

Reclaiming Language! Reclaiming Life! Critical Reflections of an Anti-racist Educator's Lived Experiences

Enid Lee
enidlee1@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay is part of a larger legacy project entitled “Retracing My Steps”. The legacy project is my response to a recent challenge from a professor from my undergraduate years at the University of Western Ontario, who observed that it was important that I consider what he referred to as launching my legacy in Anti-Racist education. These reflections capture key elements of my practice and in particular, the conscious use of language from a sociolinguistic perspective.

Keywords: Anti-racism, Pedagogy, Liberation, Sociolinguistics

Introduction

Positionality, Purpose and Process

I begin my reflections with the following quote from the book, *Letters to Marcia: A Teacher's Guide to Anti-Racist Education* that I wrote 35 years ago to assist Canadian educators in furthering anti-racist education: “Some activities in schools are designed to maintain order, but there are others with the distinct potential for changing the order and making it more equitable. Writing can be viewed as one such activity” (Lee, 1985, p. 2).

I revisit this statement at a time when it seems that the world order is being nudged toward greater social justice by global uprisings and resistance, by bodies on the line, by shouting, writing and drawing. All of these challenge us to make right the wrongs that rob so many human beings of liberty and life. I hope to use this piece of writing to document the practice and promise of some of the educators with whom I work in schools and in so doing, to contribute to the unending struggle for racial justice.

In this essay, I critically reflect on aspects of my practice as an anti-racist scholar/practitioner, professional development specialist, community builder and writer who “interrupts” her writing frequently to teach and organize with fellow-travelers for greater justice and joy in the world. On this occasion, the “interruptions” are taking place in the midst of two pandemics: COVID-19 and the global reckoning on anti-Black racism and racial justice. Naturally, these pandemics have found their way into this essay.

Firstly, I make use of current events and their implications for anti-racist practice, especially with the opportunities they offer with respect to the definition of the word “racism.” Secondly, I explore my use of and some teachers’ responses to tools I have developed and continue to use as I have engaged with them in anti-racist practice in a variety of professional

learning settings. Finally, I end with an invitation to the community of readers whom I have encountered in this reflective writing to engage in further explorations of language as an emancipatory force in the global reckoning on racism and racial justice and beyond.

Part 1

One Word/Three Cases

Current Events in a Global Reckoning:

Racism and Racial Justice: Masking, Unmasking and Making Reality with Language

Because I view anti-racism as an applied field, and as a subject that “refuses to allow itself to be theorized into irrelevance” (Lee, 2012, p. 117), I frequently draw on current events, news headlines in particular, and email messages from colleagues when facilitating conversations in professional learning sessions. These sources often provide me with the very stuff of which racism and anti-racism are made, and always with the language—the material which humans use for masking, unmasking and making new meaning of reality.

The following three cases are intended to illustrate the powerful function of language in the examination of definitions such as racism.

Case 1

Kennedy Mitchum, 22, Gets Merriam Webster to Update its Definition of Racism

(Good Black News, June 16, 2020)

Kennedy Mitchum is a 22 year old African-American woman “who recently graduated from Drake University and lives in Florissant, Missouri, just a few miles away from Ferguson, where protests over the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown helped solidify the Black Lives Matter movement” (David Williams’ CNN report, June 9, 2020).

According to newspaper headlines, “Kennedy Mitchum, an African-American woman Gets Merriam Webster to Update its Definition of Racism.” She discerned that the Merriam Webster definition of racism “was too simple and too surface level.”

She decided that this definition was a major contributor to misunderstandings that occurred in the many conversations about racism with which we are concerned in this national and global reckoning on racial justice and anti-Black racism in particular. Mitchum was determined that it was the last argument she was going to have about racism. She emailed the editor of the Merriam Webster Dictionary and insisted that they include the “systematic oppression of people” as an essential feature of their definition on racism. She explained in a recent interview: “It’s not just, ‘I don’t like someone’. It’s a system of oppression for a certain group of people.”

After a number of exchanges between Mitchum and Alex Chambers, the editor of the Merriam Webster Dictionary, she received word that a revision to the entry concerning racism was being drafted. The editor’s response to Mitchum included the following acknowledgement:

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“this revision would not have been made without your persistence in contacting us about this problem. We sincerely thank you for repeatedly writing in and apologize for the harm and offense we have caused in failing to address the issue sooner.” At present, the Merriam Webster dictionary defines racism as “a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.” (<https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/racism>)

The existing definition of racism focuses exclusively on the belief aspect of racism, and in the process, it masks the long-standing and ongoing experience of the many human beings who experience “abuse, hate, violence, lost opportunities, injured civil rights, jobs etc.” (Lynch, 1986, p. 96). The definition muffles the anguished cries of those for whom the aforementioned experiences are daily companions. The choice of language here does not lead us to examine the access and accomplishment experienced by the beneficiaries of the alleged inherent superiority. It does not direct us to pay attention to the systems and structures through which this alleged inherent superiority is realized and the economic and behavioral consequences of this belief. These matters are kept safely out of view in the discussion. According to sociolinguist, M.A.K Halliday, language is as it is because of the functions it serves in society (Halliday, 1994).

In anti-racist practice, both in formal and informal settings, unmasking the power-base of racism is absolutely essential. I recall with regret, those times in workshop situations when I allowed myself to be pressured by the severe limitations of time and have rushed to explore the applied nature of work in anti-racism without thoroughly undressing racism and unmasking its systemic and historical foundations with workshop participants. I have had to return to embrace the lexical choices related to “history, systems, policy and group oppression,” and call into service the active voice of the verb as opposed to the passive. Furthermore, I insist on the use of the present tense of the verb to reflect the ongoing nature of the human degradation that results from racism.

As someone who has been engaged as a foot soldier, indeed, as an anti-racist practitioner for several decades, the day on which I learned of the exchange between Mitchum and the editor of the Merriam Webster Dictionary was a day of great rejoicing. I rejoice not only for Mitchum’s courage and her struggle for the release of the word “racism” from its deceptive stranglehold, but also rejoice for the many practitioners like myself who have had the temerity for generations to craft and use more accurate definitions of the word racism. I insist that words must be reclaimed and imbued with the lived experiences of everyday human beings. It is in that reclamation we find our liberation. We encourage ourselves to fly and sing and recreate with the use of wordy weapons. We cannot defer to dominant definitions. It is heartening to see those who have the official power to name racism and discrimination come to their senses and come to terms with the reality of the silenced world.

Only time will tell what Merriam Webster’s Editor will allow within its new Dictionary definition of racism.

I continued writing this reflection several days later when the strategy for using language for liberation was counteracted with full resistance as is evident in the headline in the second case.

Case 2

Trump Supporters Deface Black Lives Matter in Martinez, CA (Kerry Leidich, July 4, 2020)

Following the murder of George Floyd, on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, the mayors of several large cities such as Washington, DC and New York, authorized the painting of large signs in yellow paint of the words: BLACK LIVES MATTER, along major thoroughfares. This tendency began to spread and as the month of June wore on more and more of these signs could be seen across the United States. The above headline is in reference to two individuals in Martinez, California who in anger and resentment undertook to remove or deface a Black Lives Matter sign that was painted across the streets in their town.

Our technology allows you as a reader of this piece to go to Martinez, California and witness the scene and hear the words of those engaged in defining and redefining racism.

The following dialogue ensued between the two people who were removing the Black Lives Matter sign by covering it over in black. As indicated earlier, the Black Lives Matter signs are typically painted in yellow.

The critical incident: A woman is painting over the sign and a man appears to be supporting her as she paints. When onlookers stop to question the action of these individuals, the following exchange takes place:

Onlooker: What's wrong with you? (to the painters)

Painters: We are sick of this narrative, that's what's wrong, the narrative of police brutality, the narrative of oppression, the narrative of racism. It's a lie. It's a lie.

Onlooker: This is racist what you are doing!

Painters: There is no oppression. There is no racism. It's a leftist lie. It's a lie from the media, the liberal left.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLuESd7zidA>

As in Case 1, the definition of racism is challenged. The battle takes place, not in a quiet classroom but on one of the nation's streets. It is almost as though Mitchum's demand that the definition of racism include oppression is made more urgent by a situation such as this one in California. How do we ensure that the means through which lived experiences are conveyed and disseminated on the public agenda does the work of explaining the structural and systemic oppression in the narrative? In the media? When are the individuals involved truth tellers? When are they liars? Who has the power to decide?

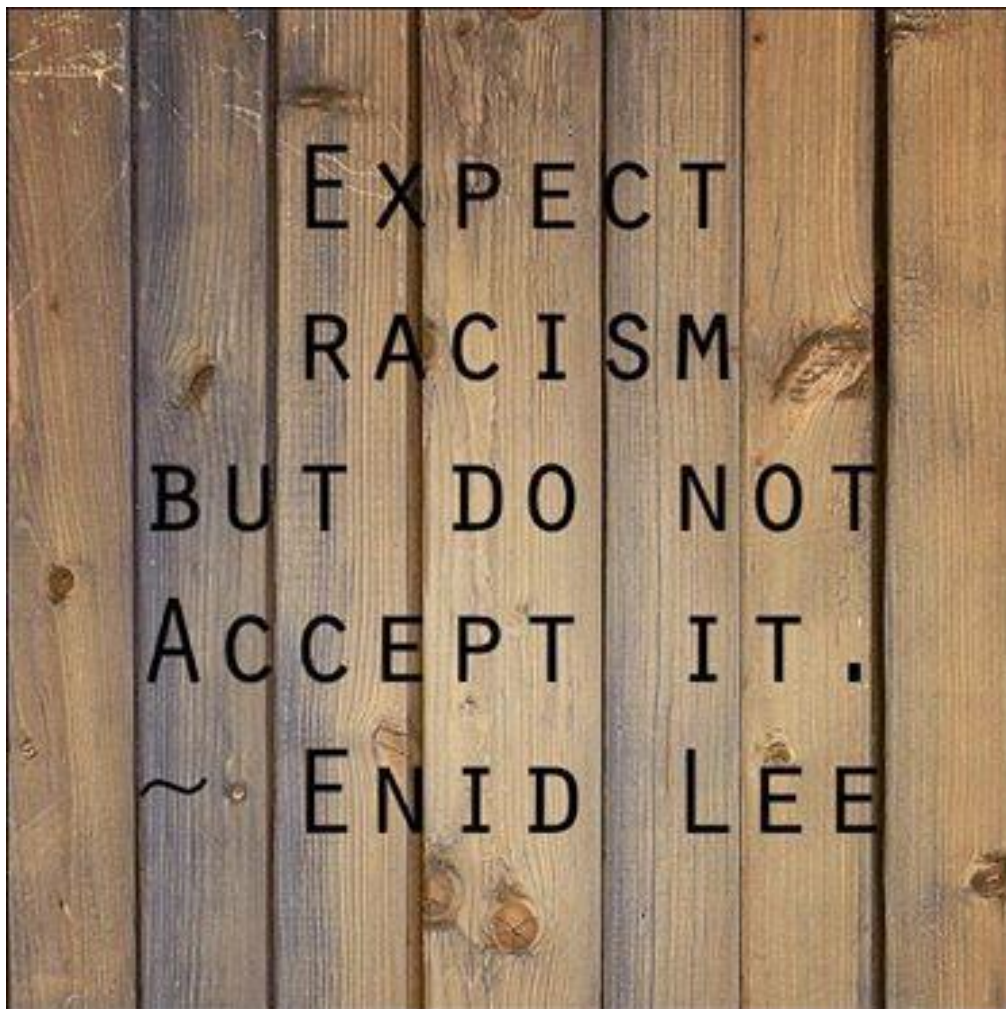
The second case points to one of the major goals of anti-racist work, specifically, *the goal of making explicit* through stories and statistics drawn from history and the here-and-now, the ongoing racial oppression and destruction of the lives of people of color. In this particular national moment in the United States, the conversation is about the killing of unarmed Black People. (See also, Rosa Naday Garmendia's artwork, this issue). It is not uncommon to hear Black Lives Matter countered with the slogan, All Lives Matter. In fact, All Lives will not

Matter until Black Lives Matter. Stories like these and the following statistics can assist with deepening understanding of structural oppression and make definitions clear.

Police brutality in the U.S. and Black Lives Matter

In the two cases (previously discussed), the headlines and the accompanying articles confirm that language used to describe racism is a contested site. The struggle for liberation through the conscious use of language is ongoing, and therefore, is never a completed project. We can mask some realities through language. As importantly, language can also be used to unmask other people's realities.

This work is never over. As long as words are available and we do not abandon our agency as human beings, whether we are in places of higher learning, or on the sidewalks of city streets, we use whatever words we have to speak, or write, or paint. I have found through my work as a person who takes action for justice, that language can unlock some of the mental, physical and spiritual cages that are lying in wait for us. I face each day with the quote I have created and placed on a poster (see below) which I use in my professional learning settings to remind me of the nature of the setting and environment in which we live.



Case 3

What is Racism?

In the weeks following the murder of George Floyd and the accompanying uprisings of protest, my mailbox was flooded with a large number of notices about webinars on the topics of racism and anti-racism in various contexts of public life. One of the shared features of these webinars was that the organizers were using current events to take a stand to address racism frontally. The following is an example of the way in which one organization seized the moment of a current event and created an opportunity to define racism.

On June 5th 2020, the webinar, *Naming Racism* was offered by the Virtual Radcliffe Series at Harvard. It was part of a series designed to explore Health Equity in the time of COVID-19. In the webinar, it is evident from the words of Dean Tamiko Brown Nagin of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard that current events led to a shift in the focus of the webinar. By way of introduction to the webinar, Dean Nagin noted:

“We had originally planned to focus this afternoon on the profound racial disparities laid bare by COVID 19 and we will, but in light of recent events we also take this opportunity to discuss race and justice in America more broadly. For my part, before I introduce our speakers, I feel an obligation to acknowledge the crisis that this nation is facing. Our country is roiling with protest and rage over yet another senseless police killing of an African-American. This time, George Floyd.”

One of the presenters at this webinar, Camara Phyllis Jones (the 2019-2020 Evelyn Green Davis Fellow, Radcliffe Institute; Adjunct Professor, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University; Senior Fellow and Adjunct Associate Professor, Morehouse School of Medicine), provided a definition of racism with a number of useful dimensions.

Camara Jones presented racism as: “a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call “race”), that

- unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities;
- unfairly advantages other individuals and communities; and
- saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources.”

(Emphasis added. See Webinar: *Naming Racism*, June 5, 2020)

Again, through our current technology, by simply tapping the link below, we can participate and reflect on this definition of racism through Camara Phyllis Jones’ images and words. (<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/video/naming-racism>)

I found that Jones’ use of the participle “structuring” from the verb “to structure” drew back the curtain with a confident hand on both the words “racism” and “opportunity.” In discussions on racism, the word “structure” frequently appears as a noun. Camara Jones’ word choice in this instance allows me to see structure at work. It reveals the deliberate nature of **how** opportunity is created.

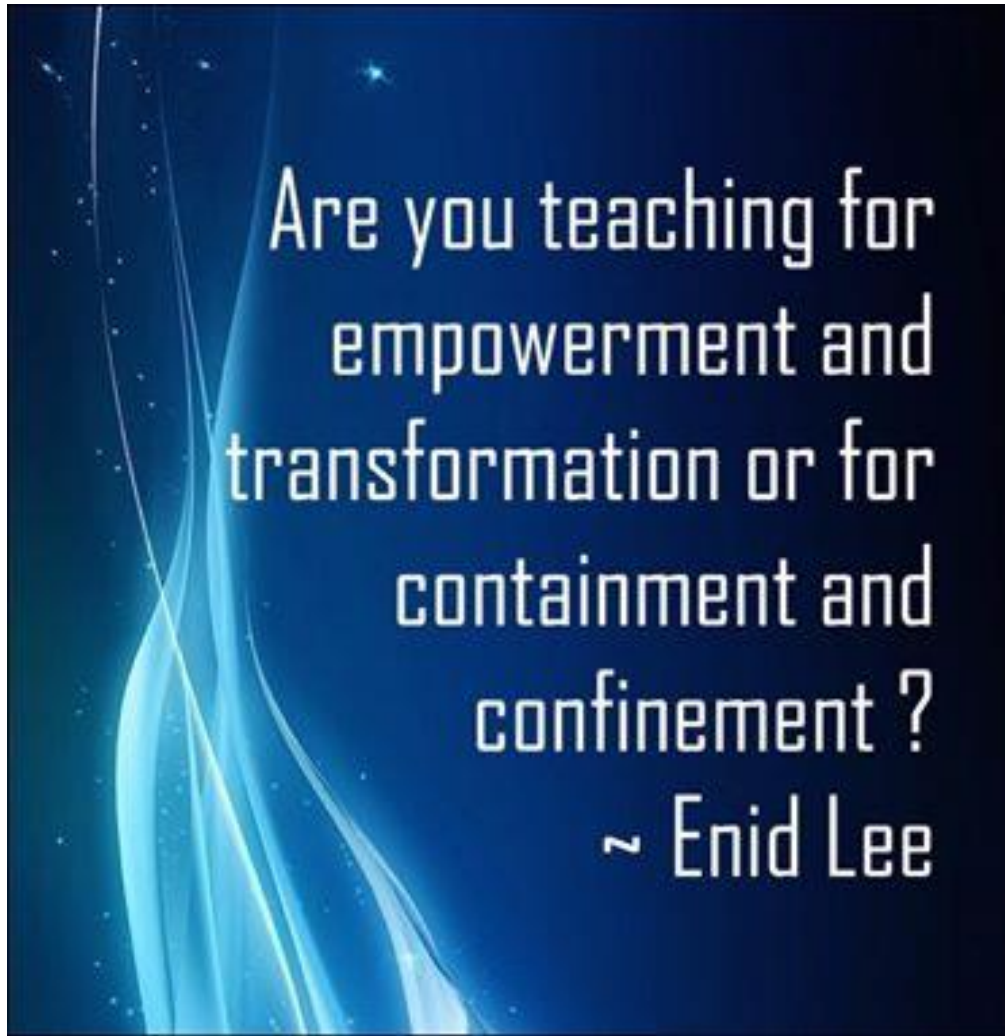
Racism is an active process in the company of the word structure when it is used as a “doing” word. Often, “structures” and “opportunities” around racism remain mysterious, impenetrable and almost preordained. This particular definition invited me to tease out the structuring process and commit to working on restructuring opportunities differently – in a manner that would result in greater justice.

The three cases remind me of the importance and the volatile nature of definitions of the word racism, and also the possibility that current events, even deadly ones, allow for redefinition and recommitment to tackling racism at its roots. As mentioned earlier, current events have been an important resource for me as an anti-racist practitioner. I urge teachers to draw from current events as they work to create more racially just spaces in classrooms and schools whether they are operating online or in person.

Part 2

One Poster/One Card/Many Posters

In this second part of the essay, I reflect on the use of tools I have created for anti-racist practice. This process of reflection is infused with the joy I experience when I learn of, or actually witness the ways in which workshop participants have applied those tools in their teaching. I am even more joyful when I learn that their students experience the transformation through their acts of learning. The example I have selected for discussion is the transformation poster below and one card which belongs to a set of educational cards I created entitled: *Checking and Changing My Systems for Equity (2011, 2017)*.

The Transformation Poster

I developed the question on the poster about two decades ago when consulting in schools in Canada and the United States. My thinking, at that time, was influenced by the social reproduction theory as is reflected in my PowerPoint slide, below:

“Schools reproduce the social order unless human beings actively work to turn them into institutions for social transformation” in *Milestones and Minefields: One Canadian School Journeying to Excellence and Equity* (2012). Such statements are usually associated with my presentation and discussion in the section, in a PowerPoint presentation entitled: “8 Considerations of this Professional Development Consultant”.

My theorizing has placed my thinking and practice on the point of the social reproduction continuum which embraces the idea of human agency in transforming society, and as importantly, stresses that schools are among the sites where the social order is either reproduced in its inequality or transformed in ways that allowed for greater human possibility.

Why posters?

Quite recently, I developed a set of posters in the spirit of creating resources that reflected in everyday language, guiding principles of my work as an antiracist practitioner. Furthermore, I have noted that a poster is often readily visible in a teachers' classroom or as an Instagram page. Therefore, the poster is more likely to be considered and reflected upon than if the information is buried in a scholarly book or journal article.

Over the years, this question of the purpose of teaching has continued to remain important to teachers with whom I have worked. I was reminded of this by an email I received from a California-based teacher with whom I had worked many years before. The personal correspondence below illustrates an unintended benefit of my work:

Hi Enid!

Happy Summer! I hope you are doing well. Patty and I will be presenting together at this year's New Teacher Institute at the Dual Language Immersion Conference in a couple of weeks in Sacramento. We were hoping to quote you regarding "teaching for transformation" and wanted to get your blessing and appropriately cite you. What you've said previously is something along these lines I believe:

"Teach for transformation and empowerment, not for containment and confinement."

Is that about right? Are those your exact words? Is there another way you'd like us to quote you? Do you have something published along these lines that you'd like us to cite?

Thank you for being the transformative, anti-racist educator and mentor that you are.

Warm wishes,

Katie

(K. McGinty, Personal Communication, June 11, 2014)

It is heartening to learn that teaching which transforms is considered not only desirable by teachers but also doable. The correspondence between Katie and myself resulted in her focusing on teaching for transformation in her conference presentation entitled: 3rd Grade New Teacher Institute: Teaching for Transformation in a Two Way Immersion/Dual Language Setting. The link to the conference presentation has been included in the reference section of the article, thus allowing us to see the aspects of transformation that Katie and her colleague explored.

The particular question about the purpose of teaching found its way into a number of the 54 cards in the workshop resource that I created for educators entitled: *Checking and Changing My Systems for Equity* (Enidlee Consultants, 2011, 2017). This is the education tool that I designed, developed and produced. It is designed deliberately for "assessing, advocating and advancing equity in the everyday practices of educators." To illustrate a teacher's response to the workshop and resource, I analyze the responses to and use of only one of the cards (in the set of 54), by a high school teacher in the following section.

The Context

The teacher whom you will meet in this section was among the participants at a four-part workshop series I designed and facilitated which was entitled, *Making Equity Work in Schools (in January-April, 2019)*. One of the learning goals of Part 1 of the series was “to deepen our understanding of how our purpose as educators and the purpose of systems in society, in schools and classrooms, are related to educational equity” (*Part 1, Making Equity Work in Schools – Purpose and Content, by Enid Lee*).

We viewed the Ted Talk: “Why Black Girls are targeted for punishment at school—and how to change that” by Monique. W. Morris. In that video, Morris referred to the work of education as “Freedom Work.” ([Monique W. Morris | Speaker - TED Talks www.ted.com › speakers › monique_w_morris](https://www.ted.com/speakers/monique_w_morris))

The debrief of that video lead participants to ponder the purpose of their work as educators. They asked the question on the poster, above: “Are you teaching for empowerment and transformation or for containment and confinement?” To connect the question to the tangible realities of teaching, each participant selected a card from the set, *Checking and Changing My Systems from Equity*. “How can I link this lesson to my major goal as a teacher?” was the card selected by one participant. Her follow-up actions are discussed in the following section.

About a month after the Professional Development Session on January 29, 2019, one of the teachers (who participated), was a panelist along with others who had attended the session. She shared a glimpse of the way she had responded to the above question when she summarized her practice for all of her colleagues (at her school in a school-based professional development session). I was present at that session and I provide below, a partial transcript of Larissa Adams’ presentation to her colleagues.

Workshop Participant, Larissa Adams’ – Social Studies Teacher’s Experience

My *story* is quick and I don’t want to *say* it wasn’t all purposeful but it all came together after the first PD that we had with Enid.

I had taken some *notes* on a *conversation* we were having about work and why we do the work that we do. It transitioned into a *conversation* into how we convince students that all of the work that they choose to do is honorable and important; whether they take the college track or more of a career track; really valuing the work that students do, that their families do.

... ..from that I made these little *notes* to myself and it was like a series of *questions* I had written down:

“Why do I do the work that I do?”

“How can my work better my community, my family, my world?”

“Who has done the work before me?”

“Who is doing the work beside me?”

“How can we work together?”

I had *written* all of this down in *my notes* and then the Monday when we came back (from the professional development session), after I had missed that Friday, I was having a *conversation* with a student. I don't know if you have, Brianna Mejia. She was asking me why I was gone on Friday.

She wanted know what we did at the equity sessions.

I *told* her and she *said*, "that sounds super interesting."

She then *said*, "Well, why did you become a teacher?"

So I started talking about being a history teacher...

(Larissa directed the following remarks to the teachers in the session:)

At the front of my room, I teach history for those of you who don't know me...I had all of the presidents, all of the US presidents...and the timeline and because I am a history teacher, that's what I put up."

(Larissa returns to her conversation with Brianna)

Brianna: Oh did you become a history teacher because you like teaching about presidents?

Larissa: No. (emphatically)

Brianna: Do you like looking at the presidents everyday?

Larissa: No, I don't. (emphatically)

(Larissa to her colleagues)

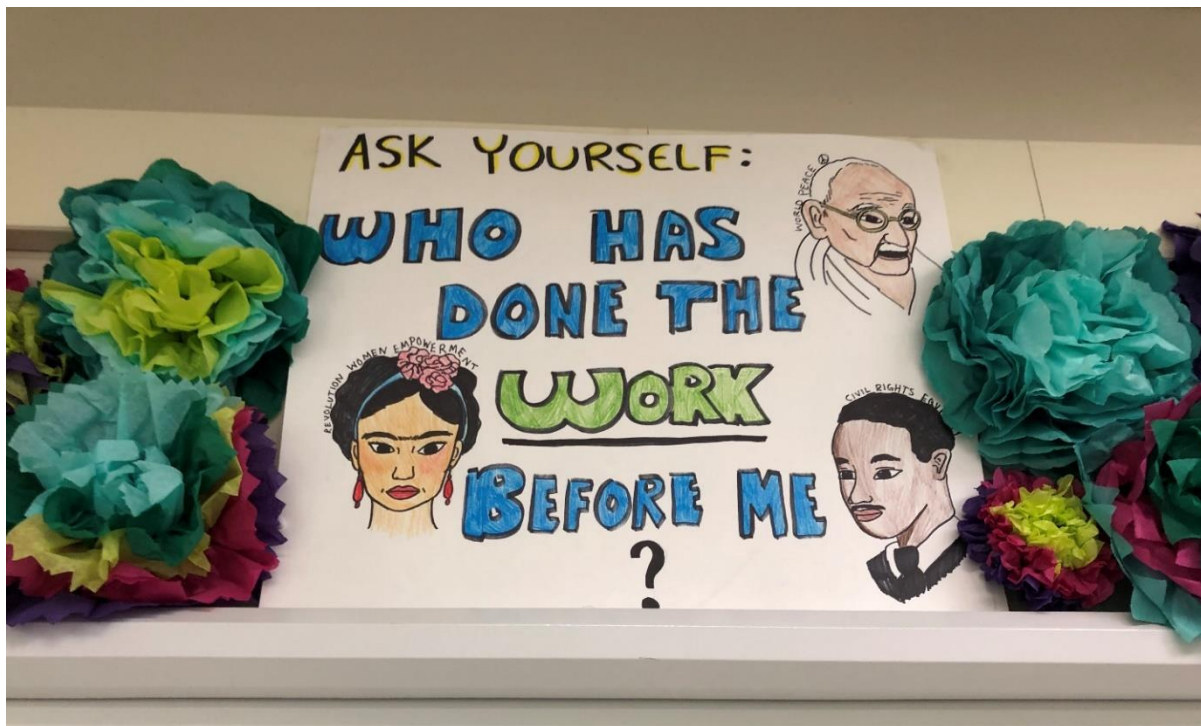
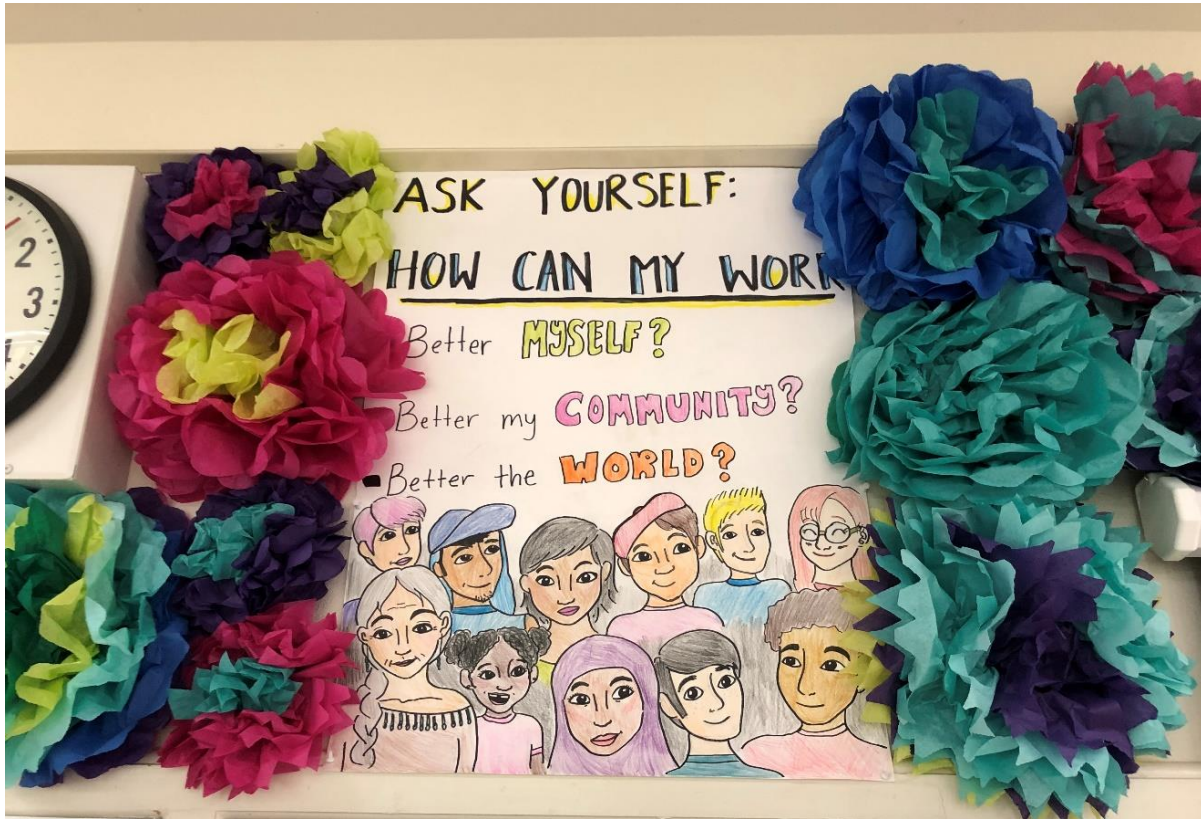
It was like this thing that I always did and I had never thought about it. So I *explained* to her the things I had *written down* and I showed her my notes.

Brianna: Well you should have *that* up in your room. *That's more interesting.*

So she actually made me the poster because she is super artistic and then it turned into this whole project with my class when on Valentine's day... we made little tissue paper flowers and I *put them all* up. But it's this little thing that has now sparked all of these conversations in my class, so I now have posters [on the walls] that say:



10th Grade World History Class, Santa Cruz High School, Santa Cruz, California, 2019



10th Grade World History Class, Santa Cruz High School, Santa Cruz, California, 2019



10th Grade World History Class, Santa Cruz High School, Santa Cruz, California, 2019

Larissa concludes: By putting these things up, it has reshaped the conversations that are happening in my class and allowed me to make the history that we are learning a little more relevant and it was a tiny thing that had happened because I had written some things down on a post-it note. But it was a really good reminder for me to come back to that question every day of what you are doing in your classroom and how that fits into or doesn't fit into the work that you are doing.

(In agreeing to inclusion of part of her transcript in this article, Larissa Adams insisted that her real name and not a pseudonym is used).

Discussion

Sometimes the tools for teaching for empowerment and transformation can seem well beyond our reach because of the weight of racial capitalism and all the ways in which it impacts on our identities and institutions. However, as I listened to Larissa recount to her colleagues how a question from a set of educational cards designed to encourage teachers to check the systems we control in our classrooms, I realized fully that one of the tools I had created could be useful in the process of teaching for empowerment and transformation.

In writing this article, as I analyzed the transcript of Larissa's presentation to her colleagues, I was struck by the number of times that words related to the following: 'written', 'spoken', 'displayed', 'heard', 'considered' language appeared in the text. These words have been italicized in the above extract from Larissa's transcript. They serve as this teacher's footprints on this stretch of her journey of teaching for transformation and empowerment.

Some other words capture the nature of the confinement and containment that we can experience in our respective disciplines. Larissa Adams is not the only history teacher in the USA who has the presidents up on the walls in the front of her class. As she said, "I had all of the presidents, all of the US presidents...and the timeline and because I am a history teacher, that's what I put up."

Other words reflect the kind of productive and honest conversations that teachers can have with their students. Larissa's response to her student's question about her absence from teaching on Friday illustrates how the experience of professional learning can have immediate impacts in a classroom, touching on some of the most important dimensions of our work, namely, the purpose and the content and their relevance to students' lives.

There were many travelers involved in this stretch of Larissa's journey, specifically:

- (i) the participants at the workshop,
- (ii) the student who asked her teacher 'where she had gone on Friday',
- (iii) the rest of the class who were involved in making the posters, and
- (iv) the community of teachers at the school-based professional development seminar who asked questions, and who stopped by her class to see the student-made posters in the classroom.

Of all of Lisa's reflections that leave me most hopeful is one that demonstrates her awareness of the ongoing nature of the journey to teach for transformation, is the following:

"It was a really good reminder for me to come back to that question every day of what you are doing in your classroom and how that fits into or doesn't fit into the work that you are doing." (Larissa Adams)

This is a question I invite readers to answer in this time of racial reckoning. I urge us to use the powerful tool of language, whether we find it in newspaper headlines, on sidewalks, in emails from colleagues, or questions from those who are in our community. Words point us to the places of confinement, and as importantly, they point to the pathways for freeing our minds, hearts and our hands.

Part 3

The Invitation and Conclusion

Nothing seems to be the same since the beginning of the year.

Hardly anything matters and yet everything matters because we don't know how much time we have to live.

Not that any of us ever knew.

According to Sonya Renee Taylor,

We will not go back to normal.

Normal never was.

Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, rage, hoarding, hate and lack.

We should not long to return to the old 'normal'.

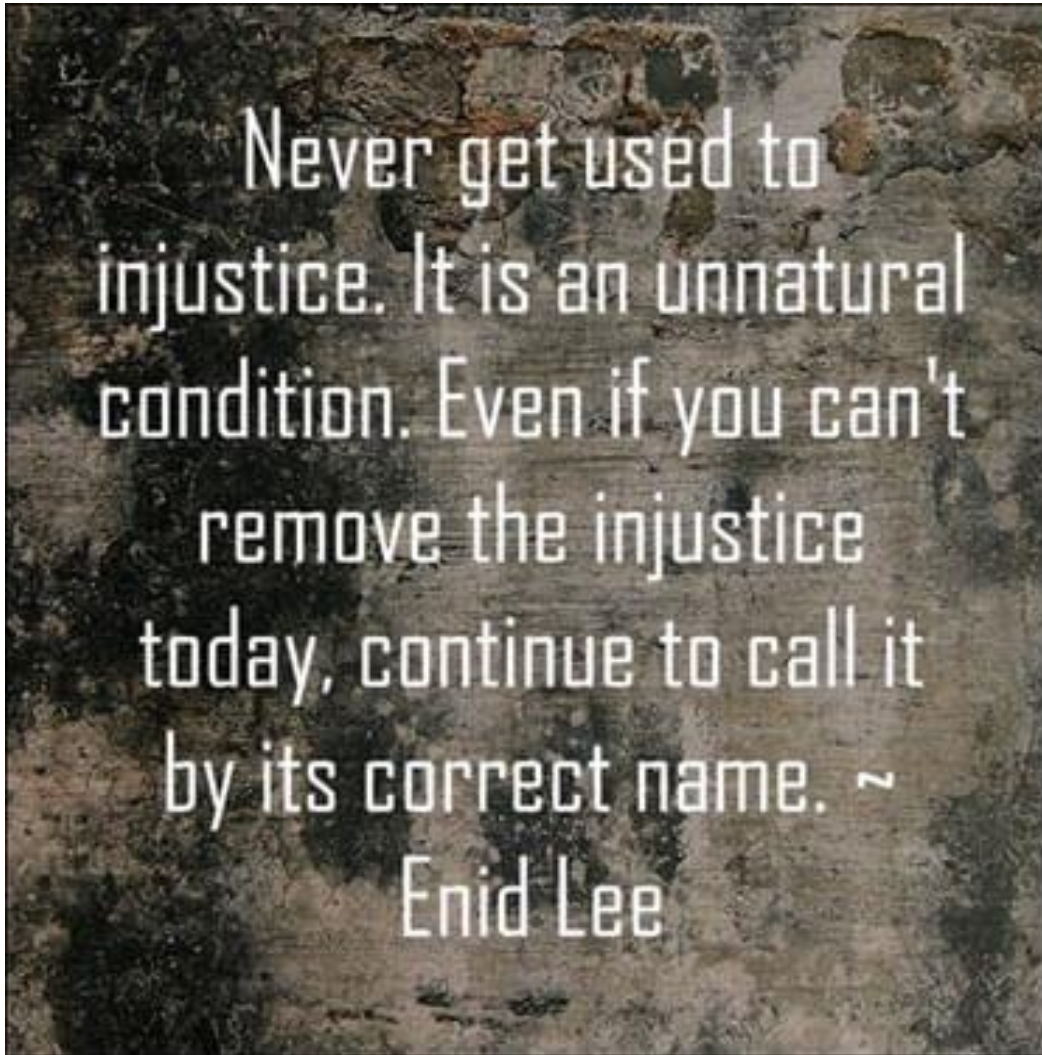
At present, we are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment.

One that fits all of humanity and nature.

www.instagram.com/sonyareneetaylor

Language is a key tool in stitching this new garment!

It's a chance to change course and set a new foundation for the present and the future.



I urge the readers to change course and practice the wisdom in the poster above.

This is my invitation to CPI's readers to examine with fresh eyes the process by which language works on us and harness its power to work for us in the struggle for our collective emancipation.

Finally, special thanks to Katie McGinty Ruiz & Veronica Aguilar for their PowerPoint presentation, to Larissa Adams, Brianna Mejia, and all the students of the 10th Grade World History Class, 2019, Santa Cruz High School, California, for their posters and persistence in knowledge-making activities.

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(Downloaded February 5th, 2019).

Enid Lee, anti-racist professional development specialist, leadership coach and writer

