Unmasking Genocide:

Teaching, Vulnerability, and the Silence of Academia

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Received July 2024
Accepted for publication July 2024
Published July 2025

Abstract

Feeling burned out and silenced by academia, especially amid the genocide in Gaza, this piece highlights one university professor's transformative experience of teaching and healing, and the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning when we let go of our masks and embrace our vulnerability.

Keywords: *teaching is healing, Gaza genocide, critical pedagogy*

When a friend and colleague called me late last year to ask me to teach a graduate class on theories of counseling, I was hesitant. Five years into my career as an adjunct professor, I had already hit the bottom of my tank in academia. Unlike many others whose work as adjuncts is their livelihood, I was always privileged to teach as a passion project. I firmly believe that we must inject social justice principles and training into the actual schooling of future therapists, teachers, and healers. So, I teach mainly because I want my students to have opportunities to question the traditional positivist and medical models in which they are still being trained. But this still did not exempt me from the burnout and isolation that most adjunct professors inevitably feel, knowing full well that we are the new way in which the higher education industrial complex makes profits while devaluing educators and education.

My burnout last year wasn't just about adjunct work. Nearly three months into the genocide in Gaza, I knew full well that could not discuss the matter in my classes. Week in and week out, I would go to class feeling as if my heart might explode, but afraid that if I said the wrong thing a student might take offense, and I would be reprimanded. As a West Asian immigrant, I felt deep shame about my choice to remain "professionally silent," especially when teaching about subjects like trauma and social justice.

'You can't center your own mental health needs over students,' I would tell myself. As an Iranian immigrant who came into higher education after 9/11, I had years of training on how to pretend away my own mental health needs for fear of others' being offended by my very identity. So, while I was used to neglecting my own needs, I was still struggling.

Even within my professional networks in education and mental health, where I worked in private practice and wasn't formally employed by an institution, I still knew I was expected to conform to a culture of silence. Though I have worked in social justice for years, and many of my colleagues know me in that capacity

specifically, even in social justice circles the issue of Palestine was off limits. I knew this from experience.

A few years earlier, during the Sheikh Jarrah demonstrations, I chose to speak up in an email to a social justice group I co-founded, urging that the Palestinian struggle for justice be recognized as a crucial issue for all social justice advocates. Within hours of sending the email, the organization's president contacted me, reprimanded me, and demanded I apologize to the Jewish members of the group or leave. After a series of discussions, which reinforced the harsh truth that even in such spaces, much of the supposed social justice language is just lip service, I made the difficult choice to leave. But this time, as I watched children being slaughtered on my phone daily, I didn't have the mental health capacity for my usual willingness to fight. I needed to self-protect. I also knew I wouldn't find the safe space I deserved in academia – or, ironically, in mental health, even though I desperately needed one. That's when my friend reached out, inviting me to teach, and to my surprise, he was adamant that this class would be different.

We don't talk enough about the mental health of professors in academia. We don't talk much about professors, period. We don't talk about the cognitive dissonance of teaching values your own workplace does not hold. We charge students tens of thousands of dollars because of the value we claim to place on education, but don't pay professors who impart that value a living wage. Three months into hearing every day about the importance of peace while funding a war machine, I needed my friend to know I didn't have the capacity for more cognitive dissonance.

"This class will be different," he insisted, "you're free to speak your mind. I think the students will really benefit from your perspective." I knew that he had spent a great deal of time and energy developing this program to reflect the principles and ethics we had valued in our own doctoral studies, but still, I didn't fully believe him. I was too familiar with the power dynamics in academic spaces, thought part of me resisted being overly cynical. It's funny how fear and dread can strip away that sense of privilege.

Skeptical, and still masking—both in the professional and emotional sense—I agreed to teach the class.

Mental health is political. This is the thrust of all my work both in and outside of the white supremacist culture of academia. Centering radical love in our work, engaging in politics, and insisting on collective justice and healing are reminders I try to sneak into the hearts of my students in between teaching them about diagnostic criteria and statistical norming. I try to remind them not to give into the ways the system has engulfed even social justice ideas and language, and to resist. In my one-on-one work with children and families as well, I always try to remind students that their very existence is resistance. But by the time I reluctantly walked into that counseling classroom I knew I had no fight and little resistance left.

Another group whose mental health we conveniently ignore in America is people of East Asian, or "Middle Eastern" decent. We don't address the cognitive dissonance of living in a country that often runs on hating you. We gift Muslim children tens of thousands of bombs in the name of freedom, then ask them not to hold it against us, all in the name of democracy.

As I started my way towards the classroom building, I was jolted by the memory of a scene from Gaza that I had seen on social media a few

months prior. It was an image that had haunted me among all the others for days. A small boy of no more than 10, walking quickly down a decimated street in Gaza, in his bare feet, stops and turns when a journalist taps him on the shoulder. "What's wrong?" the journalist asks the little boy. He had just been playing with his friend when their ball had rolled under a car, he explains. When his friend went to get the ball, he was blown up.

Compared to the atrocities and images I had seen up until then, and that I have witnessed since, this was not an especially gruesome one. Two boys playing in Gaza getting bombed. Nothing new or abnormal about that in the way the death of people in that region has become normalized. Two boys in Gaza, one dead, one trying to pull his dead friend out from under the rubble. Just another day in the Middle East. But it was this boy's face, which looked like the personification of trauma, and what he said that haunted me.

"What is this life?" he asked, looking at the camera. Tears poured down his face, leaving a trail like the white phosphorous in the skies. "What is this life?" he repeated, his question, so earnest, so piercing for a child to ask when faced with the reality he lived, it instantly unmasked me. It was this same mask I had been trying to hold up in front of my face for months, for years, for decades. It was this same mask I was still trying to hold up as I stumbled into this new classroom in this new building with this new group of students that my friend had promised me would be safe.

"What is this life?" a deep part of me wanted to know as I reminded myself that I am an expert, I am a professional, I am a professor. I must hold up a mask. I cannot cry. I cannot speak of the pain in my heart or the cold soot in my soul growing darker by the day. I can speak of trauma and healing and justice and revolution, but I can never show it, like the little boy, so exact and authentic as he demanded an answer. The recording of his reaction, of his state, showed not just the moment trauma gets inflicted on a human body and mind, the moments we all work so hard and so well to forget. It also showed the beautiful fragility of the human spirit, and its demand to be loved, to be safe, to be seen, to be abundant, and to be whole. When that is taken away, whether in one strike like in Gaza or piece by piece slowly and quietly like in America, we deserve to ask, "What is this life?"

"What is this life?" I wanted to shout at my new students as I clumsily set up my things on the desk at the front of the class. What is this life if we can't discuss what's in our hearts and on our minds? What is this life if we can't be completely ourselves? What is this life if we come together to pretend to care, to pretend to be in community, to pretend to want to learn and to grow, all while we don't even have the courage to live without our masks? It wasn't even about speaking up about Palestine anymore. It was about all the experiences in our fields, in our training, in our "professionalism" and how education has become nothing more than learning how to mask and how to convince others never to unmask. That's what I wanted to say. But instead I just said, "Before we start, I need you all to know that I am pro-Palestine and if that is a problem you probably shouldn't be in my class."

I was unnerved by the potential risk of how I had just started class with a group of students I did not know. But what really unnerved me was their faces. They looked at me, all sixteen of them, the way I imagined that journalist, though he was never in the frame, had looked at the little boy–warm and empathic and honest, as if to say, you are right, this is not okay, we are not okay, but we are here. We are here.

Nothing about watching a genocide equates to living it. In that moment, I realized how despite decades of work: therapy, education, decolonization, excavation, and countless attempts to heal my trauma from growing up in post-revolution Iran during war times and then as an adult in post-9/11 America—the only thing that could heal me were the faces looking back at me.

What is this life if experts in mental health and trauma can't talk about a genocide unfolding in front of them? What is this life if an educator can't invite her students to reflect on their political reality? What is this life if social justice advocates can't speak about the social injustice of decades of American foreign policy in the Middle East? "What is this life" the little boy wailed earnestly, and his question gave me the courage to cut through decades of my own internalized shame and willingness to comply and stay quiet in academic spaces. What is this life if I can't share with you, my students, how heavily this weighs on me? What is this life if I can't take a moment, part of a class session, a whole class session, a whole semester to let out the cries that have been shrieking inside me since I can remember? And I knew in that moment what I had thought I knew for years, what I had taught and said and wrote about—we only heal in community.

I don't know if my class of sixteen students will ever know that on that night, in saying nothing, in looking back at me silently, but openly, they set the stage not just for the healing I needed, but for the healing we all then took part in, together. As our class progressed, many of them would come up to me to thank me for holding space for them, for creating an atmosphere that allowed them to be vulnerable and to share. But they had no idea it was them who did that first.

Perhaps it was a kind of miraculous synchronicity, or perhaps it was what had helped set up my subconscious before that first class, that our first assignment in the course was a visual autoethnography curated by my friend and colleague, where students were asked to create an actual mask. This mask was meant to help them explore their identity through an intersectional lens, but as we would all come to understand soon, the assignment was not just about understanding our masks, but about doing the petrifying, but essential work, of taking them off.

What unfolded as my new students—who hardly knew me but who trusted our space "because you were so honest with us" and "because you are the only professor we have had who has even mentioned Palestine" —began to share in their mask presentations and stories went far beyond the scope of the assignment's expectations. What unfolded was a kind of unveiling, a taking off of every layer of protection that I had not done in years in therapy, or teaching. What we were able to establish, in just a few short weeks, was an intimacy that one usually expects after years of built trust. But how? What was the potency of this assignment that had almost every student in tears, and me in tears after every share?

There is no question that the nature of the assignment, where students got to use visual symbols, draw art, choose photos, and construct something with their hands played a huge role. This is not something we normally get to do in the over intellectualized world of higher education. But what we all came to soon realize, was that it was the "permission" to disarm—the intentional decision to be ourselves, the agreement that what we normally project is, in fact, a mask and that this was a space where we were allowed to take that off, that made this assignment so incredible. This agreement allowed us to move beyond the social justice goals of the assignment and step into

true communion. Perhaps we got this courage from the children of Gaza.

As bell hooks reminds, in Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, dominator culture tries to keep us all afraid so that we always choose safety instead of risk. But, true resistance, as she reminds, begins with people confronting pain (hooks, 2000, p. 69). In image after image of the destruction of Gaza, I have watched a people utterly fearless in confronting their pain. In a classroom in Los Angeles, I asked a group of students to help me confront mine. This is how we resist domination, not by hiding our pain, but by feeling it. This, in the end, is the true work of teaching, of resistance, and of revolution.

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This was the assignment: "Create a visual ***mask*** representation of your autoethnography which you will present," the assignment dictated. "Design a mask with an intersectional analysis, that reflects your understanding of your social location related to power, privilege. You will be specifically examining your social location within the dominant culture and how this affects 'who' you are and 'who' you are perceived to be by others considering your experiences of privilege/status, power, race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality/sexual orientation, ability status, religion, etc."

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Post note:
There are several components of this assignment that I think are critical to why it is so powerful. First, is simply the willingness to dedicate so much time to it. As a rule, in academia we tend to be so hyper-focused on achievement that just the idea of giving each student in a class 10 to 30 minutes to talk about themselves, to laugh, to cry without producing anything tangible, is rare. Multiply that by 16 and we spend about a fourth of the entire semester's class time on this assignment. Giving it that weight and value was critical. Second, I think it's important to note that this assignment can easily become devoid of all its power if the person leading it is not willing to set an example of complete vulnerability which is required to create the kind of sacred space needed. If I want my students to share their deep pains and insecurities, I have to be willing to share mine, while also giving them the assurance that I can handle whatever they bring forth. This is extremely difficult to do in a new class, where the students don't yet know and trust you or each other and it is up to the teacher to be the kind of gentle guide and firm protector that vulnerability requires.

At the time I did this exercise I already had years of experience in both teaching and counseling, but it was extremely important to me that I was not using any counseling techniques on the students. Instead, I gave my complete attention to each student, deep and quiet listening for as long as they needed to go. There may have been small interjections if needed (for example, if a student was crying or having a hard time sharing something), but zero expectations, zero pressure, and no "goal." When each student was done, others in the class would ask questions, give affirmations, share something of their own, and then I would point out (often through tears) what stood out to me about the story I had just heard and the incredible person I had just learned a bit about. I saw nothing but love in these stories, nothing but courage, nothing but beauty even when the stories were of rage and cowardice and loss. My only pushback to students was when they would try to dismiss or quickly turn their or others' story into a positive frame. The point was to feel whatever came up, and at the start I made

clear to them that it is the whole human experience that must be honored, with all its ugly and sadness and shame, and there was no reason to try to force that into something hopeful. This, too, was a lesson I had learned from the people of Gaza.

What I came to learn about my students was just as precious to me as what I had learned from them. They shared stories of their most embarrassing experiences like being shamed in school, being poor, being illegal. They shared stories of their current struggles, a sister dying from cancer, a father being laid off, the guilt of leaving family to attend school. They shared stories of their own cognitive dissonance and of their goals and dreams in a world where they no longer believed goals can be met and dreams can come true. And they bonded over learning how alike they are and how different. First generation college students who were never expected to go to college were able to find common ground with international students who felt crushed under the weight of having to perform and be successful. Our worlds expanded and shrunk and expanded and shrunk within those classroom walls. I remember calling my brother on my way home from class one night, to tell him things are getting better, despite the worsening news in the world, because here was a graduate classroom on this earth in which we were able to feel, and how starkly different that was from our experiences as immigrant children. So, how is that not progress? This of course played against the background of waking up every morning to news and images of yet another university bombed in Gaza, another professor, doctor, or student murdered. And as I told my brother, if it had not been for this class and these students, I would not have made it.

It seemed apt that a semester that started as it did ended right around the time of student protests, encampments, and resistance on our campus. In fact, our last class was spent at a school wide meeting about the administration's harsh pushback against students, police arrests, campus checkpoints, and the potential cancelation of graduation ceremonies. I watched as my students fought back, spoke their truth, stood for justice, and embodied again, exactly what we had taught in readings and lectures and assignments, un-wavered in their courage to show up authentically.

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy," hooks writes, and this is still true today, despite everything, *if* we are willing to show up with radical honesty (p.12). And this is why I know, that despite these last cries of fascism at home and abroad, that we will eventually be okay. Inside these same institutions of power and oppression, beats loud the heart of a liberated and authentic youth, from Los Angeles to Gaza, and nothing—no bomb, no wealth, no power—will ever be a match for that so long as we can center radical love.

Fighting still and always for a Free Palestine.
Long live all our resistance.
Los Angeles, July 2024

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This author has chosen to remain anonymous.

Photos