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Anger as a Tool for Decolonization and Student Empowerment

In June of 2019, i was hired as a social studies teacher for Jamon Senior High School¹—affectionately known as “Jami” (pronounced “ham-y”)—in Desert Angels Unified School District.² I taught five different twelfth-grade “Honors” and “regular” Government and Economics courses, within one specific learning community entitled “Business and Interactive Technology (BIT).” All of my classes bubbled over the union-fought district limit of 41 scholars. The other small learning communities include “Mathematics, Science, Medicine,” “Communication Arts Academy,” and “Global Studies,” while there are two magnet small learning communities located in Jami called “Humanities” and “Academy of Music & Performing Arts (AMPA).” Despite my status as a “BIT Teacher,” the scholars that sat in my classroom are a part of various learning communities.

Jamon Senior High School (JSHS) is a densely-populated public school with an enrollment of 2,637 scholars across grades 9 through 12. Of this large scholar population, 69.1% of scholars are considered “socioeconomically disadvantaged,” 6.9% scholars are “English Learners,” and 0.5% are foster youth. Furthermore, the racial and ethnic make-up is diverse: 51.5% are (1,358 scholars) Hispanic; 25.3% (666 scholars) are black; 0.4% (10 scholars) are American Indian; 3.3% (87 scholars) are Asian; 1.4% (37 scholars) are Filipino/Pacific Islander; and 16.6% (438 scholars) are white.³ Only one of the scholars in my classroom self-identified as “white.”

The following study is an examination of my first year as a social science instructor in an urban school. Using an autoethnographic approach, my research centers *anger*, the emotions that twelfth-grade scholars of color exhibited as a response to environmental injustice emphasized within an anti-capitalist, anti-racist curriculum. In the ensuing pages, i first review critical literary texts that support a reconceptualization of student “anger” and “aggression;” Then, i provide a brief summary of the decolonial theoretical lens used for this analysis. Finally, i analyze two verbal and written samples of my scholars’ work, discussing the implications of their “anger.” The purpose of this work is to disrupt

¹ The names of the school, the school district, and students have been omitted or changed due to the nature of the accounts and the involvement of minors.

² Throughout this thesis, i utilize the lowercase “i” as a rhetorical strategy which de-emphasizes the significance and role of the individual within history, community, and, more importantly, the classroom. Such a rhetorical strategy functions as an intentional tool to counter neoliberal conceptions of the individual over the community within academia.

³ Demographic data on the student body is derived from the California School Dashboard “School Performance Overview” for the 2018–2019 academic year.

capitalist assumptions embedded in the paradigms of social science curriculum and social-emotional learning, as well as to examine scholar empowerment as having the ability to dismantle racial and environmental injustice. This work recommends to practitioners in the K-12 classroom an entirely new framework to anticipate and embrace student anger as a justified response to systemic oppression.

Literature Review

By returning to decolonial literature, such as Franz Fanon's (1961) cutting, controversial text on violence in *Wretched of the Earth*, anger can be understood as the colonized's inherent, famished urgency for liberation. My scholars articulated their experiences such as feeling "hyper-visible" to school police, unwarranted searches and seizures, and teachers' racial bias. In these recounted stories, my scholars often describe a definite binary, a world that is "cut into two" by class, race, and *age*: the white institution (adults) and the black and brown community (scholars). How my scholars have painted their school landscape for me mirrors Fanon's description of the educational system within a colonial setting: "In capitalist societies the educational system...serve[s] to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and of inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably" (p. 29). If schools are understood as an extension or projects of colonialism, then education that advocates for equity or social justice and not emancipation from capitalist exploitation cannot transform the social and economic realities of our scholars (Grande, 2004, p. 24).

Before developing an Economics curriculum, i also re-imagined scholar empowerment through an anti-capitalist lens. Dr. Na'im Akbar (1999), an educational theorist who centers blackness, spirituality, and liberation in *Know Thyself*, helps us conceptualize student power in education beyond the individual. Akbar argues power is derived from the ability to influence our environment, and "consider the needs of others beyond [our] ability to fulfill...individual needs" (p. 38). In this sense, Akbar utilizes the term "environment" to refer to our communities, the spaces we inhabit, the ideas and images we are exposed to in an increasingly technological world. But i contend that the power to heal our natural world—a literal definition of environment—must be the "most tangible outcome of education." There is a moral imperative to think of racism as a symptom of an economic system that will result in the destruction of our planet.

The decision to have scholars study capitalism and the climate crisis in Economics is grounded in the literary critiques of Paulo Freire, Antonia Darder, bell hooks, Franz Fanon, and Na'im Akbar—all of whom insist that our struggle against oppression necessitates solidarity across differences to challenge "the

main enemy,” the system of global capitalism (Freire, 1997). Decolonial authors also contextualize different colonial modes of control like policing, as well as the accumulation and exploitation of land for profit, as components of a longer historical process known as “settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012).⁴ The historical relationship between environmental exploitation, modern systems of oppression such as racism, and capitalism is very well documented (Beinart & Hughes, 2016; Crosby, 1986). Yet, until quite recently, there has been little collaboration between environmental activists, critical race theorists, and educators to develop curriculum for the K–12 classroom (Bigelow & Swinehart, 2013). The gap in social science curriculum served as an impetus for this research.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This article highlights several student responses and my daily field notes documented and collected during an autoethnographic study of my first year of teaching. Throughout the academic year, i observed and captured my scholars’ behavior, dialogue, emotions, interactions, classwork, and assessments in one to two observational entries a day. Other data collected during this time include recorded interviews with scholars, transcriptions from the unit assessment simulation, and their written journal reflections. For this inquiry, i chose to document observations of my fourth period Government and Economics class because of their collective willingness to participate in small and large group discussions, and general affinity towards one another. When analyzing scholars’ journal reflections and cumulative assessments, i was attentive to key moments in which patterns of cultural experiences were evidenced. The purpose of my autoethnographic research was to gain critical insight into the nuanced cultural experiences of my scholars, as well as develop and improve my own teaching practices within an urban context.

Fanon’s (1961) theory of decolonization in *Wretched of the Earth* is used to analyze scholar social-emotional responses, cumulative assessments, and journal reflections. How Fanon describes the colonial context is fitting to the context of my classroom, and the community of Southwest Los Angeles in which the black and brown community are continuously under threat from various forms of violence such as gentrification, displacement, police brutality. For example,

⁴ Tuck and Yang (2012) also argue that “decolonization” ought not serve as a metaphor, divest of the settler colonial context. Instead, “decolonization” must center Indigenous people and refer specifically to “the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is *all* of the land, and not just symbolically” (p. 7).

during our second unit on the founding principles and political philosophies of the U.S. Constitution, we studied social contract theory alongside the Ferguson riots that proliferated following the shooting of the young Michael Brown. My scholar Trynne, a black female scholar that lived in Missouri during the Ferguson riots before moving to Los Angeles, spoke up during one of our class periods:

“Wow, I feel empowered. I almost want to go downstairs and yell at school police for treating us like criminals,” she says.

Her voice is loud, thundering over the heads of her peers from the back of the class. I recognize her courage to articulate this feeling of anger and empowerment, and to be compelled to act on these feelings inspires me.

I respond, “Hm. Well, I wouldn’t stop you.” (Field Notes, September 26, 2019)

In this moment, Trynne connected her own experiences with Jami school police with that of the community of Ferguson that was violently confronted by local and state police. I immediately recognized Trynne’s expression of anger as empowerment, an internal and physical process that Franz Fanon (1961) names as “decolonization.” Fanon argues that decolonization is incited by a “fundamental jolt,” a feeling of self-realization in which the “colonized subject” no longer fears the structures of oppression which bind them, “his voice can no longer petrify me. I am no longer uneasy in his presence. In reality, to hell with him” (p. 10). Social psychological research also supports the idea that group-based anger and “perceptions of injustice” can serve as a motivating force to participate in social movements (Sturmer & Simon, 2009).

In the first semester, i took the opportunity to use a forty-minute class period to lead community circles. The community circles consisted of four “rounds” in which scholars answered the following questions: (a) What “battery percentage” are you at? (b) Where do you want to go after you graduate? (c) Who do you want to be after you graduate? (d) What are you most scared of after graduation? After leading these activities with my scholars, i wrote a short journal entry on the sensation of being a part of a classroom community built on trust:

As the community circle enters the fourth rotation, i begin to hear my scholars’ heart beats and the atmosphere thickens. Scholars are 100% engrossed in what is being said. Not only are my scholars allowing themselves to feel, they are allowing themselves to feel together.

I got ’em.

I'm thinking to myself that i have tapped into the hearts and dreams of both my 3rd and 4th period regular Government classes. Their hearts began to beat as one. Their laughter follows one rhythm. Their heads drop down humbly as one. Nine weeks into the semester, and i feel that we have finally taken a step together towards a mutual trust. (Field Notes, October 16, 2019)

Fanon (1961), too, describes the sensation of decolonization as a “new rhythm . . . with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new [people]” (p. 29). Unlike his theoretical counterpart Paulo Freire (1968), who situates the process of “humanization” solidly within a similar oppressor/oppressed paradigm, Fanon focuses on the *collective* sensations that are shared amongst the colonized masses that incite and propel decolonization. He highlights the disappearance of individualism, and the emergence of a new collective identity, much alike what was constructed during the community circle. Once scholars began to conceptualize themselves as a collective with the capacity to affect change in their own community, i took a calculated step back.

Unit II: Introduction to Capitalism

Before my scholars' last semester of high school, i reflected on how the content of their Economics course could empower them to critique a capitalist economy fixed to the detriment of young adults of color (Lowrey, 2020). The second semester i taught content on the national and global economy with astute attention to the local economy of Los Angeles, as we dove into topics of climate, food, gentrification, housing, and the job market. In this section, i discuss my second unit of Economics which explores the development of capitalism, and how the system is innately intertwined with the exploitation and destruction of the environment. By sharing my curriculum, i hope to better contextualize student responses, and provide educational practitioners with new considerations to design social science rigor and discourse.

The objective of this unit is to ensure scholars are able to make connections between capitalism, industrialization, and our climate crisis. As social studies instructors begin to bridge these studies of the environment, race, and capitalism, new challenges arise: How do we influence our scholars of color to feel connected to and passionate about environmental and climate issues?; And how do we empower our scholars of color to feel that they can disrupt systems of exploitation?

In order to guide scholars towards a critical understanding of capitalism as well as envision new paths for healing our environment, i developed the following essential questions: (a) “What role does capitalism play in the climate crisis?” and

(b) “What alternative economic policies can we take to fight climate change?” I designed the unit backwards around these big complex ideas and the standards outlined in California’s History-Social Science Framework, whilst ensuring that scholars are interpreting multiple economic perspectives and engaging in high level assessments. Simultaneously, i focused on integrating various participation structures and discourse, carefully selecting experiential activities that require small and large group collaboration, and verbal discussion. Thus, all scholars were given multiple opportunities throughout the unit to participate and engage in meaningful questions about the development of and impact of capitalism.

The following section outlines more thoroughly the unit curriculum map, and the materials and theoretical framework that prepared scholars to perform in the final simulation. Then, i describe two particular moments of the simulation in which scholars adopt or perform an entirely new way of thinking that challenges capitalist economic norms and values.

Week 1. The first day, scholars experienced a simulation of capitalism by participating in the “Thingamabob Game,” an activity taken from *Rethinking Schools: A People’s Curriculum for the Earth* (2014). In this game, scholars were randomly grouped into “companies” that compete against one another with one sole purpose: to accumulate the most wealth after seven rounds of production. The winning group, they were told, would receive the mouth-watering, highest quality chocolate. In order to accumulate profit, each group decided how many thingamabobs to produce, fully aware that the production of 1,000 thingamabobs contributes 2 ppm (parts per million) of carbon dioxide (CO₂) to the atmosphere. At the start of the game, scholars were informed that the current concentration of carbon dioxide in the planet is 380 ppm. Scholars are also notified that if the global CO₂ concentrations reach anywhere between 420 and 460 ppm, then the “Earth’s environment will be damaged beyond repair” (p. 151). My role throughout the game as “the invisible hand” was to calculate carbon dioxide concentrations after each round and mercilessly encourage production. The game simulates the climate crisis because capitalist production—the unregulated, uninhibited pursuit of profit—will always result in the destruction of the planet.

Every class effectively destroyed the planet. Of all five courses in which we played the “Thingamabob activity,” only one class, my fourth period, was critical of the rules of the game enough to attempt to disrupt the production process. They nearly did so by reaching across company lines and forging agreements to limit or completely halt production of thingamabobs. However, my fourth period ultimately failed due to two groups whom were disinterested in challenging the rules of the game.

The second and third days were dedicated to analyzing the original theory of capitalism as written by Adam Smith. To problematize this theory, scholars delved into Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' notable critique of a profit-driven economy in *Communist Manifesto* (1847). These readings were abridged and formatted for close-reading with critical questions in the margins. It was integral for scholars to conceptualize capitalism first as a game, a system, before engaging in these complex economic theories.

Week 2. In the week following, scholars studied the historical development of capitalism and its simultaneous exploitation of the environment. In class, we completed three different worksheets: Rethinking School's "Climate Crisis Timeline" (pp. 102–5); "Fossil Fuels: The Social and Environmental Cost of Production Worksheet"; "DBQ Alternative Economic Policy Proposals." These worksheets guided scholars' studies of how economists predict and calculate the inevitable cost of the climate crisis in terms of food scarcity, destruction of housing and property, poverty, disease, and unemployment. To support scholars in the beginning to imagine solutions, we studied various nation-states including China, the United States, Sweden, and Mexico, that have attempted to address or have neglected the issue of climate change. It was critical for scholars to analyze how economic structures - socialist, capitalist, and mixed economies - influence each nation-states' strategies, or lack thereof, to curb CO2 concentrations.

After they compared and contrasted the effectiveness of various macroeconomic policies, scholars watched the documentary *Disobedience* (2017) by the activist organization 350.org. This short film spotlights communities around the world utilizing grassroots organizing strategies, such as protests and demonstrations, to take on fossil fuel companies. They were assessed after the second week on their understanding of climate change, capitalism, and strategies to challenge or disrupt the capitalist world economy in a two-page written reflection to the following prompt: "Imagine you are living in 2050. How did we solve the climate crisis? Describe our relationship with the planet." Towards the latter portion of this article, I highlight a snapshot of my scholars' journal reflections, several of whom perceive activism as a critical tool for solving the climate crisis.

Week 3. During the final week, scholars prepared for the culminating assignment: a "trial" in which scholars performed and prosecuted different groups of people, governments and institutions for contributing to the climate crisis. For example, scholar groups performed as "U.S. Consumers," "U.S. Government," "Developing Countries," "Oil and Coal Companies," and "The System of Global Capitalism." This trial was also adapted from *Rethinking Schools: A People's*

Curriculum for the Earth (2014, pp. 163–70). Some scholars were assigned the role of the jury, facilitating and leading the prosecution of each group. They were given two full days to memorize the material, prepare a written defense, and anticipate the jury’s questions. After providing scholars with all the adequate materials to defend themselves as well as blame other groups, i played a much lesser role on the day of the trial by simply commencing the trial and transcribing the discussion. The ensuing section will describe two examples of scholars who embrace “anger” as an appropriate—justified, even—emotional reaction to systemic exploitation of the environment.

Findings

The climate crisis trial. There are two moments i capture in the following section that portray my scholars' capacity to dream of solutions to the climate crisis, and to envision themselves as participants in those solutions: the first, a gripping line of questioning between one scholar against a group of seven during a role play trial; and the second, written reflections from various scholar journals on the necessity of aggression and radical action. My scholars’ work mirrors their positionality as young people of color building consciousness.

“Why must you be so greedy?”

Noelly is one of seven jurors in our Climate Crisis Trial, a black female scholar that switched into 4th period from 7th period this semester. As she begins her line of questioning towards the team that represents the U.S. Consumers, her words are cutting, intentionally discomfoting. I immediately identify her questions as overtly suggestive, implying that consumers are greedy without first inquiring about statistical patterns of consumption. There are excited whispers around the classroom, as the other scholars observe the general atmosphere of the trial quickly boil.

Renée, a black female scholar who represents U.S. Consumers along with six other scholars, is taken aback by Noelly’s question and demeanor. “I don’t think we are necessarily greedy, we are just doing our job [as consumers].” She waves her long purple fingernails into the air, and smiles nervously.

Without a second to breathe, Noelly replies: “I think it is.” I pause only momentarily, and decide to allow Noelly to proceed. “You are 5% of the global population but you consume too much... Your addiction to the automobile has caused global warming. What has stopped you [from transitioning to] a more

eco-friendly lifestyle?” Noelly continues to press and press for ten more minutes, frequently interrupting the team on trial. She is vicious.

“You should be taking responsibility.”

“Why aren’t the basic necessities good enough?”

“But do you realize that these developing countries look up to the U.S. as a model?”

Throughout the trial, i had often intervened when the conversation went awry, pushing scholars to be more specific in their questions or their answers. At times, i even told scholars to adjust their tone. Here, as i listen to Noelly’s biting performance, i lean back in my chair and continue to transcribe the trial. There is no need to intervene.

This culminating assignment evaluates scholars’ grasp of capitalism as an economic system, one in which is innately intertwined with the rapid destruction of the environment. Furthermore, the “Climate Crisis Trial” challenges each scholars’ ability to articulate arguments and advocate for themselves, even if they do not necessarily agree with the argument.

One of the jurors in my 4th period course, Noelly, dominated the prosecution of U.S. Consumers. Throughout the year i have built a relationship with Noelly, understanding her as a proud, self-aware young woman, always precise in her language. More importantly, she is a black scholar activist and leader on campus as President of the Senior Class, and club executive board leader of the Black Student Union. Despite missing significant class time to attend extracurricular commitments, she submitted assignments on time and impeccably, without exception. Once the trial began, i endowed the jury, a group of seven scholars, significant autonomy in leading the direction of the conversation. For the entirety of the two-day long trial, i remained at the sidelines transcribing the discussions. Thus, only on rare occasions during the trial did i re-orient the discussion.

As evidenced in this snapshot, Noelly often interrupted others or answered her own questions, thereby dismantling each representatives’ attempts to relieve themselves of guilt. It is discernible from the transcript that exasperation and a desire for justice underlay Noelly’s line of questioning. In this moment specifically, i permitted Noelly to lead an incredibly uncomfortable discourse surrounding our excessive and environmentally destructive consumption of unnecessary materials. That she was no longer asking questions and instead expressing emotionally-charged statements is necessary in such a discourse, i

believe. Her words were so sharp, one could have truly believed she represented Planet Earth. I honored Noelly's expression of what i perceive as a thirst for accountability, as well as her counterparts who were so briefly encumbered by significant guilt often assigned to entire systems, nations, and international oil corporations. A decolonial theoretical lens demands that we analyze Noelly's "anger" as student empowerment within and against a larger context of systemic exploitation. Her response was critical and urgent, suggesting that social science practitioners must adapt curriculum to the pressing issues and lived realities of our scholars, and anticipate that they will struggle against and grapple with systemic injustice.

The Year 2050. Towards the end of the unit, i asked scholars to envision solutions to the climate crisis in a two-page creative writing assignment. And so they did, but not without also imagining a context of resistance, violence, and war from which those solutions might emerge. Their visions were sophisticated, indicative of their understanding of material, political change and the means by which that change is erected.

In their notebooks, i required my scholars to copy and respond to the following prompt: "Imagine you are living in 2050. How did we solve the climate crisis? Describe our relationship with the planet." I chose to assess scholars based on this journal entry in their class notebooks because a handful of scholars felt uncomfortable speaking in class, preferring to express their reflections and arguments on paper instead. I hoped to affirm these scholars' strengths in writing. Several of their written responses pointed to foundational components of sustained political and social movements, including but not excluded to an unwavering commitment to justice, a cross-generational solidarity, and a certain radicalism. For example, one scholar wrote in the third person point-of-view, placing herself as a participant of various political actions. She clearly names radicalism and "agress[ion]" as a necessity:

We protested when things were going wrong. We became more radical and aggressive to get the change. We risked ourselves being arrested to make sure our voices [were] heard. (Alani)

While Alani is confident that violence is inevitable, she is equally sure that there is a solution to our climate crisis. In the same paragraph, she later paints a beautiful image of the "old and young, march[ing] all around the world." Part of the solution then, she claims, must also mean bridging differences between the old and young, whom to her seem to have irreconcilable ideological differences.

Alani also recognizes a need for concrete sustainable, transformative political and economic legislation yet to be implemented at the national level. For example, her reflection unabashedly recommends mandated environmental education, stronger international agreements, substantial national incentives for renewable energy and technology, and rigid accountability for “carbon emission companies.”

However, much of their hopeful sentiments are matched with healthy criticism of complacency during a time of urgency:

And of course, the people who sit on their asses and watch the world burn, people who don't give a damn, are also part of the problem . . . (Andrés)

Andrés, the author of the quote above, writes with a pessimism towards an unfettered complacency and neoliberal ideology rampant within a culture under the Trump Administration. Many of his critiques are harsh, pointing at businesses and corporations that emit large quantities of carbon, and the masses entangled in an apathetic “mindset.” Unlike many others in the class, Andrés is often quiet and prefers to only participate in small group discussions due to his learning disability and fear of speaking in class. Yet in his journal, he goes on, his literary voice thunderous and damning:

I believe society has a problem with individualism of identity and ideologies, and how most of the time, our own pride and ignorance doesn't mix well with a two-party system . . . (Andrés)

While his rage is blatantly reflected in the general tone of the journal entry, towards the end of his reflection, Andrés suggests that he, too, is pessimistic and acknowledges that there are many people fighting for environmental justice—“Earth Savers,” he names them. His term for environmental activists is quaint and implies that he is still hopeful and, ultimately, believes in the efficacy of activism. The frustration woven into my scholars' analyses reveals a rather nuanced, developing awareness of both capitalism and the arduous journey towards radical political and economic change. The concluding remarks of Andrés' journal entry are somewhat prophetic for the conflicts we are to face in the coming years as a collective: “I believe people will respect and care for the planet more, both out of fear and love.”

Conclusion

In an autoethnographic study, i analyzed student cumulative and summative assessments, my own ethnographic journal entries, and class

discussions as qualitative data while re-conceptualizing student “anger” and “aggression” through a decolonial theoretical lens. Various limitations of this inquiry include the relatively short length of the unit and the number of classes chosen to observe. It is recommended that similar studies observe student responses to anti-capitalist, anti-racist curriculum in various subject areas, extend the length of the unit, and expand observations for more than one class. In order to improve curriculum design and impact, student perspectives of the unit should be collected and included in future or similar studies.

The urgency communicated in my scholars’ reflections and discussions highlight a need for a dynamic K-12 social science curriculum—one that is distinctly anti-capitalist and anti-racist, conceptually and theoretically rigorous, and relevant to the lived realities of our scholars. Student discourse, various participation structures, and high-level experiential tasks allowed scholars to engage in multiple economic theories and meaningful reflections surrounding the climate crisis. Concurrently, the findings challenge the paradigm around social-emotional learning, indicating that student “anger” in response to capitalist exploitation resembles empowerment, a part of a much larger process of decolonization.

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