JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION
2024, VOL. 23, NO. 4, 1–16
https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-6336

Article

What's disturbing about power? Reflections on teaching US-Arab encounters in the Middle East

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Keywords: culturally relevant pedagogy, decolonisation, Middle East

Highlights:
– Culturally relevant pedagogy can be an effective tool for decolonising educational practices.
– The experiences of learners and teachers in the classroom are defined by the outside world.
– The case study method is a valuable tool for understanding classroom dynamics.

Purpose: The paper aims to illustrate some of the challenges and outcomes of teaching courses addressing the politics, culture, and history of the US in the Middle East. In doing so, it contextualises an application of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and describes its implementation.

Methodology: A case study method is applied to qualitative records to illustrate the experiences of both the learners and the teacher, as narrated by the latter.

Findings: Narratives suggest that a curriculum of US import, taught in a context that bears the new and old scars of colonialism, makes US-Middle East encounters capable of deepening students' understanding of their condition in a world still dominated by 'others'.

Implications: The findings of the current study bring to the surface the need for decolonising educational practices that allow for imagination of life in dignity and pluriversity.

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Suggested citation:
El Alaoui, Khadija, & Pilotti, Maura (2024). What's disturbing about power? Reflections on teaching US-Arab encounters in the Middle East. *Journal of Social Science Education*, *23*(4).
https://doi.org/10.11576/jsse-6336

Declaration of conflicts of interests: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

1 INTRODUCTION

> As I travelled from the global north armed with a PhD in Westernized education to teach at a Middle Eastern University, I wrestled with a dilemma that I have been experiencing since then. I know I look like most of my students with whom I share languages, cultures, and historical and present wounds, but my thinking is steeped in Eurocentric epistemology. I was wondering whether I would be able to develop pedagogies that could better serve my students. I was agonising about the relevant pedagogies in times of violence committed by local, regional, and international powers. This is the region in which impunity is rampant. The US invaded Iraq without the UN's approval [2003]. Losses of human lives in the region seem to be of no concern except to the families who suffer the unbearable losses. When modern technologies are still breaking people in all imaginable and unimaginable ways, what hermeneutics can I enlist to make sense of texts celebrating lives and rights?

These were the thoughts shared with us by an educator of Arab descent who taught in the Levant a seminar that dealt with politics, culture, and the US in the Middle East and North Africa.

The present paper is an attempt to reinscribe her teaching experience loosely framed by the application of the principles of *culturally relevant/responsive pedagogy* (CRP; Ladson-Billings, 2014) to instruction based on a US curriculum. Its content is a recognition of the opportunities CPR offers and those it fails to make available, even under the most heartfelt intentions. After a review of the main principles of the selected pedagogy, instances of its application are described in the form of the experiences of our foreign-educated teacher. Lastly, a discussion of some key challenges of CRP is entertained, along with suggestions for possible remedies.

Culturally relevant pedagogy: what is it?

Teaching in a foreign country under the auspices of an institution that represents the power held by the Global North in the Middle East is not an easy task. Yet, some educators undertake the task eager to foster exchanges of knowledge through teaching and learning. For such souls, CRP could be a vital approach. CRP does not ask what is wrong with students who are facing difficulties in the courses in which they are enrolled. Rather, it is a model of teaching and learning that starts with the assumption that the success of students relies on educators who bring to teaching an appreciation of their students' assets through their being demanding, thoughtful, and inspiring. Overall, such educators demonstrate a desire to connect with their students' daily lives and communities of origin under the understanding that critical connectivity is key to academic success and much more. Ladson-Billings (2014) identifies three goals of CRP that define it as a unique pedagogical tool: (a) academic success, which concerns students' intellectual development; (b) cultural competence, which pertains to students' ability to appreciate their own culture and other cultures as well; and (c) sociopolitical consciousness, which refers to students' skills to use acquired knowledge to identify, analyse, and address concrete problems, thereby taking learning outside the confines of the classroom. Within these goals, culture is a critical concept conceptualised as "an amalgamation of human activity, production, thought, and belief systems" (p. 75), which remains, at any given point in time, fluid.

CRP calls for changes in curriculum, instructional practices, and student support services across disciplines (Green, 2020; A. Johnson & Elliott, 2020). Of course, it is not enough to introduce different cultural modes of existence in instructional practices. Education, within the CRP framework, is seen as fostering critical analysis of different viewpoints and practices that may impact students' lives

and those of the people in their communities. To wit, CRP focuses on ways to foster academic achievement (Pilotti et al., 2021) rather than behaviour management in and outside the classroom, on cultural competence instead of cultural eradication or assimilation, and on real-life problems and issues instead of school-based activities that are unconnected to students' lives.

According to Giroux and Simon (1989, p. 237), a successful pedagogy is one that "takes into consideration how the symbolic and material transactions of the everyday provide the basis for rethinking how people give meaning and ethical substance to their experiences and voices".

Hence, CRP is a pedagogy that "sees the outcome of learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits". It entails an education that "sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1). Although academic achievement is a central aim of culturally relevant instruction, its critical sociopolitical approach to information processing highlights that content knowledge and its delivery mode (i.e., pedagogy) in and outside the classroom are not "neutral". Thus, the task of the educator is to help students uncover, critique, and deconstruct the cultural and socio-political fingerprints of the knowledge to which they are exposed (Boutte et al., 2010).

CRP may be a particularly useful tool in courses covering culture, history, and politics taught in the Middle East. Students who come from places other than the United States or Europe are confronted with the worldwide influence and consequences of the Global North's powers (Fawcett, 2016) not only in textbooks and other study materials (Burns, 2014) but also in their family history as well as daily lives (Casper, 2010). Thus, history and present realities are likely to generate "a complex intermingling of fascination and horror" (Azevedo, 2010). Namely, the Global North may appear as the land of popular culture and affluence and, thus, a source of curiosity and fascination. But it is also the emblem of past and current imperialism (including oppression, exploitation, and discrimination), and thus a reminder of traumas, whereby horror, sorrow, and despair coexist unabated to define a sense of powerlessness.

Broadly speaking, courses covering politics, culture, and the United States in the Middle East and North Africa through historical lenses are often part of undergraduate programs with differing denominations, such as International Studies, American Studies, Global studies, etc. (Darian-Smith, 2020; Smallman & Brown, 2011; Stoddard, & Collins, 2016; Swimelar, 2020). Such programs offer students opportunities for a critical examination of the antecedents and consequences of the strategic, political, and economic presence of foreign powers in different areas of the world. In doing so, they ask students to practice transnationalism, which challenges the American imaginary and depolarises it in the local context. The transnational approach and the adoption of transdisciplinary methodologies encourage students to be critical consumers of a multiplicity of past and current events and viewpoints. Included are the legacies of colonialism and European territorial expansion and conceptual frameworks spanning from authoritarianism and American exceptionalism to views of gender, indigeneity, and race/ethnicity.

Irrespective of the location where courses covering culture, history, and politics are taught, they demand that instruction both acknowledge and dispute the supremacy and deeds of the Global North. According to McGreevy (2010), instruction in such courses should ideally be aimed at (a) presenting the power embodied by some countries as a human creation rather than the unavoidable outcome of a natural order of things; (b) examining nationalist narratives as contents created by those with the power to define communities and their voices; and (c) contrasting these narratives to the realities

and counternarratives of the voices of those traditionally excluded, thereby depicting marginalised people as valuable actors in the intricate social fabric of communities across the globe.

2 THE PRESENT RESEARCH: METHODOLOGY AND MAIN OBJECTIVE

The instances of CRP described below are a demonstration of this type of pedagogy in action. Selected instances rely on the carefully recorded recollections of a foreign-educated instructor of Arab descent who taught a seminar that dealt with politics, culture, and the US in the Middle East and North Africa through historical lenses. She taught the seminar across an academic semester in the Levant at a higher education institution that conforms to a US curriculum and a student-centred model. Peer evaluations and results of the *LOGO F* scale (Eison et al. 1989) characterised the teacher as a learning-oriented educator. In self-evaluations, the instructor described her teaching as based on five key values of CRP (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011): (a) diversity viewed as an asset (i.e., cultural differences are conceptualized "as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning, and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum"; Gay 2000, p. 29); (b) emphasis on equity and excellence (i.e., recognition of diversity to ensure equal opportunities to learn in a context of high expectations for both students and educators); (c) suitable instructional practices (i.e., selection and implementation of activities that address students' needs, adapt to their learning styles, as well as acknowledge, explore, and use the knowledge that students bring to class); (d) instruction that considers the whole person (i.e., recognition of students as both individuals and members of cultural groups); and (e) student-teacher relationships of quality obtained through being demanding, but also supportive, accessible, and caring. At the very start of the semester, these five values were credited by the instructor as particularly suited to foster academic success in the culturally and ethnically diverse group of students (n = 15) who attended the course she was asked to teach.

The teacher acknowledged in her self-evaluations that in and outside the classroom, "communication is strongly culturally influenced, experientially situated, and functionally strategic" (Gay, 2000, p. 109). She conceptualised the seminar as an opportunity for students to understand how the dominant/colonial culture hides in the contents of the curriculum and drives the academic assessment of learners' knowledge, thereby relegating marginalised communities to a particular relationship with the dominant social structure (White et al., 2014). In her teaching, she was guided by J. Baldwin's (1985) epigraph that "[t]he great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do" (p. 409). The seminar allowed her to teach how knowledge is constructed and disseminated through historical examples, as well as how to interrogate it through questions such as "Whose knowledge?" and "Whose interests does it serve and at what price?" (White et al., 2014). Thus, she was particularly keen to recognise her students' knowledge base as well as the modes they used to express thoughts, share experiences, and develop ideas.

Records were selected from a diary of events written immediately after each class meeting by the teacher. Her goal was to remember notable experiences of the dynamic flow of teaching and learning and reflect on the artefacts of her work. The technique used by the teacher to record the verbal and non-verbal behaviour of her students across the timespan of a semester was described in the first pages of the diary well before the first class started. The teacher noted that observed behaviour assumes clarity of meaning through the context in which it occurs and across time. For instance, if a student frowns immediately after having heard a particular comment, the interpretation of his/her body language may not be entirely clear. It may suggest surprise, disagreement, or

even outright distress. However, if words accompany the expression suggesting the subjective experience of a specific emotion (e.g., distress), then the behaviour can be described more precisely, and uncertainties regarding its meaning are greatly reduced. Furthermore, if frowning reoccurs after a similar comment is made, the student's strength of his/her commitment to a particular viewpoint can be inferred.

In the diary, identities were concealed by codes. Anonymised students' participation complied with the guidelines of the Office for Human Research Protections of the US Department of Health and Human Services, as well as with the guidelines of the American Psychological Association for the ethical treatment of human subjects in educational research. Records pertained to one semester of instruction. The selection of records to be included in the present manuscript was made by the authors to illustrate two main themes: students' reactions to the content of the curriculum (i.e., openly verbalised reflections on assigned readings) and the teacher's response to such reactions. An ancillary theme was offered by the teacher's self-reflections on her role as an educator. Thus, the research relied on a case study methodology, which is defined as one that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Its purpose was primarily descriptive. To this end, the guidelines of thematic analysis were used (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021), including familiarisation with the content of the diary and coding of records according to the two themes of interest. Coding was approached as a descriptive enterprise to remain as close as possible to the content of the participants' behaviour as reported by the teacher. Inter-rater reliability for all coded events reported here, as produced by two independent raters, was consistently above 90%. It is important to note that the selection of events relied on the teacher's 'eyes', and we, as the researchers, tried as closely as possible to capture her viewpoint. Yet, we recognised that our readings of the teacher's reports on students' behaviour would be situated. Namely, we acknowledged that the assumption that data speak for themselves is questionable. Thus, our selection of records was based on the recognition that those producing data make decisions that are informed by their social positions. Notwithstanding our sincere intentions to be close to the teacher's views, as researchers, we were aware of such influences and recognised that our transnational life experiences as faculty from territories of both colonisers and colonised people might shape the selection of narratives. For this reason, we focused the study on uncovering the limits of CPR from the viewpoint of the teacher rather than making our work an exploration of constructivist methodological arguments.

3 EXCERPTS OF US-ARAB ENCOUNTERS: WERE THEY STUDENT-TEACHER ENCOUNTERS?

The diary starts with and is punctuated by the teacher's reflections on her role as the facilitator of a seminar dealing with politics, culture, and the US in the Middle East and North Africa. The teacher described her experience teaching the seminar, which she dubbed "a US-Arab-encounter course", as rather quickly engulfing her in the cognitive dissonance she had experienced completing the various steps of her education, from high school to a PhD program in American Studies. It concerned the renewed realisation of having to teach the history and the ensuing constructed realities of the very power that has subjugated her, most of the students in the audience, and many generations before them.

Yet, this case of cognitive dissonance was more severe and heartfelt as she was formally embodying that power through her being a representative of a higher education institution that embraced a US curriculum and related artefacts. A key question haunted her mind: What is one to do with

the pain of injustice expressed by the body language of the students (their facial expressions being the most telling)? The teacher figuratively described her experience with the "US-Arab-encounter" seminar as the task of taking apart a tall and sturdy wall (i.e., representing knowledge constructed by colonial powers) while parts were falling on the very bodies who were undertaking the task. In her class, power was defined (Dahl, 1957) as "A causing (or having the ability to cause) B to do something that B otherwise would not do" (D. Baldwin, 2012, p. 311). A broad generic meaning, which implies "influence" and "control", was an attempt by the teacher to capture a common element among the many definitions of power without negating the necessity, at the right time, to specify the term further.

Students were of diverse national backgrounds, including Lebanese, American, Palestinian, and Arab-American. From the start, she could not ignore the students' body language vis-a-vis the texts that comprised the required curriculum. Their non-verbal responses ran the gamut from shrugging indifference to expressions of embarrassment, anger, and pain, punctuated by the occasional sigh. The seminar became less about the texts and more about the position(s) from which students of different socio-cultural backgrounds encountered the US texts that were part of the required curriculum. Of particular interest were the reactions of Arab-speaking students towards such texts in an environment still constitutive of colonialism and violence (El Alaoui, 2016). This was the main conundrum that continued to haunt both the students and the teacher since the very beginning of the seminar.

In her recollections, the teacher emphasised that her class never reacted as one body to the texts they discussed. Students of diverse national backgrounds re-enacted different ways of being in the world. Similarly, their different self-selected sectarian affiliations – Druze, Maronite, Protestant, Shia, and Sunni – were embodied in the classroom experience. In such a space, where the teacher and students met as historical creations and unique individuals, conversations were bound to be full of tension. A sense of betrayal and suspicion loomed in the air, but there was also a sense of confidence, energised by the very possibility of having honest and serious conversations about what power does to human minds and bodies as well as one's way of being in the world.

3.1 Knowledge/power: getting an education to surrender

The class was approaching the end of the term. During that time, students were exposed to a variety of texts that showed how nation-building could be a criminal process, as in the case below. The topic was the Gulf War of 2003. The texts to be discussed were an article written by Fouad Ajami (2002) and a talk given by Chalmers Johnson (2008) on US militarism. All the students disagreed with Ajami's views on Arabs and what they perceived as an obscene celebration of imperialism by a scholar who was one of their own. The two American students in her class dismissed him as an extremist beyond the pale.

The teacher handed out copies of Adam Shatz's "The Native Informant: Fouad Ajami is the Pentagon's Favorite Arab" (2003). She asked them to find out why Ajami was the Pentagon's favourite and why Shatz described him as a native informant. Students pointed out Ajami's access to the mainstream media and the ear of the most powerful people on earth at that time, the Bush Jr. Administration. The teacher provocatively asked whether such access constitutes a form of success and power coveted by many of us. She could see that a female Palestinian student was silently, even though almost loudly, preparing her response. To her surprise, the student did not simply respond to her question but used the knowledge she acquired from the article to respond to her classmate's comment that Ajami was an extremist and should not be taken seriously. She said with a trembling

voice: “I find it always troubling to dismiss voices who have the ears of those in power, such as Professor Ajami’s, on the grounds of their extremist views. I find it deeply troubling because what else can imperialism and its knowledge/power equipage be but absolutely extremist? An empire can work because it can disregard the will and desire of the people it subjugates if these stand in the way of its plans. While I am not sure about all the apparatuses that enable that fundamental plan of subjugation, I see extremism in all empire’s prints. I see it repeatedly in its announcements against all evidence that it is good and benign. For whoever disagrees, the empire can always ‘review its military and political policy’ to impose its will. Fouad Ajami seems to be part of that reviewing stance. He is definitely one of its foot soldiers, for George W. Bush did not typically consult with every Iraqi before he ordered the invasion of Iraq but with Ajami, other professors, and experts who immediately obliged. In the near future, government top-secret documents will again emerge to tell us the secret everybody knows behind the US’s bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq. Namely, they did it because they are the empire. Chalmers Johnson (2008), for whose words I have a lot of respect, spells out the recipe of how my death is possible; Ajami’s zealous pronouncements, such as, ‘wars of liberation are never simple; gratitude is never guaranteed’ politically scientise how my death is rational and even palatable” (p. 28).

In the class, the teacher recalled, this statement was followed by a long silence. The conversation that ensued was about why the empire that dehumanises expropriates and commits acts of global violence still looked seductive. The teacher mentioned that if Professor Ajami were ever invited to their university, he would be presented as a shining example of success to emulate. Many students admitted that they dreamt of being admitted to Johns Hopkins University, where he was the director of Middle East Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Others wondered whether access to power was contingent on living up to power’s unethical expectations.

3.2 Policy planning without those planned for

The teacher decided to conclude her class by asking her students to re-read a document that had been discussed at the beginning of the term, albeit briefly. The task was to choose a short paragraph, share it with the class, and review its content in light of what they had learned in class. The text was George Kennan’s “Report by the Policy Planning Staff,” drafted on February 24, 1948. Again, revealing examples of the intensity and diversity of students’ engagement were recalled by the teacher. Some students found it strange to go back to a document that was written in 1948, while the coverage of class content had made great strides, reaching 2003. For them, the process of decision-making in 1948 was antiquated, past, and irreversible. Meanwhile, other students did not see time as moving linearly towards a single and grand telos. Rather, their experience of time was in step with Achille Mbembe’s (2001) theorisation of African subjectivity and temporality when instability and crisis reign. Mbembe’s focus on time as experienced by Africans led him to speak of the “time of entanglement” that “repudiate[s] not only linear models but the ignorance that they maintain and the extremism to which they have repeatedly given rise” (p. 17).

By opening her ears to the students’ different relationships with temporality, the teacher acknowledged that many students with an Arab background moved differently between past, present, and future. For instance, a student selected one date from the document that she wanted to share with her class and linger on. It was 1948. It was a fresh wound (the *Nakba*, i.e., the dispossession of Palestinian people and their displacement from their land and homes) and so many other losses. Yet, while the present allowed students to access education and be globally connected, the pain became all the more acute because the conditions of the present, so commonly written as

"advanced" (e.g., excellent education, intellectual skills, and globalisation) de-valorized the stories around the festering wounds. She explained that her family sought refuge in Jordan in 1948. Both her parents worked in Saudi Arabia so that she and her siblings could afford to join the best universities in the Middle East. She felt angry because the educational system had prepared her to be either a Fouad Ajami or an Edward Said. Protests erupted in class about her equating the two scholars. She attempted to explain that she was proud of Said's work, like most Arabs, but her story was still being bulldozed, and Said's voice became a symbol of the empire's tolerance of dissent.

The students, whose collective memory insisted on interrupting the linear understanding of time and the smooth reading of the dominant narrative of modernity and progress, seemed unable but to tinker with the trajectory and teleology of these narratives. Whenever they were engaged in that tinkering and interrupting business, their bodies, gestures, unusual silence, and sighs were in marked contrast with the rest of the students. The teacher recalled that, on such occasions, students often literally sat on the edge of their chairs, as if ready to spring, holding in their hands, even though much more in their heads, the documents and narratives that had written their present and likely will contribute to the writing of their future. The teacher interpreted students' body language as a mixture of opposition to the contents of the materials they had read and frustration regarding the past and present deeds of colonial powers. Looking at their nervous hands and feet, the teacher was compelled to ask them to verbalise how they felt about the text and where they thought they stood in relation to what was being said.

Another Palestinian student said that she would describe the experience of reading/listening to US policymakers' conversations as stepping into a battlefield. She felt crushed by the power of the text-as-knowledge that pointedly discourses on her irrelevance and obscenely writes out her story and experience. Yet, she added that she intuitively found herself looking for ways to undo what the text did. The teacher interpreted her description as an invitation to view learning not as the mere acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake but rather as the survival reflex that drives the interpretive impulse.

The teacher asked whether anyone selected a specific paragraph to be discussed. An American student of Greco-Italian descent and Bostonian working-class parents expressed his embarrassment at Kennan's agonising over the appropriate way to implement the European Recovery Program (ERP) after WWII and his recommendation to his colleagues to show extreme sensitivity towards what he called "the psychology of the Germans" after defeat. The student pointed out sarcastically that Kennan did not seem to consider that Arabs had a psychology of their own that was suffering from British-inflicted defeat. The student could not understand why Kennan endorsed British colonialism. He read to the class the following paragraph:

> We [Kennan and staff] have… decided that it would be not desirable or advantageous for us to attempt to duplicate or take over the strategic facilities now held by the British in that area. We have recognised that these facilities would be at our effective disposal anyway, in the event of war.… [This] *does mean* that any policy on our part which tends to strain British relations with the Arab world and to whittle down the British position in the Arab countries is only a policy directed against ourselves and against the immediate strategic interests of our own country. (Kennan, 1948, pp. 520–521)

Emphatically, the student concluded that these recommendations were "past mistakes from a country that prides itself on freedom and equality". Then, he pointedly noted that the US State Department knew then about the psychology of people in defeat. Thus, he asked rhetorically: "Why didn't US officials make use of that knowledge in Iraq after the Gulf War of 1991?"

Again, the terms "past," "over," and "mistake" seemed to disturb Arab-speaking students, who immediately intervened. Their queries and comments showed them to be not so much interested in what they termed the familiar logic of coloniality in Kennan's (1948) text but rather in the American student's assumptions behind his use of the word "past" and his question about the US failure to live up to its ideals. Again, students were up for a heated discussion. A frowning Lebanese student made the following comment: "The past is past for whom? To me, what this article talks about is still relevant. France, Britain, and the US are the same." The class discussion moved into the British unconditional support of the US invasion of Iraq. The teacher pointed out that France did not support the US invasion. Another student, who often travelled between the US and the Middle East, commented with a shaky voice:

> Here, we have an official document that ties US interest with a rehabilitated Western Europe that has for centuries systematically sought to wipe out other ways of being in the world. The document shows the usefulness of the ERP to the US as an accord to lead the Western hemisphere. It also recommends that Britain be left to exploit Africa and that its colonial practices in its Arab 'facilities' not be disturbed. The text declares these facilities to be inheritable in case Britain cannot tend to them. Moreover, the document drafters have no qualms about disregarding the views of the inhabitants of the land when Palestine is considered.

She then swiftly quoted Kennan:

> If… we decide… to take a leading part in the enforcement in Palestine of any arrangement opposed by the great majority of the inhabitants of the Middle Eastern area, we must be prepared to face the implications of this act by revising our general policy in that part of the world. Since the Middle East is vital to the present security concepts on which this government is basing itself in its worldwide military and political planning, this would further mean a review of our entire military and political policy.

Referencing many events discussed in class, she went on:

> Recall Woodrow Wilson's 14 points, the Bagdad Pact, and the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh. According to this [déjà-vu] program, which displays the US imperialistic mode of thought, Arabs, Iranians, Africans, and many other populations are laid bare for the Western empire's consumption so that the latter can recover and empower itself after its World Wars. This scenario recalls the way the so-called geographical discoveries, hundreds of years ago, were turned to empowering the Western self and enabling capitalism. So, I wonder about the politics and the thoughts behind your astonishment. If I can put it differently, I'd say I have less trouble understanding Kennan's moves than I do with your expression of wonder and embarrassment. To me, both moves, Kennan's and yours, persist in ignoring the glaring pattern of what your power is doing to me/us.

Silence. Then, the student almost blurted out:

> Here is what I suggest to you [the US student]. Instead of puzzling over the US's failure to live up to its ideals, you need to figure out the reality of these ideals. If you do, you will find that the US has spectacularly succeeded so far.

A Lebanese-American student commented that the class discussions had tended to "ignore the very important context of the Cold War that substantially influenced the ways the US devised its foreign policy". He reminded his classmates of the professor's explanation, which framed this account as one view of history. Heavy sighs were audible in the classroom, accompanied by silence. The teacher felt the sighs expressed a response, albeit asymmetrical, to the powerful Cold War narrative. She attempted to engage that silence and respond to the issue raised. She reiterated the

suggestion of thinking about the Cold War as a particular reading of history. It could be a reminder of the power that underpins much of Western thought and knowledge. The teacher explicitly asked the students to reflect on what was happening at that very moment in class. Namely, while some students resorted to the Cold War to make sense of US foreign policy in the aftermath of WWII, others were convinced that regardless of whether the war was cold or hot, it was colonialism and imperialism that could explicate the mindset of the prevailing policy. She invited them to attempt to engage or not engage each other's perspectives.

Students' immediate responses were more sighs. The Lebanese student, who previously problematised the notion of the past, retorted that "the exercise could be worthwhile, but that was, after all, what most of his university studies were about". Yet, he continued, "[a]ll that knowledge acquisition with its nuances and intricacies could never hide the magnitude of the suffering inflicted on so many nations in the name of a zombie-like term, such as the Cold War". He added, after a long reflection, that "engaging each other perspectives could even be described as an obscene exercise because he was asked to do this at a time and space in which his perspective was still largely irrelevant to the powers that be". In his view, "terms such as 'war on terror' were used to justify the irrelevance of other perspectives". An Arab student observed that he shared the sense of obscenity because, after all, he had to use the language of the coloniser when speaking the language of the social sciences. He referred to the example of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which represents, for the majority of the Arabs of the Levant, one link in a long chain of Western betrayals and crimes against humanity. In his words, he said: "I feel like calling it something like 'move number four hundred twenty-five to break us!'" Some students broke into laughter. The teacher felt grateful for the student's satirical remark that made the class laugh. It was unbearable to face one's irrelevance from the Empire's point of gun. The student added that the insistence on policing his language when he resisted using one or two terms, even if he had already adopted so many, prevented him from getting into something else, something more important to him. Instead, he felt forced to engage in futile conversations with people sitting on top of archives of knowledge that have turned the particular Western perspective into a universal one. It became obvious to the teacher that the students' dredging up memories, feelings, and wounds was an agentive stance to articulate their positions vis-à-vis mainstream knowledge and master narratives. Through teaching this seminar, it also became clear that students' agency must be(come) implicated in the hard process of thinking about what to do or not do with articulated positions.

3.3 *Palabrandar* (walking words)

The teacher recalled that most of her students were reluctant to leave at the end of their last meeting. Everyone seemed to linger, even as she thought that she had expressed her farewell to the class, conveying her genuine appreciation for their challenging engagement. She reiterated that she hoped to see them again in future classes and wished to stay in touch. One of the students suggested meeting in the evening to go through their favourite texts. Everyone enthusiastically agreed. The course was over for good in the classroom but not in their lives. Later in the warmth of the evening, the educator noted that the students wanted to circle the wound. The meeting was a get-together to grieve the dismissal of George Antonius's (1938) voice and, by extension, their ancestors' stories, a dismissal that turned Antonius's prescient warning in 1938 into their lived tragedy. Here was the passage that was read at the meeting:

> The treatment meted out to Jews in Germany and other European countries is a disgrace to its authors and to modern civilisation; but posterity will not exonerate any country that fails

> to bear its proper share of the sacrifices needed to alleviate Jewish suffering and distress. To place the brunt of the burden upon Arab Palestine is a miserable evasion of the duty that lies upon the whole of the civilized world. It is also morally outrageous. No code of morals can justify the persecution of one people in an attempt to relieve the persecution of another… [t]he logic of facts is inexorable. It shows that no room can be made in Palestine for a second nation except by dislodging or exterminating the nation in possession. (pp. 411–412)

After a long pause, the teacher brought to the students' attention that Antonius dedicated his book to American industrialist Charles R. Crane, who, along with Henry King, was appointed by President Woodrow Wilson to lead a fact-finding commission to sound out the Arabs' opinion about the Balfour Declaration and the partition of Greater Syria (Stork, 1993). President Wilson's simple idea of knowing how Arabs understood their history and conceived their future was certainly dissimilar from British and French attitudes at that time. The teacher wondered whether that was a genuine attempt by Wilson, the scholar, to listen to the "others" and acknowledge their specificities. Was that a sign of President Wilson's wish to glimpse the desires of the "others" and bring his ear nearer to their stories? Undoubtedly, it would be a gesture that was incompatible with the epistemic and economic systems Wilson was serving. Indeed, Wilson's understanding of the government's role was that of a crow-bar (Parenti, 1995, p. 28) which "must open these [overseas] gates of trade, and open them wide, open them before it is altogether profitable to open them, or altogether reasonable to ask private capital to open them at a venture". The teacher noted that spatial and epistemological roads were steamrolled to carry armies and scholars who have buried other roads, holders of multiple ways of being and knowing in this world. Then she asked: "How can we take seriously these alternative ways of being and knowing?"

Silence offered the answer that was tacitly known by all students. The grief and anger the teacher read in her students' eyes, staring at Antonius's (1938) words, were the graphic realisations of the incompatibility of Antonius's voice, Wilson's creditable gesture, and the systems the latter was serving. Their pain was the recognition of the roads that could have been in the midst of the unforgiving reality of the ones that had been developed. Antonius's enunciation in a world made by Wilson, Kennan, and so many other US policymakers and their local middlemen was a reminder of Achille Mbembe's (2001) words concerning the contemporary African experience. Namely, that "th[e] emerging time is appearing in a context –today –in which the future horizon is apparently closed, while the horizon of the past has apparently receded" (pp. 16–17). To reassure her students but also to alert them to the colossal tasks lying ahead of them, she spoke of those who not only shared the wounds but also proposed radical ways of liberation, for instance, decolonising the mind (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). She also took note of how her students were eager to get the right spelling of the authors she suggested as a way of using English, the dominant language, to know neighbours, such as Indian Amitav Gosh and Indonesian Pramoedya Ananta Toer.

The teacher's last scribbled note in her diary was "We cultivate hope," a line from Mahmoud Darwish's (2002) poem "A State of Siege" that starts with

> Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk
> And the cannon of time
> Close to the gardens of broken shadows,
> We do what prisoners do,
> And what the jobless do:
> We cultivate hope.

The teacher recalled that the young people around her talked about all the tasks that lay ahead of them. That is, they should not be afraid as their fathers and mothers were in the past. On the contrary, they should speak up, appreciate learning from others who suffered the same wounds, and look for interlocutors with whom they could have genuine conversations. The mood was positive. The students were practising a rudimentary notion of Vilma Almendra's *palabrandar* (walking words) as a resistant way of thinking, talking, and working to "confront and overturn the death project strategies" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 37). The teacher hastened to add that shortly after the end of the seminar, Israel attacked once again the "others" with US-made bombs and caused a substantial human death toll. All a US Secretary of State could think of was to describe the atrocities as "the birth pangs of a new Middle East!" (McGreevy, 2020).

4. EPILOGUE

Institution-mandated peer observations and reviews of the instructor's teaching, as well as students' evaluations, corroborated that the three main goals of CRP identified by Ladson-Billings (2014; i.e., academic success, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness) had been met by the teacher. Students consistently reported that her teaching was demanding but fair, and as a result, they gained confidence in their abilities to evaluate the quality and nature of the study materials they received in their classes. They did not report that instruction and everyday experience were disconnected. Rather, in agreement with Dewey (1938), they often remarked that learning and relevant everyday experiences benefited each other. In stark contrast to the students' admissions of having had an overall positive instructional experience, there were the teacher's memories of her students' body language and verbal statements in group discussions inside and outside the classroom. Memories of their facial expressions were so vivid that they haunted her for a suitable answer to what should be done. In such moments, the teacher frequently found herself thinking of Naeem Inayatullah's (2020) thought-provoking article on the failure to teach, especially his remark that "none of us [educators and students] wants to learn our constitutive role in the very problems we are trying to solve" (p. 25). She wondered about her role in the science of epistemic erasure.

The teacher acknowledged that critiquing social inequities involved not only developing intellectual habits and perspectives that interrogate and challenge existing philosophies, policies, and practices but also dealing with the emotions arising from the recognition that inequities persist largely unabated. Students seemed carefree at the beginning of the term. Yet, once violence was exposed, they were looking at their skin, blood, and memories, along the lines of Richard Wright's (1956) thoughts upon reading in a newspaper the announcement of the Bandung Conference, in which twenty-nine Asian and African nations gathered together in 1955. In the beginning, Wright wondered what these diverse nations had in common; then, he understood that "[t]he agenda and subject matter [of the conference] had been written for centuries in the blood and bones of the participants" (p. 14). The students did not need the class to see and know that colonialism is an ongoing project.

The teacher recalled a conversation she had with a Palestinian student towards the end of the semester, a conversation that was dutifully recorded for its intrinsic didactic value. The process of "know thyself" did not require the Gramscian recommended inventory (Gramsci, 1971). Her inventory was grafted onto her own body, one that moved between many different locations (such as Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the US). The student's experience of time immanently hovered between the two forms of absences identified by Mbembe (2001): the absence of the events that have become vividly remembered pasts and the absence of other events that one can call the

future. What the teacher remembered about this conversation was the student's anger, her shaky voice, and her tremendous care in articulating her thoughts punctuated by long moments of silence. The student seemed to tell the teacher that her acquired skills and eloquence and those of hundreds of thousands of others like her would not convince the powerful that they deserved to live in dignity. What should be done?

In her self-study, the teacher noted that her student's words revealed the painful knowledge that the stories and perspectives of those who were marginalised would remain unintelligible to the very interlocutor for whom they were intended. Coloniality is constitutive of modernity: a system that stood on top of other ways of being and ways of knowing that could not make sense of the othered. In this context, Pirbhai-Illich et al. (2017) maintain that "[m]acro-level issues require macro-level solutions and… nothing short of radical change to current education systems will suffice. Education policy, schools, and national curricula are three areas written through with hegemonic discourses" (p. 241). Decolonising educational practices would go beyond CRP. If the latter exposes colonial violence and abuse as well as unravels the power's effects on knowledge production, a decolonial praxis moves towards taking seriously local knowledge ecologies.

5 CONCLUSION

To sum up, CRP can be an effective pedagogy when administered by a competent instructor. Not surprisingly, the use of CRP has been associated with several beneficial outcomes, including enhancements in academic performance, attendance, completion rates, attitudes toward schooling, self-awareness, and feelings of belonging (Brown et al., 2018; Cavendish et al., 2017; Dreyfus, 2019; Gay, 2000). In the present case study, students demonstrated that they not only could take ownership of study materials but also could engage in meaningful development of knowledge through independent analysis and exchange of ideas (see also Hsiao, 2015; Weaven & Clifford, 2015). Namely, as a result of their interrogation of concepts of power, students' attention shifted from the mere reproduction of culturally dominant events and themes to the action of challenging knowledge by linking events and interpretations to the social, political, and economic conditions that sustain power and create social injustice (Fernandez-Balboa, 1993). Yet, CRP needs to be complemented by decolonising education, a project that aims at re-imagining life in conditions of dignity and ontological as well as epistemic diversity, or pluriversity. Like our instructor, who shared her hopelessness from witnessing relentless violence more than a decade ago, we, too, are ending this piece while witnessing another death project in Gaza. Although catastrophes can bring despair, they can also become opportunities for positive, constructive change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the participants of this case study for their contribution and colleagues who provided their unvarnished feedback to earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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