

Doing as the Trees Do

Two Femmes of Color Resisting Institutional Violence

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Abstract

Relationships, such as the advisee/advisor relationship, in academia are typically taught to be used as a resource (a commodity) for the advancement of one's career. Problematizing the advising relationship draws attention to the inherent hierarchies and violence an advisor may perpetuate. In this article, we explore our resistance and healing from EuroAmerican epistemologies in hopes of building a present and future that honors our wholeness and wellness. We examine our relationship, through an autoethnographic duet, drawing on Maya cosmology and inviting our Tree relatives to guide us in understanding how we might be well together.

Keywords: racial battle fatigue, advising, doctoral studies, mathematics education, cosmology

Introduction - Seeds

Entering this doctoral program, I (Briana) had preconceived notions of what the academic industrial complex (Stuart, 2004) might seek to do to my spirit and being. Pausing to breathe slowly, as Patel (2015) reminds us to do, I looked for spaces and people in which to create my safe place. But there are no safe spaces in academia (N.M. Garcia, 2019). U.S. academia endorses EuroAmerican epistemology as normative (Dawson, 2020) and clings to white normative standards (G. A. Garcia, 2019), such as SAT, GRE, grades, so-called pedigree, and publishing in “top

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tier journals” to sort and categorize students and faculty. EuroAmerican epistemology promotes individualism and scarcity while maintaining hierarchies (Clark, 1995), which manifests in every nook and cranny of the doctoral schooling experience. From the onset, GRE scores serve as a gatekeeping mechanism into higher education to “weed out” potential candidates based off an achievement score (Rogers & Molina, 2006)—a score having little to do with a person’s success, nor how well they may contribute to a field (Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017), as measured by dominant norms.

We begin with my (Briana’s) voice in this article because we choose to center the experience of doctoral students in resisting hierarchies and advocating for advisors to relinquish (settler) property rights of knowledge (Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Grande (2015) offers us in *Red Pedagogy*, “living radical relationality is itself the possibility of contesting and further disrupting the colonial conditions that continue to be undone” (p. 47). I (Briana) invited Kari to write this article with me, and we alternate our voices speaking from our first-person narratives (from an “I” perspective) and from our collective perspective (as “we”). This autoethnographic duet (Lee & Gouzouasis, 2017) intentionally calls on our spirits, bodies, and hearts rather than only centering our minds. The untraditional format of our writing seeks to plant seeds of resistance to conventions of academia and offer healing-centered epistemologies.

When we entered academia after teaching secondary mathematics to predominantly students who are racialized as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC),¹ we brought our former middle and high school students into the space with us. Consciously calling in their being and spirit to the center of dialogue and discussions about the educational institution means unlearning the “norms and [mimicked] behaviors to become the right fit for the...institution” (Rodríguez, 2018, p. 1), and disrupting the hierarchical relationships between our bodies and spirits. To problematize advising relationships is to draw attention to how advising relationships participate in the reproduction of hierarchies. Hierarchies in educational institutions are inextricably tied to the ableist, imperialist, white supremacist, and cisheteropatriarchal capitalist structures of power (hooks, 2013).

Moreover, in our field of mathematics education, aggressive and dehumanizing sorting practices, such as tracking (Gutiérrez, 2018), often predetermine students’ opportunities as young as elementary school (e.g., Oakes, 1986). Although proponents of tracking practices argue it accommodates the needs of students through targeted supports, research demonstrates its lack of effectiveness while harming students sorted into both low and high tracks (e.g., Boaler, 2002; Oakes, 1990). Testing, sorting, tracking, and ultimately exclusion advance the able-

Doing as the Trees Do

ist, white supremacist, capitalist project of schooling. Predictably, such violent exclusionary practices are viscerally felt by those of us whom the institutions were never meant for.

Our advisee/advisor relationship is situated within higher education and therefore serves as an extension of the institution. In academia, “the positive and most negative relationships ... spell out the career” (Gersick et al., 2000). The advisee/advisor relationship has critically shaped how I (Briana) learn about how the institution functions, who it functions for, what knowledge is valued, for whom knowledge benefits, and what “success” means in academia. Advisors often perpetuate spirit murdering (Love, 2016) by viewing advisees as servants (Williams, 1987) for knowledge production instead of as collaborators. Forming relationships within predominantly white institutions (PWIs) for BIPOC scholars is especially challenging because PWIs are part of the racializing project long sought to empirically “prove” white and male superiority (e.g., eugenics movement, Stoskopf, 2002). *Pausing to exhale*. How can one feel a sense of belongingness in a place built for profit on unceded land by enslaved people?

Alternatively, advisors can co-create a “space of radical openness” (hooks, 1989) and help graduate students of color engage in creative insubordination (Gutiérrez, 2016) to navigate the politics of academia. In this article we investigate the following research question: How do we resist the institutional violence of academia in our advisee/advisor relationship? We, as two femmes of color (one doctoral student, Briana, and one assistant professor, Kari), seek to unpack and process the impact of spirit murdering in academia (Garcia, 2020) and to heal through our advisee/advisor relationship. It is a call to *pause*, to take advice from our Tree² relatives, and reflect on how we might be well together. We center our experience because we must also center our continuous healing as we navigate the joys and tensions of our relationship within the institution connecting us and our relationship with each other.

Conceptual Framework – Tilling the Soil

Do as the Trees Do

Like many of the great First Nation Peoples and *Pueblos Originarios*, the matriarchs in my (Briana) family taught our relatives to respect and protect the Land. This cosmology—ways of being and knowing based on our origin stories—is one rooted in the *I* is always *We*; we are and others are extensions of us (including more-than human³ living entities). This cosmolectics (Chácon, 2018) is a Maya⁴ tradition honoring the “cosmos, history, sacred writing and poetry, nature and spirituality” and only

describes one facet of being in relation to others (Medina, 2000). In the Maya Ch'orti' language the word for human hands *k'ab*⁵ is similarly used to describe the branches of the Trees, both extensions from the body. Life path lessons are rooted in finding balance and harmony with the energies we are in community and conversation with. Lessons can be learned through our understanding of the ontology of Trees, if we (humans) can humble ourselves enough to listen. These lessons have been further nurtured through lessons learned from Native communities and *Pueblos Originarios*. I have been grateful to be in conversation and healing with Chumash, Nawat, K'iche', Q'anjob'al, and Taíno peoples.

This article does not presume to describe a pan-Maya⁶ (Indigenous) cosmology, spirituality, or identity, but rather serves as a reflection in understanding how we are in relation. In our advising relationship we have both invited and challenged each other to put into practice this theory of change within academia. Understanding and navigating our advising relationship is to understand how we might find balance in our everyday-shifting energies. To do as our Tree relatives do: to communicate through the roots grounding us (spirit), to protect ourselves from institutional violence (body), to branch out in our understanding of knowledge (mind), and to offer fruits for future generations (heart). We recognize all these components of our wholeness (i.e., spirit, body, mind, and heart) are interwoven in how we experience life. None can exist without the other. The challenges and joys of our relationship nurture our research and nourish our spirits to work toward building a liberated future.

Methods – Tree of Truth

Watering the Seeds

To explore our research question and nourish our growing relationship, we planted seeds by conducting photovoice interviews with each other (de los Ríos, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). We also analyzed the transcript of a mathematics education podcast interview we were invited to speak for (TODOS, 2020) where we discussed our advisee/advisor relationship. Nurturing the seeds also meant including mathematics autobiographies (Aguirre et al., 2013), created during a course Kari was teaching, to use as part of the analysis. These autobiographies explored our early schooling experiences which influence our relationship with the academy. Briana was participating in the course and therefore presented their mathematics autobiography, and Kari shared her mathematics autobiography with the class as well.

Absorbing the Sun

Our analysis, informed by the ontology of Trees, shines light on themes representing the wholeness of our being: (1) Spirit (roots): With whom and how do we ground ourselves and this work? (2) Body (trunk): How do we protect ourselves from spirit murdering in the academy? (3) Mind (branches): How do we conceptualize truth and knowledge? (4) Heart (fruits): What do we offer to others, each other, and ourselves? Our learning about each other and ourselves came from analyzing interview transcripts, the podcast transcript, mathematics autobiographies, and photovoice images. We engaged in multiple rounds of coding and re-coding using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. First, Kari conducted multiple rounds of coding with Dedoose, inductively developing inductive subcodes to the four deductive codes. We then met to discuss emergent themes from the subcodes to the spirit (roots), body (trunk), mind (branches), and heart (fruits) codes. Briana then conducted multiple rounds of coding with Dedoose applying the four deductive codes and the inductive subcodes Kari developed. Briana noticed additional themes, creating additional inductive subcodes. We then met to discuss themes Briana noticed in the data. Kari then returned to the data to code with Briana's additional subcodes, and we continued these cycles of coding and data analysis meetings to agree on subcodes, clarify their meaning and connection to other subcodes, to develop themes and meaning from the data. We video recorded our data analysis meetings (with Zoom) to return to throughout our analysis and writing and wrote first person narrative reflections describing our findings. In the findings, rather than present quotes from our data, we instead share our analysis of the data and our feelings by writing from the first person.

Positionality

I (Bri) am a non-binary femme of Maya Ch'orti' and Central American descent. My family of *campesinos* are survivors of the Salvadoran Civil War between 1979-1992 (1996⁷), as well as the Salvadoran-Honduran War of 1969. I practice Maya traditions and spirituality; I continue to unlearn and relearn what Maya cosmology is and how to find balance within and with others. As a secondary mathematics teacher, I hoped to disrupt the spirit murdering I had experienced by disrupting traditional mathematics classrooms. In the wake of 45's election, the students I organized alongside inspired me to return to school to dedicate time to understanding what mathematics' role is in society and how it is used as a mechanism of social control in the U.S. I aim to engage in healing practices and co-create spaces where we can be well together.

I (Kari) am a Japanese American womxn,⁸ whose family was unconstitutionally incarcerated during WWII. I attended a large (over 4,000 students, 90% of whom identified as BIPOC) Title I⁹ public high school in San Jose, California where I witnessed inequitable tracking practices and educational negligence. My family incarceration ourstory¹⁰ and high school experience fuel my commitment to justice. Prior to entering doctoral studies and then the “professoriate,” I was a mathematics teacher activist and mathematics coach for 10 years at Vanguard High School (2001-2011), a Title I New York City public high school with predominantly (~95%) BIPOC students. As a critical scholar and educator organizer I continue to organize at my institution, incorporating social justice pedagogy in my teaching and founding and coordinating Black Lives Matter in Schools events and a Social Justice Curriculum Fair.

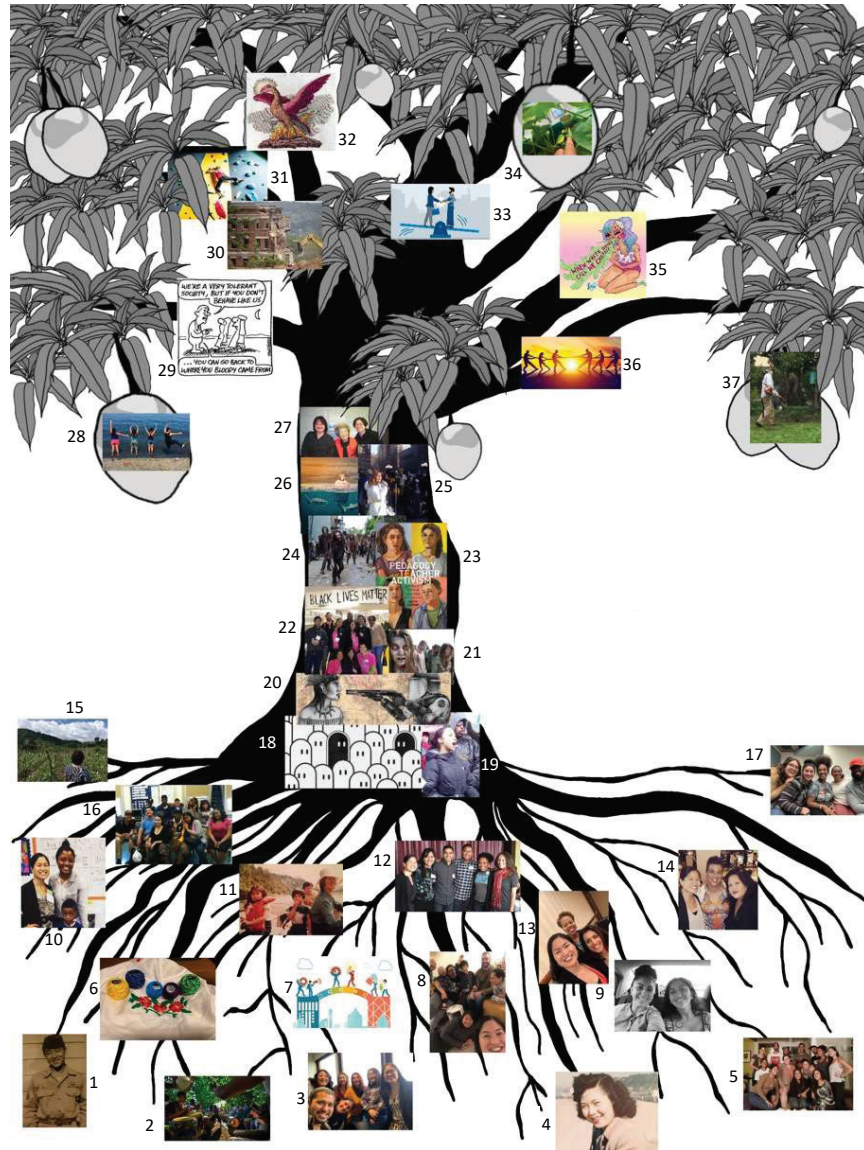
Findings – The Harvest

Releasing the tension in our body, we investigated how we (as advisee and advisor) have come to know ourselves, how we are in relation to each other, and how we might navigate academia together in our wholeness. Working on this article together has been healing, and we share a portion of our harvest—our challenges, successes, tears, and dreams. We offer our own bodies and spirits as projections of the impact our advising relationship has had on us in response to the research question: How do we resist the institutional violence of academia in our advisee/advisor relationship?

Our analysis revealed that our resistance from violence of the academy, including our own relationship building and collective healing, mirrored Maya spirituality. Because of Briana’s background, these ways of knowing and being shape who they are and how they might be in relation to others. In our analysis we found patterns reflecting Maya principles of well-being on the mind, body, heart, and spiritual planes, even for Kari whose background is not connected to such spirituality. To honor our whole being, we offer Figure 1. Our Tree of Truth (see Figure 1) as an artistic representation of the images we used to describe how we resist institutional violence through our collective healing. Figure 1 illustrates the image of a mango Tree because for Briana it represents an image of their parents’ homeland. Below, we first discuss how aspects of spirit ground us in community with others, as represented by the roots of the Tree. Second, we discuss how our body feels and resists violence from the academy, represented by the trunk of the Tree. Third, we describe how our mind helps us reconsider truth, represented by the branches. Lastly, we discuss how our hearts embody resistance through our gifts, as represented by the fruits.

Figure 1
Our Tree of Truth

Note: Thank you Rowan Terra for the artwork.



Roots – Spirit

The roots of Trees absorb water and nutrients the body will need to live and anchors the Tree to the ground. Similarly, we resist violence from the academy by grounding ourselves in relationships with ancestors, family members, chosen family, community members, and students. Both of us shared experiences of the institution attempting to strip us from relationships by valuing individualism. We often sacrifice time to study, research, write, and publish—the ways “success” is measured by white normative standards of the academy—to spend time building relationships.

Briana inhales.... Normative (i.e., a settler colonial, cis-hetero-patriarchal ableist) ways of being are not a privilege I was born into as a non-binary, queer, Central American femme. My existence is extraordinary, and this normative lens is not conducive to my livelihood. My resistance is thus held in the stories of my Elders, the community supporting me and holding me accountable, and my cohort-mates turned friends (see image 17 in Figure 1) who are also struggling to survive these institutions (images 6, 9). Tears flow periodically when I find myself frustrated with the chasm between schooling and learning (Valenzuela, 2005). During my first year of doctoral study, our required introductory seminar explicitly taught us what the institution wanted us to know and value. Even when I mentioned wanting to challenge the fields of educational psychology and learning sciences to use language and frameworks honoring dehumanized beings and call into conversation structures of power and oppression, I was “given” very simple advice, “You must use what is normative for your discipline.” *Pausing to exhale.* I was reminded by an Elder that I am here for more than just academics (image 2) and to take what was useful for my path and what might help others in our community (image 15). The tensions between what would be demanded of me in spirit (indoctrination) and in body (production) has thus far continued, yet through nurturing relationships with my community I am able to absorb the nutrients I need to survive the spirit murdering enacted by academia.

Briana reminds Kari to breathe.... I (Kari) often forget to breathe and to take care of my body, spirit, and heart. Throughout our collective writing, Bri has consistently invited me to connect with my whole being. While I struggle to feel and write about my spirit, body, and heart, I offer my attempts to share through this article. In reflecting on “Spirit (roots): With whom and how do I ground myself and this work?,” my spirit smiles as I think of and feel the human connections I am grateful for grounding me. My family anchors and fuels my work (image 11). My family’s WWII incarceration deepens my understanding of racism,

Doing as the Trees Do

trauma, and injustice (images 1, 4) solidifying my commitment to social justice and transformative solidarity.

My chosen family also keeps me grounded through our connection in spirit, friendship, and camaraderie. I have had the honor of learning from comrades and friends who have bridged their professional and personal commitments (image 7) in the pursuit of freedom and liberation (see images of Rosa Clemente, DJ Kuttin Kandi, image 14; Radical STEMM¹¹ Educators, image 8; People's Education Movement, image 5; and Critical Educators for Social Justice Special Interest Group, image 12). I have also had the opportunity to learn through my sisterhood with Drs. Rochelle Gutiérrez and Marrielle Myers (image 13) through our co-constructive research partnership, which serves as a model for me to work with my doctoral students (image 3). I have had the opportunity to learn from womxn of color senior scholars, and I continue to learn through long-lasting relationships with my former high school students. As a high school teacher at Vanguard High School, I worked as an advisor with my students over their four-year high school careers, also forming close relationships with their families. It is here where I learned how much I love familial relationships with students, modeled by my late principal Louis Delgado and chosen sister Sorel Rodriguez, rest in power to both of them. I have written elsewhere (Kokka, 2017) about the power of these mutually supportive advisee/advisor relationships at the high school level, where my students cared for me as much as I did my best to care for them (images 10, 16). I am deeply honored to have had the opportunity to learn from my Vanguard students for the 10 years prior to entering academia. I am grateful Bri continues in this same tradition as being a teacher and caring supporter to me, while I strive to offer the same in return.

Trunk – Body

The bark of a Tree protects it from the outside world, and continuously renews itself from within to protect the tree against the natural elements, e.g., cold, heat, insects. Our bodies endure the force from the violence and disequilibrium we experience in academia, and through our bodies we resist institutional violence and spirit murdering. Working in and attending PWIs, we resist the harm from colleagues and peers who often rely on us to name racializing language and actions, and then act passive-aggressively when the problematic nature of such language is highlighted.

I (Bri) must protect myself from professors in classes who bring up the “achievement gap” and “issues of race and class” using a deficit lens (e.g., meritocracy) without a structural analysis of how achievement in the dominant frame is designed to intentionally sustain racialized

hierarchies (Ladson-Billings, 2006). I therefore coordinate course work with other critical colleagues (image 18) to develop a support network for if/when we are called to defend our (community's) humanity. Our bodies must then show up and speak up, while also balancing silence for wellness. I am grateful for pedagogically creative professors who offer students differing ways of demonstrating our learning. Few BIPOC (and white) professors adopt creative pedagogies to resist violence by learning from communities outside academia. Creating boundaries against what is learned within the academic institution—competition, comparing oneself to others—is important to centering knowledge created by communities rather than that which is learned in school (Jones Brayboy & Maughan, 2009). I protect my spirit by working with communities and collectives outside of academia, and doing so helps keep the zombies, who represent academia and its agents of indoctrination, behind the fence (Galvez, 2018; see image 21). Even our advising meetings prior to the COVID-19 outbreak were off-campus because we both felt the need to remove our physical selves from the grounds draining our spirits instead of giving us life (image 24).

Kari inhales deeply... While I (Kari) am most often “in my head,” I am also someone who uses movement as resistance and for overall wellness. I am a former Division I college athlete (springboard and platform diving) and have since taken up capoeira (in 2006) and boxing (in 2017). By focusing on movement for wellness I simultaneously care for my spirit, body, mind and heart. In addition, I center wellness through my organizing work. Through teacher activism, such as co-founding the Creating Balance in an Unjust World Conference on STEAMM¹² Education and Social Justice (image 22), I have learned the healing power of community organizing (See Catone, 2017 for discussion of my teacher activism, image 23). Even more meaningful were the opportunities to witness the power of my students through community organizing (see image 25 of Karen and image 19 of Jessi, two of my 10th grade mathematics students speaking at rallies). Through my teacher activism I had the great honor of meeting Yuri Kochiyama (image 27) whose solidarity work with the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and Young Lords Party inspires me to center solidarity and community wellness in my work. Now as an assistant professor, I aim to use the influence I have to shield my students from institutional violence and cultivate a healing space for collective well-being. Within the academy I often feel like agents of the institution are “out to get me” (see zombies and sharks in images 21, 24, 26). The agents “out to get me” (and others like me who resist fitting into dominant norms) are the white normative standards and those individuals who perpetuate them, even those who do so complicitly, implicitly, and unconsciously. To survive the racial

Doing as the Trees Do

battle fatigue (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020) of aggressions often communicated through passive aggressive comments and emails, I find comfort and healing through the camaraderie of our advising relationship.

Branches – Mind

The branches of the Tree serve to grow leaves and to extend out to absorb the sun so the Tree can sustain itself. The branches create pathways for themselves to better receive the life-sustaining energy. It is the same energy we humans need and a truth we share with our Tree relatives. As BIPOC scholars, we take on the responsibility to tell the stories of those marginalized by institutions, to give space so living beings can tell their own stories, and to tell our own truth. Our own ways of being reflect our understandings of what truth and knowledge are, who is allowed truth and knowledge (i.e., who is an expert), and how we might critically investigate the knowledge and truth existing in white supremacist systems.

Kari exhales... I believe one of my responsibilities as a critical BIPOC scholar and advisor is to dismantle the “normative expectations” (image 30) my students are instructed to adhere to. Therefore, I share research articles with my students using methods and frameworks outside of the dominant frame to offer alternate, humanizing pathways in the academy (image 31). I encourage my doctoral students to read critical literature by BIPOC scholars (e.g., Cariaga, 2019; Pham & Philip, 2020; Valdez, 2020, to name only a few) to inspire them with examples of scholarship outside the dominant frame and to affirm their own (and my own) existence in the academy. Writing this article with Bri also serves as an opportunity to engage in humanizing scholarship and build trust, where Bri and I can be our authentic selves. I aim to create pathways outside of white normative standards for my students (and myself) to exist, to be, to feel, and to ultimately thrive as our healthy, full, authentic selves rather than attempting to shove our spirit, body, mind, and heart into a small, rigid, prickly box of white normative epistemologies and ontologies.

Briana inhales... My experiences taught me to understand how individuals and groups might view the world differently. Although I was frustrated as a child being labeled as an “under achiever,” I now understand my truth means achieving my goals on my terms and at my pace (image 33). I honor my truth (and my ancestors’ truths) by minimizing my submission to white normative standards (image 35, 36), while also building relations with others without holding them to this impossible standard (image 29). My relationship with Kari is based in doing so—I understand she has her own truth and I accept her for who she is in the present moment, whether different than the day before.

Understanding our present moment and selves is part of being con-

scious about how universities occupy space on the ancestral homelands of relatives¹³ who were exterminated for profit. It also means more than just acknowledging my light skin and how I am racialized differently based on my context (Omi & Winant, 1998). As a non-Black person, being a co-conspirator against anti-blackness means “confronting imbalances of power” (Love, 2019, p. 118). This means learning (image 34), explicitly calling out racializing language and naming (Smith, 2012, p. 157) anti-blackness in conversation, classes, and workshops. Naming anti-blackness in educational contexts allows us to name the realities of the white supremacist institutions we navigate in as non-Black people. When problematizing educational institutions, we must also call-in theories to analyze social stratification and power in our discussions as BIPOC (as non-binary) attempting to “name the world” (Freire, 1997, p. 69) we inhabit. Varying knowledge traditions must be affirmed and valued, which involves constant cycles of transcendence (image 32) to be in balance with and in service of others. These branches of knowledge inform how we might build community without pathologizing and essentializing anyone’s experience.

Fruit – Heart

Flowering Trees create fruits that can sustain us and seeds that may be used to grow more Trees. Fruits are thus essential to the growth of the Trees and to the growth of future generations. When we examine the ways we help sustain each other in our advising relationship, we reflect on what we can offer each other to sustain ourselves and what we might offer future relationships we engage in.

Briana reminds Kari to breathe again... I (Kari) often do not notice the heart/gifts I give to others, and I struggle to give these gifts to myself. In our TODOS Mathematics for All interview, we were invited to explain what we have done in our relationship to make it feel supportive and nonhierarchical for Bri. Bri responded, “What you’re really good at is always being true to yourself ...you are always open with your heart and always walk with your heart.” I felt incredibly honored to hear this from Bri. In my struggles to write this section, Bri also reflected to me that a gift I offer is the ability to listen, engage in challenging conversations, keep an open mind, and take accountability to repair and restore our relationship when difficulties, misunderstandings, and harm occurs. This is a gift of time, space, and opening of the heart and soul to another whom I trust. I am able to and want to be vulnerable in this way with Bri because I trust them. I am able to exhale and simply be my authentic self rather than attempt to create a “professional” relationship that feels sterile, “proper,” and distant. I feel affirmed in my

Doing as the Trees Do

ability to co-construct an advisee/advisor relationship where Bri feels supported, and I feel honored to be someone Bri trusts.

Briana inhales... Taking care of each other is the most radical thing we can do for ourselves in this institution. By radical, I mean to resist further internalization of heteropatriarchal capitalist notions of individualism. Sandy Grande asked us to reflect in a talk she gave, “How do we teach individualism?” (Two-Feathers- NAFS, 2020). As doctoral students, it is a strange standard to be expected to prove we are somehow independent of our advisors (image 28) through the comprehensive exams and dissertation thesis. No one works alone, and no one heals alone. To be in relation with each other means sharing my truth with Kari, working with her, and healing with her. I grew up believing our truth was “nobody’s business *fuera del hogar*.”¹⁴ This is why I stayed closeted for such a long time; it did not feel safe to be myself. While it is still never safe to be me, I am at least most comfortable when I can express myself how I need to. Withholding who I am creates toxic environments for me and others. I am grateful Kari is as truthful to me as she can be to herself; no matter what, Kari shows up to me with her heart and this inspires me to do the same. She is as honest about her struggles as she is about her successes. I appreciate sharing these moments of truth and vulnerability with her. If Kari were not compassionate and a great listener, I would not feel as comfortable being in my truth and in my vulnerability. With Kari, our vulnerable moments have brought us closer together, especially when patience, compassion, and flexibility have been essential during this pandemic. These are not moments I feel I can share with all colleagues at PWIs. If I do it is because it has taken time to trust they (BIPOC or not) will not compare me to the stereotypes created about my communities. When we can show up for each other, we reject EuroAmerican epistemology as the only “truth”. In reflecting, healing, and writing this article we (Briana and Kari) display our truth in hopes others are inspired to engage in their truth. It is by no means easy, yet it is in this truth we might plant seeds for other cosmologies to be valued, such as the stories making us who we are (image 37).

Discussion – Nourishment

In this article we aimed to examine how we resist institutional violence and spirit murdering from academia in our advisee/advisor relationship. Our sharing of spirit, body, mind, and heart continue to be present beyond writing this manuscript (Hernandez-Saca, 2019, as cited in Green, 2020). *Pausing to inhale*. The study findings suggest we are in best relation to each other when we do as the Trees do: share space with the wholeness of ourselves—our pains, reflections, challenges,

successes, and healing. Learning from the Trees has offered us a way of reflecting on how we ground ourselves (root), how we protect ourselves (trunk), how we sustain our truest selves (branches), and what we have to offer each other, others, and ourselves (fruits). *Pausing to exhale*. None of these parts of our being stand alone, rather they each contribute a fundamental part of our being to be the truest version of ourselves. It is when we are in best relation with each other that we can resist the hierarchies of the institutions, both in our relationship with each other and in our relationship with academia, and nourish our essence to honor our different paths.

In reflecting on our roots, we both expressed that the institution functions like zombies (Galvez, 2018; see images 21 and 24) eating at our spirits through the adherence of white normative standards (Gorski, 2019). These white normative standards manifest through the demand to produce beyond wellness, to use “the language of the discipline”, and to not question EuroAmerican epistemology. Although both of us still navigate the aspect of “production” to meet the requirements of the doctoral program and tenure, we do so by honoring the communities we come from. Kari builds bridges of support between her varying organizing work and her research colleagues. Briana longs for a safe space, but because no safe space exists in academia, they find safety in building relationships with other minoritized people in and out of the institution who want to do more than survive (Love, 2019). Finding safety is critical to our resistance to violence from the institution, as both of us expressed having familiar experience with U.S. state violence. *Releasing tears of our story*.

Our stories have taught us that our existence is our resistance. Our bodies resist the physical space of the institution built for profit on unceded land by enslaved people. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this meant finding safe spaces away from the campus to meet and engage in community organizing. While means of collaborating have dramatically changed and we are currently working to adjust to these changes, our strategies of resistance must adjust as well. As Nick Estes (2016, p. 21) writes, “As colonialism changes throughout our time, so too does our resistance to it.” Our relationship to the institution is fragile. At any moment, we recognize this institution may choose to replace us, as racial capitalism has taught us it will do. Yet we have chosen to work in the field of education because we believe in dismantling schools as places of harm and creating new spaces supporting collective balance and well-being. We have chosen to first see each other’s wholeness (spirit, body, mind, heart), i.e., we acknowledge and accept the wisdom and the shared pains and healing we engage within and without the institution.

These reflections demonstrate a guidance of a healing-informed praxis in advising relationships, where we honor our own truths (Gin-

Doing as the Trees Do

wright, 2015; Kokka, 2019). Working in spirit murdering (Garcia, 2020) institutions like PWIs is especially challenging for BIPOC scholars (Gorski, 2019). Our communities are often talked about from deficit lenses (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and are pathologized instead of allotted the power to define our own epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. A critical consciousness is thus crucial to our own survival and to redefine for ourselves what is our truth, what are the multiple truths, what is knowledge, what is expertise, and how might we use this critical consciousness to create a pathway for young people to live their fullest selves. In our advisee/advisor relationship, it means seeing the person in front of us, and accepting and understanding who they are in the present moment. The institution will tell us through course work and publications whose knowledge is valued, but in our relationship we affirm our truths as counternarratives (e.g., Milner & Howard, 2013).

Conclusion – Seeds

There is no one way to resist the academy. Kari shared her resistance of the “checklist formula” or “tip and tricks” approach for developing nonhierarchical advising relationships. Doing so brings challenges. Briana and Kari work on different schedules and at different paces, which can bring challenges of production to the forefront of the conversation. Such challenges affirm a greater need for both Briana and Kari to not hold each other to the same standard. Although our stories are similar as former secondary mathematics teachers and in being gendered and racialized as womxn of color, we both have distinct experiences with schooling and distinct traumatic experiences therein. *Pausing to release tension*. We have built trust and a willingness to share our vulnerability and view these moments as spaces of support, strength, and gifts. Our willingness extends to setting boundaries and understanding those boundaries are fluid (i.e., they can change from day to day), much like our relationship.

Furthermore, we offer our livelihood to each other and to the future relationships we develop. Our driving force is in people and not the institution. We resist publication for the sake of publication and power. We aim for our writing to be a reflective and a healing process, as has been working on this project together. We resist fixed notions of what this relationship “should” look like. We resist a unidimensional advising relationship and invite a multi-dimensional one. In our resistance we honor our present selves in hopes of growing into the liberated future which may not yet exist, yet we work toward building together. *We resist*.

Notes

¹ Racialized experiences are not a monolith. Using this term means understanding that the individual experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of color may also vary by context, class, gender, immigration status, ethnicity, perceived ability, and spiritual practice.

² We capitalize Tree to respect them as Elders, and express gratitude for all they do.

³ More-than human recognizes the living beings, such as plants, animals, fungi, protista, and monera, having existed far before human beings.

⁴ It is important to note some of our Elders have a paradoxical relationship with the term Maya because our stories do not describe different Maya nations as we know them today prior to the arrival of the Spanish colonizers.

⁵ *q'ab'* in Maya K'iche'.

⁶ Pan-Maya might assume all Maya communities practice the same cosmology, but this is not necessarily true. The description of the complexities of Maya cosmology is beyond the scope of this article. This article chooses to focus on one teaching within Maya cosmology, namely what we might learn from our Tree relatives.

⁷ While the official signing of the peace accords happened in 1992, fighting in the highlands on the Salvadoran-Honduran border did not end at the signing. 1996 approximates how long the fighting went on in our homeland.

⁸ We use the spelling womxn as a form of linguistic resistance to the gender binary and to bring attention to people from minoritized genders (e.g., womxn of color, trans womxn, trans non-binary femme, among other identities).

⁹ Title I schools are public schools where 40% or more of students qualify for free or reduced lunch and therefore qualify for additional federal funding.

¹⁰ We use “ourstory” as a gender-neutral alternative to “history.”

¹¹ Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Making

¹² Science, Technology, Engineering, Activism, Mathematics, and Making.

¹³ People, plants, and other more-than-human beings.

¹⁴ Translation—outside the home; in public.

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Doing as the Trees Do

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Doing as the Trees Do

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