceived slights instead of engaging with them through a critical and contextualized analysis of their choice. Collaboration remained a key feature of relinquishing epistemological control, and the co-teachers with whom I was fortunate enough to work were able to masterfully navigate challenging conversations in ways I did not have access. In the shift to virtual learning, pre-existing structures for collaborative lesson planning remained constant, and I controlled the content and epistemologies of the classroom. By adhering to the existing structure, I inadvertently disabled my co-teacher's ability to serve our students more effectively.

The decolonizing compass consists of four major points of access. To engage in decolonizing work, one must remain true to examining instances within the concept of the line, the center, and outside. By first situating an interaction within its colonized context, one can name and deconstruct the power dynamics at play that uphold white supremacy in order to act against them. The fugitive literacies window is a tool to peer into the cross-sections of ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy when applied in the context of the line, the center, and the outside. Navigating through these moments requires a deep understanding of these intricate connections and an ongoing commitment to

decolonizing work. To best situate one's decolonizing aims, critical constructivism remains necessary to ground important social and historical context that can inform any given interaction. The East and South directions on the decolonial compass are theories that most significantly represent my identity and my own epistemologies and are used most frequently as tools for navigating through my internal and interpersonal grappling with white supremacy. When engaged, the decolonial compass usually requires a heading that uses more than one critical theory at a time, as detailed in this chapter.

Remote learning was a tumultuous sea of uncertainty that overwhelmed teachers and students alike. Navigating through the challenges with a decolonizing compass not only contributed to my understanding of how I was already relinquishing epistemological control with the aim of decolonizing but also helped me more closely examine the ways in which I sought to epistemologically control myself and those around me. As a result, I have been able to approach leading the English department with particular attention to critical analysis of institutional policies and procedures, I seek to humanize students before engaging in disciplinary conversations, and I no longer adhere to only one prescribed method for co-teaching and collaboration. This was made possible through my own critical self-examination and process of conscientization, leading to significant pedagogical and personal growth for the benefit of myself, students, and colleagues.

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis

Combatting dehumanization through critical love

Working as a founding teacher in a new school community was an incredibly challenging undertaking for me, especially as a first-year teacher. This role provided me opportunities to create institutional policies that shaped our school culture in meaningful ways. In a school community that was founded on the tenets of critical pedagogy, much of this work was done in conversation and collaboration with students. Our founding class of students who began in sixth grade and remained enrolled at our school through high school graduation were empowered as agents of change and were fundamental to crafting and executing our school vision: With support and guidance from teachers, students created after-school clubs, petitioned for elective classes of interest, built successful basketball and track teams, organized school dances, and blazed a trail for academic tracks of interest. As a founding teacher, I personally worked closely with students to create our first student government, create our school's after-school drama club, and put together our first set of talent shows. Because we are a small school, many of our founding students participated in crafting these schoolwide experiences. This allowed me to spend countless hours with a core group of students, both during and after school, in planning meetings and working side by side to put together our school's collective experiences. I also had the great joy of looping upward through the grades with students. I was the English classroom teacher to many of our founding students in 6th, 10th, and 12th grades. These students graduated in 2019, but when colleagues and I talk about the students in our original class, we lovingly refer to them as the "founding kids."

In an informal discussion with a colleague, I recently remarked that I believed pandemic and post-pandemic teaching would have been easier with the founding kids. I remember my

experiences with them with a distinct sense of joy and keep in contact with many of them still. After I made that remark, I continued to think about it for the rest of the day and into the evening. I worked to interrogate my sentiment that pandemic teaching would have been easier or better with the founding kids. When I awoke the next morning, I had a realization. The relationship I had with the founding kids was defined by a well-developed sense of love. In her description of Freire's notion of love, Darder (2015) stated, "...love constitutes an intentional spiritual act of consciousness that emerges and matures through our social and material practices, as we work to live, learn, and labor together" (p. 49). The relationships I had and continue to have with the founding kids were able to develop over many years. Students could see, hear, and feel how I showed up for them every day as we worked together to build our school community. And in return, students placed their trust in me as their teacher. Whether it was continuing to teach through the flu after losing my voice for a week in our first year together, or staying at school late into the evening with students to help them plan initiatives and apply for colleges, the founding kids knew I loved them. The students walked through halls with demonstrable trust, openness, and pride in their school as the collaboratively constructivist approach to building our school created a distinct sense of love in our democratic and equitable atmosphere.

In the world of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there were fewer opportunities to engage with students from a place of radical love. The repeated sentiments from institutions emphasizing self-care for teachers and extensions of grace to students were completely devoid of actual, transformative love. In her work *All About Love: New Visions*, hooks characterized her concept of love as distinctly feminist. She went on to describe love as an interdependent combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust in

her essay “Love as the practice of freedom” (hooks, 2010). This chapter relies on the notion of love that hooks established in her essay. She wrote,

> Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination. (hooks, 2006, p. 243)

The definition of *love* by hooks is an actionalized one, inextricably central to liberation and a collective rejection of oppression. Love in this way is a fundamental aspect of any efforts toward decolonization, especially in terms of schooling. The absence of this actionalized love allows people to objectify and dehumanize one another, which in turn shapes their ideologies. As a result, these ideologies are codified into institutional policies that impact people’s interpersonal interactions and internalized values. This mutually reinforcing system endures, with internal values shaping interpersonal interactions, informing institutional policy, and reinforcing white supremacist ideologies. Integral to my struggle in decolonizing my virtual classroom spaces was actionalized love. In Chapter 4, I established the decolonizing compass as a tool to navigate the metaphorical oceans of virtual learning. In an extension of this metaphor, critical, REhumanizing love is the lens through which I read and interpret the experiences detailed in this chapter.

Critical love reduces deficit perspectives

A primary feature of colonization is dehumanization. In a colonized society, all people are commodified and placed into rigid racialized, classist, patriarchal hierarchies. These socially constructed barriers reinforce the concentration of power in the few, who are most closely aligned with white supremacy. It is important to emphasize that within our colonized society, ALL people are commodified and therefore dehumanized, even those who benefit most from the

structure. This is reproduced through all of the systems and institutions in the United States in large and small ways. This structure is evident in the bureaucracy of public schooling that perpetuates inequities in mutually reinforcing and intersectional systems. In *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Patel (2016) illustrated how colonialism is manifested in educational research and schooling: "Inequity is less understood as a material condition of which dominant and less frequent meanings are made and which meanings in turn are constantly shaping and reshaping material conditions" (p. 11). Patel is emphasizing how the material and the abstract inform one another in mutually reinforcing structures. For example, in any given public school system, the people who make decisions that impact students' daily lives can include teachers and support staff, parents and families, principals and assistant principals, superintendents and deputy superintendents, and school board members. Each person in the chain of decision makers has a different perspective and agenda they want to serve. A superintendent may be most concerned with preparing students for standardized testing in order to promote their school district as high achieving. A principal may be most interested in preventing fighting in their school. Parents may prefer to focus on the performance of their child on a sports team and teachers might center a student's literacy skills as their primary focus. In this example, in teachers' eyes, students are reduced to lexile scores; to their parents, they are scorers on a football team; to principals, students become behavioral incident reports; and students are just faceless SAT scores to a superintendent. Although students remain the most disenfranchised by this chain of dehumanization, every member perpetuates the dehumanization of the others in this instance. The superintendent sees school principals through the SAT scores their schools achieve. The principal evaluates teachers by the number of fights students have in their classroom. The teacher sees students as high achieving or low achieving based on their reading scores. While this is a

simplified example, it illustrates the perpetual dehumanization of everyone involved in the school system in a cyclical process.

As one who exists in this system of perpetual dehumanization, my priority as a decolonizer becomes one of REhumanization. In the following excerpt, I detail the impact of the institutional grading policy that impacted my interpersonal interactions with students and my internal struggle against deficit perspectives during remote schooling.

Instructional Reflective Memo 2

Saturday January 30th, 2021

> So I began the week sitting in all kinds of deficit perspectives about children and families. The marking period was set to end on Friday January 31st and I was feeling extremely stressed about entering first-semester grades for kids. English is one of the subjects that students need to pass all four years of in order to graduate. The grade I would be entering for kids would be on their transcript and could impact their ability to graduate. The directives we received from the department of education were adjustments from last Spring. Students cannot receive failing grades, but are instead assigned a grade of NX, meaning no credit. Students are supposed to be given every opportunity to make up the class and the credits so they don't end up in a compounded hole of failing grades. But at the start of the week, I met with my co teacher to review the current status of the grade book. Out of 95 students in the 10th grade, we had 46 students failing. I felt that this was unacceptable, especially considering that we were at 32 students failing just a few weeks prior. So we made a plan to blitz families and children with phone calls and emails….

Now of course, we had many, MANY students that were failing because they had never attended a single synchronous class session nor had they turned in any assignments despite numerous attempts at outreach. On Sunday and Monday, I emailed all the students who were in danger of failing. I called all of their homes to let their parents know there was a fresh email, and I even directly emailed some parents to share the information further. In a brief video call with my coteacher we lamented the state of many of the students' grades, not because they were dealing with difficult circumstances, but because many of them were home, with access to wifi, and no compounded issues like food or housing insecurity, and were choosing not to engage in remote schooling. We discussed the lack of parental support we were facing and commiserated over the accountability measures that were imposed on us as teachers. For assigning a failing grade to students, we are required to log multiple documented outreach attempts, adjusted and modified assignments, and parent meetings. It can feel as if we're asking to remotely parent students that we don't have any actual power to impact remotely.

But, after Monday, I reflected. I considered where my feelings were coming from: I was stressed because I did not want to assign failing grades to any students but the required policy was to continue to grade and measure students. I thought about how this policy was pitting me, the teacher against the students and families in a way that created sides. I am not a teacher who usually slips into deficit perspectives about children, but because the accountability measures were increased on my end, and I felt at risk of punitive measures, I was feeling angry with children and families for not engaging in remote learning.

So, I worked to act against it. On Tuesday, I engaged in two separate conversations with colleagues about the grading policy, trying to figure out how they felt about it, and how they were navigating the policy in their classrooms. They reported similar feelings but through those conversations, we were able to locate our disdain for the policy that seemed to be a holdover from in person learning. Some schools were not grading students and I wondered why we would not be able to do the same. I don't know how much power we have to act against this policy but I plan to bring up the no-grading policy in an instructional cabinet meeting soon. But how can I combat this policy in my own classroom? Here is what I tried. I offered, specifically targeted to students who hadn't been showing up, a set of additional extra help sessions. Every day this week, I had anywhere from 2 to 8 students logging in to work with me on their makeup assignment. And what I discovered in these make-up sessions is that the students were more than capable of completing the task. They didn't really need me to guide or interject much. I stayed on the computer after school with children for up to 2.5 additional hours every day this week, just so they could stare at my face while they worked. Often, I had students on video calls while I cooked dinner. It was the imposing of routine and structure that allowed these students to succeed. My co teacher joined in and between the two of us, our phone and email blitz, and our adjusted grading policy…we were able to reduce the failing rates from 46 students to 22 by the end of the week. While 22 is still an unacceptably large number, it was heartening to see that when students were participating and logging in, they were able to demonstrate the skills necessary to navigate this institutional hurdle.

This entry was documented at the end of January 2021, during the end of the first semester of completely remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the surface, the newly established NX policy was an effort to give students grace and make space for the multitude of exacerbated issues students and families were facing. With this policy, however, students were essentially just given more time to complete assignments. Institutionally, schools could have chosen to forego grading and standardized testing and instead center meeting students' emerging needs through the trauma of the pandemic: Students could have received increased socio-emotional support, received more opportunities to feel connected with one another, and practiced fundamental literacy and numeracy skills through project-based learning experiences. Instead, teachers like myself labored to reproduce traditional classroom experiences in virtual spaces. After working for months to assist students with varying degrees of technological literacy and widely different work-from-home circumstances, teachers were expected to evaluate students using this newly developed NX policy. Additionally, teachers received explicit policy guidance that students could not be considered "absent" from a class if they interacted in some way with teachers or school staff. Many students quickly understood how they were being assessed and measured, and they developed strategies to receive credit for their attendance and their classwork, while missing daily instruction. Based on my personal records, more than 50% of the students on my class rosters during this time were not logging into the synchronous instruction and were turning in daily classwork tasks after completing them independently. As a result of these interacting policies, determinations around credit-bearing grades were largely compliance based rather than measurements of actual academic achievement.

As I grappled with this policy, I also struggled to define and understand my own feelings. I identify as an anti-racist educator who actively resists deficit perspectives about students and families in my internal thought processes and in conversations with colleagues. Comber and Kamler (2007) documented the processes taken by teachers resisting deficit perspectives: "disrupting deficit discourses requires serious intellectual engagement by teachers over an extended period of time in ways that foster teacher agency and respect, without celebrating the status quo" (p. 300). Deficit perspectives can shift any teacher's mindset, regardless of their own identities. The resistance of deficit perspectives requires an active and purposeful commitment to excavating deficit thinking within the self with a simultaneous rejection of white supremacist ideologies. As a K-12 student, I experienced inequities and oppression at the hands of my teachers. Therefore, as an educator now, I am hyper-aware of my meta-cognition, emotional interpretations, and interpersonal communication regarding the community I serve. In *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Patel (2015) wrote, "Colonialism will be pervasively experienced, wrought and tightly protected, almost regardless of what our ethical stances of oppression might be" (p. 15). I understood intellectually that the students were engaging with virtual schooling according to the newly developed NX policy, but I was projecting my negative emotions onto students rather than the policy that pit us against one another. At this time, in meetings with colleagues to discuss the NX policy and perceived lack of student engagement, I often remarked that as a high school student, I would have likely made the same choices as our students if faced with the same circumstances. I also made a conscious effort to remind colleagues that we were also experiencing the trauma of the pandemic, burnout, and mental and emotional exhaustion. Darder (2014) wrote, "The struggle for radical activists of color was…a larger struggle for our humanity and our survival, given that we had suffered, in the flesh, the

violence of oppression at every level of our existence" (p. 3). In other words, the institutional practices and policies of remote learning consistently dehumanized teachers, which fostered an environment for teachers to engage in the dehumanization of students.

Primarily, I was disappointed that students would fail my course and not receive necessary credit for graduation, especially when I believed my instruction to be straightforward, clear, and engaging. Students who were in danger of failing my course at the time of this entry were students that I had no contact with at all. Due to the pandemic and the sudden shift to virtual learning, the requirements for receiving a passing grade in my course were extremely relaxed, and I was frustrated by the feeling I was working harder than the students were. These kinds of feelings are unusual for me, and as they emerged, I actively worked against them. I opted instead to engage in the practice of radical love in order to shift my perspective and take a humanizing approach. Darder (2015) described Freire's concept of radical love as follows:

> For Freire, the enactment of radical love in the classroom, in contrast, seeks to build a democratic field of critical praxis, in which numbing experiences of alienation can be openly named, challenged, and dismantled, creating a place for teachers and students to contend more honestly and effectively with the human differences that exist between us, as we discard reactionary tendencies. (p. 58)

In this instance, the "mind numbing experience of alienation" was the virtual learning spaces and the intersecting policies around attendance and grading. These policies created an additional barrier to authentic teacher–student engagement and meaningful learning opportunities for students. A defining reactionary tendency of this circumstance would have been to rely on the NX grading guidance to implement a more punitive grading policy. I realized quickly that, in my frustration, I was allowing these policies, which were institutional manifestations of white

supremacy, to cloud the ways in which I typically love and center students. These policies turned students into numbers in my grade book rather than individuals with unique circumstances and varying academic and socio-emotional needs.

Colonialism endures as a result of the dehumanization of all individuals, even those whose labor upholds white supremacy. Although I am an educator and teacher leader who upholds institutional policies, it does not preclude my own dehumanization as a result of white supremacist–aligned policies. The institution's NX and attendance policies emphasized the necessity of student compliance around two major questions: (1) Are students attending virtual school at any point in the day? (2) Are students producing work? The same way a factory worker may be required to punch in to their job and meet certain quotas in a day, these policies asked teachers to monitor and track students according to these compliance-focused questions rather than demonstrations of authentic learning. Teachers in this instance were not valued as professionals who have pedagogical expertise that should be used to guide institutional policies around grading and attendance. In turn, the teachers like myself who experienced this dehumanization projected their experiences onto students, by monitoring their attendance and work completion instead of engaging in meaningful teaching and learning. This is an illustration of the cyclical nature of dehumanization. The institutional policy dehumanizes teachers who then enact the policy in ways that dehumanize students.

As a teacher working to decolonize her virtual classroom spaces, I had the benefit of a well-developed practice of conscientization. I regularly reflect and act against deficit perspectives that can impact my daily choices as a teacher. I am acutely aware that I am entrusted with power over students and am wary about perpetuating harm. Because I recognized the intrusive deficit perspectives that were clouding my judgement, I opted to engage with students

from a place of critical love that aligned the interests of both teachers and students. Recognizing the emotional and mental exhaustion was the first step toward rehumanization. I then deconstructed the feelings I was experiencing and identified the significant deficit perspectives that were shaping my mindset. I chose to act against this by implementing steps to rehumanize myself and students by centering critical love. Freire (2005) invoked the necessity of actionalized critical love in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as follows:

> …true solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce (p. 50)

Thus, I chose to take tangible steps against my deficit thinking and toward critical love. I waited until the end of the school day and called the parents of students who were not regularly attending school. I specifically asked the parents for the cell phone numbers of students and received permission to reach out directly to the students. I called all the students I could get phone numbers for to ask them what they needed in order to meet the school's expectations. Most students said they slept through the school day and would not even attempt to log on to virtual school until after 1 p.m., when most core classes were already over. I offered the students virtual school at the end of the day, outside of office hours, and well beyond my contractual time. In the first few sessions, it became apparent that most students who were attending these additional sessions were only in need of an imposed structure. In my experience, high school students struggle to create healthy routines for themselves, and many learn how to do so in 9th or 10th grade. This was a moment of clarity for me. Students who may not have already developed regular work routines were thrust into the world of virtual learning without the tools necessary to navigate the abstract space. Students' ability to manage their time effectively correlates to their

academic success (Liu et al., 2009). Tools that were normally at their disposal like physical homework planners, reminders on the board about due dates, study hall periods, and regular feedback and support from teachers were not available during this time. Ultimately, providing additional sessions for students that imposed structure was enough to support many students in completing the necessary assignments to receive credit for the course.

When I reflect on this entry, I consider the ways in which the decolonial compass was enacted as a decolonizing tool. Because the NX institutional policy was distinctly dehumanizing to teachers, it fostered a deficit perspective in my approach to students. As a result, I had lost my ability to see clearly and navigate through a colonized construct. My response to this form of oppression was to engage another oppressed group with love. Freire (2005), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* characterized the love born from the unity of oppressed groups as they respond to oppression:

> Yet it is—paradoxical though it may seem—precisely in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors that a gesture of love may be found. Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, or nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love. (p. 56)

Initially, I was not examining the teacher–student interactions with a critical eye and instead leaned on feelings of anger, disappointment, and frustration. By misplacing these feelings onto students, I was perpetuating their dehumanization and viewing them only as grades in my grade book that I would be held accountable for. To reorient myself, and in an interrogation of institutional policy, I needed first to reground myself in my true North of decolonizing theory. In its simplest form, decolonizing work requires one to name, deconstruct, and act against manifestations of white supremacy. I recognized that I was relying on “kid blaming” because I

was frustrated with the expectations being placed on me by the NX policy. I named my negative feelings clearly and recognized that they should not be the primary drivers of student evaluation. I then chose to act against my negative feelings by seeking out trusted colleagues who could offer critical thought partnership and commiserate with my emotional struggles. I would not have been able to engage in this process without first committing to a REhumanization of students through radical love. Freire (2005) wrote, "...true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love" (p. 89). By locating my negativity in a disdain for the manufactured institutional hurdle that students and I were required to leap over, I was able to recenter my value of critical love. This allowed me to recognize that the regular confines of school were not sufficient to meet the needs of students during the virtual learning of the pandemic. Instead of positioning myself and students on either side of the hurdle, enacting critical love reoriented my understanding that students and I were on the same side of the hurdle and needed to lean on one another to leap over it. As a result, I was able to build and strengthen relationships with students during after-school hours. Students seemed to feel seen and heard by their teacher and were interested to see into my life outside of school. To leap over the virtual learning hurdle with students, critical love allowed me to be flexible and open to providing what they needed in ways that still respected my own boundaries and needs.

Talking with students about our class novel *Shadowshaper* while cooking my nightly meal was rejuvenating and humanizing for myself and for students. As students worked their way through the novel, our nightly video calls were filled with casual discussions about our favorite moments in the text, predictions about the plot, and inferences about the characters along with spirited discussion about current events and the virtual learning experiences students were having across classes. Upon reflection, I realize that these small acts were moments that students

and I were actively engaged in a process of humanizing one another. Mutual humanization (Freire, 2005) is obtained through a process of conscientization, or critical consciousness. Freire defined *conscientization* as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35). In our conversations each night, we were informally discussing the social, political, and economic factors impacting our daily lives and regularly engaging in mutual processes of commiseration and mourning while reveling in individual and collective triumphs. Freire (2005) went on to describe *mutual humanization* as a way to subvert the banking system of education:

> If men and women are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation. But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. (p. 75)

Remote learning created a virtual chasm that made it increasingly challenging for teachers to build strong, trusting relationships with their students. This virtual void became a place where deficit thinking festered and could have easily become the driving factor in my teaching practice. However, I opted to navigate across the chasm with the lens of critical love. This deliberate act allowed me to rehumanize myself and the students by cultivating positive relationships in informal virtual spaces outside of the contractual remote school day. Student success was necessitated by my ability to work outside of the virtual learning structure that was being imposed on us. In 1984, Audre Lorde wrote,

> For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (p. 111)

By recognizing that the "master's tools" of the NX policy were not serving the needs of me and my students, I engaged my own critical pedagogy and used radical love to navigate myself and students over a significant institutional hurdle.

The nature of this interaction was multi-layered. The decolonial compass heading was directed almost entirely toward North throughout this interaction. However, it was applied in all four window panes of Lyiscott's fugitive literacies. I briefly brought critical constructivism into focus by contextualizing the NX policy. And, my pathway toward enacting critical love to humanize students was laid by Indo-Caribbean feminism. However, the primary direction in this instance was North toward decolonizing theory. Decolonizing theory was used to navigate the line, the center, and the outside through the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy. By examining this instance through more than two of Lyiscott's fugitive literacies window panes, I methodically peeled back the ideological layers of white supremacy that were shaping the institution's policy, my interpersonal interactions with students, and my internalized deficit perspectives. Figure 4 depicts this process.

Figure 4: Applying the Compass

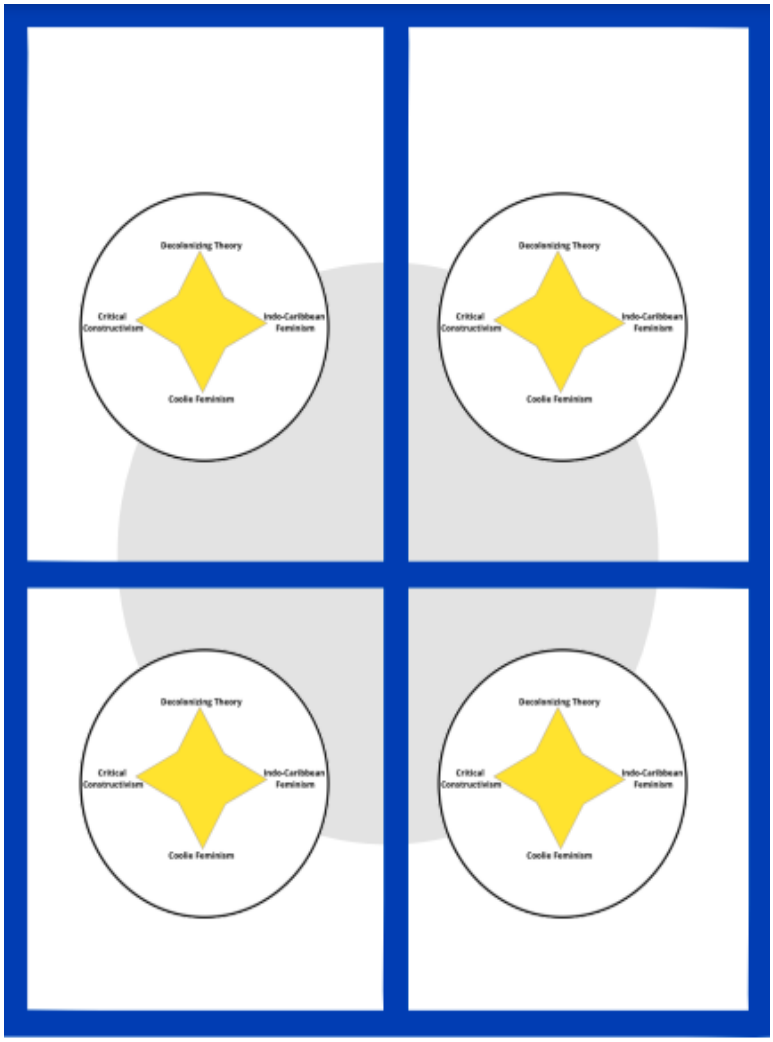


Figure 4

Humanizing students through critical love was made possible by activating my personal epistemologies of Indo-Caribbean and coolie feminism. I remained attuned to eradicating inequities across all oppressed groups and successfully navigated myself and many students across a chasm of virtual learning. However, my well of love was significantly depleted over the course of remote learning, largely due to my inability to set appropriate boundaries between

work and home. Participating in my own dehumanization caused me to perpetuate dehumanization with students, which is documented in the following excerpt.

When the critical love well runs dry

Although I actively worked to push against deficit perspectives, I still struggled to humanize students during remote learning. White supremacist ideologies thrive in an environment of dehumanization: Institutional policies in schools remove student individuality and teacher agency. Schooling is also impacted by social factors that limit or enhance a student's potential: "Students who come from low-income families, who are the children of single, young, unemployed mothers, or who have experienced high degrees of family stress are more likely than other students to drop out of school" (Ritter, 2015, p. 4). Thus, socio-economic status is one of the largest predictors of student success in high school. Teachers contend with a number of social factors that shape student success in their classrooms, including food insecurity, housing insecurity, the impact of the prison industrial complex, limited access to physical and mental healthcare, and even physical and digital infrastructure issues. In the shift to remote learning, these factors did not disappear. In fact, the pandemic exacerbated many of these issues for the students I served. For example, the rate of unemployment in the county where our school is located jumped from 3.9% in January 2020 to 13.5% in January 2021. Many of the parents who lost their jobs in our community also lost access to affordable healthcare, regular food and housing, and consistent access to the internet. When students are low-performing on standardized assessments, it is not necessarily a function of student ability, but is instead the result of the intersecting social systems that purposefully impoverish and disproportionately disenfranchise BIPOC peoples (Broussard, 2014). However, instead of addressing these social issues by ensuring universal healthcare, affordable housing, and regular access to food and utilities,

schools enact policies such as increasing class time spent on test preparation in order for students to demonstrate achievement. Because school policies value high scores on standardized tests, teachers have less agency to contextualize the factors impacting students' learning needs and instead must focus on meeting standardized benchmarks.

The struggle to meet academic expectations while also contending with social issues was made even more challenging by remote learning. In the virtual learning environment, I worked almost entirely with students I had never met in person, whose faces I had never seen, and whose families I had not previously connected with. The excerpt below is from my personal journal. A strategy I often rely on is a consistent practice of journaling. In recent years, I have taken to using the voice-to-text feature of my smartphone to put my thoughts into writing. I sometimes use this strategy for the sole purpose of venting in order to release and move past frustration or anger. I prefer, however, to take a more reflective approach to my thought process. Like the wizard Dumbledore from *Harry Potter* using his pensieve, I regularly return to my memories, thoughts, and feelings to critically analyze them. I use this strategy to return to my writing later in order to identify patterns in my own thought process. This practice has been fundamental to my own mental and emotional well-being but also played a role in my decolonizing process. In the excerpt below, I share my thoughts after a particularly challenging day. I was experiencing frustration with my co-teacher, exhaustion, and burnout after being required to work through vacation time and increased anxiety about the escalating coverage of racial tensions across the country. On this day, I received a new student on my roster just a few minutes before class started. My emotional reaction is depicted in the excerpt from my personal journal.

Personal Journal Excerpt

01.15.21

> And then, we got an email about a kid who would be signing on for the first time today. THE. FIRST. TIME. TODAY. Like, um okay. Thanks for the email 5 minutes before the kid is scheduled to be in my class. So I give him some assignments he can work on independently and send him on his way because I'm not sure what else I could have done in the 5 minutes. We just got a chain of follow up emails. He was in ACS (administration for children's services) custody since September but was MIA (missing in action) from their facility. And he was incarcerated for some of this time. I haven't seen his face at all, there's not even a picture of him in our school database. But I'm expected to teach him, assess him, and work with him. All my teacher powers are wrapped up in building strong relationships with students. Which I do in person. I am feeling at such a loss with how to proceed with this kid. I'm just frustrated.

Although my interactions with this student over the following weeks were not informed by this level of frustrated panic, my initial connection with him was devoid of the humanity necessary to foster a meaningful relationship. Working only with the information I received before meeting him, I knew only that he was a student being newly introduced to our school community. His name had appeared on my roster for several weeks prior, but he was documented as a student who could not be reached by the school attendance monitors. In January, however, he was finally able to sign onto virtual schooling. When I was informed five minutes before class began that he would be attending, I experienced the news of a newly arriving student largely as inconvenient. My initial reaction was mostly informed by my passion and excitement for the unit of study I was completing with students at the time. We were completing a mock trial unit where students made arguments for or against lifetime imprisonment for a juvenile offender. The day this new student arrived in our class was our second to last day of preparation before the mock trial.

Therefore, I did not have sufficient time to consider ways I could welcome this new student and successfully integrate him into the classroom culture. So, I opted to provide some readings for review to the student and quickly dismiss him from the virtual classroom. Throughout the day, I received a chain of emails providing more information about the student. Although the student had technically been enrolled at our school since the start of the year, he was unable to attend school for a number of reasons. At the start of the school year, he was supposed to be in some form of temporary foster care but was reported MIA (missing in action) from the facility he was meant to report to. For some of the time he was missing from official records, he was likely homeless. During this time, he had also been arrested and incarcerated for criminal activity. His virtual attendance in my classroom in January was immediately preceded by his release from prison and a new custodial arrangement involving his biological father. In his record, it was also documented that he had an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), meaning he had at least one documented learning disability. None of this information was made available to me prior to my first virtual interaction with the student. In this instance, I was not provided with suitable access to vital information that would have impacted the choices I made when meeting this student. Had the institution centered my professional abilities as an educator, it might have been a more standard policy to provide teachers with pertinent student records in order for teachers to prepare adequate accommodations for the student. Instead, I was informed of his recent trauma and learning needs after I was meant to integrate him into our classroom. If I had been aware of his recent incarceration and his documented learning disability, I would not have assigned him independent readings on the criminal justice system. Not only could this have been emotionally triggering for him; it also could have been a task that was too challenging for him based on his

literacy needs. Because the institutional policies did not prioritize my time and professionalism, I perpetuated a dehumanizing practice in my first meeting with this student.

Having a student join my class mid-year is a circumstance that is familiar to me. It is not uncommon for students to transfer in or out of schools or even between different teachers all throughout the school year for any number of reasons. During in-person learning before the COVID-19 pandemic, I would have navigated this situation with a distinctly humanizing approach. For Freire (as cited in Salazar, 2013), "humanization is the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world" (p. 126). I would have set my class to some kind of independent or group task for the class period while I spent time getting to know the new student in a private conversation. Often, I would do this at my desk out of earshot of the entire class and ask the student questions to get to know them better. This is a low-stakes and informal opportunity for me to build a relationship with a new student while creating a comforting and welcoming space for them in my classroom. I usually also ask the student to complete the start of the school year survey I provide each year. The survey has many questions about student interests, hobbies, hopes, and fears and can be a valuable tool for my instruction. When a student joins my class well into the school year, I usually ask them to complete the survey and casually monitor them as they work. Watching a student in this way allows me to ascertain relatively quickly what academic support they may need in a fast, informal way. I can take note of their reading, writing, and thinking process. I can also get a quick sense of how they feel in the new environment by watching their body language and facial expressions during the class period. I always follow up this initial conferencing with a series of conversations, formal reading and writing assessments, and informal check-ins with the student to integrate them smoothly into my

class. However, the institutional structures in the virtual learning world perpetuated interpersonal and internal dehumanization and posed significant barriers to an authentic, humanizing experience in our initial meeting.

As neo-liberal education policies shape the nation's perceptions of educators, teachers have been increasingly undervalued and mistreated by the system. Although the contractual teacher workday is six or seven hours, most continue to do significant amounts of work outside of the classroom (National Education Association, 2018). This practice was exacerbated during remote learning. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions struggled to craft effective policies that supported both students and teachers during remote learning. The lack of defined boundaries magnified the dehumanization teachers regularly face. As an educator at this time, I was effectively dehumanized by the system and struggled to set appropriate work boundaries. This led to significant burnout that diminished my usual capacity for a humanizing approach in my work with students. White supremacy perpetuates the particular dehumanization of Black children as a result of colonialism: "By the middle of the 20th century, European immigrants were assimilated into the category of 'white' while people of various phenotypes and genealogies were relegated to the category of 'black' determined by the one-drop rule" (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 26). European immigrants received the privileges that accompanied the label of "white" while Blackness became its own racial category that was developed in opposition to whiteness through criminalization (Muhammad, 2010). Consequently, dehumanization enables the ill treatment of Black children in ways that would typically be considered amoral with children from other racial groups. In a 2014 study, researchers found that when compared to their white peers, Black boys are viewed as older than they are, less innocent, and "prompt a less essential conception of childhood" (Goff et al., 2014, p. 526). This type of racial bias, whether implicit or

explicit, has significant consequences on the lives of Black children. For example, police officers who dehumanize Black people are more likely to use excessive force on Black children. This concept applies in schooling as well:

> Teachers as a group are more likely to deem students' behavior harmful or indicative of a harmful pattern when those students are Black. Similarly, misconduct from Black students is punished more harshly than the same misconduct from white students. (Welsh, 2021).

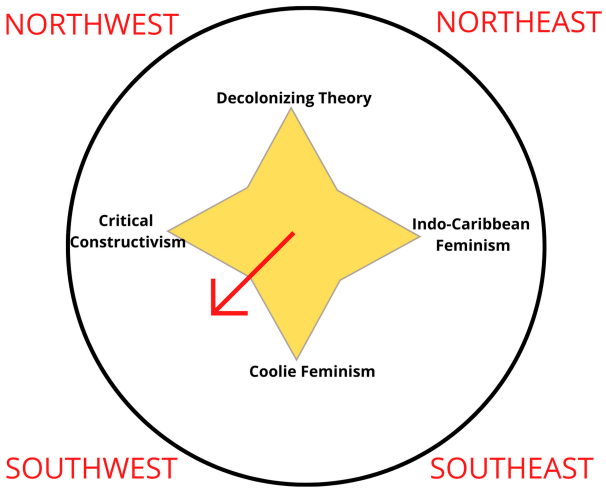
My first interaction with this student, regardless of my intention, was informed by some level of internal bias as well. I did not take into consideration what logging into virtual schooling might feel like for a student in his circumstances. Instead, I dismissed his needs and treated him like an inconvenient intrusion into my already-established classroom.

Applying the decolonial compass to this circumstance, I may have approached this initial interaction by heading South. Coolie feminism is a branch of Indo-Caribbean feminism that actively subverts power structures that are inherently hierarchical (Mohammed, 2012). If I had taken a step back from the dehumanizing circumstances I was experiencing, it would have provided the necessary space for a humanizing perspective. In the virtual learning environment of COVID-19, the institution directly benefits from the dehumanization of teachers: It enables the institution to overwork and underpay teachers, blur appropriate boundaries for work-life balance, and encourage teachers to be increasingly self-sacrificing for their students. Colonial hegemony is predicated upon a foundational alignment with patriarchy. The K-12 teaching profession, which is overwhelmingly made up of women, continues to be devalued as teachers face increasingly dehumanizing circumstances. The switch to remote learning only magnified the dehumanizing effects of teaching in a neo-liberal education system. Actionalizing coolie

feminism in this circumstance would have required me to tap into my critical consciousness and extend critical love to both myself and the students I serve. However, my perception and capacity were both compromised by the dehumanization of remote learning. Indo-Caribbean feminist scholar Patricia Mohammed (2016) wrote, "consciousness is not fixed or homogenous. It is transformed through ideas, reactions to prevailing ideologies, moments of great trauma, or even of abundant joy, and shaped by the material conditions of the time in which we live" (p. 27). In the pre-pandemic teaching and learning environment, I was regularly able to draw upon my criticality by examining patterns in my thought processes and monitoring my internal discourses. However, due to the dehumanizing instatiations I faced on a daily basis during virtual learning, I was cut off from my own critical self-love and therefore could not extend it to others. Coolie feminism as an actionalized branch of Indo-Caribbean feminism asserts that one must center her own identity and values in order to work against systems of oppression (Mehta, 2020). Freire (1970) also noted that "without a sense of identity, there can be no struggle" (p. 186). Consequently, a coolie feminst who cannot first center their own humanity with clarity cannot effectively humanize others to work toward collective liberation. Had I given myself permission to make space for reflection before action, I would have considered three major questions: (1) What does the student need or want from his initial introduction into our school and classroom community? (2) What do I need or want from this initial interaction with this student? (3) How can I reconcile our desires to center our mutual humanity in our first interaction? By asking myself and answering these questions, it is likely I would have asked the student into a private conversation, either via virtual breakout room, phone call, or G chat. I would have spent a few minutes getting to know him by asking him about what he was interested in and what his hopes, fears, and dreams might be. Then, after explaining the project our class was working on, I would

have provided him options for how to proceed with integrating into the class experience. Although this instance was a significant mis-step on my part, I was able to tap into my well of critical love in order to foster meaningful dialogue and partnership with his family in subsequent interactions.

If I had chosen to navigate this situation with the decolonial compass, I would have chosen a Southwest direction.



This would have deliberately paired critical constructivism and coolie feminism in order to subvert oppressive power structures. Critical constructivism would have provided an opportunity to examine the interaction through Lyiscott's institutional, interpersonal, and internal fugitive literacies window. A Southwest heading allows for contextualizing the institutional policies or lack of institutional policies that could have better prepared both me and the student for his first day in class. A coolie feminist would have drawn upon my critical love well to foster a stronger interpersonal connection while also combatting the dehumanization shaped by internalized white supremacy. Although this connection was a missed opportunity, in some interpersonal interactions, I was able to navigate potentially challenging situations with the aid of the

decolonial compass. One interaction with a student's parent was deeply informed by critical love and is detailed in the following section.

Critical love between teachers and parents

Two-way partnership between schools and families endures as integral to student success. The more involved a student's parents or guardians are in their in-school experience, the greater academic achievement a student has (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Murray, 2009). Pre-COVID, traditional education offered many opportunities for families to connect with their student's schooling life. I would connect regularly with families at school-based events such as sporting events, talent shows, drama club performances, and awards nights. I would also occasionally run into students and families at the nearby shopping center during off-school hours and would chat amiably with families while picking up groceries. The remote learning instituted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic removed all opportunities for these informal connections between teachers and families. At the height of the pandemic, my primary vehicle for connecting with families was through phone calls. I regularly reached out to the families of students I served, mainly focusing on students who were not participating in virtual learning at all. In the excerpt detailed below, I recollect a phone conversation I had with a parent of a student who was not attending remote school.

Instructional Reflective Memo 1

Friday January 22nd, 2021

> There are probably students in this group of 29 that are struggling. They live in shelters, or don't have wifi, or are working, or taking care of family members. Some of the students are/were incarcerated, or are struggling with addiction. So, it's no wonder that they don't log on. But some of those students in the group of 29 are sitting at home with

> good wifi, game consoles, and parents who are not enforcing online schooling for them. In a phone call at the start of this week I had a mom sigh and tell me she was also working from home and was so tired that she was ready to send her 2 year old to school too. I commiserated with her about the struggles of raising a teenage boy and told her that it was a struggle all the kids were having. She said it didn't make her feel better to know that everyone was struggling but she thanked me. She said, it's hard enough because they are so "retarded" with the computers. I said, I understand your frustration and quickly ended the call.

In the constantly evolving policies of remote learning, parents and families struggled to support their students from home. This struggle was compounded by a number of factors. First, many families worked and could not be home to monitor and troubleshoot issues with their students. If parents were able to remain home with their students, many lacked basic technological literacies that would enable them to support their students. In addition, parents were not equipped to care for their children full-time while also managing their own workload. Teachers were expected to continue teaching all the students on their rosters, and parents were being asked to ensure that their students were logging in and participating in the virtual learning experiences. This created an environment that could easily have pitted parents and teachers against each other. In the above excerpt, however, I used critical love and an Indo-Caribbean perspective during a phone interaction with a frustrated mom. I called this parent, Mrs. Jones, many weeks into the semester. At the time of this phone call, Mrs. Jones had been contacted more than five times by the school to inform her of her student's failure to attend. Her son Michael had not logged on to remote learning in English class at all in many weeks, but he was occasionally attending his social studies class. The purpose of my call was to ascertain why he

might be missing English class and to offer any additional support or resources that I could. For the duration of the call, a crying baby could be heard in the background. When I initially informed Mrs. Jones that Michael was not attending English class, she responded quickly with "I know; I keep telling him to get on the computer." I then asked her if she knew about what time he woke up in the morning. She told me she woke him up at 8:30 a.m. in order for him to log in to his 9 a.m. class. She said he did not always wake up or stay awake because he played video games late into the evening most nights. She said she was grateful to have the option to work from home so she could be there for him, but she was extremely frustrated that he wasn't listening to her. It was at this point in the conversation that I informed her that in my experience, it was developmentally appropriate for teenagers to be defiant to their parents and that many students were having similar struggles. She said it did not make her feel better to know that but thanked me for sharing that information. She made a joke about being exhausted and asking if we take two-year-olds at our high school. She said that she was struggling with just her two kids and could not imagine what teachers were experiencing with whole classrooms of kids. We laughed together and I told her that I was not a parent and could not imagine what her experience must be like. I told her that I respected her attempts to manage work and kids all from home during a pandemic and emphasized how much of a blessing it was that she could work from home. She agreed but then mentioned that it was particularly challenging because her son was "retarded" at the computer. I wanted to correct her word usage but instead I validated her frustration, emphasized next steps for her son's success in English class, and ended the call.

Working as an educator over the past decade has enabled me to reflect on my own linguistic choices while seeing students' sensibilities evolve over time. For example, within the last 10 years, students would commonly use the term "gay" when they wanted to emphasize that

something was negative in some way (Chonody et al., 2012). Now, it is rare that I hear students use the term "gay" with any negative connotation. "Retarded" is also a term that has been regularly used by students to refer to something with a negative connotation (Siperstein et al., 2010). In my classroom, the term "retarded," like the term "gay," is no longer used pervasively as slang. Students seem to understand the negative connotations associated with the word. When I worked as a middle school teacher, it was a more frequently occurring term in students' daily vocabulary. But as a high school teacher now, it is not a term my students use, at least in my presence. In conversation with Mrs. Jones, I wanted to push back on her use of the term "retarded" to describe her son's struggles with the computer. Her son Michael who did have a documented learning disability could have likely overheard the way she was referring to him and his abilities. When she used the term, I immediately wanted to remind her about the connotations of the term and why it was no longer considered an appropriate descriptor. However, I approached my conversation with her from an Indo-Caribbean feminist perspective.

Indo-Caribbean feminism emphasizes collective obligations to the communal raising of children (Roopnarine, 2013). Women were largely the caretakers of children during indentureship in the Caribbean and were able to foster a communal child-rearing environment as a result of a common dialect (Mohan, 2001). This practice endured during the second wave of Indian immigration from the Caribbean to North America. It is common in Indo-Caribbean homes for parents to treat all children like they are a part of that household in terms of discipline, feeding and clothing children, educating them, and protecting them. In my own home, I had multiple sets of parents participating in my growth and development. As a child, I had a number of "aunties"[2] from whom I could have received food, clothing, shelter, protection, or discipline

[2] I am using the term "aunties" here in the Indo-Caribbean sense. It is common to use the term "aunties" in the Indo-Caribbean culture to refer to any adult woman or any woman one would like to demonstrate respect to.

without question. Even when values in parenting did not align among different sets of guardians, Indo-Caribbean parents respected each other enough as communal caretakers to allow other adults to participate in the raising of their children. It was this Indo-Caribbean perspective that informed my choices in this interaction. First, I centered Mrs. Jones as a respected partner and parent of Michael. Although my linguistic practice differed from hers, I opted to center her needs and wants as Michael's primary caretaker. Values I ascribed to her parenting included that she was well intentioned, wanted to support her son, and that she loved him. I also reminded myself that she was likely frustrated, tired, overwhelmed, and likely as overworked as I was. I grounded myself in the purpose of the conversation: to support Michael's academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being in any way possible. The best way to help him navigate virtual schooling was to continue working in partnership with his mother who was almost entirely responsible for his physical and mental health. Therefore, in this initial conversation, a choice to chastise a parent for her word choice would have done more damage to an emerging relationship than good. It would have made it even more difficult to build a bridge between Mrs. Jones the parent, and me the teacher, to allow Michael to cross the chasm of remote learning. As a result of my choice to validate Mrs. Jones' feelings, I was able to establish lines of communication that Michael relied on for the next two weeks. His mother and I spoke with each other many times via text and phone call to help Michael work on English assignments. The progress was tenable and Michael was able to pass the course and achieve credit for 10th-grade English.

Mrs. Jones and I mutually humanized one another during the phone call depicted in the above excerpt. I recognized and validated her experiences as a parent during the pandemic and she in turn recognized and validated my experiences as an educator working to support many

students during remote learning. Through dialogue, we actively listened to each other's concerns and validated one another's struggles. According to Freire (2005),

> …dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself. (p. 89)

Mrs. Jones and I engaged in dialogue with a distinctly humanizing approach built on mutual trust, critical love, and an assumption of best intentions on both of our parts. In my conversation with Mrs. Jones, I took an approach that centered my experiences as an Indo-Caribbean feminist that valued communal child rearing. In recognition of Mrs. Jones' struggles, and by valuing her as a partner to support Michael academically, I enacted Freire's concept of love across oppressed groups as follows:

> Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffers the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. And this fight, because of the purpose given it by the oppressed, will actually constitute an act of love opposing the lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressor's violence, lovelessness even when clothed in false generosity. (Freire, 2005, p. 45)

In this example, the oppressor's violence was the institutional policy that determined how students were to be assessed. The policy diminished the academic success and socio-emotional well-being and prioritized a compliance-based approach. Teachers and parents were not provided

any additional opportunities to connect with one another in support of students. Instead, parents and teachers labored separately in a way that established a warped hierarchy wherein teachers were the enforcers of the institutional policy that perpetuated harm for parents and students. By enacting critical love in this instance, Mrs. Jones and I were rejecting the implied power dynamic to mutually humanize one another in a unified quest toward liberation.

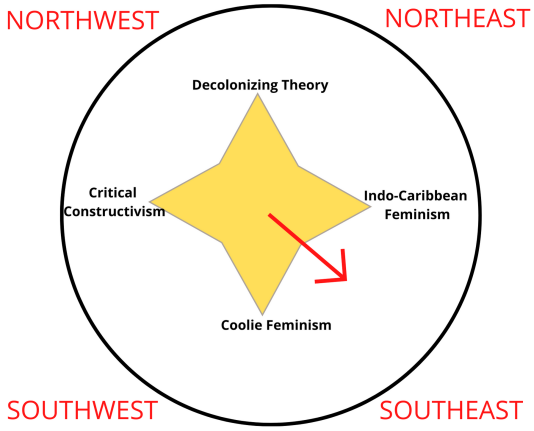
In this instance I had multiple goals in the conversation with Mrs. Jones. First, I wanted to ascertain the root cause of Michael's attendance issues in English class. Second, I wanted to understand his technological and literacy needs to better support his remote-learning experience. In conversation with his mother, a third objective was apparent. I wanted Mrs. Jones to understand that I was doing my best and was committed to Michael's success while Mrs. Jones also wanted me to understand that she was doing her best in commitment to Michael's success. Students in remote learning were most successful when parents and teachers communicated regularly across the chasm of virtual learning (Morgan, 2020). However, virtual learning fostered an environment of isolation between teachers, students, and parents. Using critical love at this time facilitated a more critical examination of the intersecting systems that dehumanized me as the teacher and Mrs. Jones as the parent. In direct resistance to these circumstances, Mrs. Jones and I opted to center the needs and experiences of one another and forge a partnership to support a struggling student. Mrs. Jones's and my actions throughout the conversation invokes bell hooks (2010) as follows:

> Fundamentally, if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. Until we are all able to accept the interlocking,

> interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle. (hooks, 2010, p. 1)

In our conversation, Mrs. Jones and I were able to humanize one another as we struggled through virtual learning. We actively centered each other's needs, validated one another's unique experiences, and came together around a common goal. We both recognized the dehumanizing nature of remote learning and enacted critical love to mutually humanize one another. This allowed us to plan together and subvert the status quo of remote learning to best support the needs of Michael. Our partnership and critical love of one another enabled a collaboration that ultimately facilitated academic success for Michael.

In this interaction, the decolonial compass was successfully implemented to decolonize what could have been a tense conversation. Heading Southeast put Indo-Caribbean feminism and Coolie feminism at the forefront of my horizon.



This analysis was enhanced by looking through Lyiscott's interpersonal fugitive literacies window to understand how the manifestations of white supremacy could have informed my interaction with Mrs. Jones. Had we opted to collaboratively examine and unpack the school's

policies during virtual learning, Mrs. Jones and I might have peered together through Lyiscott's institutional fugitive literacies window. Instead, the institutional policies during remote learning continually evolved to perpetuate the dehumanization of students, families, and teachers. This is evident in the structure for parent–teacher conferences, which is discussed in the next section.

Institutional dehumanization of families and teachers

Some instances of parent–teacher communication were informed by critical love and were humanizing spaces for families and teachers. However, virtual learning spaces as a whole created barriers to building meaningful relationships with students and families. Because people were missing the regular connections of school, any opportunities to forge meaningful connections were increasingly important. Usually, parent–teacher conferences are spaces for families to connect with the school community, immerse themselves in the learning spaces of their students, and speak with teachers about their students' academic progress and socio-emotional needs. Due to the remote schooling of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual conferences were offered in lieu of in-person conferences. At our school, families were able to sign up for 10-minute meetings with teams of their students' teachers. As a teacher of sophomores and seniors, I sat with the 10th- and 12th-grade teachers for meetings with the families of students I support. The virtual meeting structure was particularly dehumanizing. My reflections on the conferences are detailed in the excerpt below.

Parent / Teacher Conferences Memo

Friday March 19th, 2021

Post Conferences

Something that stuck with me during Friday conferences was the experience parents were having. In each virtual meeting room was the entire group of 10th-grade

> teachers. Parents would pop in, we would introduce ourselves and then rattle off all the basics of how the student was doing in class. It was a rapid fire of information. Parents who didn't speak English well, or who didn't have anything to write with may have felt overwhelmed by it.

At the start of this excerpt is my reflection on the virtual conference structure. Parents signed up for 10-minute conferences with teams of teachers. This structure was developed by the school administration to increase efficiency and allow parents to speak with all of their child's teachers at once, instead of having to navigate through multiple virtual links. Parent–teacher conferences were offered over two days with the first day's session lasting two hours and the second lasting two and a half hours. On the Google calendar for the 10th grade, every 10-minute slot was occupied by parents who had signed up to speak with their students' teachers. This was a series of 27, ten-minute meetings for the 10th-grade team of teachers to navigate through. There were also three emails from parents who were not able to sign up for a time slot because all the schedules were full. The parents requested additional conference times to speak with teachers about their children's progress. In a traditional school year, I serve approximately 100 students. It is typical that I meet with 10 to 15 families total over the two days of parent–teacher conferences, meaning that a significant portion of families never meet with me for a formal conference about their students' progress during the school year. As a critical educator, I recognize that what could be perceived as a lack of parental involvement during conferences is more likely a result of the intersecting social factors that impede a family from attending in-person conferences. In their 2018 study, Lechuga-Peña and Brisson documented three major barriers to parent involvement in schooling including, "cultural and language differences in their children's school, undertones of racism from teachers and parents, and being the primary

caregiver or sole provider for their children" (p. 1). Because I am aware of this, I also understand that it is my obligation to reject manifestations of white supremacy that shape my middle-class perspectives about parent–teacher conferences:

> It's all too easy, for even the most well-meaning of us, to help perpetuate classism by buying into that mindset, implementing activities and strategies for 'working with parents in poverty' or 'teaching students in poverty' that, however subtly, suggest we must fix poor people instead of eliminating the inequities that oppress them. (Gorski, 2007, p. 1)

It is commonly believed that parents of high school students are less involved during parent–teacher conferences. However, the virtual parent–teacher conferences suggest that parents were extremely interested in meeting with their children's teachers. The virtual time slots were completely filled, with additional parents requesting meetings. This suggests that families want to attend parent–teacher conferences but may face other barriers to participation.

As a 10th-grade team, we were venturing into this first series of virtual meetings without considering the quality of the parent experience or how to elevate parent and student voices. We received directives that conferences were to last 10 minutes each and that parents could request additional meeting time at a later date if necessary. On a team of four core subject teachers—including English, math, social studies, and science, with the addition of elective teachers for courses such as Spanish, gym, health, and art—this institutional structure effectively gave each teacher approximately one minute to speak. In that one minute, teachers were expected to communicate with parents about their course curriculum, disciplinary procedures, the individual student's academic progress, socio-emotional development, upcoming deadlines, and important reminders. In turn, this gave parents approximately one minute total to process the information that was being shared, pose questions, and express their thoughts. In a traditional

school year, I prepare for parent–teacher conferences by reviewing all of the student work products I have for every student I teach. I also compile some anecdotal notes about each student, including particular mentions about their talents, interests, friendships, socio-emotional development, and academic skills. I usually take two to three hours total putting together data about each student and compiling resources for families to take with them. Parents do not sign up for parent–teacher conferences in advance at our school and can walk in at any time during the designated blocks of time. Therefore, I prepare information about all of the students in preparation for meaningful conversations with their families. This is also a mid-year practice that allows me to spend time looking closely at patterns across student data in my classroom. During traditional parent–teacher conferences, there are no enforced time limits. As a result, some conferences take only a few minutes, as I may have a previously established rapport with a family, or may only be sharing brief positive updates on a student with a family. Some conferences, however, can take 15 to 20 minutes, especially if I want to emphasize a student's academic or socio-emotional needs to a family. In these conferences, I usually shut my door, use student work products to ground my conversations, and when the student is present, have them facilitate the conference with some gentle guidance from me. These conversations typically culminate in concrete next steps for the student and/or family with a plethora of resources. These conferences almost always end with families thanking me for the update and the resources and always help me to establish positive relationships between me and the families.

In the virtual parent–teacher conference model, the institutional policy prioritized efficiency over authentic teacher–family engagement, which effectively dehumanized the parents and teachers within each meeting. This implied that the purpose of parent–teacher conferences was for teachers to deliver information to parents, significantly limiting the space for critical

dialogue. The one-way virtual model reduced parents to objects by removing their agency and positioning teachers as keepers of knowledge. Freire (2005) addressed this in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> …attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. (p. 65)

Parental input was not solicited when the institution crafted its parent–teacher conference policy. Instead, the policy was crafted from a largely institutional perspective, which aimed to maximize the number of opportunities for parents to connect with their student's teachers. On the surface, the policy seemed convenient, as it enabled the largest number of families to log in and meet with their students' teachers with only one easy to manage calendar link. However, teachers were forced to work within the confines of this institutional structure that devalued the quality of parent–teacher interactions by prioritizing the quantity of meetings over all else. Teachers, on the other hand, wanted to convey the same quality of interactions with families that usually occur during traditional parent–teacher conferences. Therefore, in the virtual conferences, teachers rattled off all the information they deemed important to share about a student. In the conferences, by the time each teacher had spoken, parents and students had two minutes or less to ask questions. This structure did not provide appropriate time for parents to process the information that was being shared with them. Consequently, they were disempowered to ask clarifying or probing questions to better understand their students' progress. This dehumanization was best combated by an effective use of the decolonizing compass. In this moment, teachers could have reoriented themselves to their true North or decolonizing work. After the first few conferences, it

became clear that parents were not having positive experiences in the virtual meetings. As a team, the 10th-grade teachers could have stopped to identify what was occurring and deconstruct the structural features contributing to the circumstances. Then, in the following conferences, teachers could have acted against the dehumanizing structure by inviting parents to lead. Conferences could have begun from a place of genuine dialogue, with parents leading the conversation through a series of questions they posed about their child's progress.

Examining this entry with the decolonizing compass, it is necessary to head West and use critical constructivism to situate the social dynamics at play. The structure implemented for parent–teacher conferences was an institutional policy that emerged from a particular ideological standpoint. Yosso (2005) explained that upper- and middle-class knowledges are deemed valuable and therefore carry with them social capital:

> The assumption follows that People of Color 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility. As a result, schools most often work from this assumption in structuring ways to help 'disadvantaged' students whose race and class background has left them lacking necessary knowledge, social skills, abilities and cultural capital. (p. 70)

Based on this assumption, families and their potential contributions to school communities are also devalued when not aligned with upper- and middle-class knowledges. Thus, a structure such as parent–teacher conferences is not utilized as a tool for authentic collaboration and partnership between teachers and families. Instead, it reproduces a hierarchical structure wherein families are least valued in the conversation about their students. Teachers both reinforced and were restricted by white supremacist–aligned epistemologies wherein teachers were the holders of knowledge that should be deposited into families' minds. As noted by Freire (2005), the struggle for humanization "is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is

not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed" (p. 44). In the parent–teacher conference structure, the oppressors were first the institution who created a structure that dehumanized teachers. This caused the teachers to perpetuate the role of the oppressors who then actively dehumanized the families, making them the oppressed. A hierarchical society continually reproduces itself through structures that provide varying measures of power across marginalized groups. Teachers and families both represent groups that are oppressed within the larger institution of schooling. The unity of dehumanized and oppressed groups with less social and political power can facilitate a challenge to the dominant power structures. This can be achieved by centering one another's epistemologies and methods of communication in authentic and purposeful ways. Darder (2014) emphasized the need to subvert hegemony by rehumanizing oppressed groups as follows:

> The political consequence of hegemonic schooling is the wholesale denial or erasure of communal histories, cultural knowledge, and political self-determination—often replaced with superficial multicultural interventions that do little to respect the dignity or human rights of students, whose histories are indelibly marked by centures of genocide, slavery, colonization, and economic exploitation. (p. 61)

When parents and teachers work together in a community, they have the power to subvert the status quo and effect positive change in their school communities. Therefore, the institution of schooling, which benefits from a hierarchical power structure, would not encourage authentic dialogic spaces for families and teachers to commune. This situation would provide sufficient space and time for collective organizing and advocacy for a humanized approach to schooling. Although this would benefit students, families, and teachers, the ideologies guiding the

institution could be called into question, disrupting the social hierarchies and power structures that concentrate social and political capital in the few.

After the parent–teacher conferences, I brought up the dehumanizing experience in the institutional spaces where I hold some form of capital: I spoke about it in instructional cabinet meetings, department meetings, grade team meetings, and advisory team meetings. I posed questions to colleagues about how we could collectively engage with virtual conferencing in ways that could prioritize dialogue over efficiency. I was met with considerable resistance, as many colleagues did not view the conferences with the same critical lens as I did. It is my hope that the next round of virtual conferences will be implemented with a more humanizing approach that utilizes some of my recommendations for elevating authentic conversation between teachers and families.

Like the excerpt that depicted a new student's dehumanization during virtual learning, this excerpt demonstrates the disconnect between institutional policies, teacher practice, and the needs of students and families. To create cohesion among these, the decolonial compass can be applied by heading in a Southwest direction. Coolie feminist and critical constructivism could assist in the unification of the different objectives of each stakeholder group under one primary purpose: to build more equitable, decolonized spaces. Enacting the compass to examine manifestations of white supremacy through Lyiscott's fugitive literacies framework offers the potential for a powerful tool to move closer to the decolonizing aims.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this study, I am continuing to work as a classroom teacher in high school English courses. Recently, I observed a student, Charles, who refused to complete any work during my class period. He refused to write his name on any of his work, would not

provide verbal responses to any questions, and kept his head down on his desk for the majority of the class. I chose to ask him to remain after class to speak with him about how he was feeling. I gently posed a series of questions over a few minutes—"Are you feeling angry? Are you feeling sad? Are you feeling tired? Are you feeling hungry?"—to help Charles locate his thoughts and feelings, but I only received a flat affect with noncommittal grunts and shrugs in response. Luckily, I did not have a class to teach and invited Charles to sit a while in my classroom with me. I went about some classroom tasks like organizing papers and resetting the classroom while Charles sat near my desk. After a few minutes I returned to my desk and sat with him. Instead of asking him questions, I rambled about my own day. I told him about the traffic that made me feel angry, the mistake in the breakfast delivery order that caused me to feel frustrated, a cat video that made me laugh, and a war dog video that made me feel sad. He was visibly interested in each story and his facial expressions changed as I relayed each detail. I mentioned to him that I was feeling a bit concerned for him because he was not successful in class and was reverting to some behaviors from the beginning of the school year. I asked him if I could call his mom to talk about it with her and maybe bring up a conversation about seeking some counseling services at school. He nodded his head yes. As he left the room, I said to him, "Charles, if no one else told you today, I hope you know I love you." He turned toward me at the door, smiled, and said "Love you, too, Ms. Khan." I called his mother later on in the day to relay our conversation to her. She was in full agreement with me and said she had been trying but was unsuccessful with securing mental health support for him outside of school. She mentioned some of the personal struggles they were facing as a family with Charles's father who had recently suffered an accident that put him in long-term care. I thanked her for sharing and mentioned that I would check in with Charles the next day at school. When Charles came in the next day, he loitered at

my desk at the end of the class period and I mentioned that I had spoken with his mother. He smiled and said, “I know, I heard everything.” I asked him how he was feeling and he said “OK.” We then walked over to meet the school counselors together so he could get to know them, which was an appointment I had previously arranged with the team. As I was leaving, I said, “Alright, Charles, have a good rest of the day; love ya!” and he responded with a sheepish smile and an “Love ya, too, Ms. Khan.”

Critical love is a deliberate effort encompassing trust, respect, care, commitment, knowledge, and responsibility. Love is also the ultimate humanizing act. To critically love another person, it is vital that their humanity is centered. When I take steps to deliberately love someone, I consider their mental well-being and their socio-emotional needs, but also their interests, their quirks, their values, and their talents. I think about the entirety of the person in front of me and accept them as they are. Colonialism and white supremacy endure as a result of the perpetual dehumanization of all within the colonized system. For individuals within the system who wish to subvert the dominant power structures, we must push against the internalized values white supremacy imbues in order to impact ideological change. When institutional structures like grading policies encourage the dehumanization of students, teachers can actively work against it. By monitoring deficit perspectives that can emerge as a result of institutional policies, teachers can more effectively name, deconstruct, and act against dehumanization. Although the institution can create structures that allow teachers to easily dehumanize students, every interaction with a student or family is another opportunity to build collective power, center one another’s humanity, and engage with each other through critical love.

In some ways, virtual learning has provided spaces for teachers, families, and students to co-create and reimagine existing paradigms with one another. How we navigate through and out of the initial stages of virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic will be determined by our ability to combat all manifestations of white supremacy. This process is one that requires deliberate action and an enduring commitment to collective liberation. My vision for how the decolonial compass can contribute to this work is detailed in the following and final chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Maintaining a decolonizing approach

In Plato's allegory of the cave, a group of people are raised from infancy seeing only shadows on a cave wall. They are tied together and never experience anything beyond the shadows of the cave wall. One member of the group frees himself of the shackles and emerges from the cave to see the larger world. He recognizes that the beliefs he held previously were a result of his only exposure to the world being projections on the cave wall. When he returns to the cave to liberate his fellow prisoners, they choose not to believe him and opt to remain confined in the cave. Had this enlightened former cave-dweller had access to navigation tools to lead his comrades out of the darkness, he may have been perceived as a liberator instead of dismissed as a madman. The decolonial compass is one such tool that educators can use to navigate their way out of the metaphorical cave of colonized classrooms.

As we collectively emerge from the initial pandemic trauma, teachers and students have returned to in-person learning with fundamental changes to their pedagogy. Although remote learning has not remained an available option in many places, teachers, students, and families have been freed from Plato's metaphorical cave. As some states craft legislation to restrict teachers' decision-making abilities and parents clamor to ban books, teachers are increasingly calling out inequities and pushing back against racist policies. Like the escaped member of the cave, teachers, families, and students alike have been able to briefly see beyond the confines of the classroom cave and look beyond the shadows on the wall that they had become accustomed to. For example, in a Facebook group for AP Literature teachers that I am a member of, teachers regularly seek resources and suggestions from one another to advocate for embedding critical literacies in their curriculum.

As a result of remote learning, teachers and students have been able to explore new methods of teaching and learning with one another. In some places, teachers can more freely question their curricular, disciplinary, and leadership choices. Using the decolonial compass with decolonizing theory as the true North for educators would enable an intentional naming, deconstruction, and action against manifestations of white supremacy. Additionally, students in many schools who have returned to in-person learning are less passive, less compliant, and less willing to accept disengaging and oppressive pedagogies. This moment presents a meaningful opportunity for teachers and students to unite and co-create the institution of schooling with the ultimate aim of decolonizing the space. To do so effectively, teachers need to ground their work in the relevant and necessary social, historical, and political contexts of their classrooms. Heading West on the decolonial compass uses critical constructivism and offers a pathway for teachers to critically and authentically situate necessary context that informs their personal pedagogy. Through a critical constructivist lens, teachers and students can also collaboratively examine the ideologies that shape daily school life and trace a direct path to the institutional policies that the school community is beholden to. Although the institution continually evolves in the image of white supremacist ideology, the post-pandemic teaching and learning world is an opportunity for authentic shifts in curriculum, discipline, and leadership that is co-led by students and teachers. These shifts must happen for educators internally as well. Teachers should revise the decolonial compass to more appropriately represent their identity and experiences. By adding frameworks to address people's intersecting identities and their most prominent theoretical worldview, teachers can more clearly articulate how their personal epistemologies can be actionalized in decolonizing work. It is my hope that the decolonial compass provides a tool for ongoing shifts in the post-pandemic teaching and learning world.

Summary of the Study

In this autoethnographic study, I documented my experiences in virtual learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as I attempted to decolonize my classroom and leadership. This study examined how I subverted or upheld colonialism in my teaching and leadership practices. The nature of an autoethnographic study is exploratory, with a purposeful excavation of the self within specific political, social, and historical circumstances. Because the structure of virtual teaching and learning was brand new, the focus of this study was cast wide at the start in order to be responsive to the evolving circumstances of the remote world. I spent 10 weeks from January 2021 to April 2021 writing detailed reflective entries on my experiences in virtual learning. Each day, I took detailed notes on my experiences as a classroom teacher in virtual learning. At the end of each week, I used these notes to write detailed entries on my classroom experiences. In addition, I wrote in-depth entries about my experiences in leadership after facilitating English department meetings and after attending instructional cabinet meetings. I also wrote additional reflections before and after parent–teacher conferences, which were held virtually for the first time. Throughout this process, I also continued to keep my personal journal. This made for a total of 22 formal entries and 1 additional entry from my personal journal that was incorporated into this study. This study used a unification of critical theories in the form of the decolonial compass to examine the entries and experiences I logged over 10 weeks: this bricolage included decolonizing theory, critical constructivism, Indo-Caribbean feminism, and Coolie feminism. The compass was utilized as a tool for navigation within Smith's (1999) concept of the line, the center, and the outside. To more closely examine and interrogate each experience, Lyiscott's fugitive literacies framework became a window through which I analyzed the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy in

any given circumstances. Major findings were detailed in Chapters 4 and 5. They are also summarized in the following section.

Major Findings

Throughout this research study, the virtual-learning environment continued to develop and evolve. In some ways, it provided necessary shifts toward equitable teaching and learning spaces. In other ways, it adapted to reinforce and uphold white supremacist ideologies and perpetuate oppression. As a teacher grappling with the institutional policies of virtual learning while being forced to work within them, I struggled to maintain a decolonizing approach throughout the remote-learning experience. Virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was incredibly isolating and effectively dehumanized the teachers and students. As a teacher and teacher leader, I was a representative of the institution who, despite efforts to the contrary, perpetuated dehumanization. In some ways, I was able to relinquish a need for control and take a more decolonizing approach to teaching and leadership. There were also instances that I engaged with others through critical love in order to combat the dehumanization of virtual learning. How I navigated remote learning with a decolonizing approach was illuminated through my interpersonal interactions with colleagues, families, and students. Although I inadvertently perpetuated white supremacist values in my leadership and in my pedagogical choices, I was also able to successfully decolonize some of my practices by taking a humanizing approach in terms of curriculum, discipline, and leadership.

Finding 1: Relinquishing epistemological control is central to decolonizing classrooms

Colonization endures through an exertion of epistemological and material control. Race, social class, and patriarchy all seek to maintain the colonial center through an establishment of socially constructed and reinforced hierarchies. This pattern is repeated across all aspects of

society, including schooling. Teachers, regardless of their personal identity and intersectionality, are aligned with the institution of schooling as upholders of white supremacist ideologies. This is evident in the curricular and disciplinary choices teachers make in the classrooms and in the leadership style of teacher leaders like myself.

As an educator, remote learning was newly challenging, especially in terms of discipline and student accountability. Because I no longer had control over the physical classroom spaces, I sometimes struggled to take a humanizing approach while attempting to maintain epistemological control. In some instances, when students did not conduct themselves in a manner I deemed classroom appropriate, I took a more punitive approach. This disempowered students and only created a wider chasm of virtual learning between teachers and students. In some disciplinary conversations, I took a more decolonizing approach. In restorative conversations, students and I humanized one another and engaged with one another in dialogic spaces. A decolonized disciplinary approach offered me and my students opportunities to de-escalate negative thoughts and feelings we may have been feeling internally, in order to find common ground across conflict.

My choices as the English department leader in virtual spaces also evolved throughout the process of remote learning. Prior to experiencing significant burnout and dehumanization, I was able to remain true to my long-standing leadership philosophy. When institutional policy required the English department to engage in a data and assessment process, I was able to foster a space for critical dialogue wherein the members of the English department deconstructed and named the inequities being perpetuated by the policy. As the facilitator, I led the team to collaborate and construct a new policy that was more closely aligned with our pedagogical values. Over the course of the study, I was significantly beaten down by the dehumanization and

isolation of remote learning. As a result, I struggled to lead the English department in navigating and pushing against oppressive institutional policies after many weeks of remote learning. When I reported the official grading policy for remote learning to the English teachers, I presented it as an official policy that we were required to abide by. I failed to create space for critical dialogue and instead tried to force the teachers to obey a policy that we all knew was not the best choice for our students. Because I navigated these circumstances with the decolonizing compass, as depicted in Figure 3, I was able to contextualize each instance using decolonizing theory, critical constructivism, Indo-Caribbean feminism, and Coolie feminism.

The compass was used to examine Smith's concept of colonialism through the fugitive literacies window by examining the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal colonialism. As a result, I deconstructed, named, and acted against manifestations of white supremacy both during the time of the study and after, during my process of analysis. The figures below are a depiction of this process.

Figure 1: Smith's concept of the line, the center, and the outside

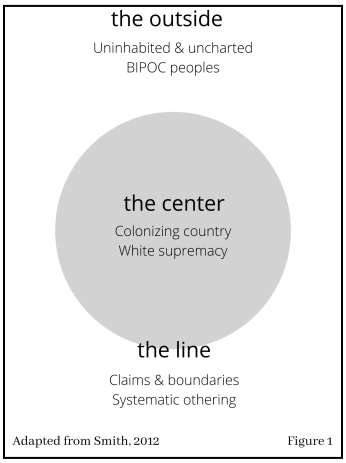


Figure 2: Lyiscott's fugitive literacies framework applied as a window into Smith's concept

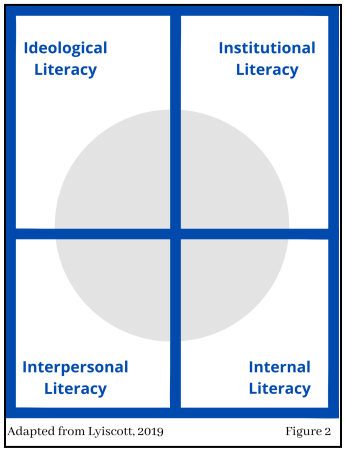
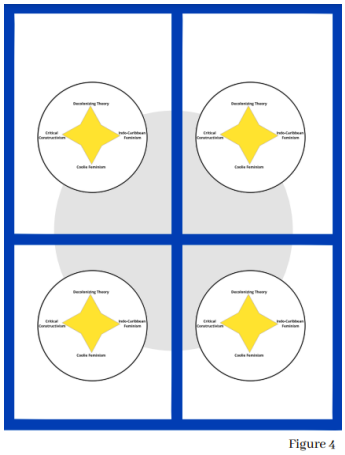


Figure 4: The decolonial compass used to navigate through each window pane



In this process, I first established the explicit and implicit boundaries of colonialism. Then, I examined ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized white supremacy that radiated out from the center. Within each window pane, I used the decolonial compass to excavate the inherent colonialism by naming it, deconstructing it, and acting against it. The actionalized aspect of decolonizing work sometimes relied more heavily on my perspective as an Indo-Caribbean feminist, such as when I chose to engage with a disruptive female student by creating space for critical and respectful dialogues. At times, it was necessary to activate critical constructivism to contextualize the historical circumstances present in an instance while also using Coolie feminism to actively resist patriarchy (e.g., in my choice to reject a hierarchial leadership and facilitate the English department's active resistance to an unjust policy). While the unification of these theories through the compass enabled me to theoretically and and practically resist established hegemony in the service of others, it was also necessary to actionalize its use through a process of critical love.

Finding 2: Critical love is a tool for combatting dehumanization

Colonization thrives in a dehumanizing capitalist system. The process of sorting and labeling in schools is upheld by standardized testing and the continued commercialization of schools. Educators who are working to decolonize the institution of education can do so by humanizing themselves and others within the system. Critical love is integral to humanization. This study documented instances where critical love was used as a tool for humanization and where critical love was absent, resulting in dehumanization.

The institutional structures of virtual learning cultivated a uniquely isolating and dehumanizing teaching and learning environment. As a teacher, I struggled to build strong relationships with students within the confines of the virtual classroom, especially when students

did not log in. As a decolonizing teacher, I actively worked to combat deficit perspectives that emerged as a result of students' perceived disengagement from virtual learning. By deconstructing and naming those deficit perspectives, I resisted the ways in which they could have shaped my grading and assessment practices. Although it would have been easier to rely on the punitive measures of the institutional grading policy, I built a bridge between disengaged students and myself using critical love. By going outside the parameters of the established virtual classroom, I created simple structures and humanizing routines where students felt connected to me as their teacher and the curriculum of high school English. Despite my capacity for critical love, the dehumanization of virtual learning continued over many weeks, contributing to my significant burnout and exhaustion. This in turn led me to dehumanize students and fostered interactions devoid of critical love. The institutional structure of remote learning perpetuated the dehumanization of teachers, which severely diminished our capacity for criticality and care. Thus, students who needed additional support from me did not always receive it and I sometimes inadvertently perpetuated dehumanization.

Critical love was also a key component of rehumanization between teachers and parents. The policies of the remote-learning environment could have pitted families and teachers against one another. However, drawing upon critical love allowed me to humanize parents with an empathetic approach to their unique and evolving circumstances. Parents and I found ways to commiserate with one another and establish common goals for the students. Despite differing values and opinions, when critical love was actionalized between parents and teachers, students were better served during remote learning. Conversely, when institutional structures were prioritized over the needs of teachers and parents, institutional policies perpetuated oppressive structures. The virtual structure created for parent–teacher conferences valued the quantity of

conferences over quality and resulted in a formulaic set of conferences where parents and teachers were stripped of their agency and authenticity. Instead, teachers opted to rapidly deliver information to parents without creating space for dialogue and partnership. When critical love was centered in relationships, it became a tool for rehumanization and consequently decolonization.

Research question 1: How do ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of colonialism shape one teacher's efforts to decolonize their classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, educational policies continually shifted in ways that both removed and upheld barriers for teachers, parents, and students. White supremacist ideology is a manifestation of colonialism that shaped the evolution of institutional policy during remote learning. These policies then impacted the interpersonal interactions I had with colleagues, students, and families. This was also shaping and shaped by my internalized alignment with white supremacy.

In Chapter 4, I first established the dehumanizing and isolating environment of remote learning. I then examined how ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy shaped my interactions with colleagues, students, and families. As the English department leader, I aimed to remain true to my leadership value of constructivism through collaboration and dialogue. This objective allowed me to rely on a co-leader structure to create space for critical conversation around school-wide policies on data and assessment tracking during the pandemic. My choices as a leader during department conversations enabled us to engage in rich discussion that unpacked the inequities being perpetuated by institutional mandates. As a team, we deconstructed the white supremacist values

that were shaping the requirement and co-constructed a new target. Doing this allowed us to meet the obligations of the institutional policy while still working on our authentic teaching practice in ways that better served our students. As the pandemic continued, white supremacist ideologies also shaped my leadership choices in ways that inhibited dialogue and authenticity. In this instance, also documented in Chapter 4, exhaustion and burnout diminished my ability to be a critical leader. I failed to push against institutional policy and instead aligned myself with a hierarchical leadership style that relied on a white supremacist notion of patriarchy. As a result, the team I led was forced to abide by an unjust institutional policy and did not have space to critique or act against it.

In my interpersonal interactions, I both upheld and pushed against manifestations of white supremacy. In terms of student discipline, I was able to draw upon my well of critical love to humanize students and engage in critical dialogue around perceived transgressions. At times, I upheld interpersonal iterations of white supremacy by adhering to a hierarchical standard in student–teacher conversations. When disciplining a student for a perceived transgression, I held the power in the conversation and did not allow space for the student's perspective to be heard. I also leveraged my relationships in interpersonal interactions as a leader. Working as the English department leader, I created space for the critique of institutional policy and helped the team co-create policies that better served the students and our school community. Over the course of remote learning, and as my capacity for criticality diminished, I lost my ability to resist white supremacy. Instead, I aligned myself with the institution and perpetuated oppressive practices to the detriment of the English department.

Internally, I grappled with manifestations of white supremacy, including deficit thinking about students and families and perceived challenges to my authority as a classroom teacher and

teacher leader. I actively worked to excavate these instances within myself in order to work against them in the moment. At times when I was unable to navigate them successfully, I closely examined them in order to act against these manifestations of white supremacy in the future.

Research question 2: In what ways does one teacher attempt to maintain epistemological and material control over students during remote instruction?

During remote learning, I did not have access to material control over students' learning spaces. Instead, we engaged in teaching and learning in the abstract space of virtual classrooms. Due to the loss of material control, I relied increasingly on epistemological control in ways I did not prior to the virtual learning of the pandemic. In terms of student discipline, when I perceived a student's use of a term to be derogatory to a historically oppressed group, instead of working from a place of understanding and engaging in dialogue, I chose to reprimand the student and stop them from using the term again. With co-teachers, I controlled the nature of the lessons and took on the bulk of the planning and implementation of classes. This disempowered my co-teachers in what should have been collaborative spaces. During remote learning, and as a result of this study, I was able to shift my lesson planning process to better support my co-teachers' learning process. This cultivated space for collaboration and dialogue in new ways.

It was through a process of relinquishing epistemological control that created space for a decolonized teaching and learning environment. In a perceived instance of student misbehavior, I chose not to reprimand a student and created space between us. Then, we engaged with one another through a process of critical reflection and dialogue where we actively humanized one another. Because of this, we were able to come to a mutual understanding and de-escalate a moment of potential conflict. Relinquishing epistemological control in co-teaching also created space for a richer learning experience for students. In a lesson about the N-word, for example, I

trusted the lived experiences and expertise of my two Black co-teachers and empowered them as leaders in the lesson. Instead of approaching the lesson in ways I would have previously, I took the role of active listener and created bridges for students between hearing about teachers' personal and professional experiences with the N-word and a critical examination of its use in literature. Although this research question aimed to examine how I navigated epistemological control over students, the scope of this study allowed for an examination of epistemological control in co-teaching as well.

Research question 3: How does one teacher work to humanize themself, colleagues, students and families within dehumanizing circumstances through a decolonizing process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy?

Colonialism endures through dehumanization. To take a decolonizing approach, I worked to humanize students and families as I worked with them. In my interactions with families, I drew upon my Indo-Caribbean and Coolie feminist approaches to raising children. By centering our collective goals of supporting, loving, and affirming students, I built authentic bridges with parents that carried us over the chasm of virtual learning. Although I took active steps to work in partnership with families, institutional policies sometimes created obstacles to fostering meaningful relationships between teachers and parents. Virtual parent–teacher conferences were structured with a focus on the quantity of meetings and did not provide opportunities for dialogue among teachers and parents. Because the structure was so dehumanizing to parents and to teachers, I worked against it as a member of the leadership cabinet to recommend changes to the virtual parent–teacher structure. I also engaged in a series of follow-up meetings with parents to provide more time and space for constructive dialogue in support of students.

Virtual learning was a dehumanizing experience for teachers and students alike. The world felt tumultuous and lacked the imposed structure that people were accustomed to. Students struggled to engage with teachers and the virtual classroom spaces they were being asked to learn in. As a result, many of the high school students I worked with were failing to log in to classes. In an effort to support their success, I took a humanizing approach and offered students virtual structure outside of the virtual school day, when they were more likely to be awake and engaged. Students enjoyed spending virtual time with me and we mutually humanized one another. Coming together in these informal ways supported students in the formal setting of the virtual classroom and opened a space for me to cultivate meaningful relationships with students. Conversely, the lack of boundaries and increased accountability on teachers catalyzed my burnout and exhaustion, severely diminishing my capacity for critical love. In some interactions with students, I failed to center their humanity and instead opted for what was easy or convenient for me. A student who joined my class for the first time mid-year needed significant emotional and academic support. Instead of welcoming him and laying the groundwork for a successful pathway, I dismissed him from the class period with independent work because I was unable to consider how to fit him into my already-running virtual classroom. Additionally, after a student conducted himself in ways that I perceived to be disrespectful, I opted for a more punitive disciplinary conversation rather than engaging in open dialogue as I usually would have.

This study enabled a process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy. I analyzed instances where dehumanization of myself or others perpetuated our collective oppression and upheld white supremacist ideologies. I was able to push against instances of dehumanization by accessing my capacity for critical love. Working to humanize others in our colonized society requires a deep understanding of critical love. I

needed to understand how I conceptualized critical love of the community I served and how I drew upon my personal epistemologies to cultivate a meaningful and authentic critical love. Indo-Caribbean feminism and coolie feminism offered a pathway toward humanization. I drew upon my notions of collectivism and commitment to subversion of all oppression in order to humanize both myself and the community within which I worked.

Limitations of the study

This study aimed to examine one teacher's process as they grappled with racism and classism as manifestations of colonialism in virtual learning. Although this study included rich description, it was limited in three particular ways:

1. The term *decolonizing* was used in this study to describe one teacher's efforts to unmake racist and classist pedagogy in their classroom and leadership spaces. This study did not address the primary goal of decolonization, which is Indigenous sovereignty and repatriation. In this study, there were highly detailed descriptions of interpersonal interactions between students, families, and colleagues. As the researcher in this study, I bore the responsibility of protecting the anonymity of the site and people referenced in this study. Therefore, I did not address land and other factors connected to the neighborhood as they could have violated the anonymity of persons involved in the study. Additionally, this study took place during virtual learning and working environments. Students, families, and colleagues were all physically separated. Throughout this study, students, families, colleagues, and I simultaneously existed in abstract virtual spaces and colonized physical land. Examining racism and classism as manifestations of colonialism was central to this study but did not necessarily address decolonizing aims regarding Indigenous land.

2. Although this study provided a deep analysis into one teacher's experiences as they worked to decolonize their classroom space during remote learning, the results of this study are not generalizable. However, the decolonial compass, which was crafted as a tool for analysis during this study, could be used by other educators to engage in a similar process of self-excavation to decolonize their classroom spaces.
3. One other major limitation of this study includes the subjectivity of myself as the autoethnographic researcher. Because this process is an authentic reflection of unpacking my choices during remote learning, there is a level of subjectivity to the findings. To combat this, instances documented in this study were member-checked by members of the school community. Interactions that documented events between teachers, students, and parents were read and critiqued by colleagues from the school community.

Implications and recommendations for further study

This study examined the experiences of one teacher in the tumultuous shift from traditional schooling to remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools largely returned to in-person learning for the 2021–2022 school year and in some ways reified oppressive and dehumanizing structures. At the center of this study was my commitment to conscientization (Freire, 1970), or a critical examination of the self to implement positive change. This study was not able to address the particular history of the land upon which Community School A and the virtual classroom spaces sat. The long history of the land included patterns of dispossession and a diminished access to resources such as food, public transportation, and healthcare. It is my belief that this study would have been more robust had it been able to name and interrogate the legacy of colonialism on the particular lands connected to the school.

To examine the ways in which the decolonizing process of naming, deconstructing, and acting against white supremacy could take shape outside of the realm of one teacher, further research may include ethnographic studies of entire school communities who engage in this process collaboratively with one another and in ways that acknowledge and examine the context of the land. Teachers may create their own versions of the decolonial compass, situating decolonizing theory and critical constructivism alongside their personal epistemologies to triangulate internalized manifestations of white supremacy. School communities may use the decolonial compass as a tool to navigate toward a decolonized future wherein they regularly call out and resist white supremacy. When the two major theories of decolonizing theory and critical constructivism are taken together, it becomes easier to trace the legacy of colonialism through the social, political, and historical context that creates the ideologies that shape institutional policies. Further study may take the form of teacher, student, and parent book clubs, along with cooperative critical reflection of classroom interactions. Teachers, students, and families can commit to the collaborative and critical examination of interactions and work together to decolonize their school communities. Following this process over the course of a school year could elevate meaningful changes in communities that can move schooling toward creating more democratic, equitable, and decolonized spaces for all stakeholders.

I also envision implications for teacher education as a result of this study. Throughout this research, I critically examined my own teacher practice, with the aim of dismantling racist and classist ideologies. Because we are all participants in a society built using the settler–native–slave dynamic, teachers aiming to subvert oppressive structures must engage in self-excavation to examine and resist their own white supremacist ideologies. The decolonial compass can provide a framework for such work in teacher-education programs. Pre-service

teachers who are in the process of developing their pedagogical identity can use the decolonial compass to establish a foundation as a critical educator. However, it is with some trepidation that I offer this suggestion. As a woman of color, I see the liberatory potential of such a tool, but I am acutely aware that in our colonized society, nothing is neutral. Just like any other critical tool, I am hesitant to emphasize the possibilities of the decolonial compass as it could easily be co-opted to oppressive ends. I would like to continue working with this tool in various professional development and departmental settings to further explore its possibilities and shortcomings.

I also imagine the decolonial compass being used as a tool for catalyzing large-scale and small-scale change in current schooling. For example, when the decolonial compass is activated as a decolonizing resource, students can be empowered to navigate challenging conversations with teachers whose policies may be more aligned with white supremacy than they recognize. For example, in a recent study by Milner IV (2017), 96% of surveyed English teachers cited a need to discuss race in classroom settings, while only 38% of those teachers said they felt prepared to do so. With the compass, teachers and students can locate manifestations of white supremacy both within and outside of themselves to eradicate it. To further bolster the viability of this tool as a decolonizing resource, I recommend that educators reimagine it by changing the Eastern and Southern perspectives from Indo-Caribbean feminism and Coolie feminism, respectively, to match their own personal experiences. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the theories in the compass must be taken in concert with one another and must address intersectionality in some way. While this compass is still in its early stages, I believe it has some potential to support the critical pedagogies of teachers of color in particular. For me, it provided a

tool to hold multiple aspects of my experience at the same time and closely examine how each, both individually and in tandem with others, collectively formed my perspectives.

After a customization of the compass, I then recommend they engage in a process of critical reflection through journaling, even if it is just one entry of a particular moment they found challenging or would like to examine more closely. Using the decolonial compass, they should navigate their way through the instance by naming what occurred in a low-inference manner, deconstructing the implicit and explicit nature of the interaction, and then resisting an alignment with white supremacy. The pathway toward resistance will emerge from the frameworks they choose to engage in the Eastern and Southern positions of their compass but are necessarily tethered to the context provided from the Western critical constructivism. I plan to continue exploring the viability of this tool in professional development and department meetings with colleagues.

Conclusions

I recognize that I am complicit in perpetuating the settler–native–slave dynamic in our modern society, both in my personal and professional life. Although I am a woman of color whose own family legacy emerged from colonialism, on the North American continent, I represent another iteration of settler. As stated by Tuck and Yang (2012),

> In this set of settler colonial relations, colonial subjects who are displaced by external colonialism, as well as racialized and minoritized by internal colonialism, still occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land. Settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts. This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler colonial forces. (p. 7)

Decolonizing a classroom space is not something that occurs in one school year. Teachers navigate the white supremacist ideologies that shape the institutional policies they are forced to abide by. Teachers also navigate "strategies of internal colonialism, such as segregation, divestment, surveillance, and criminalization, [which] are both structural and interpersonal" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). The primary aim of decolonizing is to assert Indigenous sovereignty: "Indigenous intellectuals theorize decolonization as Native futures without a settler state" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 13). Dismantling the settler state is one that requires a rejection of land as commodified property, implying a need to dismantle the capitalism, classism, and racism that uphold that concept. These concepts need one another to endure, and truly decolonizing spaces demands a complete annihilation of the settler state. As a result of this study, I characterize working toward these ends in service of the decolonizing project.

This study allowed me to examine the ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal manifestations of white supremacy. This examination was applied across interactions with colleagues, students, and families with the decolonizing aim of naming, deconstructing, and acting against manifestations of white supremacy. Throughout this study, I was able to identify moments where decolonizing actions took place during an interaction where dehumanization, othering, or perpetuating oppression could have occurred. These moments of transgression were deconstructed and named using the decolonial compass. Additionally, I documented interactions between myself, colleagues, students, and families where I failed to decolonize, rehumanize, or push against oppression. These moments were named and deconstructed using the decolonial compass, with the aim of acting against white supremacist–aligned instatiations in the future.

As a result of this study, I argue that decolonizing schooling is a process that takes place simultaneously within and outside of the self. Although the process of critical journaling was

confined to 10 weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic, this is a habit that endures in my daily pedagogical practice. I am continuously working to root out my internalized racism, white supremacy, sexism, and classism. It is easier to name, deconstruct, and act against moments of conscious bias. However, continuing the process of critical journaling allows me to more closely examine moments of unconscious bias in order to prevent them from occurring in the future. I also aim, in every interaction, to first humanize those I am working with in any context. Questions that emerged as a result of this study and continue to guide my process include: (1) What is happening on the surface of this interaction? What do I see, hear, or know for a fact? (2) What assumptions and inferences am I consciously or unconsciously making? How can I verify or refute these assumptions? (3) In what ways might I be acting in alignment with white supremacy? What can I do to subvert manifestations of white supremacy? (4) What are the responsibilities of a school to its community and a community to its local school? (5) How do schools avoid perpetuating erasure and displacement of Indigenous peoples in order to serve decolonizing ends?

Final Thoughts

Personal Journal Entry Excerpt

> *February 11, 2022*
>
> *Fruit Fridays!*
>
> There was a brief moment of peace today. Every school year, there's one random day in February or March, when Spring pokes her head out briefly. It still looks bleak and wintry outside, but somehow there's always a day where the sun shines a little brighter, or the wind smells different. These are usually the first indications of the season shifting. And, I can always feel a change in my own outlook and mood on this day. Prior to the

pandemic, this was always a day I kept my classroom windows open and shades up to allow the sun to stream in. Today, I was so inspired by the 50 degree, sun-shiny day that I upended my entire plan for my tenth graders. I asked some of my early morning homeroom students what they might want to do later in the day for English class and their responses were “eat snacks” and “relax.”

The students are obviously laboring under some serious pandemic trauma. Students are actively resisting any assignments that require collaboration or peer to peer interaction. Because of the limited pathway of virtual learning, my tenth graders did not have all the camaraderie and confidence building experiences that ninth grade usually provides. I have referred more students for in-school counseling services this school year than I have in the past five years combined. There are more frequent instances of violence between the students. They are generally struggling with motivation and engagement, no matter how exciting and interesting I make the lessons. But today, I decided it would be “fruit Friday.” Instead of reading, analyzing, and discussing the poem we were scheduled to, I printed out a short story by Jason Reynolds called “The Ingredients.” It’s a story about a group of friends who are talking about the different foods they want to eat as they walk home together from the swimming pool on a hot summer day. Prior to my classes starting, I went to the local grocery store and bought assorted fruit and muffins. I teach 10th grade for the last two periods of the day. When the students arrived to English class and began to take their seats, they were lethargic as usual and expressed strong desires to go home. I announced that we would be going on a picnic outside and reading a story together instead of reading our class poem. The students immediately perked up and picked up the supplies I had packed for the trip outside. We walked the five minutes to

the football field behind the school and found a comfortable spot for the class. Some students opted to sit on a blanket that I brought from my classroom. The students dutifully lined up as my co-teacher and I proceeded to sanitize their hands, pass out the snacks, and distribute copies of the short story. I joked with students to leave some snacks for everyone else because it was very expensive and I wasn't rich. Then, once all the students were settled and happily snacking on muffins, mango, strawberries, pineapple, grapes, cantaloupe, and honeydew, they listened as I read the story aloud. It was easily one of the most joyful moments of my entire school year so far.

As I read the story to the students, I looked up periodically to emphasize a passage with a facial or physical expression, or just to pause and give them a moment to process a section I just read. I would also insert my own commentary or solicit audience reactions with prompting questions like, "What do you think about that?" or "Would you do the same?" And each time I looked up, I was able to truly see each student's face clearly. They were not nestled deeply into their hoodies and avoiding eye contact. Their face masks were pulled down and they were seated on benches or sprawled in the grass. They were peaceful, basking in the sunshine, happily snacking, and listening raptly to an interesting story about teenagers enjoying their summer with each other. After our reading was completed, we cleaned up the field and walked back to school together. As we walked back, my co-teacher and I chatted about the experience. I said, "It's so nice to see our kids just getting to be kids" and she agreed. She thanked me for coming up with the idea and planning the period and said it did wonders for her mental well-being for the day. Students walked alongside us and shared how grateful they were for the break, emphasizing how much they enjoyed being outside and just relaxing.

There was some intention to the implementation of Fruit Friday. I wanted to be outside with students and provide an opportunity for authentic relationship building and positive experiences. But I also just wanted to be a regular person with students. This moment illustrates the power and ongoing necessity of decolonizing work. Students and I engaged with one another by centering one another's humanity. I was overwhelmed by a sense of love for the students and we were able to cultivate a space for joy with one another. And my decision to let go of the originally planned lesson and have the students suggest that what we do was integral to the success of the impromptu outing. I could have maintained epistemological control and forced students into compliance as we read the poem and did the assignment I had previously planned. Instead, we created a space for us to exist with one another in a positive, loving, affirming place. This is the learning I am ultimately taking with me. Critical love and letting go of control are necessary parts of the decolonizing process that can ultimately lead to liberatory experiences. In all my endeavors, I plan to leave every person I interact with feeling seen, heard, loved, and affirmed, and I want them to do the same for me.

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Appendix A

Molloy College

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www.molloy.edu

Kathleen Maurer Smith, Ph.D.
Dean, Graduate Academic Affairs
T: 516.323.3801
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E: ksmith@molloy.edu

DATE: January 18, 2021

TO: Nadia Khan-Roopnarine, M.A.
FROM: Molloy College IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1696874-1] Decolonizing my classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic: An autoethnographic study

REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: January 18, 2021

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # *1*

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Molloy College IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations. However, exempt research activities are subject to the same human subject protections and ethical standards as outlined in the Belmont Report.

This acknowledgement expires within three years- unless there is a change to the protocol.

Though this protocol does not require annual IRB review, the IRB requires an annual report of your exempt protocol (Expedited and Exempt Research Protocol Annual Report Form) which is available on the IRB webpage.

If there is a proposed change to the protocol, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy College IRB of any requested changes before implementation. A change in the research may change the project from EXEMPT status and requires prior communication with the IRB.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Patricia Eckardt at 516-323-3711 or peckardt@molloy.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN, FAAN
Chair, Molloy College Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

Meisha Porter, Chancellor

Institutional Review Board and Ethics Review Committee

52 Chambers Street
Room 310
New York, NY 10007
September 8, 2021

Dear Nadia Khan-Roopnarine:

The New York City Department of Education Institutional Review Board and Ethics Review Committee (NYC DOE IRB/ERC) has completed its Ethics Review of this proposed research and cleared your research proposal, "Decolonizing my classroom during the COVID 19 Pandemic: An autoethnographic study." The NYC DOE IRB/ERC has assigned your study the protocol number of 3737. Please make certain that all correspondence regarding this project references this number. The approval is for a period of one year:

Approval Date: September 8, 2021
Expiration Date: September 7, 2022
Review Level: Ethics Review

Approved Study Team Members: Mrs. Nadia Khan-Roopnarine

***** COVID-19 Response:**
If this study requires in-person interactions or interventions with research subjects, note that these procedures cannot take place without explicit written permission for site access from the NYC DOE IRB and principal or site director.

Unless explicitly detailed in this protocol and reviewed and approved by the NYC DOE IRB/ERC, virtual interactions or interventions with research subjects may not take place.

This information is subject to change without notice. ***

Responsibilities of Principal Investigators: Please find below a list of responsibilities of Principal Investigators who have DOE IRB/ERC approval to conduct research in New York City public schools.

• Prior to contacting individual schools or principals, all designated personnel named in this protocol to conduct research in NYC public schools with NYC DOE staff or students, or using NYC public school student data, must complete the NYC DOE security clearance process. This includes but is not limited to being fingerprinted by the NYC DOE. To initiate the security clearance process, all named participants must report to NYC DOE Office of Personnel Investigation (OPI) located at 65 Court Street, room 200, Brooklyn, NY 11201 for registration on the IRB/ERC PETS roster. Each individual must provide a stamped copy of the IRB/ERC or ERC approval or clearance letter, along with government issued photo identification and a valid social security card. Each will be expected to provide personal identifiers such as name, date of birth, social security number, home address, phone number, and working email address. Once registered, the individuals will receive an email from PETSAdminSupport@schools.nyc.gov that will outline all

next steps in the security clearance process. Once they have received and acknowledged the email, they can be fingerprinted by the NYC DOE and complete all additional steps. Please be advised the cost of fingerprinting is currently $135, subject to change without notice.

2020-2021 Revised Procedure: At this time, the PETS team requires for all researchers to submit scanned copies of the following required documents to

PetsAdminSupport@schools.nyc.gov : • Stamped IRB Approval Letter • Government Issued State ID • Signed Social Security Card • Email addresses and telephone numbers for all named study team members. The PETS team enters researchers into PETS system. If researchers do not have prints in the system, once they complete the online forms they can request to schedule a fingerprint appointment through the link included within the nomination email. It can take up to three business days to receive a response from HR Connect with available fingerprinting time slots. If researchers have prints on file with the DOE, and they have been active with our system within the past six years, they simply update the online forms.

- Approval by this office does not guarantee access to any particular school, individual or data. You are responsible for making appropriate contacts and getting the required permissions and consents before initiating the study.
- Approval by this office does not constitute a determination of compliance with New York City Conflict of Interest Board rules, or other applicable City rules, regulations, policies, laws, or statutes. Researchers are responsible for ensuring compliance with all of the aforementioned.
- When requesting permission to conduct research, submit the Principal Informational letter approved with this protocol to the school Principal summarizing your research design and methodology along with this IRB/ERC Approval letter. Each Principal agreeing to participate must sign the Principal Informational letter. A *completed and signed letter for every school included in your research must be attached to your NYC DOE protocol by Amendment.* Principals may also ask you to show them the receipt issued by the NYC Department of Education at the time of your fingerprinting.
- You are responsible for ensuring that the research is conducted in accordance with your research proposal as approved by the DOE IRB/ERC and for the actions of all co investigators and research staff involved with the research.
- You are responsible for informing all participants (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, and students) that their participation is strictly voluntary and that there are no consequences for non-participation or withdrawal at any time during the study.
- You must use only the study materials associated with this protocol and bearing the IRBManager NYC DOE IRB/ERC approval stamp. Stamped documents are available in the Attachments section of this cleared protocol in IRBManager.
- You must provide all research subjects with copies of their signed consent forms; maintain signed consent forms in a secure place for a period of at least three years after study completion; and destroy the consent forms in accordance with the data disposal plan approved by the IRB/ERC.
- In the event that this research will involve non-English speaking subjects, you are required

to translate all study materials to be used with this subject population and submit all translations to the NYC DOE IRB/ERC by protocol Amendment for review and clearance prior to use. All translations must be accompanied by attestations of translation accuracy from a qualified translator, or formal certificates of translation by a transcription service.

- You are required to ensure that CITI Human Subjects Research training remains valid for all research personnel designated in this protocol throughout the duration of the protocol clearance period. You must submit updated or renewed CITI training certificates by Amendment before they expire.
- In the event that contracts, external approvals, or other documents are pending at the time of this approval, they must be submitted for NYC DOE IRB/ERC review by Amendment once obtained.
- If the NYC DOE IRB/ERC required changes to this research in the course of its review, note that you must seek review and approval of these changes from your IRB/ERC of

record. Approval of said changes by your IRB/ERC of record must be documented and this documentation must be submitted to the NYC DOE IRB/ERC by Amendment once obtained.

Mandatory Reporting to the IRB/ERC: The Principal Investigator must report to the DOE IRB/ERC, within 24 hours, any serious problem, adverse effect, or outcome that occurs with frequency or degree of severity greater than that anticipated. In addition, the Principal Investigator must report any event or series of events that prompt the temporary or permanent suspension of a research project involving human subjects or any deviations from the approved protocol. All reports must be submitted using the IRBManager Protocol Violation, Deviation, Adverse Event, and/or Unanticipated Problem Report form.

Amendments/Modifications: All amendments/modification to this protocol require prospective IRB/ERC approval, except those involving the prevention of immediate harm to a subject, which must be reported within 24 hours to your IRB/ERC of record and to the NYC DOE IRB/ERC.

Continuation of your research: It is your responsibility to insure that an application for Continuing Review is submitted 90 days before the expiration date noted above. If you do not receive approval to continue research before the expiration date, all study activities, including, but not limited to, analysis of collected data, must stop until said approval is obtained.

Research findings/Study Closures: The NYC DOE IRB/ERC requires a copy of the report of findings from this research. Interim reports may also be requested for multi-year studies. Further, you are required to formally close this protocol by submitting a Study Closure form once all research procedures, including, but not limited to, all analysis of coded or identifiable data, have concluded.

Data Request: Note that approval of this research does not constitute confirmation of release of data requested in a Data Request form. All data requests are processed and approved by the Data Request Fulfillment Team. Please email rpsgresearch@schools.nyc.gov with any questions you may have regarding this matter.

If you have any questions, please contact IRB@schools.nyc.gov

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,
New York City Department of Education Institutional Review Board

Appendix C
Reflective Memo Timeline

01.18.21	01.19.21	01.20.21	01.21.21	01.22.21
No School- MLK Day				Instructional reflective memo week 1 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 1
01.25.21	**01.26.21**	**01.27.21**	**01.28.21**	**01.29.21**
				Instructional reflective memo week 2 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 2
02.01.21	**02.02.21**	**02.03.21**	**02.04.21**	**02.05.21**
Professional Development Day				Instructional reflective memo week 3 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 3
02.08.21	**02.09.21**	**02.10.21**	**02.11.21**	**02.12.21 - 02.19.21**
			Instructional reflective memo week 4 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 4	Mid-winter recess
02.22.21	**02.23.21**	**02.24.21**	**02.25.21**	**02.26.21**
				Instructional reflective memo week 5 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 5
03.01.21	**03.02.21**	**03.03.21**	**03.04.21**	**03.05.21**
				Instructional reflective memo week 6 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 6
03.08.21	**03.09.21**	**03.10.21**	**03.11.21**	**03.12.21**
				Instructional reflective memo week 7 Dept. Mtg. Reflective Memo 7
03.15.21	**03.16.21**	**03.17.21**	**03.18.21**	**03.19.21**
		Instructional reflective memo week 8 Dept. mtg. Reflective Memo 8	Parent / Teacher Conferences Reflective Memo in PTC's 1	Parent / Teacher Conferences Reflective Memo on PTC's 2

03.22.21	03.23.21	03.24.21	03.25.21	03.26.21
			Instructional reflective memo week 9 Dept. mtg. Reflective Memo 9	Start of spring break
04.05.21	**04.06.21**	**04.07.21**	**04.08.21**	**04.09.21**
				Instructional reflective memo week 10 Dept. mtg. Reflective Memo 10

Appendix D

Example of the color-coding process used to identify representative excerpts during Tesch's 8-steps process

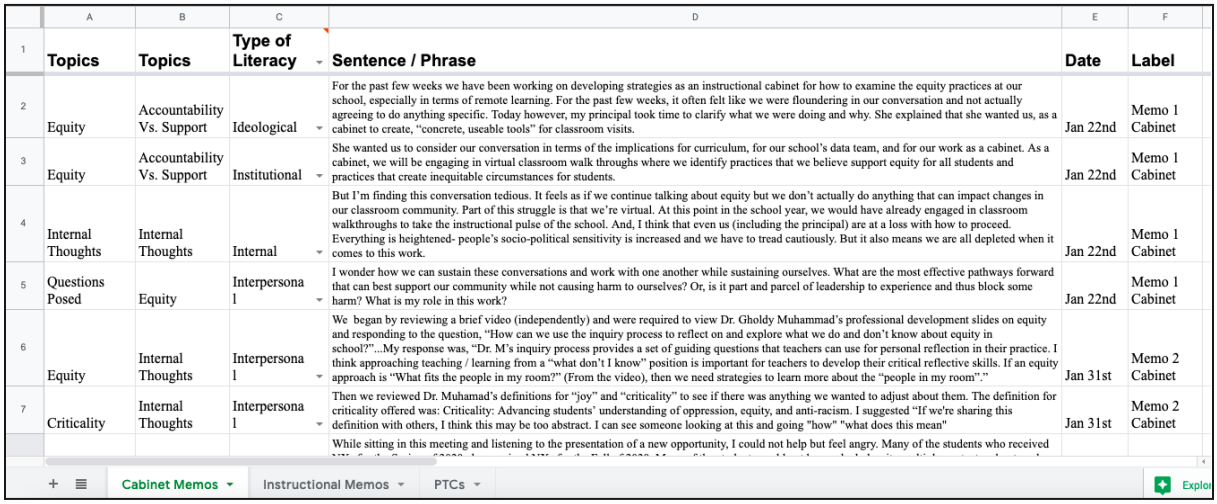
Department Cabinet Meeting Reflective Memo 1
7:55pm
Friday January 22nd, 2021
Home

Today in our department meeting we talked about equity. As we have been for weeks. It often feels like we do a lot of talking as a cabinet and not enough acting. For the past few weeks we have been working on developing strategies as an instructional cabinet for how to examine the equity practices at our school, especially in terms of remote learning. For the past few weeks, it often felt like we were floundering in our conversation and not actually agreeing to do anything specific. Today however, my principal took time to clarify what we were doing and why. She explained that she wanted us, as a cabinet to create, "concrete, usable tools" for classroom visits. She wanted us to consider our conversation in terms of the implications for curriculum, for our school's data team, and for our work as a cabinet. As a cabinet, we will be engaging in virtual classroom walk-throughs where we identify practices that we believe support equity for all students and practices that create inequitable circumstances for students.

Prior to today's conversation, we had engaged in conversations around our roles as classroom teachers and as leaders of the school in the equity conversation. But I'm finding this conversation tedious. It feels as if we continue talking about equity but we don't actually do anything that can impact changes in our classroom community. Part of this struggle is that we're virtual. At this point in the school year, we would have already engaged in classroom walkthroughs to take the instructional pulse of the school. And, I think that even us (including the principal) are at a loss with how to proceed. Everything is heightened- people's socio-political sensitivity is increased and we have to tread cautiously. But it also means we are all depleted when it comes to this work. As a cabinet, I wonder how we can sustain these conversations and work with one another while sustaining ourselves. What are the most effective pathways forward that can best support our community while not causing harm to ourselves? Or, is it part and parcel of leadership to experience and thus block some harm? What is my role in this work?

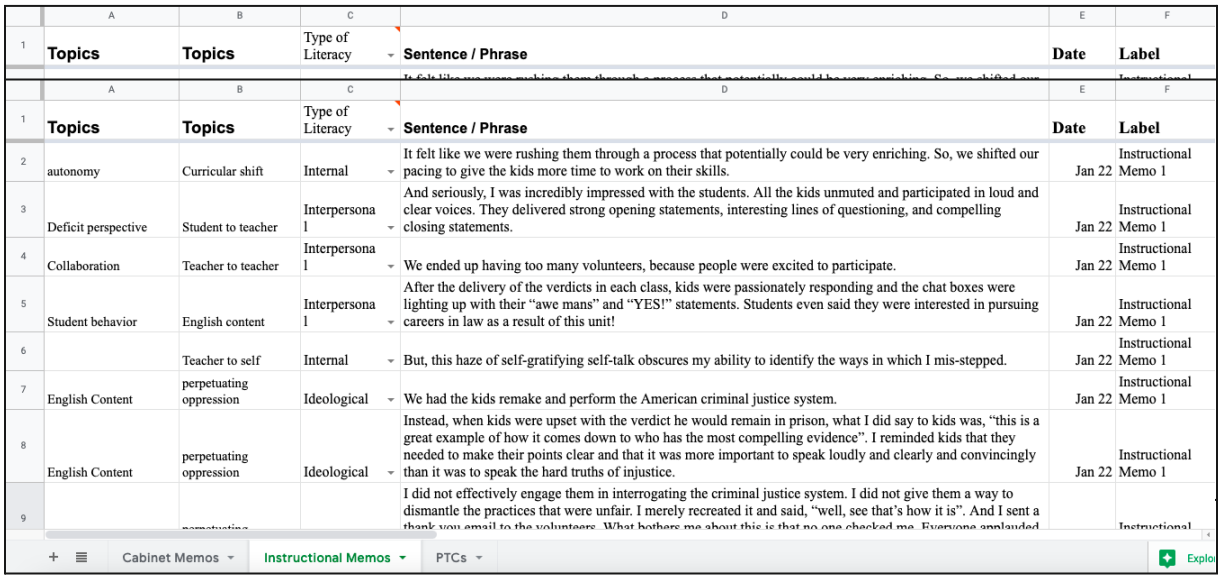
Appendix E
Example Spreadsheet from data collection and analysis

Codes applied to excerpts from cabinet and instructional memos



	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	**Topics**	**Topics**	**Type of Literacy**	**Sentence / Phrase**	**Date**	**Label**
2	Equity	Accountability Vs. Support	Ideological	For the past few weeks we have been working on developing strategies as an instructional cabinet for how to examine the equity practices at our school, especially in terms of remote learning. For the past few weeks, it often felt like we were floundering in our conversation and not actually agreeing to do anything specific. Today however, my principal took time to clarify what we were doing and why. She explained that she wanted us, as a cabinet to create, "concrete, useable tools" for classroom visits.	Jan 22nd	Memo 1 Cabinet
3	Equity	Accountability Vs. Support	Institutional	She wanted us to consider our conversation in terms of the implications for curriculum, for our school's data team, and for our work as a cabinet. As a cabinet, we will be engaging in virtual classroom walk throughs where we identify practices that we believe support equity for all students and practices that create inequitable circumstances for students.	Jan 22nd	Memo 1 Cabinet
4	Internal Thoughts	Internal Thoughts	Internal	But I'm finding this conversation tedious. It feels as if we continue talking about equity but we don't actually do anything that can impact changes in our classroom community. Part of this struggle is that we're virtual. At this point in the school year, we would have already engaged in classroom walkthroughs to take the instructional pulse of the school. And, I think that even us (including the principal) are at a loss with how to proceed. Everything is heightened- people's socio-political sensitivity is increased and we have to tread cautiously. But it also means we are all depleted when it comes to this work.	Jan 22nd	Memo 1 Cabinet
5	Questions Posed	Equity	Interpersonal	I wonder how we can sustain these conversations and work with one another while sustaining ourselves. What are the most effective pathways forward that can best support our community while not causing harm to ourselves? Or, is it part and parcel of leadership to experience and thus block some harm? What is my role in this work?	Jan 22nd	Memo 1 Cabinet
6	Equity	Internal Thoughts	Interpersonal	We began by reviewing a brief video (independently) and were required to view Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's professional development slides on equity and responding to the question, "How can we use the inquiry process to reflect on and explore what we do and don't know about equity in school?"...My response was, "Dr. M's inquiry process provides a set of guiding questions that teachers can use for personal reflection in their practice. I think approaching teaching / learning from a "what don't I know" position is important for teachers to develop their critical reflective skills. If an equity approach is "What fits the people in my room?" (From the video), then we need strategies to learn more about the "people in my room"."	Jan 31st	Memo 2 Cabinet
7	Criticality	Internal Thoughts	Interpersonal	Then we reviewed Dr. Muhamad's definitions for "joy" and "criticality" to see if there was anything we wanted to adjust about them. The definition for criticality offered was: Criticality: Advancing students' understanding of oppression, equity, and anti-racism. I suggested "If we're sharing this definition with others, I think this may be too abstract. I can see someone looking at this and going "how" "what does this mean"	Jan 31st	Memo 2 Cabinet
				While sitting in this meeting and listening to the presentation of a new opportunity, I could not help but feel angry. Many of the students who received		

Cabinet Memos | Instructional Memos | PTCs



	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	**Topics**	**Topics**	Type of Literacy	**Sentence / Phrase**	**Date**	**Label**
2	autonomy	Curricular shift	Internal	It felt like we were rushing them through a process that potentially could be very enriching. So, we shifted our pacing to give the kids more time to work on their skills.	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
3	Deficit perspective	Student to teacher	Interpersonal	And seriously, I was incredibly impressed with the students. All the kids unmuted and participated in loud and clear voices. They delivered strong opening statements, interesting lines of questioning, and compelling closing statements.	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
4	Collaboration	Teacher to teacher	Interpersonal	We ended up having too many volunteers, because people were excited to participate.	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
5	Student behavior	English content	Interpersonal	After the delivery of the verdicts in each class, kids were passionately responding and the chat boxes were lighting up with their "awe mans" and "YES!" statements. Students even said they were interested in pursuing careers in law as a result of this unit!	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
6		Teacher to self	Internal	But, this haze of self-gratifying self-talk obscures my ability to identify the ways in which I mis-stepped.	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
7	English Content	perpetuating oppression	Ideological	We had the kids remake and perform the American criminal justice system.	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
8	English Content	perpetuating oppression	Ideological	Instead, when kids were upset with the verdict he would remain in prison, what I did say to kids was, "this is a great example of how it comes down to who has the most compelling evidence". I reminded kids that they needed to make their points clear and that it was more important to speak loudly and clearly and convincingly than it was to speak the hard truths of injustice.	Jan 22	Instructional Memo 1
9				I did not effectively engage them in interrogating the criminal justice system. I did not give them a way to dismantle the practices that were unfair. I merely recreated it and said, "well, see that's how it is". And I sent a thank you email to the volunteers. What bothers me about this is that no one checked me. Everyone applauded		Instructional

Cabinet Memos | Instructional Memos | PTCs