

Loving Difference: Embracing Critical Love and Art in Anti-Oppressive Teacher Education

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Abstract: We share findings from a critical practitioner inquiry into a new arts-integrated anti-oppressive education course in a teacher certification program. The course responds to pre-service teachers' (PSTs) desire for more learning opportunities around equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. Co-designed and co-taught by an arts educator and artist-in-residence with two student participant research assistants, the course foregrounded themes of critical love, unsettling "cancel culture," and emergence. We focus our inquiry on the instructors' practices, reflexively storying joyful moments, creative tensions, missteps, and emergent insights experienced throughout the course.

Keywords: Critical Love; Artist-in-residence; Arts integration; Teacher Education; Anti-Oppressive Education; Emergence; Critical Practitioner Inquiry

Navigating the tensions of anti-oppressive education requires a commitment to creative disruption: surrounding a new arts-integrated course in a teacher certification program at Mount Royal University in Mohkinstsis (Calgary, Alberta). A departmental survey (Schaffer et al., 2025) showed that pre-service teachers (PSTs) wanted more learning about equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (EDIA). The 12-week Winter 2025 course was co-designed and co-taught by an arts teacher educator and artist-in-residence, and supported by a student participant research assistant. We set out to create a unique learning experience through the arts to call 36 PSTs into anti-oppressive education (Callaghan et al., 2023; Kumashiro, 2000b), foregrounding themes of critical love (hooks, 1994, 2000; Sealey-Ruiz, 2023) and unsettling *cancel culture* (brown, 2020). The course was designed to be different, emergent, and responsive to the PSTs. We focus our inquiry on the practices of the instructors, not on performance of the PSTs. Rather than offer a replicable model, we story the joyful moments, creative tensions, missteps, and emergent insights during the course, hopeful that our critical reflections will prompt future dialogue and explorations.

The project began when Kristen Schaffer, the department's art teacher educator, developed her first arts-based anti-oppressive education course after leading departmental EDIA-survey work. To generate creative openings, distribute instructor power, forge connections with the local arts community, and learn from another's practice, she secured funding for an artist-in-residence to co-create and co-teach it (e.g., LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019). Through an interview process she selected Kodie Rollan in November 2024: a local dramaturg, Artistic Director of Chromatic Theatre, university drama instructor, and practitioner rooted in decolonial and anti-oppressive traditions. Kristen and Kodie jointly determined the course aims, emergent flow, content, assignments, and readings, and alternated teaching. Kristen alone graded. The residency was intended to support reciprocal learning, whether or not it resulted in artistic productions. To remain accountable to the PSTs and course as a critical practitioner (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), Kristen hired Daniela Quintero, a sociology student (not a PST) as a student participant research assistant (Cook-Sather, 2011). Daniela audited and consulted as the course and research unfolded. After grades were submitted, course participant Reginald San Jose was hired as a second student participant research assistant. With consent, the other 35 PSTs contributed through anonymous feedback, anecdotal accounts, and assignment responses.

Together, we pursued several lines of inquiry while creating an anti-oppressive educational experience that provoked critical and creative reflection, thought, and action. Our overarching inquiry and pedagogical question for the PSTs was: How did centering critical love, emergence, and the arts enable us to enact anti-oppressive education? For the authors and PSTs, this meant teaching and learning *with*, *about*, and *through* the arts.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework for this course brings together theories and approaches within the field of anti-oppressive education, with significant reference to the work of Kevin Kumashiro (2000b, 2000a). We set about creating a course with a different feel from other courses in the program, sensing that a too-familiar course would foreclose possibilities for learning (hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2000b). It was important to Kristen and Kodie that the course be responsive to PSTs and emergent (brown, 2017). We also wished to disrupt PSTs' fears (brown, 2020) and embrace critical love (hooks, 1994, 2000) by leveraging the promise of arts-integration and artist residencies for social justice (Donahue et al., 2024; Shields et al., 2021).

Anti-oppressive Education

In their seminal text, *Towards a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*, Kumashiro (2000b) describes anti-oppressive education as "an attempt to address the myriad ways in which racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression play out in schools [...] and articulating ways to work against it" (p. 25). He names the opportunities and challenges of four approaches, where *the Other* represents those who are marginalized in society: (1) education for the Other; (2) education about the Other; (3) education that is critical (e.g., Freire [2000]) of privileging and othering; and (4) education that changes students and society. He recommends a combination of these methods, looking at both systemic and individual relationships to oppression and privilege, and turning to "theories that remain marginalized in educational research" (p. 25).

Daftary and Sugrue (2022) describe five essential anti-oppressive practices: "(1) cultural humility, (2) challenging oppression and injustice, (3) building relationships with students and families, (4) support and accountability within the school community, and (5) modifying the

curriculum” (p. 148). These approaches, when practiced in a familiar, trust-based environment, can support students who experience fear, distaste, and apathy towards anti-oppressive education. Airtton (2018) adds that when we care for the wellbeing of students, it is possible to engage in the “extra,” but not “excessive,” challenge and crises which are encountered (as cited in Callaghan et al., 2023, p. 7).

Emergence

Kumashiro (2000b) grounds anti-oppressive education in a feminist, poststructural view of knowledge as always “situated” (p. 30)--a partial and embodied perspective (Haraway, 1988)--and of education as inherently “unknowable” because education always engages partial and situated knowledge (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 113). In this context, Kumashiro (2000b), citing Britzman (1998), describes the educator’s role to support students through crises of learning, that is an unknowable, situated learning experience, which entails a challenging change-making process of unlearning and relearning to emerge differently. The aim, Kumashiro (2000a) clarifies, is not to emerge from crisis better than before, but different in relation to anti-oppressive education.

brown (2017) adds to our understanding of emergence, or the process of becoming, describing it as a mode for working towards anti-oppressive worlds while embracing anti-oppressive practices despite oppressive systems for working. Re-imagining existing structures will open up a plurality of space for new and previously denied ways of being and knowing. brown (2017) recommends small, responsive, relational engagement, and moving at the “speed of trust” (p. 42), noting that these processes take time.

Cancel Culture

Kristen and Kodie set out to create an emergent course to call PSTs into anti-oppressive education and move towards a vision of schools as liberatory spaces (Sealey-Ruiz, 2023). Education is shaped by oppression (e.g., Whiteness, colonialism, heteronormativity) (Marom, 2023, p. 185), and privileges those who help to reproduce the ongoing oppression. PSTs vocalized fears of the consequences of making a mistake, or engaging in cultural appropriation in a province that restricts teacher autonomy, and imposes oppressive, transphobic policies (Schaffer et al., 2023). PSTs felt, in order to be a “good Canadian teacher,” one should uphold the status quo (Marom, 2023, p. 185). They even feared being cancelled or shunned for being different. brown (2020) argues “when we engage in knee-jerk call outs as a conflict-resolution device, or issue instant consequences with no process, we become a cancer unto ourselves, unto movements and communities” (p. 58). This is not to excuse oppressive systems and individuals from responsibility for harm and abuse, but centre healing, accountability, and trust as imperatives for education.

Critical Love

We see love (hooks, 1994, 2000; Sealey-Ruiz, 2023) as a critical, embodied, and relational counternarrative to Cancel Culture. As learned from Black feminist scholars, critical love is a liberatory pedagogical stance that disrupts dehumanizing norms in teacher education by centering care, wellbeing, accountability, transformation, and loving the whole person (Brooks, 2017). hooks (1994) advocates for love in teaching: “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential” (p. 13). Koders Shah & Tsang (2023) describe love:

My friend, in the moments when you are driven to name dimensions of power and oppression in the classroom, in the moments when you are asked to come together in vulnerability with your learners; in the moments where you are struck by the beauty of students coming together for the sake of community, call such moments for what they are: call them love (p. 11).

Despite the power of love as a force for social justice, love remains taboo in academic discourse (Ohito, 2019), connecting the hegemonic distaste for love in how it “disrupts hierarchies of power, refuses neutrality, and demands presence” (hooks, 2000, p. 194). Yet, critical love is underexplored empirically (Ghiasvand & Sharifpour, 2024).

Sealey-Ruiz (2023) expands theorizations of critical love through her *Archaeology of Self*TM, a framework linking love to historical literacy, self-excavation, and racial justice. She writes, “it is the ‘self’ that does the work of critical love, critical humility, and historical literacy” (p. 61). Therefore, love is agential, transcending the personal to transform structures. In her TEDx talk *Truth, Love, & Racial Literacy*, Sealey-Ruiz (2022) reasons what the student experience might be if every teacher meets every student with love, emphasizing, “returning to love can restore our humanity” (00:09:35). Without love, she warns, justice work risks reinforcing the very harm it seeks to undo.

Arts-integrated Learning

hooks (2000) makes a connection between love and artistic practice, noting that art is a “vehicle for the sharing of life-affirming thoughts” (p. xvii). Greene (1995) also highlights the power of the arts (e.g., visual, performing, etc.) to open up radical possibilities by challenging oppressive norms and inviting individuals and collectives to envision expansive ways of being and knowing. Looking at creativity which accompanies the arts, Callaghan et al. (2023), citing Freire (2000) and hooks (1994), assert “despite the history and current reality of education as an oppressive force, anti-oppressive educators insist that we can (and must) find creative and collaborative ways to resist, deconstruct, and reimagine education as a transformational and liberatory process” (p. 2). Thus, the arts help us re-imagine education, embrace situated and marginalized knowledge, and prompt new ways of being. Through collective artmaking, students and teachers can engage with complex social themes, cultivating critical humility and moving through challenges (Donahue et al., 2024). Thus, arts integration and the creativity and criticality activated cyclically affect teachers as much as students.

Artists-in-residence in Education

Artists-in-residence programs promote arts integration and disrupt traditional educational paradigms, fostering creativity and professional growth for both students and educators. Teacher-artist partnership programs seek to create longer-term professional development opportunities for teachers and enable arts-based pedagogical approaches (Morrissey & Kenny, 2023). Kind et al. (2007) observed that artists and teachers, when strong communication was established, significantly influenced and shaped each other's teaching approaches and artistic practices. In the provision of space and administrative support for experimentation, teachers' confidence, self-efficacy, and interest in teaching the arts improve (Andrews, 2008). Oreck (2004) notes teachers and artists may have to work through conflicting agendas or different perspectives about art and art education.

In the context of teacher education, LeBlanc and Irwin (2019) described how, by bringing artists, researchers, and teachers together to study contemporary national identity, all involved

learned “to think, rethink, and to think again” (p. 346). In Shields et al. (2021), an artist-in-residence set up a studio space and informally engaged PSTs in arts-based learning and pedagogical inquiry. They

Propose that the value of an artist-in-residence is not through pre-planned learning outcomes that support a defined curriculum, but rather through the capacity of an artist-in-residence to prompt students and faculty to consider ways of learning that fall outside of how they understand curriculum (p. 96).

The Ontario Arts Education Institute (Upitis et al., 1999) and the Odyssey Project: Teacher Development in the Arts (Andrews, 2008) provided intensive professional development for in-service teachers during the summer break. This project was a 2-week program in which teachers collaborated with artists in studios, galleries, and concert venues. A supportive culture fostered trust, risk-taking, creativity, and reflection, conditions that are conducive to anti-oppressive education.

Methodology

Critical practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) is a methodological approach grounded in critical, feminist theories aiming to humanize and democratize research. Zeni (2001) asserts “practitioner research is inquiry into one’s own practice. Therefore, we begin by looking at ourselves and what we bring to the research—personally, culturally, and professionally” (p. 157). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) continued their description of this form of inquiry, “which refers to the reciprocal and recursive relationships of research and practice (or of theorizing and doing), as well as the dialectic of generating local knowledge of practice while also making that knowledge accessible outside the local context” (p. x). As the course instructors and course designers, Kristen and Kodie (particularly the former) wielded a great deal of power in terms of facilitating the course, student engagement, content, and assessment. In anti-oppressive work, power should be redistributed toward the community to support a more equitable and just distribution of authority (Minkler, 2005). A methodological feature of this work is not to analyze the work done by the 36 PSTs. Rather, we sought to challenge ourselves as teachers to unlearn and relearn what anti-oppressive education might be, might not be, and could be.

Two students were hired to support Kristen and Kodie’s critically reflective and emergent processes (Cook-Sather, 2011). Daniela, a sociology student (not a PST), was hired as a student participant research assistant. She reflected on her experience auditing the course, and consulted with Kristen and Kodie as the course evolved. Reginald was one of the 36 PSTs enrolled in the course. Following the course completion and the dissemination of grades, Reginald joined the team as a student participant research assistant, providing additional depth to the individual and collective reflective process.

Meet the Authors

Kristen Schaffer is a White, non-Indigenous settler from Silver Spring, Maryland, moved by relational and Fluxus traditions, love and desire in teacher education, and community-based research.

Kodie Rollan is a Philippine-born Canadian playwright, dramaturg, lyricist, arts leader, producer, and Artistic Director of Chromatic Theatre. He creates space for shared storytelling and arts equity and teaches university drama.

Daniela Quintero is a Venezuelan-Canadian mother, sociologist, and early childhood educator who advocates for student-mother's wellbeing and children's rights to play and learn on the land.

Reginald San Jose is a Philippine-born Canadian who completed the Bachelor of Educator program with a Spanish minor and teaches junior high in Calgary. His interests include cultural humility, land-based and interdisciplinary learning, and supporting English-as-additional-language learners.

Data Sources

This elective special-topics course enrolled 36 second- and third-year PSTs (8 and 28, respectively) and met for three hours each Friday from January 10 to April 4, 2025. Before and throughout the course, PSTs were informed through the consent process that Kristen and Kodie would be studying their practice and Daniela would be auditing the course. PSTs could submit optional anonymous feedback through Qualtrics; Daniela vetted the three responses for anonymity before sharing them with the instructors.

Kristen, Kodie, and Daniela gathered data throughout the course, including:

- Course materials (e.g., course syllabus, assignments, slide decks)
- Weekly field notes and memos by Kristen and Daniela.
- Transcripts from weekly 30-minute video reflections by Kristen.
- Transcripts from audio recordings of weekly collaborative planning and debrief meetings between Kristen and Kodie; and Kristen and Daniela.
- With written consent, PST-created artifacts (e.g., assignments)
- Formal peer evaluation and instructor self-reflections on student evaluations

The four of us also conducted an asynchronous metalogue in Google Docs from September 9 to October 11, 2025, exploring how we learned together to facilitate anti-oppressive education. Metalogues are a genre of written individual and collective remembering (Roth & Tobin, 2004, para. 25). The goal is not so much to reach consensus as to explore individual, sometimes contested experiences, clarify understandings, and ask further questions (Staller, 2007). Roth and Tobin (2004) note that “doing (writing) a metalogue is part of the data analyses,” that over iterative “sweeps,” metalogues “ratchet up from descriptive analysis to increasingly theoretical discussions” (para. 22). For our metalogue, we each wrote 2-4 letters back and forth to each other in a single document, adding comments in the margins to make further connections and engage in layered analysis with repeated readings.

Data Analysis

Before and after the metalogue, we applied a reflexive thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke (2019), including familiarizing ourselves with the data; coding (e.g., awkward silence; truth-telling); generating initial themes (e.g., joy and humour; love); reviewing themes; refining themes; and making connections to literature. Kristen, Daniela, and Reginald independently coded the dataset to generate multiple perspectives, then interpreted it collectively. Through the metalogue, we identified and responded to the most significant themes, stories, literature, and reflections. Repeated reflexive and analytic responses produced six research stories below. Each story intentionally weaves together data, established theory, and scholarship to explore critical lessons learned and their broader implications for arts-integrated, anti-oppressive education. Due to the nature of collective reflection, the timeline is inconsistent, occasionally chronological, while also referring to moments of hindsight.

Storied Findings

Staging an Anti-oppressive Classroom

Kristen and Kodie co-designed the course over six weeks. Responding to PSTs' previously expressed fears of being "cancelled," Kodie asked, "how do we give the students the confidence to enter into discussions bravely and collectively problem solve?" (Planning Notes, Nov. 18). He recommended brown's (2020) *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* as a guiding text alongside articles, videos, and podcasts.

Kristen already laid the groundwork for trust and critical love with 32 of the 34 PSTs in prior arts and introductory education courses. PSTs were used to her attention-grabbing harmonica, and how she craft-papered tables for doodling, altering the typical "("depressing"?) classroom environment" into "a canvas of paintings and colorful expressions" (Reginald, Metalogue, Sept 9). Kodie, however, had to build trust with PSTs at the start of the course, so we prioritized activities to get to know one another. Reginald reminisces, "Kodie brought joy and warmth" (Metalogue, Sept 14).

Of note, Kodie, as a Filipino-Canadian, had an immediate representational impact for PSTs who had few interactions with racialized instructors. Reginald writes in the metalogue:

Thank you, kuya Kodie, for being part of the class! When you were introduced in the class, I felt a great sense of representation as someone who came from a similar background and culture. I often find that I repress my Filipino identity to conform to the norm (starting with erasing my accent). [...] When you talked about whiteness and privilege, this resonated with me the most, as I felt that I often have no voice in this matter, coming from a visible minority. Then it dawned on me that my narratives and ideas are equally important, and that worldviews and experiences are valued at the table. (Sept 29)

Knowing PSTs' desires for a more representative faculty (Schaffer et al., 2023), Kristen intentionally sought an artist who was demographically different from herself; however, it was also important that the individual be rooted in anti-oppressive practices and avoid essentializing.

We acknowledged the land and its caretakers, the Blackfoot including the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai Nations; the Îethka Nakoda, including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney Nations; the Tsuut'ina Nation; and the Métis before establishing shared expectations for learning that was playful yet serious. Kodie introduced a 20-minute check-in (i.e., name, pronouns, accessibility needs, current feelings, and light-hearted question), and we co-created a classroom working agreement (e.g., "lessons leave, stories stay"). Throughout the course, Kodie shared drama games to invite joy and vulnerability (e.g., Never have I ever), or to model a concept (e.g., Person A/Person B). These routines and accountability measures, coupled with opportunities for levity, set the tone of the classroom as one that was both serious about learning and promised moments of whimsical play.

Kristen and Kodie agreed to provide upfront direct instruction on social location, privilege, and positionality. Kodie was keen to teach *about The Other* through local data stories (Kumashiro, 2000b), while Kristen worried that PSTs would form saviour complexes in relation to The Other. However, in favour of Kodie's approach, a PST anonymously requested, "I would love if we could go over the definitions of discrimination, oppression, prejudice, bias, and any other terms that are applicable in this course. It would help me to understand the differences and be able to use this language in the course" (Jan 17). Kristen reflected that she made assumptions about PSTs' prior knowledge, and did not always honour where PSTs were situated in their

learning journey (Fieldnotes, Jan 17) (Haraway, 1988). Taking the PST's suggestion to heart, while PSTs took 4-minute turns privately sharing their hopes and anxieties for the course with Kristen and Kodie, the class created a shared dictionary. Still, Kristen wishes she heeded Kodie's advice and provided more upfront direct instruction to develop shared language and understanding of the realities of oppression in education from which to move towards difference. This experience revealed a small, though not insurmountable, pedagogical disconnect which can occur in teacher-artist partnerships (Oreck, 2004).

A few weeks into class, Kristen recalls being overwhelmed by the time crunch of a 36-hour course in relation to the amount of possible content to cover (e.g., Callaghan et al., 2023). She expressed regrets for her indirect teaching approach, and opted to create and share a weekly 30-minute video to clarify concepts for the PSTs who desired more scaffolding. Another PST, however, anonymously shared, "I really enjoy how the content is more explorative, and there is more facilitating happening rather than just constant direct instruction. I really appreciate what they are both doing and I think it is going great! Keep it up :))" (Jan 24).

PSTs also expressed concerns around grades (e.g., for graduation, scholarships) and the open-ended assignments, "having had only 5 classes so far, I do not feel that I have learned enough to complete either of these assignments. Both assignments feel very vague and lacking in details and examples as to how to go about them" (Anonymous feedback, Feb 7). Following this recommendation, Kristen spent time re-creating rubrics with PSTs for the final two assignments to nurture the trust necessary for emergence and the accompanying discomfort of the unknown. Convincing PSTs that in this course, being a "good" student meant taking risks, meant slowing down the process of building trust (brown, 2017). Kristen wonders if smaller changes in course design would have shifted desires and anxieties, freeing up PSTs' capacities to work through crises. That, or, the course could be re-made with a pass/fail grading scheme.

Humour

In week 4, Kodie asked PSTs to read aloud a script of *Women of the Fur Trade* by Frances Koncan (Saulteaux-Slovene) (2024), projected on the screen around which we circled. As the title suggests, the satirical play re-presents the Métis-led Red River Resistance against European colonisers as told through the eyes of a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. Kodie led a frank discussion about the politics of representation, language usage, and cultural appropriation, before sitting in a circle for the read-aloud. Kristen and Kodie audibly laughed at the critical references to pop culture and witty repartee. Apart from a few chuckles in response to the readers' inspired inflections, the students remained largely silent. We were surprised by the silence. While we thought this lesson might be a little bit "extra," given the novel format and uncomfortable learning around colonialism, we did not think it would be perceived as "excessive" (Airton, 2018). In the metalogue, Kodie reflected upon this experience:

The experience was fruitful but also humbling. So often in my practice, I am engaging with communities who are already deeply rooted in the work that we do. Especially in my theatrical practice, a lot of times we engage with folks who not only have the same values as I do, but also have the same vocabulary as I do when it comes to issues of equity. I've learned how easy it is to end up in our own bubbles, the difficulty (at times) to expand past that, but also how important those convergences are. (Sept 23)

Next class, Kristen and Kodie created what Kumashiro (2000a) calls "curricular space" (p. 7) to invite PSTs to share feelings related to the read-aloud. The PSTs explained their silence, citing lack of familiarity with the pop culture references, novelty of the experience, and fear of making

a mistake. They described feeling afraid to laugh, worried their laughter would cause harm. One PST shared they were taught never to “laugh at” or “make light” of traumatic historical events, calling it “disrespectful” (Daniela, Fieldnotes, Feb 7). PSTs concurred. This prompted discussion about the power of humour to engage with uncomfortable learning, as well as honouring an artist’s intentions. In the metalogue, Daniela later reflected that humour is culturally influenced and that PSTs perceived it as professionally risky. Reginald recalls learning in a more recent course, “I learned that humour can be used with loving kindness as a strategy to navigate difficult topics/knowledge” (Metalogue, Sept 20). We wonder whether we could have anticipated this fear and disarmed it by “start[ing] with a chat about laughter in addition to a chat about what-not-to-do in drama read-alouds?” (Kristen, Metalogue, Sept 9)

Nourishing Emergence

Kristen and Kodie took turns teaching. Leveraging her art practice and referencing artists, Black feminists, and Indigenous kitchen table traditions (Navarro et al., 2013), Kristen facilitated a potluck of learning, where, together, we broke bread around a kitchen table. With a loose set of guidelines and a co-created pass/fail rubric, we prepared for this event by creating teaching tools designed to move us away from oppressive practice.

Around a large circle of sixteen tables, we nourished one another with favourite comfort foods and by sharing anti-oppressive tools. At each place setting, Kristen set a “menu” with a land acknowledgement and a secular prayer of gratitude. Plates full, each PST had 2 minutes to share their tool, followed by the peer to their left who would provide constructive feedback before presenting their own. Tools varied from implicit bias meters, to universal design for learning approaches, to artworks (e.g., Kodie sang a self-composed song).

A peer evaluator for Kristen’s tenure process was present that day and remarked: “I feel as though there are no ways to express in writing how the class session felt” (Peer evaluation form, Mar 14). Daniela was “blown away by the effort” of the PSTs and the “familial” experience (Fieldnotes, Mar 14), a feeling that Daftary and Sugrue (2022) suggest is conducive to anti-oppressive education. Kristen was grateful and, admittedly, relieved by how PSTs “showed up” to the experience (Fieldnotes, Mar 14), teaching her about the importance of a teacher’s humility. As it happened, “every single PST presented a tool which was in some way (even a small way) seeking to heal and not harm, the PSTs taught me to trust them, as they trust me with providing them with meaningful learning opportunities” (Peer evaluation self-reflection, Mar 14).

Kristen conceived of this class as her way of enacting critical love to students (hooks, 2000). To choose critical love, she had to counter deep-seated desires to control learning variables and mistrust students while presuming she could “know what is best” (Fieldnotes, Mar 14). She learned to honour students’ strengths, have faith in their competence, give grace to the learning process, and shed her expectations while learning to appreciate alternative ways of teaching and learning anew.

Dance, then Abolition

A benefit of co-teaching with a local artist is the networking potential. Kodie invited his colleague, dancer and arts administrator, Mpoe Mogale, to lead an abolition workshop during the penultimate class. Mpoe engaged PSTs’ whole selves (Brooks, 2017) by dancing together before diving into explicit instruction on carceral pedagogies, policing, and White supremacy. During the discussion, a PST voiced their discomfort with abolition, sharing their close relationships to

police officers—news to Kristen and Kodie. In turn, Mpoe courageously shared their traumatic encounter with the police as a racialized person. Both the PSTs’ vocalization of fear and Mpoe’s honesty were simultaneously unsettling and encouraging, and allowed us to perceive how knowledge is situated and can coexist (Haraway, 1988). There was palpable friction in the room made possible by Mpoe, who modelled how collective dancing is a disarming, loving act that prepares us for the crisis of learning (Britzman, 1998). Although we did not achieve a resolution, and do not think we ever will, courage nonetheless overcame fear.

One PST, with permission, wrote in their final reflection:

This work has made me reflect on my own judgement: How can I love others who are not deserving of that love? Who am I to say who deserves love and who does not? Mpoe said their community lives by, “You are, therefore I am” [to quote Ubuntu as referenced by Mpoe]. Mpoe challenged us, what would justice look like if no one was disposable? To lead with love is not to excuse those who have done harm, but to refuse to abandon people because of it. (PST Mary Marcos, named with permission, Apr 12)

Here, artists sharing their art prompted us to understand ourselves and our capacity to love through active listening and learning from their perspectives. Diverse perspectives create more opportunities for transformation.

Unlearning, Relearning, Transforming

For the final assignment, PSTs co-created a final exhibition. Kristen and Kodie supported this process with informal surveys to collectively decide on the mode, theme, and timeline of the final exhibition. Given Kodie’s drama expertise, we hoped students would do something theatrical—they did not. We did not force a drama experience, worried it would generate too much resistance. In retrospect, we wonder, as Mpoe demonstrated, if drama could have created the unsettling conditions with which to tackle crises. The PSTs selected and moved forward with a multi-media group exhibition.

PSTs took charge, selecting the theme and title, *Unlearning, Relearning, Transforming*. Seven groups created artworks and one curated the exhibition; Kodie invited a colleague to provide critique. Held in the classroom on the final evening, the public exhibition drew administrators, instructors, friends, and family. Artworks addressed intersectionality, masculinity in education, privilege, belonging, cancel culture, and local school inequities using collage, painting, games, video, interactive work, children’s literature, and podcasts. Its public nature heightened accountability and prompted dialogue about anti-oppressive education. One visitor rejected the concept of restorative justice as presented by the group exploring cancel culture, demonstrating art’s capacity to disrupt. Another said a group was not “critical enough,” and should instead do “more” (Kristen, Fieldnotes, April 4), revealing how competition infiltrates activist practice (brown, 2017; Kumashiro, 2000b).

Following the event, Kristen and Kodie spoke at length about the experience of the exhibition versus their expectations of PSTs. Kodie stated,

Looking at the final presentations, it dawned on me that many of the PSTs are at the very beginnings of their journey and that’s great! But I wish I was able to push a bit more, really explored some of the discomfort many of them felt especially around the topic of whiteness. (Metalogue, Sept 23)

Kristen less-generously reflected, “there were times when PSTs would express ideas which were still, in my mind, I worry verge on being oppressive. [...] I feel like a failure as their teacher” (Metalogue, Sept 9). Kristen felt haunted by her desire to be a “good anti-oppressive teacher

performance,” above her desire to be changed by the experience. Through critical practitioner inquiry, she reveals her struggle as an educator and activist to let go of oppressive concepts, including “better”; “enough”; seeking affirmation and sameness (Kumashiro, 2000a); distrust of others (hooks, 2000); and overlooking small changes (brown, 2017). In the metalogue, she writes of her colonial desire to:

Control the narrative of the classroom. Kodie, you helped me to get out of this hierarchical power grab on my part, for which I am eternally grateful for. And moving forward, I really want to consider how to promote a culture of critique, in which we can all present and be provided in situ feedback however hard it may be. (Sept 27)

This desire to control what happens in the classroom is not dissimilar to how she did not fully trust PSTs ahead of the kitchen table event. However, as teachers and artists, when we relinquish control by learning to do things differently and beyond ourselves, we open up radical possibilities (Greene, 1995) for emergence. Kumashiro (2000a) adds, “it is only when educators acknowledge the impossibilities, unknowabilities, and uncontrollabilities of teaching, and work within stuck places, that change is possible” (p. 10). As PSTs instructed in their exhibition title, all of us, teachers included, must emerge through the unsettling process of unlearning and relearning.

Reginald invokes love, responding to Kristen’s anxiety:

I believe that the failure is not on you Kristen, but within the system of privilege, power, and discrimination embedded from historical roots. [...] Despite some of the students having difficulties understanding EDIA, the course accepts students with love and understanding, which reminded me of radical love from bell hooks that we encountered in the class. (Metalogue, Sept 9)

Here, Reginald echoes Kumashiro’s (2000b) assertion that the goal in anti-oppressive education is difference, not better, noting that sometimes difference may repeat oppression. Kristen voices a problematic teacherly desire for students to become more like her, or work towards perfection. Reginald also reminds Kristen that it is the teacher’s responsibility to love students unconditionally (hooks, 2000; Sealey-Ruiz, 2023), regardless of whether they meet the co-created expectations of the assignment.

In her feedback to PSTs, Kristen worked past her resistance to honest (hooks, 2000) assessments, fearful of PSTs’ rejection. In past courses, she confused the hurt and pain that comes with truth-telling in assessment, with harm (brown, 2020). Kodie also described this balancing act: “I think I really tried to toe the line between compassion, radical empathy, and really being able to challenge assumptions” (Metalogue, Sept 23). Moving forward, Kristen hopes to close the feedback circle earlier in a course, such that it becomes, for both PST and teacher, more possible to receive and give challenging feedback (Daftary & Sugrue, 2022). She resolved her contemplations by reconsidering assessment as an honest, loving, uncertain act (hooks, 1994; 2000, Ellsworth, 1997), appreciating the artworks for what they were and the general atmosphere of belonging they curated (Ungemah & Stokas, 2018). Taking these lessons, she wrote long, loving letters to each group.

Kodie reflects on the exhibition,

I feel like we were able to plant seeds in this course, but especially for me, as someone who doesn’t get to interact with them past this journey, it’s a lesson in trust. [...] I won’t be able to see the fruits of my labour. I can only trust that the work that I did made some sort of impact and that the environment around them will continue to till and nurture those seeds. And like many plants, some of those seeds may die, [...] I am hopeful that

there will be a beautiful wellspring of life that comes from our time together in the class.
(Metalogue, Sept 23)

Here, Kodie, echoing brown (2017), articulates a key role of an anti-oppressive teacher: to nurture students' emergence through gradual, rhizomatic changes timed to the speed of trust.

Loving Difference

In doing something so dissimilar to her previous academic experiences, Kristen curated a personal, lengthy transformative crisis (Britzman, 1998). Needing an initial foothold in reality, she relied on familiar, if not always anti-oppressive, teaching, scholarly, and artistic practices, gradually releasing her dependency on known variables. Kodie, Daniela, and Reginald share similar stories of learning how to love the unknown, while letting go of the comfort of sameness. We are taught to conform and reject differences as schools standardize, or we are taught to perform at being different in sanctioned, celebrated ways. To love difference indiscriminately is deviant. In the context of education, love is different. Reginald describes the general opposition to love in education:

I felt heavy resistance between people who want to share their ideas and how the space invites them to. Not because the space is not inviting; but rather because of fear of disagreement and hurting one another out of politeness; complacency. [...] I felt that the program of shaping teacher education forces PSTs in a cookie cutter structure and prescribed qualifications shaped over the years hindered a lot of us to openness and vulnerability; that when a space for openness and love is provided; it appeared bizarre and deviant. That is to say that the course did not fail its purpose, but rather one course is not enough and there could always be places and opportunities within the program and academia to deepen these understandings. (Metalogue, Sept 20)

Rejecting complacency, standardization, and discrimination, critical love teaches us to unconditionally love the communities with whom we work (Brooks, 2017; Sealey-Ruiz, 2022). When we love one another, we feel love ourselves (hooks, 2000). We felt it was our job to make loving difference familiar, to see love as academically rigorous and liberatory (Kodershah & Tsang, 2023; Ohito, 2019). Daniela remarks, "While going through my fieldnotes and transcriptions, for a while I ignored how much love jumped from the pages" (Metalogue, Sept 28), a testament to how defiantly love infiltrates scholarship and teaching when learning through the arts.

Moving Forward Differently

Kristen began the metalogue with the statement, "Wow, we did a thing!" (Sept 9), unable to wholly describe the experience. The experience differed and, for better or worse, ultimately became wholly unexpected through our collective emergence in relation to one another (Kumashiro, 2000a, 2000b; brown, 2017). As we continue to reflect on this course individually and collectively, we identify several recommendations for practice.

Arts integration opened up unforeseen possibilities for vulnerability, self and collective expression, multimodal demonstrations of understanding, critical and creative thought, ownership and responsibility, as well as a fun, joyful learning environment (Greene, 1995; Donahue et al., 2024). Working in draft with multiple feedback checkpoints from instructors, peers, and the public facilitates opportunities for critical and creative reflection, assisting

students to become “unstuck” (Kumashiro, 2000b, p. 44). We recommend facilitating more and earlier opportunities for constructive critique than we provided in this course.

An artist-in-residence expands the instructor’s pedagogical repertoire and brings the local arts community into the classroom, moving teacher education towards community-centred practice.

Co-teaching also enables transdisciplinary exchange (Andrews, 2008). Inviting Kodie from among remarkable candidates was therefore perhaps one of Kristen’s greatest points of control. Daniela shares,

Kodie provided an energy that interlaced activism to artistic inquiry as a way to personify anti-oppression in a tangible and digestible form that is both liberating and life-changing as this work is never ending, and it must be undertaken with “whimsical” intention to avoid burnout. (Fieldnotes, April 4)

This energy challenged Kristen to take risks and try out new experiences that holistically changed herself and her teaching practice. Routines, views on assessment, demonstrations of love through trust and honesty, and courage continue to move her today. The learning was reciprocal, with Kodie gaining new perspectives on teacher education and schooling (Morrissey & Kenny, 2023; Kind et al., 2007).

Critical love finds expression through art and, we suggest, is deeply entwined with it; art is often an act of critical love. Sharing art opens us to critique and love. Looking back, making or engaging with art prompted the most dialogue, vulnerability, movement, and critical self-reflection (e.g., dancing with Mpoe, reading a play aloud).

Kumashiro (2000b, 2000a) acknowledged the place of rational and direct teaching in anti-oppressive work, alongside the provision of ample, embodied space to unlearn. It is valuable to provide concrete information about oppression, from the perspective of those who are marginalized, as well as those who are critical of privilege. As such, we would redesign this course to address priority concepts like abolition upfront, rather than work up to the teachings of said concepts.

We intend to continue to workshop emergence, re-considering the “small is good” approach brown (2017, p. 41) recommends, and what that means for a university course. We wonder how we can instigate depth as well as breadth, and community above production in both content and assignments. We feel it would be useful to provide clearer wayfinding in a course that opens up so many possibilities. We wonder, with the provision of scaffolds, if we could have “pushed the lessons more” (Kodie, Metalogue, Sept 23), particularly around concepts of Whiteness and privilege.

Concluding Thoughts

In this critical practitioner inquiry, Kristen, Kodie, Daniela, and Reginald sought to understand how, by centering critical love and arts education, we enacted anti-oppressive education. Inviting a local artist-in-residence to co-teach opened up new spaces to engage in difficult learning and unlearning, healing and re-learning. We describe how acts of critical love, demonstrated in the student-centred approach and via the arts, helped to nurture a space of trust, vulnerability, and courage. We also share our missteps, the moments when we, as arts instructors, repeated modes of teaching which kept us stuck in the learning or re-created sameness. We did not perform the best anti-oppressive education, nor did we do as we were told. We played, laughed, and loved learning together; we suggest that this is neither enough nor not enough; it just is, despite any misgivings that it is not. We are excited to continue to learn and

hope to prompt others to create the conditions for sharing power, letting go of control, and working past comfort towards loving difference. Finally, we wonder what this course would have been like had we named it “Enacting Critical Love in Education”?

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