

THE WAR ON IMAGINATION

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Shyam is currently a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education and a recipient of the Ontario Graduate Scholarship. He received both his MA in Education and BEd at the University of Ottawa, and he completed his BCom at McGill University. He was also a former fellow with Teach for India, working as an elementary school teacher at Rakhial English School No. 1.

Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

For me, everything circles back to heartache. Grief is so deeply ever present in our lives, and I believe it underpins all other emotion¹. There is a gravity to agony and misery, a pull that I cannot seem to shake off, no matter the reason. It might seem strange to connect grief with professional experience, but for me, it is not unusual at all. I cry all the time. I listen to sad songs. I read the valence of sorrow in fiction and then watch it unfold on screen. Somehow, grief always finds me even when I do not seek it out, and it seeps into my work.

Feeling abandoned, grief stricken, and lost within schooling and society, I stepped into the classroom as an elementary school teacher from 2014 to 2017, teaching Grades 1 to 4. I taught a group of brilliantly curious and thoughtful students in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, a few hours away from my ancestral village, who moved me to pieces. Despite their past fears of schooling, my students had so much faith in me. Their unconditional trust in me, and mine in them, served as an unbreakable bond. Together, reading children's books and writing stories, we created so many worlds, spun out of childhood dreams and imagination. To this day, my students give me hope and sustenance when I think about a world on fire, both figuratively and literally. They mean so much to me, and they continue to be

handprints on my heart. Over the past eight years since then, I have remained in the field of Teacher Education. I began as a teacher candidate and student teacher for two years and later pursued a Master of Arts in Education for another two. Currently, I am a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at York in what I hope is my final year. As a teaching assistant, I work to prepare a future generation of teachers to make sense of the complex and ineffable histories that plague them and their students. I am far from perfect, but I walk alongside them through this work: creating an extraordinary childhood for the students we serve, while also making space to reflect on and exhume how our pasts and ongoing grief might shroud our personal and teaching lives.

Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.

Transformative justice underscores how I move in and out of grief. I am learning that conflict is not always immediately or necessarily abusive or violent² and that punitive measures are utterly destroying our relations with each other. My dissertation, however meager and shaky, attempts to integrate transformative justice as a practice of antiracist education: to inform "difficult" and "hard" conversations about race and racism in Teacher Education. Feminist scholars and thinkers insist on applying and understanding this framework within intimate spaces so that we can enlarge our understanding of how to address

institutional and state violence. When beginning teachers are asked to consider colonial and racial histories, emotional responses of denial, guilt, and shame among white teacher candidates overburden the classroom. On the other hand, teacher candidates of colour are inundated as they encounter gaslighting, fatigue, and racial microaggressions; their past schooling lives - filled with exclusion and fear - come back to haunt them.

In my study, I propose that calling in rather than calling out can transform conflict into productive conversations and teachable moments in antiracist education, disarming defensive reactions that have often hindered a teacher educator's ability to facilitate classroom discussion. I also offer pedagogical lessons and strategies to support teacher candidates of colour who are historically left out of antiracist discourse and who are burdened by the program's exclusion of their specific lived experiences and needs.

I had a different title when I began this research, and then I read somewhere that white supremacy is a war on imagination³. I want this future generation of teachers to dream more and to know that race relations and solidarities hold immense potential.

What inspired you to do this work?

My master's thesis serves as an impetus to this current study. In it, I describe the intense and reeling sensations I felt as a teacher candidate, incessantly feeling overwhelmed by the pervasive nature of racism in the program. Outside of Teacher Education, my involvement in community organizations, in a labour union, and a student union, all indicate a wanting disposition around race relations. Struggles to establish and maintain relations due to racial differences can impede our ability to stay in the work together. I find that these relations are so

fraught and vulnerable that imagining otherwise is agonizing. Knowing that loving relations have the capacity to shatter, I want to think deeply about what reparative characteristics are inherent to teaching, and how teachers can restore and sustain antiracist, feminist modes of accountability, community, and healing.

Admittedly, I wanted nothing to do with such a speculative gesture. Racial grief and trauma are so excruciatingly pitiful and sad, even though I know there is an emancipatory and reparative quality to it. But someone has to do it, and I am not alone. I situate my praxis alongside activists and community organizers like adrienne maree brown, Ijeoma Oluo, Khalida Jarrar, Loretta Ross, Mariame Kaba, Mia Mingus, Mimi Kim, Sarah Schulman, Shira Hassan, and Tarana Burke.

What are the main takeaways you want others to come away with?

1. Read and then read again. What you cannot find in yourself or in others, you might be able to expose and uncover through reading. I read Aparna Mishra Tarc and Pat Palulis's work often, especially when I am stuck, and their words inspire me to write my own.
2. Rest will not come to you; instead, you have to make the time for it. Sometimes, to be honest, I wonder how I get anything done because I sleep so much, read for pleasure, and spend so much time watching anime and Korean dramas. In any kind of work, you have to. To meaningfully integrate transformative justice into our lives, we have to rest. Only then can we do this work in a gentle, tender way.
3. Under the watchful eyes of the institution and the state, it can be daunting to go against the grains. If you decide to critique the institution, which truly is an act of love, you have to be willing to go on an inner, spiritual journey because graduate studies will be otherwise so

isolating and punitive. So, in a sense, love your craft and hold onto it for dear life. It is precisely in times of devastation and ruin that scholars need to get to work⁴. The rest will fall into place and find its way.

Tell us about the challenges you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

So many colleagues and professors have told me that my writing is too literary and unconventional, and that such an approach will deem me unhireable. No one apparently wants to fund poetry, narratives, and stories, especially not when it carries a critique of the institution. Though it can be devastating to confront this reality, I am grateful to have a supportive supervisor and committee that has given me an opportunity to be myself.

I also (re)turn to the scholarship of prolific writers to usher me out of this despair. I have an affinity for people who defied the odds. Scholars like Audre Lorde, George Yancy, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sara Ahmed have given me so much. And, most of all, it has always been and will remain bell hooks who allows me to catch my breath. Thich Nhat Hanh, too. His emotional and spiritual work on the inner suffering child has deeply impacted me.

Tell us what you enjoy the most about the work you do.

Really and truthfully, the students. After teaching in India, I never imagined that any group of students would ever make me so inspired – at least not so powerfully. But I have been fortunate to always have worked with students who continue to motivate me. Last year in particular, I worked with a cohort of elementary beginning teachers, leading a tutorial for the “Foundations of Education & Theory Into Practice” course. So many of them

stunningly and unapologetically immersed themselves in social justice education in a way that made me more confident to do the same.

What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?

Academia can be so utterly disappointing and lonely at times, and it seems the only way to survive is to surrender to its competitive, unrelenting demands. I feel sorry for colleagues who need to play the game so much that they lose themselves in the process. We obsess over awards, grants, and institutional validation, allowing these things to overtake us. My advice is to let that all go. For sure, navigate the system, but do not let it crush you or bring you to be so vicious towards others.

As a graduate student, I recognize how painfully difficult it is to break from these expectations and norms. More and more, however, I ask what I want with wanting⁵, and the answer leads me to realize that the people in my life are the most important to me. Surrounding myself around family and friends, even when they infuriate me, is a reminder of who truly matters. It keeps me grounded and humble as well. Most of the people in my life have had little to no access to formal education, and their presence is a testament to so many things, especially to keep going and to not get bogged down by harsh criticism, failure, and rejection.

What are the next steps in your research?

To me, it seems that scholars have lost their way. The Palestine exception⁶ is a striking reminder of this tragedy. We are witness to children, fragile and small, desperately pleading to the world for intervention and so many scholars have turned the other way, including ones who write about genocide and traumatic histories. Writing about social justice does not offer scholars moral impunity when they are

silent. If we have any shred of humanity left as educational researchers and scholars, we have to be willing to take risks. And if we truly believe that the pen is mighty and words are powerful, we have to make a promise to never sharpen that weapon to allow for the suffering of others.

I have such profound appreciation and respect for comrades who live what they write, who participated in the encampment or who showed up during the labour union strike. Even if we have different strategies and ways of coming to this work, our commitment to another world is so remarkably needed and significant. I do not want to turn into one of those scholars who writes about humanity and social justice only to live out the opposite. I care less and less about what someone has to say, and more and more about how their actions and values orient them. There are so many things I want to do after this research, but most of all, I want to be grounded in what I espouse and how I personify those principles in this most fragile, tumultuous world of ours.

Notes

1. Mishra Tarc, A. (2020). Engaging texts today or how to read a curriculum poem. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 35(1), 32-45.
2. Schulman, S. (2016). Conflict is not abuse: Overstating harm, community, responsibility, and the duty of repair. Arsenal Pulp Press.
3. Oluo, I. (2024). *Be a revolution: How everyday people are fighting oppression and changing the world—and how you can, too*. HarperOne.
4. Morrison, T. (2015, April 6). No place for self-pity, no room for fear. *The Nation*.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/no-place-self-pity-no-room-fear/>

5. Palulis, P. (2009). Geo-literacies in a strange land: Academic vagabonds provoking à pied. *Educational Insights*, 13(4).

6. Islamophobia Research Hub (2025). "Documenting the 'Palestine Exception': An Overview of Trends in Islamophobia, Anti-Palestinian, and Anti-Arab Racism in Canada in the Aftermath of October 7, 2023." Islamophobia Research Hub, Toronto: York University