

IN THE WINGS

Premise

Welcome to “In the wings,” an anti-oppression workshop organized by students, faculty, and recent graduates from Carleton University and Ottawa University.

Participants in the workshop will have the opportunity to join break-out rooms and enact a role-play exercise about racism and resistance co-authored by students, faculty, and recent graduates from Canadian post-secondary institutions. This role-play seeks to facilitate critical and creative reflections about systemic racism, hierarchies of knowledge and expertise, and structural inequities embedded in universities.

Following the role-play, there will be a group discussion and conversation about how students and faculty experience these systemic issues in their everyday lives. We anticipate that these discussions and conversations will involve knowledge-sharing about the ongoing legacies of oppression within which pedagogy and research take place as well as the potential of education as a decolonial practice.

Cast of Characters

	DR. PANTHERE <i>pan-tèr</i>
	INAZUMA <i>ee-na-zuma</i>
	KAYIMAN <i>ka-ee-man</i>
	TAAJ <i>t-è-j</i>
	KIPANGA <i>kee-panga</i>
	DR. GAVEL <i>gaa-vel</i>

CONTENT WARNING

This exercise includes content that some may find disturbing, traumatizing and/or offensive. It will touch on topics of police brutality, racism, colonialism and violence. We ask that all participants help create an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity. If someone is triggered by the material, please refer them to the resources section at the end of the Facilitation Guide.

ACT 1



KAYIMAN: Since starting university, I'm now more careful about which spaces I choose to occupy, who I choose to associate with, and how I occupy or take up space. Although I've had the opportunity to engage in more inclusive spaces, these often end up being spaces where the harms that we're trying to address take place. As a racialized student representative, I've had to navigate institutional bureaucracies and endless anti-racism committees. I often think back to one particular experience during my mandate that still keeps me up at night.

It all began when a group of students filed a complaint about a professor who, after assigning a reading by a writer who outwardly denies that racism is a problem in the United States, handled students' concerns inappropriately. As I led a thorough investigation of this incident, I watched video recordings of the class, read messages online and interviewed everyone involved. Here's how the story went down:



DR. GAVEL: Welcome back to class everyone. I'd like to begin today with a discussion on the reading I assigned. What is everyone's position on the article? Kipanga, perhaps you can start us off?



KIPANGA: While I was reading the article, I found that the author relies on racist stereotypes when they claimed that the Black Lives Matter movement puts forth an anti-cop narrative. When the author argues that the BLM movement underrepresents racialized police officers, they fail to recognize that simply having racialized people in positions of power doesn't solve systemic oppression. And honestly, the fact that the author relies on age-old conservative tropes such as Black on Black crime as a reason for police violence, shows the bias of this article.



DR. GAVEL: Taaj, did you have something to add?



TAAJ: I agree with what Kipanga is saying. This article seems to be projecting an idealized stance on police in general, and in particular the reactionary movement named "Blue Lives Matter". This reminds me of how the Blue Lives Matter movement is on campus. It is frightening. We first saw signs of it when the

university hired a new head of campus police who was known for having killed an Indigenous person. These experiences on campus where students are racially

profiled and harmed reflect the broader parallels between the harms produced by community police, outlined in this article, and the harms we see taking place on campus everyday. The article you asked us to read seems to be actively leaving out the experiences of racialized people and how policing does not always equate to safety. Could you help us understand why this article was chosen for today's class?



DR. GAVEL: I gave you this article so you could engage with the other side of the discussion. Our university program is full of left-leaning and radical perspectives, like Black Lives Matter, abolition, and calls for defunding the police and the military. So, I thought I would provide you with a perspective you don't normally get. Perhaps I should give you a chance to speak on this topic. I would like you students to hold the floor. But first, let me just say...



KAYIMAN: Not only did the professor monopolize the conversation after stating that they wanted students to hold the floor, they went on to use the term "Blacks" as a racial identifier, which some students found offensive. After the class, a couple of students started talking online and shared their stories and concerns. They shared these messages with me:



INAZUMA: The discussion in class today was a lot.



KIPANGA: Yeah, it was super intense. Have any of you ever experienced something like that before?



INAZUMA: My experience of university so far was much different. In my other classes, my professors have not only exposed me to new concepts and ideas that I'd never heard of, but put words to my personal experiences. They weren't only teaching me those concepts, they were also applying them in the way they taught. They recognize the power they hold as professors within an institution (and let's be honest, a country) built on colonialism and other systems of oppression. They did their best to level with that power, and to embrace more accountable ways of learning and sharing, but there was only so much they could do. But I felt like prof Gavel was feeding into long standing hierarchical and colonial systems. It made me really uncomfortable, to be honest, especially knowing the power they hold on

students. I was afraid to say anything though, because as an international student, I couldn't risk getting a bad grade and losing my scholarship.



TAAJ: Honestly same, I was really nervous to speak up, but I knew I had to say something. I really hope this doesn't affect my grade, because I can't afford to lose my scholarship either.



KIPANGA: I am honestly not surprised. Throughout my university experience I've seen the countless barriers racialized students have had to face in this institution. I saw Black students profiled and racialized professors, who attempted to disrupt the status quo, never promoted. And any talk of antiracist education and liberation that I witnessed was always in a context of the institution denying its racist tendencies. So, I didn't have high expectations for this class.



KAYIMAN: As the students were working through their discomfort and fears, the professor consulted with a colleague...



DR. GAVEL: I have been in the university a long time, but I have also seen the real world. I was a Criminal Court Justice once, and I know the kinds of real-life challenges that judges face. These students don't see those challenges, they don't see that life. I don't necessarily agree with the article myself, but I recognize that the real world has all of these perspectives. It's my role now as a professor to open the students' eyes. It's not fair to them that they are not given the chance to see the truth.



DR. PANTHÈRE: I understand what you are trying to say, but as a racialized professor, I also see the point the students are trying to make.



DR. GAVEL: But you work with me, don't you see how the students are judging me? I wrote to them, I singled out the student who is leading the pack, and I tried to help her understand in front of the others. A person -- like me or anyone else -- can't be judged just because of our professional background, skin colour, or other characteristics. She is making assumptions based on stereotypes, and it's my job to teach them not to do that.



DR. PANTHÈRE: How do you know that she or the other students are judging you?



DR. GAVEL: Well, no one else has talked to me like this. My best friend is Black, I have Black in-laws, I have Black colleagues, and they say the same kinds of things that I shared in class. But the students didn't like the article, that's for sure. And now I have to worry about them possibly complaining. They don't see that I was trying to expand their horizons, open their experiences, and prepare them for the real world. I had better send them a message explaining my point of view.



KAYIMAN: And so, the professor sent not just one message, but several. This is the point where the students filed a formal complaint with me. I then coordinated with the equity committee on campus to launch an investigation. Throughout this investigation, I led the interviews with everyone involved and got their individual perspectives:



INAZUMA: I think the professor eventually caught wind of our concerns about the assigned reading because we received a series of gaslighting emails. The emails were so problematic.



DR. GAVEL: I don't know why the students are being so sensitive, I simply wrote to them explaining that it is my job as their professor to encourage them to learn about all philosophical orientations and worldviews, not just those they necessarily agree with. This means that I present various perspectives – which can be at times, provocative – to challenge them to think critically, while appreciating their own biases. I want to show them how the lens through which they view the world impacts their understanding of it. In doing my job, I don't present just one point of view to my students on controversial issues. I hope that students aren't too sensitive, and they recognize that it's not personal.



KIPANGA: As students, we were shocked by the professor's emails. They went back and forth with their justifications when all we wanted was accountability. All we wanted was for the professor to accept the harm they had caused and apologize. Nothing has been done despite our pressing. Although these issues remain at the front of our minds, we must be patient with ourselves as we work with our limited

support and resources to figure out ways for our school to grow. Unpaid and overworked, we move.



KAYIMAN: Unfortunately, nothing really happened when the investigation was over. I was really frustrated with how it all went down. I did everything that I could, but the administration was no help, even after all of the evidence pointed towards Dr. Gavel's incompetence when it came to teaching sensitive material. The students were also disappointed, but they knew about the reality of what it means to be a racialized student.

We have since directed our labour towards other projects relating to equity-based justice, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism, however, these issues remain. If we do not take the time as a school to turn the finger back upon ourselves and reflect and work away from the white supremacy endowed within our institutional spaces, it will continue to entrench itself in our lives.

Discussion Questions

The following questions are created to help you critically engage with the characters and the script more deeply and further reflect on your own experiences as they relate to this role-play. Feel free to create your own questions as you gauge what concepts and ideas you'd like to focus on and prioritize.

Once you finish each Act, run through every participant and answer the first question below. Then use the second question to run through the circle again, with each person taking a turn to offer ideas. Speak from the heart; refrain from commenting on the ideas of others. If you prefer not to speak when it is your turn, simply say you prefer to pass.

- Search through the role play and find instances of power inequalities. What is the power structure and tangible means through which power is enacted? Who holds power? What kinds of power are held? What mechanisms create hierarchies? Do you have a story to relate to this?
- Walk back through the role play and find instances of socially accepted myths. What are the ideals and the belief system that enable harms to be enacted? What are the commonly held notions that uphold hierarchies? Do these messages connect with you and your life?

For more specific questions on each act, feel free to use the questions below as examples to guide you through the reflective process:

- While speaking to Dr. Panthère, Dr. Gavel mentions that he is trying to prepare his students for the real world. How do power structures in a classroom uphold hierarchies of learning? How can we build classrooms that encourage and celebrate the experiences of students as valuable forms of knowledge?
- Often, actions like Dr. Gavel's are seen as anomalies in a larger system. How does focusing on individual acts diverge attention away from policies and structures of racism embedded in the university?