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## **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid transition to online learning have produced a flurry of articles, blogs and forums rethinking pedagogical approaches to the college classroom. Forced into the often-unfamiliar territory of online instruction and ourselves beset by the pandemic, teachers came together in inspiring ways to brainstorm how to maximize learning for students under conditions of extreme duress, inequity and isolation. Here, I suggest that many of the techniques and strategies adopted intuitively during the height of the pandemic fall within the purview of 'Trauma-informed teaching and learning' (TITL), or trauma-informed pedagogy (TIP). As a previous social worker and a new instructor, I draw on these emerging fields and my own clinical training to suggest that these are practices we should hold onto if and when we return to the 'regular' classroom. In light of the response to the murder of George Floyd and the movement to end racist police brutality in the US over the summer of 2020, I argue that structural oppressions such as anti-Black racism produce 'ecologies' of collective and transgenerational trauma that are present in our classrooms *all* of the time. This is a reality historically recognized in anti-racist and feminist pedagogies, whose techniques and strategies foreshadowed many of the insights of TIP. In light of both the very real pedagogical benefits of trauma-informed praxis, and the pervasive and endemic nature of structural and collective trauma, I argue that it is incumbent upon us as educators to adopt a trauma-informed approach. Doing so will not only enrich our pedagogy, but it will help us to avoid reproducing patterns of collective harm through our classrooms.

## **Human *and* professor: Trauma-informed pedagogy beyond the pandemic**

*To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.*

- bell hooks, 1994-

I began teaching in New York city in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. Instead of stepping through the doorway of my first classroom to face a roomful of students, I found myself hovering over the 'start meeting' button on Zoom at 10.59am on my first day of teaching, heart hammering at my ribs. The faces that materialized on my screen were eager and exhausted, weary and smiling, disconnected, anxious and hopeful. Many, of course, were masked by those little black squares, their names the single, lonely gesture towards the possibility of a human presence behind the screen.

As the semester wore on, the range of experiences I read in the faces looking back at me on that first day only intensified. Some of my students were juggling full-time caretaking responsibilities during the pandemic, charged with the online schooling of younger siblings, the care of older relatives, or with parenting their own babies and toddlers. Others were working overtime in essential industries to make up for a parent or partner's lost employment; some had lost parents or partners to the virus. Some of my students were depressed and anxious from the effects of persistent isolation and the stresses of online schooling; two experienced panic attacks for the first time during the semester. There were others, however, who seemed to be doing relatively okay. One student called in each week from an office at his parent's

home, where he told me he was enjoying the constant stream of homecooked meals and not having to commute ('more time for gaming'). Another student flew to Canada and spent the fall in a ranch in the countryside with her cousins and family, where she reported she was doing 'just fine'. All said and done, the experiences of my students over the past twelve months have ranged from 'okay' to traumatic. There is no single story of the pandemic.

This inequity in student experiences of the pandemic, coupled with the stress and anxiety faced by both students *and* instructors, has been widely recognized in collective attempts to reimagine college education online. In order to avoid penalizing students struggling with circumstances beyond their control we loosened deadlines, built consistency and flexibility into our courses, widened avenues for student participation and focused on strengths-based encouragement in our feedback. In Spring and Fall of 2020 some teachers chose to give every student an A (Goldberg et. al, 2020), some discarded grades completely (George, 2020) and others took the leap into grading contracts (Friedman, 2020). Many over the past several months have simply chosen to grade more generously (Tanenbaum and Gallagher, 2020). There was a recognition that potentially triggering content related to the pandemic should be treated sensitively and offered with warnings, and those who had not previously done so were urged to include links to counseling and student support services in their syllabi. Rather than interpret a student's disengagement as laziness or resistance to learning, instructors described taking the extra time to enquire into the structural and personal circumstances that might be getting in the way of a student's participation (Krause, 2020). In other words, many of us chose to take

Cathy Davidson's advice that in designing and executing our courses for the pandemic we should choose to be '*human first, professor second*' (Davidson, 2020).

But while reading Davidson's (brilliant) article I couldn't help but wonder; how is it that the separation of 'human' and 'professor' makes any sense to us to begin with? What kinds of assumptions about the regular classroom must be at play for us to imagine that our identity as '*professor*' can or should ever take precedence over '*human*'- pandemic or not- and how might these assumptions harm not just teachers and students, but the *learning process itself*?

As a graduate student with a professional background in social work and a new instructor looking back at the 'normal,' pre-Covid classroom from an outsider's perspective, I am curious to think through what our adaptations to the pandemic reveal about how teachers *would* respond if we understood collective trauma to be *pervasive, structural*, and at play in our classrooms *all of the time*. How can we take the set of teaching values demonstrated in our responses to the pandemic and use them to reimagine teaching in the post-Covid classroom?

## **Responses to the pandemic and the reasons for them**

When the pandemic first compelled universities to move online in the Spring of 2020, instructors were forced into emergency thinking. With next to no warning, teachers who had never so much as considered online teaching found themselves navigating their courses across Google docs, Zoom, Blackboard, Moodle, Slack, Whatsapp and a host of other platforms. While some chose to plough on through their syllabi undeterred, attempting as close an

approximation to the 'regular' classroom as they could muster via video conferencing, many opted for a more flexible approach. Amongst the myriad advice columns, articles and blogs written by and for college instructors during the early stages of the pandemic, a pattern of recommendations began to emerge:

- Instructors encouraged each other to **build flexibility into their courses** in light of the unequal burden of the pandemic on students and the different resources available to them to navigate online learning (Gurung, 2020). In terms of **attendance**, instructors were urged to make all work available in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Whilst the augmented workload this resulted in has become the bane of many of our lives, by many it was seen as a necessary evil - what was required to accommodate our student's different schedules, capacities and needs (Spitzer-Hanks, 2020, Stommel, 2020). Flexibility was also urged in relation to **participation** (Veletsianos and Houlden, 2020, Davidson, 2020b). If some students were unable to turn on their microphones due to background noise or faulty technology, how might we accommodate their contributions? If a student had caregiving responsibilities during class, how could we consider their participation asynchronously, through a blog post, discussion board, or voicethread? If a student was more comfortable writing than speaking during groupwork, liked their camera on or off, was unable to complete the reading but could focus in class time, how could we accommodate that? To navigate these questions many of us turned to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2021). Ultimately, this renewed interest in flexible teaching and learning embodied the

recognition that simply translating a ‘traditional’ model of teaching online would disadvantage those students whose circumstances, needs or abilities did not allow them to engage equally in this model, and that this would be unjust.

- Attention was paid to the **need to intentionally build community in the online classroom**, not just as a balm amidst the turmoil of the pandemic, but as a deliberate pedagogical technique (Hickman and Higgins 2019, Stommel 2020b, Schroeder 2020). This built on the recognition that the isolation and anxiety many students were experiencing due to the pandemic was negatively impacting their capacity to learn. When undergoing extreme stress, the brain’s limbic system (survival emotions/fight or flight) hijacks the cerebral cortex, physiologically inhibiting our ability to engage in higher-order thinking (Imad, 2020). Insofar as community and connection have been shown to ameliorate the effects of chronic stress (Martino et.al, 2017), they are thus important preconditions for learning. Techniques shared for community building in the online classroom ranged from regular check-in polls and surveys to student reading groups, recurring formations in breakout rooms, assigning partners to check in on each other throughout the semester, and an increased focus on peer work-sharing and collaboration (Stommel, 2020, Peshkam, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Like many instructors, I found that opening the Zoom session fifteen minutes early for students to join and/or leaving the session open after I exited created space for student interaction that would not

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<sup>1</sup> Further tips for fostering engagement and collaboration online have been gathered from instructors worldwide and compiled in [this interactive document](#) by Jennifer Baumgartner of Louisiana State University.

otherwise exist online. Following Alex Shevrin Venet, I have also begun hosting regular open 'office hours' on Zoom (what she has rebranded for the duration of the pandemic the '*get shit done club*' (@AlexSVenet, 2020)) in which students drop in to work alongside me or ask questions. Ultimately, the intentional way in which instructors have approached community-building online during the pandemic recognizes that trust and connection are invaluable tools in combatting the effects of chronic stress, and in facilitating learning for all members of a class.

- Instructors were asked to consider **relaxing hard-and-fast rules relating to the timeliness of student work** (Krause, 2020). This was in recognition of the fact that students had been forced into radically different positions by the pandemic- saddled with the uneven work of earning, grieving, caregiving - and that there could be many reasons beyond apathy or disengagement leading a student to struggle to turn in their work on time. Following Matthea Marquart (Marquart and Creswell Baéz, 2020), I have built several 'no questions asked' late days into my syllabus this semester; students have seven days available to use on any major assignment, the only requirement being that they email before the deadline to notify me that they will be using X amount of days. At the same time, I have adapted Melissa Thompson's concept of a 'self-care coupon' (@mmt98, 2020) to allow each of my students to take one day off throughout the semester when they are feeling overwhelmed. The assumption motivating each of these techniques is that because the trauma of the pandemic is not evenly distributed and we

cannot know each individual student's circumstances, it is incumbent upon us to build leniency and care into our syllabi.

- Instructors were advised that **less is more**. Relaxing demands on student productivity during a pandemic is not a sin or a failure, we were told, but actually a sound pedagogical decision (Pettit, 2020). As many were careful to point out, stress makes it more difficult to focus; a brain swamped with the adrenal overdrive of fight-or-flight is incredibly perceptive to its immediate environment yet will struggle to 'dive in' to more complex or abstract tasks (Imad, 2020). In recognition of this, Professor Margaret Chapman explained at the beginning of the pandemic that she had simply chosen to assign her students less reading (Pettit, 2020). Others chose to return to the same texts multiple times throughout the semester, so that students could practice the same depth of analysis without being expected to churn through so much material (Pettit, 2020). This was a common approach- in a inter-departmental survey of 826 US undergraduate faculty released by Bay View Analytics in Spring 2020, approximately half of respondents said that they had lessened the amount of work they expected students to complete, whilst a similar amount (46%) said they had 'dropped some assignments or exams' (Lederman, 2020). Rather than signaling lowered expectations, what this showed was a creative adaptation *in the interests of learning* to a situation in which we recognized that a majority of our students were undergoing significant stress and upheaval.

- Those teaching online were encouraged to **collaborate with students in designing aspects of the course** (Abbott and Stein, 2020). From collaborative syllabi and negotiated grading rubrics/class policies to regularly soliciting student feedback, cooperation in deciding the direction and outcomes of coursework was emphasized as a way of helping students to experience agency in relation to their learning at a time when they may have been suffering from a lack of agency in other areas of their lives (Koretsky, 2020). This adaptation also built upon the recognition that giving students a say in what and how they learn strengthens their engagement and retention of material (Lang, 2016).
- Instructors were advised to consider introducing **content relevant to what students might be experiencing under lockdown**, whilst also being sensitive to and providing warnings for content directly related to the effects of the pandemic. This advice recognized the ways, mentioned above, in which stress impedes our ability to engage in abstract thinking (Imad, 2020). In other words, we shouldn't fault our students if they are having trouble dissecting an 15<sup>th</sup> century sonnet or grappling with string theory right now- it's only natural. In an article written for HASTAC in May 2020, Professor Cathy Davidson detailed the ways in which instructors she knew across various disciplines had adapted their coursework to reflect the urgency of the pandemic and the new reality of life lived within four walls. Some professors studied pandemics of the past, while others asked students to engage with the technologies structuring their lives at a meta level through enquiring about the 'different forms of friendship that blossom over Zoom'

(Davidson, 2020). In my online composition classroom we dissected structural and historical reasons for the racial disparities of the pandemic and read articles analyzing the politics of vaccine distribution. The encouragement to recognize experiences of the pandemic in our course content went beyond a simple attempt to engage student's attention- it acknowledged that one of the biggest strengths of education is allowing students to historicize, externalize and develop a sense of *collective* agency in relation to experiences that, when approached individually, might feel overwhelming or paralyzing.

- Finally, instructors were urged to **employ alternatives to traditional grading** such as ungrading (Stommel, 2018), labor-based forms of contract grading (Inoue, 2019), 'A for all' (Goldberg et. al, 2020), Credit/No Credit grading options (Gibbs, 2020), or by simply suspending grading altogether (George, 2020). This move away from traditional competitive grading models was encouraged on the basis that students had been plunged into such unequal positions by the pandemic that *grading as a comparative exercise had lost its value*. For this reason, Stephen Sawchuck argued that grading students during a pandemic would effectively be 'grading them on what their home life looks like, which wouldn't be fair on anyone' (2020). The complete list of universities that transitioned to Credit/No Credit, 'A for all' or suspended grading during Spring 2020 has been compiled by Laura Gibbs (2020).

Interestingly, many of these universities (including my own, the City University of New York) revoked their pandemic grading policies and returned to normal grading in time for the fall

2020 semester, which continued online with the pandemic in full swing. As university administration's initial decisions to suspend grades had set the tone for many of the shifts in classroom policy that I detailed above, there is a risk that returning to 'normal' grading will also signal a return to more 'normal' classroom practices.

My argument is that this would be a missed opportunity. Motivating many of the adaptations to teaching made during the pandemic, I suggest, are a set of pedagogical values that we should hold onto. That we refuse to relinquish these values is all the more urgent when we consider that the kinds of deep inequities (of race, class, ability, etc.) shaping student's experiences of the pandemic are structured into contemporary US society, impacting our student's learning *all of the time*. Not only are these inequities present in our classrooms, but they are often reproduced within the classroom space through our pedagogies and practices.

This, then, is a critical juncture at which to collectively ask: what *is* normal? And is it really what we want?

### **Trauma-informed pedagogy- what is it and why do we need it?**

Many of the practices adopted intuitively and en-masse in response to the pandemic have been discussed, theorized, and implemented in the 'regular' classroom for a long time now under the umbrella of 'Trauma-informed teaching and learning' (TITL) or trauma-informed pedagogy.

Trauma-informed approaches to pedagogy initially emerged out of the principles of ‘Trauma-informed care’ (TIC), which were introduced to the realm of behavioral health sciences in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century by Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris (2001). The need for trauma-informed care comes out of the recognition that ‘trauma is part and parcel of our social reality’; the average adult in the US has experienced almost five traumatic events in their lifetime (Harris and Fallot 2011, 1). Trauma here is defined more by the *effects* of an event on a person than by the event itself; the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration defines trauma as “an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2020).

TIC represented an attempt to apply the increasing body of knowledge about trauma- its impacts, causes and repercussions- to redesign care services that risked inadvertently retraumatizing vulnerable populations, while contributing towards frameworks of healing and recovery. In this sense, Harris and Fallot’s project of TIC is very different from trauma-specific services (EMDR, trauma-focused therapy etc), as it focuses on reorienting institutional patterns and practices rather than on treating individual victims of trauma (Carello, 2020).

I first encountered the principles of TIC in my role as a caseworker, where to be trauma-informed meant to understand the ways in which the effects of individual and collective trauma were showing up in the relationships between workers, clients, and organization. The principles of TIC guided my and my colleague’s efforts to challenge institutional policies that fed into the re-traumatization of both workers and clients, and to replace them with practices that

intentionally worked to produce a collaborative and empowering environment. At the same time, an awareness of the impacts, pervasiveness and transgenerational persistence of trauma helped me to situate my client's addictive or antisocial behavior within longer genealogies of harm, and to understand such behaviors as adaptations to challenging circumstances rather than individual failures or pathologies. For example, if I was working with a person who repeatedly did not show up to a court date or housing meeting, instead of assuming that they were uninterested in their own legal or housing process I would instead ask what kinds of obstacles these situations might be presenting to my client's involvement. Expressing an attitude of curiosity rather than condemnation often led me to learn about specific histories that were informing my client's behavior, and to better understand how to structure both my own and the organization's actions to account for those histories (did I need to find a female housing worker, organize a remote meeting, accompany my client to court, make sure someone trusted could attend as a secondary interpreter, rethink my own expectations or challenge an organizational policy etc.). At the same time, becoming cognizant of the long-term effects of trauma reinforced to me the ways in which individuals can never be detached from the social conditions and structures that produce us, and that broader structural inequities (racism, colonialism, classism etc.) are almost always at play in individual forms of alienation and harm.

Trauma-informed pedagogy attempts to adopt the insights of TIC into the 'regular' classroom, where the effects of personal and collective trauma are pervasive. In a 2016 study 89% of students reported having experienced a traumatic event or situation (Patricia Frazier cited in Rieman, 2020 slide 31). An American College Health Association survey of 48000 college

students reported that, prior to the pandemic, anxiety, stress and depression (common secondary effects of trauma) were the three largest factors self-identified by students as negatively affecting their academic performance (ACHA, 2018 p. 5). Extreme loneliness, which in itself can be traumatic, was a problem for 65% of women and 55% of men at the college level, whilst 42% of students said that they had been 'so depressed in the past year that it was difficult to function' (p. 14).

Trauma-informed pedagogy attempts to address the impacts of this crisis in our classrooms by adopting approaches that: "a) understand the ways in which violence, victimization and other forms of ongoing trauma can impact all members of the campus community, and b) to use that understanding to inform policy, practice and curricula for two main purposes: 1. to minimize the possibilities of (re)traumatization and/or (re)victimization, and 2. to maximize the possibilities for educational success" (Carello, 2016). Through focusing on reorienting general policy and practice rather than attempting to 'spot' trauma in individual students (which is, after all, the job of a mental health professional and not a university instructor), trauma-informed pedagogy recognizes that the effects of trauma in student populations will most often surface unannounced; through forms of dysregulated behavior, patterns of avoidance and dissociation, and difficulty focusing and retaining information (Marquart and Creswell Baéz, 2020). Trauma-informed pedagogy aims, then, to build our curriculums, syllabi, classroom policies and teaching practices to mitigate the impact of traumatic experience on both teachers and students, while building cultures of choice and empowerment that will prevent re-traumatization and benefit *all* members of a classroom community.

## Trauma-informed Pedagogy in practice

To understand what these goals look like in practice, we can turn to Janice Carello's (2016) adaptation of Harris and Fallot's (2009) original five principles of trauma-informed care (safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment) into the realm of teaching and learning:

1. Recognize the impact of violence and victimization on development, learning, and coping strategies
2. Minimize possibilities of re-traumatization and maximize possibilities of successful educational outcomes
3. Identify successful educational outcomes as the primary goal
4. Employ an empowerment model
5. Strive to maximize choices and control
6. Mitigate power imbalances through relational collaboration
7. Create an atmosphere that is respectful of the need for safety, respect, and acceptance
8. Emphasize strengths, highlighting competencies over deficiencies and resilience over pathology
9. Strive to be culturally competent and to understand people in the context of their life experiences and cultural background

Interestingly, these nine steps guide us towards many of the classroom policies and practices adopted in response to the pandemic: collaborative syllabi, negotiated and flexible deadlines, building choice into classroom activities and assessment, turning to systems such as Universal Design for Learning to create just and equal options for participation, labor-based grading or grading practices that emphasize feedback and coaching over judgement and competition, designing content to empower students in relation to their immediate reality, mindfulness when assigning possibly retraumatizing content (content warnings, student capacity to opt out or to choose an alternative text), accounting for the impacts of student's unequal burdens and

resources in classroom policy, and community and trust-building exercises that help to create an environment in which students can feel regulated enough to learn.

Through recognizing that human behavior is primarily adaptive and that what may appear on the surface as 'laziness' or 'resistance to learning' often has much deeper roots in student's past and present experience, a trauma-informed approach to teaching encourages us to move away from demanding; '*what is wrong with you?*' when a student disengages from their learning, and towards asking '*what has happened to you?*' (Carello, 2016). This is not a literal question to pose to students- indeed, it shouldn't be- but instead a broader ethos that asks us to assume that when a student procrastinates, exhibits dysregulated behaviors, does not turn in work or avoids class they are not doing so to spite us, but are instead responding to a set of situational constraints or logics developed through past experiences that we may not be privy to. Psychology professor Devon Price goes so far as to argue that 'Laziness does not exist- but unseen barriers do' (2018). Situational constraints (including histories of trauma and structural harm), Price argues, typically predict student behavior much better than personality, intelligence or any individual-level traits.

While the impacts of collective trauma on teaching and learning were easy enough for instructors to recognize during a global pandemic, trauma is likewise present in and shaping the 'regular' classroom, where its effects may be less obvious. What trauma-informed pedagogy teaches us is that it is not only during a pandemic that student's unequal identities, resources and responsibilities are acting upon their experience in the classroom; rather, everything from

the ways in which students are impacted by course material to how they relate to figures of authority, fellow students and the university space are shaped by personal and/or structural histories that are likely not transparent to us as instructors.

## **Black Lives Matter and Ecologies of trauma**

In June 2020, at the same time as the Covid-19 pandemic was unfolding around us, protests were sweeping across major US cities in response to another emergency; that of anti-Black violence. I attended protests in New York, where the pain, righteous anger and despair of Black people in the face of ongoing police brutality- a brutality emerging out of long histories of anti-Black violence and white supremacy in the US - were visceral. On 28<sup>th</sup> of June, standing in a crowd of protestors outside City Hall, I listened to a young Black woman step up to speak into the mic. She turned to the white women in the audience. 'Your husbands raped us and we had their children. Then you sold our children away as slaves, and you made us *breastfeed* your own kids.' The '*we*' and the '*you*' that she spoke of; the '*we*' that had suffered the trauma, and the '*you*' that had inflicted it; were transgenerational, centuries of violence condensed into the emotion that resonated through the speaker's voice. This was a '*we*' and a '*you*' kept alive by the terrible continuity of the violence she was describing.

While the traumatizing effects of anti-Black violence have been documented by Black writers for centuries, until very recently the field of Western psychology exhibited resistance to framing racism in the language of trauma (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005, 484). This has been partially due to the fixing of definitions of trauma in assaults or threatened assaults on physical integrity

such as rape, violence, and threatened death (see American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

While racist incidents do not by necessity involve physical violence, we know from Frantz Fanon's famous description in *Black Skin, White Masks* just how deeply even the act of racialization can shatter one's bodily integrity; 'What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?' (1967, 112).

Through its investment in a 'naïve empiricism' that separates the subject from history and ontology (Teo, 2018), much Western psychology has struggled to capture the deeply relational nature of human subjectivity and thus failed to account for the shattering harms of ongoing, identity-based violence. At the same time, the reluctance to consider racism in terms of trauma can be linked to the tendency within psychological literature to categorize "normal responses to traumatic racist incidents as disordered," throwing the responsibility for injury back upon the racialized person (Carter et. al, 2005).

Thema Bryant-Davis and Carlota Ocampo (2005) have argued against these forms of hesitancy in their examination of how the trauma of racism parallels the traumas of rape and domestic violence, suggesting that racist incidents are capable of producing similar post-traumatic effects. At the same time, the authors describe the ways in which even witnessing or experiencing racism secondhand can produce secondary traumatic stress in those who identify with the victimized person (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, 489). A 2018 study in the *Lancet* by Borr et. al upheld this conclusion, demonstrating that being exposed indirectly to anti-Black violence (via video, image etc.) led to notably poorer mental health outcomes for Black Americans, while it did not do the same for Whites. The study, which collected data from 100,000 respondents,

concluded that police killings of unarmed Black Americans were so detrimental to the mental health of other Black people in the US that this form of violence should be targeted as a public health issue. A 2016 article by Lillian Polanco-Roman, Ashley Danies and Deirdre M. Anglin from the Graduate Center, CUNY, examined dissociation as an effect of exposure to racial discrimination in young adults, and similarly concluded that racial discrimination could result in a pervasive form of race-based trauma. Racial trauma, pervasive among racialized populations in the US, has been shown to result in both physiological and psychological effects including hypervigilance, flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance and suspicion, as well as headaches and heart palpitations (Comas-Díaz et al 2019, 2). These symptoms are similar to the clinical effects of post traumatic stress disorder, although exposure to racial trauma is more likely to be ongoing (ibid.). Indeed, these recent quantitative studies emerge out of much longer genealogies of work critiquing the event-based model of trauma as itself inherently Eurocentric (insofar as this model erases the 'normal' traumatic *conditions* of racist, colonial societies for colonized and racialized peoples), and instead theorizing oppression-based, collective and historical trauma (see Fanon 1967, Braveheart 1998, Duran and Duran 1995, Atkinson 2002, DeGruy 2005, Craps 2013).

In light of these findings, Noah Golden warns that we need to shift our focus from 'traumatized individuals' to 'ecologies of trauma' when implementing a trauma-informed approach to education (2020). By 'ecologies,' Golden is gesturing towards the complex interrelation of subject and environment, and the ways in which the intersecting structures of racism, sexism, ableism etc. present in our classrooms routinely (re)produce trauma in individuals. The fact that

longstanding traditions of anti-racist feminist pedagogy foreshadow many of the recommendations of trauma-informed pedagogy is no accident here (see Jordan, 1969, Omolade, 1987, Shrewsbury, 1993, hooks, 1994, Bambara, 2017, Savonick, 2018, Tomás Reed, 2018).

For Golden these structures of *collective* trauma and victimization, and the ways in which we are constantly reproducing them through our classrooms and institutions, must be at the center of any trauma-informed approach. While theorists of trauma-informed pedagogy such as Janice Carello have been explicit about the need for a trauma-informed approach to target ‘ongoing systemic and cultural oppression’ (Carello, 2016) Golden’s argument is that too often this dimension drops out of the analysis once we go to implement a trauma informed approach in our classrooms. Instead, Golden suggests that instructors often revert to a dominant biomedical framing of trauma which looks upon the individual student as damaged and requiring accommodations, instead of seeking to understand the ways in which the ‘normal’ classroom and institution can themselves work to reproduce victimization. For example, George Yancy explains that the historically sedimented whiteness of most academic spaces is harmful to Black students and professors in ways that may go unnoticed and unmarked; “White bodies move through those spaces habitually...Black bodies, however, are stressed and their appearance becomes hypermarked against the unmarked space of white intelligibility’ (Yancy, 2017 p. 9).

Here, an ecological understanding of trauma reveals an important tension within understandings of 'safety' in trauma-informed practice; as Yancy points out, directly addressing the racial dynamics of the classroom may lead some white students to *feel* unsafe, and yet the safety that is being threatened is premised upon retaining whiteness as norm and is thus itself built upon the erasure and vulnerability of Black students (2012, 53). Rather than assuming the simple presence or absence of safety in the classroom then, an ecological understanding of trauma through an anti-racist lens can lead us towards a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which instructors are called upon to balance different *kinds* of safety in the classroom, and to sometimes weigh these forms of safety against one another *in the name of learning*. Working within this calculus, many anti-racist instructors have argued that white students will need to experience a form of 'unsafety' in the classroom if they are to unlearn the patterns of white domination that threaten the wellbeing of BIPOC students and professors (see Joseph, 1995, Leonardo and Porter, 2010, Yancy, 2012, Leonardo, Bautista and Huerta, 2019) .

Ultimately, orienting the way we practice trauma-informed pedagogy towards an 'ecological' understanding of trauma asks that we do the work of unpacking and then challenging the ways in which collective oppressions such as anti-Blackness, racism, colonialism and sexism play out through the 'regular' classroom, producing patterns of re-traumatization and inequity under the guise of 'business as usual'. In my current composition classroom, this means drawing on bodies of anti-racist feminist scholarship to interrogate the racial power dynamics embedded in language practices and expectations, rethinking the ways we respond to grammar concerns, amplifying minoritized voices and perspectives through a negotiated syllabus, modelling

reflexivity in relation to my own racial identity and positionality, adopting labor-based grading contracts, and reshaping classroom practices, policies and relations towards a culture of student empowerment as I have described throughout this paper. In other disciplines, it will look different. What is common across all disciplines is that an *ecological* understanding of trauma demands that we take our commitment to trauma-informed practice beyond the classroom, to our departments, our university administrations, our unions, and even to the streets. Such an approach recognizes that meeting the most basic requirements of trauma-informed care in the classroom for *all* of our students – namely, the refusal of revictimization and student empowerment over their learning- will require that we participate in the push for broader systemic change.

### **Conclusion: ‘To care for the souls of our students’**

“The poet as teacher, human as poet, teacher as human. They all feel the same to me”

Audre Lorde (2009, 182)

Cathy Davidson’s advice that in responding to the pandemic we must act *first as human and second as professor* was important advice, and I agree wholeheartedly with the spirit of her request. But here I have also questioned the separation between ‘human’ and ‘professor’ through which this request comes to make sense to us to begin with. What does it mean, for example, to choose to be professor *before* human in the ‘regular’ classroom? Don’t we each bring our whole selves- along with the histories and traumas that have shaped us – into the classroom with us *all* of the time, *whether we choose to or not*?

This was something that radical anti-racist feminist scholar Audre Lorde, who taught at CUNY during the open admissions period of the 1970's, certainly believed. For Lorde, embracing both her own full humanity in the classroom as a Black lesbian feminist and that of her minoritized students was an inherently political act, one that called into question the racist and sexist norms of the university (Savonick, 2018, Tomás-Reed, 2018). Within a university and a society that continues to be dominated by traumatizing structures of anti-Blackness, bell hook's urging that we 'care for the souls of our students' is likewise political. Here I have suggested that an ecological understanding of trauma-informed pedagogy, in alliance with anti-racist feminist praxis, will be a useful tool in helping us to live up to this advice and transform the 'regular' classroom into a space where we might be both human *and* professor, while recognizing the humanity of *all* our students. As hooks implies and as I have attempted to show here, we pursue this goal not just in the interests of building a more compassionate and just classroom space, but in the interests of *deepening the learning process itself*. Combining human and professor, it turns out, may well be the best way to be both.

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