



Longing for Possibilities: A Learning and Literacy of Love

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Abstract

What possibilities exist when we engage and evoke decolonial love at the site of learning and literacy? This question is one that I attempt to answer, and, for me, it begins with a personal narrative that demonstrates a mattering of love. From there, I set out on a journey to situate the meaning of decolonial love, which I situate in relation to the classroom context. I insist that critical discourse and language disruption are necessary and significant to a rupturing of decolonial love, especially in terms of self-love. In the former, I consider how discourses of resistance encourage my students and I to confront colourism in the classroom, and to embrace a love for one's body and identity. In the latter, I speak to the hatred that my students and I develop for the [m]other(ed) tongue, shedding light on the importance of reclaiming dialects and languages that have been forced into exile and pushed to the margins. But, most of all, what I profess is the profoundness that exists in the following words: *I love you*. This tenet, more than anything, is a provocation that to speak about love is perhaps the most important thing one can do to practice the act of decolonial love.

Keywords: Decolonial love, Discourse, Language.

Introduction

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.

-Arundathi Roy (1999), *The Cost of Living*.

At the Airport: A Prelude

I begin with a moment that remains so profound and significant that it has changed my whole life. It unfolds as such: I am, almost anxiously, waiting to board a flight from Montréal to Zurich and then from Zurich to Mumbai. I am leaving this birthplace of mine, with a passport that does not run deep in my veins, but which is the only entry that allows me to travel to my homeland. As I am about to depart from my father, mother, and sister, I reminisce a scene that has never left me. My father hugs me for the first time, or from as long as I can recall, and he weeps tears of sadness because of my departure. As I write this, I feel tears forming and a pang of emotions overcome me. Yet, what haunts me more about this memory, quite painfully, is that it is the only time where I remember such an intimate moment with my father. A few weeks later, this memory surfaces. I remember being in Pune for a six-week teacher-training institute

that I had to go through before being in my own classroom. Every now and then, I would run out from a meeting to cry in whatever private space I could find. I did not know it then, but to find the beauty in its lair, I had to find the ugly in it first. In *All About Love*, hooks (2000) points to this absence of love as the moment that reminded her of the mattering of love. This learning, and perhaps literacy, of love, is where I begin.

Ishq, Prem, Pyar

In this search for love, certain words come to mind: *ishq*, *prem*, *pyar*—these are all ways to say love in my homeland, India and elsewhere. Never to be forgotten. Yet, what demarcations of colonialism have drifted among our communities that have made love so lifeless? What makes the Brown body, like mine, so loveless and unloving? Or is love simply incapable of being ascribed to such a body? I am unable to dissect these questions without examining the heartache that resides within me. To this day, I have not been able to say, *I love you*, to most of my family and friends. At the same time, it is the precipice of love that calls to me. It draws me to an emotional pull that I cannot seem to escape. It is like the residue of life that remains between a mother and child when the cord is severed. In that way, love is always present even when it is detached.

However, “[b]uilt into the mechanics of love is the possibility of mismanagement, for we can never adequately anticipate how our relation to a love object might shift or morph over time” (Belcourt, 2020, p. 2). Perhaps this is what terrifies me the most. Love palpates, not as an affixation, rather as fluctuation. It tends to both break and be unbroken. On some days, it whispers softly. On others, it ravages me. It weaves me into messiness. To make meaning of this, I journey across boundaries and cartographies in the longing for possibilities—to rip asunder what Bhabha (1992) calls being unhomely. To live at a crossroad, even. Anchored in this search, I arrive at the classroom, as a teacher, to consider how these same contentions, negotiations, and questions can be examined and interrogated to cultivate Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of love (Darder, 2017).

On (Dis)locating Decolonial Love

The journey of defining a literacy of love is complicated by whiteness and how it ascribes a narrative of unlovability to the “Othered” bodies. According to Lea and Sims (2008), “Whiteness is learned; it is embodied discourse” (Lea & Sims, 2008, p. 11). This stems from race as being a social construct (Lopéz, 1995; Mills, 2011). In other words, racialization characterizes and then catalogues populations into categories of importance based on their biological or cultural differences (Miles, 1989, as cited by Stanley, 2014). In that operationalization, the white body holds a status as norm and is symbolic (Yancy, 2005). The author explains that such normalization is reverberated over centuries. Similarly, Tuck and Yang (2012) mention that the settler is seen “as more developed, more human, more deserving than other groups or species” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). As such, whiteness is a property that accumulates as a valuable asset (Harris, 1993). The author equates being white to having more economic, political, and social leverage, whereby basic needs and survival are substantiated by access to power and privilege. Such realities vis-à-vis whiteness as hegemonic are (re)perpetuated in the classroom (Lea & Sims, 2008). According to Ladson-Billings and Tata (1995), “[S]tudents are rewarded only for conformity to perceived ‘white norms’ or sanctioned for cultural practices (e.g., dress, speech patterns, unauthorized conceptions of knowledge)” (to Ladson-Billings & Tata, 1995, p. 59). The authors suggest that it makes whiteness alienable. As a result, students of colour take on a white middle-class habitus, engaging in mimicry and moving away from the self (Wayah, 2019).

There is a long history of such internalized racism among racially oppressed peoples (Kohli, 2014). But what makes this so? According to Brown and Gershon (2017), “Bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings” (Brown & Gershon, 2017, p. 1). This social construction sees the white body as normative (Yancy, 2005). At the same time, intersections of colonialism, race, and trauma shape the classroom experience (Grinage, 2014). The aforementioned complicates and troubles what we know of literacies, especially in relation to the housing and trafficking of oppressed peoples. The body is one of the first landscapes where such constructions take form, even within literacies. In her work on reading images of Muslim women, for example, Watt (2012) explains that assumptions and biases influence representations of otherness. The author explains that images are not simply contrived through the image in itself, but through the beliefs that characterize the interpretation of the image by the viewer. For the racial body, this reading and interpretation is provoked through whiteness (Warren, 2001). According to Yancy (2005), “To have one’s darker body invaded by the white gaze and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerful experience of violation” (Yancy, 2005, p. 217). And, students of colour internalize such messages, especially negative racial messages in the media and society that are not deconstructed in the classroom (Kohli, 2014). In many ways, this “reading” or rather assemblage of literacies makes the racialized body one of non-significance and even unworthiness, whether that is verbalized or communicated otherwise in a barrage of subtle but constant demonstrations of abuse and violence. Such repetitions can lead to assumptive and negative connotations of that who is the ontological Other.

To make cracks in such assumptions, borrowing the words of Watt (2012), is a starting point. Perhaps this can take form through decolonial love (Ureña, 2017). This is a form of love that refuses and resists colonial ways of acting love. According to the author (2017), “[D]ecolonial love [is seen] as a theoretical and practical model for healing the wounds of coloniality” (Ureña, 2017, p. 87). Therefore, it is not a love that is propelled by a Western narrative (Sandoval, 2000). Rather, the author suggests it is a reinvention of love that (re)forms the self and the world. She draws attention to how it is a “different mode of consciousness” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 72). It envisions literacy as a social practice (Carter, 2006). The author argues that language, literacy, and learning, and such practices are activity systems that are related to communities. By reflecting on otherness beyond colonial thinking (Ureña, 2017), decolonial love reveals such struggles and dismembers colonial structures (Drexler-Dreis, 2019). It is an undoing of assumptions and the whiteness that come with it (Lea & Sims, 2008). Otherwise, liberation from exploitation and oppression continues to be compromised (hooks, 1994).

Provocations à la Critical Discourse and Language Disruption

To begin, I consider critical discourse and the possibilities it offers. Critical discourse analysis elucidates discourses of resistance that address and challenge domination (van Dijk, 1995) and how the reproduction of racism potentiates itself (van Dijk, 1993). As I have noted, such a reproduction also comes in the form of internalization. Therefore, I cannot dissect a literacy of love without considering the self. As a Brown body living in the diaspora and the margins, to love means to unfurl in reading the body- to make meaning on an undesirable terrain on a topography that is so accustomed to harm, hurt, and trauma. It means to rupture. To take a dagger- merge it into the fault lines- ripple an earthquake in the body. I do this to become free from the colonialism that consumes me. I run from mimicry, but evading it is not always possible. Bhabha (1984) explains, “Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (p. 126). I am drawn to this desire to want to perform whiteness. I am unable to love all that is Brown, and, therefore, I am unable to love myself. Like Kohli (2008), “I too internalized the racism in my education” (p. 185). As the author discusses her embarrassment

of being Indian, I remember chiding other Gujarati students in elementary school for speaking our native language. In high school, I would never want to be seen with other South Asian and/or Brown students. I had this longing to be white, where a problematized glamorization of ‘rags to riches’ consumed me. Perhaps Bhabha (1984) is right about mimicry being subversive, exposing the gaze of otherness, whereby a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence ruptures an inherent injustice in the process. For a long time, I did not love the Brownness written, and perhaps read, all over me, including the ebbs and flows of the Brown contours and the unruly hair. The depths of whiteness engulfed me such that I engaged in what Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) call the passing-of-white and being trapped against a colour chart.

However, it is critical discourse that leads me to challenge this hierarchy of colourism. Coupled with that is the shock of recognition that a darker body experiences that brings forth emotions (Menakem, 2017). I come to learn that whiteness is hegemonic and the white gaze as its peripheral understudy control dialogues about race (Grinage, 2014). To peel these layers of whiteness, the pedagogy of love addresses interlocking systems of oppression (hooks, 2001; Darder, 2017) because discourses distribute hierarchal structures (Gee, 1998). In that sense, critical discourse has me grapple with love by grappling with myself, as a Brown tapestry that basks in colonial complexities. Opening like an atlas, then, I read the body. I trace birthmarks like countries on a map. Territories drawn on a landscape of the Other. Although it has taken me time to undo years of mimicry, I teach this to my students. I remind my students to do what brown (2019) compels us all to do: to stare into a mirror, hold its gaze deeply, and name one feature that you love. Such a practice, a literacy of love, lends itself to the following: “it means that I must undertake to love myself and to respect myself as though my very life depends upon self-love and self-respect. It means that I must everlastingly seek to cleanse myself of the hatred and contempt that surrounds and permeates my identity, as a woman, and as a Black human being, in this particular world of ours” (Jordan, 1995, p. 142). Borrowing these words of Black feminist scholar June Jordan, I find volition to name self-love, as a tenant to the literacy of love.

Despite this (un)learning, the students I have worked alongside with, who are mostly students of colour, often confess hatred towards their complexions, even if I tell them otherwise. Almost always, it seems the body of colour presses against the grains of white skin, only to find rejection. One student, for instance, tells me how much she hates herself for having dark skin. Another confesses that he uses a skin-lightening product. This is where hooks (2000) reminds me: “Many people find it helpful to critically examine the past, particularly childhood, to chart their internalization of messages that they were not worthy, not enough, that they were crazy, stupid, monstrous, and so on. Simply learning how we have acquired feelings of worthlessness rarely enables us to change things; it is usually only one stage in the process” (hooks, 2000, p. 54). Critical discourse, which I argue is a tenant of the learning and literacy of love, is not simply about discerning self-love. Borrowing from hooks (2000), it is about confronting lovelessness in the healing process. There is importance in analyzing sociocultural contexts of racism through historical contexts (van Djik, 1993), but a literacy of love also encompasses in a futurity of the body beyond a colonial subjugation. This is the first step to (re)claiming the body and averting the white gaze. To name the interlocking systems of oppression that deduce disabled, gender non-conforming, gender diverse, fat, female, queer, non-binary, racialized, trans, and all other historically marginalized bodies, is a powerful act. Ultimately, it starts to provide the wounded heart a road to self-recovery (hooks, 2000).

Alas, the road to self-recovery is not without its challenges. A body cannot “come to terms” with itself when it has constantly been at war. I know this all too well. There are times that I can deeply hold the bounty of my Brownness and worship it. At other times, however, I tremble in fear of what is in front of me. Like their teacher, my students experience similar

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inhibitions. Therefore, I want to cultivate a classroom where all of us are less terrified in the Browning body and instead tremble in fear of how powerful we happen to be. In such a classroom, to name coloniality and to eradicate its bane is an act of commitment. As West (2017) reminds me, it means to reject and unlearn societal standards. To do this, I probe my students with questions like the following: “What makes whiteness more beautiful?”, “Who decides that?”, and “Why do you believe that as the truth?”. Not only does this create a culture of questioning (Darder, 2017), it disrupts the feeling of being unlovable or the undesirability of the self as the Other. Along with such questions, the question of “why” provokes my students the most. It can make the classroom uneasy, especially when daring to examine and interrogate internalized oppression, but in its dangerous domain unfolds a powerful aftereffect. It constructs, ever so slightly, a generative possibility that sites of resistance can be formed even if the messages, whether from those we know intimately or from the mainstream, can be individually and collectively challenged by (re)claiming the body. That does not necessarily mean that there is an unrealistic nature of always loving the body (West, 2017), but rather that the self is less interested and less willing, as much as possible, to participate in how others define the body. It is difficult work, but it can be attained. It emerges when reading children’s books like *God Loves Hair* by Vivek Shraya or *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi. It happens when literary texts include different forms of representations that are beyond what is historically dominant. Through this, the possibilities that I hope to conceptualize is that my students, with all the wounds they carry, are much further in their healing process than I ever was at the start of my adulthood.

But, as I know personally, this only traces the outer body. Inside, I am another form of broken. I carry the blood of a land that my tongue does not register. A taste that is there, yet still unfamiliar. It only speaks Gujarati at home, even then, however, with a sense of unease, feeling that anything but English dirties the mouth. I learn, quite early on, that this dialect must be one that I swallow over and over and over and over again. A language that I must not let slip or it might slit my throat instead. I owe this tongue an apology, but I worry that it has long been severed by the bite of colonialism. Writing to this, Anzaldúa (1999) disserts, “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 59). In India, this hurt me even more, where the Gujarati that I professed had been considered a “village” or “unrefined” dialect. Such an internalization leads me to, even to this day, compare the dialect of my ancestors to the affluent, city speak. So, while I no longer hold a mirror to whiteness, its colonial shards reside elsewhere.

In the classroom, quite similarly, such dynamics are a dangerous blow to students. During my teacher training in India, I remember the emphasis placed on English as the language of instruction. While I understand the complexities that come with navigating colonial spaces, including the use of English, I believe it is counterproductive to learning and literacies of love if it eviscerates ancestral and familial languages. Yet, the teacher training ingrained in each teacher a penchant for hierarchization, assigning students according to their reading and writing levels. There existed a stress on “the production of poor performers” (Gee, 1998, p. 21). Perhaps this is because education is a commodification and profitization impulse, which, in turn, is imparted to students in the form of what Spivak (2002) calls a killing literacy. Often, then, the language of the Other is murdered, and I had killed it through the “Englishing” of the classroom. Even grammatical structures as such are harmful, wherein the biases and perspectives of white speakers prevails dominant (Van Dijk, 1993). Kohli (2008) provides an example in the following:

One day, a few months into my first school year as a teacher, I was in the hallway during lunch talking with the English teacher, Ms. Wright. Eddie came up to us and

asked, “Ms. Wright, I don’t got no lunch money, can I sit in your room and use the computer?” Ms. Wright was a seventh year White teacher who received a lot of respect for the high academic standards that she held students to at this underperforming school. Ms. Wright immediately responded, “I am not going to answer that question until you speak correctly. How can we say that in proper English?” We both looked at Eddie, waiting for him to rephrase his words, but instead he calmly replied, “Maybe not in your house, but in my house that is how we speak correctly.” (Kohli, 2008, p. 178)

Although not using the same words, I remember doing the same. I would tell my students in India that proper English uses “cannot” instead of “can’t” in both speaking and writing. I want to now run from such language restrictions, even refuse and resist it.

Three years later, I am again working with my students from India, teaching from and with them for a few hours on the weekend. Even though we converse in English, I no longer welcome it as the only language for teaching. I have come to realize that to course the tongue in English is to burn it. The home language, however distant homeliness happens to be, can temper that blaze. I now ask myself questions like Kohli (2008) does: “Why did I assume that Standard English was the best way to express things? What happened in my life that led me to, consciously or not, hold dominant White culture superior while teaching Youth of Color?” (Kohli, 2008, p. 179). I believe my own travel through schooling and society imparts on me that I must do onto students what has been done to me. Just as my teachers would tell me that the use of a conjunction is not ‘proper’ English, I would do the same to my own students. Challenging these assumptions and biases through decolonial love, I develop a learning and literacy of love that empowers a social practice of communities that they are familiar with for them to redefine literacies (Carter, 2006). So, this is an opportunity for me to atone for my mistakes, and perhaps this process is decolonial love.

This (re)mapping requires me to think about speaking of love. As I depart from this encomium of (re)claiming the native tongue, I wonder how love as literacy, as the spoken modality of expression, can whisper a lullaby to the community amidst what feels like a confinement to (mis)representations and stereotypes of an “unlovable” body. Here, the words of Chrystos (1988) come to mind: “Sandpaper between two cultures which tear” (Chrystos, 1988, p. 66). I am trapped in the in-between of contentions and negotiations. So much so that I am still unable to say the following: *I love you*. To speak of love, with emotional intensity, we believe renders us irrational and weak (hooks, 2000). In my own family, love is everywhere. It is the makeshift home we nestle within, away from the homeland, but loosely holding onto it. Yet, the language of love is never spoken. It is present, however, following us in our actions and gestures. When my sister or I fall ill, my father quickly tends to our aching bodies, with a gentle massage. To Ahmed (2005), this is love as empathy, to release a loved one from pain even at the expense of labouring the pain onto oneself. In that same vein, my mother simmers an old remedy passed down from one generation to the next. These examples remind me of the words of Trawick (1992), who explains that the silence of love does not mean an absence of it:

In the ordinary course of affairs, people did not often talk about love...Occasional indirect references were made to love. Even more occasionally, words for love and words of love were used. Yet acts of love, including acts done in words, were as common, as wrapped in cultural significations, as eating. (Trawick, 1992, p. 92)

Indeed, love is a verb, and hooks (2000) argues we would all love better if we saw it as such. But, in that passing, love is not always spoken out loud. To speak of love is uncharted territory. This is quintessential in the South Asian household, at least in mine and in others that I have witnessed, and it can be damaging. It is with this in mind that I arrive at the classroom, as a

teacher, to remember that love must be spoken. That it must be named. To love the self and to love the tongue in all its language is simply the start to the decolonial love that I seek to immerse in the classroom. It is a pedagogy of love that calls into the possibilities that emerge when colonial enactments are abolished and rejected. It is a language and literacy of love.

The Storm I've Been Hiding From

As I try to (un)do the unloving tendencies that I have come to enact, I sometimes feel that I am running out of time. The flesh of this paper can only remain for so long before it, too, runs amok. Before it does, I urge our communities, particularly as people of colour, to harness love with both the self and the relational. We are each aching and hurting, longing for possibility—the language and literacy of love. As a Brown body, I know all too well that love is affixed to a currency, with fixed boundaries of invisible lines that operationalize the Other as unlovable. Yet, such ramifications cannot deter the love with/in me/us to remain quiet. It tempers, sometimes dangerously and treacherously, and ruptures into a prayer—one for each other. So, however love comes to form, embrace it gently, nurture it and unleash its full potential. I end with the words of Gill (2018): “Become the storm you are hiding from / a hurricane does not run from the rain” (Gill, 2018, p. 61). With this, I unfold like the monsoons in Ahmedabad, where I first became a teacher, starting with downpour and leaving gently in the backdrop of a city that taught me to love. I say goodbye to that rain and luggage elsewhere. Waiting at the airport, three years later from that departure with my family, I am now on a different flight. I am not only longing for possibilities, but I am engaging in a learning and literacy of love.

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Bio-note

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curriculum attunements and pedagogical possibilities that imagine education as a site of healing, repair, and (re)worlding.

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