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## “I love you all”: Centering a critical theory of love while teaching during and after the pandemic(s)

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### Abstract

Informed by autoethnography, this scholarly personal narrative highlights my pedagogical practices and reflections from students during the 2020–2021 academic year amid the COVID-19 health and racial unjust pandemics. Specifically, by employing a critical theory of love and social sustainability, I share how I engaged in love, care, humanizing, and culturally engaging and sustaining practices that positively affected class discourse and relationship-building among graduate students and myself. The findings highlight some of my personal reflections, thoughts, and feelings while teaching during the 2020–2021 academic year and some email communications received from graduate students that year, condensed into three identified themes: (1) moments of transparency and engaging in critical topics transparent and not asking the students to do anything I wouldn't personally do, (2) offering grace and being flexible, and (3) checking-in with students. Recommendations for instructors are offered to better support students in online formats.

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“I am blessed to have found you this semester. The patience, grace, and care you provided to me is what I needed at this time of life, and I’m forever grateful.”

[Student email]

## Introduction

On the evening of March 10, 2020, I was at a salsa dancing event in Phoenix, Arizona, in the United States, when a friend turned to me and said, “This is probably the last time we are going to be able to dance in a while.” The next day, our planet unexpectedly turned upside down when the World Health Organization announced a global health pandemic for an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes coronavirus disease (COVID-19; Soria et al., 2022). COVID-19 presented numerous threats and unprecedented challenges, including mandatory quarantines and physical social distance mandates, healthcare and racial inequities, and mental health issues (Barber et al., 2021; Burki, 2020; Ekpe et al., 2023; Santa-Ramirez et al., 2022; Tachine, 2022). As a result, higher education institutions across the globe were forced to make an abrupt shift in course delivery from in-person to online instruction. The COVID-19 global pandemic had effects beyond what faculty and other institutional agents could have expected.

COVID-19 was not the only pandemic. While most families were isolated and quarantined at home, the world watched media outlets—more specifically in the United States—consistently publicize anti-Black ideologies (i.e., society’s inability to recognize the humanity of Black people and communities; Dumas & Ross, 2016) and harm, including the unjust murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others. As a result of the national reckoning, numerous higher education institutions and corporations released institutional messages, some accompanied by strategic plans to further their efforts on diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracist practices. In addition to a host of new faculty and staff appointments (e.g., chief diversity officer), for the first time in U.S. history, although still majority white, there were more Black, Latina/o/x, and other non-white college and university president and chancellor appointments (Harper, 2023; Lederman, 2022). The opening quote is from an email from a graduate student—who identifies as Black—after experiencing a racist incident with a law enforcement officer and the deaths of loved ones due to COVID-19. During the summer of 2020, amid the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement marches and at the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I transitioned to a university in Western New York, in the United States, where I would begin teaching—entirely virtually—graduate students predominantly enrolled in the higher education and student affairs master’s and PhD programs. Amid the chaos as I developed my curriculum and syllabi, I remained intentional and conscious of how I wanted to deliver a level of love and care to the students enrolled in my courses. Moreover, I made it a point to incorporate critical race theory (CRT) and other critical methodologies, frameworks, and epistemologies in my teachings. This point is especially salient during a hostile sociopolitical climate—during and after the President Donald Trump Administration, with attacks on CRT taught in schools; the banning of books highlighting the racist history in the United States; and legislation in various states to defund diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (Lu, 2023).

I begin with a brief review of the literature on the effects of COVID-19 and racial injustice, in addition to love, care, and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy. Then, I describe my

pedagogical philosophy and praxis before, during, and post COVID-19's height, followed by the theoretical connections, methodology, and findings. Finally, I offer implications for instructors and my concluding thoughts.

## Literature Review

### Effects of COVID-19 and racial unjust

The surge of the COVID-19 global pandemic has undoubtedly impacted higher education by forcing school closures and shifting how instructors deliver teaching and learning practices online (Burki, 2020; Tice et al., 2021), an unforeseen transition for most faculty and students. The change was smooth for some; however, many students with disabilities and students without adequate utilities and Wi-Fi experienced additional difficulties transitioning to remote learning (Scott & Aquino, 2020; Tachine, 2022). In a phenomenological study conducted by Santa-Ramirez et al. (2022) on the transitional college experiences of first-generation, first-year, and first-year transfer students during the 2020–2021 academic year in the Northeast region of the United States—with the majority of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) student collaborators—the authors found that these collegians experienced increased isolation and mental health issues and the hardships with finding and building community with faculty, staff, and peers. Further, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the national student survey data from higher education institutions in the United States and Canada highlighted a significant decrease in students' sense of belonging to their universities and a decline in learner engagement (NSSE, 2021; Tice et al., 2021). Students with minoritized identities (e.g., Native American, Black, multiracial, and 2SLGBT+) from high financial need family backgrounds, those who are working class, and caregivers experienced financial hardships and took on additional family responsibilities (e.g., caring for siblings and elders) at higher rates than their more privileged peers (Soria et al., 2022; West, 2021).

The COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated the disproportionate impact BIPOC communities are consistently faced with (Tachine, 2022; Watson & Baxley, 2021). BIPOC communities died at a disproportionate rate (Wood, 2020). Further, “Black people were 4 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than white people due to inequalities in healthcare, education, and policy decision-making” (Ekpe et al., 2023, p. 1). Moreover, 69% of undocumented im/migrant workers, the majority Latinxs (inclusive of Black and Indigenous Latinxs), in the United States were essential workers on the frontlines during the pandemic (e.g., agricultural fields, healthcare facilities, and the service industry), with nearly half lacking necessary health insurance and were 50% more likely to contract COVID-19 than U.S.-born individuals (Runwal, 2022). During the BLM movement in 2020, Grace, a 15-year-old Black teen, was jailed in a detention centre for over 2 months for failing to complete her schoolwork during the pandemic (Watson & Baxley, 2021). Deemed by a judge as a “danger to society,” even amid the pandemic, Grace was not given grace and was “treated with neither care nor empathy” (Watson & Baxley, 2021, p. 144). Additionally, there was an uptick in anti-Asian racist rhetoric and xenophobia. During the first year of the pandemic, approximately 3,800 hate crimes were reported (Graham, 2021). A vast number of verbal and physical assault hate crimes have occurred against individuals of Asian descent in response to Donald Trump—then president of the United States—and his administration publicly stating that COVID-19 is the “Chinese virus” and an overall lack of knowledge on COVID-19 (Maleku et al., 2022). BIPOC communities, including those in college, had to navigate the challenges of the

pandemic in addition to experiencing secondary trauma associated with watching racialized violence against and targeting their communities (Hernández & Harris, 2022; Russell, 2022).

### **Love, care, and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy**

Love may be interpreted differently in cultures across the world. This paper is written from the perspective, understanding, context, and current societal norms the author is exposed to. hooks (2018) suggested that love could be used as a verb versus a noun and that we all can be part of a loving community. hooks (1994) also proposed that critical reflection should exist in teaching, seeing classrooms as communal spaces, and that “professors and students have to learn to accept different ways of knowing, new epistemologies, in the multicultural setting” (p. 41). Tachine and Lipe (2023) suggested that love should not be viewed as only a fantasy or romantic notion derived from capitalist and settler colonialist structures. These authors noted that love should be grounded in justice, mutuality, joy, and liberation, centering on relationship-building and community relations. Squire et al. (2022) shared that care “requires intent and an awareness of impact. A care that is intentional removes itself from the confines of neoliberal whiteness . . . and places decision-making in the scope of community and communal justice” (p. 10). As aforementioned, love can be defined and conceptualized in myriad ways.

Love (2019) proposed that educators engage with students on issues about oppression, racial violence, intersectional justice, and how to make sustainable communal change collectively. Ladson-Billings (1995) employed culturally relevant pedagogy to highlight racially minoritized students’ expertise areas—with a particular focus on Black students—while considering how to build a social community with students. Paris and Alim (2014) centered on culturally sustaining pedagogy and valuing cultural histories and traditions, assets, and integrating various linguistic and cultural elements with aims to seek anti-oppressive, engaging, and democratic learning spaces. Freire (1970) suggested that educators move beyond the banking model (i.e., solely the teacher or oppressor holds knowledge and that learners have pre-selected information deposited in their minds) to shared, collaborative, and reciprocal pedagogical spaces and curricula where all students actively educate others. Emdin (2021) inspired educators to liberate themselves from the often-harmful ways they have been taught to teach students and instead celebrate their identities and the assets, skills, and power they bring to classroom spaces. Montelongo and Eaton (2019) shared how instructors in online education formats can be mindful listeners by having various modalities pedagogies (i.e., visual and audio), understanding the importance of building community and relationships, engaging in tenderness as embodied practice, and using feminist pedagogical practices.

### **My Pedagogical Philosophy and Praxis Before, During, and Post COVID-19’s Height**

My pedagogical practices were comparable to pre pandemic; however, I became more vulnerable about sharing some of my lived experiences with students during and after the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This article acts as a gentle reminder that educators can incorporate collaborative, inclusive, and humanizing practices and worldviews at any time and in any course delivery format. In an ongoing sociopolitical climate where injustices are exacerbated (Roland, 2020), faculty members must “rethink underlying assumptions, actions and policies, roles and relationships, pedagogical approaches, and levels of preparedness that challenge current modes of operation and force faculty to answer ‘why’ and for ‘whom’” (Byrne-Jimenez, 2010, p. 6).

As part of my commitment to humanizing and valuing the knowledge and experiences students bring to college, the core of my pedagogical approach to teaching has always been empowering, engaging, and collaborative, where reciprocal knowledge is exchanged (Freire, 1965, 1970/2011). This approach involves dialogic consciousness-raising inquiry and builds rapport, trust, and relationships of care for our learning community while being mindful of the diverse student body's contextual, cultural, and pedagogical differences and learning styles. I actively seek to empower students to arrive in these spaces—inside and outside of classroom settings—as their holistic and authentic selves (as much as possible), where everyone shares the responsibility for cocreating an engaging and collaborative environment (Freire, 1970/2011). Pivoting away from traditional lectures, I am a proponent of group collaboration and discussion-based learning, incorporating historical events and contemporary issues via real-world scenarios, case studies, written reflections, videos, and various digital technologies. Whether it be personal development or career advancement, I aim to create intentional mentoring-centered relationships with students to identify their motivations to learn. Ultimately, I aim to create a beloved community, centering learning spaces driven by love and an ongoing commitment to joy, critical reflection, justice, and healing (Emdin, 2021; Watson, 2020).

For example, during the 2020–2021 academic year—teaching online amid the height of COVID-19—I intentionally held one-on-one meetings with the students enrolled in my courses, mainly intending to get to know them informally and vice versa. I am confident these interactions and care assisted the students' holistic development. Further, I included a "COVID-19 statement" in my syllabi, with some language adapted by a faculty member at Ball State University (Indiana, United States). Dr. Amanda O. Latz highlighted people were experiencing a global pandemic mixed with systemic and anti-Black racism, xenophobia, and economic precarity. It was vital for me to acknowledge everyone was experiencing an extraordinarily stressful time, especially persons with intersectional minoritized identities.

Moreover, in the statement, I shared I would lead the courses with compassion, understanding, flexibility, and care, and everyone's safety and health (i.e., physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and psychological) were paramount and prerequisites to learning. I also stressed that everyone's health and safety should not be put at risk for the sake of classes. I ended by asking everyone to remain mindful of the precarious circumstances, to extend grace to one another, to give ourselves and others patience, and to be okay with doing the best we can. I continue to engage in the aforementioned practices. On several accounts, during and since the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I would publicly state, "I love you all," during or directly before ending class. These words, I believe, we all need(ed) to hear during such turbulent times.

### **Theoretical Connections**

This article is guided by the critical theory of love (CTL) and social sustainability. Brooks (2017) emphasized that a critical theory of love means:

Love must be embodied to ensure that we intentionally perform love instead of reifying oppression through our pedagogical and epistemological violence. This redefined and embodied critical theory of love must engage the breadth of our humanity and the social and cultural identities that each of us brings to the spaces and places where we reside. (p. 111)

Brooks stated that love should be reconceptualized and reimagined; it must be embodied and performed (i.e., how well we love ourselves), which challenges contemporary discourses on love (e.g., romantic, familial, and sexual in nature). Further, CTL affirms the full personhood of people, centers all parties' experiences, and cocreates rehumanizing practices that heal and restore. Love should be an anti-oppressive and liberatory practice. Brooks proposed that love should nourish and encourage growth and healing, and prepare instructors and higher education agents to create spaces and engage in practices to help others heal themselves.

Although a vague concept, social sustainability centers on a just and not exclusive society that demands societal and institutional changes (Littig & Griessler, 2005; Wolff & Ehrström, 2020). A social sustainability ethos in teaching should include critical discussions and reflections, culturally diverse learning, and a focus on inequality and power issues (Wolff, 2011). Faculty should create and maintain learning spaces with "action-oriented transformative pedagogy, characterized by elements such as self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation, and inter and transdisciplinarity, as well as the linking of formal and informal learning" (Rieckmann, 2019, p. 40). Throughout the following autoethnographic account of teaching before and during the pandemic, focusing on the 2020–2021 academic year, I center data on my pedagogical practices that align with various aspects of CTL and social sustainability. I also suggest recommendations for sustainable humanizing, love, and whole-person-centered pedagogy.

## **Methodology**

The methodology I employed was scholarly personal narratives (SPN) informed by autoethnography (Nash, 2019). SPN allowed me to engage in self-reflection. Data were from personal communications (i.e., emails and notes) sent directly to me from graduate students enrolled in my online courses during the 2020–2021 academic year and reflective memos I wrote to myself regarding my teaching experiences and student responses. I intentionally reimagined what love is, centering platonic love at the core of my pedagogical practices and community building with the students (Brooks, 2017; Quaye et al., 2019; Tachine & Lipe, 2023). While living among multiple pandemics (e.g., health and anti-Black racism), it was salient that I unlearn my socialized beliefs of faculty–student relationships and behavioural norms, often lacking relationship building and love as actions (Squire et al., 2022). I challenged that notion and got personal by humanizing the students' experiences and positioning them as people first with their student identity second. For anonymity purposes, I used gender-neutral pronouns and edited their names and other identifying information in the findings.

## **Findings**

The following section highlights some of my personal reflections, thoughts, and feelings while teaching graduate-level education courses during the 2020–2021 academic year, with some email communications received from students, condensed into three identified themes: (a) moments of transparency, engaging in critical topics, and not asking the students to do anything I would not personally do; (b) offering grace and being flexible' and (c) checking in with students.

## **Transparency: “I will get personal and won’t shy away from critical topics.”**

My teaching is tied to my intersectional identities, including being a non-white Latino man, queer, from a high financial need status family background, and a first-generation college student. When course prepping for the Fall 2020 semester, I wrote in my memos, “I won’t ask students to do anything I wouldn’t do.” I often approached teaching by opening up brave spaces for students and myself to share worldviews and life experiences in a way that humanizes classroom environments. Further, I invest in building trust and rapport with students and getting to know them as individuals. For example, during a Fall 2020 semester course—and continuing to do so after—I facilitated an activity where students completed a five-stanza poem, “I am from . . .” adapted by Dr. Beverly Christine Daniel Tatum.

This activity focused on where students have been, where they are, and their aspirations. Before the exercise, I shared my poem with the class, encompassing many of my minoritized social identities and upbringing information. I hoped students would be comfortable enough to share parts of their lived experiences with their classroom colleagues. Each poem represented their privileged and oppressed identities, in which students voluntarily shared their poems in a supportive and affirming environment. This exercise ended by honouring the individual narratives and dialogue on learning from and appreciating the differences everyone enters college with. Before this lesson, I wrote the following memo:

This week, I will work on engaging the students in an activity where vulnerability is necessary. Thus, it’s essential that I, too, challenge myself and model what I hope the students will do as they work on their poems. I always said that I would never make a student(s) do anything I wouldn’t do first. So, I will share a lot about my past, some happy and not-so-happy memories. I don’t expect folx to solely list their trauma. I just want to model that we all have fears, aspirations, joyful moments, and experiences analogous to one another. While writing my 5-minute poem, I will be true to who I am in hopes that the students feel that authenticity and vulnerability, and maybe they will feel empowered to share a bit more of themselves that isn’t solely surface-level. I don’t remember many of my faculty throughout my educational trajectory openly sharing things about themselves beyond what you could find on their faculty profile online. Here is to shifting the narrative.

I read the following poem out loud to the class:

*I am from . . .* abandoned houses and blossoming trees. Sounds of gunshots at night and church bells on Sunday mornings. I call this the perfectly imperfect “little Puerto Rico” section of North Philly.

*I am from . . .* the tastes filled with amazing Puerto Rican spices and love. The ones that lit up my nostrils whenever going into any home in my hood. I hear English, Spanish, and Spanglish spoken all around me. I am from a lack of safe parks, so us kids roller skated up and down our street and cooled off mid-summer with the fire hydrants on the corner. I am from Philly cheesesteaks with salt, pepper, and ketchup! And not from the “famous Philly steaks” spots—the bomb ones come directly from the corner bodegas (stores).

*I am from . . .* a strong mother and father. Although challenges were faced daily with separated parents, I was always taught what love is and how to love others who are like

me and those who are not like me. I am from a white high school guidance counselor who told me, "People like you don't go to college." I say, "People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it," initially stated by the late playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw.

*I am from . . .* a high financial need family in a (purposefully) economically neglected neighborhood, where education wasn't considered a value or necessity for many folk around me. I am from school bullying and teachers who supported me . . . and others who didn't care enough to engage with my queer, Latino, low socioeconomic status Brown body. I am from a working-class mother who always showed us love the best way she knew how with the little she had.

*I am from . . .* a performance arts high school (living my best Glee kid fantasy!) and three higher education degrees from some of the finest (and problematic) public institutions. And trust me when I say it was their honor to have me! I am from resilience, perseverance, and determination. I am proud to know and love where I'm from. The goal now is to continue growing, learning, challenging oppressive systems, and paying it forward. The sky is NOT the limit; it's just the beginning.

This poem exemplifies CTL by humanizing my whole personhood via social and cultural identities. When sharing the poem, I remember feeling a bit anxious yet liberated. At the poem's conclusion, many students added the clapping-hands emojis on Zoom and typed in the chat with messages such as, "Thank you for sharing. That was powerful." These supportive messages made me feel validated and safe being in the community alongside these brilliant scholars. When the students who volunteered to read their poems were done, I responded with "Thank you for sharing," and the entire class would offer affirming messages along with claps and finger snaps. Analogous to being an active participant and sharing with students more about myself, I also spoke with them about my feelings and thoughts throughout the year. For example, I shared my own when I opened the classes with thoughts, reflections, and emotions. I shared how I felt one evening while facilitating class shortly after January 6, 2021, the day of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, DC. The following excerpt is from a reflective memo I wrote the evening after that first class of the Spring 2021 semester:

Today, I opened class by asking about thoughts, feelings, fears, joys, etc. To model, I shared how angry and fearful I felt on January 6th. While watching the news that day, I saw a sea of white folk storm the capital building. The building that is supposed to be one of the most protected and safest in the world was under attack. I told the students that I didn't feel safe in my home if those people—intense Donald Trump supporters—did not think twice about storming the capitol. When riots occur, they are often in and around the downtown areas of cities. I live in the downtown area. I shared with the class how that evening, alone because my spouse was away for work as a travel nurse assisting with COVID-19 patients, I (hardly) slept and had a knife beside my bed. I had an increased level of anxiety. I felt like I couldn't trust anyone and that the supporters who stormed the capitol may not end their journey there and begin attacking various cities nationwide. Luckily, nothing bad happened to me that day or evening; however, the impact of those people's actions stuck with me.



Sharing my thoughts and feelings opened up a floodgate of other responses, including conversations around safety for racially minoritized people, anti-Asian hate crimes, how the country appeared politically divided between love and hate, and so on. Although most students seemed to be impacted emotionally or psychologically by the events at the capitol, it was evident students of color who openly shared their concerns, thoughts, and feelings were experiencing increased psychological and physiological trauma. Thus, I did not hesitate to develop (a) my syllabi with minoritized scholars' work, (b) a curriculum filled with BIPOC scholars as guest lecturers and critical and asset-based theoretical frameworks developed and designed by BIPOC individuals, and (c) assignments that offered flexibility in allowing students to express themselves culturally and creatively. These practices align with the intentions of social sustainability in teaching, where critical discourse exists with a focus on inequality and power issues. I received the following emails from doctoral students after a synchronous online summer course I developed focused on race, racism, and undocumented college students:

Hi, Dr. Santa-Ramirez. Since the course ended, I have felt an overwhelming urge to send you a thank you note. I never send thank you notes to my professors, but in 6 short weeks, I felt that I learned so much more than I typically do, and was empowered to do something with this learning. And I have already begun sharing what I've learned through my work regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion topics . . . Thank you for sharing your time, expertise, and passion with us. I wanted you to know how much I appreciated being seen. Your emphasis on the support and love you offer your research co-collaborators [participants] has inspired me to think of ways I can do the same when I am able to begin my research. I hope to be able to take another class with you in the future. Thank you sincerely.

Another doctoral student shared:

Hello, Dr. Santa-Ramirez. Thank you so much for such an enriching and enlightening curriculum/class. The knowledge and articles I have obtained since taking your course have put me in a much better position to advocate for social justice! I absolutely love your facilitation style, and it is one [that] many teachers and facilitators could grow from. You are such a wonderful addition to the faculty and a much-needed perspective in Western New York! Thank you!

The two notes reminded me that centering social and racial justice and highlighting the knowledge, experiences, and works of minoritized communities is warranted, which is especially salient amid such hostile sociopolitical times when Republican—primarily white—legislators across the nation continue to try to stifle and erase the accurate histories of U.S. practices (e.g., the genocide of Indigenous peoples; slavery; mass incarceration of racially minoritized communities; housing, healthcare, and educational disparities; and anti-2SLGBT+, two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and more; Tachine, 2022). These practices include addressing existing inequalities in higher education and aligning with a social sustainability teaching ethos, particularly focusing on inequality and power issues (Wolff, 2011).

**Offering grace: “You need an exception or flexibility? No problem!”**

During the academic year, I received several emails from students referencing points I verbalized during class or to them individually. In alignment with CTL and care, I offered grace during times

of need. One student reached out for some personal and professional advice. They were conflicted about whether to attend class when feeling under the weather and having a lot on their plate that week with their employer. I shared with them that their health is a priority and that sometimes the demands of our jobs must take precedence, especially when working in helping professions. Their response was:

Thank you so much for making an exception for this week. I appreciate your advice and care for my time as both a graduate student and a part-time employee. It can be so difficult to navigate a balance between the two, so I really appreciate your thoughtful guidance!

Various students were experiencing contracting COVID-19 themselves or residing in homes with others who contracted the virus. Thus, it was salient for me to check in with students at the beginning of each class about how they were doing, asking what was on their minds and hearts. And also, what did they need from the class community or me at this time? During a check-in at the beginning of class, a student requested their presentation time be rescheduled because they were not feeling well due to the after-effects of COVID-19 and how constantly watching computer screens was impacting their focus and causing migraines. They shared in an email to me:

I just wanted to say thank you for allowing me to reschedule last night. I apologize that I wasn't able to present, knowing my topic is really important with what is happening currently [attacks on racially minoritized communities in the United States]. But I'm finally able to get up this afternoon with a lingering headache. I had COVID-19 during Christmas break from my roommate. Ever since, I get severe migraines, but being fully remote sometimes makes them worse. I've been struggling with it this semester, so I just wanted to say again that I appreciate you being so kind in letting me rest.

Without question, I approved this student's request and suggested that they log off the Zoom call and rest their eyes for the remainder of class and the day. They were so appreciative that they felt compelled to send me a thoughtful note the following day. Another student struggling with personal matters all academic year—whom I kept in close communication with to ensure they stayed afloat amid the myriad challenges and barriers—sent me an email after seeing their final grade posted. The following is part of our email correspondence:

Dr. Santa-Ramirez, I don't know how I got an A in your course or how I finished/am finishing this semester. It has been a roller coaster. It still is. Thank you. I can never thank you enough. I am eternally grateful.

I responded:

Paulina, you received an A in my class because regardless of what was happening around you, you persisted and didn't give up. Your dedication, resilience, and strength resulted in you getting an A in my course. It may be hard to hear right now, but I'm very proud of you. You should be proud of yourself, too. It has been an extremely challenging year for you, yet, here you are. I don't want you to feel alone in this process because you're not. Stay amazing and continue to reach beyond the stars.

They replied:

Dr. Santa-Ramirez, I have reread this email repeatedly and picture you telling me this. I am sincerely grateful for all your help, push, and advice this first year of my grad school journey. I don't know what I would have done without you and the other professors who pushed me to get through. Thank you very much.

These emails from students displayed care and humanization, considering their whole selves beyond solely their student identities. These practices align with CTL and social sustainability in the "post-COVID-19." I continue to ask probing questions at the beginning of class and offer care and grace to students depending on their needs at a particular time. The final example of being flexible and accommodating that I implemented during the 2020–2021 academic year and beyond is not having a strict dedicated time and day for weekly office hours. I wanted to meet the needs of the students best, considering their times of availability and capacity levels, including meeting during late evening hours and weekends. This practice was stated on my syllabus, and I also publicly verbalized it during class times. Further, following each class, I would stay after to speak with any students who wanted to chat about anything class or not class-related. Tice et al. (2021) also encouraged faculty to incorporate this pedagogical practice into online courses. Although providing grace was fulfilling and necessary, it sometimes came with internal challenges. For example, balancing my personal life with the additional time investment of staying after class and altering assignments and schedules. I had to learn better how to ensure I was being present for the students while also taking care of myself and implementing some boundaries (e.g., now I actively try not to respond to non-urgent emails after a particular hour). However, being accommodating and receiving messages from students sharing their appreciation made me feel I was in a position to offer a little help and not hurt.

### **Checking in: "I really appreciate you reaching out..."**

As previously stated, in addition to the adverse effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, people in the United States faced many racial injustice challenges and harm, such as multiple anti-Asian hate crimes (McClure et al., 2023). During the academic year, I had one course where an Asian-identified student was absent from class directly following Asian hate crime murders in the Atlanta, Georgia area, where a gunman targeted three Asian-owned spas and killed eight people (Graham, 2021). The class and I engaged in a conversation about the incidents and discussed the sustainable implications of better supporting our Asian-identifying friends, students, family members, and colleagues. Considering that one of the Asian students did not attend the class that day, I contacted them directly to check-in. The following is part of my initial email and their response:

Hello, Kourtney. I hope you are doing well. You were missed in class this week. I'm sure you're aware of the anti-Asian incidents that occurred this past week in Atlanta, Georgia. It's been very emotional, and I just wanted to check in with you and ask how you're doing/feeling? Just know that you are in my thoughts, and I'm keeping you close to my heart. Know that you are valued, appreciated, and loved. I will always be a cheerleader for you and all justice issues. Please don't ever hesitate to reach out if/when needed.

Hello, Dr. Santa-Ramirez. Thank you for reaching out. It really means a lot to me. Racism against Asians has been heightened since the beginning of the pandemic. I read a story about it, and I tried to keep myself calm. The fear never felt so real once I

stepped out of my safety nest [of my] on-campus apartment. Whenever someone looked at me, I feared they would assault me for being Asian. This is scary & stressful . . . this lady was walking by & loudly yelled to ask where I was from. When I answered “[U.S. city],” she yelled back, “Really?” with a lot of sarcasm. I think she wanted to start some kind of unfriendly conversation—guessing from her attitude—but there were three of us and one of her, so she just continued walking. It feels so real, and I want to deny it, but I think it is a part of life that I need to prepare myself for and hopefully I will be able to change it for the next generation. But sincerely, I really appreciate you reaching out, your support, your thoughts, and how you always care for your students.

Had I not checked in with this student, I would not have known they were experiencing fear and stress due to the anti-Asian, hateful, and discriminatory political climate. Our conversations continued beyond the email excerpts provided, with this student continuously sharing their appreciation for my checking in and the level of care I provided to them and other students.

Another example of checking in I implemented was meeting with each student individually via Zoom to get to know them personally and vice versa. This practice resulted in building strong connections with students, and several felt they could trust me enough to share some of their challenges (e.g., BIPOC students feeling isolated, personal family issues, and testing positive for COVID-19). During a one-on-one meeting, a student expressed their concerns regarding microaggressions they experienced from someone during their on-campus job. We discussed their feelings and collectively discussed an action plan they could take to rectify the negative impact a particular staff member in their department was making on their life. Soon after, I received the following email:

Good evening, Dr. Santa-Ramirez. I wanted to update you about my encounters with that staff member who was saying things about my religion and clothing. I ended up taking it to the department head and asked for action to be taken. The person did end up apologizing to me afterwards. . . It was an emotional and conflicting journey, but it was very refreshing to hear after going through the whole ordeal. Our conversation went very well as we had a heart-to-heart. I definitely learned not to be scared, to stand my ground, and that there can be positive outcomes when things like this happen . . . I connected with you so much when you opened up the last class about why you went to California. I just want you to know you are someone I look up to, and I really appreciate it. The work that you are doing is helping students like me. Thank you for fighting the battles that you do for us students of color, even when it can be difficult. I understand how hard it can be to stand up for yourself, let alone for others, and that is why I really wanted to thank you! You definitely help make this university manageable. Keep doing what you're doing because YOU ARE AMAZING!

At the end of the Spring 2021 semester, two students of color shared some words of appreciation with me. One student shared:

You said something to me that was culturally recognizable and that I can relate to. You are the reason I decided not to drop out this semester. When I started the master's program, I didn't know I would have a faculty member who looked like me, and I could relate.

The other student shared while tearing up, “It was because of your impact that I had a more enjoyable first year in the master’s program.” The aforementioned statements meant the world to me, mainly because I felt their love. I understand the significance of representation on college campuses of people you can relate to, which I did not always have at my disposal during my educational trajectory. In a reflection memo, I wrote:

I’m glad I decided to have one-on-one meetings this year with the students and reached out to them individually. I know better how they feel about what is happening worldwide regarding these hate crimes, so I can best support them moving forward. Fortunately, I have had colleagues check in on me when they feel like I may be personally impacted by something (i.e., hurricane Maria that hit Puerto Rico, where my family resides), but, unfortunately, I cannot recollect any of my faculty members doing so (besides my PhD advisor) during my tenure as a student.

## **Recommendations**

Teaching during the COVID-19 global pandemic has taught instructors a lot. In her forward in *Strength to Love* (King, 2019), Coretta Scott King mentioned that she and her husband, civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., were optimists and believed that one day, the strength to love would bring the dream of a beloved community to earth. I, too, am an optimist and believe love can and should be centered in teaching and community-building practices. The following actions are some that higher education instructors can implement in their pedagogical practices regardless of instructional format (e.g., face-to-face or online): building trust and rapport via transparency, offering grace via showing up early or staying late, incorporating culturally engaging and responsive pedagogy, being intentional with the modalities employed in courses, and checking in with students during and outside of class. First, it is crucial to build trust and rapport. I shared my example of one-on-one meetings with each new graduate student enrolled in my courses during the 2020–2021 academic year. This practice improved communication with the students and allowed us to better relate to and humanize one another; thus, analogous to CTL, affirmed all parties’ full personhood and experiences (Brooks, 2017). Further, checking in is salient to learn about the students and their needs, and vice versa.

Moreover, instructors could consider showing up (i.e., if courses are in person) or logging into their virtual learning platforms (e.g., Zoom) a bit earlier than the scheduled class time and staying after synchronous course meetings to chat with any students who may have questions regarding the class or their personal development. I found these practices to be highly beneficial for building trust and rapport with my students and humanizing their holistic experiences. Santa-Ramirez et al. (2022) found that students felt a greater connection to their faculty members amid COVID-19 and virtual learning when they had their cameras on and made an effort to get to know their students on a personal level. I would be remiss not to mention that I understand these choices have certain privileges, and not all faculty have this capacity and availability. For example, faculty who teach large courses (e.g., 50+ students) may not be able to implement this practice but can adapt what works best for them and their students.

Next, I recommend that instructors incorporate culturally engaging and responsive pedagogy and issues pertaining to inequities, power, privilege, and systemic oppressive structures in their curriculum. As institutions become more diverse, instructors must be intentional with including

topics, readings, and theories from and about the experiences of minoritized and underserved scholars and communities (e.g., BIPOC, 2SLGBT+, undocumented im/migrants, students with disabilities, and Black women), in addition to class activities that allow students to take the lead in their learning using their critical and creative minds. For example, in June 2023, the majority of the Supreme Court of the United States Justices voted to end race-conscious admissions policies, which can impact college access for historically underrepresented and minoritized students and communities (Savage, 2023). Instructors can incorporate curriculum around this topic and engage in activities and dialogue about the implications of this ruling and how higher education institutions can resume their diversity, equity, justice, inclusion, and anti-racist efforts.

Further, as I tried to do as much as possible as is suggested in existing scholarship on culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (Montelongo & Eaton, 2019), it is essential to be intentional with the modalities employed in courses, ensuring that various are incorporated: visual (e.g., observations and videos), audio, written, and so forth, in addition to outcomes such as critical thinking. Also, many students require additional time to process readings and videos; thus, it is essential to consider sending materials to the class in advance. Additionally, as exemplified in the findings with one student experiencing continuous migraines due to consistently being in front of computer screens, instructors teaching online should consider incorporating multiple breaks and ending class earlier than scheduled, especially those longer than 2 hours. Lastly, considering humanizing and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy so that students can contribute to their learning, instructors can provide opportunities for students to suggest topics, readings, and assignments of their choosing. For example, instructors can consider incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing and Native values (Tachine, 2022) in lessons and activities, such as storytelling, prayer, family and elders, and a focus on collectivist ideologies.

## Conclusion

This semester has been tough, but you have made it so much easier. I love your innovative and creative education methods. I hope I will have another chance to study in another one of your classes again in the future. You made my first year of graduate school so meaningful, and you also taught me, through your actions, to be understanding and caring. Thank you so much for a great year, Dr. Santa-Ramirez.

–Student

COVID-19 was and continues to be present in society. These turbulent and unprecedented times have undoubtedly shifted how I approach teaching, learning, and community building and have forced instructors to consider sustainable strategies in a post-pandemic era. It also helped me better recognize that regardless of COVID-19, we all need sustainable, radical love, grace, and care because humans' lives are complex; outside of a global health epidemic, people face many challenges (e.g., racism, xenophobia, and homo/transphobia). Thus, it was and is vital for me to employ and embody a CTL in and out of my classroom settings while considering how these practices are and can be socially sustainable (e.g., ongoing critical discussions and reflections, culturally diverse learning, participatory and collaborative, and bridging formal and informal learning (Rieckmann, 2019; Wolff, 2011; Wolff & Ehrström, 2020) that challenge whiteness ideologies (García-Louis et al., 2023). Were/are my teaching approaches perfect? Not at all. When we transitioned from fully online courses to face-to-face instruction, I continued—as best I

could—to provide the same level of love and care to my students and myself. For example, I continue to begin classes by asking students what is on their minds and hearts and what I or the class community can do to help them. According to Watson (2020), one of the first questions people should ask when developing a beloved community is, "How are the children?" (53:46). In that nature, I ask probing questions to the students in my courses to understand better how they are doing.

Further, as suggested in CTL and social sustainability development in higher education, I am more intentional with not shying away from bringing up conversations around real-life issues, mostly centering injustices and topics impacting higher education (e.g., police brutality targeting racially minoritized communities and gun violence in schools), with aims of working toward short- and long-term outcomes for the advancement of marginalized people. I do not subscribe to the saying, "leave your personal life at the door," meaning only bringing certain parts of your identities and experiences to class and academic spaces. Many of us, faculty and students alike, are personally impacted by hostile social forces and what is happening in society (e.g., anti-Blackness; anti-2SLGBT+ policies; and im/migration legislation, ideologies, and actions). I am intentional with holding space and time during my classes to engage in these critical conversations, just in case the students do not have an opportunity to talk, reflect, and process these topics in their other classes or other spaces (e.g., home and work). However, CTL and social sustainability do not mention the complex political nature and exclusionary laws and policies that impact the work of many higher education professionals. I do recognize that I currently work in a state (New York) where I feel comfortable implementing curriculum and speaking freely about injustices and systemic oppression issues. Not all places in the United States are as welcoming to such conversations and practices. For example, the current Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, signed Senate Bill 266 into law in May 2023—with a similar bill (Senate Bill 17) passing and signed by Governor Greg Abbott in Texas effective January 1, 2024—banning public higher education institutions from spending money on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and initiatives (Diaz, 2023; Phillips, 2024). However, at the core, instructors and other administrators in higher education can employ various aspects of CTL and social sustainability within their comfort and safety levels.

Over the years as an instructor, I have become increasingly aware of the difference a collaborative, humanizing, and engaging environment can make in student success. I remain committed to ensuring that my learning and teaching spaces foster analytical and critical consciousness that will contribute to student's academic development beyond the course and can assist in their personal transformation and professional lives as scholars and practitioners. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) stated, "Empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks" (p. 21). Thus, as shared in the findings, and more specifically in the first theme, it was salient for me to be transparent with my thoughts, feelings, and experiences to humanize myself in the learning spaces while modelling to students that they, too, can bring all they are. In doing so, I received numerous emails, some shared throughout this article. I felt as if my being in a faculty role had meaning. I felt intrinsically fulfilled knowing that my pedagogical choices and employing love made and continue to make a positive difference for all involved in my classroom spaces. Faculty and instructors can implement various ways to incorporate love in their classrooms—in any instructional format—to best serve their

students in online and in-person courses. We must continue to reimagine, redefine, and unlearn the foundational ideologies of love. We must center love and humanize ongoing pedagogical practices while working toward a sustainable, socially just, and equitable future.

### **Conflict of Interest**

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