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Shifting Skins: Becoming Multiple During Emergency Online Teaching

Bianca Licata and Catherine Cheng Stahl[1]

At the end of March 2020, teachers across the United States, ourselves included, were forced to reorganize our rooms and prepare two weeks' worth of emergency remote lessons. We left notebooks on desks, projects hung up on walls, jackets that kids forgot to take home. We would be back, we thought. This would be little more than an extended snow day. But soon, we found ourselves jettisoned into a world where we could no longer *be* who and what we had come to believe a teacher *was*. Slipped into the in-between of students' worlds and ours, feeling our way across screens and voids, through the pain, desolation, and loneliness of isolation; through the outpouring of calls for racial justice in the face of heightened racism, violence, and political upheaval; through the sonorous drone of endless New York City and Newark, New Jersey ambulance sirens, we tried to reach our students. Yet, as we struggled to find our footing in this new and, what seemed to be, crumbling world, we saw neoliberal education, with its demand for high-stakes accountability and constant monitoring of student and teacher productivity, fold beneath the chaos, and saw our mechanistic teaching roles and restrictive student identities slip, slide away.

Ejected from this landscape of formal schooling, we found ourselves navigating the online learning space through a structure familiar to us and our students outside of typical learning space—that of virtual gaming. This unexpected relationality showed us the possibility of a learning environment open to multiple and expanding ways of being and learning. Yet, in the months that followed, we have seen a reclamation of neoliberalism in online learning and heard the call for resuming testing, surveillance, and controls when we make our return to in-person learning. In what follows, we argue instead that we cultivate the relationality we experienced in the game-like and game-infused world of emergency online learning.

CAGED INTO A SINGULARITY: NEOLIBERAL SCHOOL SPACES

We regard neoliberal education as the organization of educational practices motivated by capital gains and measured by (white, male, heterosexual) meritocracy, which inherently harms multiply marginalized communities (Kumashiro, 2000). Neoliberal education specifically devalues Black, Indigenous, and people of Color (BIPOC) knowledges and cultures by essentializing high-stakes tests that privilege Eurocentric ways of knowing. Rather than celebrate BIPOC students' multiplicity of knowledge and experience, neoliberal education claims an "achievement gap" between white and BIPOC students (Ladson-Billings, 2007), citing a need to implement character and cultural reforms (Coleman, 1966), marketing behavior management strategies (Lemov, 2015), and enacting a discourse of white saviorism that de-agentifies BIPOC/multiply marginalized students (Au, 2018; Brewer et al., 2018; Sondel et al., 2019; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2018).

Raised through the racist 1916 Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales and reinvigorated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind, high-stakes testing and accountability practices reinforce deficit approaches to

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1   This article has been equally authored.

teaching (Counsell & Wright, 2018). These practices simultaneously perpetuate feelings of self-doubt and of deference to authority within BIPOC students (Tuitt & Carter, 2008)—students who have been historically and socially figured as "ruining" lessons with outbursts and unsanctioned movements; whose racialized, gendered spirit haunts the classroom with disruptions; and whose energy has been constructed as "the physical embodiment of a deviance in the body politic that must be controlled" (Ramlow, 2004, p. 114). Heightened by increased school surveillance designed to control BIPOC bodies (Krueger, 2010), neoliberal learning spaces vibrate with anxiety yet purvey these everyday traumas as "necessary" for BIPOC folk to reach the "status quo" (Grant et al., 2020). As two women-of-Color teachers who feel valued according to our singular proximity to whiteness (Solorzano, 1997), we intimately recognize this anxiety as something we have internalized as normal and natural—rather than normalized and naturalized, exogenous to our natural inclinations, and beneficent for only a certain few.

Thus made normal, these structures have remained fairly imperceptible, under the radar, or at least underexamined. It took a dramatic shake-up of our ecosystem, caused by a pandemic, for the facade of business-as-usual to crumble, exposing the latticework of injustice and inequity historically built into neoliberal education. In this newfound environment, distanced from the typically surveilled structures of school time-spaces, our everyday classroom roles underwent a transformation—one similar to a space we'd felt before: the space of virtual gaming.

FREEDOM IN MULTIPLE SKINS: (RETURN TO) THE (UN)FAMILIAR VIRTUAL (GAME)SPACE

With physical proximity removed, and the eyes of surveillance blinded, the "(social) production of (social) space" (Soja, 1996) no longer relied on us to be teacher "machines" and "eyes" of accountability and to measure, castigate, and dehumanize for the sake of our and our students' "success" in a world that moved us, gravitationally, to the margins. Bianca, who taught eighth-grade English Language Arts in Newark, New Jersey, serving Black and Brown middle schoolers, was suddenly unburdened of an encroaching New Jersey State exam. Catherine, a writing instructor working with first-year college students in Manhattan, no longer felt pressured to harangue them for glitching internet connections and digital absences. Yet this unburdening was frustrating: How were we supposed to *be* with our students and teach material without our capacity to measure, bind, order? Porous and vulnerable, we rode wave after wave of frustration, determination, exhaustion, and depression, grappling with how to navigate our and our students' losses and pain alongside the call to continue teaching, continue building learning experiences.

But at the same time, this space embodied a feeling of openness to imagination that we recognized from our youth. It was there, in the middle of a crisis about *what we were supposed to be for and with our students* that we recognized the potential for a relationality constructed in experimentation, in play, *in becoming.* We knew this spatial relationality and had experienced it in our youth as a space into which we could escape, remake ourselves and our worlds, and *become* other and multiple. It was a relationality that paralleled the world of virtual gaming, where we could explore learning (with)in new terrains, side by side. And though we did not play with students in real time, we experienced an escape into a playful, frustrating, and complicated world, like those of virtual gamespaces. As teachers, we reflected on these parallels together, and learned through conversations with our students about their expeditions and escapes into the world of gaming.

It is not new that youth have escaped into virtuality simultaneously in search of and crafting self and community (see for example Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Gray, 2009; Ito et al., 2013; Wargo, 2017). And

while the charge has often been that gaming has little to do with education, there is a multitude of research supporting not only its educational benefits (Halbrook et al., 2019; Stiff & Bowen, 2016; Swain, 2007), but also its affordances toward fostering new forms of social organization (Ito et al., 2013), alternative ways of thinking and problem-solving (Gee & Gee, 2017; Steinkuehler, 2005), and confidence through its participatory and social core (Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Squire, 2010). These are all qualities we as teachers hope to nurture with our students. Not only this, the gaming world is an ecology rich with opportunities to construct new worlds (Squire, 2008) and new identities (Squire, 2010).

In the world of gaming, players can take up "skins," or avatar versions of themselves. Similarly, players can move through imagined "maps," or gamespaces, and even create their own. Both the middle school students and college students with whom we experienced this emergent virtual learning space dipped into maps and skins to escape from and (re)narrate the chaotic world around us into something new.

For some of Catherine's college writing students, virtual games—coined as a "serotonin booster" by one—like the Nintendo life-simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* became an extension of their physical lives. For students materialized in a "villager" skin, home-building and interacting with neighboring villagers took on new meanings during a time of both alienation due to social distancing and chaos and instability from disrupted learning environments, sudden sickness, and loss of employment. *Animal Crossing* was a site of healing and community, a site of play, a site of imagination and future hopes. Through building homes on "islands" and establishing reciprocal relationships with "villagers," students attempted to write, story, and imagine the world in which they want to live and participate. Students' game play during COVID-19 was a vision of life-in-the-making in relation to others.

For middle schoolers at Bianca's school, the 2018 Inner Sloth game *Among Us* served as a place where students could collaborate, problem-solve, and transcend death in a time when so much death and destruction surrounded them. (Re)materialized as humanoid avatars, *Among Us* players fix a breaking ship as it moans through space while an "imposter" moves "among" them, taking lives. But in death, players gain new powers; death here is a new beginning, an invitation to know the killer. Players move through former boundaries, observing, and still fixing the ship (that never seems to crash). Students played voraciously, secretly, sometimes slipping codes to one another into Zoom class chats and across emails. Though death was threateningly imminent in both worlds, players in *Among Us* could get a do-over, a restart, a try-again, all the while wearing genderless, colorful, silly-hatted skins alongside other playful bodies. The perceived disruption, then, of *Among Us* into the "learning spaces," was an act of liberation, of becoming-beyond and becoming-more-than the surrounding chaos.

And the worldmaking, narrative-bending, becoming-other architecture of these worlds did not remain contained within the gamespace. Indeed, week after week, we saw the amoebic structure of emergency online learning expanding, assembling, and (re)shaping the worlds we shared with our students. Our students merged their world maps with ours as they Zoomed from bedrooms, kitchen tables, public transportation—dimensions of their lives we hadn't seen. Our homes, schools, and work blurred; private selves and public personas became entangled.

And *our* skins shifted too: We felt it first through a heightened sensitivity toward subtle changes, minor gestures, and shifts in voice inflections as we (re)attuned to pixelated versions of our students and ourselves. Behaviors formerly deemed "disruptive" or counterproductive in physical neoliberal learning spaces became "normal," expressive, connective; they became a language to be heard and read rather

than silenced. Further expanding our language capacities, we played on digital whiteboards; shared at length GIFs, memes, music, and stories from our days; met before and after class; learned about Naruto and BTS; watched students dance; ate breakfast, lunch, snacks on screen and during class; played with feedback, lessons, language; listened to worries, laughter, sorrow; came to understand (and expect) black screens. We learned to become freer to expression, to play toward new ways of learning.

Commentators on virtual gaming have named the ingenious scaffolding of learning how to play the game while playing the game. This is particularly the case with multiplayer games, in which you join with a group of other players—sometimes known to you, but often anonymous—to navigate through levels in worlds that are, at least initially, completely unknown to you. Our game-inspired relationality with students in the (re)created world of online learning was just this kind of learning; it forced us toward a revaluation of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing that opened new levels of experience, new ways of approaching and understanding the process of writing, the discussion of literature, the labeling of what literature and writing could be. And so, we thought that as we shed the thick, neoliberal-callused "teacher skins," we had welcomed back the "immaturity" of the new player, replete with the playful promise to become someone who understood, who knew, who could relate, could join in, and could play in order to teach learners.

Yet, while we shifted away from being neoliberal surveillers and producers, we never fully grasped our new skins because we were still, in this beginning stage, trying to construct ourselves as *teachers distinct from students,* and we perceived the play we experienced as facilitating instruction toward predefined standards. What's more, we are privileged in our access to technology, to comfortable homes, to health care and family, and so could not fully relate to the loss and struggle that many of our students experienced. And therefore we felt ourselves slip, grasp, slip, always just on the edge of understanding where we were and how we were supposed to be with our students, who faced death, destruction, racism, and isolation simultaneously. As time passed, we knew we could not pretend and play our way through a skin of "relatability"—the virtual space we occupied had made this *impossible.*

A MULTIPLICITY OF SKINS: CONSTANT BECOMING IN THE *THINNING SPACE*

What we felt, then, was a shifting not into a new type of teacher skin, but into many fast-moving, always-changing skins, a constant and temporary transformation from self to selves. The game-like spaces of emergency online learning pushed us to (re)member what it means to become multiple, to embody more than a single Eurocentric measure of being, or, as endarkened feminist scholar Cynthia Dillard (2012) puts it, "to recall and rethink of again … [and] put back together" (p. 3) our inherent pluralities of being with others—past, present, and future. We experienced ourselves as we/they, as us/them, as what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has described as nos-otros. We felt a fluid, *horizontal,* and expansive relationality, entangled within our and our students' human and nonhuman, digital and physical, material and conceptual entities, rather than a singular, vertical relationality.

Recognizing ourselves as immersed in a "plane of immanence" (Deleuze, 2005)—in which boundaries, distinctions, and definitions are dissolved—we ultimately felt what it meant to be phenomenologically queered by a space (Ahmed, 2006) and to more freely cultivate within it conflict, conversation, and community. We call this space of becoming a *thinning space* (Licata & Cheng Stahl, in press), as our skins and our power along with them were constantly thinning and changing. We were students, collaborators, (be)coming alongside as learners among (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) our many, complicated selves.

We recognize this thinning space as an assemblage that could be invoked in various situations, including teaching and learning. Simultaneously, we recognize the danger in forgetting how to be multiple and, consequently, recreating those familiar, sturdy, yet oppressive fixtures that regulate our becoming potential. Thus, as we return to in-person teaching and learning, we assert that we must cultivate the *thinning space* to broaden our and our students' capacities, resist neoliberal confinement, and restory what it means to be(come) "normal."

SUMMONING THE *THINNING SPACE* IN PHYSICAL SPACES

More than a year after we left our respective physical classrooms, we are still navigating this strange learning space that we have come to know as "online learning." Yet, as time has passed and routines have set in, neoliberalism has begun to affix itself back on/into the bodies of learners and teachers, especially since the impending return of New Jersey State testing. Simultaneously, calls for a return to "normal" in-person schooling grow louder on behalf of "fixing the economy" and toward a return to familiar social habits. In the face of havoc wreaked against all, and most injuriously, against the multiply marginalized and fiscally unstable, a desire for a predictable edifice, for a firm wall, is understandable. But while many seek familiarity, "familiar" is not the same as "equitable" and "just." For some, beneath this call for a return to brick-and-mortar walls is a call for more control.

Yet, in sitting with the phenomenal collapse of formerly delineated worlds amidst COVID-19 and with the expansive, multiple possibilities of learning and becoming that we and our students experienced, we imagine future teacher-student relationalities expanding into an open world, offering all bodies exploration in(to) and underneath skins. We envision teachers as shedding—that is, as *actively thinning*— thick, neoliberal skins to become an-other learner alongside learners, embracing multiple ways of being, moving, and connecting (with)in an anything-but-normal space. We have seen dismantled the institutionalized apparatus of control that we as teachers had been conditioned to deploy against ourselves as women of Color and against our BIPOC students in the name of enlightenment. Point blank—we know it can be dismantled again, and we argue that it must.

Black feminists have always reminded us that change requires us to examine the context of our multiplicity (Evans-Winters, 2019), to awaken within the wake of former ways of being (Sharpe, 2016), and to (re)member the people and pasts so as to talk back to structures that bind bodies and to recognize our own "power in the process" (Dillard, 2012, p. 16). Likewise, teachers can situate the affective experiences they had as children alongside those experienced by their students. Thus, in recognizing that all beings share different and shifting multiplicities and contexts, and in wanting to honor this, we offer some suggestions derived from our own experiences to summon a thinning space into spaces beyond the virtual world. Looking to Dillard (2012) and her teachings of (re)membering, we look back in order to journey and imagine forward.

Emergency online learning began with no broad, sweeping plan, no measure of consistency, no grasp on what "virtual learning" must look like, leaving many children with limited or no access to learning resources and online coursework. It took family and communities coalescing in an assemblage of care, filling the spaces made and created by neoliberal divisions and isolation. We name, then, that *intentionally creating space for community must precede the thinning space.*

Once in the virtual world, occupants were still "embodied and embedded in [their] historicities" (Braidotti, 2018, 5:44) yet also part of a burgeoning assemblage of rewired power pathways. As entrants

in a game-like virtuality, we (re)membered ourselves as children, filled with possibility, and found ourselves and our students in constant unsettled identity-play, taking up multiple, porous "thin skins," shapeshifting into new entangled realities (Licata & Cheng Stahl, in press). To summon the thinning space, then, requires teachers to acknowledge the commutability of multiple skins as opportunities to reflect on and (re)consider entanglements with BIPOC/multiply marginalized students and to *welcome resistance to the normative embodiment of neoliberal productivity and obedience.* Likewise, we envision thinning space curricula as a "relational ethics" (Eaton & Hendry, 2019) that *resists singularity and encourages students to explore new maps, learn new skills, collaborate, and embrace the certainty of change in the continued process of becoming.*

Affective attunements toward a thinning space invite teachers to reveal, put back together, and reclaim other selves—as sibling, partner, caretaker, "and … and … and …" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—in our work toward more just learning environments. Once they have been conscientious in a thinning state, teachers might also become more open to working alongside students in the inquiry, exploration, and worldmaking that is necessary. This could take the form of curriculum co-construction, learning agreements, restorative/transformative justice work, and, and, and …

THE END?

It took a global disruption of life as we knew it for our society as a collective to pause and revisit the question of whom our current system really serves. In education, neoliberal temporal and spatial structures have only closed in around us, stretching into insurmountable barriers between teachers and students and between students and their possible futures, territorializing our social spaces of learning with epistemological binaries. Thus, it is critical to address the systemic oppression of children, and particularly of multiply marginalized children, bound by these walls, where a sense of freedom is only understood within the space of a tiny vessel. Informed by the teachings and (re)membering of Dillard's (2012) endarkened feminism and Anzaldúa's (1987) nos-otros, a thinning space invites teachers to engage in constant unsettled identity-play and to imagine how embracing our multiplicitous "thin skins" (Licata & Cheng Stahl, in press) can engender radical care (Hobart & Kneese, 2020; hooks, 2018; Lorde, 1999) and expand our and our students' possibilities for becoming.

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Catherine Cheng Stahl is a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research explores youth identity constructions in, through, and across digital spaces. She engages in multimodal, ethnographic, and participatory methodologies to elevate youth digital identities by exploring the complex ways young people come to know and (per)form themselves in technology-mediated, connective worlds. This research interest stems from both her own lived experiences as a t(w)een immersed in virtual worlds in the early 2000s and her seven years of hanging out with Gen Z youth as a high school and undergraduate educator.