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Navigating "thorny" issues

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Abstract In their article *Mindfulness and discussing 'thorny' issues in the classroom* Konstantinos Alexakos et al. (Cult Stud Sci Educ, 2016. doi:10.1007/s11422-015-9718-0) describe "thorny" issues as "difficult topics to discuss because they are more personal to some perhaps even cause pain and violence." As women from different backgrounds, we engage in a metalogue, which expands on our thoughts and emotions the thorny issues evoked. Our discussion is grounded in theoretical frameworks of mindfulness, wellness, and safe space for learning. We also reflect on our experiences of facing some of the thorny issues in our academic and personal lives. Having trust and respect for one another and being aware of thorny issues allows for a meaningful conversation about the complexity and nuances involved in discussing difficult topics in a classroom setting.

Keywords Identity · Race · Gender · Mindfulness · Safe spaces

Kashema Hutchinson: In Kenneth Tobin's doctoral class, Expansive Methodologies for Learning Sciences, at the Graduate Center, CUNY, we read Konstantinos Alexakos et al.'s article *Mindfulness and discussing 'thorny' issues.* I met with Tobin and shared how my experiences related to the article. He proposed creating a metalogue, an interactive dialogue about the problematic issues addressed in the paper. After hearing the thoughts of others in class, Aderinsola Gilbert, and Anna Malyukova joined me to produce this forum.

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I am a first generation Black American. Aderinsola Gilbert is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. Anna Malyukova emigrated from Russia when she was 21. As we come from different backgrounds we look at "thorny" issues from multiple perspectives. Some of these thorny issues are right on the surface: issues such as race, ethnicity, citizenship, and gender, but some are more individual and nuanced to our personalities and experiences.

Aderinsola:

"If we are
the truth we seek
let us speak
what we know to be"
– Naima P. (Garcia and Penniman 2014)

As we look at mindfulness and the potential to be hurt by thorns, our safety is always in flux especially when emotions arise. Part of being in a safe space is to exist (unapologetically) and to have ownership of our feelings. Emotions are part of the learning experience, or rather, our lived realities. The thorny issue article caused me to reflect on my educational experience. I felt a range of emotions, primarily anger. Part of this anger comes from having a voice that has often been silenced or pushed out into the margins. For example, when I recall being an undergraduate at a predominantly White college, I remember multiple instances of having my bag searched in front of the crowded school bookstore. I remember, as a first year engineering student, being in segregated study groups. Many of the White students I attended classes with were often from small rural towns, and many had limited to no interaction with someone of my race before. Part of the anger also stems from recognizing the parallels between my story and the shared reality of the colleagues and fellow students who were often characterized as "other."

Kashema: That otherness is all too familiar even in New York City. Despite my achievements and efforts, my work is still questioned—if it is even acknowledged – whether it is because I am Black, a woman, or both. Being reminded that I am marginalized because I am a Black woman happens frequently, not only in academia but also in everyday life (Chavous and Cogburn 2007). Addressing such thorny issues provides an opportunity for transformative learning, but I think that knowing the self | other is vital to interactions. For example, I once attempted to discuss colorism, the discrimination of one's skin tone within a racial group (a thorny issue for me), and it exacerbated the situation. I saw a picture of Lupita Nyong'o and commented on how gorgeous she is. Someone within earshot said she is ugly and "mad black" (very dark skin). I asked him, is she ugly because she is "mad black?" He said yes. We got into an argument because he used Eurocentric ideologies (the hegemonic influence) of beauty to assess her looks and skin tone. Trying to explain this became a negative and defeating experience. As upset as I was about the interaction, I realized that the issue was bigger than the person I was speaking with.

Anna: In a social setting it is important to be mindful of the multiple voices (polyphonia) and multiple meaning systems (polysemia). In Joe Kincheloe's tradition, critical ontology is grounded in respecting difference and learning from it (Kincheloe 2011). When you, Kashema, attempted to discuss colorism with someone who you thought you knew and with whom you felt safe enough to have a discussion, you ended up having a moment when you felt defeated, instead of a moment of transformative learning. Bringing this topic up was like casting a stone into what only seemed like calm waters, revealing the culture of someone in that interaction.

While this experience didn't promote positive emotions, it was, nevertheless, important to have, even if there is little hope for any dialogic experience. Mikhail Bakhtin (1994) wrote about dialogic experience, which he contrasts with monologic experience, where everything anybody ever says always exists in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in the future. This implies that each individual should have an awareness of other perspectives and other opinions and refrain from a monologic experience where everything is based on one perspective only. Having the guts to initiate a conversation is huge. For far too long we have ignored many of these difficult to discuss issues, pretending that the problems are not there. It was a transformative learning experience for you even if it doesn't feel like one. Hopefully, it was also transformative for the other person; leading him to reflect upon that conversation and change his mind.

Kashema: Initiating the conversation was not a huge deal for me, I was curious about his axiologies (value systems). The conversation illuminated the power of the hegemonic (ruling or dominant) class and culture on him and his inability to mindfully (radically) listen (Kincheloe 2015). He was reluctant to hear from a marginalized perspective and reconstruct his western consciousness. The experience is a reminder that those with western epistemologies (knowledge systems) only see "such a tiny dimension of what is occurring in the world" (Kincheloe 2015, p. xxxvii).

Anna: The hegemonic class that you describe is represented in the person's habitus, which is created socially rather than individually. Habitus, as a structure set up by the world around us, develops the habitual patterns of our minds and the emotional responses of each individual characterized by patterns of our behavior, tastes of each individual, sensibilities, etc. And perhaps, in your example, this person's assumptions about social structures were transferred to a social situation unusual to him. Habitus is reproduced by passivity and is also revealed in its breakdown, which in your example is seen very clearly; at least it was to you. According to Bourdieu, habitus is created and reproduced unconsciously without any conscious concentration,

> The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices. It is the relationship between the two capacities, which define habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world is constituted (Bourdieu 1984, p. 170).

Kashema, since hegemony is a ruling cultural force, the person's habitus didn't allow for radical listening, because it does not allow for any other perspectives other than the dominant one.

Aderinsola: I do not believe that identifying within a hegemonic class renders one incapable of being able to enact the praxis of radically listening.

Anna: Alexakos and his colleagues talk about radical listening, and in order to practice it, one should be silent and engaged in what the other person is saying. Silence doesn't mean listening. Often, we are too preoccupied with what we want to say next and are half listening to the speaker.

Kashema: Radically listening is really about participation. How much does one want to know or understand from their position in society?

Aderinsola: It most likely plays a part in this individual's reluctance, rather than inability, to listen to a perspective that challenges the comfort in their way of being and knowing.

Kashema: Agreed. It's not that they *can't,* they just *don't* want to.

Aderinsola: Violence is embedded throughout the daily functions of social life where systemic and symbolic violence passes as natural (Leonardo and Porter 2010, p. 140). Hegemonic violence acts as a regulatory power; however, it requires both active force and consent.

Kashema: It's all interrelated from the micro to the macro level. The violence that is experienced is pervasive. It's imperative that we, as incoming teacher | researchers, take an integral approach that looks at individual and collective consciousness and inquire why there is force and consent inside and outside the classroom (Davis 2008).

Aderinsola: When addressed, social constructs, such as race and class, are often considered as though they exist independently of one another. This is problematic, because it further de-contextualizes the realities of marginalized individuals/communities. Intersectionality (or intersectional theory) is a theoretical framework that analyzes constructed categories and their interactions and placements within society (Crenshaw 1991). Kimberle Crenshaw asserts that various axes of identity interact on multiple and often simultaneous levels. Examining the intersections within "thorny" issues can help us to better grasp the dynamic complexities and sensitivities that arise in discussion.

Anna: Intersectionality, as you describe it, or as I may call it multilogicality and phenomenology, is the framework that is present in research on thorny issues. We consider identity as dialogic and fluid, not separate from the collective experience (Alexakos et al. 2016). Understanding these identities and the relationship between self and others is, in other words, becoming aware of the unaware. In discussing thorny issues, we have to start with awareness of our own identities and their relationship to bigger social systems, as well as awareness and respect for others' identities and their connection to the collective experience. Our values and beliefs are such because of how the world around us shaped them and how we interacted with that world.

Kashema: Agreed. They also affect our emotions and overall wellness. The wounds that are produced from thorns, whether derived from racism and/or sexism, can be what legal academician, Adrien Wing (1990), calls "spirit injuries." Injuries vary in size. However, if there are too many injuries, they cause a slow death "of the psyche, the soul, and the persona" (Wing 1990, p. 186) which can result in a spirit-murder, whether one is "in the depths of poverty or in the heights of academe" (Wing 1990, p. 186). Spirit-murder is a term coined by Patricia Williams who examines racism as an "offense so deeply painful and assaultive" and "as no less than the equivalent of body murder" (Williams 1987, p. 151). Wing adds sexism to the description of spirit-murder. Wing's father, despite being a doctor and the first Black on the research staff of a major drug company, still endured spirit injuries because of his race in social settings and committed suicide when Wing was nine.

Give and take

Anna: At the February 2016 USER-S forum (a monthly seminar) at the Graduate Center, CUNY, Anna Stetsenko talked about the role of agency in creating knowledge. Her statement "World is given to us in the act of taking it," sounded very powerful and stayed with me for a while. Obviously, what is given to each of us is different. If you are a woman, an immigrant, a minority, and live from paycheck to paycheck, you are not given the same as a rich White man. To some, this statement may even sound unfair, because the crucial part is what is given; the act of taking comes next. But Stetsenko also talked about agency and how it can become the driving force of change and knowledge creation, something she called, "pedagogy of dare" (2016).

Kashema: The "pedagogy of dare" is an interesting notion. I, too, gave the concept extra thought after hearing it. Malcolm X once said: "Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you are a [wo]man, you take it" (X and Breitman 1990, p. 111). If I am taking my freedom, equality, justice or anything, how important is the other person's agency to me? Now, I am aware of who I am interacting with, but at what point do I "take" regardless of the other person's epistemologies? Are they considering mine?

Aderinsola: I think one would have to factor the context when considering the questions you've posed. As Freire mentions,

> Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion (Freire 2005, p. 47).

The act of taking one's freedom is one that holds one accountable to the broader community as well as exercising one's ability to act independently and make decisions without approval.

Anna: I believe that it is very important to identify the structures, but also not overlook the agency of each individual and how this dialectic relationship of agency and passivity is manifested. Being aware of each person's identity and his/her relationship to social structures is not an easy task and it could easily take years to understand even for the individual him/herself. But not rushing with assumptions and judgments and taking at least a moment to consider where each individual comes from is very important in discussing thorny issues. If we don't, those thorns can potentially hurt everyone involved without us even knowing it.

Kashema: I get what you are saying, but being oppressed and living with fear have created a culture of resistance in different communities. For different reasons, a lot of people have had enough. This culture of resistance can be a very unapologetic defiance that unflinchingly stares you in the eyes. People are not accepting what was given to them. As Sewell (2005) explains, "Culture is the sphere devoted specifically to the production, circulation, and use of meanings" (p. 157). Therefore, when "taking" is being enacted in this context (thorny issues), the awareness of the others' identities and ideologies is nuanced and the "taking" could be *by any means necessary.*

This culture of resistance is prevalent in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Culture of resistance is confronting oppression and creating solidarity (O'Hearn 2009). Although the meaning of Black Lives Matter varies, it creates a stronger awareness of injustices and identity among Blacks. The "normalized" notions of our hair, skin, language, capabilities and conditions—and their appropriations—are being rejected and replaced with a rejuvenation of acceptance and love for ourselves (the "taking," if you will). Today, we are very mindful of the persistent injustices (social, political, economic, legal, global …) that impinge on the daily lives of Black people that we will not accept as truths. Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager who was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, who was later acquitted, should be able to get a late night snack and not look "suspicious." Sandra Bland, a Black woman who was found dead in her prison cell from allegedly committing suicide after being arrested for a "moving violation," should be alive today. Although I feel a sense of Black solidarity and pride, I also feel hurt, tired, upset, and afraid. When I look my little brother in his eyes, I pray it is not the last opportunity to do so. When I talk about race, there is definitely an undercurrent of emotions. How these emotions manifest varies by the conversations I have with others.

Anna: Agreed. For so many, there are other issues that can be called thorny, but aren't such. The application of mindfulness requires one to be aware and compassionate. The awareness will be illustrated in opening yourself up to others' experiences and points of view, and trying to understand their epistemologies. And compassion will be applied when refraining from judging and trying to empathize with another.

Safe spaces

Kashema: A safe space is a place—whether physical or virtual—where people can share their thoughts and feelings with trust and respect. A safe space is ideal for having transformative discussions about thorny issues. A great example would be communication within the classroom. Having a safe space can become thorny as power dynamics come into play depending on what is allowed in the classroom.

Aderinsola: I want to build on that a little bit. Alexakos talked about how he allowed for the first utterance of the n-word to occur. I sit back and ask why? Why didn't he correct the student at the first utterance of the word? Some may argue that it created a learning opportunity. I think we have to be mindful about what we mean by that experience, especially when dealing with thorny issues. At what cost will we allow this experience and who ultimately pays? I can recall an example during an undergraduate creative writing class where students were tasked with a creative group writing assignment. A group of White students presented on ni****s vs. ninjas. The professor did not stop the presentation. In fact, the presentation was met with much laughter and applause. Later on when the professor was comfortable in addressing the class, an email was sent to apologize to the members of the class who were offended by the presentation. The professor went on to say that it was important that members of the classroom recognize the racial blinders that White privilege enables. "White privilege is at the center of most race dialogues, even those that aim to critique and undo racial advantage" (Leonardo and Porter 2010, p. 140). Often the main objectives of these dialogues are centered around the restoration of White humanity; rather than further highlighting, dismantling, and repairing the damage of

systemic racism. For me, I have felt that this experience has often come at the expense of my safety, so that those who live beyond the margins can be taught to do better.

Anna: Each of us has a different story and an idea of being in the world, a different ontology. How we make sense of the world will be defined differently by our unique epistemologies. Our value systems, our axiologies, will be different as well. In every situation with a thorny issue, this issue will be identified by each individual's ontology, epistemology, and axiology. And being mindful of others' ontology, epistemology, and axiology and where in them thorny issues are situated, can be quite a challenge.

Silence

Aderinsola: People are entering these safe spaces with the realities of their lived experiences. What is our balance between the learning experience and keeping people safe? Must the learning experience come at the risk/expense of someone else's safety? Furthermore, I would like to examine the politics of the condition of safety in regards to a public conversation on race. Safety for whom? A subtle but fundamental violence is enacted in safe discourses on race, which must be challenged through a pedagogy of disruption, itself a form of violence but a humanizing, rather than repressive version (Leonardo and Porter 2010).

Kashema: I find it difficult to be quiet for the sake of someone's comfort or privilege. I was raised to speak my truth, and although I was occasionally reprimanded for how I delivered my truth, I was never silenced. Over the years, I have learned how to finesse my various deliveries when addressing thorny issues. I do bite my tongue at times, but I am as fluent in silence as I am in English.

When speaking of thorny issues we often focus on words and their meanings, but we hardly address the role and effects of silence. We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that for some it is a coping mechanism and/or it accommodates negative experiences.

Anna: Silence is very powerful in the variety of ways in which it can be used. It can hurt a person when there is a need to speak up or respond to something, but instead there is silence. For example, if someone shares a personal story and hears nothing back (or not enough back), that could really be a moment in which silence causes deep wounds–wounds that will prevent this person from speaking up in the future, especially if it is a thorny issue and it was hard enough to speak up in the first place. It takes someone with an open mind to be able to recognize such moments and respond to them mindfully. Another example of silence hurting would be an instance of injustice that takes place in the classroom and those who witness it choose to remain silent.

There is also silence that protects or prevents an escalation of an emotionally charged conversation. If a few are already engaged in a heated argument another voice joining the conversation can make things worse if the person doesn't use his/her voice mindfully. In such cases choosing silence can be a lesser of two evils.

Kashema: The pitch of someone's voice can defuse the conflict, but this is all contextual, usually resulting from the power dynamics of an interaction. For example, if I am in a heated argument with someone and my mother yells for me to calm down to exhort control

or softly utters it to create an alignment (Roth and Tobin 2010), I will calm down. Another person may not have that effect.

Anna: Silence itself is neutral. But the value is added to the silence depending on when and how one uses it. My mother often told me that words are like birds, once you let them out, you can never catch them again, and that words can hurt and silence is golden. However, when I am facing injustice, all of those beliefs go out of the window, and I feel the need to speak up.

Aderinsola: Silence is far from neutral. I would argue that one must examine the situation and context of when, where, and how silence is enacted.

> In public settings, people of color find themselves between the Scylla of becoming visible and the Charybdis of remaining silent. If minorities follow an analytics of color, they run the risk of incurring white symbolic racism at best or literal violence at worst. (Leonardo and Porter 2010, p. 140)

In the original article on which this Forum contribution is based (Alexakos et al. 2016), through Mark's use of the n-word, students were emotionally triggered and tension was created within the classroom. Although, Alexakos (the class instructor) did interrupt Mark during a second utterance, I believe that the impact and consequence of the first occurrence disrupted some classmates' sense of safety. Similar to power, spaces too, are dynamic. As I read Alexakos' reflection regarding Mark's use of the n-word, a series of questions came to mind. How did Alexakos address the impact of Mark's words on the class? Should he (Alexakos) be the one to address it? If not, then who? Does responsibility lie within the collective (both teacher and students)?

Kashema: Alexakos and the rest of the class's failure to not challenge Mark the first time may have led to Mark using the n-word again. Mark may have thought it was "safe" to repeat it. Looking at it from the outside, the collective may have been uncertain of what just happened and how to handle it. Celeste, one of the authors, observed that in such situations, students appeared uncomfortable and concluded that it wasn't acceptance that others were exhibiting, but inexperience in dealing with that kind of interaction. This brings up how these situations should be handled in the classroom.

Adding to your line of questioning regarding the n-word, Aderinsola, how significant is the race of the student who says the word? Also, how significant is the race of a person who hears the word? How are safe spaces created? In this context, disrespect should not be disregarded. I would have sought to educate Mark (and the rest of the class) immediately on why it is unacceptable to say that word. There would never have been a second time.

Space and time

Aderinsola: People are walking into these spaces with different experiences that are tied to their identity. Period. At the end of the day, there are people who will enter these conversations as an option, while others don't have that option. This is a part of their lived daily experience. They are always having these conversations in and out of these "safe" spaces.

According to the Vygotskyan framework, people's thoughts are largely shaped by common methods of physical and economic survival, language, and socially ordered ways of parenting. Our development and ability to learn is largely established through social and cultural contexts. These social and cultural contexts are emergent.

Anna: There is also the issue of time. Extended time is an important element when it comes to discussing thorny issues. For many, it is only after the class, after the semester, or even after a longer period of time, when they feel ready to contribute to a conversation. Do I have the authority to speak? Will I be able to convey my thoughts properly? Will I be understood? Will I be respected? Oftentimes these questions prevent me from engaging in a conversation about thorny issues and I imagine I am not alone in feeling this way.

It can take time for me to conclude that the space is safe enough for me to express my opinion, and even more time to actually say something. Personally, I need to hear a lot from others before I can contribute myself. I want to test the waters, see what happens when others talk, and how the class reacts. Only *then* might I contribute. But usually I will not say much, even if I have a lot to say. And when I disagree, I will be even more terrified to speak up, afraid to be alienated, misunderstood, or—even worse—to get stuck in the middle of my point, totally defeated.

There are instances when I feel strongly about something, when I can no longer stay quiet. I might speak up in those moments, despite fear and doing my best to ignore the heart pounding in my ears, focusing on the point I want to get across. But those are rare instances. I am helped to feel that a space is safe when I know the people, trust them to consider my opinion carefully, and encourage them to be patient with one another.

In this forum it took me a long time to address my own experiences when discussing thorny issues. And even then, I did this only toward the very end of the process.

Kashema: Instead of reacting, you respond to the situation where you see it fitting. You are methodical, yet driven by your emotions. I think this relates to your proximity to the subject matter. For example, when discussing poverty, the effects, the knowledge, and meaning of poverty of someone who has lived it may attribute to *how* they speak regardless of the space itself.

Aderinsola: As we discuss safe spaces, we should expand beyond the focus of the temporal agreement shared amongst a group of participants. Where are these conversations taking place? I think back to a few experiences as an undergrad and the physical spaces where we would discuss thorny issues and how these spaces impacted the flow of the conversation. If a discussion was held in a meeting room or an administrator's office space, certain parts of the dialogue were censored or altered for various reasons (i.e., safety, audience, etc.).

> If one element is changed, the opposite is transformed in the process as well; each element in these dualities presupposes and mediates the other. Each constituent meaning is a part of a whole and one does not exist without the other. (Alexakos et al. 2016, p. 4)

Kashema: What you would call flow, I would call shape, meaning that the content and context of the conversation will take shape like liquid in a container. The size and shape of the container affords what can fit inside. However, continuing with the concept of flow and its relationship to space and thorny issues, it is important to describe the experience and its meaning. "Becoming mindful of the words we use challenges us to think creatively and

imaginatively of significant flow data" (Lloyd and Smith 2015, p. 262). The appropriate use of language can create a safe space that was once considered unsafe.

Aderinsola: Adopting a sociocultural theory such as critical race theory (CRT) helps our educational system to better respect and account for the diverse talents and ways of learning. As the demographics of the United States change and continually shift, the lack of social competence of the present day educational models become even more pronounced. The growing disconnection between teacher and student further facilitates the dichotomization of the teaching and learning experience (Freire 2005).

Anna: The hermeneutic process of learning becomes very important in a conversation about teaching and learning and in conducting research on education, where understanding of the whole is grounded in understanding the individual parts and one's understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole (Heidegger and Krell 2008). The role of the audience in this process becomes an important part of the whole, because they are participating in a conversation as well. The dialectical relationship between the agency and passivity of each student in a classroom cannot be overlooked. When a few people engage in a conversation and the rest take the role of the audience, they may seem very passive, but there is a lot going on in that passive state. Something that is often perceived from the outside as a passive state doesn't always reflect the inner turbulence. In a silent audience, for example, individuals may be exercising their agency by staying silent—choosing to be silent for one reason or another; engaging in radical listening (while they seem passive); having a strong emotional response as a result of events that take place in a social setting, which requires a moment of silent reflection.

But it is not always about the physical space or the time frame. As a woman, an immigrant, and a White person, I often have multiple identities at any given moment and in any given space. And, more often than not, I feel uncomfortable expressing my opinion, even if I feel that the space is safe enough. When I first came to the U.S., I learned what it means to have the privilege of having White skin and, I am not going to lie to you, it felt good to have some kind of privilege, because my family back in Russia never really had any. After some time, I internalized that privilege, as if I am better than some by just simply having this type of skin.

The existing cultural structures in the U.S. helped with that process, providing plenty of opportunities to experience this privilege, and where, in turn, oppression of others takes place on a regular basis. After some time passed, I learned how wrong I was. But because of this journey, I am also able to recognize the trap that some White people fall into. Of course being an immigrant and a woman constantly diminished my identity as a White person—so I learned to keep quiet and be respectful, to the best of my ability, before I dare to say anything. Even in this project about thorny issues and safe spaces, bringing this up as a natural progression of the ongoing conversation about these issues still leaves me feeling very vulnerable.

Kashema: As far as identity, as a Black woman, I have learned that I am not the sum of my parts—I cannot add or subtract my parts (e.g., race or gender). My existence in all situations is layered and multiplicative. According to Wing (1990), "multiply each of my parts together, one X one X one X one X one, and you have *one* indivisible being. If you divide one of these parts from one you still have *one*" (p. 194). This whole being is single and distinctive (Abu-Jamal and Hill 2012). This distinction affects the interactions I have with the people I meet, the opportunities I get, and the conversations I have. That being said, I am not afforded the privileges granted to you, Anna—and I was born here.

I think dialogues like these should happen often, but gradually. Placing people in a room and saying, "Let's talk about all the thorny issues you have," is problematic without trust. It also lends itself to difficult knowledge. Difficult knowledge represents "the pushes and pulls between… one's early history of learning and one's haunted present of learning and between experience and its narration" (Pitt and Britzman 2015, p. 410) when someone rejects new information because it goes against what they already know to be true and causes trauma. As one of our classmates, Lindsey, put it, "once your 'lovely knowledge' has been shattered by 'difficult knowledge,' you can't go home anymore." I think some people don't want to find a new home or be homeless. Accepting certain truths may not be what many people (including teachers and students) want to acknowledge. There is an emotional attachment to this knowledge. It takes time, it takes trust, and it requires being honest with one's self.

The "Thorny" label

Kashema: Thorns hurt. How we deal with the hurt varies. Recently, a professor said my writing was "subpar" and that I was "valued" coming into the graduate program. Being "valued" as opposed to having value is a world of a difference. Together these words implied inferiority, which triggered my anger. There is a problem: I reject the notion of being inferior. I could not afford to be silent, so we had a conversation about his use of words. Moreover, as an incoming doctoral student who has been learning mindfulness, it better prepared me to suppress my anger and to listen and question while delaying judgment. This interaction made me realize that some professors say things without being aware of the thorns their words carry and/or the resistance of these thorns from whom they are interacting.

Aderinsola: I feel like we are distancing the topics such as race, gender, and class from their roots by lumping them under the thorny issues label, which is problematic. This repackaging seems to de-contextualize the subject matters that may be more readily acceptable and comfortable for a predominantly White audience that may feel uneasy with words such as race and racism as well as the stigma attached to these words.

Anna: Shakespeare wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (2005, p. 113). Following the same logic, a thorn by any other name would hurt no matter what you call it. Race, class, sexuality, gender, etc., and conversations about each of these issues will hurt whether you call them thorny issues or not.

Aderinsola: A rose may smell as sweet, and thorns may hurt. If we are to address these issues and we are to have an open and honest dialogue, we must name issues for what they are. The thorny issues we've discussed are symptoms of a racist, heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalistic society. In naming, we can begin dialogue issues. When discussing thorny issues, in regards to race, the thorny label perpetuates a desensitized and erasure of the marginalized realities within this social construct. Especially when a predominantly White academy wants to speak on race and systemic racism. This is problematic because yet again the majority has control of the narrative. However, part of why we are having these dialogues and creating these spaces is to challenge and disrupt the hegemonic culture.

Kashema: Agreed. That's why I am committed to shattering the crisis of representation whenever possible. Crisis of representation reflects the hegemonic/patriarchal truths and meanings of marginalized groups without the group's perspectives (Berry 2015). It is important to me to add a perspective of the Black narrative or the woman narrative or the Black woman narrative—depending on the context, of course. I have also been educating myself about other identities including Latino and transgender through viewing their narratives on social media. The hegemonic view does not constitute their story. Moreover, the knowledge that comes from our experiences (the marginalized voices) is not represented or misrepresented. If others don't *know* or see our experiences, how can we expect others to speak about them?

Aderinsola: If we examine the acquisition of knowledge, this renaming process almost presents itself as though this is new knowledge that is being formed and created. My problem with this thought is that this knowledge is not new. This knowledge has been created and experienced within marginalized communities long before. The renaming of sexism, racism, classism, microaggressions, etc. further perpetuates a neoliberal desensitization of systemic forms of oppression.

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