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COUNTER-NARRATIVES

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THEME: RACISM IN EDUCATION

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Essays & Position Papers

I Am Afraid of White People: Notes from the Margins

SHYAM PATEL (HE/HIM)

White privilege and white supremacy seep into the conclaves of everywhere. According to Ross (2016), “[i]t has evolved into a totalizing system — a toxic sea in which we all swim” (p. 3). Therefore, it also pollutes the classroom context and materializes in all its facets. Like a dagger, then, schooling and society can wound — traces of blood trailing here and there. It can be a dangerous place — a shotgun fired in the barrel of a throat — to silence those who defy and resist the dominant culture. Here, I reflect on my own experiences — ones that remain with me like the residue of ancestral bloodshed — with/in the realm of “formal” education in relation to race and racism, as I migrate between the hybrid and the margins as a Brown body.

In elementary, I learned to be afraid before I learned to read and write. For instance, the first-grade teacher would strike us with a ruler to “manage” behaviour. This was in Montréal in the early 1990s. What pain and trauma did my teacher, as a Black woman, experience to want to do the same to me? This use of abusive punishment maintained the power of dominant parties (hooks, 2000), which preceded learning. In that manner, schooling seemed to be a place of contrition, where the affixation of abuse and violence had been attached to the confounds of the classroom. I slowly internalized this notion of “knowing” my place in fear of punishment. Soon, the soft palette of my name, Shyam — one of the many names of the Hindu God, Krishna — became butchered to appease the white tongue — one syllable broken into two. To add to this sacrilege, I decided to have a “home” name and a “school” name. In other words, I severed my own tongue before anyone else could slaughter it first. Perhaps I had internalized the racial microaggression (Kohli & Solóranzo, 2012). Said differently, I started to internalize negative messages about my own culture and identity (Kohli, 2008). I refused to eat Indian food at school. I wanted to have a “Canadian” lunch because I lived in fear of the “smells like curry” racial epithet that could have been placed on me. These transgressions, as they accumulated, rendered me as invisible.

Leaving the elementary years wounded, I embarked towards new beginnings in high school. The possibilities, however, came in the form of being punctured by hateful words — ones that were meant to belittle and violate me — like ‘fag’ or queer (pejoratively used), shit skin, and terrorist. I could not dissect the intent of these remarks, but the impact felt like suffocating lungs, with the air so close yet just out of reach. According to Ahmed (2004), “[s]uch words and signs tend to stick” (p. 59). It struck more — almost like a blow (remnants of the first grade still trialing [after] me) — when the words were from a teacher. I recall a white teacher pointing out that all the Brown students always sat together, although she never mentioned the fact that she sat (perhaps subconsciously) with all the white students. During an economics project, that same teacher put most of the students of colour in low-income households (*was it still subconscious?*) while the white students were given affluent and wealthy narratives. Racism, even in covert forms like this, can foster disempowerment

(Kohli, 2008); it “can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche” (Hardy, 2013, p. 25). In her own way, then, the teacher had fired a bullet to remind me to remain afraid of white people.

The curriculum, as well, upheld white privilege and white supremacy, which according to Carr (2016), has permeated the educational setting. For example, I did not learn about the Residential School System, the Komagata Maru incident, and the enslavement of Black peoples in so-called Canada, among many other instances of abuse and violence towards oppressed communities. Instead, I learned about colonialism as an event — a [positive] thing of the past — even though it has been, in fact, a social formation (Wolfe, 2006). These curricular experiences have not been unique to me. James (2007) has drawn attention to a group of high school students mentioning the lack of curriculum about Black and/or Indigenous and/or People of Colour. This happened to be a pervasive reality for most of the people of colour in my life. In the tenth grade, for example, we read *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee without contextualizing racism in the so-called Canadian context or without critiquing the role of whiteness in (re)perpetuating racism. To make matters worse, the troubling notion of multiculturalism plagued the curriculum, which had often been superficial (Gérin-Lajoie, 2008) and did not address structural inequalities (James, 1995). Rather, multicultural education often has been “defined by the celebration of difference on special occasions or dates, which is typically accomplished as an add-on to the regular curriculum” (Kirova, 2008, p. 107). Gérin-Lajoie (2012) reiterates this by explaining that white teachers, in particular, have integrated it as the “sharing of each other’s culture” (p. 215). I had participated in multicultural events, but it was always fetishized or tokenized by bringing samosas, dressing up in Indian clothes, and sharing Bollywood music. Yet, outside of those events, my culture and identity were never to be seen. As a result, hooks (2003) explains how children of colour internalize/d this notion of inferiority when *counter-narratives* are not presented. As such, I have had to not only “enter” the curriculum, but rather, “work with and against the grain of a moribund curriculum” (Morawski & Palulis, 2009, p. 12).

Travelling to university did not change these experiences and stories. Henry and Tator (2009) explain, “the university continues to be a place where various overt and covert forms of racism and other forms of oppression are practised” (p. 8). In Teacher Education, for example, a group of students of colour decided to sit together in the *Schooling & Society* course to challenge the lack of representation among faculty and the racial microaggressions perpetuated by white teacher candidates and white professors. One peer referred to us as being intimidating. A few others did not understand why all the people of colour were sitting together; it made them feel uncomfortable while they sat in mostly white clusters. They did not have that same sense of discomfort, however, when we had been called ‘coloured’ people and creatures by two of our peers. They did not show the same conviction when white peers compared their own experiences of being grounded or being scolded to the Residential School System. Rather, they were too invested in restoring the white racial equilibrium, which DiAngelo (2011) explains is a form of white fragility, where racial stress leads white people to display a range of defensive moves. Reflecting on that experience now, it seems that the denial of racism — both covert and overt — is so institutionalized with/in the university that it reminds me of the power and privilege white people hold regardless of their position. In its own way, it is deafening, but these experiences have helped me probe what it means to be a person of colour.

Yet, the housing and trafficking of racism with/in education did not end there. In a graduate school course, I had been told to “soften” my language for an assignment, where I called out the faculty for being *inherently* racist and for referring to racism as being pervasive. In another course, I was critiqued for trying to be too “scholarly” in my writing. Like hooks (1994), then, “the classroom became a place I hated, yet a place where I struggled to claim and maintain the right to be an independent thinker. The university and the classroom began to feel more like a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility” (p. 4). Graduate studies, in the same way, confined and constricted me. I had to write in a certain way. I had to defend the use of terms like *refusing* and *resisting* the university. In other words, it reverberated the following: “[w]hite supremacy is not only repressive or oppressive but also productive” (Bery, 2014, p. 336). The operationalization of whiteness seemed (and seems) to consume graduate studies, as well. In that manner, it functions like a malicious current in the river. It drowns out and leaves bodies afloat. But, despite this, graduate studies did not plunge me to the bottom of the ocean. My breath — in fact, every part of it — surfaced beyond all measure.

The aforementioned does not occur only with/in schooling. The drowning at the hands of whiteness emerge/d everywhere. In 2020, for example, I remember waiting at the bus stop near my family’s apartment in Montréal. As I had been waiting, a car with four white teenagers stopped in front of me, and one of them aimed a gun at me. The gun had been fake and so was the bullet that grazed my shoulder, but what if it had been real? This was one of the few times where I was unable to process what had occurred. I could not process beyond numbness. Is that how death occurred? Do we go numb before we die? In dreams, I had recounted this death over and over in different ways. Once, for example, I had dreamt that the students of colour I studied with during Teacher Education had been burned alive by our white counterparts. I, however, had been able to escape the fire, but I could not flee with the others. They had been left behind. Even in dreams, then, I have been told how the Brown flesh will be pillaged or how it will barely make it out alive. I wonder how many more dreams I will have before the flames consume me. Until then, I will forever be haunted by such memories. In the words of Roy (1997), “[i]t is curious how sometimes the memory of death lives on for so much longer than the memory of the life that it purloined” (p. 17).

Even now, I am afraid of white people. I live in fear of what white people can do to me just for merely breathing and existing. As a result, I enter the classroom always wary and worried about what will happen to me. I almost expect to be distilled and truncated towards death. However, I do not let the knife sever me entirely. I continue to live. Holding on, I trace the words of Palulis (2009), as she writes the following: “I have been trying to find a heartbeat in Academia—a pulse in the impasse” (p. 10). In the live/d curriculum (Aoki, 1993), I find that pulse — the rhythmic thumping of survival. So, even though academia has hurt me (Aoki, 1983), I practice writing as a form of healing to disrupt hegemonic narratives. I protest and make incisions — [scribbled] notes from the margins — in a history that tries to erase me. I do not let schooling and society suffocate me. So, yes, I am afraid of white people even now, but, in the words of Maya Angelou, “I can be changed by what happens to me but I refuse to be reduced by it.” And, most of all, I refuse to be erased.

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She Said My Name Right

AISHA MAULA BUX (SHE/HER)

My name is Aisha. It's a Muslim name that means *alive* and *she who lives*, but growing up I used to want a white name. Something pretty and obviously feminine. Something easy to spell and could be found on tacky souvenirs. Something that just rolled off the tongue like common knowledge. Something like Ashley.

When I was in kindergarten, my friends asked me if I had an “English” name. At the age of five, I could barely write my own name, let alone any other name, so I was confused but intrigued as to what they meant. I was always shocked when my astute five-year-old friends could spell out what were considered to be difficult names like Vanessa and Katherine on our group sheet but, the marker was always handed to me so I could write mine out because my name was “just too hard” for them. My curiosity got the best of me and after ruminating over this lingering question, I decided to ask my teacher to elaborate. Looking back, her response was less than comforting as she justified my peers’ question by stating that my name was unusual. Unusual is what you would call a child who likes to fling their snot across the room, not a child wanting their name and their presence to be validated. Using the word “unusual,” was a way for my teacher to manipulate my confusion so that she and my peers would be comfortable with their actions. Her words left me feeling like the unreasonable one, the one who was at fault, the pariah. The word “unusual” meant advocacy to her. It meant alienation to me. I decided to call myself Ashley for a week and suddenly everyone felt comfortable calling upon me. Suddenly I wasn’t labeled as “unusual” simply because of my name. My mom even entertained the idea since she saw how happy it made me. That week, it felt like I was wearing a mask that didn’t fit perfectly, but everyone, even me, insisted it worked. Acting in a role that didn’t really belong to me, like I was borrowing this persona on stolen time. But for once, I was popular because people could say my new name; people would talk to me without hesitating, pick me by calling out my name, and even invite me to join them in group field games. The biggest flaw with this facade was that it was exhausting to keep up. The lingering question of who Ashley to Aisha was, and vice versa, kept me up. I kept the name for only one week. It just wasn’t me.

From grades one to six, there was a girl named Alicia in my class. While Alicia was a lovely girl, I hated how similar our names were and, by the luck of the draw, she was always in my class. As we progressed through the grades, I had become conditioned to responding to anything that sounded like my name. It was a learned response after having teachers, staring me down, waiting for an answer from me despite calling her name, not mine. My ears were constantly on alert, perking up whenever a variant of my name was called in class because that at least meant that somebody was paying attention to me. I was always ready to jump in, in case the teacher meant to call on me instead of Alicia. For once, I didn’t have to fight to be noticed or worry that I had been forgotten. During the occasional year when Alicia and I didn’t share a classroom, it would be days before the teacher would interact with me. Often, they didn’t use my name or call upon me, and, as time progressed, my name seemed to feel too foreign on their lips; in their shame I was never the first to be picked. I told myself I had to work harder and smarter to be the best, to prove that I belonged

and was worth listening to, worth being picked. Brilliance in my mind meant belonging. So, I poured myself into my academics, hoping to earn my place, just as my parents had when they immigrated. I'd learn the math rules ahead of time and even read the chapters we would read in class the night before, so I'd be prepared to have something to say if I was fortunate enough to get picked. If it wasn't my lucky day, I could at least be ahead of the curve and volunteer myself to be a helper. However, there were always enough hands being raised and plenty of willing helpers. Striving to be acknowledged and yet constantly being stifled by the people who determine your worth, people who are willing to ignore you because they feel uncomfortable calling your name, is toxic. Elementary school me, who would shoot her hand up at every chance, practically begging to be picked, didn't know better. For years I thought I was a nobody in the classroom, just a name on the attendance sheet, nothing more, but oftentimes, not even that.

As the only multiracial girl in my grade, with no ethnic clique to cling to, being cast aside by my teacher felt like being sentenced to exile. How could my friends see me as I truly was if my teachers didn't take the time to? As I grew older, it came to my attention that I wasn't Black, Brown or Chinese enough to truly fit in with my peers who found a sense of camaraderie in their groups. I craved to be included, to be seen by these minority groups who, in my eyes, should accept me. Groups who should want to claim me as one of their own. On paper, we faced nearly identical struggles and yet, I struggled harder because I bore them alone. I was the odd one out because I couldn't speak the languages that they would whisper to each other on the playground. Nobody wanted to taste my stinky spiced lunches when thermoses were passed around, no matter how many times I insisted they would like it. What I had to offer in the places where I was different wasn't enough. I was just a little too diverse or a little not enough. If I didn't truly belong in any friendship circle and I didn't belong in the classroom, where did I fit in? As a result, being ignored was the ultimate fear. Forsaking my identity to combat being left on the sidelines was a risk I was always willing to make, regardless of the harm and confusion that would inevitably catch up to me.

The panic that crosses a teacher's face when they stumble upon my name on the attendance sheet on the first day of school is a sight I'll never forget. If you've never been privy to this experience, let me walk you through it. First, their face scrunches as they do a casual glance over your name. Then, they bite their lip as they mentally try to phonetically piece sounds together that "sound right". My favourite part is when they say, "oh I'm going to butcher this," and then proceed to slaughter my name with the most cacophonous pronunciation that, mind you, sounds nothing like how it's supposed to. And then, there's the pregnant pause where it's expected that you laugh at their feeble attempts and correct them with a smile plastered on your face. Sometimes, you might offer a funny joke or mnemonic device to help guide their fumbling tongue, but a name isn't something that should be reduced to a joke. Occasionally a teacher will reassure themselves by saying "oh I was close" or "give me a bit of time to get used to it." Nobody's first interaction with anyone, especially their educator, should be anything like this, yet me and many of my peers have frequently been victims of this phenomenon. These are words that still echo in my head when I step into a new classroom and haunt me when I introduce myself to somebody new. While you might condone their efforts and perceive this action as trying, a step in the right direction, you haven't had your name butchered enough and I am equally happy for and jealous of you.

As I grew older, I'd memorize where my name would be in the attendance sheet so that I could interrupt the teacher before they could utter my name. I had become too tired of being framed as the "Other," too jaded to entertain their ignorance, too tired of pretending to be anything but who I was. For a while, I used to hold teachers accountable for being the ones to educate the class on diversity; however, I now realize that the onus is on the student to learn as well. It's ironic how the students, teachers and professors who claimed that they were *allies* and "meant no harm" were the ones who consistently altered your name to suit a Western vocabulary. No amount of correction could cure the ignorance and microaggressions that persisted over the terms and semesters. Gradually, I ignored these harmful signs and let the frustration fester and consume me. What was the point of speaking out if these individuals, who were here to support me, always fell flat? These feelings only amplified in my undergraduate years, where school was less personal. In a sea of a thousand names and faces, I always had to reintroduce myself to my professors and make a joke about my name before we could discuss what I initially came to them for. Unfortunately, jokes can be the most harmful coping tool of all. The only professor of colour I had prior to attending my Bachelors of Education program was nicknamed the N-word due to its "similarity" to his given name. I don't know if he's blissfully unaware or chooses to overlook this derogatory jab, but to this day I don't know how to act or respond to this. A political science professor, who preaches justice and equality, being reduced to a slur. How do I unpack this moment knowing that these experiences could be part of my future as an educator knowing the potential of my education and abilities could easily be overshadowed by the origin and ethnicity of my name? I untrained myself to stop making jokes about my name that semester.

This cloud of negativity followed me to Teacher Education, until I reached my second class on the first day in my cohort. In the midst of introductions, my teacher said my name correctly. My Muslim name rolled off her tongue effortlessly, and all that pent-up anger and anxiety dissipated. She then proceeded to state to all of my peers that it was important to learn the names of our students because not only is it respectful, but we also need to make our spaces feel inclusive and our Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOCs) peers feel seen. While I was listening to this empowering speech, all that was racing through my mind was "she said my name right" over and over again. After all this time, my rage felt justified but now became a burden that I no longer wanted to carry. Soon after, my colleagues and friends learned to say my name and would apologize and correct themselves when they got it wrong. Despite professors, who mind you are well established teachers, insisting that my name was something else, I now had friends who would step in and step up for me, to call them out on their ignorance. I had allies. And yes, in the grand scheme of things, being able to say my name is not revolutionary nor is it the cure all for systemic racism in education, but it means something to me. It's a start. It makes me know what it feels like to have people who will rally and fight the fight I had given up on a long time ago.

Sometimes I wonder what difference it would have made if I were called Ashley. Who would that girl be? Would she be more confident than me? Would she have felt more seen? Would she have a better sense of self? But as my mind begins to indulge in these fantasies, I realize that I'm just undoing all the healing I've accomplished. I'm learning to be comfortable in my own skin. Learning to be proud of who I am and what I have accomplished without needing to don a mask to feel like I belong. Learning to love my name. My name is Aisha, not Alicia, not Elisha, not Alyssa, nor all the other variants uncultured mouths can justify. It's not Ashley, no matter how many times I wished it was when I was younger. My name is Aisha. It's an Arabic word that means *alive* or *she who lives*.

It's five letters, and frankly not hard to say. My name is Aisha.

Get it fucking right.

A Case against the Racialized Reactions

AARON SARDINHA DRAKE (HE/HIM)

When I was ten years old, I shyly approached my Trinidadian Granny and Aunt and sat down to ask them a question. “Are we Black?” They looked at me puzzled as if I had asked them what year we were in. Such obvious realities to them seemed so perplexingly difficult to me. “Of course we are Black, wise up child” my Granny Margaret replied in her sing-song Trini-Bajun accent. She was a wonderful, educated woman who I looked up to immensely. I always loved it when she told me that, ‘wise up!’ like everything could be solved by designating just a few more minutes thinking about it sensibly. I only spent summer days here and there with my Trinidadian family and lived full time with my Nana and Papa in Peterborough. Both of whom had parents from England and Newfoundland. At school, this troubled me as I would be berated for my skin and curly hair and would go home to grandparents who seemed so distant to the racisms I was facing in the playground. I can recall asking my Nana and Papa about my mixed existence, to which they replied, “You’re mulatto.” Later, I would recite this to the kids at school who would ask me similar questions I asked my family. “Are you Black?” “What’s your background?” “Where are you from?” They would ask. “I’m mulatto!”

Introduction

My sense is that, at times, my existence is paradoxical. As a mixed racialized man, I speak for myself and not the existence of those who may accompany me on this, confusing journey of privilege and discrimination. I am torn between honouring and identifying the parts of myself that arbitrarily fasten me to the gaze of otherness. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Franz Fanon (1986) speaks of being seen by others, particularly as a Black man with all the historicity of race. Awad Ibrahim (2017), remarks on the process on becoming Black with all the fixities of racializations. Both of these scholars are acutely aware that when one is labeled ‘Black’, it comes with the cost of racisms. This labelling process, for Ibrahim (2017) occurs upon entry into colonized land of North America, and for Fanon (1986) it occurs at birth. Both, in ways, are inescapable. For many Black men and women in these same lands, it is deadly.

Cathryn van Kessel, in her podcast interview with Nicholas Ng-A-Fook reminds us, that if we are not standing up against the evil banalities of everyday life, we fall privy to believing that atrocities are behind us, and not possible in today's context. I will be drawing upon van Kessel's (2019) Terror Management Theory (TMT) to work through my understanding of her four defensive reactions. I will be framing these four defensive reactions in light of my autobiographical story, as well as the protests taking place around the world today in response to the murder of George Floyd and many other innocent Black men and women.

Literature Review

Terror Management Theory

TMT, a relatively new addition to educational research (van Kessel, 2019), suggests that individuals invest in cultural beliefs as a means to mitigate their anxiety regarding their own mortality. van Kessel (2019) notes that one's cultural beliefs are tied so closely to one's sense of self and is used as a means to reduce anxiety at the fear of death. Thus, when an individual's cultural beliefs or worldviews are challenged, one comes closer to their understanding of mortality, their anxiety is heightened, and their sense of self is compromised. van Kessel (2019) draws on empirical research in the field of TMT to support her arguments in this text. Primarily, she pulls forth the *mortality salience hypothesis* and the *death-thought accessibility hypothesis*. The first hypothesis reports that individuals will judge an individual more harshly when asked to consider their own death. Such evidence is supported by a case study wherein a control group of judges had to provide a sentence to a crime. van Kessel (2019) states "The results supported this prediction. Judges in the [Mortality-Salience] condition suggested an average bond of \$455, whereas the control judges suggested an average bond of only \$50" (p. 3). The second of these hypotheses had a group of individuals who had had their sense of Canadian culture belittled, fill in a set of word fragments (eg.: 'S K _ L L'). These individuals had more readily filled in the set of word fragments more closely linked to death, than a group of individuals who had *not* had their Canadian culture belittled. Van Kessel (2019) notes "If cultural worldviews function to buffer individuals from thoughts of death, then threatening or weakening these psychological structures should increase the accessibility of death-thoughts". As a result of world views being challenged Van Kessel (2019) states that individuals use four main defensive reactions to protect their own beliefs. These are Assimilation (the process by which a person's views are made palatable in the context of one's own beliefs), Derogation (The process by which a person belittles another for different world views), Annihilation (the killing or injuring of someone with different beliefs), and Accommodation (the modification of one's own world view to incorporate only some of the other's world view). These are the defensive reactions I will discuss in relation to anti-racisms and Blackness in our current lived contexts.

Anti-Racisms and Blackness

To better understand how I use the terminology surrounding Blackness and anti-racism, I draw on Awad Ibrahim's (2017) article *Don't Call Me Black! Rhizomatic Analysis of Blackness, Immigration, and the Politics of Race Without Guarantees*. In response to Zahida Sherman Ewoodzie (2014), Awad Ibrahim (2017) creates a critical pedagogy within which he analyzes the North American racialization process. In this piece, Ibrahim refers to the process by which racialization is manifested for immigrants of colour. Ibrahim notes that people who would consider themselves by membership of their country, *become* Black as they enter into Canada and the United States. Ibrahim (2017) reviews three articles that illustrate process of racialization onto the Black body, and how it is different in Canada and in the United States. By doing this, Ibrahim (2017) highlights the multiplicity of ways Blackness is constructed, perceived, and heterogeneous. Ibrahim concludes that it is important for us as educators to arm our students with the knowledge to analyze and deconstruct the racializing structure that identifies our Blackness on our behalf. Ibrahim argues that we as people of colour ought to take the necessary precautions in this process as we unravel and untangle the threads that unify our 'oneness' or Blackness. Ibrahim (2017) urges us to be aware that in doing so we enter into the dangerous territory

of identity politics where one 'Blackness' is pitted against another 'Blackness'. Ibrahim (2017) notes on this matter “process of Americanization is synonymous with racialization: to be become American means to become Black American [...] once in North America, these adjectives become secondary to their Blackness. They retranslate themselves, hence becoming Black” (p. 215). Ibrahim (2017) finally calls for a pedagogy that empowers and allies Black students before recreating a decolonized and less violent category for Blackness.

The Defensive Reactions

Assimilation

Assimilation describes the process of a person holding alternative, and often times, countering worldviews to one's own attempting to convert the latter into the former's belief system (van Kessel, 2020). Former Brietbart employee, and current HuffPost employee Michelle Fields, pries fellow journalist Juan Williams in pleading that Black Lives Matter is simply a politically correct statement that should truly be 'All Lives Matter' ([foxnews, October 15, 2015](#)). "Yes there are lots of Blacks who are suffering here in America. There are also lots of Asians, Caucasians, and Latinos who are suffering..." (foxnews, 2015, p.1). Such an effort to call for 'all lives matter' is a clear declaration of assimilation. It dilutes the potency and messaging implicit in the Black Lives Matter movement, and ultimately prevents the voices of the 'opposing' perspectives to be challenged. Carl James (2019) objects against our current model of schooling due to its inherent assimilative practices. James (2019) remarks that the inclusion of the Black body into the white institution does not acknowledge the lived experience of Black youth. Essentially, such a structure will ultimately leave Black youth struggling in ways that white youth will never struggle. James (2019) states “The deviance and out-of-placeness imposed by anti-Blackness upon Black students, and the draconian punishment and exclusion that result, are demonstrated in their radical overrepresentation in suspensions and expulsions” (p. 318). As I think back to my first year living in Peterborough, Ontario. I remember finding myself in the principal's office, in trouble for what felt like the colour of my skin. Sitting beside a white school mate after he had thrown racial slurs at me, I looked at my skin and saw myself for what I would always be: racialized. I would be suspended for fighting back against this, for pushing, for yelling insults back, and my skin would thereafter be a source of punishment. The school was not able to understand what I was experiencing. The assimilation was failing me for derogation I could not control.

Derogation

By degrading, belittling, or insulting the opposing perspective, it becomes easier to maintain one's own worldview, and ultimately reduces the anxiety that van Kessel (2019) notes is held at bay by one's beliefs. Fox News anchor, Tucker Carlson on June 9th, 2020 stated on air, "This was without precedent in the modern era. A small group of highly aggressive emotionally charged activists took over our culture" ([Foxnews, June 9th, 2020](#)). Regard the language here "small group..., aggressive..., emotionally charged..., *our* culture." What Carlson is doing here is positioning the Black community as separate from his own, and in his position as a *patriotic* American sitting in front of red, white and blue and a backdrop of the pentagon, the views of *those protestors* couldn't possibly represent *our* beliefs. In one fell swoop, Carlson degrades the Black lives matter

movement, creates a binary between right and wrong, and separates the demands of justice from the beliefs of the *greater* United States. The rest of the 'news' show (if one can call it news) espouses condescension and undermining that his viewers will absorb and churn into apathy.

Annihilation

Annihilation is tragically the spark that ignited the flame with respect to the Black Lives Matter movement. In Canada, the list of names grows larger: Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Jason Collins, D'Andre Campbell, Orlando Brown, Andrew Loku, Jermaine Carby, Kwasi Skene-Peters, Marc Ekamba-Boekwa, Sammy Yatim, Ian Pryce, Alain Magloire, Nicholas Thorne-Belance, Phuong Na (Tony) Du, René Gallant, Abdurahman Ibrahim Hassan, Bony Jean-Pierre, Abdirahman Abdi, Pierre Coriolan, Brydon Whitstone, Josephine Pelletier, Nicholas Gibbs, Jaskamal Singh Lail, Chad Williams, Greg Ritchie, Machuar Madut, Sean Thompson, Randy Cochrane, Eishia Husdon (CPEP, 2020), are an unforgettable group of people who have lost their lives to police annihilation. It isn't hard to see the connections between these names and the actions that have been pushing this movement towards justice. Here van Kessel (2020) reminds us:

If groups of people with opposing beliefs can be injured or killed, the implication is that their beliefs are truly inferior to our own. Further to this point, by eliminating large numbers of people with a different version of reality, the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat. (2019, p. 6)

In June of 2020, I attended the march for Abdirahman Abdi, a Black man who had been murdered by police outside of a Bridgehead coffee shop in Ottawa. Lining up at the Police Headquarters we walked towards city hall shouting 'Justice for Abdi!' and 'No justice, no peace, defund the police!' It's hard to describe the feeling of that moment. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what felt like hundreds gathered, all in masks, to mourn, and to demand that his life not be forgotten. Almost eight months after this, Abdi's murderer Daniel Montsion was found not-guilty of manslaughter and was acquitted of all charges (CBC, October 20, 2020) In November of 2020 a peaceful demonstration was held on the corner of Nicholas Street and Laurier in Ottawa (CBC, November 21, 2020). I had the pleasure of watching Indigenous elders and community members, Justice for Abdirahman, and Black Lives Matter supporters singing, dancing, lighting sage, drumming, and demonstrating solidarity for the lives lost at the hands of racial injustice. As I read that last clause of the above van Kessel (2019) quote "the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat" (p. 6). For those unfamiliar with the intersection of Laurier and Nicholas, it stands firmly under the University of Ottawa's gaze. Under its watchful eye, the first night after the demonstration, while protestors slept, Ottawa police crossed the picket line for the first time and arrested 12 protestors and one minor. I think back to that day in the March. I think about standing in solidarity to demand more from inaction, I think about the life, the passion that surrounded me that day, and I know that we will never cease to exist. Despite the annihilation of police officers across Canada and the United States, in March, in November, and likely in the years to come, community members gathered outside of the police headquarters in Ottawa and demanded the immediate release of our Black, and Indigenous brothers and sisters. I re-read van Kessel's (2019) quote once more. "the threatening worldview may cease to exist, and thus no longer pose a threat" (p. 6).

The next day, the protestors were released (CBC, November 21, 2020).

The following week the council voted on an increased police budget of \$13.2 million (CBC, November 21, 2020).

All but one council member voted in favor of the budget increase. The one who voted against it was Rawlson King of Ward 13. The only Black council member (CAMS Ottawa, 2020).

Accommodation

The fourth and final defense mechanism as highlighted by van Kessel is Accommodation. In the context of neoliberal oriented, bureaucratically run, meritocratically perceived country such as Canada, the stings of accommodation are nefarious, and deep. For van Kessel, this is defined as "By adopting aspects of a potentially threatening worldview, that threat is diffused and absorbed" (van Kessel, 2020, p. 6). But this may also take the form of policy making micro reforms in attempt to appease the respective demographic. This is likely to surface in the following weeks in light of the demands of Canadian and United States protestor's calling for a complete defunding of the police services under the hashtag #DefundThePolice (CPEP, 2020). One may also look back throughout history to acknowledge the ways in which accommodation was used to appease the threatening worldview. I think back to my younger years when I would respond to question of my existence by telling others that I was mulatto. Admittedly, it was a long time before I realized that I was using the language of the colonizers and the enslavers. In the late nineteenth century census data had changed as a response to the emancipation proclamation (Nobles, 2000). Meaning, after all those enslaved had been declared 'free' forms of categorizing Black people would have to change. Respectively, census information would then begin to accommodate Black individuals who had at once been 'Free Male' or 'Free Female' to a more nuanced categorization of racialization ([WashingtonPost, 2015](#)). This language, of course was still riddled with undertones of discrimination, tightly bound by the historically recent discourse and normalcy of slavery only a few decades prior. One census gave the following instruction to enumerators:

Write *white, Black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese* or *Indian*, according to the color or race of the person enumerated. Be particularly careful to distinguish between Blacks, mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons. The word 'Black' should be used to describe those persons who have three-fourths or more Black blood; 'mulatto,' those persons who have from three-eighths to five-eighths Black blood; 'quadroon,' those persons who have one-fourth Black blood; and 'octoroons,' those persons who have one-eighth or any trace of Black blood (Nobles, 2000, p. 188)

'Black blood', it states, as if our racialized skin leaks within us only to be diluted by whiteness; or perhaps the whiteness is what purifies our Black blood. With this, I'm reminded of Tim Stanley's (2019) remarking on the division of race. Stanley (2019) notes that such significance which is given to the imagined differences between racialized and non-racialized bodies perpetuates and upholds the racism in which it inherits. Stanley (2019) notes "This organization is originally deliberate (Arendt 1973, 363); it is purposive and made by human beings, but over time can be taken for granted, seen as just the way things are" (p. 35). As I walked through the playground proudly espousing the language of accommodation, I was normalizing the very words that had tied my ancestors to racialization that I can only slightly imagine.

Conclusion

These words, among other fabrications of racialization, are very much alive and real today. They exist to assimilate, to derogate, to annihilate, and to accommodate the Black body in Canada and the United States. In this paper, I have attempted to explain the ways in which van Kessel's (2019) conception of the four mechanisms for defensive reactions may be framed in the context of racializations in Ontario. I have illustrated my way of thinking through such notions in relation to my own lived experience as a racialized body in Canada. Moreover, I have called upon others curriculum scholars to help me make sense of some of the ways they have taken up concepts of anti-racisms in the context of my lived experiences as well as those racisms witnessed in the education system. Given the scope and limitations of this writing, I have not been able to explore the ways in which racializations can be countered inside and outside of our current education experiences. However, I hope to stress the importance of coming to terms with how these racializations exist through these defensive mechanisms. For now, and throughout my learning, I adhere to the words of my Granny Margaret, and remember to 'wise up, child'.

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Letters & Poems

One Year

OTA MANG (SHE/HER/THEY)

Content Warning: Racism, sexism, death, suicidal ideation, explicit language

I love school.
But school doesn't love me.

August

After 4 years, I am back in my province.
I'm unemployed. I live with my mom.
She retired and bought a house in a new town.
The house feels like home. The town feels different for me.
I need to find a job.

August

I apply to elementary posts at Anglophone school boards.
Radio silence.

August

A family friend says to apply to the Francophone school board in the area.
I apply to an elementary position.
I get a response.
They need an ESL teacher in one of their secondary sector rather than their primary sector.
My qualifications are for primary school.
But they really need a teacher.
I agree to the position.

August

During my interview, the principal is impressed with my resume.
But he warns me the clientele is *different* here.
He is not white.
But everyone else is.

August

I am a late recruit, so I only have two pedagogical days before the start of the school year.
I don't get an agenda because they are out of stock.
I don't get an electronic log-in because I am not in the system yet.
But everyone is cordial with me.
Maybe it will be okay.

Unknown

“I heard you taught in Asia for 4 years.”
“Yeah. I just got back in August.”
“How did you feel about the racism there?”
“Well I was born and raised in Canada, so I am used to a bit of racism.”
“Oh, but that’s different.”
“It feels pretty similar to me.”
“But it isn’t. Just trust me, I have lived there.”
I hate talking to white people about racism.

September

Our school athletics teams are named after an Indigenous group.
This area has no ties with the people they named themselves after.
I read why they chose the name.
“They are a people who are strong and live in harsh winter conditions”
Just like the Washington Football team, it is “to honour them”.
They use the name in a grammatically incorrect way.
I don’t buy the merchandise.
But I also don’t speak up.

September

We don’t have a real ESL curriculum.
That’s okay. We have more freedom I guess.
I am excited to work. I buy myself a laminator to make materials for my classes.
I still don’t have a school agenda and I am still not in their database.

September

Introduction classes.
They go okay. Except for one.
I tear up a bit at lunch time.
But I want to get to know them.
I am excited to share all my activities.

September

I have a bad day at school.
I go to my room and cry.
I don’t eat breakfast the next day.
I still don’t have an agenda nor am I in their school database
The next few weeks to get easier.
I try to remain optimistic.
The first year at a new school is always hard.

September

Family troubles.
Troubles at school.
I don’t want to eat.
I throw up in the bathroom.
I call a help line that night.

I want to die.

September

I don't have a family doctor yet.
My friend in the city recommends her doctor for now.
I get a refill for my medication.
I want to die less.

September

"My students are getting really disruptive. I can't get anything done in class."
"You have to be strict with them. If you aren't, then you have to send them to detention."
"Really?"
"Yeah. Send the ones who are giving a hard time."
I send 5 kids to detention.
I am approached by the detention staff.
"You can't send 5 kids to detention."
I still don't have an agenda.
But I can finally print.

September

My grade 7 students use Jewish and Autistic as derogatory terms to insult each other.
I tell them they are not allowed to use these terms. I try my best to explain in French why it is so
offensive.
They don't get it, but they try to use it less.
The teachers around me don't really get why I'm so upset either.
I continue not to eat breakfast.

October

I spend Thanksgiving with some friends and their friends in the city.
"So, I heard you taught in Asia for 4 years."
"Yeah. I just got back in August."
"How did you feel about the racism there?"
He and I are both biracial.
"I was born and raised in Canada, so I am used to a bit of racism."
"Yeah, I guess you're right. I just know how my family from there can be."
"Yeah. I get it. Sorry, I just get this question a lot."
He understands. But I am still fuming.
I don't want to go to school on Monday.

October

I talk to a co-worker.
"None of my kids are finishing their assignments."
"Send their parents a message and give them a 0 until they hand it in."
I send parents a message.
Radio silence.

November

I start seeing a therapist.
I talk about family and work.
I cry. But it feels good this time.
I have an agenda now.

November

The vice principal calls me in.
“Why are nearly all of your students failing?”
“They didn’t hand-in the work. I was told to put a zero until they hand it in.”
“You can’t give zeros”
“But I can’t make up marks. This is what I was told to do.”
I get in trouble.

November

I come home after another bad day.
My mom suggests that maybe teaching isn’t for me.
I cry more.
If I’m not good at teaching, then what I am good at?
I don’t know what I’m good at.

November

There is a new teacher replacing the French teacher because he is on sick leave.
She is not white.
Would it be weird if I talked to her based solely on this?
We make eye contact and nod our heads.
We don’t talk.

November

The class is not listening.
I tell a student he has to leave my class and go to detention.
He gets close to me.
He tells me that I don’t deserve to be in this country.
I am stealing jobs.
“Go back to where you came from, bitch.”
He leaves.
The class is silent.
I call a behaviour tech and leave too.
I am sent home.
I don’t make an effort anymore.

November

The vice principal talks to me. I am not sure I will last after December.
She tells me the students in this area have parents who are part of white nationalist groups.
“They are not dangerous. But they have a specific way of thinking.”
I say nothing.
“No school is perfect. You know, I had a hard time at this international school once. The parents were upset that I wasn’t giving more work to their children.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It was difficult in it’s own way. It was just a different clientele. You are not used to a blue-collar clientele.”

I come from a town that is only accessible by plane.
I ask if I can have support staff in the classroom.

November

My family gets a dog.
She loves us.
I feel less shitty.
I cry less. I don’t want to die as much.

December

The student counselor approaches me.
“We are going to set up a meeting so he can be back in your class.”
“... Okay.”
“Do you want an apology?”
“Will he mean it?”
“No. He probably won’t change much either.”
“No apology then.”
She means well.
I am still deciding whether I want to return in the New Year.

Unknown

My mother comes back from visiting her friends in the city.
“How was it?”
“... It was okay.”
“What happened?”
“I told them you taught in Asia and were having a tough time here.”
“And?”
“They said asked how you were treated in Asia because it’s racist.”

January

I decide to come back.
I am not given any additional support in my classroom.
Just classroom management tips and told to try and connect with the kids.

Unknown

The French teacher and I finally talk.
We have some of the same groups of students in Grade 9.
She asks me how they are.
I tell her. “They have been... a challenge.”
She agrees.
We leave it at that.

January

I am in a discussion in the staffroom.
A teacher is having a challenging student and had a meeting with the father.

“And so I tell him. I’m not doing this because I hate your son. I love your son. That’s why I am on his case. All teachers love their students.”

Do I love my students?

January

Some of my older boys use the N-word between them.

I tell them not to use it.

“Miss, it’s okay. My cousin is black.”

“I’m also black. You’re not. I’m telling you not to use it.”

He stammers, but agrees.

January

I start an after-school club.

Some grade 7 students join. I know some of them.

We have fun. I like them a lot.

February

My classes are going slightly better.

Because the kids in my grade 9 classes are being suspended from school.

They are misbehaving in other classes.

They now have a contract.

I was not included in these meetings.

February

I send another kid out of class.

He calls me the N-word before leaving.

I don’t leave class, but I report the incident after.

They are aware of the situation.

Nothing comes out of it.

I don’t cry.

February

A student is found dead up the street from my mother’s home.

She is 12-years-old.

She is not my student, but some of my students are friends with her.

They catch the culprit shortly after. A family friend.

The winter carnival is cancelled out of respect for the family.

I sub for a teacher who taught the girl.

She doesn’t want to teach first period.

The bell rings.

“Some girl dies and we don’t get a winter carnival. This is bullshit.”

I can see why the teacher didn’t want this to be her first class of the day.

We only get one day of counselling.

We are expected to go back to normal after March break.

March

There is a conversation about COVID-19 in the staff room.

“I heard there are some cases of coronavirus in the province.”

“It’s gotta be the science teacher’s husband. You know, since he’s Chinese.”

I don’t say anything.
Why don’t I say anything?

March

All but one class has improved.
I cannot get anything done in this class.
Some of the girls gang up on me and yell and swear at me.
I don’t understand it all because some Francophone slang is hard for me to understand.
But I know they hate me.
I leave the class.
I cry.

March

We have a new vice-principal.
She asks to observe the class I still have troubles with.
She also wants to do a teacher evaluation.
Fine. Whatever.

March

The vice-principal doesn’t observe my class. She doesn’t do my teacher evaluation.
The schools are closed due to COVID-19. We don’t know for how long.
I am scared.
But I am also grateful.

March and April

I take walks with my dog.
I make yogurt for fun.
I pick up some old hobbies.
I video chat with my therapist.
I eat breakfast.

Unknown

My nephew talks to his friends. He uses the N-word.
I know his friends are white.
I tell him not to use it with them.
He says that I’m being an “oversensitive Boomer”.
I’m 30 but fine. Do what you want, kid.

March

I watch the news every day.
I read about Winnipeg Police killing 3 Indigenous peoples in March.
They are not originally named in the reports.
They are Eisha Hudson, Jason Colins, and Steward Andrews.
I read about Ahmed Arbery. He is killed by armed white men as he was jogging.
I read about Breonna Taylor. She is killed by police in her own home.
I learn that a majority of people infected by COVID-19 are from Black and Brown communities.
There is always time for racism it seems.

April

I write a letter of resignation. I am not coming back next year.
HR asks why.
I tell them it's because I'm moving to Ottawa to study for my masters.
It's a half truth.

April

I still get a teacher evaluation despite not being evaluated.
I get a failing grade.
Poor classroom management skills.
Is always asking for help.
Cannot connect with students.
Maybe would do better in an elementary school setting.
My mom asks again if I want to change careers.
I cry.
If I'm not good at teaching, then where do I go?

April

We get an email from our school.
They want us to prepare for both online and in person classrooms.
The thought of going back to school scares me.
But I do it anyway.

April

The teachers are making videos for the students. On the main social media site.
I message a teacher wondering if I was missing something.
She realizes that no one invited me to the school group chat.
A chat that has been around for years.

May

Most students are at home, so I prepare an activity for my grade 9 students.
My co-ESL teachers love it.
The kids don't mind it either.

May

“Oh hey, apparently the substitute French teacher is coming in today.”
“Oh yeah?”
“Yeah she needs to give her final thoughts about the students.”
“Apparently the students treated her like shit. They threw stuff at her and sprayed her with a water bottle and tried to ‘clean’ her. It was apparently really bad.”
“Man, these kids are racist.”
“What do you mean?”
“Just... nevermind.”

May

Some of the students come back.
I feel sick.
But things are bearable.

We all know we are in a weird situation.

May

The George Floyd protests begin.
I don't want to watch the video, but I do.
I cry. I don't know what to do. I am not an activist.
I live a privileged life and yet I feel like shit.

June

Protests arrive in my province.
I have never been to a protest. I want to go.
My mother and nephew are considered high risk for COVID-19.
I contact the organizer to get his opinion.
He tells me to stay home.
But I donate so they can rent a loudspeaker.

June

I cannot go to protests.
I read, I donate, I watch videos.
I talk to my white mom.
I talk to my friends.
I talk to my therapist. I learn her children are biracial.
I don't talk about it at school.

June

My school needs an ESL teacher to teach summer school for a week in July.
No one wants to do it.
I volunteer.
What the fuck is wrong with me?

June

I have to decide whether or not to pass my students from this year.
I pass all but 8 of them.
I don't want to get in trouble again.

June

A student messages me.
She asks me if next year I will still host the after-school club.
I tell her that I am not coming back to school.
She is sad. She tells me I was her favourite teacher.
I feel guilty.

June

Second last day before summer vacation.
There are three of us teachers in a classroom.
We wonder what September will bring.
One of them curses the Chinese for 'spreading coronavirus'.
I am disappointed.

Her father is an immigrant.

Unknown

I follow my nephew on his social media.
He shares a document on why only black people can use the N-word.
I smile a bit.

July

I have 7 students.
I know some of them.
Every morning I wake up and don't want to eat.
They are nice to me.
I start to joke with them.
I relax. I haven't joked with my students since November.

July

The class ends. They all pass.
I talk to the vice-principal.
"The kids said they really appreciated your class. They liked that it was a slower pace."
"Thanks. They were good too."
"I am glad that you can end your time with us on a good note."
I thank her and leave.
I don't look back.

Present

I am studying my M.Ed.
I like my classes.
I feel more like myself again.
I never got a new teaching job.
Everything was met with radio silence.
Maybe that is okay. I am still scared to go back.

I love school.
But school doesn't love me.

Closed wound, healing scar

LYDIE MASENGO (SHE/HER)

It's interesting, how my present escapes back into the past every year

Every September, for the last 15 years,

I am reminded of the 9-year-old me

Sitting at my desk, having an existential crisis at that tender age, you see,

I was the only student in the class with deep brown skin, full lips, and hair that defies gravity

But still,

I've never had to question myself because I knew who I was

Until,

That Wednesday morning in Mrs. T's class

She always began the class by saying, "Good morning class!"

She seemed so nice and, she was trusted to help me enjoy the excitement and challenges of learning

But that Wednesday morning, she became the roadblock, to my learning

Hear me out!

Many of us could remember "that one" educator that helped us when in doubt,

Helped us set a path to our future education

You know, the ones that help prepare the next generation

Just not for me she said to my peers, "Out of everyone, you chose her to be the leader?"

That's the sentence that comes knocking on my door every September like a yearly reminder

Sending me right back to that day in a classroom in Quebec

I was walking towards Mrs. T's desk

Behind my back, I hear the woman who was supposed to be caring, and kind, to **me**

Lead me along the path where I wanted to be, **me**

Someone my parents trusted to keep me safe, and let me be, **me**

Thought of me as inferior to other students no matter my high grades, just for being, **me**

That afternoon, I learned that in front of her, I was dwarfed compared to other students

Her words were not by accident

Out of the abundance of hate,

She expressed her feelings towards me, coming from her heart

It was then, that I learned I was different from those with skin lighter than mine

Those with hair and features deemed “softer” than mine

It was the first time that I had asked myself what it would be like to be different

With each grade after that I continued to feel insignificant

I decided to go see my guidance counsellor, about the matter

Instead of assistance and advice, I was belittled and asked “what IS the matter?”

As if nothing was the matter. Nothing! Nothing seemed to matter

The denigration didn't matter

The insult to my intelligence didn't matter

I, as a Black person, didn't matter

I am reminded of the “Black Lives Matter” movement

Those saying “all lives matter” counter movement,

Are oblivious to the structural and systemic discrimination and racism that exist in our society

Just because discrimination and racism are not your experience, it doesn't mean they're not a reality

Trying to fight what I though was confirmation bias,

I stopped myself, to think about my lived experiences of discrimination and racism, and how I remained quiet

Learned behaviour! When I spoke, I got shut down

My words deemed insignificant because my skin is brown,

Rich brown seen as a threat for simply being, so I watched my words carefully

I began eating myself to obesity as therapy

Looking around for someone to talk with that looked like me

Hard to be found in positions of education and counselling, you see,

This society is not structured for people like me

There are times that I thought nothing else could be done

The damage to people like me, Indigenous, Black, People of Colour, cannot be undone

It can't. Closed wound, healing scar!

But, we have come from far

There is a gap in education, a gap to be filled with Indigenous, Black, People of Colour as educators and counsellors in schools

Young People of Colour want to be heard, understood, and fueled to begin or continue healing our scars

With more experience and 15 years later, issues of discrimination and racism are still prevalent today

It is no mistake that I am in the master of education program in counselling psychology today, as my past self (once) envisioned it as "someday"

I am changing the narrative for my People of Colour

I have learned that I have to start and not another

To my Indigenous, Black, People of Colour, I encourage you to change the narrative with me

The road is ten times harder for us as the society is not structured for us but you see,

I believe in us

Do YOU believe in us?

I believe in you

Do YOU believe in you?

To all my Indigenous, Black, People of Colour I say again, I want to be thought by you

To all my Indigenous, Black, People of Colour I repeat once again, I want to be counselled by you

You matter!

The road may seem impossible but you are the answer,

To the confusion to self, guiding our little People of Colour's existence

Pave the way! Confuse the system! Shock the system!

Don't be afraid to take the tenth seat with nine others taken by white people

Don't be afraid to speak up just so they could be comfortable

Love all but don't be a fool to none, it has been too long

Continue to be who you are, and how you are, and don't try to prove yourself to them to belong

Look at your scar and see how far you have come all this time,

Despite its state as a fingerprint from crime

Committed

Never admitted

With a Lift of my Chin

PEARLINE BARRETT-FRASER (SHE/HER)

As I take a moment to close my eyes,
I take a deep breath and pull the cool air in.
I relax my shoulders and lift my chin.
Alright I got this, everything will be okay,
I then push the buzzer and enter the school
And begin my day.

Take the keys, the binder, the notes
Went up the stairs to the room 215.
Anxiously waiting to start living my dream.
To teach, to make a difference,
To help those after me, to educate, to motivate,
To encourage them to **be** all they can **be**.

I take a moment close my eyes and take a deep breath in,
This time forgetting to lift me chin.

As I enter the classroom, I feel the energy shift.
Bodies turn, eyes stare...my anxiety begins to lift.
I put my things down and juggle the thoughts in my head,
And remind myself why I got out of bed.
To share my truth and live my passion
To educate the **youth** and the youngsters, **better** than the past did.
To show them that **movement** and dance can be used as a form of expression,
To tell a story and make a connection.
It can unify us, connect us and help us spread a message

One of **peace**, one of **hope**, one of revolution and **changes**

With our words, our minds, our hearts and **our time**.

We promote **the** message of diversity goes beyond **your** skin and **mine**.

One of questions, one of reflections

One that changes in form

One that makes you wonder **whose** voice, thoughts and perspective is being wore.

Being wore **and** declared in the books,

The movies and lessons that we share.

Whose voice is missing, what makes you unique,

And **Who** is **really** listening when you speak?

Questions, conversations, this is the way to start.

My goal is to teach our students that they are more than a work of art.

To give them power, show them understanding, educate them with love and hope.

So that they **too** can wake up

And **truthfully** feel **woke**.

But again the bodies turn and the eyes stare

As they notice somebody with such different hair.

It's so big. It's so puffy and her skin is also Brown.

As one student in the front says, "we haven't really seen someone like you around."

As I pull my shoulders back, lift my chin, take a deep breath.

I **begin** speaking with **confidence**, and with **all** the energy I **had left**,

"Good morning beautiful people, how you doing today?"

Suddenly their chins start to **lift** and probably thinking, "Is this teacher okay?!"

I continued to speak with style and grace, "Let's get started!" I see a shift in each face.

In a classroom way different than the one I grew up in.

The Bronx, New York where I wasn't judged by the colour of my skin.

Or the way I wore my hair, or the way I spoke.

All that mattered is that you came to school, **and** worked hard to **grow**.

Here the community was rich with **culture**, positive vibes and flow.

Where everyone you see is **someone** you know.

With potlucks and church, cookouts and family gatherings, man how I really miss all these things.

The Music, the art and Block parties that provide a fun atmosphere,

It's sad that some people's goals would be to make it out of here.

But my **abandonment** and shift **in scenery** was not my choice,

Breast cancer, diabetes, and **my mother** who could not **escape the noise**.

At the age of 9, **the pain** was too hard to bear,

Oh, how I miss how she used to comb my hair.

A **different** style every **week**, no wonder till this day, I look so **chic!**

But again, my abandonment and shift in scenery was not my choice

It took **a** while to learn... but because of it I was able to find my voice.

From a culture where I **always** got a **seat** at the table,

My life shifted **so** quickly

To an environment where I **felt** unstable.

There people reminded me of my **Blackness**

And the way I **dressed** and **social tone**.

Blackness was a **characteristic** that was **no** longer my own.

But belong to **everyone else** to seemed to talk a lot.

About my hair, my skin...this was my **Canadian Culture shock**.

Where the **whiteness** was **blinding** and shocking in truth.

The **lesson** of the **otherness**, I **quickly** learned **throughout** my youth.

Where my **Blackness** turned to **otherness**.

Making me feel **worthless**.

And through the **struggle**

And through the successes

Making me **wonder** if I deserve this.

But as I take a moment to close my eyes, I realize who the **hell** I am

And I remind myself **why**.

Why I should never fall into that trap...that lie.

To not let the **comments** lead me to question **who AM I?**

Comments like:

Can I touch your hair?

Or how did you get it to stay up there?

Or isn't vinegar a bad word if you take out the vin_

Or you look great in that colour!

Oh how I wish I had that **dark** Oprah skin!

Haha

Oh honey

How I **wish** you were satisfied with the skin you are in.

To have the privilege that you have to not have to worry.

Not having to second guess, alter your tone or say you're sorry.

Or being called **angry**

When you are really **passionate** on speaking your **truth**.

I hope these are **not** the lessons you teach **the** youth.

But you know what

....maybe you just don't understand,

All the power that you have in your hand.

So, I hope that you **learn**, and **open** your hearts to **change**,

Because when it **begins**

It will start to pour like **hot** summer rain.

My entire life has been a roller coaster of micro**aggressions**

Cultural **oppressions**

Hair **obsessions** and cultural **protection**.

To **build** that **tough** skin,

So, the **comments** won't **hurt** so bad,

As they cut **down, deep, deep** within.

Healing wounds, still hurt, so it is **critical** that we out in the work.

Oh the stories I **have**...so much more.

Things that happen inside and outside this classroom door.

The comments from staff and students I've heard.

Even some attempting to **say** the **n-word**.

But teaching in a classroom that is different from my own.

My lessons are the same. **Bright** and **encouraging** as my tone.

To share **my** truth and live my **passion**

To educate the **youth** and youngsters and **better than** the past did.

To give them power, show them understanding, educate them with love and hope.

So that they **too** can wake up

And truthfully feel **woke**.

With the minutes **before** us and **actions** unknown.

I hope to make a **mark** in the future

As I represent my **race**, culture and **home**.

We can **collectively** take a deep breath,

Pull back our shoulders **and lift our chin**.

It is time for the world to know our **stories within**.

Dearest Education Graduate Student of Colour

SHELINA ADATIA (SHE/HER)

Dearest Education Graduate Students of Colour,

Racism in education starts early. In fact, it was in Junior Kindergarten where I, the only Muslim in Mrs. K's class, learnt a lesson I will never forget: **hell hath no cruelty like a group of four-year-old white boys at recess**. *Sans compréhension du racisme ni des microaggressions, ces garçons m'ont présenté leurs effets néfastes sans aucune hésitation.* In other words, what may have sounded like my name mispronounced, was a recurring microaggression LOUDLY pronounced. That was the start of my story of racism in education but THIS is my opportunity to rewrite that story for you and for future Education graduate students of colour. My name is **Shelina**, pronounced **SHEH-lee-nah**, and THAT is what I should have said, loudly and proudly, all those years ago. Instead, I cried in the girl's washroom.

Thankfully, in 2020, authors like Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow (*Your Name Is A Song*), have written beautiful stories meant to empower children as they learn about the beauty and the history behind African, Asian, Black-American, Latinx, and Middle Eastern names. My message to you, my fellow graduate students, is to **NEVER accept anything less than perfect pronunciation of our names - whether that be from a four-year-old or a tenured professor**. *Accepter moins que cela ne ferait que perpétuer le racisme qui privilégie les noms européens par rapport aux noms des personnes noir.e.s, autochtones et de couleur.*

As I write this letter, Hannukah and Christmas have just passed and Kwanzaa is upon us; however, as a Shia Ismaili Muslim, I celebrate *Salgirah*. Taking place on the 13th of December, *Salgirah* (meaning anniversary) is a celebration of the birth of our present living Imam (our spiritual leader), His Highness the Aga Khan. Today, it would not be uncommon for a non-Ismaili colleague or friend to wish my family and I *Salgirah Mubarak* (Happy *Salgirah*!), but growing up, *Salgirah* was not even acknowledged by my teachers or peers. In fact, during high school, I can recall several instances where my sister and I would be writing exams on December 13th. The one time I did mention *Salgirah* to a teacher, I was asked to give a 'special presentation' following the exam period. To this day, I remain stunned at the AUDACIOUS claim that I spend my winter break preparing a presentation on *Salgirah* simply because I don't celebrate Christmas. Moreover, I remember wondering, why is it up to ME to educate my teachers and peers? Are they incapable of doing the research themselves?

Today, as a graduate student, this request is one I would associate with the often unpaid or invisible labour asked of BIPOC students and professors. While this work can be extremely rewarding, it can also lead to extreme fatigue, frustration, burnout, and even missed opportunities for promotion. Moreover, when we do engage in this work, it usually comes with an implicit WARNING: Don't ruffle any feathers along the way. *Mon conseil? Apprenez à dire NON de temps en temps. If you don't prioritize your physical health and mental well-being, no one else will.*

Saying NO or disrupting the status-quo is not something that comes easily. As a child of immigrants, it has been ingrained within me to be calm, obedient, respectful of my elders and authority figures, and most importantly, grateful to be living in a country of opportunity. That said, causing any sort of disruption at school would NOT have been tolerated; hence, I chose not to speak up while I was bullied by a white, male peer throughout high school. “Hey stinky”, he would murmur under his breath, as he passed by me in the halls or stood behind me during the daily recitation of O Canada. One day, while I waited at the bus stop after school, I remember spotting him across the street. As always, I ignored him, but unfortunately, he didn’t do the same. As my head was turned away, I became the target of his biggest snowball, thrown at lightning speed. With tears streaming down my face, snow trickling down my back, I could see him out of the corner of my eye, laughing with a friend, as I stepped into the bus.

That moment should have been my wake-up call to SPEAK UP. But alas, out of fear of hurting my parents, or being accused of overreacting or lying by the school administration, I said nothing. At the time, I felt that silence was my only option but this past year, more so than ever, I have learnt that by saying nothing, I too am part of the problem and not the solution. ***Donc même si ce sera difficile au début, je vous encourage fortement à dénoncer les injustices. Ce sera frustrant et fatigant et vous ne verrez peut-être pas toujours l’impact de vos paroles et de vos actions, mais soyez assurés qu’elles font une différence.*** Indeed, it is only then that our white allies will truly AMPLIFY our voices and share in our vulnerabilities.

As I conclude this letter, we are on the cusp of 2021, and I find myself recalling the wise words of His Highness the Aga Khan: **“The right to hope is the most powerful human motivation I know”** (His Highness the Aga Khan, 1996, para. 30). Yet, 2020 has certainly given us many reasons to lose hope. For instance, a few weeks ago, the uRacism collective engaged in a peaceful sit-in, sleeping on the floors and couches of Tabaret Hall in order to secure a meeting with the University of Ottawa’s top administrators. Their reasoning: to discuss concerns regarding the newly proposed Committee on Anti-Racism and Inclusion. As I followed their posts on social media, I remember feeling completely hopeless as their request was met with push backs, delays, and ultimately, with utter ignorance. It was a sad day, I thought, to be a BIPOC graduate student at uOttawa. It was at that point that I reached out to a fellow BIPOC graduate student, an individual whose words and actions alike have been a continuous beacon of HOPE throughout this academic year. ***Alors, chers collègues, ne sous-estimez jamais le pouvoir de vous entourer de ceux et de celles qui vous inspireront lorsque vous vous retrouverez au plus bas.***

Racism in education starts early, but as a collective, we can find the motivation to continue fighting against it by DISRUPTING oppressive discourses, practices, and policies. This, however, is no easy task, so in the spirit of moving forward, I share the following tweet: **“Educators cannot disrupt oppressive practices if they don’t understand how these oppressive practices intentionally came to be”** (Wilson, 2020). As we look towards 2021, let us, the Education Graduate Students of Colour collective, renew our commitment to both learning and unlearning, so that we may, *inshallah* (God willing), REWRITE, and dare I say, ABOLISH, stories of racism in education for present and future generations of graduate students of colour.

Yours in Solidarity,
Shelina Adatia

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