

EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS OF COLOUR

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

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.