Critical, Interconnected Approaches to Professional Engagements

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Abstract

Much of the literature on professional development offers disembodied, secular, detached and technical approaches to teaching and learning. Born of a collective need for healing, meaning and co-inquiry, I joined justice-oriented educators to explore our overlapping experiences as liberatory practitioners and spiritual seekers. We met for over a year in fluid, yet predictable ways, sharing, breathing, moving, writing, reflecting, meditating. Engaging critical ethnography (Madison, 2007; 2011) and a spiritual dialogic approach (Edwards, 2016), I documented critical, interconnected approaches to professional engagements. This a critical and decolonial approach that is distinct from traditional notions of professional learning, in that it centers collective healing, interconnectedness and sustenance alongside pedagogies of justice and liberation. Situated in the in-betweenness of decolonial and anti-colonial theories, this studydescribes the context of our gatherings and the collective experiences of educators, including : awareness, embodiment, and healing; shapeshifting and multiplicity; and practicing interconnectedness and relationality. I conclude with guidelines and possibilities for critical, interconnected approaches to professional engagements.

Introduction

As a K-12 educator and then as a preservice teacher educator and professor, I held in tension a commitment to justice on the one hand and a deep yearning for connection, awareness, and spirituality on the other hand. I could not make sense of the psychic violence I was experiencing

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in justice-oriented educational communities (Shah, 2019) and I also did not feel like I fully belonged in spiritually oriented educational communities that seemed to deny my lived experiences and disparage emotions such as anger and rage. Traditional professional learning opportunities were also disappointing as they seemed to center disconnected, technical aspects of the how of teaching and learning, with little to no focus on who we were as educators. This study, focused on critically oriented and interconnected approaches to professional learning, is more than a curiosity; it represents a longing for professional communities that attend to the complexities of human experience.

In part, these tensions and grapplings are personal; As a second-generation, South Asian woman living on Dish with One Spoon Territory, the stolen lands of Tkaronto,[1] Canada, I identify as a colonized settler. While my ancestral and diasporic histories include multiple expressions of colonization and coloniality, I continuously contend with my relations to these lands and my responsibility in advocating for Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, land and life. These experiences as well as my experiences as a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, English-speaking, middle-class person have shaped my commitment to pedagogies of justice and activism as an elementary school teacher, a professor in a faculty of education and a community activist. For the past 12 years, my practice of vipassana meditation has dramatically altered my view of self, purpose, and relation, as has my interest in learning about Indigenous ways of knowing and being to many lands. My growing spiritual connection has profoundly impacted my pedagogy, with greater focus on contemplative, relational and embodied practices, a more sustained commitment to structural change and justice-oriented pedagogies, and a willingness to stay in tensions and contradictions.

In time, I found colleagues and friends with whom I could explore these, and other wonderings, despite our varied spiritual and religious worldviews and diverse lived experiences. We would meet in my home on Saturday mornings as a group of educators with varying educational roles and responsibilities, guided by our common commitment to liberatory pedagogies and our parallel paths of spiritual seeking, what we referred to as critical spirituality. Through quiet reflection, dialogue, and embodied practices, nestled in laughter, tears and food, these encounters became sacred spaces for healing and imagining, unearthing new possibilities for justice in our lives and in our work. Despite differences in our spiritual orientations and enactments of justice-oriented pedagogies, we witnessed ourselves into deeper truths of common, yet distinct experiences of pain and joy, longing and hope. While we had all been a part of professional learning communities over the years, we had never before journeyed inward, together, blurring the lines between personal

and professional selves. Over time, there was a slow and natural undoing of conditioning and expectation of what it meant to be a "professional", of hiding ourselves to fit into preconceived notions of professional learning, and internalizing the ongoing reminders that we did not belong in our fullness. This type of personal journeying became possible in a community of practitioners in which we witnessed and were witnessed by one another. While not intentional, we found ourselves moving between anti-colonial conversations that challenge Christian and western hegemonic notions of self and other and the beingness and embodiment of spiritual knowing and justice.

As a colonized settler on these lands, I heed the wisdom of Tanya Rodriguez (2021), who, drawing on the work of Tuck and Yang (2012) suggests that decolonization is not for White people, Black people, and People of Colour to engage in on stolen land, while benefitting from systems of oppression. Rodriquez urges to people who are not Indigenous to these lands to consider the notion of *uncolonizing*, a "voluntarily distancing, detaching from colonial morays." While acknowledging this perspective, I also consider complexities and complicities that exist within historical and contemporary power asymmetries. For example, we do not all benefit from these systems of oppression in the same way and some of us are simultaneously harmed. Some of us were brought to these lands by force through political and economic atrocities such as the transatlantic slave trade. I attempt to honour these complications *and* a body of decolonizing scholarship that I have learned from and that informs this study. This qualitative, ethnographic study involving K-12 and preservice educators explores how our community of educators engaged in critical, justice-oriented explorations that center spirituality and interconnected approaches to professional development, what I refer to in this study as critical, interconnected professional engagements. As I/we work through these ideas, I draw on understandings, both complimentary and contradictory, of anti-colonial and un/decolonizing framings.

Anti-Colonial and Un/Decolonizing Framings

Molefi Asante (2006) defines colonialism as that which "seeks to impose the will of one people on another and to use the resources of the imposed people for the benefit of the imposer" (p. ix). In the colonial imagination, one's proximity to more/less desirable land and one's ability to own land established/s differential values of human life, serving as justification for a "natural" order (Wynter, 2003). These practices of domination and imposition have also given rise to the resistance and agency of anti-colonial theories and praxis that challenge both historic legacies of colonialism and the ongoing dispossession of lands and peoples.

While colonization is about land and space, Asante (2006) reminds us that colonizers "did not only seize land, but also minds" (p. ix). Coloniality, as related to but distinct from colonization, refers to the control and management of knowledge by "universals" of Western modernity, Eurocentrism and global capitalism (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Sylvia Wynter (1989) refers to this as epistemological nihilation, the erasure of knowledge systems resulting in the negation of particular beings to legitimize the existence and superiority of other beings. Of significance to this study is the intentional erasure and subjugation of Indigenous spirituality by colonial logics based on warped notions of a spiritual poverty among Indigenous people (Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Wane, 2006; Zine, 2004).

Decolonization has re-emerged in anti-colonial discourse (Dei, 2019) and "is a messy, dynamic, and contradictory process" (Sium et al., 2012, p. II). Sium et al. (2012) state:

> …despite our certainty that decolonization centers Indigenous methods, peoples, and lands, the future is a 'tangible unknown', a constant (re)negotiating of power, place, identity and sovereignty. In these contestations, decolonization and Indigeneity are not merely reactionary nor in a binary relationship with colonial power. Decolonization is indeed oppositional to colonial ways of thinking and acting but demands an Indigenous starting point and an articulation of what decolonization means for Indigenous peoples around the globe. (p. I)

Tuck & Yang (2012) assert that decolonization necessarily includes land repatriation given the historical and continued imposition, dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples and land on Turtle Island, and the refusal to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty. Decoloniality, as related to but distinct from decolonization, gestures towards epistemic reconstitution and a re-emergence of a multiplicity of Indigenous ways of knowing (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), that deterritorializes and destabilizes the fixity of knowledge (Paraskeva, 2011) and actively disrupts espitemicide (Sousa Santos, 2007). While Indigenous knowledges are widely diverse and (re)shaped by time and space, many of the teachings promote interconnectedness, relationality, reciprocity, community, and humility, and as such, reclaim and reimagine possibilities for justice, for education, for our world.

There are also important tensions inherent in anti-colonial and decolonial discourses. On the one hand, some anti-colonial theories may turn away from the spiritual, the embodied, the more than human, and the unknown or mystical. As participants in this group, we found ourselves moving between these various locations, imagining and feeling our way into possibilities. As such, I am drawn to Bhattacharya's (2009) de/colonizing perspective that both imagines a utopian decolonizing possibility and acknowledges that colonizing and decolonizing forces exist in all spaces, challenging notions of

purity and absolutism and acknowledging that colonizing and decolonizing forces exist in all spaces and in all people. The dash in de/colonizing connotes a shuttling between experiences (and embodiments) of colonization and decolonization (Bhattacharya, 2009). Wong (2018) explores this concept in her piece on mindfulness as a decolonial practice:

> I can see no fixed or solid identity that I can call "me": Chinese, woman, or person of colour. Nor can I draw a clean line between the colonized and colonizer, consumer, and capitalist, oppressed and oppressor, human and nonhuman, or good and bad, and simply place myself in the first group within each of these dualistic constructions. (p. 257)

Adefarakan (2018), an Indigenous African woman of Yoruba descent, grapples with what it means to be "an Indigenous African on land to which one is not Indigenous," arguing for more flexible imaginings of Indigeneity (p. 230). I am especially drawn to this theorizing because while participants in this study are Indigenous to multiple lands and worldsenses, we are all settled on Turtle Island; some came by choice, and some were brought by force through the transatlantic slave trade or indentured servitude.

On the other hand, decolonizing approaches may construct Indigenous ways of knowing as "an addition" to a system that is inherently designed to engage in theft of land and life, or as a mechanism of distraction and bypass to maintain settler innocence and absolve settler responsibility. Therefore, I am also drawn to anti-colonial and decolonial discourses that take seriously practices of resistance to disrupt historic and present material effects on the lives of colonized peoples (Howard, 2006), and imagine transformative, embodied, interconnected futurities. In their anti-colonial theory, Simmons and Dei (2012) explore: the coloniality of knowledge production; power relations established by dominance and subordination; local experience, knowledge systems and voice; spirituality and spiritual knowing; and a politics of resistance, accountability and responsibility. Anti-colonial discourses also encourage us to seek out and interrogate interlocking systems of power to gain more nuanced understandings of how dominance is reproduced and sustained (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001) and acknowledge the resistance and survival of spiritual ways of knowing and being despite neo/colonial and connected powers (Shahjahan, Wagner & Wane, 2009; Wane, 2006). As Dei (2019) asserts, "anti-colonial and decoloniality are intertwined logics…[where]… the anti-colonial becomes the path to a decolonial future" (p. viii). Colonial logics are designed for fragmentation, categorization, competition, power, and control (Dei 2000; Shahjahan 2004). I turn my attention to how we might consider professional development and learning from radically different approaches to challenge these colonial logics.

From Professional Development to Professional Engagements

Professional Development and Professional Learning

Sancar et al. (2021) note that defining professional development is difficult given its multidimensional nature that occurs over a teacher's professional life. In attempting to develop a working framework for optimal professional development, they reviewed 156 papers. They noted that the majority of articles defined *traditional approaches* to professional development, focused on "processes and activities arranged to improve teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enhance students' learning" (Guskey, 2003) (Sancar et al. 2021, p. 4). They distinguish professional development based on *new approaches* that are broader in their aims and account for a teacher's "individual, social, and occupational dimensions in a collaborative, inquisitive, and self-directed learning environment" (p. 4). Gore et al. (2017) note growing agreement among scholars that similarly broadens traditional approaches to professional development as involving teachers as both learners and teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995), supporting teachers' emerging needs (Aelterman et al., 2013), integrating professional development into practice (Armour & Yelling, 2007) and therefore offering it within the school day (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001), aligning with school and system policies (Desimone, 2009), and promoting transformative change over calls for accountability (Kennedy, 2005). Kennedy (2016) found that inadequate attention has been paid to the relationships and power dynamics between professional development facilitators. She also found that teachers want concrete strategies that are clearly explained rather than prescriptive demands or general content knowledge in the absence of attention to application. Pulling this all together in a review of 156 articles on professional development, Sancar et al. (2021) put forth a framework from teacher education to retirement that acknowledges the role of reforms and policies, curriculum, supportive activities, collaboration, and school context in classroom practice (i.e., teacher characteristics, what to teach, how to teach, and student outcomes). Taking theses shifts into account, these frameworks largely ignore systems of power, identity, and constructions of difference. They also ignore the inner worlds of teachers and the importance of self-reflection and embodied awareness in professional development.

Professional development models have also been critiqued for their passive and intermittent nature, leading to professional learning models that are active and consistent, occur in the teaching environment, and are supported by teachers' colleagues (Stewart, 2014). Emerging out of research on school effectiveness and improvement, professional learning

communities (PLCs) are generally understood as a structure that supports teachers from the same school in having the autonomy to select their learning objectives and learn about collaboration in examining their practices to improve student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006). In this framework, teachers share and critically reflect on their practice "in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, and inclusive way" (De Neve, Devos, & Tuytens, 2015, p. 32). While the PLC model mirrors elements of the gatherings of educators in this study, they do not center justice-oriented approaches to education, nor do they center the spirituality of the educator. I turn my attention to both of these exploraitons below.

Justice-Oriented Approaches to Professional Development

Critiques of professional development suggest that neutral, apolitical, and ahistorical approaches to content-area learning are inadequate and should support educators in developing the skills of identifying and disrupting systems of oppression, engaging local communities, and teaching through an interdisciplinary lens (Fernández, 2019; Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Parkhouse et al. (2019) conducted a meta-ethnographic, systematic literature review of 40 studies focused on multicultural education–focused professional development programs. They found widely diverse approaches and components to professional development programs, with different theoretical approaches and conceptions of multicultural education, different notions of diversity, and different priority on the theory-practice spectrum. They found somewhat of an increased emphasis on models such as coaching, communities of practice, and action research, as well as critical self-evaluations of teaching, and immersion experiences (e.g., places of worship, community events, etc.).

Studies on anti-racist professional development are less evident. Kohli, Picower, Martinez, and Ortiz (2015) describe a model of critical professional development (CPD) "where teachers as engaged as politically-aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society" (p. 7). Other studies speak to hostile racial environments and the racial dehumanization that educators of colour experience (Kohli, 2019), including racial microaggressions (Endo, 2015; Kohli, 2016). As such, a growing number of justice-oriented teachers rely on critical professional development in preservice and in-service education (Kohli, 2019; Picower, 2015; Pour-Khorshid, 2016), which is intended to "provoke cooperative dialogue, build unity, provide shared leadership, and meet the critical needs of teachers" (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 11), and is a tool for racial literacy development and the retention of teachers

of colour (Kohli, 2019). Picower (2015) speaks to a critical professional development group called Inquiry to Action Group that created a sense of community, which benefitted participants emotionally (renewed energy and confidence), intellectually (content knowledge), and professionally (through resources and lesson plans), enhancing their practice inside and outside of the classroom.

One study spoke to the importance of healing in justice-oriented professional development. Pour-Khorshid (2016) describes the program H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Colour, a group that is part of the grassroots organization Teachers 4 Social Justice in the Bay Area of California. H.E.L.L.A. stands for Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action. It is described as a:

> …critical professional development space (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015) [that] incorporates critical dialogue, popular education (Friere, 1970), and radical healing (Ginwright, 2016) as professional support for teachers of color in the California Bay Area, who are interested in deepening their analyses of education and teaching through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth. (Yosso, 2005)

H.E.L.L.A., like our group in this study, is a professional development space that was formed because this type of space does not exist within the institution, challenging notions of professional/ism by encouraging educators to bring their whole selves into a space that attends to power asymmetries and the necessary healing to thrive in our bodies and in these roles.

I extend the critique by inviting us to consider how we might engage critical professional development that attends to different conceptions of knowing and being. How might onto-epistemologies that construct the Self as spiritual, interconnected, co-constituted and relational (Grande, 2018; Shahjahan 2010; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Wane, Manyimo & Ritskes, 2011) inform possibilities for critical professional learning and being? For example, how might immersion experiences focus on knowledge of self in relation to other, instead of knowledge of other? While these approaches have yet to significantly influence the scholarship and practice of professional development and professional learning (what I refer to as professional engagements in this paper), we see it being explored in the literature on teaching and learning in K-12 classrooms and higher education.

Critical, Interconnected Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Interconnectedness is a concept that has existed for generations in many Indigenous and Eastern cosmologies[2] and challenges understandings of Self as individual and separate and instead presents Self as in-

terconnected and relational (Grande, 2018; Shahjahan 2010; Wagner & Shahjahan, 2015; Wane, Manyimo & Ritskes, 2011). I turn my attention to several critical, interconnected approaches to schooling that center and disrupt power asymmetries and invite inner knowing and healing.

Inspired by Paulo Freire and Thich Nhat Hanh, the late bell hooks (1994) defines engaged pedagogy as the sacred act of teaching in which teachers attend to the souls of their students by facilitating their intellectual and spiritual development. Nina Asher (2003) describes her approach to teaching as a self-reflexive pedagogy of interbeing, which is "transformative, enabling both students and teachers to 'see with the eyes of interbeing' (Hanh, 1991, p. 98) and heal from the wounds of oppression" (p. 235). Ryoo, Crawford, Moreno & McLaren (2009) offer a notion of critical spiritual pedagogy that is centered in spirituality, humanity, and power, and "acknowledges the way students and teachers are exploited, fragmented, and Othered in schools while advocating for curricular and educational practices that are based in love and integrity in an interdependent classroom community" (p. 132). Wane, Manyimo, and Ritskes (2011) offer a compelling compilation of chapters in their book *Spirituality, Education and Society,* exploring the challenges and importance of centering spirituality in educational spaces, and drawing out tensions between spirituality and justice as well as spirituality and religion. In higher education, several scholars speak to the connection between spirituality or contemplative practices and social justice in various contexts to foster greater self-awareness, compassion and accountability (Berila 2014; 2016; Shahjahan, 2010; Shahjahan, Wagner, and Wane, 2009; Tisdell, 2000; 2003; Wagner & Shahjahan; 2015).

Critical and decolonizing scholars offer important considerations for professional engagements. One consideration is the recognition of the importance and interdependence of cognition, emotion, and spirituality. Asher (2010) invites us to challenge dualities within "by acknowledging one's implicatedness and recognizing that one is 'at the interstices' that one can engage in both the intellectual and the psychic/emotional work of decolonization" (p. 398). Berila (2016) suggests that dissolving the mind-body-spirit distinctions allow an appreciation for the body as a site of healing, a site of stories, and a "site of knowledge" (p. 38). Ng's (2018) notion of integrative critical embodied pedagogy conceptualizes embodied learning as decolonizing pedagogy that supports a form of integration that frees us from sources of separation. Decolonizing spaces offer a place of healing to attend to the spiritual and emotional harm from "the spiritual, cultural and mental alienation of the self that creates a sense of hopelessness and despair" (Dei, 2010, p. 3). In part, this necessitates the need to "destabilize the dominant understanding of affect and emotion as individual and natural (and therefore indis-

putable) and resituate affective encounters as sociohistorical" (Nixon & MacDonald, 2018, p. 117). This process revives an inner life force (Ng, 2018) and restores a lost humanity (Dei, 2010). Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of spiritual activism figures here. Rooted in epistemologies of interconnectedness and relationality, spiritual activism promotes a spirituality that challenges systems of oppression (Keating, 2005). This is similar to Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of Socially Engaged Buddhism that merges mindfulness with social action.

How might such critical and interconnected approaches apply to professional learning and professional development for educators? What might it look like to dissolve dualities and fragmented constructions, center the body as a site of decolonization, and contextualize these understandings within political, economic, and sociohistoric contexts that mediate spiritualites, emotionalities, physicalities and materialities? In this next section, I explain how this group of educators came to know what we know about professional engagements through our practice and reflection.

Embodied Inquiries

This study aims to engage constructs of relationality as embodied inquiries through a blending of critical ethnography (Madison, 2007; 2011) and a spiritual dialogic approach (Edwards, 2016). Critical ethnography aims to critique hegemony, oppression, and asymmetrical power relations to foster social change (Palmer & Caldas, 2015) within a particular lived domain (Madison, 2011). Critical ethnography incorporates reflexive inquiry as researchers employing this methodology see themselves as subjects that are inextricably connected to participants (Madison, 2011). My experiences and conversations with participants in this study mirrors the dialogic performative in critical ethnography (Conquergood, 1985; Madison, 2007). As Madison (2007) explains, "The *dialogic performative* is charged by a desire for a generative and embodied reciprocity, sometimes with pleasure and sometimes with pain. It is a mutual creation of something different and something more from the meeting of bodies in their contexts" (p. 320). Madison's three key aspects of the dialogic performative are described below: paying attention, reflexivity, and the imaginary.

This study also employs a spiritual dialogic research approach (Edwards, 2016) that extends the notion of dialogue to include knowledges and experiences that transcend the five senses. The spiritual dialogic research approach views a spiritual community as a method of inquiry. This approach focuses on *attention* to spiritual matters that arise in group settings with an understanding that while there are multiple versions of spiritual truth, spiritual reality is unknowable. A focus on

attention invites the researcher to explore feelings, beliefs, and events, as well as traditions, rituals, wisdom, and intuition, realms of human existence that are often kept hidden or private. The spiritual dialogic approach also centers *intention* to genuinely understand the process of spiritual development. In part, this intention requires a deeper dive into self-reflexivity that invites an exploration of one's own spiritual ways of knowing and being as researchers, which are often so embedded in our ontologies and epistemologies. This approach focuses on dialogue as a process of spiritual knowing in which the researcher and participants work together to develop an intersubjective understanding of a topic. In this study, we explore critical, interconnected approaches to professional engagements that invite and honour the spiritual realm of educators.

Context

In 2018, my colleague and I invited a group of educators to gather in community for connection and rejuvenation. As a former K-12 educator, participants in this study were colleagues and friends who were engaged in anti-oppression and anti-racist work in various educational settings and who were also inclined towards contemplative practices and spiritual seeking. This critical ethnographic study with a focus on the spiritual dialogic component captures my analysis of observations in our group gatherings, intimate one-on-one conversations with group members, and their writing reflections. As a group, we represent diverse identities in terms of race and ethnicity, sexuality, gender, social class, and faith/creed/spiritual worldview. We are classroom teachers, school administrators and senior leaders, retired teachers, and preservice instructors. We met bi/monthly on Saturday mornings in my home for about one year where we began informally, catching up over treats and coffee before making our way into a circle in my living room. With some on the sofa and others on cushions on the floor, we would begin with an embodied, centering activity such as intentional breathing, visualization, or bodily awareness. This allowed for a kind of *attention* to our inner and embodied knowing beyond cognitive reflection that a spiritual dialogic approach supports. This was followed by a prompt in the form of a poem or quote and time in quiet reflection before we shared insights and experiences in the larger group. Madison (2007) explains that when we are truly paying attention to each other in a dialogic performative, when we are in body-to-body presence with others, we are co-creative and co-constitutive.

The group was fluid, in that new members would join over time, and we rarely had the same configuration of 10-15 people in the room. Yet, there was a predictable structure in which we would review and commit to practicing the eleven Touchstones of the Circle of Trust (Palmer,

2008)[3], norms that were familiar to some of us from different contexts. To be in circle in this way is to exercise a form of radical acceptance through witnessing, the experience of which is often described as transformative for both the speaker and the listener. Paradoxically, in listening to another person's story, while aware of our thoughts and emotions, we hear deeper into our own truths. As in dialogic relationships that involve co-witnessing between researcher and researched (Conquergood, 1985), we witnessed each other, again and again, without agenda or intention, and we were continually remade by the exchanges between us and the possibilities for imagining otherwise. In this space, we fostered the *intention* of understanding ourselves as spiritual beings engaging in justice-oriented work in educational spaces. This kind of inner work is slow and intentional, never hurried along in a particular direction. It wanders, (un)settles, disrupts, enlivens, connects, breaks apart, and is never finished.

Noblit et al. (2004) suggest that "Critical ethnographers must explicitly consider how their own acts of studying and representing people and situations are acts of domination even as critical ethnographers reveal the same in what they study" (p. 3). In studying a group to which I belonged and to which I was instrumental in forming, my commitment to group members and myself was to *work the hyphen* (Fine's, 1994), to continuously and critically reflect on how I was constituted by relation, acknowledging dynamics of personal friendships, power relations, and multiple, intersecting positionalities. Minh-ha (1988) explains the role of the insider-outsider as one that "stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out gesturing 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference… and 'I am different' while unsettling the very definition of otherness arrived at" (para. 12). While this has been my experience throughout the study, I offer that this was a collective experience of negotiating difference and inquiring about our experiences. Madison (2007) suggests that critical ethnographers nether hide their subjectivity nor make themselves the primary subject of their study and recognize the interconnections and effects of collective reflexivities. I would add collective embodiments.

As we became more curious about how these gatherings informed our educational practices, I invited group members to have one-on-one conversations with me and share their reflections through journal entries to capture their insights. 10 group members participated in the one-on-one conversation and 5 of them also shared journal entries. Our conversations explored understandings of spirituality and the connections to education for justice and liberation. As Madison (2007) explains, we used the dialogic performative to shake up our consciousnesses and imagine futures that did not yet exist. Many of these conversations occurred over food and drink in my home or other comfortable locations.

Conversations were recorded for transcription and notes were taken during the interviews to note relational dynamics, personal reflections, and insights. In each conversation, we were aiming to make sense of each other, ourselves, and ideas of criticality and interconnectedness. After a year of meeting in my home, many of us continued to meet more formally in Circles of Trust (Palmer, 2008) under the direction of Center for Courage and Renewal facilitators. In part, this allowed me to engage more fully as a participant, rather than a planner-participant. The structure of these gatherings was similar with time for personal reflections, deep sharing in triads, and large group reflections. I continued to observe patterns and mine insights that emerged from my conversations and interactions with educators in the group, recognizing the change in context; this group met more formally, under the direction of an established organization, and included non-educators. These and other meetings continue to occur. One group member held a circle for Black educators on the beach at sunrise.

I reviewed and analyzed the detailed notes that I took before and after each of the gatherings in my home as well as email exchanges between me and my colleague about the evolution of our gatherings. I reviewed the transcripts of my conversations with group members as well journal entries provided. I also reviewed observations notes of our gatherings with facilitators from the Center for Courage and Renewal and ongoing conversations with educators in this space. I was looking for the aspects of this type of engagement that allowed us to simply be and be in relation differently. What specifically about our time together allowed for a sense of deeper connection and rejuvenation in our work as justice-oriented advocates and spiritual seekers? The first round of coding examined the "effects" of these professional engagements on our professional and personal lives, which upheld colonial narratives of progress, closure, and finality. Then, I turned my attention to the process of this work. How were we being together? How were we becoming? I was looking for patterns in how we engaged, and how these embodied engagements influenced how we related to ourselves, one another, and our work in educational justice. I returned to the literature that speaks to the importance of healing, self-awareness, relationships, community, but spoke less to how communities of practice might foster these orientations. This study seeks to describe the how of critical, interconnected professional engagements.

As I noted themes in what was said and not said, I would drop into my body to identify energies that belonged to me and energies that belonged to others. This form of analysis goes far beyond cognitive approaches to coding and categorizing data. I shared emerging ideas and themes with group members for feedback and resonance checks. I was

interested in how the ideas resonated with them and how that resonance changed over time. The several iterations of this paper mirror changes in individual and collective thinking and being over the course of two years. It also captures the realms of possibility that we are dreaming of in relation to critical, interconnected professional engagements.

Critical, Interconnected Professional Engagements

This next section outlines important elements of and conditions for professional engagements with an intended purpose of fostering critical interconnectedness for un/being and un/becoming.

Awareness, Embodiment and Healing

As we attended to our thoughts and bodily sensations, as the attention drew inward and outward again and again, these meetings became spaces to witness and be witnessed into deeper parts of our personal and professional selves. In this space, we were able to access and work with the pain we experienced as educators. Some participants reflected on the pain they experience as educators at the hands of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy and some shared feelings of powerlessness and pain in witnessing violence and harm enacted on students daily. We shared our fears and insecurities, the ways in which our internal struggles for power and freedom played out in education and society, and the contradictions, tensions and complicities that lay deep in our bodies as we acknowledged harm that we were enacting on ourselves and our students. There were moments when we forgot to censor ourselves, moments of radical honesty, a laying bare of the burdens of having to perform, pretend, or deny our selfhood to align with expectations of "professionalism." On several occasions, stories, words, sounds, or tears would emerge for participants as though from a more unconscious place deep within the body.

Many participants referred to this group not only as a place where we could connect to our own pain, but where we could increase our capacity to bear witness to the pain of others, while recognizing the gift and responsibility of this bearing witness to undo and unlearn the parts of ourselves that are implicated in the suffering of others. A white woman that identifies as spiritual and not religious reflected on the importance of these spaces in helping to make sense of her inner terrain and releasing emotions that would otherwise be directed at her students or herself. Similarly, in speaking to the importance of a consistent, contemplative practice, a South Asian woman who identifies as Buddhist noted:

> …bearing witness... a witness to systemic barriers that are out there and consequently the tremendous suffering of many, many, many stu-

> dents in our system have also motivated me to practice more. I need to ground myself to hold all that pain. I have to respond to that suffering in a real way, with actons that are rooted in wisdom and compassion all the time.

The experience of bearing witness and being witnessed allows for experiences and energies of shame and dispossession to shift to creative energies of anger, restoration, and humanity, changing our abilities to stay with suffering and perhaps transmute it. Participants named having access to a broader range of human experience in our gatherings, enabling different constructions of self and other that included but were not limited to trauma narratives. As an East Asian woman who draws from multiple eastern spiritualities shared, "This incident caused such shame in me. But it is liberating to know that I'm not alone, that others have experienced similar things. And now I'm angry and want to do something about it!" In the act of bearing witness to our individual and collective pain, we began to depersonalize our emotions and situate them within larger sociohistorical and sociopolitical contexts. It also created possibilities for identifying internal complicities and contradictions as we softened dualities. As one South Asian, Muslim participant explains, "Because of the harm that Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized people have had to endure, if we don't do the work of healing, we actually replicate and uphold colonial structures… the same structures that are harming us."

Participants also spoke to complexities of blurring spiritual practices and commitments to justice. In speaking to the ways that spirituality is often used to bypass materiality, one White woman notes:

> You have to do the inner work with your shadow, and you have to do the work with the shadow of the world. In the shadow of the world, it's racism, it's sexism, it's oppression. It's material in that way. It is not about spiritual bypassing. See that to me is not real spirituality, because real spirituality is to see and witness and be with the suffering. Not to say, "Oh, it's an illusion." That's a bypass.

One Black woman spoke to the ways in which school initiatives intended to support wellness and mental health are often individualized, offering little to no analysis of how systems of oppression harm children and are often used to "calm" particular children, especially Black boys, who are painted as "out of control" and "troublesome." Several participants also spoke to the detrimental effects of pursuing social, political, and economic justice that is separate from spiritual connection. Some spoke of being so involved in the immediate fight that they would forget the long-term vision, while others spoke about needing to feel the freedom and liberation they were fighting for deep in their bodies. Participants

explored what it might look like to blur the binary between political activism and spiritual activism (Anzaldua, 2002). At times, they described an activism that demands fierceness and boldness that engages more of our whole selves, and other times, they described the importance of silence, pause, and bearing witness without acting, inviting deep personal reflection that invites us to consider some form of relation, even through conflict and discontent.

This type of activism also constructs self-care and community-care as active forms of resistance. As one South Asian participant shared:

> So often what ends up happening is that we become toxic with each other. We police each other to death. We don't spend time on our own healing, or we hit rock-bottom, and we have to pull away from everything…Everywhere you look, colonization wins. If we fight, it wins because the law comes down on you. You fight and you become sick, the system wins. You choose not to fight, the system wins… So how do you do this work and maintain a whole sense of self? And I think that's where spirituality really helps you because you see it as a journey as opposed to a moment.

A white woman spoke to the importance of building in regular opportunities in her life to connect inward for rejuvenation and regeneration. A Black female participant shared the importance of "being with her people" so she could let her guard down and experience comfort and joy in her body. On many occasions participants shared their experience of this space as one that was inherently counter-cultural to other professional opportunities to connect with colleagues because it fostered communal care of our whole selves. This space understood the importance of ongoing healing in an inherently human profession and depersonalized our individual experiences of shame and guilt by both witnessing and being witnessed and situating these emotions in a larger socio-political context.

Multiplicities and Shapeshifting

As we explored our multiple, dynamic selves, we engaged in a practice of shapeshifting, playing with the edges of ideas, people, identities, living and non-living, past and present. Several of us spoke about our multiple, and at times contradictory selves. We used terms like shadow selves or wounded selves, as well our whole and real selves. There was a growing awareness and comfort with naming our shadows and wounds as parts of a larger whole, recognizing that they were not permanent fixtures in our constructs of self. We also explored how our multiple selves influence how and why we engage in justice-oriented pedagogies. As one White woman who identifies as spiritual explained:

> Some people can get inflated with a cause. They get inflated by the archetype of the warrior, or the saviour, or the liberator. People get inflated and that's dangerous. That's part of the shadow. I think another shadow is victimization in that people stay in victimization. Can't see beyond, can't see their own choices as well. I think another shadow is spiritual bypass... And power is always a shadow. Power and control... because it's harder to live with the reality that we're all very vulnerable and could break any moment.

An awareness of multiple and contradictory selves also breeds awareness of the partiality of our dynamic natures. One South Asian participant shared that when he can see the parts that are operating, knowing that they are simply part of a larger whole, he can engage that part with greater attention instead of feeling overwhelmed or all-consumed by it. One White male stated, "It's like looking through stained glass. We see partial."

This also prompted us to consider how our "larger wholes" or the containers that held our multiples selves were conditioned differently by systems of oppression. Several of us explored the need to reframe unacknowledged societal privilege as spiritual disconnection that limits our containers and a full range of human experience. As one South Asian participant explores:

> It has harmed our ability to have whole relationships and be expressive in relationship because we are taught that that's not what men do, right? So, you're benefiting from this privilege of just being a man. And then you cannot fully be who you are because society tells you that you are supposed to be these things and not these things... So truly working for social justice means me understanding how my privilege is wrapped up around constructions of masculinity and requires me to do some heavy work around the toxicity of the construction of that.

These explorations felt both scary and dangerous on the one hand and illuminating on the other hand. From this vantage point, white supremacy, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, colonization, imperialism, and other forms of oppression hurt us all, albeit differently. This includes White, Christian, male, able- bodied, cisgendered, heterosexual, middle/upper-class people. This does not mean that we recenter whiteness or maleness or settler-ness, nor does it mean that we turn our gaze away from those who experience violence and death because of colonization, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and other systems of oppression. It means that we challenge the binary between these two gazes. This perspective invites us to see and know each other for, and through, our positions, ideas, attitudes, and orientations, while attending to power asymmetries, contexts, and histories. It also invites recognition of the tremendous strength and spiritual wisdom that often accompanies struggle and suffering.

We also spoke about the ways in which the environment was shaping us as humans and educators. As we shared food and sat in a circle in my living room or in a cozy conference center, outside of institutions that were sources of stress and trauma, armour was falling, connection was strengthening, and possibilities were emerging. One Black woman commented on feeling a sense of freedom in being able to explore intersecting identities and simultaneously not being singularly defined by her identities. In a reflective journal entry, one participant wrote, "I'm not sure what happens here. I just know that those pillows hold parts of me that allow other parts to come out." In being formed and reformed, made and remade by relation, space and time, these gatherings invited a being and becoming, and an undoing of the effects of institutional oppression, where we might begin to blur the lines between self/other.

Practicing Relationality

These encounters prompted us to explore fundamental questions about what it means to not only be in relation, but to be made of relation. As one White participant noted, "That's part of the ultimate truth we work towards, but it's not even about my higher self and your higher self being friends. I think they're connected. They're extensions of each other." Several participants also named the interdependence and interbeing they experience with lands and waters, with animals and other creatures, and with ancestors, future generations, and the entire cosmos. In speaking to the necessity of these types of learning engagements, one Black participant wrote, "And not just communities of human beings, but community as connected to land, and connected to the environments, and connected to all living creation."

We questioned where one person or idea begins and ends as we played with the idea of relational identities and ideas. For example, we explored Kumashiro's (2000) profound statement, "I do not mean that we should see the Self in the Other or the Self as the Other, but that we should deconstruct the Self/Other binary" (p. 45). As such, we explored the notion that "our sense of normalcy needs, even as it negates, the Other" (p. 45). We explored how the need for moral righteousness, superiority, power, control, or the desire to enact activist identities, might need, even as they negate others, constructing them in partial and dehumanizing ways. We explored these ideas in relation to students and colleagues, questioning how the construction of o/Others is influenced by our individual archetypes, needs, fears and failures. One South Asian participant who identifies with eastern spiritualities asked, "How do I not become the hate that I see in the world? Has the hate in me always been there? Is it activated when I see hate in the

world? If so, how am I any different from those who more outwardly display hate?"

Our responsibilities, integrities and commitments to care required the practice of holding tensions in this space. For example, one White participant explains, "But I think you have to individuate to truly be in community. And when community subsumes your individual identity in different ways, I think that is a loss to the collective." Yet, critical, spiritual communities can also hold us to higher levels of responsibility as a South Asian participant explains:

> Your liberation and my liberation are bound together and if I don't actively work on myself to work on my own self liberation, in terms of understanding how I am complicit or harmed by these structures, I can't help anybody else. So, the conversations that we don't have is about how our ego plays into the work that we do.

A related tension was the desire for deep connection without erasing or dishonouring difference. As a group of justice-oriented practitioners, we often imagined the dangers and possibilities of these spaces in professional learning opportunities in which injustice is commonplace and difference is demonized. This group was formed in difference; the participants hold different positionalities, different roles in education, different emphases in their commitments to justice, and different spiritual beliefs. Difference necessitates encounters with the self in which experiences of undoing, unlearning, and unbeing are witnessed, into difference. Some participants also expressed a yearning to create additional spaces that spoke to particular lived experiences and positional realities, such as spaces for Black educators, queer educators, or educational leaders. We spoke about the dangers of White people unlearning white supremacy in the presence of Black, Indigenous, and racialized colleagues and the need for them to both engage in their own work of racial healing and accountability and engage in coalition-building and solidarity work with colleagues of colour to dismantle the system of white supremacy (Shah & Peek, 2020, Tanner, 2019).

Some participants shared that these spaces invited them to know parts of their collective selves that had long been invisibilized, whether areas of privilege that were designed to be invisible, or internalized oppression that was invisibilized through shame and fear. Others shared that they were coming to know parts of themselves that lay beneath experiences of socialization and racialization, parts that felt deeply interconnected with all life. As one White participant shares:

> We're all connected. We must honour that interconnection in order to live on this planet, to exist in this universe, and there is something fundamentally that makes me different. How do I hold those things that make us different in a way that honours you, honours me, and is responsible to the common project that we must work together to preser

In interviews and journals, several participants played with the idea of "I", inquiring about how our experiences, ideas, and pedagogies change when "I" is expanded to include all living beings.

Towards Critical Interconnected Approaches to Professional Engagements

Traditional approaches to professional development have prioritized developing teachers' discrete skills and knowledges to support narrow definitions of student learning (Sancar et al, 2021). More progressive notions of professional development account for system priorities, teachers' interests and needs, the application of theory to practice, transformation of practice over accountability, and power dynamics between educators and facilitators (Gore et al, 2017; Kennedy, 2016). This body of literature is largely void of an analysis of power, socio-political and historical contexts, and difference. While there have been calls to challenge apolitical and seemingly neutral approaches to professional development (Fernández, 2019; Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015), studies that center power and difference differ greatly in their approach, theoretical framing, and outcomes (Parkhouse et al., 2019). We build on these studies to include approaches to professional learning that center different knowledge systems with a focus on interconnectedness, embodiment, self-reflexivity, and healing (Asher, 2003; 2010; Berila, 2014; 2016; Dei, 2010; hooks, 1994; Ryoo, Crawford, Moreno & McLaren, 2009; Wane, Manyimo & Ritskes, 2011). In this section, I draw on findings in this study to outline important considerations for critical, interconnected approaches to professional engagements for educators.

First, professional engagements must normalize the place of spirituality and religion in the lives of educators and students. I include religion here to caution against the creation of a potentially dangerous binary that positions religion as "bad" and spirituality as "good" (Shahjahan, 2010). Despite the many ways that educators come to experiences of humanization, healing and radical love, many of us in this study were hesitant to publicly name the influence of contemplative practices and spiritual or religious ways of knowing on our educational practices for fear of professional ridicule or ostracization. In their book *Spirituality, Education and Society*, Wane, Manyimo, and Ritskes (2011) speak to the ways in which spirituality is silenced in higher education (and I would add K-12 education and preservice education). They also remind us that centering spirituality is not simply an attempt to support individual teachers; centering spirituality transforms broken systems that serve to fragment us further and requires that we "look inward, ponder deeply, and witness the contents of our consciousness" (p. xix).

Second, professional engagements must challenge the binaries between our spiritual and justice-oriented selves and recognize their co-constitutive natures, so as not to deny schools as sites of struggle and resistance, nor reinforce Christian hegemony in our justice-oriented approaches. To dismiss embodied experiences of interconnectedness and wholeness, and inquiries into mystery and the unknown, also denies educators access to some of their greatest resources in living and educating for freedom. Instead, we might blur the binary between mind, body, and spirit, recognizing the mind as a necessary, but limited partner in educational liberation and freedom. The mind necessarily engages in inquiries such as how can educators foster communities of learning in environments intended to fragment knowledge and relation? Professional engagements allow us to challenge epistemic nihilation (Wynter, 1989) and honour cosmologies in which learning emerges in relation, from the body, from unexpected insights, through healing, in community, from our elders, ancestors and future generations, and from the land. This practice invites educators to learn from different and unexpected places.

Third, professional engagements must curate embodied encounters with the self, with a focus on developing self- and relational awareness, centering emotional wellness and healing from traumas past-present-future, and inviting opportunities to stay with tension, contradiction, and ambiguity. They can offer practices that invite us to reclaim our humanity and meet our complicities and complexities with compassion and kindness, without turning away from them or turning away from ourselves and each other in the process. This practice of staying-with engenders humility, critical reflexivity, and a recognition of our unfinishedness (Freire, 1998) that keeps us searching and committed to being and becoming. Critical, interconnected professional engagements invite us to consider what is made possible when we approach structural oppression and healing from this interconnected standpoint, in that we are not as stable, separate, or self-made as colonialism, white supremacy and capitalism would have us believe. As such, they increase our capacity to acknowledge the tremendous failure of schooling to produce humane communities of learning and being, and the tremendous success of schooling as processes of social reproduction.

Fourth, many of these types of professional engagements may not be captured in the literature, because, like H.E.L.L.A. (Pour-Khorshid, 2016), these groups emerged as grassroots collectives to fill needs that educational institutions have failed to provide. In many ways, professional engagements are examples of (un)professional (un)learning, in that they challenge notions of "professionalism" and "learning" that are steeped in the logics of white supremacy, settler colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. If we take seriously how these communities of practi-

tioners come to gather, on their own time and at their own expense, we must consider the importance of professional engagements that are invitational and fluid. We might invite different educators to take turns leading the gatherings, which can be held off school property to invite educators to bring more of their whole selves to the experience. Yet, there needs to be a structured container including agreed upon norms that hold us responsible to ourselves and each another so that we can deepen our reflexivity and embodied healing in a safe and predictable environment.

Fifth, this all takes time. I join critical, feminist, and decolonizing scholars that call for slow scholarship, which challenges neoliberal and colonizing metrics of "productivity" (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Mountz et al. 2015; O'Neill, 2014; Shahjahan, 2015). We might consider professional engagements that are slow, that engage different purposes, that relax attachments to goals and outcomes, and that allow us to imagine and experience otherwise. Critical, interconnected professional engagements disrupt colonial narratives of progress and productivity and instead ask what we might learn, and who we might be, if we rest in the unknown, the unanswered, the unfinished, the not yet.

Notes

[1] "Toronto" is derived from the Mohawk word Tkaronto, meaning "a gathering place."

[2] The notion of Ubuntu, "I am because we are" or "a person is a person through other persons" has roots in African philosophy and spirituality, generally referred to as African Humanism (Hailey, 2008). Similarly, All My Relations is a concept of interconnectedness and interdependence known to most Indigenous people in North America that includes ancestors, descendants, and those still to come (Battiste, 2013; Haig-Brown, 2008; King, 1990), as well as all animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined (King, *All My Relations*). The Buddhist concept of interbeing, or Anatta in Pali, speaks to the notion of non-self or the substance-less of all animate and inanimate objects. Similarly, human beings do not have a separate self and can only inter-be in relation to everything else (Nhat Hanh, 2015).

[3] We held as central to each gathering the eleven Touchstones of the Circle of Trust (Palmer, 2008), which include: Give and receive welcome; Be present as fully as possible; What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand; Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth; No fixing, saving, advising or correcting; Learn to respond to others with open, honest questions; When the going gets rough, turn to wonder; Attend to your own inner teacher; Trust and learn from the silence; Observe confidentiality; and Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was you needed when you arrived.

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