

**Relational Awareness and Culturally Relevant/Sustaining Pedagogies—Praxis and Possibility:  
A Story in Four Acts<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** This self-study examines how I enacted culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies (CRP/CSP) in a graduate course. Specifically, I was seeking to understand what core practices of relational awareness were supportive of CRP/CSP. Using a first-person/self-study and arts-based action research approach, I describe my learning that developed hand in hand with vital tensions and paradoxes.

**Act I -The Swirl**

This story begins on my front porch in a delightfully temperate August morning. I sit with the 2017 syllabus from my graduate course, “The Relational Context of Teaching and Learning.” The nine-page document is printed and strewn on the six-foot long pine table. I am asking myself: What would it mean to enact culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies (CRP/CSP) in this course? What core practices of relational awareness are supportive of CRP/CSP? What does it mean to really break open this course that I have been teaching for almost 20 years? I felt the tension in my body. I was beset by fear—fear “that I would not do this well. And not good enough—not equipped enough for this...The self-judgment is severe. The fear is real.” (Journal, 8/10/19). I painted the first painting of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> The 4-act structure was inspired by NPR’s “This American Life.” Deep gratitude to the students and colleagues who read and offered generous and critical feedback.



### Painting 1: Fear

In reflection I wrote: “I painted it vertically, but when I flipped it [horizontally] it was a raging sea. That’s really how I felt. And the color I felt was blue.” (8/10/19). Note: I am not the kind of person who easily says, “the color I felt was blue.”

*Personal Interlude: As I tell this story, I interrogate my practice as a white teacher, as a professor of education, a ciswoman, a Jewish person, daughter of a German-Jewish refugee and a Holocaust survivor, parent of trans, queer and straight children. Also, you should know, that while I love the arts and I have crafted all my life with quilts, jewelry, and yarn, I do not consider myself an artist. All of these identities come into play as I tell this story.*

As I dug into the syllabus over the next few days, I had some clarity about my task. There were too many white voices in the reading list. While the foundational relational theories of the course were developed by a predominantly white group of scholars (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997), the scholarship in the field had become much more diverse. And while I had updated the course in 2017, the scholarly voices in the syllabus were not diverse enough. Over the next few weeks, I continued to read a stack of new books, chapters, and articles. It was as if I was meeting new friends, knowing that I would need to let go of some of my old ones, some that I had relied on, like close confidants, since my graduate school days. I also had to face the fact that I needed to get to know voices that have been around for generations that I did not know well. The ground I was standing on felt shaky — I asked myself “can I teach sources that I have not studied for years?”

Ten days later, I am swirling. I painted:



### Painting 2: Swirl

My white question mark swims in the brown, tan, black, ochre, and ivory swirls. I yearned for more solid ground, knowing the churning was essential.

*Theoretical interlude: This study is rooted at an intersection between Relational Cultural Theories (RCT) (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Schwartz, 2019; Walker, 2020; Way, Ali, Gilligan, & Noguera, 2018) and Culturally Relevant/Sustaining Pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Paris & Alim, 2017). The essence of RCT is the idea that the goal of human development is participating in and deepening growth-enhancing relationships. In contrast to the prevailing psychological theories of the twentieth century which argue that autonomy and independence indicated maturity, RCT was a radical theory, with feminist origins. RCT scholar Maureen Walker (2020) also argues that chronic disconnection — in relationships with self or others — can be caused by culture, “which, in addition to shaping our narratives about self and others, determined systems of access and opportunity” (p. 27).*

*This study is also situated in the groundbreaking work of Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014, 2021), which launched the concept and practice of culturally relevant pedagogy and its three central propositions — “academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political /critical consciousness” (2021, p. 71). I am also informed by the evolution and extension of this theory, which centers on sustaining culture as argued by Django Paris (2012) “...culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95). In this self-study, and in the Relational Context of Teaching*

*and Learning course, I understand that awareness of the relational dynamics in the unfolding life of a course is essential to assure that the learning environment is one that invites the voicing of differing perspectives, dissent and disagreement (Schwartz, 2019). Aceves & Orosco (2014) have helped me understand that developing, maintaining, and nurturing positive teacher-student relationships is a core dimension of CRP/CSP.*

August 29, 2019. Students gather in one of our college’s less appealing classrooms—chairs with attached mini desk surfaces that are hard to get into and make it impossible to spread out notebooks and books at the same time. With smudged white walls, there is no character to this room, but at least there are windows! The class is big for a seminar, 21 people. It is also the most diverse class I’ve had at this university. There are five Black women, one international student from China, and the rest appear white. There is one man. From the first exercise of the course—a discussion of the values and actions that would shape how we would work together issues of race were on the table. I found myself scrutinizing every question I posed to the group and every response I offered.

The next morning, I painted this picture which I titled, “The swirl is real.” The micro self-reflection was so uncomfortable. “Is this self-study?” I wrote that night. “If so, I don’t like it!!!”



**Painting 3: The Swirl is Real**

There is no solid ground in this painting. I flail in the swirl of color.

### About This Self-Study

As Connie Kendall Theado wrote in the opening essay of this special issue, our Cincinnati Critical Friends (CCF) study group decided that each of us would attempt a self-study during the 2019-2020 academic year. I chose to study this course because it had been “calling” me to change. If I were to take seriously the cultural dimension in RCT, then enacting CRP/CSP practices were essential. The question gnawing at me was how to help graduate students build cultural competence and critical consciousness, and what role did relational awareness play in developing these crucial capacities?

*Theoretical Interlude: You might be asking “why relational awareness?” How does relational awareness fit into this picture? Ladson-Billings and Paris & Alim do not spell out relational awareness in their iterations of CRP/CSP. As a researcher who has spent the past two decades dedicated to studying the relational context of teaching and learning, I understand relational awareness as a core capacity for both teachers and students in the construction of healthy relational learning communities (Raider-Roth, 2017). Jordan (2004) defines relational awareness as:*

*the development of clarity about the movement of relationship; this importantly includes an awareness of our patterns and **ways of connecting and disconnecting and transforming the flow from the direction of disconnection to connection**. It includes personal awareness, awareness of the other, awareness of the impact of oneself on the other, the effect of other on oneself, and the quality of energy and flow in the relationship itself. (p 53-54, emphasis added)*

*I have come to understand that building relational awareness is rooted in learning the practices of building connection, detecting disconnection, and facilitating repair (moving the flow from disconnection to connection). One of the findings of this self-study, as I will describe below, is that learning these core practices are essential to engaging in the rich and sometimes difficult conversations about culture, race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity (and others) and the isms that often arise.*

As an action-researcher and teacher, I have long wanted to study my own practice with a gaze centered on my decision-making, artifacts of teaching, and pedagogical dilemmas. It was our CCF group and teaching a course on practitioner action research in 2019 that galvanized my energy to finally dive in. LaBoskey (2007) guided me in offering key dimensions of self-study, including being “improvement-aimed,” changing and reframing my thinking and practice, incorporating complementary methods, and presenting the work to colleagues and the field for critical feedback (pp. 859-60). This article is an essential piece of this last aspect of self-study.

*Methodological Interlude: Dear Reader, you may have noticed by now that the structure of this article includes four acts, a variety of interludes, and later you will encounter five “learnings.” While the four act format might suggest a linearity to my learning — that there was a structure and a chronological order to the semester — the interludes are an invitation to join me in the messiness that self-study invited. My understandings — theoretical, methodological, pedagogical and personal — came in fits and starts, over time, and unpredictably.*

### **Self-study Processes**

**Journaling.** From the outset, I chose journaling as a process as I know myself to be a person who processes the world in words. As a writer, and a long-time fan of and participant in psychotherapy, I knew that recording my experiences and writing about them would both be a forum for record-keeping as well as reflecting on the experiences in my class. I committed to journal immediately after class or in the following day since class occurred in the late afternoon/early evening.

**Painting.** My doctoral students inspired me to paint. In particular, Mary Dulworth Gibson, a veteran teacher in Cincinnati Public Schools, an artist, and a warm, intense, doctoral student with a delightful sense of humor, chose to do a self-study as part of the 2019 practitioner action research course that I taught. She reflected on her teaching for 30 days, and then painted a small canvas (2”x3”) each night (Dulworth Gibson, 2019). At the end-of-the-course presentation of work, I was stunned by her exhibit, and moved by the emotion I experienced in viewing her collection of work. I was inspired to try to engage in a form of reflection that was less wordy, that tapped into my heart, soul, and brain in a different way. I knew that this work was a full body experience; it would call up a plethora of emotion, and I wanted to capture it all. While I committed to painting before or after I journaled each week, in sum I created 12 5”x7” paintings/drawings/collages over the 15 weeks of the semester. While there were secondary sources of data for this study, including careful record keeping of the relational practices I tried out and student feedback, this article focuses on the two data sources above.

#### **Act II — The Text as Partner**

Bringing in foundational texts in relational theory, as well as new texts written by scholars of color, was core to the redesign of the course. As a teacher, building relationships with new texts and their writers required that I find my own positionality with these texts. Such was the work of Act II. The students also had to cultivate their own relationships with the texts, and the multi-vocal nature of the syllabus elicited strong responses.

During the third week of class, we read a chapter by Janie Ward (2108) entitled “Staying Woke: Raising Black Girls to Resist Disconnection,” a powerful piece about Black girls, their resistance and resilience, focusing especially on their resistance to cultural forces of disconnection. This chapter invited some of the most constructive discussions of race that I have

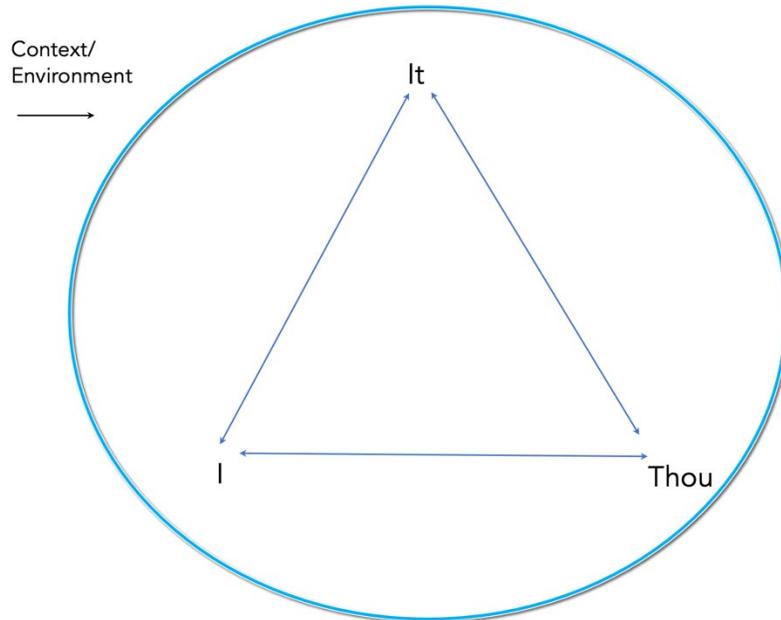




**Painting/Collage 5: Face to Face/ פנים אל פנים**

The following week I focused on the cross-cultural, cross-racial dialogue. How could I, as the facilitator, the teacher of the course, support authentic, honest dialogue that would not further disconnection, but build growth-enhancing relationships—the kinds of relationships that would deepen and further student learning? Echoing Jordan's (2004) definition of relational awareness, I was yearning to keep the flow of the course moving in the direction of connection.

*Theoretical Interlude: A theory that is core to my understandings teaching-learning relationship is David Hawkins' triarchic model "I, thou and It" (Hawkins, 2002). This model is often referred to as the instructional triangle (Ball & Forzani, 2007) and which I have taken to call "the relational triangle" to highlight the dynamics between the three main partners in the learning relationships—teacher, learner and subject matter/content. Adding to the triangle is the very important circle of context, which shapes and is shaped by the dynamics of the triangle.*



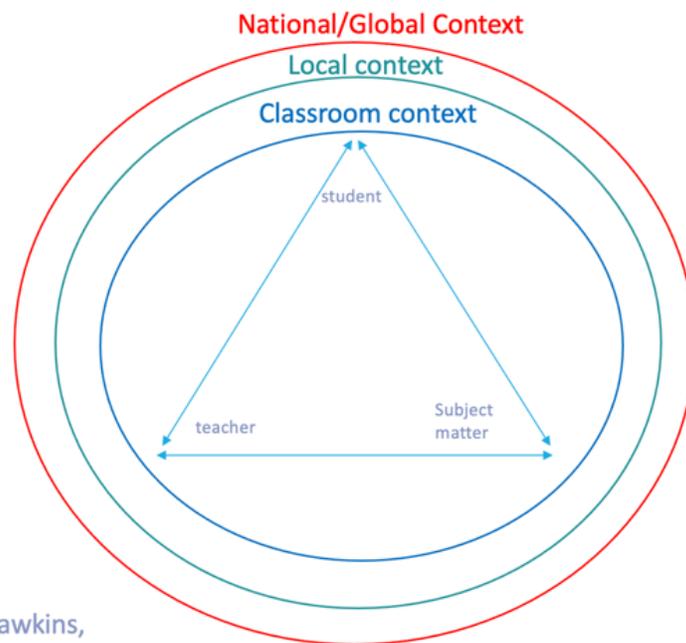
**Figure 1: The instructional/relational triangle**

I thought I had done an admirable job of letting go of readings from the old white cannon. But I did not let go of enough. For years, I had dedicated a week of the course to “Goodness of Fit” theory (Thomas & Chess, 1977), because it seemed to highlight the ways that relational dynamics between parents & children (and other literature based on Goodness of Fit extend the idea to teacher-student relationships, e.g., Keogh, 1986) shape children’s capacity to thrive. The following journal excerpt recounts the class discussion of this theory:

At some point in the class discussion, [a student] said that in her field [of] counseling, they study Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system’s theory. And as we had a full group discussion, and we were talking about the individual’s interaction with the environment, we started talking about the different “circles” of environment — family, school, neighborhood, social-economic-political cultures. And how “fit” may mean something different in those different circles. And when you take pressures of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, “fit” starts to sound downright oppressive...

By introducing a more diverse set of readings to study and having a more diverse class, it so shapes what needs to be studied and moved to the side the theories that are not culturally relevant/sustaining. This was a big aha for me. As I write this, it doesn’t seem so revolutionary—but for me it was a big realization. (9/28/19)

As the student and I described Bronfenbrenner’s theory, I drew on the board a figure that looked like Figure 3 below, which integrated the idea of circles of systems with the idea that contexts/environments shape the dynamics of teaching learning relationships.



Based on Hawkins,  
1974, Raider-Roth, 2017

**Figure 2. The relational triangle with circles of context.**

As I revised the course for fall 2021, I removed Goodness of Fit from the syllabus, and focused on Bronfenbrenner instead.



**Painting/College 6: Circles of Culture**

In playing with collage in this piece, I sought to foreground circles with a red triangular bead in the center of the smallest circle, while at the same time illustrating that Goodness of Fit did not fit anymore. The pieces no longer connected.

### **Act III: Lightning**

While some texts, like Ward's (2018), facilitated connections to the text and to the class community, others like Thomas and Chess (1977) raised up the ways that theories can be limiting or even oppressive, and some texts had the capacity to be lightning rods. Such was the case of Patricia Hill Collin's landmark essay (1999) "Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images." I had selected this article to be read hand-in-hand with a chapter from Harriet Schwartz's (2019) book *Connected Teaching* that focused on the RCT concept of relational images—that the images of prior relationships can carry over into current ones. I had hoped that studying Collins' notion of controlling images—the idea that cultural images of oppressed peoples can seep into our thinking without our consciousness—together with relational images offered the students the chance to understand how an individual's own relational history and the images that are ubiquitous in the environment, culture, media can shape the baggage that teachers and students may bring into the classroom. But you know what they say about best laid plans.

*Personal Interlude: I can think of so many things I could have done differently during this class. Before this class. When I prepared students for the reading. I struggle deeply when I think about the events that transpired in the class. About the harm that people experienced. In my journal that night I wrote "...this is what I feared. That I would not be able to handle this kind of conversation. That I was not trained for this yet. That I am inadequate." 10/17/19*

So what happened? At least two excruciating moments of disconnection, but I know there were many more. One white woman asked the Black women as a group how they felt about reading the article. My body tensed. What's the best teaching move right then? As facilitator and teacher, I could have said something to remove pressure and obligation to respond. I might have asked the student what needs were driving her question/request. Those were not my moves. I was silent. Later, a white woman shared, "You know, not only Black women are stereotyped. I have been stereotyped, too." And a very painful class ensued. Tears were shed, an uncomfortable laugh, long pauses. A Black student left the class, later to return, speaking from her heart about the pain she experienced in class. A Black student shared that the comments were an example of why white women are most dangerous to Black women.

*Methodological Interlude: A crucial part of my ethical commitment was to share a draft of this piece with students whose words were represented here, and I did my best to locate them, two years after the course took place. Sharing my work with them was also an effort towards trustworthiness, as explained by Hamilton, Hutchinson, & Pinnegar (2020):*

*...we suggest that the primary research relationship to which we must be trustworthy in S-STTEP [self-study in teaching and teacher education practice] research is not the researcher and the academy but rather the researcher to the world in which their life and practice is embedded and the researcher and those practitioners, students, and communities for whom we write the research. (pp. 308-309)*

*In listening to the students' feedback, I understood that Act III is spare, more of a sketch than a fully rendered drawing. Perhaps I am still processing it, perhaps I am seeking to protect the privacy of the pain in the moment, for everyone involved. I can only write what I observed and experienced. There is another essay to be written about what happened that night—coauthored, co-voiced by the students in the room.*

I ended the class, returning to core tenets of RCT—connection, disconnection, and repair. While I had not yet read Walker's 2020 book (it was published just after the semester ended), I now realize I enacted one of her "nine rules for remaking the meaning of race" (p. 115); namely, "when an interaction reaches an impasse, say one true thing" (p. 122). I shared with the class that I felt disconnections had occurred for many of us—with self, others, and the text; that I was aware that I did not know that was happening for each of them. I promised that we would work on repair; that I needed time to process the class and come up with a plan. As Walker (2020) suggests "[s]aying one true thing creates spaces where more truths can emerge" (p. 124). I asked them all to write down a reflection with the prompt "what is alive for you right now."



**Painting/collage 7: Lightning**

The next morning, I painted and collaged this piece. The flashpoints of the evening felt so much like lightning—sudden, brilliant, frightening. The vastness of the night sky, which can lead me to feel awe, insignificant, and alone, was the image that came to mind.

#### **Act IV: Repair, Dancing Triangles, Circles and Light**

To say that I was left swirling would be an understatement. After class, I immediately sat down in my university office and wrote as much of what I could remember that transpired. The recurring question that evening and the ensuing days was, “What could I have done differently?” I reached out to colleagues in the CCF community to help me unpack what had happened, to figure out how I might have responded or facilitated the discussion in a different way, and to plan next steps for the coming week’s class. My need to repair the enormous rupture was acute.

*Learning #1: This kind of tough introspection into one’s pedagogy should not be a solitary sport. We need to be accompanied by fellow travelers who can support and challenge our observations, interpretations, and questions.*

#### **Repair**

I also reached out to a close colleague and friend, Kathy Simon ([kathysimonphd.com](http://kathysimonphd.com)), with whom I have studied the principles and practices of nonviolent communication (NVC) for the past decade. As an expert in communication and deep understanding of educational contexts and pedagogies, she is an important thought partner in my life. Kathy sees a richness in hard conversations. She sees an opportunity to build new understandings and stronger connections by wading through the choppy waters of conflict. In short, she believes conflict is potentially positive and transformative, and skills of repair are vital.

In retelling the story to Kathy, she helped me focus on the needs/values that I heard the students expressing. I could hear the student’s needs for connection, authenticity, and learning in asking the Black women in the class how they received this Collins’ article. I could hear the other student’s need to be seen for the suffering in her life. In this reframing of the events in the classroom, from racist or insensitive comments to ones in which human needs were being expressed, an opportunity for connection emerged rather than being shut down. I understood in this conversation that a core practice for developing relational awareness was a particular form of listening, one that Kathy calls “attuned listening.” This kind of listening requires tuning one’s ears to the needs/values that the person speaking might be expressing; to make every effort not to “rush to judgment” (Carini, 2001, p. 163) but rather try to make sure one understands the

content of their narrative. In the higher education classroom—and I would argue in all classrooms—this must be a shared responsibility among all members of the class, not just the teacher/facilitator. As I’ve learned in my own life, and as a student of NVC, this kind of listening takes sustained practice, much like learning to play an instrument or speak a new language.

*Learning #2: Attuned listening is a core practice of relational awareness. To teach relational awareness, it is important to teach skills of attuned listening and practice them throughout the course.*

By telling the story of the “lightning” class to my CCF partners and Kathy, I was listened to in this way and seen for my desire to convene a class where hard conversations can occur, where diverse voices can be heard, and where respect for divergent points of view is authentic. And my colleagues urged me to continue the work.

With Kathy’s help, I crafted a lesson for the following week where we could practice attuned listening and begin to repair some of the ruptures. Not everyone in the class found this satisfying. Some wanted to return to the points of conflict, to unravel the knot that we had confronted, to see if we could find more common ground. Perhaps it was my fear, cowardice, or desire to “get the class back on track,” but I felt strongly that the students needed more skills in order to dive back into these rocky waters.

The following week, I taught skills of empowered speaking—the skill of speaking one’s full truth without accusation or demeaning of another person. Practices of empowered speaking are grounded in observations, rather than judgments, and are rooted in a person’s positive values, such as compassion, inclusion, communication. Empowered speaking invites collaboration as well as articulation of one’s own vulnerability (Simon, 2019). These skills are also part of the NVC approach to communication.

*Learning #3: Empowered speaking is a core practice of relational awareness. To teach relational awareness, it is important to teach skills of empowered speaking and practice them throughout the course. Attuned listening and empowered speaking are the foundation of relational repair.*

*Personal Interlude: Fall 2021. In teaching this course again, redesigned based on what I learned from doing this self-study, I introduced attuned listening and empowered speaking in the first weeks of class. And I learned that some of the Black members of the class found the NVC practices limiting, or worse yet, constraining. Not aligned with the ways they wanted to speak or be heard. Not direct enough. At the time of writing this article, I ask myself, are these practices not aligned with the principles of CRP/CSP? I am still wrestling with this question.*

In the least generous view of these weeks, I could say I was flying by the seat of my pants. I was off script from the syllabus, and I was building each class session based on the previous one, to be as responsive as possible and build a context where repair could take place. In meeting with Sarah Hellman, a community artist, arts-based action researcher, friend, colleague, and former student, she set out a newspaper covered table at a nearby café. A glass jar, half full of water and well-loved paint brushes sat on the table. A pan of watercolors lay before me. Sarah handed me a piece of paper, gave me a black sharpie marker, told me to close my eyes and draw a flowing line, not lifting my hand until I felt finished. When I opened my eyes, she offered me the paint as well as magic markers, and asked me what I saw in my squiggles. I instantly saw a dancer and brushed ochre colored paint on the lines. She asked me how I interpreted this dancer and I responded, "Improvisation. She's improvising." At that moment, I realized I could reframe my self-critique. Rather than seeing my actions as flying by the seat of my pants, I could view them as pedagogical improvisations.



***Drawing/Painting 8: The Dance***

*Lesson #4: Ruptures in the classroom, as in any relationship, are inevitable and unpredictable. The acts of repair require an improvisational stance. Attuned listening and empowered speaking are iterative processes, that require/invite responsiveness in the moment as well as reflection to plan next steps.*

### **Dancing Triangles:**

November 7, 2019: A Zoom class. Due to my travel for a conference, we held this class session via Zoom. Upon reflection, I drew and then wrote:



### Drawing 9: Dancing Triangles

When I look at this drawing, thinking about all the students in their spaces—[one student] lying in bed, the kitty behind [another student's] body, [two students] in a room [at the university], this grid came to [my] mind, with each student as their own triangle, with their own connections, disconnections [&] repairs. And then there's me—I need my own triangle! And trying to stay alert to all the triangles in the room. No wonder teaching is so exhausting! (emphasis in original.) 11/7/19

While Zoom classes became ubiquitous during the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019 I only conducted Zoom classes when I was ill or traveling for a conference. There was something about this shift in environment, when each person was situated in a square, that that led me to envision each person as their own unique relational triangle, seeing their individual contexts that exert force and shape the nature of the relationships within. When gathering in the four walls of the classroom, I am often drawn to our shared contexts—the room, the building, the university, our city, etc. With each of us in our own environs, I became especially alert to the numbers of triangles and circles that join together to form a classroom learning community.

*Learning 5: Relational awareness as a teacher means paying attention to the collective relational triangle, as well as the individual ones as well. The cognitive, emotional, and relational demands of this kind of awareness is intense. Relational awareness is a form of presence.*



### **Painting 10: Dancing Circles**

This painting had been brewing in my mind for a number of days. Over time, I imagined circles with purple hues. These circles are different from painting from week three. It didn't feel like a black hole or sixteen circles dancing separately. These circles are pairs or trios, holding hands, creating movement together. The course was coming to an end. There had been many connections, disconnections, and repairs. Different forms of community emerged, final papers were being written, the language of relationship, relational contexts, and Relational-Cultural Theories had become more second nature. Discussion of culture and race continued, perhaps a little more carefully, a bit subdued.

## Light

When students arrived for the last class, long tables were set up outside the room and they placed fruit salad, brownies, chips, pinwheel sandwiches, and sparkling water on the tables as they arrived. A last-class potluck is a tradition where we celebrate together all the accomplishments of the semester. When the students walked into the room, they found jars of colored pencils and markers placed on the tables throughout the room accompanied by small stacks of 5x7 index cards. The students in the class knew that I had been experimenting with artwork as part of this self-study, and I wanted to invite them into the process for the last class, to offer them an opportunity to reflect in a different medium, using different parts of their minds. Sarah Hellman had shared an exercise with me that she suggested might support the students' visual and artistic exploration. This exercise invited students to create a "Relationship Character" by first reflecting on three relationships in their work or personal life that were on their mind after completing the course. I asked them to engage all five senses. If relationship were a color, what color would it be? What does relationship smell, taste, sound, look feel like? After reflecting on these questions, I asked them to draw a relationship character, symbol, or metaphor.

The drawings were stunning in the representation of story and learning. Class time ran way beyond our ending hour as each person told the story of their image and received appreciative comments from the others. I felt a sense of the collective, the learning community that had evolved, with all the points of rupture and repair. I, too, drew my image:



**Drawing 11: Light**

One student commented that orange and yellow are the color of relationships. For me, the blooming flower signified a sense of openness, growth, pausing after the intense energy of opening.

### Epilogue

In the Nonviolent Communication suite of practices, as interpreted and taught by Kathy Simon, “mindful inner world” accompanies attuned listening and empowered speaking. Together with colleague Itzel Hayward, they describe this internal presence as follows: “We seek to interrogate what is **habitual** for us and choose whether we can find a path that feels **alive**, that speaks to this unique **moment**, and is **most aligned with our deepest values.**” (Hayward & Simon, 2021, emphasis and color in original). I regret not teaching this practice in the fall of 2019. It is perhaps, the grounding that we all needed to be able to be present to one another while the relational dynamics swirled when engaging with issues of race.

I return to the image of “swirl” that began this story and my physiological experience of so much of the course. When I attend to my fear of talking about race—a fear that indeed feels like a deeply engrained habit—I feel that swirl in my body. I am guided by Maureen Walker’s (2020) words:

Racialized anxiety may be a physiological reminder that we don’t need to enact inherited fear or hostility. Breathing into tightened muscles facilitates relaxation and gives us room to decide how we want to act. (p. 118)

In Itzel Hayward, Kathy Simon, and Maureen Walker’s words, I hear a clear message of attending to my breath, what is alive in my heart *and* my mind. Like all mindfulness practices, the mindfulness that is required to enact culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies in a higher education classroom is a consistent and difficult practice. Just when I thought I had a handle on what was happening, new discussions emerged, new relational images surfaced, old controlling images penetrated the discussion, and ruptures occurred. The presence of mind and body, the necessary improvisation and strong community articulated values were all necessary dimensions for facilitating repair.

Final theoretical interlude: As I write this, I am reminded of the idea of “cultural humility” that our CCF recently studied in a shared reading (Cochrane et al., 2017) which centers on three tenets: “commitment to lifelong learning and critical self-reflection, especially around social identities”; “the need to recognize and disrupt power imbalances”; and “institutional accountability” (p. 3-4). The internal work of cultural humility is insufficient—acting to create real change towards equity is essential. Cochran et al. liken cultural humility to “critical humility” which is defined as:

...the practice of remaining open to the face that our knowledge is partial and evolving while at the same time being committed to speaking up and taking action in the world based on our current knowledge however imperfect...In other words, we strive toward being a 'good white person' while trying not to fall into the trap of thinking we actually have become that person. (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2012 p.2) (p. 5)

I am drawn to this definition because it asks us to remain mindful of our own limited capacity to see another person's experience. Our obligation is to remain open to the widening our capacity to see, while remembering that we will never see fully. Chabra (2017), building on Hook et al (2013) adds to the theorizing of cultural humility by highlighting:

the interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person], *especially those aspects that trigger in us a sense of unearned privilege about ourselves and an implicit prejudice about the other.* (emphasis in the original, p. 44)

By underscoring the interpersonal dimension of cultural humility, this second definition reinforces a stance of openness to the other while at the same time attending to our own sense of privilege and prejudice.



**Painting/collage 12: Light and shadows**

As a study of my own practice, I am left swirling, with some learnings and with many more questions. The work feels unfinished. Hamilton, Hutchinson, and Pinnegar (2020) offer that an “ontology of becoming” is an essential facet of self-study, which “disrupts traditional notions of knowing, trustworthiness, and quality as static understandings of reality to embrace constant moving, shifting, and *becoming*” (emphasis in the original, p. 309). In writing this piece, I pause temporarily to reflect on what I learned, how I am evolving, or becoming, but without a sense of completion. The work has brought me insight and more fear, light, and shadows. I strive to teach relational awareness as a dimension of CRP/CSP and know that I will never quite master this pedagogy. Holding that paradox is the essence of this work.

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