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Unmasking Colonial Practices in the Classroom While Teaching about Decoloniality: Part 1

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There are two subjects about which I am passionate as a teacher and scholar: leadership formation and decolonial praxis. These areas may seem to be at odds with one another, at least in white western worldviews; but disrupting colonial frameworks and ways of being and doing leadership in ministry and theological education is a necessary endeavor for those of us who continue to long for worlds beyond death-dealing hegemony and homogeneity. As an early career Latina teacher and scholar, I feel this longing in my bones. Perhaps more importantly, I experience these longings from students both in my courses and in the wider institution.

But what do you do when the very students who express such deep desires for change—even explicitly longing for a dismantling of western/white/colonial structures, processes, and epistemologies—function in ways that are wholly aligned with "possession, control, and mastery" as the ultimate display of white, self-sufficient masculinity, as Willie James Jennings articulates?[1] In other words, how does one *teach* decolonial praxis in a course *about* decolonial praxis, particularly with well-meaning and well-intentioned white students who praxis coloniality?

The first time that I taught a course on ministry leadership and decolonial praxis, I was not prepared for the embedded resistances that I encountered from students, particularly socially and/or politically progressive white students, that sometimes contradicted the very praxes we were reflecting upon that same week. Of course, such actions were so subtle and automatic that the students themselves were unable to recognize them; but that's how colonialism works

its deadly charms—in the corners and cracks of the unconscious. As educators, our most important task is to unmask that which lies just underneath the surface of what students articulate in word, speech, and affect, as a learning for the whole, and with kindness, respect, and compassion. As bell hooks said, "We practice interrogating habits of being as well as ideas. Through this process we build community."[2]

After that first course, and like any good scholar, I researched what others had written about decolonial pedagogies in the classroom and white racial identity formation and resistances. I also engaged in wisdom-seeking conversations with trusted educators and scholars on their own practices for mitigating colonial praxes in their classrooms. Through this process, what began to appear were patterns of behavior for what I and others had experienced. In gaining clarity about the nature and origins of some of these movements on the part of white students, I was better able to respond in the moment and incorporate pedagogies and practices to mitigate these in my courses. Here are just a few of the subtle embedded resistances that were unmasked.[3]

Co-optation. Whether it be in online or in-person discussions, many white students—unintentionally and without awareness—often *take up* time, space, and/or voice in class conversations and *take over* ideas, characteristics, and practices of nonwhite others, collapsing them into their own worldviews and subsuming them for their own purposes. For example, I noticed that a few white students in my class resonated with particular attributes or characteristics associated with some postcolonial and decolonial communities and leadership. Identifying that their own communities and/or leadership exemplified some of these attributes, they signified their ministries to be "decolonial" (yet remained situated contextually as majority white, middle-upper class congregations not necessarily allied with those most harmed by colonization and colonialism nor engaged in any kind of stated decolonial praxis). These attempts at possession and control also come in the form of collapsing decolonization into movements for gender, LGBTQ, or socioeconomic equity without acknowledging the racialized foundations and socio-historical trajectories of colonialism. Ultimately, students' desires to not be seen as carriers of colonialism resulted in them perpetuating the very colonial characteristics they were attempting to deny.

Silence. Several of the scholars with whom I spoke shared their experiences of white students maintaining silence in class in order to give space to students of color to speak or share or, more often than not, out of a fear of doing or saying "the wrong thing." Unfortunately, this itself highlights the privilege one has to practice opacity as an exercise of power, leaving others to perform vulnerability for the benefit of white students' learning. In my experience, white students—and even white colleagues—who say little to nothing in intercultural or interracial spaces often end up perpetuating the "white gaze" on students and colleagues of color as if they are being monitored or put upon to present in particular ways.

Resignation. When the depths of our collective entanglements with colonialism are realized more fully, one of the most frequent responses from white students is to "burn it all down," a form of resignation to the irreparability of religious and secular systems alike. It's as if starting

over completely, dismantling current structures, or working outside of institutional church spaces to create something new will rid us of our colonial ways of being and doing. Such a totalizing response arises from the privilege of being able to transcend or separate oneself from those very structures with little consequence or loss of power. Students of color in my courses have tended to not articulate such statements because the legacies and forces of colonization impact them more intensely and intimately than their white counterparts (though, of course, intersections exist). These students have not had the option or power to "burn it all down" and have learned to navigate within such systems for survival, with many finding spaces of joy and flourishing in spite of colonialism's strongholds. Simply burning something down doesn't make it disappear; it simply takes on another form.

Unmasking such praxes in the classroom takes discernment, patience, and care on the part of the instructor. In the next blog post, I will share some of my pedagogical learnings around unmasking.

[1] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020).

[2] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 43.

[3] While postcolonialism and decoloniality are intersectional in nature—meaning that they also seek to dismantle imposing eurowestern constructions of gender, sexuality, class, caste, etc.—the construction of racial hierarchies and white supremacy in the subjugation of non-white "others" assumes, historically and presently, a foundational place in the colonial project. Furthermore, because I noticed this phenomenon taking place with white students (regardless of their gender, sexual identity, or class), the praxes named here necessitate a specific focus on race as a socially constructed phenomenon.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/09/unmasking-colonial-practices-in-the-classroom-while-teaching-about-decoloniality-part-1/