Black Feminist Liberatory Pedagogy and *Ubuntu* Solidarity: Toward an Otherwise World of Education

Karin Louise Kaerwer

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Marcus Weaver-Hightower, Chair

Andrea Baldwin

David Kniola

Rachelle Kuehl

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning, U.S. public schools have perpetuated harm towards students that do not fall under the descriptors of male, middle/upper class, cis-gender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, and white. Education scholars with varying ideological backgrounds have approached questions of education equity for decades; yet, in asking these questions through the "white gaze" (Wright, 2023), some scholars have perpetuated the harm they seek to demystify. The following series of manuscripts express the dire need for (re)calibrating U.S. public schools so that all children receive just, equitable, and humanizing education. The first manuscript analyzes harmful white supremacist ideological hegemony embedded in education policy, the second manuscript is an *ethnographic portrait* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) that resists the "white gaze" and illuminates the *good* in a thriving classroom comprised of Black and Brown teachers and students through a lens of Black feminist theory, and the third manuscript interrogates what it takes emotionally and intellectually to do this work as a white woman scholar who seeks *ubuntu* feminist solidarity. The dissertation concludes with a posture of hope. Hope of an *otherwise world* (Greene, 1995) of education in which *ubuntu* feminist scholarship will inform praxis so that students may experience pedagogies that liberate instead of harm.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Since the beginning, U.S. public schools have perpetuated harm towards students that do not fall under the descriptors of male, middle/upper class, cis-gender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, and white. Various types of education scholars have approached questions of education equity for decades; yet, in asking these questions some scholars have perpetuated the harm they seek to examine. The following series of manuscripts express the dire need for (re)calibrating U.S. public schools so that all children receive just, equitable, and humanizing education. The first manuscript analyzes problems and harms embedded in education policy, the second manuscript gives the reader a seat in the classroom of an educator that exemplifies liberatory pedagogy, and the third manuscript interrogates what it takes emotionally and intellectually to do this work as a white woman scholar. The dissertation concludes with a posture of hope. Hope of an *otherwise world* (Greene, 1995) of education in which collective feminist scholarship will inform teaching practice so that students may experience pedagogies that liberate instead of harm.

Dedication

To Jillian and Elise:

May you inherit an otherwise world—and if not, contribute to its becoming.

Acknowledgments

Marcus, thank you for being such a generous, caring, feminist advisor. Your openness to student creativity and personality in research and writing is an example of liberatory pedagogy. Thank you for not expecting me to force my work into a box labeled "normal" and allowing for *woo woo* when it's fitting. Also, you're right, contractions are the best and underlining is sadly outdated. Finally, thank you for writing books on "how to write." I sincerely hope your future students recognize how fortunate we are to have a literal *how to* book—authored by our own advisor—for writing qualitative research.

Andrea, I don't know what you were thinking when you agreed to work with me, but whatever it was, I'm grateful! Working with you helped me understand *the erotic* (Lorde, 1984) because I always leave our interactions a better human and feeling quite joyous. Your faith in me has catalyzed my growth and confidence in this work. Thank you for your *ubuntu* friendship and loyalty.

A big thank you to Rachelle, it is a joy to work with and learn from you. Your attention to detail is impeccable and I am so grateful for your time, expertise, and encouragement. Thank you for your willingness to "get your girl" and push me when needed! Also, without you, who knows what the spacing on this dissertation would look like? And David, you are gifted at the art of encouragement. From our first interaction, you have helped me feel worthy and capable of this difficult work. Your kindness and sense of humor got me through this process!

Alysha, I cannot thank you enough for your trust in me. My experiences in your classroom were truly life changing and I am thrilled to partner with you in our collective motive of just and liberatory education. I am honored to play a part in highlighting your radiant pedagogy. Jennifer, thank you for your love and support throughout this process. I am grateful every day for our friendship and proud to be your "intellectual buddy."

Dennis, I am so appreciative that you accepted my manuscript to be published as a chapter in *Resisting Divide-and-Conquer Strategies in Education: Pathways and Possibilities*. Your kindness and confidence in my work have made a huge impression on me and my career. I can't wait to continue working together in solidarity against hegemony! Myers Press, I am thrilled to be published under your name and I look forward to more opportunities to work together. Thank you for granting me permission to use my chapter as part of this dissertation.

Finally, I have enormous gratitude for my family. I've never been more aware of the phrase "it takes a village" than I am right now. Drew, your flexibility, perseverance, and dedication to our family are the scaffolding that bolstered this endeavor. Thank you for exemplifying love as a verb. Mom and Dad, thank you for being the best cheerleaders. Mom and Dad K, thank you for engaging my work with curiosity. Sister, you keep me. Sweet daughters of mine, remember that *women hold up half the sky* and to be each other's keeper. I love you all very much!

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Attribution

Manuscript One: Resisting Hegemony through Liberatory Pedagogies: Unraveling Virginia's Executive Order One

This manuscript has been published by Myers Press as a book chapter in an edited volume by Dennis Rudnick titled, Resisting Divide-and-Conquer Strategies in Education: Pathways and Possibilities. I am honored to be part of the collective that contributed to this important and timely text. Thank you, Myers Press, for permitting me to use the book chapter as part of this dissertation.

Manuscript Two: The Lion Becomes a Historian: The Liberatory Pedagogy of Alysha Butler

As evident in the title, this manuscript is a portrait of Alysha Butler's pedagogy. While Karin is the primary writer, Alysha is the source of knowledge that the writing tries to capture. Together as co-investigators, Karin and Alysha analyzed data, developed themes, and constructed this portrait. Therefore, we share equal ownership of this co-authored work.

Author's Notes

Tense

Stallings (2012) states, "Black women are living texts that possess a wealth of wisdom and knowledge" (p. 132). I believe the scholarly production of Black women is *living* because the words are so integral to the identities of many Black women scholars, and anyone touched by their work. Thus, I have chosen to refer to my literature in the present tense to honor the ongoing influence this body of work has on the heterogenous collective of Black feminists and anti-racist feminists, like me.

Terms

Manuscript Two: The Lion Becomes a Historian: The Liberatory Pedagogy of Alysha Butler

When regarding the subject of the portrait, we use "Alysha" and "Ms. Butler" interchangeably with no specific reasoning other than flow and style. In referring to race, we use "Black" and "African American" interchangeably, while also choosing the best descriptor for certain instances; such as choosing "Black" to describe a person who is of African descent, but not American. Finally, we intentionally keep "white," as a racial descriptor, lowercase and capitalize "Black" and "African American" to emphasize the de-centering of white supremacy.

Given Karin is the primary writer, when the pronoun "I" is used, it can be assumed it is from Karin's voice. "We" is used when we write collectively and explicitly agree on the statement.

Introduction

Explaining one's research agenda is a common experience for any graduate student. In conversation, once someone hears that you are in graduate school they quickly ask, "What are you studying?" emanating curiosity and intrigue. I have mastered the 30-second answer to this question, "I'm studying education, particularly who has access to quality education and who is relegated to the margins. I study this through the lens of Black feminism and critical theory." Then, there it is, a furrowed brow the listener unconsciously displays on their face indicating confusion, as in—*but . . . you're white.* "Interesting, why did you choose that?" The arc of this dissertation answers this very question. Why should scholars interrogate educational equity in the United States through a lens of Black feminism and critical theory?

The State of Education in the United States: Can We Just "Do No Harm?!"

From the very beginning, public schooling in the United States has failed to equitably serve children in marginalized groups. Any child that does not fit the descriptor of male, middle/upper class, cis-gender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, and white has at some point struggled to access quality education. Arguably, all children, including the few that fit the aforementioned descriptor, have been harmed by public education because of systems of discrimination and exclusion. Although the harm is rather ubiquitous, children experience harm in varying degrees based on their intersectional identities; specifically, the ways in which intersecting identities lead to multiple layers of oppression and domination (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000; Nash, 2019). Black and Brown children are especially vulnerable to negative outcomes (Pratt-Clarke et al., 2020). According the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2018) Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous children experience an "achievement gap"—or as Ladson-Billings (2006) more justly frames it, an "opportunity gap" leading to "educational debt"—in both mathematics and reading achievement as opposed to their White and Asian counterparts. Black and Brown children make up the smallest percentage of students enrolled in high-level courses such as those labeled Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB). The data show that even though Black children make up only 18% of the school population, they represent the majority of out-of-school suspensions. Black and Brown children have the lowest median annual income post-graduation when controlled for educational attainment (NCES, 2017). These data show that although schools can no longer be legally exclusive through segregation policy, the de facto policies in place continue to marginalize Black, Brown, and Indigenous children. These quantitative data have led me to wonder, what is going on in these schooling contexts? Why are White children doing seemingly well and Black and Brown children are *still* experiencing unjust conditions and outcomes?

Of course, scholars associating with varying ideological backgrounds have approached these questions for decades. However, in asking these questions, some scholars have perpetuated the harm they seek to demystify. Wright (2023) elucidates the problems associated with the "white gaze" in education research. "The white gaze [is] the hegemony inherent in mainstream ethnographic research, methods, analysis and logic contributing to pervasive stereotypes of BIPOC community members" (p. 3). This type of research has resulted in bodies of literature that blame the very children who are experiencing injustice. Under the white gaze, modern

> schools have contributed to the miseducation and underdevelopment of some of the most powerful Black minds. Black children are not provided safe schools with loving and caring educators. Black children rank among the bottom in nearly all significant academic and learning measures and, conversely, rank at the top in the most punitive measures. (Wright, 2023, p. 10)

It is evident, then, that Black and Brown children in K-12 schools need imaginative (Greene, 1995) research and scholarship that frees them from the mires of the status quo (Giroux, 2020).

Education Otherwise

Scholars of color and other marginalized groups have also studied educational disparities for decades, and their approaches are not inflicting harm like Eurocentric approaches (Wright, 2023). From emancipation (1865) to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Black educators cultivated spaces of belonging and engaged in liberatory pedagogical practices that were so successful, they helped catalyze the Civil Rights Movement (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021). Scholars who center asset-framing approaches—that is, searching for “good,” problematizing pathologizing social science research, and focusing on the health and wellness of the BIPOC community—have consistently provided frameworks of theory and pedagogy that can lead to true educational equity. Love (2019) describes such approaches as *freedom dreaming*:

> Freedom dreaming gives teachers a collective space to methodically tear down the educational survival complex and collectively rebuild a school system that truly loves all children…[it] is imagining worlds that are just, representing people’s full humanity, centering people left on the edges, thriving in solidarity with folx from different identities who have struggled together for justice, and knowing that dreams are just around the corner with the might of people’s power (pp. 102–103).

Love’s concept of *freedom dreaming* was partly inspired by the work of education philosopher Maxine Greene who believed “that imagining things being *otherwise* may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed” (1995, p. 22, emphasis mine). This compilation of manuscripts is built on Greene’s hopeful premise of imagining *otherwise.*

As cautioned by Wright (2023) this *imagining* must center epistemologies of communities of color so as not to perpetuate harm. Therefore, this dissertation is rooted in Black feminist epistemology and guided by intersectional qualitative methods to resist hegemonic strongholds of whiteness.

The Arc of this Dissertation

As Love (2019) cautions, "understanding the mechanisms that reproduce structural inequality is an essential component of freedom dreaming" (p. 103). The arc of this dissertation begins with demystifying the agendas of neoliberal and neoconservative policymakers through a critical policy analysis of Virginia Governor Youngkin's Executive Order One. Neoconservative politicians in power across the country are passing legislation that bans critical race theory, bars access to the AP African American Studies course, and dismantles equity efforts. Instead, these leaders impose ideologies of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) and post-racialism (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2017) that harm children in K-12 schools. After elucidating these divide-and-conquer tactics, I introduce liberatory pedagogies as resistance.

Manuscript Two examines liberatory pedagogy in both theory and practice. The article begins with an overview of the meaning of liberatory pedagogy according to critical and Black feminist theory leading to an ethnographic *portrait* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of Ms. Alysha Butler. Together, Alysha and I co-investigated her pedagogy as a high-school social studies educator to explore the question *What does liberatory pedagogy look like in practice?*

The final manuscript is a critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Adhering to Greene's hopeful disposition, I engage in "freedom dreaming" (Love, 2019) of *ubuntu* (Dillard, 2012; Tutu, 2005) feminisms guided by Black feminist thought. Amidst this freedom dreaming, I address the question, *What is it like to challenge one's own whiteness in order to take up BF* *theory?* Thus, I critically interrogate my own whiteness and ways it intrudes on feminist solidarity as a reflection of my dedication to the potentiality of otherwise *ubuntu*—a South African concept regarding collective humanization—feminism.

Combined, these manuscripts express the dire need for (re)calibrating U.S. public schools so that all children receive just, equitable, and humanizing education. Given the extremely lopsided demographic of white women teachers in K-12 education—about 79% of teachers are white, 76% of which are women (NCES, 2018)—this dissertation interrogates how white women can be co-conspirators (Love, 2019) in implementing equitable education for Black and Brown students. In other words, if we are going to truly *freedom dream* in education, white women need to join the party, and do so in ways that do not harm their Black and Brown students and colleagues. This series of manuscripts models ways to do so: first by analyzing the problems and harms embedded in U.S. education; next by engaging in research that seeks to find the "good" in a thriving classroom of Black and Brown teachers and students through a lens of Black feminist theory; and third by interrogating what it takes emotionally and intellectually to do this as a white woman. I conclude the dissertation with a posture of hope. Hope of an *otherwise world* (Greene, 1995) of education in which *ubuntu* feminist scholarship will inform praxis so that students may experience pedagogies that liberate instead of harm.

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Manuscript One

Resisting Hegemony through Liberatory Pedagogies: Unraveling Virginia's Executive Order One

In the summer of 2020, amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic and following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, the United States entered a moment of "racial reckoning" (Chang, et al., 2020; Lopez & Sleeter, 2023). Suddenly, media outlets and social media were ripe with discourse surrounding the yet-realized civil rights of the African American community in the United States. Many organizations and businesses made equity statements and engaged in initiatives aiming, at least superficially, to ensure their practices were just and fair. School districts throughout the country released anti-racist trainings for teachers and staff and restructured administration and policy with hopes of advancing equity. In Virginia, the Department of Education (VDOE) released initiatives such as #EdEquity, promoting webinars and resources that encouraged districts to critically examine their equity focus, or lack thereof, and make changes accordingly.

It was not long before a historically-predictable backlash ensued (Lopez & Sleeter, 2023). Conservative politicians and "think tanks" strategized to purposefully re-brand Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a villain and reduce any associated concepts to "leftist propaganda" and "indoctrination." This false narrative sparked outrage among conservatives across the nation, causing school board meetings to become a battleground against equity-minded pursuits and "anti-CRT" policies emerged (Lopez & Sleeter). Lopez and Sleeter name several national actors in the development of anti-CRT policies in education that have engaged in discourse that villainizes CRT and anything reminiscent of its tenets, including culturally relevant pedagogy; diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); critical pedagogy; ethnic studies; and antiracist pedagogy.

They name The Heritage Foundation as the creators of a model policy for banning the tenets of CRT in schools, and Kelly (2023) found that its language has since been funneled into at least 16 state legislative documents.

This story of progress and backlash, as noted by Lopez and Sleeter (2023), is not unique in U.S. history. They state:

> When the White capitalist elite minority perceives a loss of power over its ability to accumulate more wealth, it strikes back, often using race as a wedge. . . . The strategy [policy distraction] relies on racially coded messaging that fuels fear and resentment of people of color and other marginalized groups, stokes distrust of government, and promotes trust in free-market approaches (pp. 31–32).

The backlash described by Lopez and Sleeter exemplifies a divide and conquer approach to maintaining power and privilege. As critical consciousness began to emerge among groups of U.S. citizens, the conservative elite employed this approach to regain control of the discourse of structural racism. Neoconservatives targeted education, specifically, as a site of the culture wars using education systems as pawns in political strategies. As conservative politicians gained seats of power, policies emerged to silence conversations about systemic racism and inequity in schools and society.

This manuscript examines how policies like Virginia's Executive Order One (EO1) by Governor Glenn Youngkin intentionally undermine liberatory, humanizing pedagogies by adopting divide and conquer tactics. EO1 asserts neoconservative ideologies through the appropriation of equity-focused discourse to bolster neoliberal aims of education that uphold unjust racial hierarchy.

Critical Race Theory in Education

CRT, under neoconservative and neoliberal scrutiny, has been mislabeled, decontextualized, and inadequately defined by many, thus an overview of its tenets is necessary to illuminate these misnomers. Developed in the late 1970s, CRT burgeoned from the meetings of like-minded critical legal scholars who wanted to dismantle oppressive and inequitable legal discourses (Brown & Jackson, 2021). What resulted was a series of tenets that became a framework for analyzing legal discourse to challenge discriminatory laws that marginalize groups of people because of their intersectional identities. “In essence, Critical Race Theory attempts to account for and explain the continuation of racial inequality, despite laws that purport to put an end to racism” (Lopez & Sleeter, 2023).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) emerged as early CRT scholars in education utilizing its tenets to examine how racism is systemic within education structures. First is the idea that racism is normal and present in everyday structures and systems of education. This tenet rejects majoritarian rhetoric that integration due to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) marked the achievement of educational equality and points to data that suggest students of color receive inequitable access to K-12 education. CRT in education also rejects the notion of colorblindness and centers lived experiences of marginalized communities as evidence of racism through counter story-telling. Yosso (2006) states, “Recognizing these stories and knowledges as valid and valuable data, counterstorytellers challenge majoritarian [White supremacist] stories that omit and distort the histories and realities of oppressed communities” (p. 10). CRT also rejects the concept of meritocracy, an ideological myth that prosperity is solely due to the hard work of individuals and ignores oppressive social conditions (Giroux, 2020; Bonilla-Silva, 2022). A final example of a CRT tenet utilized to examine racism in education is the assertion that race is a social construction, not a scientific reality. Ladson-Billings states, “humans have constructed social categories and organization that rely heavily on arbitrary genetic differences like skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and lip size. They have used these differences as a mechanism for creating hierarchy and an ideology of White supremacy" (Ladson-Billings, 2022, p. 36). Thus, CRT is an apt framework to examine how education structures and systems are built to benefit whiteness and marginalize communities of color.

Neoliberal Strongholds on Education

The purposes of schooling, particularly in the United States, are defined by those in power. Those with a neoliberal agenda prioritize the efficiency model of education, "reducing citizenship to the act of consuming, defining certain marginal populations as contaminated and disposable, and removing the discourse of democracy from any vestige of pedagogy" (Giroux, 2020, p. 7). Neoliberal ideology feeds capitalism by promoting uncritical, common-sense (Giroux, 2020) ways of thinking among students through banking models of education and reducing students to objects rather than subjects (Freire, 1970/2018). This results in the dehumanization of populations whose values are not aligned with white, cis-gender male, heterosexual, middle-class epistemologies. "Neoliberals argue that making the market the ultimate arbiter of social worthiness will eliminate politics and its accompanying irrationality from our educational and social decisions" (Apple, 2006, p. 36). Thus, neoliberal purposes of education center efficiency and render students as either useful or irrelevant objects within the capitalistic machine.

Neoconservative Ideologies and Education

While neoliberalism centers economic aims of education, neoconservative agendas dominate ideologies surrounding the foci of schooling. Apple (2006) describes neoconservatism as a "romantic appraisal of the past . . . [where] 'real knowledge' and morality reigned supreme, in which people ‘knew their place,’ and where stable communities guided by a natural order protected us from the ravages of society” (p. 39). Encapsulated by neoconservative phrases such as “Make America Great Again,” this ideology validates a centralized curriculum that is dictated by values such as unflinching patriotism, uncritical acceptance of majoritarian norms, and fear of anything that deviates. Apple (2006) states:

> In this regard, neoconservatives lament the ‘decline’ of the traditional curriculum and of the history, literature, and values it is said to have represented. Behind this worry is a set of historical assumptions about ‘tradition,’ about the existence of a social consensus over what should count as legitimate knowledge, and about cultural superiority. . . Its primary and often exclusive focus was typically only on quite a narrow spectrum of those people who came from a small number of northern and Western European nations. . . The mores and cultures of this narrow spectrum were seen as archetypes of ‘tradition’ for everyone. They were not simply taught but taught as superior to every other set of mores and culture. (pp. 40–41)

Above, Apple describes centering whiteness within neoconservative ideologies. Whiteness is the centering of all things historically and culturally “white,” and the erasure and silencing of anything that does not serve white interests. Matias and Newlove (2017a) note “institutionalized white supremacy is maintained, enacted, and operates via whiteness” (p. 317). If left unexamined through critical analysis, whiteness becomes an engine behind racism because of the power and domination it wields. Matias and Newlove (2017b) use the term *en/whitening epistemology* to describe the hegemonic stronghold of Eurocentric ways of knowing that permeate neoconservative discourse. As argued by Matias and Newlove, this centering of whiteness leads to epistemological racism that contributes to social domination of non-dominant groups. The authors state, “We, the authors, know all too well that succumbing to it, remaining silent, or suppressing the reality of it, only furthers Whiteness in ways that will continue to divide our humanity” (p. 925). Thus, they suggest elucidating where whiteness dominates ways of knowing and centering the epistemologies of communities of color and other marginalized groups.

Neoliberal strongholds and neoconservative ideologies work in tandem to maintain a status quo of white supremacy in education. Operating under the myth of meritocracy, neoliberalism purports that if students “work hard,” score well on standardized assessments, and “rise above” their individual circumstances, they can achieve the “American Dream” of prosperity. Neoconservative ideologies bolster the systems of neoliberal education by insisting on colorblind narratives rather than acknowledging the through line of systemic oppression imposed on communities of color and Indigenous communities for centuries. Thus, as people began to unite in a collective recognition and critique of systemic racism in the United States, politicians with neoliberal and neoconservative agendas engaged in backlash policy development utilizing divide and conquer strategies to stifle unification.

Critical Policy Analysis: Elucidating Divide and Conquer Tactics in EO1

Virginia’s EO1 (2022) is an example of neoconservative policy that upholds neoliberal aims of education. The following critical policy analysis examines EO1 through three analytical frames: Weaver-Hightower’s (2008) policy ecology, van Dijk’s (2016) ideological structures of discourse, and Yosso’s (2002) tenets of a critical race curriculum. An analytic triangulation (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022) approach was utilized to “help ensure that the analysis [was] well rounded and there [was] a deep level of engagement with the data” (p. 154). The policy was coded three times, categorized, and the categories were collapsed into several main themes. Two of the themes, ideological hegemony and colorblindness, reflect divide and conquer tactics that maintain white-centered status quo.

Critical policy analysis in education (CPA) is a methodology that reveals the inherently historical, political, and value-laden context of policies that dictate school spaces. A critical policy analyst is "anchored in the vision of a moral order in which justice, equality and individual freedom are uncompromised by the avarice of a few" (Prunty, 1985, p. 136). Therefore, a significant focus of CPA is to elucidate ways in which educational policies are conduits for oppression, domination, and exploitation. Traditional policy analysis methodologies tend to approach policies in a linear, rational fashion whereas CPA embraces the oft messy nature of policy creation and implementation. Weaver-Hightower's (2008) ecology metaphor suggests that every contextual factor is part of a complex ecology surrounding a policy. This includes "texts, histories, people, places, groups, traditions, economic and political conditions, institutions and relationships" (p. 155). Thus, EO1 was analyzed within the larger context of political anti-CRT discourse and as a text—a semiotic manifestation of discourse (Fairclough, 2023). Ideologies can be imposed by dominant, powerful groups on groups with less power. Van Dijk (2016) offers an outline of ideological structures of discourse exhibited by dominant groups including techniques of polarization "us" (dominator) versus "them" (dominated), emphasis of positive self-descriptions and negative other-descriptions, and the framing of interests as positive for the dominator and negative for the dominated. The first two rounds of coding and categorizing were based on Weaver-Hightower's policy ecology model and van Dijk's ideological structures of discourse.

The final stage of analysis was guided by the tenets outlined by Yosso's (2002) theory of a critical race curriculum. Yosso applies CRT to pedagogy as a means of challenging epistemological racism in curriculum. She defines curriculum not just as information found in textbooks and discussion, but also as pedagogical methods, processes of organizing students into classes and groups, and discourses surrounding what information is taught and to whom. To resist epistemological racism, Yosso suggests a critical race lens be applied to curricula in the following ways: acknowledging the central and intersecting roles of racism and other forms of subordination present in curricula, challenging dominant social and cultural assumptions, directing the goals of curricula towards social justice and critical consciousness, centering counterdiscourses, and utilizing interdisciplinary methods to analyze social inequity. "A [critical race curriculum] exposes the oppressive and marginalizing power of schools and challenges school curriculum to emancipate and empower" (Yosso, 2002, p. 103). The authentic application of the tenets of CRT to school curricula challenges ideological hegemony and epistemological racism. These three methods of analysis resulted in the development of two themes that unveil the divide and conquer political strategies present in EO1.

Neoconservative Ideological Hegemony

While it is lawful for a governor to use their power to make executive orders, it is also bypassing the system of checks and balances by taking the legislative creation and control out of the hands of the legislative branch. Exerting control over pedagogy through an executive order rejects democratic ideals. Giroux (2020) describes school spaces as a battlefield between "abusive state power" and "equitable and just public spheres" (p. 68). Democratic aims of education, according to Giroux, include, "resurrecting the blemished traditions of Enlightenment thought that affirmed issues of freedom, equality, liberty, self-determination, and civic agency" (p. 80). Contrary to democratic aims of schooling, the discourse in EO1 oppresses alternative epistemologies in an act of ideological hegemony (Giroux, 2020; van Dijk, 2016). Giroux states, "ideological hegemony refer[s] to . . . systems of practices, meanings, and values that provid[e] legitimacy to the dominant society's institutional arrangement and interests" (p. 22). Ideological hegemony, in the context of EO1, is utilized as a divide and conquer strategy through the following discourse tactics: polarization through positive self-descriptions and negative othering of groups, strategic use of pronouns (our/ours vs. them/their) and asserting evaluative claims of norms and values (van Dijk, 2016). For example, EO1 states, "Our children deserve far better from their education than to be told what to think" (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022). Polarization is utilized in this statement by creating a positive self-image and negative other, for example, *our* (us/ours) *children are being indoctrinated by those* (they/them) *who teach critical race theory!* This technique is used several times throughout EO1 to justify "tradition" (Apple, 2006) as opposed to criticality. Ideological hegemony is also present in how EO1 defines CRT. EO1 states, "Inherently divisive concepts, like Critical Race Theory and its progeny, instruct students to only view life through the lens of race and presumes that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist, or oppressive, and that other students are victims" (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022). This statement names *individual acts* as the cause of racism, sexism, and oppression which is vehemently challenged by CRT. Ladson-Billings (2022) states, "The first tenet of CRT is the notion that racism is not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly. Rather, to a CRT scholar, racism is the normal order of things in U.S. society" (p. 34). Erroneously inserting individualistic neoconservative ideology into the definition of CRT is an act of ideological hegemony. Executive orders are imbued with power and authority, and when used democratically, should benefit all constituents. EO1 is far from beneficial: it is an abuse of power that results in the marginalization of those who disagree with polarizing neoconservative ideologies designed to divide constituents.

Colorblind Racism

Colorblindness –the belief that race “does not matter” in post-civil rights society or that one “does not see” race– is an ideology commonly used by neoconservatives to take race “off the table” in discourse. Thus, dubbing those who attempt to highlight racial injustice as “playing the race card,” rendering injustice invalid. Colorblindness is a tool for cementing the racial order of white dominance (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Operationalizing this tool allows anti-CRT politicians to negate the historicity of racism in the United States and present policy to the people that furthers *historical amnesia* (Giroux, 2020; Lorde, 1984) and perpetuates racial inequity. Colorblind ideology is evident throughout EO1, specifically through incorrectly defining CRT and silencing counternarratives, misappropriating civil rights discourse and the ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the covert centering of whiteness throughout the text.

Calling CRT “inherently divisive” indicates a colorblind interpretation of the theory. Conversely, true division occurs because colorblindness silences counter-stories of discrimination and systemic racism experienced by communities of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) which leads to marginalization. In the list of directives, EO1 orders the removal of all traces of CRT and “its progeny,” thus eliminating anti-racist professional development initiatives developed by diverse experts including scholars, educators, and administrators. The removal of these initiatives is further evidence of silencing of counternarratives that had recently been given credence in the VDOE.

Bonilla-Silva (2022) describes colorblindness as a post-civil rights era form of racism and relates it to an “ideological armor” (p. 4) that allows the centering of whiteness. “The beauty of this new ideology [color-blind racism] is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those it subjects and those who it rewards” (p. 4). The covert centering of whiteness is apparent in the misappropriation of both the language in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech. At the end of the text, EO1 uses The Heritage Foundation's model policy language to "define" inherently divisive concepts. Within this definition are phrases appropriated from the Civil Rights Act that are recontextualized to center white students as victims of discrimination. This recontextualization is explained by Matias and Newlove's (2017b) concept of "emboldened en/whitening epistemology."

> We have entered a moment of emboldened en/whitening epistemology that is characterized by the perverse re-appropriation of civil rights and socially-just terminologies and concepts—once used to support the rights of People of Color—to instead strengthen white nationalism. (p. 323)

As if misappropriating the Civil Rights Act language was not enough, the document goes on to do the same with Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech (1963). EO1 claims by eliminating "divisive concepts," "only then will we realize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream that our children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022). Legal scholar Turner (1996) addresses the appropriation of Dr. King's words as an abuse and misuse of his legacy to support colorblind ideologies. He argues that as time elapses, society tends to forget King's more radical approaches to the pursuit of equity. Therefore, advocates of colorblindness take advantage of this type of historical amnesia and "enlist King in support of their cause" (p. 129). Using Martin Luther King Jr.'s words out of context gives colorblindness an heir of legitimacy because his message is irrefutable, as if *"So, you think people* should *be judged by their skin?"* The misappropriation of Dr. King is a powerful rhetorical tool for this reason. In truth, given the context of Dr. King's activism in the Civil Rights Movement, it is unreasonable to claim that Dr. King adhered to a colorblind ideology. Donnor and Ladson-Billings (2017) agree with this assertion stating, “He [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.] was calling for equal protection under the law or the true enforcement of the 14th amendment” (p. 197), he was not professing colorblindness. By decontextualizing Dr. King’s statement, EO1 proffers a misrepresentation of Dr. King to further a colorblind agenda and cement white supremacy in Virginia policy.

The neoconservative ideology embedded in EO1 is an attempt to silence marginalized groups and retain a status quo of white supremacy through its perpetuation in neoliberal systems of schooling. The pedagogies theorized by hooks (1994, 2010), Freire (1970/2018), and Ladson-Billings (1995/2021), in contrast, center the lived experiences of people in marginalized groups with the aim of aiding the development of critical consciousness that leads to liberation from oppressive sociocultural conditions.

Liberatory Pedagogies

Paulo Freire suggests that one of society’s greatest ills is the dehumanization of marginalized groups. He regards dehumanization as not only robbing one’s humanity but also “a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (1970/2018, p. 44). Freire’s educational philosophy is at its core one of liberation. An integral aspect of achieving true liberation and thus, humanization, is an individual’s consciousness of their position in an oppressed/oppressor relationship and their agency to both reflect and change their marginalized and oppressed status. He states, “the solution of this contradiction [self-liberation in the context of oppressed status] is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom” (p. 49). Freire’s vision of liberatory pedagogy directly contrasts neoliberal efforts to educate for the purpose economic prosperity, disregarding the needs of those whom capitalism discards or deems unnecessary. For Freire, schools are a potential site of self-liberation from oppression if educators engage in critical pedagogical practices. Coined a *pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire outlines distinguishing characteristics stating:

> The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceased to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted. (1970/2018, p. 54)

Thus, in opposition to the neoliberal purposes of education, Freire defines a liberatory pedagogy that regards students as subjects, values non-majoritarian epistemologies, and ultimately humanizes those marginalized by neoliberal agendas.

Central to Freire's (1970/2018) pedagogical stance is the development of *conscientization, "*a process to acquire the necessary critical thinking tools so that students, instead of internalizing their oppression, understand how institutions of power work to deny them equality of treatment, access, and justice" (Macedo, 2018, p. 16). Conscientization, as theorized by Freire, involves both reflection and praxis. Reflection refers to the reciprocal dialogue between educator and student which unveils a critical awareness of the student's current condition of oppression. Only when the students authentically develop their own understandings does self-liberation occur. However, Freire makes clear that conscientization cannot occur by reflection alone but must be paired with praxis. Freirean praxis involves action born from the reflection state of conscientization, it is, "people's action upon their reality" (Freire, 1970/2018,

p. 106). Further, the process of conscientization is not linear, but cyclical. As a student engages in the world with new understandings, he or she will return to the site of learning with new areas in which to reflect collectively. It is through the ongoing process of conscientization that those who are oppressed in society can collectively move towards freedom from domination.

To further liberatory pedagogies and resist neoliberal and neoconservative strongholds on education, one must center non-majoritarian epistemologies and de-center whiteness. Steeped in Black feminist epistemology (Hill Collins, 1990) and Freire's work on pedagogies of freedom (1970/2018), Ladson-Billings did just that. She developed a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy with the aim of generating asset-based criteria for assessing pedagogies that humanize and liberate students of color who experience marginalization in schooling contexts. Through her grounded theory, Ladson-Billings (1995/2021) asserts that three aspects are commonly present in culturally relevant pedagogies: student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings regards Freirean critical consciousness a non-negotiable aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy, for "[t]he failure to engage in sociopolitical or critical consciousness represents an acceptance of the status quo. . . . Critical consciousness is the essence of education in a democratic society" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 6). Ladson-Billings agrees with Freire that students cannot simply develop critical consciousness by the teacher explaining the ills of society, it is developed *within* the student, through the student's own understandings and revelations. Ladson-Billings' theory of culturally relevant pedagogy centers epistemologies of communities of color and regards students as subjects through humanizing practices.

Grounded in Black feminist epistemology, hooks's (1994) "Teaching to Transgress" also describes a liberatory pedagogy. She describes *engaged pedagogy* as a sacred learning process that invests in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students, and "teach[es] in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students" (p. 13). Another salient component is the development of "critical awareness" (p. 14). She states:

> Early on, it was Freire's insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called 'conscientization' in the classroom. Translating that term to critical awareness and engagement, I entered the classrooms with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant not a passive consumer. (p. 14)

hooks describes the importance of social construction of knowledge in engaged pedagogical spaces along with notions of wholeness that include the learner's mind, body, and spirit promoting well-being. Furthermore, hooks compels educators to engage in processes of critical self-actualization, so as not to unknowingly reproduce dominator/dominated power dynamics in learning spaces. A key component to what hooks describes as "critical awareness" is *critical thinking.* Highlighting education as a democratic project hooks (2010) states:

> Now more than ever before in our nation, we need educators to make schools places where the conditions for democratic consciousness can be established and flourish. Educational systems have been the primary place in our nations where free speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions are valued in theory and practice. (p. 16)

According to hooks, school spaces that engage in critical thinking must center democratic ideals and resist oppressive forces. When mired in dominator culture, students struggle to embrace new ways of thinking and knowing (hooks, 2010). Therefore, critical thinking is a vehicle for the conscientization described by Freire, because conscientization cannot be achieved by being "told," but by the self-actualization that occurs when one understands within themselves.

Ironically, the discourse analysis of EO1 also revealed an alignment with liberatory and humanizing pedagogies. The statement, “We must enable our students to take risks, to think differently, to imagine, and to see conversations regarding art, science, and history as a place where they have a voice” (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022) are reminiscent critical race counterstories (Yosso, 2002) and Freirean praxis (1970/2018). Bringing history to the present as a “place where they have a voice” (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022) aligns with Giroux (2020) when he states, “the critical sense is inextricably rooted in the historical sense . . . the call to ignore history represents an assault on thinking itself” (p. 21). Several times, the author uses the phrase “think for themselves” (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022) which connotes critical thinking (hooks, 2010) and aligns with the philosophies of critical race curricula (Yosso, 2002). The goals of education, as described by EO1, align with humanizing and critical pedagogies, yet these are the very pedagogies EO1 bans from classrooms.

Tools of Resistance

Pedagogies such as social justice education (Borrero et al., 2018; Hackman, 2005; Styslinger et al., 2019), ethnic studies (Chapman et al., 2020; Nojan, 2020; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015), community youth programs (Sulé et al., 2021), and critical citizenship education (Cho, 2018; Johnson & Morris, 2010) highlight critical consciousness development as a central tool of resistance to divide and conquer efforts. These pedagogies, that also align with the theories of Freire (1970/2018), Ladson-Billings (1995/2021), and hooks (1994, 2010) empower students’ development of agency and unite communities through social action.

Critical consciousness is a gateway to agency for marginalized students. Nojan (2020) states, “ethnic studies . . . pedagogy centers students’ experiences with inequality and encourages youth to use their voices to speak out against societal issues and how it shapes their lived experiences” (p. 14). This form of agency resists divide and conquer tactics “because as learners challenge individual and system forms of injustice, they also learn how to be active and engaged citizens” (Styslinger et al., 2019, p. 9) as opposed to accepting unjust marginalization. The aforementioned pedagogies all define critical consciousness through the lens of Freirean praxis, a cycle of reflection and action; defining *action* as collective action against oppression. This includes unifying with the community outside of the classroom through advocacy, organizing, and activism (Nojan, 2020); counter-storytelling in affinity groups (Sulé et al., 2021); and utilizing community resources to build capacities for future advocacy and action (Nojan, 2020). When students engage in the action aspect of critical consciousness praxis, they are resisting division and mobilizing a spirit of solidarity within the community.

From an empirical perspective, liberatory pedagogies that develop critical consciousness “can alter the developmental trajectories of marginalized youth (ages 12-22) who disproportionately experience oppressive social structures . . . it can also alter the communities in which those youth live” (Diemer et al., 2016, p. 218). Diemer et al. found that youth who develop critical consciousness experience increased mental health, greater academic achievement, more representation in higher education, and successful career development. Centering ethno-racially diverse student identities through ethnic studies is tied to increased student attendance and improved academic performance (Chapman et al., 2020) as well as “social awareness, critical citizenship, literacies, and leadership that catalyze social change and transformation (Nojan, 2020, p. 26).

The implications of widespread implementation of liberatory pedagogies that develop critical consciousness have the potential to develop collective empathy and solidarity. As evidenced in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of George Floyd’s murder, when people develop authentic critical consciousness regarding systemic racism and oppression, unified action follows. Predictably, neoliberal and neoconservative backlash in the form of divide and conquer policy will also occur. Thus, students who are marginalized by ideological hegemony, white supremacy, and colorblindness must be given tools of resistance through liberatory pedagogies.

This manuscript critically analyzes EO1, unveiling divide and conquer tactics of ideological hegemony, white supremacy, and colorblind racism which marginalizes communities of color. It then highlights a vision of liberatory pedagogies through the theories of Ladson-Billings, hooks, and Freire and describes how students can counter divide and conquer tactics through the development of critical consciousness which leads to agency, collective action, and ultimately empathy and solidarity.

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Manuscript Two

The Lion Becomes a Historian: The Liberatory Pedagogy of Alysha Butler

Until the lion becomes a historian, the hunter will always be the hero.
African Proverb and Ms. Butler's Classroom Motto

The concept of *liberatory pedagogy* often connotes the work of Freire (1970/2018) and describes learning spaces in which students develop understandings about themselves, society, and freedom. In Black feminisms, it is used as a descriptor for the unique practices of Black women pedagogues that support growth and identity development in students (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021; Perlow et al., 2018). The literature focused on defining and theorizing liberatory pedagogy is plentiful. However, studies of praxis—how theory informs practice—are much scarcer and left me wondering, *what does liberatory pedagogy look like in the K-12 classrooms?* This portrait provides the reader a metaphorical "seat in the classroom" of a secondary social studies educator who excels in liberatory pedagogical praxis.

The Pedagogue

I was introduced to Ms. Butler's pedagogy through her own published writing. I was in preparation mode for a course titled, "Pedagogical and Curricular Principles in PK-8 Social Studies" and I came across her published article, "Why My Students Weren't Surprised on January 6th." Her evocative title captured my attention immediately, I thought, *I'd like to know why your students weren't surprised! Do tell!* Her concise, three-page essay unabashedly asserted the necessity of centering Black history in social studies curriculum. When I reached the section in which she described her pedagogical choices, I was overwhelmed with inspired emotion. She wrote:

> Even though it is not a requirement in my curriculum, over the course of my 20-year teaching career, I have taught my students about events like Louisiana's 1873 Colfax

> Massacre, when the Ku Klux Klan refused to acknowledge a local Republican election victory, which had been delivered largely by the votes of newly freedmen. The Klan and white paramilitary groups murdered some 60 to 150 members of a Black state militia who had been defending the local courthouse and the Grant Parish regional government. I have taught my students about North Carolina's 1898 Wilmington coup, the only instance in U.S. history where a legitimate government was overthrown by a white-supremacist revolt. In the past, I have taught my students about Florida's 1920 Ocoee massacre that took place when a Black man had the audacity to exercise his 15th Amendment right to vote, for which a white mob forced his entire town to pay the price in bloodshed. In each of these cases, the local police either stood by and did nothing or joined with the white rioters. This is the America my forefathers inherited. This is the America in which my forefathers came of age. This is the America I make sure to also teach my students so that they not only take the threat of white supremacists seriously but also exercise their right to vote in order to change the laws that enable that threat. Perhaps if the public and members of law enforcement had learned about these events in social studies classes, white Americans would not be shaking their heads in disbelief and struggling to interpret the events we just experienced. I am not suggesting this be the only part of America's history that is taught. I am simply insisting that this history can no longer be left out of our textbooks or curriculum (Butler-Arnold, 2021, pp. 8–9).

I remember exactly where I was when I read these words for the first time. I was sitting in the dining commons surrounded by books, various plates of food, and several half-enjoyed beverages (evidence of my working lunch). Ms. Butler's words brought me to a screeching halt, my five-lane highway planning brain suddenly a one-lane road at a stop sign. *This is an educator*

I have to know. Embracing my one-lane road mind, I began an online search to find some form of contact information for Ms. Butler. I came across media articles describing how she had won national awards for her social studies pedagogy, I found videos of her students cleaning up a Black cemetery near her school, and then I found her Twitter account. On August 27, 2021 I sent the following "fangirl" message via Twitter, "Hi Alysha! I'm a huge fan of your work, I am in awe of your prowess as a SS teacher. I am a lecturer in Education at Roanoke College. I'm currently teaching a [SS methods] course and I'm thinking you'd be an amazing guest speaker for our course/ed department. Do you do speaking engagements?" (Kaerwer, personal communication, 2021). To my delight, Ms. Butler replied. Since that time, we have worked together professionally and developed a genuine friendship. She and her pedagogy are the subjects of this ethnographic *portrait* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Subjectivity Statement: Alysha

As a scholar, I identify as a Black feminist truth seeker who wishes to uncover, learn, and share the untold and unheard stories of Black people in America. On my maternal side, I am the great, great, great grandchild of formerly enslaved people in the American South whose descendants to this day still bear the name and share the DNA of the white Alabama family who enslaved them in the 19th century. I am the great granddaughter of the 1950s Georgia sharecroppers who withstood repeated threats and acts of violence from the Klan. On my paternal side, I am the great grandchild of Bahamian immigrants who came to this country and worked as brick layers in Miami in the 1920s whose son proudly served as a World War II veteran but was denied the benefits of the GI Bill after the war and was forced to watch his wife work the majority of her life as a housekeeper because of the little to no economic opportunities afforded to Black women in the 1940s Jim Crow Florida. I am the daughter of parents who were among the first to integrate their local high schools, were the first in their immediate family to graduate from institutions of higher learning, and whose efforts eventually earned them positions in middle class society.

When describing my beliefs and approach to teaching, these facts and descriptions of my family history have shaped my pedagogical perspective and approach more than any degree or certificate I have earned over my twenty-four-year teaching career. My goal is to ensure that their stories and the stories of so many Black people in America who have like them contributed to the character, success, and prosperity of this country be told in our classrooms. I would like to think that I walk in the tradition and attempt to continue the work of Black American educators who came before me and saw education as a form of resistance that could empower Black people against systems of oppression.

Subjectivity Statement: Karin

My primary role in this work is a narrative portraitist/writer, meaning all data is developed and interpreted through me, the research instrument:

> In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choice of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative. Voice is the research instrument, echoing the *self* of the portraitist—her eyes, her ears, her insights, her style, her aesthetic. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85)

Thus, salient aspects of my identity should be divulged so that the reader can experience this portrait in all its complexity and nuance. Professionally, I am a social foundations of education scholar and pre-service teacher educator with a background in public education. I have spent a total of 15 years teaching in these roles, four and eleven respectively. I am a proud member of the American Educational Studies Association (AESA), an organization that challenges me and keeps me intellectually engaged in varying perspectives about education and society. While I spent my whole career teaching in Title I schools, they were situated in rural contexts, thus what I know about urban schools I learned from reading and supervising student teachers in a smaller urban setting. I am also a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend. I am of European descent; my grandmother immigrated to the United States from Germany and the rest of my ancestors are U.S. born. My race is classified as white; however, my scholarship troubles the unquestioning acceptance of *whiteness*.

As a scholar, I identify as anti-racist, critical theorist, and feminist. This means I am first, and foremost, responsible for examining how the race I was born into afforded me opportunities, privileges, and unearned favor in U.S. society.[1] I reject my cultural socialization into the supremacy of whiteness concurrently acknowledging ways this socialization unconsciously (and unwantedly) creeps into my day-to-day interactions and relationships with people who do not share my race. I steep myself in the work of Black feminists and womanists and position them as my teachers. As a form of resistance to white supremacy present in scholarship, my work elevates the epistemologies of women of color, anti-racist, and anti-colonial feminists, de-centering commonly referenced Eurocentric epistemological foundations that are not explicitly anti-racist.

I hold several beliefs and opinions that are directly related to this study. First, I believe Black history is not a "separate" or "alternative" history, but an integral through line of truth in our society. As a pre-service teacher educator, I infuse criticality into the curricula to prepare future teachers to enter classrooms as critical pedagogues. Next, I believe the United States is failing to serve public school children equitably. There are many disparities between schools whose populations are mostly white and those whose populations are mostly students of color (Kaerwer & Pritchett, 2023). I believe *every* citizen needs to critically examine systems, such as education, and identify ways these systems support the success of few to the detriment of everyone else. Finally, I am a native of the DC Metropolitan area attending high school in the suburbs of D.C. Thus, my initial perceptions of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the site of research, come from news reports, comparative reports of urban and suburban schools in the area, the narratives of my family and friends regarding the city, and what I experienced on my sporadic trips downtown throughout my childhood.

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[1] A critical examination of how I have benefitted from whiteness is attended to in my third manuscript; therefore, in order to avoid repetition, I am intentionally succinct in this particular discussion of whiteness.

As the reader experiences this portrait, I position the words of Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) as central:

> The portraitist's voice, then, is everywhere—overarching and undergirding the text, framing the piece, naming the metaphors, and echoing through the central themes. But her voice is also a premeditated one, restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled. Her voice never overshadows the actors' voices (though it sometimes is heard in duet, in harmony, and counterpoint). The actors sing the solo lines, the portraitist supporting their efforts at articulation, insight, and expressiveness. (p. 85).

May it be so in this portrait.

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought and Epistemology

Black feminist epistemology, as described by Hill Collins (2000), honors the knowledge generation of Black women as a heterogeneous collective. "Epistemological choices about whom to trust, what to believe, and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead these concerns tap the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail" (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 252). Black feminist epistemologies question *whose* knowledge is valued in empirical research. Because white, middle/upper-class males dominated and built the foundation of higher education, Eurocentric epistemology is often accepted as the academic standard of knowledge. However, if research aims to challenge hegemony, alternative epistemology is needed. Audre Lorde states, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1984, p. 112). Rather than relying on the "master's tools"—exclusive, Eurocentric epistemologies—that have legitimized domination, we center Black feminist epistemology in order to *dismantle* the hegemonic discourse presiding over public schooling. hooks (1984) emphasizes the positionality of Black women as uniquely equipped to challenge hegemony:

> It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony. (p. 15)

Black women scholars such as Ladson-Billings and Evans-Winters have applied Black feminism directly to qualitative inquiry in education in order to generate knowledge that concurrently challenges Eurocentric hegemonic constraints on what counts as "truth." Evans-Winters (2019) states:

> It is imperative that those committed to social and racial justice paradigms give attention to how non-White women make sense of contemporary and historical patterns. Moreover, it is equally important for us to consider the ways in which Black women seek to question, understand, and challenge, via the formal inquiry process, contemporary social

> injustice, like the imposition of deficit-thinking, white supremacy, and racialized gender bias in society as well as the research process itself (p. 15).

Thus, we examine education through theoretical perspectives and frameworks of Black feminists and womanists[2] in order to investigate the intersectional oppressions children experience in K-12 contexts as well as posit which pedagogies liberate in the face of societal oppression.

Intersectionality

A particularly salient frame constructed by Black feminists is Intersectionality Theory. The theory was originated by Crenshaw (1991) in a foundational work that described "how Black women experienced workplace racial and gender discrimination due to multiple intersecting identities" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 3). The theory examines the ways that power and oppression influence people differently depending on their intersections of race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, gender, socio-economic means, and other identities. Black feminists have been collectively constructing the theory over many years through rigorous critique, defining and redefining, and examining nuance. Nash (2018) writes in-depth about the history of intersectionality theory and the many tensions associated with its use outside of Black feminisms. She expresses:

> I treat the word "black" in front of "feminism" not as a marker of identity but as a political category, and I understand a "black feminist" approach to be one that centers analyses of racialized sexisms and homophobia, and that foregrounds black women as intellectual producers, as creative agents, as political subjects, and as "freedom dreamers" even as the content and contours of those dreams vary (p. 5).

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[2] Womanism is a type of Black feminism coined by Alice Walker that focuses specifically on Black women's contributions and humanity.

We align with Nash's vision of a future of intersectionality that is concerned with centering the intellectual labor of Black women in an act of solidarity in women's studies to resist hegemonic oppression in all its forms.

Asset-Based Research

Eurocentric epistemology often frames the "other" from a deficit lens. This results in qualitative inquiry that leads to research questions that aim to uncover "what is wrong" with students instead of examining the intersecting oppressions they face due to discrimination which is embedded in school structures. In describing portraiture, the methodology we utilize and describe later in this paper, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) address the contrast of asset-focused research and typical social science research stating:

> We [do not] suggest that the portraitist focus only on good things, look only on the bright side, or give a positive spin to every experience. Rather we mean an approach to inquiry that resists the more typical social science preoccupation with documenting pathology and suggesting remedies. (p. 141)

Ladson-Billings also discussed this tension stating, "Instead of scratching my head and joining the chorus of voices that asked what was wrong with Black children, I dared to ask, 'what is right with Black students and what happens in classrooms where teachers, parents, and students get it right?'" (1995/2021, p. 2). Inspired by Ladson-Billings' and Lawrence-Lightfoot's approach to research, this qualitative inquiry is unapologetically asset-focused. Thus, the literature and theory chosen to frame this work resists deficit foci and centers pedagogies that liberate.

Liberatory Pedagogy

Perhaps the best-known educational philosopher and writer about liberatory pedagogies is Paulo Freire—in fact, one can pick up his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* at their local

Barnes & Noble rather than having to order it from a specialty academic website. “Freire suggests that one of society’s greatest ills is the dehumanization of marginalized groups. He regards dehumanization as not only the stealing of one’s humanity but also “a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (1970/2018, p. 44)” (Kaerwer, 2024, p. 252). Freire (1970/2018) describes humanizing classroom spaces of freedom in which educators support students in their development of *critical consciousness*—the awareness and interrogation of structures of oppression and domination in society. In his description he emphasizes the notion of *praxis* which tethers reflection and action. In the reflection stage, students develop critical consciousness through both individual study and collective thought. In the action stage, students embrace agency and apply their understandings through avenues such as activism and solidarity within the community. For Freire, the goal of education is for students to develop critical consciousness and engage in praxis so that they can reclaim the humanity that dominators of society have rendered null. He suggests that when students reclaim their humanity through this pedagogy, they are able to liberate themselves from oppressive societal structures.

Inspired by the work of Freire, Black feminist theorist bell hooks (1994) describes a liberatory pedagogy grounded in Black feminist epistemology. Coined *engaged pedagogy,* hooks theorizes that critical consciousness emerges from learning spaces grounded in *care*. The *care* hooks describes fosters intellectual and spiritual development in her students. From an early age, she embraced the concept of *theory* as “making sense out of what was happening . . . and learned [from reflection and analysis] that theory could be a healing place” (p. 61). Linking to Freire, hooks states, “when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice” (p. 61). Thus, hooks cultivates classrooms of liberation both through her emphasis on *care* and Freirean praxis.

Combined, Freire (1970/2018) and hooks (1994) are foundational scholars in the area of liberatory pedagogies.

The theories of hooks and Freire undergird the work of Ladson-Billings who operationalized the liberatory practices through her theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Her theory suggests that pedagogy that liberates rests in three criteria: student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Ladson-Billings (1995/2021) directly cites Hill Collins's (2000) four dimensions of Black feminist thought as her undergirding epistemology for developing this theory, which is further elucidated in Ladson-Billings' criteria for culturally relevant classrooms. She connects "concrete experiences as a criterion of meaning" to her criteria of community and cultural infusion into pedagogy and "the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims" as a basis for her methodology which involved co-creation of knowledge with teachers named by the community as "excellent" pedagogues. The "ethic of caring" is central to culturally relevant pedagogy, as it exemplifies the *why* of the theory. Ladson-Billings (1995/2021) states:

> [culturally relevant teachers'] common thread of caring was their concern for the implications their work had on their students' lives, the welfare of the community, and unjust social arrangements. Thus, rather than the idiosyncratic caring for individual students (for whom they did seem to care), the teachers spoke of the import of their work for preparing the students for confronting inequitable and undemocratic social structures. (p. 24)

Finally, she addresses "the ethic of personal accountability" in order to assert the importance of ideological and/or value positions of pedagogues who engage in culturally relevant pedagogy.

These four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology are woven into the fabric of Ladson-Billings' theory.

Current discussions of liberatory pedagogies are discussed in an edited collection by Black women scholars titled *Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies* (2018). In the book, the authors state, "It is disheartening, to say the least, that white folks are viewed as the educational 'experts' when their methods have been gravely inadequate for and damaging to Black people and other people of color" (p. 5). Further undergirding this study is a body of literature that focuses on the various perspectives of Black women educators both historic and present day (Bass, 2012; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005, 2009; Brown et al., 2018; Dixson, 2003; James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2023). Given my positionality as a woman of European descent as the portraitist, I rely on this body of literature for analysis as well as Alysha's verification of the findings.

Methodology

Investigating liberatory pedagogy requires a theoretical framework and methodology that prioritizes honoring the humanness of the subject. Evans-Winters (2018) states, "I believe it is through stories, personal reflections, and a shared consciousness with marginalized communities that researchers who embrace a qualitative tradition are able to appreciate individuals and a group's full humanity" (p. 9). Portraiture is a methodology created by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot that blends the aesthetics of narrative prose and rigorous social science research. Akin to educational ethnography, portraiture methods illuminate the inherent humanness of the subject through narrative accounts of fieldwork. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state, "These 'humanistic' dimensions must always be in close communication with rigorous and systematic attention to the details of social reality and human experience" (p. 8).

Aligned with Black feminist thought and epistemology, portraiture peers through asset-focused lenses, seeking to find “goodness” within the fieldwork. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis argue against traditional deficit-laden inquiry when researching marginalized communities stating, “the locus of blame tends to rest on the shoulders of those most victimized and least powerful in defining their identity or shaping their fate” (p. 9). In contrast:

> Portraiture resists this tradition-laden effort to document failure. It is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections. The researcher who asks first ‘what is good here?’ is likely to absorb a very different reality than the one who is on a mission to discover the sources of failure. (p. 9)

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis align with Evans-Winters (2018) who states, “I believe that all scholarly endeavors, including research and teaching, should be culturally affirming and forthcoming as far as socio-political intent” (p. 9). Given its narrative style, portraiture is an inclusive methodology, accessible to a variety of readers. The authors state:

> With its focus on narrative, with its use of metaphor and symbol, portraiture intends to address wider, more eclectic audiences. The attempt is to move beyond academy’s inner circle, to speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive, and to develop texts that will seduce the readers into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them. Portraitists write to inform and inspire readers. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 10)

Portraiture, then, is an apt approach to engaging in intersectional qualitative research. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) state, “Decolonial and intersectional methodologies call for multiple representations of voice in our research performances” (p. 169). The narrative prose embedded in portraiture frees the writer to embrace her authentic voice and speak to a variety of readers.

Portraiture further aligns with Black feminist thought by emphasizing the lived experience and narrative stories of Black women. Evans-Winters (2018) outlines what qualitative inquiry infused with Black feminist thought ought to embody:

> It is argued that a researcher's embracement of a Black feminist consciousness shapes: (1) musings about knowledge and knowing, (2) how one interacts with participants throughout the research process, (3) one's understanding of the context where the study takes place, (4) the body of literature reviewed, and (5) interpretation and analysis of data. (p. 15)

Evans-Winters's criteria are embedded throughout this study from the epistemological framing to the many decisions, from minute to substantial, made throughout the research process.

As previously discussed, the study is grounded in Black feminist epistemology and Black women's theories of liberatory pedagogy. Early on, we (the authors) made the decision to work collaboratively as co-investigators because, as a researcher in a white-body, I (Karin) am cautious about unconsciously researching through a "white gaze" (Wright, 2023; Morrison, 1992). Thus, Karin was positioned as portraitist and Alysha as subject; both investigators infusing their voices into the piece with a reliance on Alysha's confirmations that data and analysis were accurate and conveyed her essence. Common phrases I used during collaborations included, "did I get that right?" "help me understand," "does this feel right to you?" Each phase of research was initiated by Karin and scrutinized and confirmed by Alysha. It was decided from the beginning of the project that Karin would be the main writer; however, given the data/lived experiences of Alysha are central, that she would be co-author and investigator and retain ownership of her story. In these ways, we honored Evans-Winters's criteria for qualitative research aiming to engage in inquiry equitably.

We also found it imperative to embrace our differences and examine them as they arose throughout our collaboration heeding Lorde's warning that, "Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" (p. 117). It is important to note the ongoing tensions of the "white gaze" in qualitative research (Wright, 2023)—even when the researcher rejects white supremacist epistemologies—and approach this work with transparency and openness to critique.

Research Methods

Ethics. One of the most salient ethical considerations for this study is the relationship between researcher and subject. Typically, the researcher collects data and then analyzes, interprets, and discusses findings after concluding interactions with the subject. However, in this study, we engaged in a collaborative investigation to align with Black feminist epistemology. Perlow et al. (2018) contend, "because much of the pedagogical literature tends to center whiteness and/or maleness, the subjugated knowledge of Black women educators who have done and are currently doing important work remains largely invisible" (p. 2). Hence, maintaining traditional researcher and subject roles raises ethical concerns regarding ownership, appropriation, and invisibility. Several decisions were made to address these concerns. Alysha's pedagogical practice is her life's work; thus, it was imperative to honor her desire to be named and receive credit. When proposing the study to the IRB and DCPS's research board, we requested explicitly for Alysha and her school to be named, for which we were ultimately granted permission. Guenther (2009) speaks to this stating:

> Confidentiality can undermine commitments to transformative justice because secrecy often protects dominant interests and systems of subjugation even as it purports to protect

> individuals from exploitation. Confidentiality can be disempowering and silencing, and can contribute to the maintenance of structures of inequality. (p. 414)

Black feminist thought aligns with Guenther's position, specifically in discussing the invisibility and appropriated labor of Black women in academia, "Because Black women are doing critical work that does not fit neatly with, and often challenges, white male hegemony, our 'success' not only often goes unrecognized, but these efforts are sometimes even punished." (Perlow et al., 2018, p. 8).

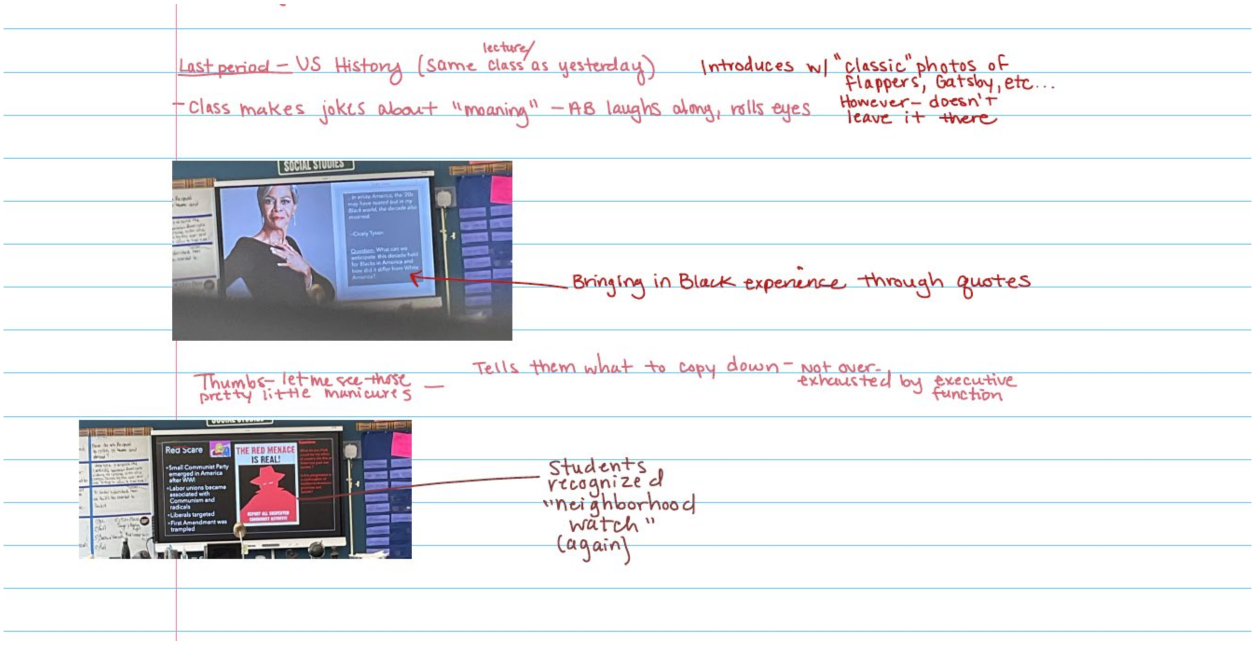
Another ethical consideration regarding the naming of the subject and context was the agency of Ms. Butler's students. Although the research was performed during "normal instructional practice" and the students were not considered participants in the study, they were indirectly involved because of their interactions with Ms. Butler. To protect their anonymity, I sat behind them which aided in disassociating their comments and questions with their individual identities. If a particular interaction with a student is mentioned, the student is given a pseudonym and any identifying details are omitted. Lastly, Ms. Butler sent home a study information sheet that offered the families of her students the ability to "opt-out" of the study, stating that families had the right to request that I not include any of their student's interactions in my notes or published study. With the blessing of DCPS and our commitment to honor contingencies regarding students, Alysha, McKinley Technology High School (MTHS), and DCPS are named in the study.

Observation. In order to craft a portrait of Ms. Butler, it was integral that I spend time in her classroom and experience her pedagogy. Thus, I observed her for a total of 80 hours over two non-consecutive school weeks. The school runs according to a block schedule; on "a" days she teaches two periods of Advanced Placement African American Studies (APAAS) and two periods of U.S. history and on “b” days she teaches three periods of U.S. history. Eight of the days were in a typical classroom format and two were in field trip contexts. Her students were primarily juniors and seniors. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) insist that the portraitist remain conscientious and self-aware about her presence in the context of the portrait. They suggest a middle ground between “fly on the wall” and “active participant” stating “the portraitist must realize a research view that is sufficiently distanced to encompass the various sources of data, the broader physical and ideological landscape, and the developing vision of the whole” (p. 69). For our study, it was particularly important that I not disturb “normal educational practice” for the students in Ms. Butler’s class. Ms. Butler’s classroom is set up in front-facing rows with two students per table. I positioned myself at an empty table in the last row on the left side. Each morning upon arriving I unloaded my iPad and stylus, lunch, water bottle, and coffee mug onto the table as if I was the newest student in Ms. Butler’s class. On the first day of observation, Ms. Butler introduced me to her class, “this is Ms. K she’s here from Roanoke College, so if you have questions about college, she’d be a great person to ask! Ms. K go ahead and introduce yourself!” Each new period that day, I arose from my seat and said hello while the students turned sideways in their seats to acknowledge me, I explained that I was also a teacher and I was there to learn from Ms. Butler alongside them. From that point on, I was largely invisible—apart from polite student greetings at the start of each class period as they trickled in and found their seats.

Classroom Observations. Alysha teaches in an interactive lecture format. She is anchored in front with her slide presentation, meandering around the room as she speaks, pausing occasionally near a student to engage them in questions or comments. My *perch* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) in the back afforded me a 180-degree view of the learning environment, the backs of students' heads a parted curtain spotlighting Ms. Butler. I recorded fieldnotes in my iPad with the Notability application— software that replicates a notebook but has infinite color selections, the ability to insert photos, copy and paste functions, and many more helpful features. This software enabled me to capture color coded, handwritten notes and insert photos throughout the lessons that I could further label and annotate.

Figure 1

Example of Fieldnotes



Last period – US History (same lecture/ class as yesterday)

Introduces w/ "classic" photos of flappers, Gatsby, etc...

- Class makes jokes about "moaning" – AB laughs along, rolls eyes

However – doesn't leave it there

Bringing in Black experience through quotes

Thumbs – let me see those pretty little manicures –

Tells them what to copy down – Not over-exhausted by executive function

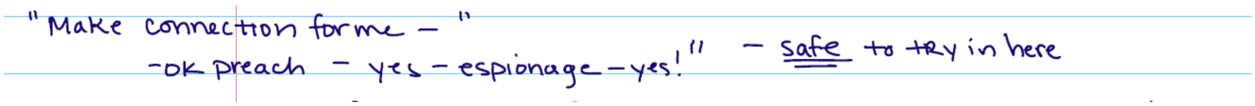
Students recognized "neighborhood watch" (again)

SOCIAL STUDIES
Red Scare
•Small Communist Party emerged in America after WWI
•Labor unions became associated with Communism and radicals
•Liberals targeted
•First Amendment was trampled
THE RED MENACE IS REAL!

I recorded classic lecture notes paying particular attention to Alysha's pedagogical methods such as analogies, storytelling, and use of probing questions. I wrote sidebars that included student reactions, anonymous quotes and murmurings audible around the room throughout the lesson, salient interactions between Ms. Butler and her students, and any thoughts or questions I wanted to address in between class periods. Lastly, I recorded initial interpretations of my observations through labeling; for example, noting that Alysha creates a safe classroom environment when a student attempted to answer her question.

Figure 2

Example of Labeling



"Make connection for me – "
-ok preach – yes – espionage – yes!" – safe to try in here

Note. The phrase on the right is an example of my initial interpretations during data collection.

Experiential Learning Observations. I was able to shadow Alysha as she led her AP African American Studies class on two field trips. In these contexts, I was considered a "field trip volunteer" because I had performed a background check and filled out the proper paperwork ahead of time. Assisting Alysha with these field trips was mutually beneficial; I was able to observe her in these contexts while also providing an extra set of hands to keep the students safe and organized. I relied on post-observation notes for these experiences given the speed and intensity of school field trips; keeping short jottings in my phone when I heard notable quotes or a moment seemed significant. When I returned to my computer, I typed as much as I could remember in a Word document, with particular emphasis on my jottings.

Interviews. The humanistic focus in portraiture underscores the importance of relationships within the research context.

> It is through relationships between the portraitist and the actors that access is sought and given, connections made, contracts of reciprocity and responsibility (both formal and informal) developed, trust built, intimacy negotiated, data collected, and knowledge constructed. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135)

Alysha and I were acquainted through her scholarship and a subsequent social media interaction and our friendship has developed naturally over the past few years. When we began the study, our conversations about ethics, desires, hopes, and possibilities were comfortable and honest. Further, as we engaged in interviews, conversation flowed freely touching on personal, professional, and academic topics. For reader clarity, we sort our many conversations into two categories: informal interviews and formal interviews. When we were in each other's presence, there were not many moments of silence; in fact, I often put forth effort to not start chatting when Alysha was trying to prepare for her next class period or organize her thoughts before a meeting. We had discussions in the car on the way home from school and walking to public transportation. During the second week of observation, we set aside time to have dinner together at Alysha's favorite restaurant. There were countless other occasions when conversation flowed. Many of the circumstances were natural, and taking out my phone or iPad to make jottings would have been inappropriate. After our conversations, if we agreed portions should be included in the study, I wrote overviews and excerpts of these informal interviews in fieldnotes and the impressionistic record.

We had three formal interviews, one was in person and two were recorded on zoom. The first interview took place during a planning period; I had noticed a pattern in her behavior that seemed like "urgency" and wanted to hear her reflections on that potential emergent theme. The interviews that followed were several weeks after the observation period, interwoven with data analysis and emergent theme development. During our first interview, I addressed several pedagogical questions that arose as I observed including: what goes on in your mind when a student seems to disengage with the lesson? How do you juggle the varying needs of your students and their personal lives with your urgency to deliver content? Tell me more about why you tell students when it is important to write a fact or statement down? The conversation then moved to more personal questions about Alysha's perception of herself, such as: what do you think about yourself as an educator? Given your focus on African American studies, how do you think about and what is your experience with students of other races in these courses? I'm noticing a parallel to some Black feminist scholarship I've read about *other mothering* in Black women's pedagogy, do you agree? Does that sound right to you? These interviews were then transcribed into a Word document for subsequent analysis.

Iterative Collection and Analysis. Analysis in portraiture is not a linear process; data are pondered in situ, at the end of the day, and revisited on and off for months. While in the field, the portraitist is observant and active in capturing the scene. After the data collection, she reflects about her experiences through a document referred to as an "impressionistic record." The impressionistic record holds early ponderings about themes, various memos, and plans for upcoming observations and interactions with the subject (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and continues throughout the research process.

> This ongoing dialectic—between data gathering and reflection, between description and analysis—begins in the very early stages of fieldwork (recording the researcher's acclimation to the setting) and lasts throughout the entire research process. The emergent themes grow out of data gathering and synthesis, accompanied by generative reflection and interpretive insights. (p. 188)

As a complement to the ongoing reflection within the impressionistic record, we engaged in more traditional coding and analysis several weeks post-observation. I returned to my fieldnotes and engaged in open coding as described by Emerson et al. (2011). The authors explain open coding stating, "the ethnographer begins sift through and categorize small segments of the fieldnote record by writing words and phrases that identify and name specific analytic dimensions and categories" (p. 175). Most of the coding of the fieldwork data could be described as *descriptive* or *holistic* codes. These were then grouped into *pattern codes* and sorted into a *matrix display* (Miles et al., 2014). Examples of the first round of *pattern codes* were asset-framing, critical pedagogy, high-interest content connections, urgency, and student success among many others. At this point, I returned to my impressionistic record and entered additional insights into the table that aided the organization of these categories into themes. I then shared all of this work with Alysha for her scrutinization and additional insights. Alysha offered suggestions for adjustments and validated the emergent themes. Following her feedback, I followed the same process with each interview transcript, adding descriptive codes to the table and tinkering with pattern codes which led to more nuanced emergent themes. Again, Alysha provided insight into the data analysis process and confirmed the themes. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) speak to the tension of attempting to organize data yet retain its inherent human messiness. They state, “The portraitist does not try to resolve this tension by choosing one side or the other. Rather she works to maintain the tension and experience the dialectic between these two approaches to thematic development” (p. 192). Therefore, the impressionistic record in its reflective, unorganized state was in conversation with orderly table of codes and categories throughout the analytic process. An example of this conversation is the topic of “urgency.” Early on in the impressionistic record, I discussed urgency as an emerging theme; yet, after sorting and organizing data, I realized I needed to return to the idea with Alysha. Together, we came to find that the sense of urgency was a small factor of a larger theme rather than a theme in and of itself. The blend of iterative data collection and analysis, ongoing memos and impressions, and continual conversation between investigators coalesced into the presentation of findings in the portrait.

Reliability and Credibility of the Study. As indicated by Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022), when researching alongside those who have been marginalized, it is integral that the primary writer is transparent about personal reflection, potential bias and deficit-framing, and diligently avoids speaking “for” others. They state, “We agree with hooks (1990), who articulated that researchers who work with marginalized populations have a responsibility to use epistemological, theoretical, and methodological frameworks that do not distort the lives of participants and contribute to deficit narratives” (p. 156). The epistemology, theoretical framework, methodology, and methods are all anchored in humanization (Freire, 1970/2018) and Black feminist thought (Evans-Winters, 2018; Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2021) in order to spotlight Alysha’s lived experiences as a Black woman educator in U.S. society. As suggested by Esposito and Evans-Winters, we also heeded the advice of Miles and colleagues (2014) by evaluating the reliability and credibility of the study alongside their “standards for the quality of conclusions” checklist (pp. 310–315) which includes lists of criteria that help the researcher determine “whether the finally emerging findings are *good”* (p. 310). For example, regarding reliability the authors state, “The researcher’s role and status within the site have been explicitly described . . . [and] Data were collected across the full range of appropriate settings, tomes, respondents, and so on, as suggested by the research questions” (p. 312). Assessing our study with these criteria, as applicable, helped confirm our research design choices were sound.

Anticipatory Schema

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe portraiture as a departure from traditional empirical quantitative research by their insistence that the investigator(s) resist entering the field with predetermined hypotheses, instead entering with “a clear intellectual framework and guiding research questions. . . only [as] starting points” (p. 186). The experiences, academic training, knowledge base, and autobiographical accounts are the schema researchers bring into the study. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis suggest the investigator(s) make clear their prior conceptions regarding the study so that the reader can better understand the "research instrument," i.e. the researcher(s).

Karin

Before this study was designed, I was pondering the foundational research question, *what does liberatory pedagogy look like in practice?* Scholars such as Ladson-Billings, Freire, and hooks write extensively about the power of this pedagogy and describe what it looks like, but I wanted to experience it firsthand. Given my experiences with Alysha to that point, I thought of her immediately as an exemplar of liberatory pedagogy. In my early memos, I state, "I know Alysha is exemplary, and expect that I'll see liberatory pedagogy operationalized in her classroom and that her students will be engaged and excited about the content." This signifies a deep sense of asset-framing already inherent in my thoughts regarding Alysha. My intuition about Alysha's pedagogy stems from my 11-year career as an educator and four years of experience as a preservice teacher educator; my professional experiences and scholarship work in tandem to inform my judgments of effective pedagogy. I also enter the field with the foundations of anti-racist feminism, critical theory, and learning from Black feminist thought, as reflected in the impressionistic record, "I also have deep belief that liberatory pedagogy as described by Black feminist scholars and Freire/critical pedagogues is the best way to teach." This anticipatory schema reflects a commitment to "finding the good" through asset-framing while also maintaining a lens of criticality about my own positionality entering this work.

Alysha

When Karin initially approached me with the idea for her dissertation, I had no formal experience in the study of Black feminist teaching or liberatory pedagogy. However, I suspected just from the phrasing alone that my practices in many ways were aligned with the basic premise of both methods. I assumed that Karin would be looking to see how and to what extent I made the content accessible to all of my students regardless of their background and academic strengths or weaknesses. I suspected that she would be looking for evidence of me helping students find a personal connection or meaning with the content I was teaching, the establishment of a safe welcoming and inclusive learning environment where everyone feels accepted and appreciated, and incidents where the content or skills shared in class were used to help students challenge existing stereotypes or misinformation about their history and could have a positive personal impact beyond my classroom.

We entered the study with the guiding question, *what does liberatory pedagogy look like in practice?* The resulting portrait allows the reader to witness the pedagogy of Ms. Butler as an exemplar.

Portrait of Ms. Alysha Butler

A portrait is often crafted to capture the likeness of the subject at a given point in time. "Expressive content [in painting] is achieved through thoughtful attention to each aesthetic aspect [line, color, shadow, texture, delineation, placement] as well as to the relationships among them" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 29). Often, portraitists create the work in layers, building until they achieve a "likeness" both in appearance and representation of "inner life" (Maes, 2015). Maes contends that portraits are distinct from anatomical drawings or anonymous nudes because the requirement that a portrait is "recognizable" (p. 304). Likewise, in portraiture methodology:

> The aesthetic aspects of production that can contribute to the expressive content include the use of keen descriptors that delineate, like line; dissonant refrains that provide

> nuance, like shadow; and complex details that evoke the impact of color and the intricacy of texture. (p. 29)

Portraits also imply the subject's involvement in the creation of the image, "the subject consciously presents a self to be conveyed in the resulting picture." In describing her experiences having her portrait painted, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) recalls:

> [T]he translation of image was anything but literal. It was probing, layered, and interpretive . . . I also recognized that in searching for the essence, in moving beyond the surface image, the artist was both generous and tough, skeptical and receptive. I was never treated or seen as object but always as a person of strength and vulnerability, beauty and imperfection, mystery and openness. (p. 5)

In crafting Alysha's portrait, I have attempted to capture her essence through layers, non-static impressions, and non-linear description. The aim is for the reader to visualize Alysha's pedagogy and, in turn, experience her liberatory pedagogy from a "seat in her classroom." The work is crafted similar to painted portraits where the artist focuses on small details, one section at a time, and then pulls back to see the portrait develop as a whole. This portrait includes both Alysha's essence and her pedagogy; the reader can anticipate shifts similar to zooming in and out as they experience this portrait.

Alysha Butler describes herself first and foremost as a historian and intellectual with an insatiable desire to dig deeply into Black history and culture. She is also a proud educator, boasting 24 years teaching secondary social studies, 14 of which have been in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Ms. Butler has been recognized by numerous organizations for her pedagogical mastery including 2010 Miramar High School's Teacher of the Year, 2019 Gilder Lehrman Institution of American History National History Teacher of the Year (the first

Black individual to receive this honor), and the 2019 Daughters of the American Revolution Outstanding Teacher of American History for the District of Columbia, 2019 D.C Community Cornestone Awardee, and 2019 District of Columbia History Teacher of the Year. After receiving these distinctions, Alysha joined the Gilder Lehrman Board of Trustees and accepted a part-time role with GBH (an affiliate of PBS) as Senior Program Manager Inclusive Social Studies Curriculum creating content for PBS Learning Media's History and Civic Collection. She was invited to join a community of scholars in the development of the Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies course through the College Board and is coauthoring the forthcoming College Board endorsed textbook that will accompany the course.

The Context

As a native of the D.C. metropolitan area, I entered the study with suppositions about the city and school district. I had not spent many nights in downtown D.C., so for the sake of immersion I rented housing in the city. Further, I arrived by train and used public transportation rather than my own vehicle. Pointing to the privileges I experienced in the suburban neighborhood 15 miles away where I grew up, I had never used the D.C. city bus for transportation. I felt anxious about the logistics of the bus schedule, as the routes are scheduled to the minute and the buses are labeled by number and cardinal direction. I was also somewhat nervous for my safety as I was not certain of the current crime statistics, and Alysha had mentioned "be careful, crime is up" when I was planning where I would stay. My anxiety about this new experience was evident in the following memo excerpt:

> I'm relatively comfortable navigating the city having grown up in the metropolitan area, but I'm also concerned about walking around alone, especially when it's dark. My

> anxiety about using public transportation (bus system in particular) is rising—I'm reading about this online to try to ease my mind.

On the first day of field observation, I write about my experience navigating the city bus:

> After thorough research on the best way to travel to McKinley Technology High School, I found myself waiting patiently at the P6 bus stop on (what I thought was) 5th and North Capital Street. Turns out, the correct bus stop was around the corner and across the street, thus making me 10 minutes later than I wanted to arrive. The bus was rather full, and I was the only white person on the bus. The area I'm staying is gentrified, lots of white folks with Trader Joe's reusable grocery bags walking to and fro, yet none of their morning commutes seem to involve the city bus. After disembarking, I realized about 8 of the individuals on the bus were MTHS students.

As a critical theorist, I am often curious about the reasons behind the status quo. My observation regarding the white city residents not utilizing the city bus points to my curiosity about how the history of the city might lead to contemporary racial divides. After disembarking, I was relieved to be able to follow the MTHS students to the school building. As I trailed behind them, I thought to myself, *it's pretty impressive that these students navigate public transportation with such ease.* We traveled up a cement staircase and over a sizable paved hill. As I approached the building, I could not help but stop and notice the large size of the campus buildings. The high school is all brick and several stories high; the Grecian columns in front stately and reminiscent of other D.C. historic buildings.

McKinley Technology High School (MTHS) is a public school within DCPS. It is considered a "selective" high school; students must apply, interview, submit letters of recommendation, and be selected in order to attend (DCPS, 2024). There is no additional tuition and students that are not selected are able to attend their "geographically assigned" public high school or apply one of the other selective public high schools. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, the high school ranks "#5 of 21 high schools in the District of Columbia Public Schools" (U.S. News Best High Schools, 2023). Further, the site reports that 96% of students enrolled are classified as "minority," the graduation rate is greater than 99%, and the participation in Advanced Placement courses is 96%. The school has a Title I designation, indicating socio-economic disadvantage, yet these quantitative measures of achievement indicate high levels of success. According to what Alysha has learned about the history of the school, it was an all-white segregated school until 1954. After integration, white flight occurred and the school's population demographic became predominately African American and Latino/a. It was designated as a career and technical education (CTE) school, briefly shut down, then reopened as a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) focused selective high school in 2004.

After entering the building, I experienced full security and metal detectors in a high school context for the first time and was sure to capture this in my fieldnotes.

> The stately nature of the building contrasts the airport-like security entering the building. I was aware there would be metal detectors, but I didn't realize I'd be disrobing from my coat, setting all of my belongings on the conveyor belt, and getting a full-body wanding. I have never had to do this when entering a school building. It felt out of place.

The students were unfazed by the experience, diligently locking their cell phones in a wooden cubby with individual padlocks, a contraption designed specifically for that purpose. My unfamiliarity with the process slowed the line down and several students hopped over to other security officers to avoid the backup. After collecting all of my belongings I signed in with the dean of students and a security officer guided me to Alysha's classroom.

The hallways of MTHS helped me recalibrate after my rookie experience with school security. Having spent most of my life in various roles at various schools, the motivational quotes, club fliers, and classroom labels created a reassuring and familiar atmosphere. By observing the décor closely, the distinct flavor of MTHS began to emerge—the adults in this school believe in their students. Students at MTHS adhere to a dress code—they are expected to wear solid school colors—yet show their individuality through their choice of accessories and shoes. The atmosphere in the hallways is lighthearted; on a given day I overheard students chatting, laughing, and greeting one another. Students and teachers connect as they pass one another with an occasional joke or comment. I was surprised by the lack of surveillance I usually encounter in high schools; teachers seem more likely to chat with students than discipline them for being tardy or loud. The mutual trust is palpable and results in a comfortable and supportive environment.

Arrival

"Hey Ms. Karin! One second, I'm on a parent call!" This is Alysha's whispered greeting as I enter her classroom for the first time. Alysha sits at her front table—her version of a podium—listening and nodding as I shuffle past, trying not to disturb the virtual meeting in progress during the before-school hours. I grab a chair and push it into the front, left corner of the room (the only vacant area), underneath a whiteboard used to display learning outcomes, areas of focus, and essential questions for students to consider. To my right, a student teacher is stationed at a table with her iPad, we introduce ourselves in a whisper and she returns to her device, presumably working on assignments. I survey the classroom for the first time from Alysha's teaching station. To the right is a wall of windows with a view of the Washington Monument standing stately in the distance. The remaining classroom walls are covered in relics of the past with specific attention to Black Americans. Posters that incite the depth of pain and resilience experienced by Black Americans such as Rosa Parks' mugshot during the Civil Rights Movement, a drawing of an enslaved mother grasping her child on the auction block, and Sojourner Truth's somber yet poised portrait. My attention drifts back to the voices on Alysha's virtual meeting. An adult voice states, "You know . . . Dani can have her moods." Another voice, presumably the mother of Dani, retorts, "I'm sorry, what are you talking about with her moods? What does that have anything to do with this. Ms. Butler, what do you think?" Alysha replies calmly and assertively that Dani needs to focus on her academic achievement, attendance, and be more attentive in class. The mother responds with a noticeable sense of calm and relief stating, "I'd like to do what Ms. Butler said." After a few more murmurings, Alysha excuses herself from the virtual meeting explaining her class is starting soon and states, "It was a pleasure talking with you!" before she signs off.

I was intrigued by this first encounter in Alysha's classroom. I thought *how is she doing all of this at once?* After concluding her early morning parent meeting, Alysha began scurrying around taking care of several tasks at once before the bell rings and students enter sporadically. In a span of about fifteen minutes, Alysha reviews her plans, gets the student teacher and I settled, debriefs a substitute that will fill in while she is on a field trip, and greets her students warmly as they arrive. She begins class by asking students to share what they did over the weekend stating, "The person who got the most sleep last night, you go first" which makes us all chuckle. After a bit of sharing, she dives right into the lecture. I'm startled by her first sentence, "Lynching and the Black nadir, write that down!" The mood shifts—students are immediately engaged. While this moment feels abrupt to me, Alysha was picking up from where she had left off in a previous class focusing on the essential question, *what caused the heightened racial* *violence in the 20th century?* She begins talking about the "red summer" in Tulsa. Specifically, how many riots took place, how many lynchings were occurring (3 per week for 30 years!), and compares two images: the sign from NAACP "A man was lynched yesterday," and a 2020 NAACP flag that said "A man was killed by police brutality." Alysha then reads, with strength, "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay. She asks the students "which line most embodies the frustration of Black people?" and then "which line illustrates the violence of red summer?" The students discuss this among themselves, then several offer up their thoughts.

Alysha then does a "quiz." She says, "When did lynching become a federal hate crime?" She offers dates from the 1970s, 1980s, 2008, then 2022. The answer was 2022—the room was aghast! She does a teaser about this (stating she'll address it later) that how we define lynching includes police brutality and that's why so many politicians shot it down. I hear a girl state, "they don't care about us" under her breath as she contemplates the idea that lynching was not technically outlawed until 2022. Every moment in Ms. Butler's classroom is utilized, whether in group discussion, individual tasks, or moments of bonding. It is quickly evident to me that, for Alysha, time is not to be wasted. Her students must have access to this content.

Curation of Content

Alysha believes in the power of Black history and culture to empower her students both through personal and academic development. She curates the content for personal impact, scaffolds student academic skills so they can utilize the content in scholarship, and provides opportunities for cultural and experiential learning. From my seat in the classroom, I was instantly aware that time is limited and there is much to learn.

The Power of the Content. The power of the lived experiences of Black Americans is present in Ms. Butler's classroom. From my perch in the back, three of the four walls are visible, all of them curated with powerful moments of U.S. history that center the experiences of Black Americans. Among them are the mugshots of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis taken after their arrests amid the Civil Rights Movement, the *1968 Olympics Black Power Salute* photograph, a portrait of Sojourner Truth, and a portrait of Frederick Douglass above a bookshelf captioned with his quote, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." Furthermore, Ms. Butler highlights Black creativity and culture through images such as *Harlem 1958*, a photo of jazz musicians during the Harlem Renaissance. Alysha's meticulous curation of powerful historical content is evident when she says:

> If I can say one thing that is the huge difference . . . these kids want to know more. They're like, they're mostly all in, because it's the content. And that's why content is so important, *content matters.* It really does matter. Absolutely 100%. Absolutely. Yup. Yes . . . that is the one revelation that I've had from this course. It is the *power of content.*

Her curation of multi-modal imagery, primary sources, and audio/visual media is intentionally intermingled with her presentation of curricular content. For example, as she discusses peaceful protests of the Civil Rights Movement, my eyes are drawn to a cheeky reference to the white nationalist phrase "freedom isn't free" that she has (re)appropriated to the mugshots of Dr. King, Parks, and Lewis. Another instance of her meticulous curation is found in her Freedom Riders lesson. She begins with an explanation that while Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s contributions are more widely known, there were many non-violent protests led by men and women, noting that women were not given as much credit as they were due. After a brief discussion about the misappropriation of Dr. King's work by those who perpetuate white supremist and colorblind agendas, Ms. Butler began telling the story of the Freedom Riders describing the participants as “soldiers in the non-violent army.” She then shares a primary source of the Freedom Riders being interviewed about their experiences as well as media footage of the assault of the Freedom Riders by a white mob. After explaining that Bull Connor ordered police to overlook the beating for thirty minutes, students gasped and one stated with indignation, “aren’t you supposed to be *protected* by police?” Ms. Butler reiterated the power of peaceful protest in the midst of violence, stating, “You know, people throw shade at this generation for staying peaceful in the midst of brutal violence, but that is what made this movement so effective, I wish I could be as brave as this generation.”

On another occasion, still addressing the essential question regarding reasons for heightened racial violence in the 20th century, Alysha displays a black and white photograph of Pennsylvania Avenue leading toward the Capitol building in her PowerPoint presentation. In the foreground, marching in synchrony toward the viewer, are enrobed KKK members bearing American flags. There is an energy shift in the room, expressions of disgust mixed with curiosity emerge. Ms. Butler nods in agreement with her students’ variety of reactions stating, “You recognize where this is, right? It’s right here, a block away from where you are right now.” Ms. Butler proceeds to discuss various groups’ reactions to the increasing diversity of the United States in the 1920s due to immigration, and complicated the narrative and myth that the KKK was only targeting Black Americans with primary sources sharing their hatred of various non-European nationalities, the “fast women” that were considered “flappers,” and several religions such as Catholicism. Ms. Butler presents complex history and does not shy away from telling the stories of persecution experienced by Black Americans. Concurrently, she provides a safe space for her students to experience a full range of emotion as they learn this hard history.

Academic Scaffolds. Alysha intentionally scaffolds her students' academic skills with prompts, reminders, and tips during her content delivery. I noticed early in my observations that she often would state, "copy this down" or "don't worry about writing [this part], just write [this part]." Further, she would note when students should be thinking about a particular essential question or when they could simply relax and watch a video. When asked about this practice, Alysha discussed the importance of not leaving students behind because of processing differences. She states:

> How many students do you think when we were in school, that kind of got left behind? You know what I'm saying? Or written off. If we would have just made—not even accommodations—but just would have thought about that, and being reflective in how we teach, how many students do you think could have been elevated or given an equal shot because we were more sensitive to things like that? So, that's what that's about.

Scaffolding her students' academic and learning skills is an intentional pedagogical practice of inclusivity and a commitment to the success of each and every student in her classroom.

One afternoon, I observed a planning period meeting in which Carly (pseudonym), an instructional coach, assisted Alysha with the creation of a project outline for the final project that would be scored by content experts. Carly plopped down in a front row seat, opened her laptop and named three previously generated documents Alysha needed to open on her laptop across the table. It was clear to me that they had a level of comfort in their collaborations. Carly proudly stated, "I just assist Alysha, she teaches me *way* more than I can teach her!" Together, Alysha and Carly review their plan for scaffolding the students' projects. Their correspondence was a well-rehearsed dance, with Carly offering suggestions ("should they [the students] watch the video at home and then come back with notes? Or is that a heavy cognitive lift?") and Alysha considering Carly's idea and responding, "maybe we should open the lunch block to them instead." The outline they created will aid the students as they research academic literature, develop an argument, and write the final paper. Alysha's prioritization of planning academic scaffolds during her minimal amount of free time in the school day indicates a strong commitment to student success.

Learning Through Experience. Alysha takes advantage of her local context, Washington D.C., by engaging her students in experiential learning outside of the classroom. While visiting her classroom, I was able to join her students on two field trips, the first to the Martin Luther King Jr. Public Library to view an exhibit on Black Feminism in D.C. and the second to see an Arena Stage production of *Tempestuous Elements*, a play that tells the story of Anna Julia Cooper and her leadership tenure at M Street School. Ms. Butler views field trips as learning opportunities "outside of classroom walls," and is constantly exploring opportunities to provide experiences for her students. I captured this in my field notes:

> While the docent shares information about the Black feminism exhibit and the MLK Jr. Library, itself, Alysha is both listening and you can tell she's thinking and planning. She notices an archival room that all D.C. residents have access to—she begins planning with her colleague, Carly, about how they could use this space for class research and discusses with library staff how they could schedule a time to come back. Further, she's discussing with the exhibit docent and coordinator of the field trip an opportunity to dive into D.C.'s history deeper through a conference hosted by the museum. She is eager to take it on—her passion for the field and her students is evident through her constant vigilance on how to improve, learn more, and provide more opportunities for her students.

Alysha retains her role of teacher and pedagogue while on field trips. During the intermission of *Tempestuous Elements* Alysha proclaims, “Do you see the idea of racial uplift?” “Did you notice W.E.B. Du Bois’s role?” The students respond stating, “Yes! I didn’t know I had beef with Mary Church Terrell!” and “I noticed the W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debate!” Her in situ pedagogy creates an atmosphere of connectedness among her field trip attendees and further underscores the importance of the curriculum.

Discussion. Advanced Placement African American Studies (APAAS) is a newly created course, currently in a pilot phase. The APAAS course guide states, “[APAAS] is an interdisciplinary course that examines the diversity of African American experiences through direct encounters with authentic and varied sources” (p. 4). The course includes four units spanning the African Diaspora, enslavement, reconstruction, movements, and debates. It culminates in both an AP examination and course project which, together, are submitted to experts and result in an AP score—a score of three to five awards college credit to the student. APAAS can be categorized as part of a rich history of *ethnic studies*, defined by Chapman et al. (2020) as curriculum that “specifically places issues of race/ethnicity and ethno-racism at the center” (p. 570). In the current political climate, ethnic studies courses, specifically AP African American studies are being contested by and outright banned by right-wing political leaders (Treisman, 2023). Instead, they insist on a “traditional” curriculum devoid of criticality. “Traditional” social studies curricula are often presented in ways that elevate Eurocentric epistemologies and stories, and the ubiquity of the curricula leads to perceptions of whiteness as “standard” and “natural” while relegating counter-stories of communities of color to the margins (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

> In education, the right to exclude is primarily determined through traditional, Western curriculum and textbooks. These classroom materials disregard the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities, valorize white Americans, and ignore government actions and social movements that have suppressed social and economic prosperity in racially marginalized communities. (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 572)

Ethnic studies, in contrast, offers students a curriculum that develops critical consciousness, "mean[ing] students learn critical academic language and knowledge about the historical and current social political and racial realities that continue to impact communities of color" (Chapman et al., 2020, p. 570).

While the course, itself, can be designated as "liberatory" in nature, it cannot be so without instructional delivery. The course guide (2023) provides instructors with themes, learning objectives, and essential knowledge for the four required units. It lists required primary sources and provides a few photos that supplement the units. Besides this basic outline, instructors are tasked with developing lessons that ensure student learning. The course expectations are rigorous; students are expected to use academic reasoning skills, content connections, literary analysis, and other high-level academic skills. The content is also complex; for example, students must analyze sources such as W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* by Anna Julia Cooper and describe concurrent themes.

The pedagogy of the instructor is integral for student comprehension of the rigorous content. Ms. Butler's pedagogy successfully accomplishes the task. In fact, her students' AP examination results were a whopping 20% higher than the national average! Her pedagogy, however, should not be solely measured by assessment outcomes. Alysha's curation of the AP

African American Studies content harnesses her identity as a Black woman in the United States and presents the legacies of Black Americans in ways that liberate her students from “traditional” curricula steeped in white supremacy.

In her public addresses, Alysha consistently begins with a slide labeled, “where I come from.” She proudly describes her ancestors and underscores the sacrifices they made so that she could have the opportunities she enjoys today. Similarly, Alysha’s pedagogy reflects ancestral roots of Black women educators as described by Perlow et al. (2018), “Black women educators of today join a river of Black foremothers whose pedagogies not only served as resistance to white supremacist and patriarchal domination, but as healing and empowerment particularly for Black community members” (p. 2). In their article, James-Gallaway and Harris (2021), highlight the culturally relevant pedagogy of Black women educators in the segregated Jim Crow South. They specifically address the ways in which these educators used their positions as “teacher” to liberate their students from white supremacist cruelty. “Black women teachers leveraged culturally relevant pedagogy to amply ready their students to exceed white society’s low expectations for them” (p. 130). Alysha’s methods of academic scaffolding mirror the findings of James-Gallaway and Harris in her commitment to the success of each, individual student in her care.

In describing Black women teachers’ legacies, James-Gallaway and Harris state, “[Black women teachers] worked to fashion their students’ ability to envision and materialize Black thriving” (p. 134). Alysha demonstrates a similar work ethic in her tenacity for providing cultural opportunities for her students that celebrate Black contributions to society. By highlighting cultural assets, Alysha is able to cultivate deep ethno-racial pride among her students that will likely serve as protection in future occurrences of racism they might face. James-Gallaway and

Harris describe this protective inclination stating, “Black women teachers attempted to impart in their students [a] protection against an unrelenting and cruel white world that positioned them as inferior and incapable of academic success” (p. 135). Although the de jure segregation and white supremist laws these Black women teachers in the Jim Crow era endured have since been abolished, African American communities still experience de facto, unwritten versions of the same ideologies (Love, 2019, 2023). Like her teacher foremothers (James-Gallaway and Harris, 2021; Perlow et al., 2018), Alysha’s pedagogy offers students a protected “freedom dreaming” (Love, 2019) space in which they can safely engage in critical investigations of race and racism, develop their academic skills, and enjoy ethno-racial affinity through cultural experiences.

Symbiosis of Humanization

Humanization, according to Baldwin (2021) involves “privileging the interior . . . daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom . . . [through] ethics of care.” Further, “such reimagining also happens when Black women as their full authentic selves—rage and all—bring visibility to themselves on their own terms.” Humanization “in the wake” (Sharpe, 2016) of enslavement in the U.S. also involves rejecting Euro-centric, white supremacist definitions of what it means to be human. Alysha cultivates a space of symbiotic humanization; she humanizes those of African descent throughout history as well as the students in her care. In turn, she and her students engage in humanizing practices towards themselves.

Humanizing Pedagogical Choices. Pretty much every interaction Alysha has with her students affirms their humanity. From her greetings, “Hey, beautiful! I love your new hair style, I need you to teach me how to braid like that!” to her closures, “Ugh! There is never enough time!” students are valued and appreciated for their authentic selves (Baldwin, 2021). Alysha begins each class period with what she calls an “SEL (social emotional learning) question.” The questions she asks open up conversation about likes and dislikes, favorite types of music and television, and discussions about fashion. With the Super Bowl approaching, Alysha posts the question, “What is your favorite halftime show of all time?” and the conversation flows with reminiscence about Beyoncé, Bruno Mars, and Snoop Dogg. Alysha describes the moment it started raining during Prince’s epic performance of *Purple Rain,* “Prince is my ALL TIME FAVORITE performer!” These conversations created an atmosphere of belonging, as Alysha validated each response with affirmations or statements like, “I’ll have to check that out!” when she was not familiar with someone’s response. Alysha is also intentional with how she directs students in group work, often starting the prompt with, “the student with the most colorful shoes answers first” or “whoever got the most sleep last night goes first!” These starters help students who would otherwise struggle to get started with a task and also reduces social barriers. The pedagogical decisions Alysha makes in her classroom support the humanness of her students by considering their social, emotional, and physical needs while they are in her learning space.

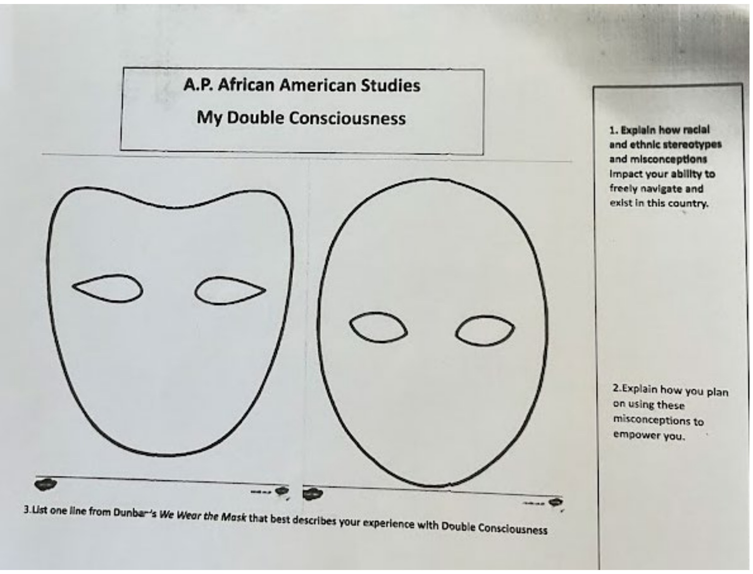
Ms. Butler’s *double consciousness* lesson was a powerful example of humanization in pedagogy. Inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Alysha begins a conversation about her students’ internal lives. She explains that a common experience of the Black community is, “what white America puts on us,” and describes her personal experience of mothering her Black son in a predominately white elementary school. She explains her desire to help her son succeed on standardized tests—“They won’t give my son the benefit of the doubt”—leading her to ask lots of questions during parent/teacher conferences. She describes feeling stereotyped as “angry Black woman” when insisting the teacher share curricular materials in an effort to assist her son in his schoolwork. Amidst her external reflection, a student states, “isn’t this traumatizing?” and Alysha nods in agreement. After her personal connection, she explains the concept of *double consciousness*—Du Bois's (1903) argument that, "he simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (p. 26).

After handing out an activity with two masks (see Figure 3), she asks the students to reflect on three statements, *who I am, misconceptions about me,* and *impact (how does this make me feel).* I observe the students' heads lower, pencils moving quickly, and sense immediate engagement with the task. After what felt like the right amount of time, she informs students that they will have the opportunity to share what they have written, giving students agency to make that choice. The discussion that ensued can be described as vulnerable, authentic, cathartic, and painful. In describing themselves, students share phrases such as, "I am determined," "logical," "I'm outgoing and humble," "I am loving!" Alysha then creates space for students to share how they have been falsely construed. Several students share that because they are invested in their education, their peers call them *white, snobbish,* and *stuck up.* The conversation moves to code switching, described by Young (2009) as, "a strategy whereby black students are taught contrastive analysis—a method comparing black English to standard English so that they can learn to switch from one to the other in different settings" (p. 52) and its relationship to Du Bois's (1903) idea of *double consciousness.*

Finally, when asked about the impact of *double consciousness,* students offered a variety of responses. One student says, "While it's not in my nature, it causes me to act reserved when I'm not sure what company I'm in." Another student states, "I have no choice but to get politically involved," and a third states, "I gotta work harder." As students process this construct, Alysha validates their contributions with statements like, "thank you for sharing," "Du Bois would agree with you!" and "it's a shame some folks immediately equate intelligence with whiteness." Her responses to students are validating, and she holds space for nuance and complexity. Ms. Butler wraps up the lesson with a poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar titled *We Wear the Mask,* further emphasizing the humanity of the historical figures they are studying.

Figure 3

Double Consciousness Lesson Handout



A.P. African American Studies
My Double Consciousness

1. Explain how racial and ethnic stereotypes and misconceptions impact your ability to freely navigate and exist in this country.

2.Explain how you plan on using these misconceptions to empower you.

3.List one line from Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask* that best describes your experience with Double Consciousness

Asset-Framing as Humanization. Alysha consistently asset-frames her students and is indignant when she senses deficit-framing. One afternoon, while driving me to the nearest Metro stop, we were chatting about how Black and Brown students are capable, yet underestimated by society. She shared a news story she heard about a white leader in a predominantly Black school, "Oh man! He was complaining about how the Black kids couldn't test themselves 'out of a paper bag' and the community was demanding that he resign or be fired." She went on to describe:

> I hate, absolutely hate, when my students [pause] like, for example, my colleague was saying when she was teaching AP Human Geography, she arranged, like, kind of like a brain bowl, like a competition between another school. And it wasn't necessarily like a

> competition like, who's better. But it's just a way for them to kind of study, but like in the fun way of a game. And when the opposing school, you know, pulled up, they were all white, and the students were like, oh, man, we're definitely gonna lose. And it had nothing to do with their cognitive ability, or how well they were prepared for the test, but they automatically assigned you know, success on a standardized state test based upon race, and that is infuriating!

When I asked her if she believed her U.S. History students (not an AP course) would thrive in her AP African American Studies course she said, “I would bet all the money in my savings account. Yup.” One of Alysha’s motivating factors is equipping her students with academic skills that will help them be successful on achievement tests. Not just for the sake of the test, but because she believes Black and Brown students are less likely to be given “second chances” by the general public. Alysha views the APAAS course exam as an opportunity for her students to feel validated. “I would love nothing more than for *this* to be an example of yes, they can. And they can. They can. They absolutely can, you know?” *And they did!*

Alysha sprinkles these affirmative statements throughout her lessons as well. For example, when discussing a famous legal case, she states, “when some of you go to school to be lawyers, you’ll learn about this case, it’s an iconic discrimination case,” indicating her belief that her students will excel in higher education. When students participate in class she habitually validates their contributions. For example, instead of simply saying *that’s right*, *correct,* or *good job,* she exclaims, “You did my job for me!” “ok! Preach!” and “you all make me really proud.”

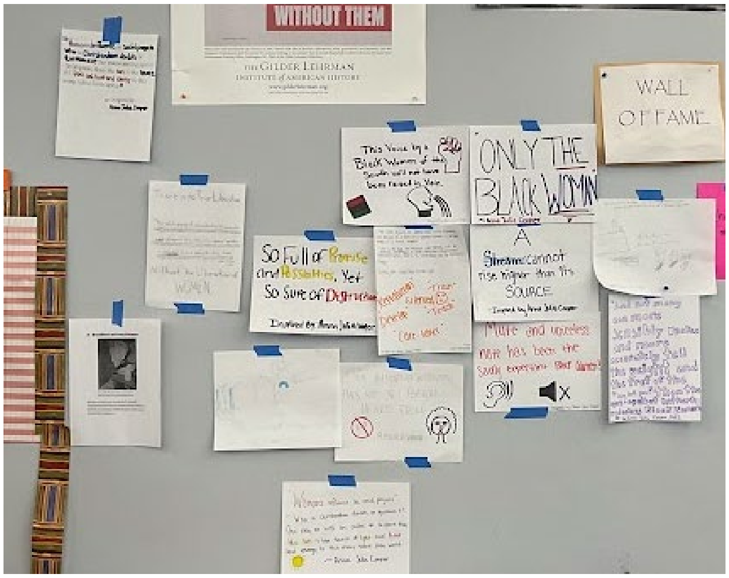
Alysha also makes a point to asset-frame herself in the classroom setting. She unabashedly refers to herself as a historian and intellectual. When describing that a certain president might have had an extramarital affair, she jests, “I’m going to give you the tea on this.

Historians love to gossip, and I'm here for it"—a nod to her self-definition as "historian." When discussing vocabulary and primary sources that will be addressed on the AP exam, Alysha did not hesitate to mention her involvement in the course creation. When describing the National Urban League as part of the Civil Rights Movement, she proudly states, "that's where I had my first job!" and tells the story about nailing her first interview, which included an impromptu essay composition, and receiving the call that she had been selected. Asset-framing is Alysha's default mode, and her pedagogy is built on the premise that she and her students are capable, competent scholars.

Humanizing Historical Figures. Ms. Butler's storytelling is not only historically accurate, she emphasizes anecdotal evidence of the humanness of Black historical figures. In conjunction with Ms. Butler's PowerPoint presentations and lectures are primary sources such as literature, art, music, and poetry. Alysha presents Anna Julia Cooper as one of the first Black feminists, introducing her to students through Cooper's own essays, clearly adhering to the Black feminist tenet of honoring the lived experiences and stories of Black women. After the analysis of her writings, students chose a quote that was most meaningful to them to display on the classroom wall as shown in Figure 4. In a final example of the humanization of Anna Julia Cooper, Alysha arranged a field trip to the Arena Stage to watch a play that navigates the many victories and struggles of her career as the first Black woman principal.

Figure 4

Students Quote Anna Julia Cooper


WITHOUT THEM
THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY
WALL OF FAME
ONLY THE BLACK WOMAN
So Full of Promise and Possibilities, Yet So Sure of Degradation
A Stream cannot rise higher than its source

Another example is how she describes the debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Part-way through a lesson about racial uplift during the Reconstruction era, she states, “do you all remember W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of the talented tenth?” Students reply with mixed responses leading her to pause the lesson for a demonstration. She asks Darryl, a tall male student with an athletic build, to stand up alongside Sean, an average height male student with a slim build. She starts by saying, “ok, let’s say these two guys are going to race.” Students erupt with cheers and predictions about Darryl’s victory while Sean shakes his head and laughs. “However! Sean, I’m going to place you up here (a few steps from the finish line) and Darryl, you will stay back there. Now, who do you think is going to win the race?” The students state the obvious that Sean has an unfair advantage. Ms. Butler goes on to describe how because white men had an unfair advantage due to their history of generational wealth, voting rights, and citizenship, Du Bois believed that in order to have a shot at equality, resources should be spent on Black men that showed the most intellectual promise so they could get positions of power and help with racial uplift for everyone else (Du Bois, 1903).

Her creative demonstration allowed for students to dig deeper into Du Bois's ideas and identity and compare and contrast his views with Booker T. Washington who believed that Black folks of that time should focus on trades and skilled labor instead of intellectual, higher education pursuits (Du Bois, 1903). She highlighted anecdotes about their lives and what led them to their conclusions. Students were then able to say who they agreed with and why, and connect to these historical figures on a personal level. Furthermore, Alysha presented the theories and ideas of Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington alongside the poetry of artists like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay to pair intellectual thought with human expression.

Other Mothering. Alysha indicated through her actions in the classroom and reflections on her practice that she believes there is a "other mothering" aspect to her pedagogy. For example, one morning the students gathered in the auditorium as a meeting place before the field trip to Arena Stage and Alysha asked for the students' attention to go over safety for the trip. "Let's keep it tight, you know crime is up in the area, and I see you all like my 'little man' (Alysha's son). All of you are 'little man,' so make sure you stay together and check in with your adult!" After her safety speech I could hear students saying, "aww she sees us as her kids!" "She says we're like "little man" to her!" They were thrilled to be considered as important as her own child and throughout the day referred to each other as "little man." In a discussion about her "mothering" role, Alysha states:

> That has just really, man, that has made such a huge impact on me, um, these last 9 years, like a lot in my teaching. A lot, I would argue that I am not the same teacher, completely, you know, totally, as I was before my son was born. It has definitely yeah, changed me a

> lot, a lot, a lot. In ways I didn't think it would be as impactful as it is. That has changed me.

The role she plays in her students' lives is important to her and she embraces the idea of other-mother stating:

> To have you know, some of my male students, say "my mom says the same thing to me, but I know it's coming from a place of love. And you remind me so much of my mother" like I, you know, instead of saying like, "Oh, God, it means I'm getting old," no, it just means that, you know, like it's just nice to be able to be in a classroom and to know that the students know that I'm not just teaching them content. I'm teaching, content with the sense of urgency for their overall, not only academic, but their social, emotional, and psychological welfare. And that means a lot, yeah.

Alysha recognizes that as a teacher of APAAS, she has a unique opportunity to help students with their identity development. One standout experience she attributes to her role as other-mother is with her student, whom she refers to as Miss Baker.

> She's a very, very quiet student, doesn't really talk too much, and the fact that just out of nowhere, um she's like "I just wanna come and talk to you, can we have a standing lunch date every Thursday, where I come and talk about just things that I learn in the class that, you know, mean a lot to me or is helping me understand about myself, or can you just talk?" That right there has never really happened to me in my entire career. Like, you know, it's so centered on what they're learning in the classroom.

This standing lunch date continued throughout the remainder of the school year.

Discussion. In defining liberatory spaces, Freire (1970/2018) argues that humanization is the ultimate goal of liberation. Alysha's unwavering commitment to humanization of her students, self, and historical figures reflects Freire's definition. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) describes womanist pedagogy as, "Seek[ing] the enfranchisement and dignity of all human beings across the social divisions of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (p. 438). Alysha's attention to the humanity of her students; their fashion choices, highlighting their athletic performance in last night's game, giving props to students for their artistic skills, and genuine interest in their likes and dislikes exemplifies Womanist pedagogy. Centering *care* (Collins, 2000; hooks 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2021), womanist pedagogy unabashedly prioritizes the "whole child" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) balancing academic success with the many other aspects of students' identities. The concept of *care* found in womanist pedagogy leans on "epistemology that combines history, culture, and experiences with individual uniqueness, expressiveness, emotion, and empathy" (Bass, 2012, p. 77). Alysha's pedagogy mirrors womanist care (Collins, 2000; hooks 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2021) that liberates students from the mires of standardized testing and narrow measurements of success and celebrates her students as they see themselves. Black women pedagogues, as described by Bass (2012); Beauboeuf-Lafontant, (2002, 2005); Brown et al. (2018); Dixson (2003); James-Gallaway and Harris (2021); and Obaizamomwan-Hamilton (2023), harness the power of the legacies of their teacher foremothers, elevate the ingenuity and perseverance of the Black community, foster critical consciousness of societal injustice, and do so with care and love for their students. Alysha's refusal to deficit-frame her students reflected in both her words and actions situates her in the descriptions above.

Dixson (2003) posits that Black women pedagogues have an inherently "political" drive to foster asset-focused views of the Black community. "African American women teachers have used their relationships with their students and community members, as well as other civic and social activities, to ensure racial uplift" (p. 219). By asset-framing herself and her impressive accomplishments while concurrently framing her students as capable, competent scholars, Alysha cultivates an environment that fosters student success and liberates them from outside, deficit-views placed upon them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Dixson, 2003; James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021; Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2023).

In describing the concept of *other mothering* in the African American community, Bass (2012) states, "Caring and nurturing are both common expressions of motherhood. African-American women have a long history of mothering and other mothering that emerges from the historical oppression of African American people" (p. 79). While Alysha mentioned she was not aware of the concept of *other mothering* (Bass, 2012; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson, 2003) from an academic and theoretical perspective, she was quite aware of the concept through her lived experiences (Collins, 2000). Having grown up in a predominately Black church, she stated she had experienced mothering by women in her church steadily throughout her time there. Yet, in her schooling, she did not have many Black women educators and did not have the *other mother* teacher experience as described by Bass (2012), Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), and Dixson (2003). Thus, her womanist expressions of *other mothering* are likely inherent in her identity and culture. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) highlights that while *other mothering* is often a result of combined identities of Black mother (of her actual children) and Black educator, it is also an inherently political act.

> The caring that othermothers engage in is not simply interpersonal but profoundly political in intent and practice . . . womanist teachers see racism and other systemic injustices as simultaneously social and educational problems. Consequently, they

> demonstrate a keen awareness of their power and responsibility as adults to contest the societal stereotypes imposed on children. (p. 77)

Further, it is clear that Alysha educates from a place of *other mothering* through her unapologetic truth-telling and personal anecdotes she shares in her lessons. For example, during her lessons on Black feminist educators and Anna Julia Cooper, Alysha shared a story about her struggles as a Black woman in the United States. She explained to the students that a manifestation of systemic racism in society is the disproportionate maternal mortality rate in Black women. She shared that in her late pregnancy stages, she found herself anxious and worried about childbirth. Jokingly, she stated, "I was telling my husband, I could be the walking dead here!" Alysha's willingness to share personal stories and illustrations of her daily interactions with systemic racism indicates a deep, mother-like care for her students.

> Thus, womanist teachers readily demonstrate their political clarity: with their students, both in deed and in word, they share their understanding of society, an understanding that does not shy away from the reality of domination nor from the existence of resistance struggles against oppression. In essence, loving students means discussing such insights with them, not withholding knowledge from them. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 80)

The humanizing environment Alysha cultivates is further evidence of her liberatory pedagogy.

Awakening from the Matrix

Alysha recalls the first time she authentically "woke up" and experienced critical consciousness about race and racism throughout history.

> I know it was life-changing for me. And that's one of the reasons why I went into teaching. I remember distinctly, like, um, getting ahold of Frederick Douglass's narrative, and I, I read it when I was in, in college, like a junior in college. Like why wasn't I

> assigned this when I was younger? You know, God only knows, but I just remember the reaction that I had, reading it as a junior in college, and I was like "oh my God." I was like "is anybody aware of what he went through?"

While she had been exposed to Black writers and thinkers, it was not until college that she made connections that led to a critical interrogation of the state of society. She became an emboldened historian with a desire to learn the untold stories of Black Americans and share them widely. She describes this stating:

> I'm gonna be completely honest with you, Black people in history, that never got their story told. I'm doing my damndest to make sure that I can get their stories somehow told.

Her enthusiasm for Black history and critical examinations of which stories are told and which are silenced is evident in her goals for her students.

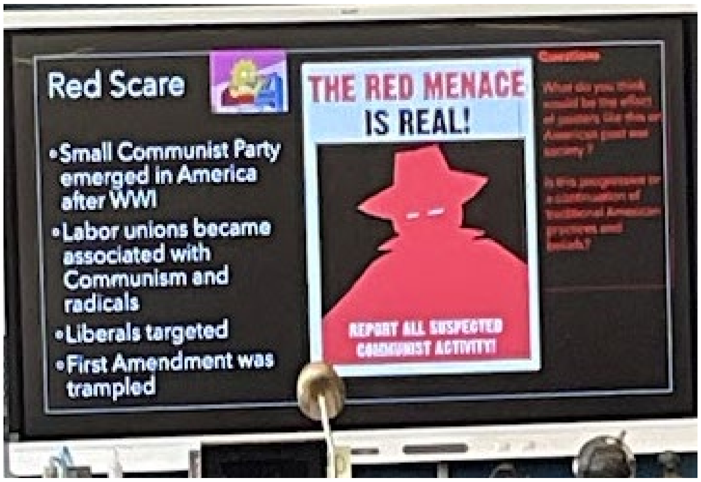
> And I just remember saying "when I become a teacher, if I could just make sure that I can get this type of story into my classroom, then there's nothing that my students wouldn't feel motivated to do or feel like they couldn't do."

When asked about her urgency to deliver the content she stated, "I just want to make sure I do everything I possibly can while I have them to make sure that they get this information, because I really feel it could be life-changing." She refers to the life-changing nature of the content through a metaphor "awakening from the matrix." This metaphor is a reference to the movie *The Matrix*, in which the human main characters awaken and figure out that they have been imprisoned by computers, and the life they knew was a simulation. Alysha uses the metaphor to express that when students develop critical consciousness about oppression, their awareness causes them to "wake up" and see that their true identities are distinct from how society defines them.

When teaching about the first Red Scare, Alysha displayed a propaganda image (see Figure 5). After displaying the image, she inquired, “What does this remind you of?” and in each class period several students would state, “neighborhood watch!” Given the class composition was mostly Black and Brown youth, their immediate connection between historical propaganda and symbols still displayed today that target Black and Brown youth indicates a critical consciousness of white supremacist narratives about who is “good” and who is “bad.” Further, this discussion about the Red Scare led a student to bring up the debates about Critical Race Theory. Alysha helped the student to explain the connection, stating people are acting out of fear because they do not understand the theory. The student replies, “They are ignorant” and Ms. Butler supportively probes the student for more information, “Why do you say that?” which made space for the student to describe that a lack of critical consciousness leads to ignorance, which leads to fear. Another example of students “awakening from the matrix” was during a discussion about Anna Julia Cooper and how the Black men in the department of education were not supporting her. A student responded outwardly, “That’s like intersectionality!” And described how the intersection of race and gender was an additional layer of oppression for Cooper.

Figure 5

Red Scare Propaganda Image in Lecture Presentation



Red Scare

- Small Communist Party emerged in America after WWI
- Labor unions became associated with Communism and radicals
- Liberals targeted
- First Amendment was trampled

Alysha believes that critical consciousness is an outcome for all of her students, regardless of ethno-racial labels. I sensed her desire to aid the identity development of her Black students, so I asked her about the presence of students of other races in her classroom. She responded with reflective thoughts about her previous teaching experience in a more ethno-racially diverse classroom in Florida:

> And the reason why I loved [working with ethno-racially diverse students] is because so much of what they were learning was the very first time that they had ever learned it. And it's funny, I would see it was just as impactful for them as it was for the Black students that were in my class, because in actuality I was teaching, you know, two groups of people [and] both of them had never learned it. You know what I'm saying? Even like, my Black students. Even though in some ways, they . . . they lived it, or their parents or grandparents lived it, but they didn't. They didn't have the history of the context, right? And so for them, they're learning this for the very first time as well, in addition to my white students and to see just the kind of transformation for my white students, “Oh, wow! So that's the reason why things are the way they are,” or “dang, you know what? Sometimes the racist comments that I would hear my grandfather say? No, that really is wrong. And now I have the history to explain that.” Or even my Asian students that are

> coming here for the first time in this country that said the same thing. “Oh, the racist comments that my grandmother or grandfather says about Black Americans. Wow! Now I know the history . . . that is wrong, or that is misguided . . .” And to see them become just as passionate about, “No, I need to, you know I need to make some moves in my household to correct this or in my own community.” And so yeah, I loved [teaching Black history to ethno-racially diverse students] as well. You know once I read this quote by this person, and she had said that . . . the failure that we have as educators is that we fear that if we teach about the things that we're not the most proud about in history, we fear our white students are gonna take the blame for it . . . why do we think our white students are automatically gonna identify with that [racism] versus those white people that did stand up in history? You know what I mean? And I totally use that like in my classroom. Look . . . just because this is what they did doesn't mean that this is what you're currently doing or that you have to identify with that, or share or shelter the blame for them. Why not identify more with those people that did stand up and say, “no, this is . . . this is wrong, I'm not gonna contribute to it.” So . . . it's the same sense of urgency, you know, for both groups, and it's just as impactful. And I actually get the same pleasure doing it for both. Very much so.

Discussion. Freirean definitions of liberatory pedagogy include a two-fold cyclical process: reflection and action (Freire, 1970/2018). The rich discussions that take place in Alysha’s classroom allow for reflection, and her commitment to providing experiential learning opportunities makes space for students to actively engage with what they are learning. According to Dixson (2003), Black women pedagogues often teach with emphasis on socio-political consciousness due to the oppressive societal conditions they and their students regularly navigate. Brown et al. (2018) contend, “Othermothers not only view it as part of their responsibility to care for their nonbiological children, but also to protect and guide them across the maturation process. For Black children, this entails understanding the challenges Black children and youth face in navigating race in a society marred by an antiBlack ethos” (p. 293). Thus, as another act of *other mothering*, many Black women pedagogues prioritize the development of critical consciousness in their students in order to prepare them to navigate unjust conditions in society. Alysha’s pedagogy aids students in developing critical consciousness, not only in her students of color, but also in the white students she teaches. Obaizamomwan-Hamilton (2023) regards Black women educators as “Transformers—creating transformative possibilities by navigating the weight of multiple and intersectional oppressions to elevate the knowledge, lives, and agency of themselves and their students” (p. 622). Her enthusiasm for fostering critical consciousness in *all* of her students, regardless of race or ethnicity, creates “transformative possibilities” for the future of U.S. society.

Dissonant Voice

Amidst the patterns found in Alysha’s pedagogical mastery also emerged a “deviant voice.” Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain:

> In portraiture, we refer to this perspective that deviates from the norm as ‘the deviant voice,’ and we never stop listening for it, even as we become increasingly focused in our inquiry and certain in our analysis. The deviant voice is useful in drawing important contrasts with the norm; the divergence in perspective and the idiosyncratic stance helps us see the quality and contours of the convergent themes more clearly. (p. 193)

A more fitting term for this portrait is *dissonant voice.* In music, dissonance refers to a note that disrupts harmony. When a dissonant note is added to a chord, the notes fight with one another. For Alysha, a dissonant note or voice is entangled in how she perceives herself.

"It is . . . it's a lot. It is a lot. It is a lot. It is a lot, a lot." This is an excerpt of Alysha's response when asked about her many obligations and responsibilities. She noted the importance of, "deflating the myth of the Black Superwoman" and reflected on particular manifestations of her "flaws," which I would reframe as her inherent humanity and understandable reactions to white supremacy and systemic racism. Together, we decided it was imperative that this portrait resist characterizing Alysha as "superwoman" because her struggles reveal the tensions of asserting her humanity while combating anti-blackness and sexism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009).

"It is . . . it's a lot." Alysha often refers to her favorite teacher and one of her few Black educators during her K-12 years, Miss Mosely (a pseudonym), as the motivation for her style and wardrobe choices in the classroom. She describes Miss Mosely stating that at the time she was "straight out of college, young, just beautiful. And she was always, always . . . fully decked out." Accordingly, Ms. Butler wears attire that could be categorized as *business* rather than teachers' more common *business casual* or even *casual* wardrobes. She wears her hair in her natural curls, cropped at chin level. Her hairstyle frames statement earrings, different every day and artfully matched with her outfit. She wears bold colors: brick red, cobalt blue, pearl white, as well as African-inspired and geometric prints. While she enters the classroom in Nike sneakers for travel comfort and practicality, she emerges from her desk area in leather pumps. In describing her "why" for her personal style she reflects:

> I do it personally, ‘cause I want my students to be able to see a different, like a version of Black women that they may not see on a normal basis, you know? ‘Cause I do take my job seriously. I'm a professional, so I dress like I'm going to the office, you know?

Her pride in her daily appearance is evidenced when I text her before my first visit asking about appropriate dress. “I will be wearing a shirt and a skirt just because I prefer skirts . . . you can wear business casual, no stress!” Further, on other occasions such as field trips she states, “you know me, I’ll be dressed up as usual!”

Her admiration for Miss Mosely is not just about the wardrobe, however, it is a way of being.

> She never raised her voice, even when she was like, you know, disappointed or upset, she always kept it professional in dealing with other colleagues and also dealing with her students and I really, really liked that. And I've tried to emulate that as much as I can. Not just emulate; it is a big part of who I am.

Shortly after describing Miss Mosely, there is shift. I notice a tightness in her voice as she describes the possibility that her choice of dress is in resistance to stereotypes. As if a narrative she held on to for years has taken a new, unexplored dimension.

> Um, but you know, then I wonder, am I . . . to what extent am I also reacting to my desire not to fall into a stereotype, you know? Of Black women, you know what I'm saying? . . . like maybe that's why I try so hard to make sure I dress professional.

Alysha continues to ponder the layers of “why” she presents herself the way she does stating, “to what extent am I not operating freely? I don’t have to be necessarily constrained to that . . . . Maybe I’m not being able to live really a free life because of [my] desire not to fall into stereotypes.”

“It is a lot. It is a lot.” Alysha battles with balancing her accumulated opportunities. She finds joy in her work, “I have profound love, like I really love, I love Black Studies,” while also holding high standards for herself as a mother and partner. Failure to measure up to these high standards often results in crippling unforgiveness of herself. “I’m not forgiving of myself. It’s like, you’re forgiving for the students, you’re understanding for the students, but when it comes to yourself, you’re not.” Alysha describes this as prevalent among Black professional women, “I don’t know if that is a personality thing as much as it something so many Black women in all fields . . . kind of face.” Alysha ponders her “inability to rest” stating, “coming from Florida, where it is a good ol’ boys network, it’s hard to say no [to opportunities] because you don’t want to let any of those go.” So she says yes, even when her capacity to take on more work feels minimal, “and it’s very, very addicting for me [accepting opportunities], and it’s very gratifying for me, but it can also be draining.” Alysha reflects on why she says “yes” even though her time is limited. After a moment, she lands on “imposter syndrome.”

> The imposter syndrome is real. The imposter syndrome is so, so, so real. And I feel like the more successful you get, the realer it gets. Maybe if I didn’t have it so badly, I’d be able to say ‘no, I can’t do it, there’s a lot on my plate’ . . . but I’m having to prove myself. I can do it, ya know? If I don’t do it, I’m not gonna get another opportunity in the future. I have to prove it . . . yea . . . when everybody else already knows that you can.

Discussion. As Alysha describes her inherent humanness, I am reminded of BF literature and commentary about similar experiences. Further, I notice that many of Alysha’s pains are her personal reactions to intersectional oppressions and harm endured by the heterogenous collective of Black women in the United States.[3] Black feminist scholars theorize origins of the harm they commonly endure; most salient to this study are ways in which Black women are "presumed non-human" (Baldwin, 2021) and are subject to racist and sexist stereotypes, concurrently experiencing the ramifications of "strong Black women" expectations in U.S. society.

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[3] After my initial analysis, I worked collaboratively with my BF advisor as a subject matter expert for confirmation to handle Alysha’s vulnerable self-reflection with love and care.

Harris-Perry (2011) discusses stereotypes that contribute to a state of *double consciousness* in Black women's identities. She describes the common myths about Black women:

> Lusty availability violates the expectations of the chaste Victorian era, but it serves the interests of slavery. Competent independence challenges the ideal that adult women should rely on their husband's judgment, but allows policy makers to define black families as deviant. Welfare dependence violates the ideal that Americans should be self-reliant, but it provides an easy scapegoat for national dilemmas. Mammy-like devotion to white domesticity reinforces safe norms, but it elicits pandering pity rather than egalitarian respect. Although none of these stereotypes captures the complexity of black women's lives, they have been powerfully and regularly reproduced in American political discourse and popular culture since the Civil War. (pp. 96–97)

The impact of these stereotypes on Black women, as described by Harris-Perry, is complex. She states, "These myths influence how black women see themselves and how they understand their struggle" (p. 97). Alysha touches on this complexity when she says, "to what extent am I not operating freely?" She wonders if her desire to present herself as a business professional is a result of trying *not* to fall into a stereotype. Harris-Perry's research indicates that in wrestling with stereotypes placed *on them* by unjust societal racism, many Black women retreat into the "strong Black woman" descriptor. "In their struggle to stand upright in the crooked room, African American women have crafted a new frame of reference: the strong black woman . . . but the strength myth has emotional and political consequences of its own" (p. 179).

Alysha's pedagogical mastery and historical expertise has led to many opportunities. Her contributions to AP African American Studies include curriculum writing, envisioning the course, and even being first author on the textbook. Her pedagogical mastery has been recognized by national organizations such as PBS Learning, and Gilder Lehrman, where she now sits on the board of directors. Yet, her "imposter syndrome" inhibits her capacity to forego opportunities that overly tax her. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) engaged in a study investigating the effects of the "strong Black woman" trope on the internal lives of Black women. After interviewing 58 Black women over the course of six years, Beauboeuf-Lafontant highlights how this label has complex psychological effects on Black women. One of her findings indicates that labeling Black women "strong" is often a way to extract unjust amounts of labor from them without leaving room for human, emotional responses to such high, often unmanageable, expectations. In actuality, these "expectations of strength pave the way for the disempowerment of Black women" (p. 105). Beauboeuf-Lafontant contends:

> In line with its justification of inequities, the controlling image of strength asserts that a weak Black woman either buckles under life and its nonnegotiable caregiving pressures, or is unacceptably focused on her own needs. Self-knowledge and an examination of one's life as a multidimensional human being are not part of the experience of being strong. (p. 105)

Alysha expressed her complex inner thoughts ("it's a lot, a lot . . .") regarding the work she does and the household in which she is central, paralleling Beauboeuf-Lafontant's findings of the inner turmoil Black women face as they try to attend to all of their roles. Harris-Perry

(2011) contends that, “what begins as empowering self-definition can quickly become a prison . . . [because] they are validated, admired, and praised based on how they behave, not on who they are” (p. 185). This leads to untenable societal expectations of Black women because as they experience the emotions that often accompany overwhelm, the “strong Black woman” expectation leaves little room for their humanity.

> Fostering a view of self as impervious to adversity can inadvertently habituate Black girls and young women to a life filled with double standards and a lack of concern for them as human beings who can be hurt and who should not be harmed. (p. 82)

It is important that in our efforts to retain Black women pedagogues like Alysha, who make indelible impacts on their students, scholars and practitioners (and our whole society) assess unjust biases that dehumanize and harm the Black women pedagogues that children (and society) need.

What All Pedagogues Can Learn from Ms. Butler

Alysha’s pedagogy is an outpouring of her identity, personality, and lived experience which underscores the contextual nature of portraiture. No one can *be* Ms. Butler, but Ms. Butler. However, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1994) suggest, “A persistent irony—recognized and celebrated by novelists, poets, and playwrights—is that as one moves closer to the unique characteristics of a person or place, one discovers the universal” (p. 14). Accepting that “in the particular, lies the general” (p. 14), pedagogues can gain new understandings by examining Ms. Butler’s metaphorical portrait of liberatory pedagogy.

Rich with texture and color is Alysha’s relationship with her subject matter and instructional prowess. She unabashedly refers to herself as historian, scholar, and professional in her field and her many reputable roles are evidence of her competence. Ms. Butler’s commitment to ongoing personal learning and growth is reflected by her students' engagement with her instruction. Alysha's prioritization of her students' academic development is also exemplary; her scaffolds imply she expects *all* of her students to be academically successful.

The subject of the portrait is not individual, but collective because of the symbiotic humanization within her classroom; and the viewer is enraptured by the radiance of the collective within the portrait. Alysha elevates the humanity of historical figures, her students, and herself through her praxis. Through the *womanist care* and *other mothering*, Alysha helps students develop their identities, rooted in radiant ethno-racial pride. In doing all of this, she, in turn, humanizes herself—reflecting the very ancestors she introduces to her students. Within this symbiosis is also the dissonant thread, the harm she endures from societal stereotypes that cause her to question the identity she so beautifully exudes. As students learn about themselves through Alysha's pedagogy they are liberated from the strongholds of the "white gaze" (Morrison, 1992).

Finally, the portrait is impressionistic, not static. Her learning community is in motion whether through creative expression, reflective growth, or physical action. Students who encounter Ms. Butler's pedagogy are offered opportunities to develop critical consciousness and "awaken from the matrix." In building understandings of oppression and liberation, students are motivated towards action and resistance of hegemony, with Ms. Butler ready and waiting to facilitate experiential learning opportunities. A seat in Ms. Butler's classroom is a liberatory opening for identity development, critical consciousness, and academic success where students can engage in "freedom dreaming" (Love, 2019) alongside their teacher.

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Manuscript Three

The Potentiality of Otherwise Feminisms: A Critical Autoethnography of Shedding Whiteness and Embracing *Ubuntu*

"I'm confused, you say that you are going to use Black feminist epistemology and theory as your framework, and I'm here for it, but then . . . I don't see it in here . . . . Do you go around asking white men for permission to use their theories? Use it!" I stare at the zoom screen, my face reddening as my Black feminist mentor and committee member, Audrey (pseudonym), calls me out for my trepidation in utilizing the scholarship she and I had studied together during an intensive independent study. That day, I was defending my preliminary exam, a paper that was written to convince my committee I was ready to begin my dissertation planning. The committee was complimentary of my work, giving feedback as expected and I was diligently notating revisions. When the conversation turned to Audrey—who was on Zoom from her new home in Utah—the momentum of the meeting screeched to a halt. Audrey was right. I had not gone "all in" with Black feminist (BF) epistemology, theory, and methods. I was dipping my toe in, afraid to embrace the field completely for fear I would do something wrong or open myself up to BF critique.

What I did not realize in the moment was that I had allowed whiteness, specifically the fear of unmasking (hooks, 1994) and my desire to be "comfortable" to marginalize the body of scholarship I knew should guide my work. As discussed on many occasions with Audrey, I have a stubborn desire to find ways for Black and white women feminists to embrace solidarity in order to combat hegemonic strongholds in education. I am also soberly aware that many past attempts of this solidarity have ended in white betrayal that harms Black women (Cooper, 2018; hooks, 1994; Nash & Pinto, 2021). As a white woman, anti-racist, feminist scholar embracing

BF epistemology, theory, and methods as my central frame, I *am* in fact opening myself up to critique and *will be* “unmasked.” However, I need not *fear* critique and unmasking as these are necessary steps towards building an “otherwise feminism” (Greene, 1995; Nash & Pinto, 2021) built on solidarity. The goal of this critical autoethnographic work is to examine the possibilities and tensions of feminist solidarity, with a commitment to “use it!”—that is, embrace BF epistemology, thought, and methods alongside BF critiques of whiteness, including my own whiteness.

Methodology

Stemming from traditional ethnographic research methodology within the field of anthropology, autoethnography strategically turns a researcher’s gaze inward to examine the “self” within the context of a culture or society (Chang, 2008; Poulos, 2021). Poulos (2021) states, “Autoethnography, simply put, is an observational, participatory, and reflective research method that uses writing about the self in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis” (pp. 4–5). The personal stories, experiences, and memories of the researcher are treated as primary data; “yet, individual stories are framed in the context of a bigger story, a story of the society, to make autoethnography ethnographic” (Chang, 2008, p. 49). Ellis and Bochner (2003) discuss autoethnographic methodology as post-structural, rejecting the notion that research can be “written from nowhere by nobody” (p. 200) as positivistic methodology might imply. Thus, autoethnography is the ultimate acceptance that researchers in qualitative inquiry are the instrument, actively generating knowledge during the research process.

Formally defined, “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis &

Bochner, p. 209). True to post-structural methodology, autoethnography is varied and dependent on the researcher. It can take forms like reflexive journaling, creative writing, poetry, prose, and performance, among others.

While similar in self-focused nature, autoethnography diverges from autobiography and memoir genres because of its aim to gain *cultural* understanding through oneself and others (Chang, 2008). Ethnography is entwined with conceptualization of culture, defining which is not a simple feat. Thus, I align with Chang's (2008) working definition of culture that involves seven premises. Of these premises, three are particularly salient for this study:

> *Individuals are not prisoners of culture*. Rather, they exercise a certain level of autonomy when acquiring, transmitting, altering, creating and shedding cultural trains while interacting with others. . . . *Individuals can discard a membership of a cultural group with or without "shedding" their cultural traits*. . . . *Without securing official memberships in certain cultural groups, obvious traits of membership, or members' approvals, outsiders can acquire cultural traits and claim cultural affiliations with other cultural groups.* (pp. 21–23, italics original).

Chang's framework of culture as related to autoethnography is an important foundation for this study because my desire to shed cultural traits of "whiteness" (defined below) rests on Chang's cultural theory. In order to "shed whiteness" however, one must critically interrogate its presence, a goal central to this critical autoethnography.

Critical Autoethnography

Critical autoethnography overlays the examination of the researcher's perspectives with a critical theoretical lens. Boylorn, an African American woman scholar, is foundational to the shaping of the method. In a discussion of her draw to critical autoethnography, she and her co-author explain, “[Boylorn] was intrigued by ethnography, but felt lost in exclusively white male gazes and interpretations . . . she began to write narratives from her positionality, identifying how and why the particularities of her experience informed her scholarship” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021, p. 1). Boylorn’s positionality as a Black woman in academia who embraces critical theory made her and Orbe’s work of particular interest for my study. In defining critical autoethnography, Boylorn and Orbe place emphasis on self-interrogation, cultural accountability, attention to the lived experiences of marginalized groups and individuals, and the historicity of experience. The method incorporates theories that demystify power, oppression, and hegemony and uses these theories as a lens to examine how the researcher navigates society under these constraints. The authors state:

> Critical praxis autoethnography . . . legitimates first-person accounts of discrimination and difference and can therefore aid in the critique of colonialism, racism, sexism, nationalism, regionalism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism. However, it can also simultaneously reveal commonality within the human experience, something that encourages connection as a means toward greater appreciation of how all individuals have fundamental needs for respect, dignity, and self-expression. In this regard, autoethnography can help challenge assumptions with “truths” that are situated within assumptions of difference or similarity. (p. 10)

Thus, critical autoethnographers commit to “improving cultural conditions through critique” (p. 6).

This study follows many of the methods of autoethnography outlined by Chang (2008) and centers the criticality described by Boylorn and Orbe (2021). The criticality of the approach is crucial for adherence to Black feminist methods because utilizing Black feminist thought as critique will aid in the decentralization of whiteness throughout the autoethnographic study. Further, critical autoethnography makes space for me to investigate my role in the oppressor/oppressed relationship described by Freire (1970/2018). Tilley-Lubbs (2016) addresses the unique aspects of critical autoethnography stating, "Intense reflexivity and introspection, examined through the perspective of critical pedagogy, help me to understand some of the cultural complexities that have shaped me as a researcher and a pedagogue" (p. 3). Further, Tilley-Lubbs describes how combining critical pedagogy and autoethnography allows the author to engage in self-analysis, "that forces me to examine my own cultural perspectives as a member of the dominant society . . . examining myself in a systematic and transparent way" (p. 6).

Critical autoethnography is a method well-situated in what Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) frame *intersectional qualitative research*. "Intersectional methodologies are an intentional interruption to Western Eurocentric male-centered knowledge claims and productions because intersectional methodologies attempt to center the cultural experiences, values, and beliefs of the research participants, including the researcher herself" (p. 21). The goal of an intersectional researcher is to "counter hegemony, cultural domination, and master narratives" (p. 21) in all aspects of the qualitative inquiry process. Esposito and Evans-Winters explicitly outline critical autoethnography as an intersectional approach to qualitative research stating:

> Intersectionality would require the critical (recall that intersectionality is a critical theory) autoethnographer to center conversations of power and privilege in their personal narrations and to examine how their lived experiences have contributed to their cultural insights, perspectives of the social world, and social phenomenon under study. (p. 64)

Thus, decisions for this study about which data are considered evidence, *whose* voices count, and how the data should be analyzed and interrogated are made through an intersectional and critical lens.

Black Feminist Theory

The field of "feminism" in academia and society can be tied back to middle class, white women that rebutted patriarchal family structures that required them to be housewives (hooks, 1984/2015). In her critique of "white feminism" hooks outlines the work of early white feminist scholars and examines their lack of attention to racism as an oppressive condition. Feminism that only addresses patriarchy—the subordination of women (Hill Collins, 2000)—and neglects contemplations of the multi-layered oppressions of racism, classism, and other oppressive conditions cannot fully address and include women of all races, ethnicities, abilities, and socioeconomic statuses (Cooper, 2018; Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984/2015, 1994; Kendall, 2020; Nash & Pinto, 2021). "[White] Feminist analyses of woman's lot tend to focus exclusively on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to construct feminist theory" (hooks, 1984/2015, p. 14). Black feminist theory, in contrast, stems from the intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000) perspective—that women of color, Black women in particular, are triply (or more) oppressed in white supremacist, patriarchal society.

> Occupying such a position, we bear the brunt of sexist, racist, and classist oppression. At the same time we are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that we are allowed no institutionalized "other" that we can exploit or oppress . . . . This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our world view differs from those who have a degree of privilege. (hooks, 1984, pp. 14–15)

I have chosen the perspective of Black feminists as a heterogenous collective (Hill Collins, 2000) to frame this study. Further, hooks (1984/2015) states, "black women [have] a special vantage point [in critiquing] dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create counter-hegemony" (p. 15). It is important, however, to make clear that in referring to "Black feminism" as a field, I am consciously avoiding essentializing the multitude of perspectives that contribute to the body of scholarship. Hill Collins (2000) addresses essentializing:

> it is important to stress that no homogeneous Black *woman's* standpoint exists . . . . Instead, it may be more accurate to say that a Black *women's* collective standpoint does exist, one characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenge. Because it both recognizes and aims to incorporate heterogeneity in crafting Black women's oppositional knowledge, this Black *women's* standpoint eschews essentialism in favor of democracy. (p. 28)

Adhering to Hill Collins (2000), I examined Black feminist scholarship from various time periods, disciplines (i.e. women's and gender studies, education, sociology, criminal justice), and from varying intersectional identities (i.e. cis-gender, queer, non-binary, lesbian) in order to glean as many heterogeneous viewpoints within the collective as possible in the scope of my research. I also frame this study concurrently with a critique of whiteness, both on macro-societal and personal levels to highlight areas of tension.

Defining Whiteness

Whiteness, a sociological construct, describes ways in which people have used race to justify unrestrained, hegemonic power over others who are not described as "white." Leonardo (2002) describes whiteness as separate from "white people" in that, "'Whiteness' is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color” (p. 31). In other words, individuals can, regardless of their race, enact the worldview of whiteness by adhering to the ideology that white is superior and/or the “norm.”

Whiteness has been present in the Americas for centuries. Armed with white supremacist values that whiteness was akin to enlightenment, the earliest European “explorers” colonized the Americas and began a massive genocide of indigenous people. This was intertwined with the enslavement of Africans and other “non-white” groups (Wynter, 2003). Throughout U.S. history, immigrants from all over the world have been subject to ethno-racial discrimination; many light-skinned groups of people were denied the title of “white” and the accompanying privileges and power. Critical theorist, Giroux, contends that “historical amnesia” (2020) contributes to contemporary society’s disregard of the injustices and hegemony deployed by whiteness. Simply put, if we “forget” how whiteness motivated the earliest colonizers and adhere to colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) that ignores injustices caused by white supremacy and/or whiteness, the status quo will prevail.

Critiques of Whiteness

The field of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) plays an important role in mapping out ways in which whiteness and white supremacy oppress and harm *everyone* in U.S. society to varying degrees. CWS is particularly tied to the field of teacher education, aiming to infuse anti-racist pedagogy in schools. Matias (2016), a prominent scholar of color who is situated in the field of CWS describes, “critical whiteness studies uses a transdisciplinary approach to investigate the phenomenon of whiteness, how it is manifested, exerted, defined, recycled, transmitted, and maintained, and how it ultimately impacts the state of race relations” (p. 34). Interrogating whiteness, as Leonardo (2002) contends, is not without its own complexities because even well-meaning, anti-racist white people can enact whiteness in the very spaces they wish to eliminate it. In a contemporary critique, however, Mock Muñoz de Luna, Hernández Adkins, and Ohito (2023) elucidate ways in which this field falls short of accomplishing the goal of anti-racist pedagogy. The authors pose the following critical questions regarding CWS:

> What is the end goal of critically studying whiteness? More directly and troublingly: Is CWS concerned at all with Black thought? Which is to say, does CWS aim to cultivate Black liberation and Black life? What can a school of thought divorced from its complicity in anti-Blackness in (teacher) education produce with regard to knowledge of the human as a heterogeneous category? (p. 6)

This well-argued critique concludes with potentialities. The authors posit that critiques of whiteness must be grounded in a “joyful death of whiteness” (p. 5) and engage in “Black thought as a harbinger of otherwise worlds” (p. 5). Matias (2023) responds in agreement with this critique, yet maintains the importance of critiquing whiteness. She jointly rebuts white navel gazing and emphasizes Black (and other people of color’s) perspectives on whiteness. She states:

> Plainly stated, whiteness studies that fixates too narrowly on white people and the betterment of white people into antiracist beings are in and of itself too self-indulgent, narcissistic, and self-serving. Whiteness studies, upon its conceptualization by scholars of Color, was initially made to reveal how people of color experience racism . . . and, henceforth, must always contend with its connectivity. (p. 1435)

Rather than claiming the field of CWS as a theoretical framework, this critical autoethnography is crafted by centering Black feminist thought and interrogating whiteness through a BF lens. I also refer to the foundational critical whiteness works of Matias and Leonardo, both scholars of color but not Black women, because of their transparency on centering voices of color.

Methods

Data collection

One of the primary documents of my autoethnographic research is a reflexivity journal I began in 2023. Chang (2008) refers to personal recall as a tool to "build the database for your cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 72). Written as a thematically focused "autobiographical timeline" (p. 73) the journal opens with memories of my first course in Africana Studies; describes my first experience reading a Black feminist piece; tells how I met my advisor, Audrey; describes the moment I realized I was a feminist; and recounts several occurrences of "stepping in whiteness and dragging it around the room" a short-hand statement Julia (pseudonym, my colleague described below) and I use to describe cringeworthy moments we have deployed whiteness. The journal is a combination of memories, reflections, and questions regarding whiteness and my journey learning about Black feminisms. As I engaged in the portraiture study[4], I also kept separate memos within my fieldnotes that were related to my autoethnography. I wrote various thoughts in the margins and would then reflect on those in-situ thoughts afterward in the reflexivity journal document.

The primary subject of an autoethnography is the self, the researcher. However, Chang (2008) cautions against relying only on oneself for data and recommends, "[Researchers] can easily complement 'internal' data generated from researchers' memory with 'external' data from outside sources, such as interviews, documents, and artifacts. Multiple sources of data can provide bases for triangulation that will help enhance the content accuracy and validity of the autoethnographic writing" (p. 55). Therefore, I included interview data from three individuals[5] that have worked with me in varying capacities. I interviewed Audrey, my advisor and mentor in

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[4] This manuscript is part of a three-manuscript dissertation

[5] Names are all pseudonyms.

Black feminisms; Julia, a colleague and friend who also studies whiteness and education; and data from conversations and interviews with Ella, a friend and co-investigator on a previous study that centers Black feminist epistemologies. Because this study directly addresses race and ethnicity as a central theme, it is important to share each interviewee's racial identities. Audrey is a Black Barbadian woman and Black feminist scholar; Julia is a white woman and a critical education scholar; and Ella is a Black woman, historian, and practitioner in education. All interviews were recorded on zoom and then transcribed into text.

Data Analysis

The framework for data analysis resulted from a deep investigation of Black feminist critiques of whiteness. Given my alignment with intersectional research methods (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022) it was integral to center Black feminist critiques of whiteness and definitions of solidarity as an analytic frame. Boylorn and Orbe (2021) state, "Critical autoethnography is concerned with culture and power, and it is also concerned with constructions and theorizations of cultural identities, intersectionality, and social inequalities" (p. 6). The literature chosen for this framework was selected with the following criteria: Black feminist theory and critique, recommendations from a field expert (in this case, my BF mentor), and researcher's familiarity with the scholarship. Further, I chose BF scholars that span several decades of BF thought from foundational to contemporary. I re-read written works from the following BF authors: Cooper (2018); Dillard (2012); hooks (1989, 1994); Kendall (2020); King (2015); Lorde (1984/2015); Love (2019, 2023); and Nash (2019, 2021). While reading each piece, I noted two big ideas: one, how does this scholar critique whiteness/white feminism/white women; and two, what does this scholar say about the potential for white and Black feminists working in solidarity? Underneath each big category, I recorded common statements or thoughts among the scholars and those became the *a priori* or *provisional* codes (Saldaña, 2021) I used in analyzing my data. For example, a common topic discussed by BF authors is the tendency for white women feminists to absolve themselves of racist behavior because they were “not aware” of how their actions were harmful (hooks, 1989; Kendall, 2020; King, 2015). This critique was coded as “whiteness as ‘unknowing’” and applied to the data accordingly during analysis. A total of 19 provisional codes were established as a result of examining the BF literature. Once the codes were developed, I excerpted the data and applied the codes accordingly. The codes were revised (Saldaña, 2021) and added to as necessary as the analysis unfolded. Some of the provisional codes were only applied once while others were applied numerous times. During the second round of coding (Miles et al., 2014) I reviewed the codes and collapsed them into categories. For example, I combined the codes “white-centric behavior” and “atta girl recognition” as concepts reflecting a similar phenomenon. After this second round of coding and categorization, themes became evident and are discussed in the autoethnography.

Whiteness Intrusion

For the past two decades, my intention has been to contribute to the study of equitable education practices. However, my ability to do so without causing harm to colleagues of color has varied throughout my time in the field because, as Kendall (2020) notes, intent does *not* trump impact. While analyzing my reflexive journal, it became clear that there were many intrusions of whiteness that needed examination through the lens of Black feminist critique. These intrusions fall under the thematic categories of presumed innocence, white emotionality, and white-centric behavior.

Presumed Innocence

I still remember the moment I "woke up" to systemic racism. I was in a *Sociology of Education* course in my master's program—that's right, it took me 22 years to wake up—and read Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* for the first time. Reading the disparate comparison of schooling experiences for white students and students of color ignited something within. I reflect on this experience in my journal entry:

> In 2010, I was in a sociology of education course and learned through Jonathan Kozol's Savage Inequalities that my education failed to develop critical consciousness about the state of society. I didn't know that African Americans in the U.S. were still experiencing inequitable conditions. I believed that MLK Jr. and his crew of dedicated civil rights activists dismantled Jim Crow segregation and now the Black community had equal rights in our country. I went to an extremely diverse high school in Springfield, VA and everyone seemed to be doing just fine there.

The "awakening" I experienced was the beginning stage of the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2018; hooks, 1994) that motivated me to continue learning about education inequities. My desire to study unjust schooling conditions is noted by both Audrey and Julia when asked (in separate interviews) to reflect on their interpretations of my research agenda:

> *Julia:* I mean just sort of like the things that just pop in my head immediately. . . . Your interests are always about . . . questions of equity. Like bringing critical questions to what we would call "status quo" sort of situations in schools or in society. I mean in a kind of a general sense, because I think that's important, that the question of equity is first and foremost kind of like your motivator and justice.

> *Audrey:* I understand your research interests as very much tied to your own philosophy as a person who is interested in equitable distribution of education across minoritized and marginalized populations.

For many years, my focus on "equity" in education lacked a critical attention to how having been born in a white body has shaped me. When asked about how she has experienced moments of uncritical whiteness with me, Julia states:

> *Julia:* And I remember first having conversations with you about it really, when we did that equity literacy, 4-part series . . . So, we were talking on Zoom . . . because in that presentation, I remember, she was talking about her current book then that was called, "Don't be a Karen." And I remember you responding and saying, "I'm really struggling with this." Even then you weren't defensive in that like . . . really terrible way white people can be, but you still had self-protection like, "I don't really like . . . I don't see how this metaphor is helpful."

As Julia described her memory in our interview, I immediately recalled that emotion. I was defensive that my name (although it is spelled differently) was being targeted as a prototype of "bad white woman." I felt ashamed and embarrassed that I shared a name with a cultural meme of white women behaving badly. I remember thinking, *not all Karens are bad! I'm a good Karin! I research educational equity!* While it is understandable that I felt territorial about my name, leaving the emotionality I was experiencing uninterrogated makes space for white defensiveness that often deflects the valid arguments people of color are trying to convey. In this case, the use of "Karen" described manifestations of whiteness that sabotage anti-racist efforts; ironically, anti-racism was my self-proclaimed research agenda. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) address this anti-racist, racist conundrum stating:

> Being an anti-racist racist is not a contradiction in terms and is likely to be a more realistic appraisal of Whites who struggle with the push and pull effects of white privilege. White educators who are committed to the project of ending racism may find the phenomenon of white privilege repulsing *but are drawn to its enactment when time and place are convenient.* (p. 156, emphasis mine)

Without a commitment to ongoing reflexivity, I was culpable of enacting whiteness when I felt uncomfortable or emotional, even though my intention was to engage in anti-racism.

In the year that followed this event, I began a Ph.D. program in Education Foundations with the aim of researching ways to dismantle oppressive structures in education. The first course in which I enrolled was *Theories in Africana Studies.* It was in that course that I was overwhelmed by my ignorance and humbled at how much I had to learn. Entering the course, I was fuzzy about Marxism had no clue who Fanon was. I knew nothing about Black feminism, how to pronounce "hegemony," and had not considered that the Caribbean had anything to do with the history of slavery and the African diaspora.

These gaps in white women's (and white society's) knowledge, yet desire to research race and racism, is widely discussed by Black feminist scholars. The "presumed innocence" of unknowing white women is critiqued by Kendall (2020):

> There's nothing feminist about having so many resources at your fingertips and choosing to be ignorant. Nothing empowering or enlightening in deciding that intent trumps impact. Especially when the consequences aren't going to be experienced by you, but will instead be experienced by someone from a marginalized community (p. 6).

These gaps are not benign and *innocent.* While many of the gaps in white women educators' knowledge can be attributed to systemic erasure of Black history (King, 2015) women designating themselves as "feminist" are culpable for their lack of knowledge, a construct King (2015) names "dysconscious racism." Dysconsciousness "denote[s] the limited and distorted understandings my students [white women preservice teachers] have about inequity and cultural diversity—understandings that make it difficult for them to act in favor of truly equitable education" (p. 112). Thus, "not knowing" about Black thought, theory, philosophy, and history in an age where information is accessible and prolific perpetuates harm—especially through dysconscious white women who work in academic realms of racial equity and justice. In her foundational BF text (1984/2015) hooks states:

> White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state (p. 4)

Although hooks' argument was directed at the women's studies movement of the time, it is still relevant today in the fields of feminism and social justice. Further, she contends:

> Until white supremacy is understood and attacked by white women there can be no bonding between them and multi-ethnic groups of women . . . [so that] they will not perpetuate and maintain racial oppression or, unconsciously or consciously, abuse and hurt non-white women. (p. 55)

hooks makes clear that feminism without deep examinations of and action against white supremacy is not feminism at all because it excludes and harms women who have multi-layered oppressions. This is echoed by Nash and Pinto (2021) who state, "it is clear that the term 'white feminism' is an oxymoron: white feminism is decidedly *not* feminism . . . it is simply 'white supremacy in heels'" (p. 887).

White Emotionality

After a full year of investigating Black studies and Black feminist thought, I was selected to present a paper at a national conference, American Educational Studies Association (AESA), that focuses on critical theory and pedagogy. I describe my experience at the AESA conference in the following journal excerpt.

> My BF mentor (Audrey) and I proposed a paper to AESA and were accepted. The paper was about how white women should engage in Black feminisms in order to serve their Black girl students well. Audrey and I had planned to present our paper in the Black girlhood strand at the conference. Unfortunately, Audrey had to take family leave during that semester. I was faced with the decision whether I should present this work solo, without my Black feminist advisor and guide. She encouraged me to do it.
>
> I was absolutely terrified. The days leading up to the presentation, I couldn't help but wonder what all these Black women would think of me up there talking about BF. I rehearsed my intro over and over, pointing out that I never intended to present this research without Audrey and I understand how out of place I must seem. I tried to convey my burgeoning understandings about the body of literature and how I genuinely wanted to contribute to the field with critical whiteness perspective. When presenting, I was scared shitless. The story I was telling myself was that me being on a panel for Black girlhood studies was insulting to Black women, that I very likely did lots of research poorly, that no one wanted to hear what I had to say, and that it was a mistake to come and do this. Some of that story was true. Based on the reactions of the audience, from my perspective, they seemed skeptical. One woman mentioned she didn't think I spent enough time reflexively interrogating my own whiteness. Another woman discussed how

> hard it is for her to be a Black woman in academia (directed at me). No one said anything "positive" about my contribution. I was desperately seeking some sort of pat on the back—it didn't come. After the presentation, I went into my hotel room and had a complete snotty-tear meltdown. On repeat in my mind was "they (the Black feminists in the room) hated it." I wanted to rip up my paper, throw it away, and never present at this conference ever again. I didn't know what I was thinking putting myself out there.

My colleague, Julia, was also in the room that day and recounts her perception of the experience in our interview after I asked her about instances of "whiteness intrusion," a code I developed to describe when whiteness seems to pop into the picture, in our interactions.

> *Julia:* you know, I've wondered . . . You were so emotional after your first AESA presentation . . . I think that whiteness was intruding there . . . . Some of it was a perfect storm, because you were the last day so your anxiety had been building. You ended up having to do it alone, which, no matter the topic that would have thrown you. And then the fact that this was in Black girlhood studies rather than critical whiteness studies element of [AESA] . . . and you felt that was not right . . . you hadn't earned your place there without Audrey. But you were already . . . before it even started . . . just a powder keg waiting to burst into tears. You were also literally quoting a study by the person you're presenting with (laughing) like, I can't even . . . (laughing) which is totally stressful, because I'm sure your mind is like, *If I have summarized incorrectly one piece she has an opportunity to tell me that I'm wrong, and she knows her work better than anyone else* and all of that. And so then at the end of it, you asked that room full of professional scholars something to the effect of, "So after this, is there any advice or anything that you would have that you think that white teachers, white scholars, need to

> be either aware of or learn, or read?" And they answered your question. I think a lot of the conversation would have directed to the other scholar because she had a bigger name, you, yourself, were quoting her study and that is the norm of these conferences. But you asked a direct question, and then they started answering. It's sort of like asking again that white question of Black women in the room, "What else do we need to do?" *When you had just very well stated the research exists—Read it!* [BF scholarship]
>
> *Karin:* (laughs, shakes head) That is so true.
>
> *Julia:* Then afterwards you just—not there, you held it, you did so well. Listening, giving attention, all of that. But then afterwards . . . you just sort of collapsed in the hotel room, and just thought you did terribly.

"White women tears" are often critiqued by BF scholars because of their propensity for harm and danger to Black and Brown bodies (Cooper, 2018; Nash & Pinto, 2021). White women who strategically cry to position themselves as "threatened" by African American men put them at risk for police brutality, and as documented by Ida B. Wells, white mob lynchings. In contemporary times, these women are dubbed, "Karens" and "Beckys." In her critique of white woman tears, Cooper states:

> White-lady tears might seem not to be a big deal, but they are actually quite dangerous. When white women signal through their tears that they feel unsafe, misunderstood, or attacked, the whole world rises to their defense. The mythic nature of white female vulnerability compels protective impulses to arise in all men, regardless of race (p. 175).

In this particular instance, I felt ashamed and humiliated in a professional setting because of the story I was telling myself about "doing a bad job" and this led to my personal emotional breakdown. Thankfully, my "white woman tears" were in private and did not leave my hotel room. Yet, their presence in this vignette also indicates white emotionality that points to other areas of whiteness I had not examined. Matias (2016) contends that white individuals that intend to engage in anti-racist theory and praxis must grapple with ways in which whiteness creeps into their work, and further understand that in a racialized society that elevates whiteness, no white person is exempt from the influences of the status quo. She states:

> Alas, the conundrum of whiteness: that which is so invisible it ceases to exist in the conscious mind but lives out in subconscious, repressed ways. Further, regardless of the attempts to abolish, lose, ditch, and/or push out whiteness, it will forever remain as an incriminating ink stain on the white rug. (p. 111)

The complex work of anti-racism requires interrogating instances of emotionality in order to elucidate areas of unexamined whiteness intrusion so as not to lean on the misnomer that “intent trumps impact” (Kendall, 2020, p. 6) and cause further harm. Instead of casting off instances of whiteness intrusion in anti-racist discourse, Leonardo (2010) encourages the white, anti-racist scholars to navigate the tensions of a contradictory space. He states:

> Affectively, within a white subject’s self-understanding he cannot be racist and anti-racist at the same time. This creates equilibrium for many white educators, which allows them to continue with anti-racist work with their identity relatively intact. But this equilibrium is tenuous and evidence of an affective strategy that is whiteness, which shields Whites from the violence (even necessary self-violence) of critical race dialogue. Many white educators are neither prepared for (nor skilled at navigating) this contradictory space. If Whites are going to experience fundamental change through dialogue with people of color, an affective theory of whiteness encourages them to embrace uncertainty,

> contradiction, and even discomfort not for its own sadomasochistic sake but out of solidarity with the Other (p. 156).

Thus, as Julia noted in her interview, by attempting to ascribe my emotionality in that presentation as thinking I was "doing a bad job," I was actually casting off interrogation of an instance in which emotion was telling me something about my whiteness.

The emotionality I was experiencing in that time was based in fear. hooks (1994) discusses this fear stating, "what many white women fear is being unmasked by black women (p. 107). The "unmasking" hooks is referring to here is in reference to the historic white woman and Black servant dynamic present after periods of enslavement but during the era of de jure segregation. In that time, Black women often served as domestic servants and "witnessed the gap between white women's words and their deeds, [and] saw contradictions and inadequacies" (p. 107) which led white women to assert racial power over Black women for fear they would be exposed. Although the servant/served relationship has diminished over time, the relational dynamic often remains. The emotion of fear in that space (a space I was invited to speak in) was an indication of an area of whiteness I had not yet examined.

Another lesson to be learned by my white emotionality in that space is *projection*. In my reflection of how I felt before and during my presentation, I state,

> The story I was telling myself was that me being on a panel for Black girlhood studies was insulting to Black women, that I very likely did lots of research poorly, that no one wanted to hear what I had to say, and that it was a mistake to come and do this.

In reality, the scholars that attended had chosen to attend, the presentation was peer-reviewed and vetted, and presenting research to a body of scholars in which I am a member is not a "mistake." The assumptions I was holding are evidence of *projection*, because I was experiencing white emotions that I had yet to interrogate, I assumed those emotions were caused by others, or the "situation," rather than my own lack of reflection. Furthermore, it is possible that there were Black women in the room that were encouraged by my presence and attempts at solidarity and my defensive posture prevented me from considering that possibility. Matias (2016) speaks to projection, stating:

> What I find most tragic is that instead of digging deeply into what makes one so ashamed when realizing something about oneself, some emotionally project their angst onto the one who is doing the revealing, i.e., the person who is indeed bringing to the surface the latent and repressed emotions of shame. (p. 170)

A consequence of unexamined white emotionality includes undermining the very goals of anti-racist, feminist solidarity. Nash and Pinto (2021) describe this stating, "They [white woman tears] are also part of the narrative of the emotional life of feminism, whereby white tears 'betray' the imagined union between feminists and women writ large" (p. 890). Feminist solidarity and unity is dependent on critical examinations of whiteness, starting with the self. As Love (2019) succinctly states, "One cannot enter freedom-dreaming spaces holding on to dark people's nightmares. We cannot have conversations about racism without talking about Whiteness" (p. 118). White women—even those who seek anti-racist solidarity with Black women scholars—are going to have moments of emotionality, projection, and other "incriminating ink stains on the white rug" (Matias, 2016) because whiteness is still leveraged in society and racism is the "normal order of things" (Ladson-Billings, 2021). However, I have learned from my AESA, white-girl tears experience that these moments of whiteness intrusion can also catalyze awareness and growth opportunities. This reflexivity allows me to enter "freedom dreaming" (Love, 2019) spaces with courageous vulnerably, acknowledging that even if I experience "unmasking" (hooks, 1994), solidarity will result.

White-Centric Behavior

As referred to previously, Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) frame the contradiction of white scholars' anti-racist agendas alongside inevitable insertions of whiteness within "freedom dreaming" (Love, 2019) spaces. One way in which whiteness intrudes is through white-centric behavior. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) describe this as a "technology of whiteness" stating:

> One of the technologies of whiteness is its ability to project itself as its own alibi. In other words, Whites have built anti-racist understandings that construct the racist as always someone else, the problem residing elsewhere in other Whites. In some instances, this alibi is a white subject's former self (p. 151)

This stance assumes that an individual can move beyond racism, even within a society that is still structured in racial hierarchy and in which a white person still benefits. An example of white-centric behavior in spaces that *could* be those of feminist solidarity is desire to be the "good" white person—someone who has an "alibi." I recall, in my reflexivity journal, an instance of white-centric behavior in which Julia and I were culpable at the following year's AESA conference.

> Bettina Love! We arrive early to get good seats. Second row, center. The front row seats are filled with adoring Black women scholars, including Cynthia Dillard. Whoa. Bettina takes the podium and Julia turns to me and says, "this feels like church." I agree—Love speaks the words that feel like fuel to my mission of education equity. They resemble the feeling of YES in my gut.

> But then. There's a moment of . . . this is not for me. Yes, it's available *to* me, but it's not *for* me. It's for those Black women I'm behind, and when I turn around it's for those women I'm sitting in front of. Why did we sit right in front? The adoring White girls once again made this about them.

Kendall (2020) aptly describes white-centric behavior left unexamined. She states:

> It's not at all helpful for some white feminists to make demands of women of color out of a one-sided idea of sisterhood and call that solidarity. Sisterhood is a mutual relationship between equals . . . . And yes, sometimes words involved are harsh. But as adults, as people who are doing hard work, you cannot expect your feelings to be the center of someone else's struggle. In fact, the most realistic approach to solidarity is one that assumes that sometimes it simply isn't your turn to be the focus of the conversation. (pp. 6–7)

The internal-narrative that whiteness and white supremacy apply to those "other" white people contributed to a white-centric moment for Julia and I. We were so excited to be part of the lecture that we inserted ourselves in the middle of a group of women who, frankly, should have been able to enjoy that experience without whiteness in the middle of the second row. I am not inferring that our seat selection was hugely problematic behavior, instead it is an instance of "death by a thousand cuts"—white-centric behavior that Black women (and other people of color) endure. I reflect on this instance as a paradox; our flippant decision that potentially contributes to the very barriers I seek to dismantle.

Feminism Otherwise

Alongside her critiques of white feminism, hooks' foundational works describe otherwise possibilities of feminist solidarity. In her description of what this could look like, hooks (1994) states:

> It is time for us to create new models for interaction that take us beyond the servant-served encounter, ways of being that promote respect and reconciliation. . . . If black women and white women continue to express fear and rage without a commitment to move on through these emotions in order to explore new grounds for contact, our efforts to build an inclusive feminist movement will fail. . . . I am confident that women have the skills to make productive space for critical dissent dialogue even as we express intense emotions. (pp. 108–109)

The feminist solidarity hooks describes requires all parties to engage in dialogue with reflexivity, openness, and vulnerability. Yet, as contemporary BF scholars point out, the presence of whiteness often sabotages attempts at collaboration. Nash and Pinto (2021) are in contemporary agreement with hooks regarding a future, feminist solidarity; however, through a genealogy of BF critique they posit an elimination of any semblance of *white* feminism must first occur:

> White feminism is cast, then, as precisely what must be disavowed, cast off from the corpus of feminist theory and politics, in order to save feminism itself. To rage against white feminism, then, is to perform and make visible a set of feminist commitments that align with Black feminism, with 'intelligent rage,' with 'eloquent rage.' (p.887)

Re-working the White Feminine Self

Nash and Pinto (2021) describe reflexivity that contributes to feminist solidarity, "What Smith and Lorde collectively call for is for white women to engage in scholarly self-work precisely because of a belief that intellectual labor can rework the white feminine self" (p. 899).

This statement is particularly hopeful regarding feminist solidarity potentiality. They further claim that this is “rooted in study, in the intellectual work of contending with the scholarly production of women of color” (p. 899). Before attempting to collaborate with Black women scholars, I combatted the “unknowing,” dysconscious racism I was culpable of as a white woman scholar committed to anti-racist scholarship and praxis.

> *Journal Entry*: The first course I chose in my Ph.D. program was *Theories in Africana Studies.* I was drawn to this course because while I was developing understandings about inequities, I had no experience thinking about these conditions from the perspectives and theories of African-descended scholars. I wanted to know how individuals and groups of Black folks thought about the Black history and the current state of society.

The Africana studies course was humbling, it was there that I was introduced to the intellectual production and pedagogy of Black women scholars. With the help of my BF mentor, Audrey, I spent a summer diving deeply into BF theory. I reflected on this experience in my journal:

> Black feminist scholarship is so generous. For Black women, women who unjustly experience the intersection of racial and gender oppression, to be willing to pour their hearts into their work . . . that form of vulnerability feels like a gift. When I read Black feminist work, I listen. It’s like I’m on a walk with this scholar, and she is explaining her positionality with no walls. There are always walls in real-life. It makes sense, for all of history *whiteness* is available to white women, and Black women don’t know if she’ll pull it out as a trump card (pun intended). I want to say, not me! I won’t do that. But I probably will, and I’m even more dangerous if I can’t admit that. So the wall is there . . . and for now, I open the gift that is Black feminist scholarship and enjoy a wall-less walk with my Black women friends.

The generosity of Black women to share their inner-most worlds through scholarship changed me, not just intellectually, but also spiritually and emotionally. It was this transformation that I was grappling with when I wrote the paper I shared at AESA, the one with the tears. Here lies the tension: I was moved enough to begin engaging in the space, but I was not quite ready to engage with Black women, interpersonally, in the space because I was still early in the process of "re-working my white feminine self." Nash and Pinto (2021) and hooks (1984/2015) claim reworking the feminine self involves rejecting "white savior" conceptions of fighting racism because it requires accepting that racism very much affects white women (certainly not to the same degree of harm as Black women). "The transformative work of feminism is to enable white women to recognize how racism constrains their lives as well—albeit in ways quite different from Black women's experiences" (Nash & Pinto, 2021, p. 897). In an excerpt from a journal entry entitled "how racism has harmed me," I reflect on this very topic.

> Racism has harmed me by creating invisible divides between me and the humans I want to connect with. As a white woman, I constantly have to prove that I'm not going to harm my brothers and sisters of color. That is painful. It is painful to look at my actions and see that I have, in fact, unintentionally (and probably intentionally) harmed those I want to befriend because of whiteness.

For me, the interpersonal divides due to unyielding societal racism are the most painful. One of my deepest desires is to connect with fellow humans, and the consequences of racism in society include wariness and distrust of white people.

> Often black women do not respond to friendly overtures by white women for fear that they will be betrayed, that at some unpredictable moment the white woman will assert power. This fear of betrayal is linked with white female fear of exposure; clearly we need

> feminist psychoanalytic work that examines these feelings and the relational dynamics they produce. (hooks, 1994, p. 107)

The dynamic hooks described reflects how I experience the pains of racism as a white woman—an experience that is not analogous to Black suffering due to racism. To be clear, it is in "freedom dreaming" (Love, 2019) that I wish this divide would diminish, I recognize that given the current state of feminism, the divide is a protective factor for Black women to protect their humanity from those who cause very real harm.

An integral aspect of this re-working is doing so with other feminist women seeking to shed whiteness. Cooper highlights this need in her critique of whiteness using the phrase "get your girl" to refer to white women who fail to work together to combat both sexism and racism. She says, "This fact alone [white woman tears having diminishing returns in the face of patriarchy] should inspire an army of white feminists to arm themselves with boxes of Kleenex, march into the world of white women, and start doing the painful work of trying to change their sisters' minds" (p. 200). Julia and I discussed in our interview how we have heeded Cooper's wisdom to "get your girl."

> *Julia*: I think our conversations are honest and vulnerable. And I don't feel that shame, I think, because we have that shared language. We can recognize that moment of like, "well, that was whiteness right there." Or I think we can actually have the relationship and trust with each other, that if I, for example, were to ever respond defensively about something that you could say, "you know . . . I think that might be your whiteness talking right now." Do you know what I mean?
>
> *Karin:* (nods) Yeah.

> *Julia:* I think I would receive it because of the conversations that we've had, and I think I could say that to you too and it would be a moment of like, "okay, I'm gonna take that in." But it wouldn't be like stomping out of the room. Like, "How dare you call me a racist?"

Julia and I share the desire to engage in feminist solidarity, thus making collaborative space for critical interrogation of each other's experiences and whiteness intrusions. As referenced earlier, I asked her about a time in which she witnessed me grappling with whiteness. She was able to mention two occasions, and during our discussion about the AESA conference (where I experienced white emotionality) she was able to help me think of that experience in a new way. For example, she mentioned that by asking the women of color in the room for advice I was enacting white-centric behavior and I responded saying, "Now that you say that, like I did kinda . . . in doing that, I sort of usurped the conversation, and she [the Black woman scholar I presented with] actually could have probably benefitted more from that [discussing her own work with the scholars of color in the room]." This conversation exemplifies one aspect of "get your girl" as described by Cooper. Julia was able to witness that occurrence, interrogate the situation through critical whiteness, and inform me of her interpretation. In turn, I was able to receive the critique and re-work my feminine self accordingly. The relationship Julia and I share as two white women seeking to "shed whiteness" is an exemplar of "get your girl" actions that lead to feminist solidarity.

Feminist Solidarity

Instances of solidarity have the potential to emerge when white women are actively re-working their feminine selves through personal and "get your girl" intellectual labor. With hope for solidarity, hooks charges feminists accordingly:

> we must have more written work and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed, and solidarity shared. It is this evidence that will renew our hope and provide strategies and direction for future feminist movement. (p. 110)

Lorde (1984) echoes this hopeful disposition stating, "Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other's difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles" (p. 122). Contemporary BF scholars speak cautiously about solidarity, indicating the many disappointments experienced in the years between the works of Lorde (1984/2015) and hooks (1994) and contemporary feminisms. In discussing her thoughts on solidarity, Kendall (2020) states:

> When building solidarity, there is no room for savior myths. Solidarity is not for everyone—it cannot realistically include everyone—so perhaps the answer is to establish common goals and work in partnerships. As equal partners, there is room for negotiation, compromise, and sometimes even genuine friendship. Building those connections takes time, effort, and a willingness to accept that some places are not for you. (p. 8)

In a collaborative study, Ella—a Black woman historian and pedagogue—and I connected over a "common goal" to elevate her teaching practices as an exemplar for culturally relevant, liberatory pedagogical practices. Our partnership and friendship developed over several years of connection about our desires for equity in educational opportunity. During an interview, she turned the tables and asked me my "why" for doing this work.

> *Karin:* Um, that started it [my initial introduction to social justice in education through my M.Ed. program] but then there was so much more, like everything I started reading when I started my doctorate really, about the Black woman's perspective. It was like the most real thing I ever read. . . . It was so . . . raw and like, "this is my reality." And so

deep, and intellectual. . . . I just got so addicted to the realness and . . . spiritually there's this concept of Ubuntu that I learned from Desmond Tutu—

Ella: Right, yeah

Karin: — how our humanity is wrapped together and I can't be free until everyone's free and . . . my humanity is dependent on your humanity—and then I started saying . . . when a white person especially, would ask me like, well, why are you doing that [studying Black feminist theory]? I'd say well, why *aren't* you doing that? When it comes down to it our humanity . . . is wrapped up in each other's. So there was like a combo of factors, but honestly the more Black feminist work I read, the more inspired I am. . . and just really wanting to learn—like, I see Black feminisms as my teacher.

Ella: Mhm. I love that you said that because it's so funny. I feel like, the Combahee River Collective, I swear that you went right into kind of like their mission statement, you know, back in the 70s when they were saying like, when it comes to Black feminism—and it's funny, my students had to read that in class for the AP exam—their argument is that, you know, once Black women are free, almost everyone is free, and this is so funny, listening to you, everything you're saying about Black feminism is exactly what their argument was. It's interesting just to kind of see someone sincerely say that, and share that, and feel that. But yeah, I had always wanted to ask you, and I absolutely love your answer.

Karin: (smiles) Aww, thank you.

Ella: And I'm glad to have the opportunity to work together on this, and I would absolutely love to see exactly like . . . where this could go.

Our conversation about our shared commitment to racial justice and our collaborative work continued and Ella reflected,

> *Ella*: I have to admit when you kind of came back with that proposal, um, I was like, you know what? I was like [laughter] this White woman is right on [laughter]. I loved it. I really did. I was like, you know what? I'm all in. Let's do whatever you want to do. I just felt like you were kind of embodying everything that you studied, right? You were able to actually put it into practice. You know what I'm saying? Like it’s one thing to be able to talk about and learn this theory . . . and historically people are treated this way, but then to be able to recognize an opportunity for you to do something different, and something against that, you know, I was like, that . . . that to me is, you know what? Yeah. I just think, it's hard for me to articulate it, but after that, I was like, you know what, Karin? I'm all in, what you got? [laughter]

I met Cynthia Dillard at a conference one year when I approached her to tell her how meaningful her work was to me and that I considered her one of my teachers, even though I had only met her through her work. Her response to me was, “Karin, I’ll know if you really learned if it’s (*she places her hand on her heart*) *in* you. When I read your work, I’ll know if it’s *in you.”* Moving forward in our research together is indication that Ella saw the work *in me,* as Dr. Dillard described. Ella describes our shared commitment stating, “The similarity I feel . . . is that we both teach with a purpose, like a higher purpose, a motive.” Thus, together we engaged in research to highlight Ella’s pedagogy and make it available for a larger audience of pedagogues to learn from.

Beyond a shared commitment to issues of justice is the element of trust. Love (2019) describes the step beyond “ally-ship” as being a *co-conspirator*. She states, “co-conspirators actively work, sometimes fumble, and keep pushing to create, in solidarity with Black people, queer people, and people of color, spaces that center healing, rage, trust, connection, safety, joy, accountability, and love" (p. 246). This title is earned by *action,* not just theorizing about what could be, but standing alongside others with shared commitments for justice. In elevating Ella's work as a practitioner through our collaborative study and making sure she was recognized and named, I was a co-conspirator. I used the power I was given to make sure Ella had a platform and was recognized for her contributions to the field of education. In a further act of solidarity, we plan to co-author the published version with her name first because it is *her* life's work.

Undergirding solidarity is an intentional focus on the collective as opposed to individualism. Many of the ways white women have harmed Black women is a narrow view of feminism that only addresses ways in which white women feel slighted by patriarchy. Feminist solidarity means understanding that "racism is fundamentally a feminist issue because it is so inter-connected with sexist oppression" (hooks, 1989, p. 52). Becoming part of a feminist collective requires centering stories, voices, theories, and thoughts of women of color; elevating this in one's scholarship; and making daily choices that reflect a focus on the collective. Among friends and colleagues, I am known to engage in "fan girl" behavior. This means when I am particularly moved by a scholar's work, I reach out and thank them for their contribution. These "fan girl" emails have led to solidarity several times. My relationship with Ella began due to me reaching out about her article; a program I co-founded was accepted into a national organization due to a "fan girl" email I sent to the leader, a Black feminist teacher education scholar; and most recently, I emailed a scholar whose article spoke to me and her response helped shape this manuscript. I describe this recent correspondence in the following journal entry.

Fan girl email reflections

I wanted [the scholar] to know that her article was beautiful. The intense research that went into highlighting the pedagogies of women who were abused, misunderstood, and never got their flowers [regarding Black women pedagogues in the Jim Crow south era] for lighting the fire in the revolutionaries that pursued civil rights. It was clear, concise, and so powerful. I wanted her to know that it was helpful in trying to capture Ella's pedagogy! I also felt that I needed to tell her that I was critical about my whiteness—I was not just a dopey prototype of a "woke white girl" that acted more like "white savior" in a field in which I didn't belong.

She wrote back with kind words of gratitude and included a list of suggested readings. One of which was an article that critiques CWS—which blew me away. I devoured the piece and it felt *accurate*. Like, is this field [CWS] taking Black thought seriously? Or is this group of scholars just somehow benefitting from talking about whiteness—and concurrently marginalizing Black thought? What a gift she gave me—another example of how *inviting in* contributes to growth. When "invited in" are we [white women] ready to hear the truth? Are we willing to shift our perspective? Am I ready to switch gears quickly with trust that this BF scholar is giving me guidance and truth? What a gift she gave! She could have just ignored me, but she didn't. This is what white women need to notice—those moments when the mood shifts, those in-between times when you get a generous nudge. Sometimes it's the thing I look back on and wonder about—*what did she mean by?* Sometimes it's that thing I'm rolling around in bed worried about . . . *what did I do wrong?* Instead of naval gazing- perhaps I need to think… *what gift was I just given? What generous insight did she find me worthy of*

> *hearing?* This piece of literature she took the time to share with me has very much improved my third manuscript—that is a hell of a gift.

Reaching out to scholars that I admire is not a performative act, it is an act of vulnerability to connect to the human behind the scholarship. It is an act of *ubuntu* (Dillard, 2012; Tutu, 2004).

***Spirituality and* Ubuntu**

I came across Archbishop Desmond Tutu's writings and sermons at a time of spiritual crisis. Having grown up in predominately white churches, several of which were considered "evangelical" much of what I was taught centered whiteness. As I began the process of re-working my white feminine self (Nash & Pinto, 2021) I disassociated with the white church and painstakingly deconstructed my faith and spirituality. Tutu was a beacon for me, helping me to (re)member (Dillard, 2012) what was good and true and discard whiteness (it is an ongoing process). Tutu's description of *ubuntu* resonated so deeply, he states:

> The first law of our being is that we set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. In Africa, recognition of our interdependence is called *ubuntu* in Nguni languages, or *botho* in Sotho, which is difficult to translate into English. It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion. (pp. 25–26)

The spiritual focus on the collective, of all humanity, was in direct contrast to the individualism taught in the churches I attended. It was from this moment forward that I refused to accept any spirituality that was not centered on *ubuntu,* collective humanity. When I started my doctoral program, it was *ubuntu* that led me towards Africana studies and Black feminism. I saw the inequities in the educational experiences of Black and Brown children in K-12 schools and my inner-most spirit was unwilling to stop (and still is) until the work of (re)humanization was accomplished. Tutu describes a person with *ubuntu*:

> A person with *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished, when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 26)

Being a person with *ubuntu* is the aim. Living in an individualistic society, I often fall short of this ideal, yet, my spirit yearns for collective (re)humanization that I believe is possible if we embrace *ubuntu.*

Ubuntu is embraced by Dillard (2012) as a way of being when engaging in BF pedagogy and, with cautious care, calls in white women scholars as well, “We need the distinctions of another to become a whole community . . . thus a commitment to *ubuntu* sees diversity as an asset and not a deficit” (p. 93). Both she and hooks (1994) embrace spirituality as an integral aspect of pedagogy—which includes a person’s scholarship, teaching practice, and research. They see spirituality not necessarily as “religious” but as the core of one’s humanity.

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred: who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to

> provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (hooks, 1994, p. 13)

Thus, spirituality is not separate from pedagogical practice, it is at the core of our being. As Palmer states, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (2007, p. 10).

I believe that any feminist solidarity I have experienced is a result of my embracing *ubuntu*—whether faithfully or clunky. In our interview, Ella describes a spiritual, serendipitous connection:

> *Ella:* I just find it so, um, kind of like, um, um, what is it? Um, serendipity almost, in a sense that, you know, Black feminism has always been . . . like the history of it . . . something that I've always loved, like in college, in graduate school. But nothing that I was ever able to pursue as far as like, outside of a master's, so it's just interesting that our paths kind of crossed [laughter] you know, all these years later.

Further, in discussing our connection and the work I am engaged in, Audrey states:

> *Audrey*: I'm really proud of the work that you're doing. I think that it will definitely make a much-needed contribution to the field. I'm really excited about what you and [Ella] can do together in terms of the writing that you can put out there. There’s not a whole lot of examples of white women and Black women writing together . . . like telling a story. And I feel like if we are going to go past this defensive posture for Black feminists, and this more accusatory kind of also defensive posture of white feminists, we need more examples of white women and black women writing together, working together. Because right now . . . the norm is that we don’t. And so, I'm just really excited to see where this goes . . . . You might get some backlash . . . . But I’ve worked with you for a while now,

> and I know that you have really broad shoulders. And because you believe in what you're doing. And I would definitely be here to say, you know, don't come for her because she's coming from a good place, and you know, like. So I really feel like this is going to be a powerful piece of work. And I'm just happy to be along for the ride.

Dr. Dillard's suggestion that she would know it was *in* me when viewing my work was a nod to *ubuntu.* Tutu states, "You know when ubuntu is there, and it is obvious when it is absent. It has to do with what it means to be truly human, to know that you are bound up with others in the bundle of life" (p. 26). If we are to move forward in an otherwise feminism, *ubuntu* must prevail.

Tensions in Solidarity

As discussed previously, seeking feminist solidarity is not simple; there are numerous historical examples of harm due to whiteness fumbles (Nash & Pinto, 2021). Embracing tensions in attempts towards solidarity is a way to move forward and possibly move past the cycle of white women's fear of unmasking and Black women's fear of betrayal (hooks, 1994). One tension to consider is a practical concern: will eager white women students usurp time and attention of BF scholars from Black women students? I reflect on this tension in the following excerpt:

> I can't forget sitting across from Audrey at Panera Bread. As she shares about her scholarship and prestigious pedigree I think, "why did she agree to have lunch with me? There's probably a line of Black women scholars at VT waiting to talk with her. Did I skip the line?

In this instance, as described previously, Audrey saw our scholarship alignment regarding shared commitment to education equity. However, given the dearth of Black women in academia and the increasing demands of their time and labor (Perlow et al., 2018) feminist solidarity requires white women to be mindful of the time and energies of BF scholars and faithfully *share.* Cooper (2018) makes it plain:

> White people have proven that they have a problem sharing. White people don't share. They take over. They colonize. They claim shit as their own and then accuse others for being territorial and retrograde for pointing out these aggressive borrowing practices that shape white culture. (p. 177)

White women who seek feminist solidarity must diligently examine their proclivity for "aggressive borrowing practices" regarding BF partnerships.

Another tension that has become clear to me is the desire (out of whiteness) for "atta girl" positive reinforcement. I have been generously invited into Black and Brown "safe spaces" over the past few years given my research agenda. One of these spaces is a collective of scholars of color seeking to increase educator diversity. In my interview with Julia, I reflect on "atta" girl whiteness tendencies in spaces of potential solidarity.

> *Karin:* We had a talk about white allies in Houston. And it was . . . Oh, my God! It was so good! I got to sit there and just take notes on what people were saying. The only thing I said in the whole conversation was . . . What makes it [allyship] genuine for me is the spirituality piece. And talking about Ubuntu and bringing that in. I've grown enough to know that you don't need to say, "Here's what we do. We're really good allies. Can you affirm that for me?" I know that I'm prone to do that. So I stay quiet until I really feel like there's something I definitely need to put into the ether.
>
> *Julia*: Yeah, yeah. I remember, we talked about that in the hotel room afterwards . . . that whole day we said nothing. We were in the circle [all of the participants circled up for discussion] how many times? I was like, this is not my space, and it shouldn't be.

> *Karin*: They generously allow us *in* that space.
>
> *Julia:* Yeah.
>
> *Karin*: And I've experienced people of color glaze over when I'm saying something, and I recognize like, *oh, I'm just doing and saying typical white stuff*. Because if you're glazing over, I'm not saying anything you don't know. And what am I really sharing with you? Am I trying to get you to approve what I've said and give me that reassurance?
>
> *Julia*: Am I trying to get like an atta girl? You have such consciousness.
>
> *Karin:* An atta girl! Yes, I want atta girl. And that's my tendency. I wanted atta girl . . . well so does everybody else. You know? And you [white women] probably get way more atta girls than they do, you know? So you know . . . my atta girl is that I was invited there [into a safe space].

As previously discussed, solidarity requires reflexivity—ongoing interrogations of whiteness—and if this is lacking, whiteness will continue to intrude and justify the silos in which feminists find themselves.

Conclusion

Otherwise feminisms of solidarity are possible, but Black feminist scholars have long contended that it requires the strenuous labor of denouncing whiteness (Nash & Pinto, 2021). In her definition of culture, Chang (2008) articulates, “without securing official memberships in certain cultural groups, obvious traits of membership, or members’ approvals, outsiders can acquire cultural traits and claim cultural affiliations with other cultural groups” (p. 23). Thus, a white woman scholar working in solidarity with BF scholars must not only claim cultural affiliation, but also must (re)imagine her feminist self. She is not a Black woman nor an “official member of the group,” she is a woman of European descent (or other roots) and she must uncover her true identity apart from whiteness. Once she has committed fully to the "reworking of her white feminine self" alongside other white anti-racist feminists, solidarity is a potentiality.

Further, her "why" needs to be elucidated so as to denounce "white savior" complexes and embrace *ubuntu.* Finally, she must remain aware of ongoing tensions and approach them with curiosity and care rather than through a fear of "unmasking" (hooks, 1994). She will know when she is in on the right track because as Tutu states, "When we Africans want to give high praise to someone, we say, 'Yu, u nobuntu': 'Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu,' A person is a person because he recognizes others as persons" (2005, p. 26). When this is evident *in* women of European descent committed to solidarity in feminism, may otherwise feminisms (Greene, 1995; Nash & Pinto, 2021) be so.

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Conclusion

No More Harm

I conclude this dissertation with a posture of hope. Hope that scholars and practitioners can unite in *freedom dreaming* (Love, 2019) spaces, develop pedagogy that liberates rather than harms, and that true solidarity can come to fruition. To get there, however, requires additional work that is outside the scope of this dissertation. Thus, in this concluding section, I will outline several avenues that need further exploration.

(Re)membering

Dillard's (2012) premise of (re)membering involves both "to recall and think of *again* . . . and also put back together" (p. 3, emphasis original). She states, "That being scattered in diaspora is an act of dispossession from our past, from connections to our culture, original homelands, languages and from each other. We must (re)member in order to be whole" (p. 4). While her words are written primarily for *African ascendants* who live in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of enslavement, she makes clear that those with other cultural identities also need to (re)member. "Thus, (re)membering becomes a radical response to our individual and collective fragmentation at the cultural, spiritual, *and* material levels, a response to the false divisions created between mind, body, and spirit" (p. 17, emphasis original). Dillard's work leaves me wondering, given my suggestions that anti-racist, white scholars should engage in dismantling whiteness, in what ways can people born in white bodies then *(re)member*? More pointedly, how can we engage white educators in *(re)membering* for the sake of their Black and Brown students? These questions are ripe for further interrogation and imagination.

Solidarity Praxis

As Audrey pointed out in our interview, “there aren’t many examples of Black and white women writing together.” Otherwise feminism requires courageous collaborations imbued with *ubuntu* care. The third manuscript examined tensions I noticed in purposeful, reflexive instances of feminist solidarity; however, deeper explorations of these tensions are needed to protect the relationship. With this in mind, we (anti-racist white and Black feminists) must take the leap. My urgency stems from the increasing harm children are experiencing in school settings due to hegemonic strongholds in education. Feminists, both Black and anti-racist white, cannot allow divide-and-conquer tactics from those with neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies to prevail. Given this urgency, more exploration is needed in the complex potentiality of feminist solidarity.

Preserving Liberatory Pedagogy

The second manuscript elucidates the power of liberatory pedagogy in ethnic studies. Given the velocity of neoconservative action against APAAS (Treisman, 2023), education researchers must unite to produce scholarship that spotlights the positive outcomes of ethnic studies courses. Further, this scholarship should be easily accessible and widely dispersed among the public. Finally, legal scholars should continue to produce evidence that these hegemonic strongholds on ethnic studies curricula are violating the civil rights of K-12 students.

Otherwise Education

The development of critical consciousness in K-12 spaces through liberatory pedagogies is dependent on the unification of scholars and educators against racism and white supremacy. Achieving otherwise education in U.S. K-12 schools is possible through radical freedom dreaming (Love, 2019), the joyful death of whiteness (Mock Muñoz de Luna et al., 2023, p. 5) and subsequent (re)membering (Dillard, 2012), and reflexive *ubuntu* solidarity (Dillard, 2012; Tutu, 2005). Let us collectively stay the course.

Conclusion References

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