

Black Worldliness: Poetic Knowledge in Education

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Acknowledgements

The world can be a cruel place for people of the African-Diaspora. It takes an incredible amount of resilience to wake up every day and face the laws, policies, and mindsets that have deemed our bodies and brilliance less than human. Sometimes it seems like you are trapped in a world that you can never escape. A world of violence, loneliness, pain, joy, brilliance, and resistance. My earliest memory is of my brother walking him and I to school. My mother and father had left our apartment for some reason and my brother took it upon himself to bring us to school. Our parents found use about a mile away from our apartment walking on the side of the road with my nose bleeding—and my brother holding my hand making sure I didn't walk in the street.

My brother was my first teacher and friend. I learned from his misfortune. I always thought that if my brother and I had the same opportunities as our white peers then we would be leagues ahead of where we are now. We had to learn to navigate life with no help. Every significant moment felt like a trial by combat, and we had no choice but to win. Gabe, thank you for preparing me when no one else could or would take the time. The letter you wrote me when I was accepted into UF's Anthro program is still one of the most precious items I have ever received. You forced me to be everything I could be. I think about it every day.

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18th birthday, the week your mother and our grandmother passed away. We were bringing trash to the dump in Richmond and we sang the whole way. We sang dumping the trash, we sang while driving back to your tiny house, and we sang that night churning homemade ice cream for the family. You taught me that joy persists in the face of hardship. Without you I do not think I could ever have come to an understanding of the poetics of knowledge. You are one of my foundational layers. Thank you.

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Alissa, you are probably the most brilliant person I have ever met. And I thought I have been around brilliant people. I love you and I appreciate you. I am honored that I get to share life and love with you as a friend and colleague. I can't wait to finally steel from your garden.

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Dedications

To Bernadette Chandler and Emmanuel Sims. Mom, your strength and love defies that of the Orishas. I still don't know how you raised three children by yourself. You are the baddest. I love you and miss you every moment of every day. I wish you could see your granddaughter. She looks just like you. Poppa, I told you I needed 5 more years. But it's okay. You are the most loving human being I have ever known. And if you take out the dope, pimping, scheming, and hustling then you would have been an angel. I will never care because you were mine. And every time I have been in turmoil, I look to your lessons and I am able to thrive.

To Gabriel and Sharai. No one should experience what we have gone through. I love you both so much. We must experience the world again, together. We must laugh, talk shit, and play on beaches we have never seen. And we will do it—with our families by our side. CMB—We All We Got

To my brilliant and gorgeous wife Hannah Rae Storm and our incredible daughter Zara B\$ Storm-Sims. Hannah you are the pivot on which I revolve. You have made my dreams come true and pushed me to do so much more. You make everything better and all I want to do is love and honor you. Zara, the "B" in your name is for Bernadette. The grandmother you won't ever get to meet. I will tell you about the \$ whenever you want to know. And, whenever you read this, you need to know that your poppa is more than the silliness he does on a daily basis. Just know that a very serious scholar is in there somewhere—hopefully you find out before I make you read Cedric Robinson and Sylvia Wynter.

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Chapter 1: “Django Unchained:” Black Worldliness and an Ethnographic Project

This project is a lesson in the unorthodox paradigms of experience and dreaming. And with dreaming comes freedom. When I think of freedom I am transported to 2012 when the director, Quentin Tarantino, released a movie named Django Unchained. I have always been a big fan of Tarantino and will eagerly watch any movie project he is a part of. Therefore, when I saw the first trailer of Django I was stunned to see that the lead role was played by a famous black actor named Jamie Foxx.

Loosely based on the life of Bass Reeves (Morgan, 2021), Django is born a slave and finds a way to escape to freedom. He befriends a white man who is a bounty hunter. He goes on to learn how to be both an expert bounty hunter and expert shooter/marksman. He learns to speak perfect English and some German while also perfecting the look of a freed man who was so far removed from being a slave that they might even buy a slave himself. Django and his new partner strike a deal that they would find Django’s long lost love, Brumhilda, and free her from slavery.

Django ends up posing as a slave catcher looking for the right type of slaves for his white partners' slave fighting business. A bunch of slick talking, shooting, and graphic depictions of the brutality of slavery ensue until we get to the final scene--Django exacting revenge on all of the people who harmed him and Brumhilda. In traditional Spaghetti Western (MasterClass Staff, 2021) fashion, the crescendo is a hail of miraculous gunfire wherein Django literally kills every single person he is fighting and then rides off with Brumhilda.

I love Django because the entire movie is a walk through the process of freedom dreaming. The depictions of the violence against Black bodies, the brilliance it takes to get free and the varying aspects of revenge. However, very few folks of color get to ride into the sunset. It is both the lesson and the risk.

A Journey to Miami

Much like my appreciation for Django and his pursuit of freedom, I was also deeply intrigued when I heard a story about people who had no choice but to get on boats and pray that they make it to freedom. The story was told to me and my 11th grade U.S. history class by the assistant principal, a man of Haitian descent, who was sharing why school was so important. He described a method of finding freedom. In this case, he told us how Haitians attempted to find freedom in the U.S. by sacrificing some so the others could make it. Groups of people would coordinate within the country and the U.S. and figure out a way to procure multiple boats. These boats would sail from Haiti at the same time. One boat would be full of children and young adults, the other would be full of adults. By the time the boats got close enough to alert the U.S. Coast Guard, the boat with the adults would try to distract the coast guard and offer themselves up to get caught and returned back to the island. They would do this so that the young children could experience freedom. The adults risked their freedom or, in many cases, their lives so that the others could have a chance at it. The choices all of the people who escaped on the

boats was to live in squalor as an undocumented citizen in the U.S. or face immense poverty and/or death in Haiti--two horrible choices (Trouillot, 1995).¹

And.

It is a sad and terrible thing that some people are forced to make these kinds of choices. Black Worldliness helps me situate myself in these types of struggles, which is one of the many reasons why I utilize these personal and historically referenced experiences. Furthermore, it helps me make better sense of the socio-political context I entered into when I walked through the doors of North Miami Beach Sr. High as a Social Studies teacher who was also a male with the unexplored identities as a Black, CIS heterosexual male. Suffice it to say, I was naive in an expansive way. So, if Black Worldliness is so important to me and my making sense of the world then what is it?

Black Worldliness is a branch on the tree of the Black Radical Tradition (Robinson). Kelley (2002) writes about the Black Radical Tradition being a cannon of people who have both lived and theorized the multitude of oppressive and privileged experiences that Black bodies have lived through. Robinson (1980) first coined the term "The Black Radical Tradition" in his seminal text *Black Marxism*. Robinson argues that, prior to global Black liberation movements in the middle of the 20th century, there was no Western conception of Black Radicalism. Furthermore, the work of Black radicals in the Western academy as

¹ Throughout this text you will see an intentional step taken to use capital and lowercase letters when using nouns relating to race, ethnicity, indigeneity, and place. I mean this to represent the power, beauty, chaos, and uncertainty of the African Diaspora and the people who have experienced it. It is very important to me that messages are sent throughout the text to cause people to ask "Why"? I hope that many people have questions about why I write in certain ways. Know that it is intentional, and meant to cause the reader to ask critical questions.

being unorthodox and unacceptable scholarship. Thus, Robison centers three titans of Black scholarship and literature to show how Black Radicalism lived in history, theory, and literature long before Europeans fully understood how to conceive of radicalism in their own countries. Those men were: W.E.B. Dubois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright.

I take Robinson's and Kelley's work and ask myself: who else belongs in this cannon? Who else has been living in and theorizing a world that discredits their work and does not know how to see them. The list is long. Therefore, I argue that the Black Radical Tradition envelops a wide range of experiences in the historiography of the African Diaspora. It allows for all Black bodies to speak to one another regardless of socio-political position. It allows for all Black experiences to be held and shared. The Black Radical Tradition is a container of pain, perseverance, joy, and privilege. It is an entity that is eagerly awaiting all Black bodies that wish to entertain it. And, I would argue, that Black folx do themselves a disservice when they do not lean into the Black Radical Tradition because it means they chose to not be enveloped in the complexities of Blackness, as opposed to settling to the binary that white supremacy settles Blackness in—white is privileged and Black is both subhuman and oppressed. I refuse to accept that logic. I choose to lean into the complexities of my Blackness. Therefore, Black Worldliness becomes my contribution to the Black Radical Tradition. And, like Robinson, I will be using a multitude of stories to show how I have been making sense of a very strange world and the histories of Black folx within it.

And.

Black Worldliness was the sentiment that intrigued me in the rooms of North Miami Beach Sr. High school. Each room was based on a 70's concept of communal teaching. This meant that they could connect with one another by a collapsible wall or a door within the classroom. As teachers, we could easily shut the front facing door of the room that allowed hallway access, and hold joint classes at any time we saw fit. It also worked well for teachers to easily talk to one another with minimal movement. On this day, the ease of access allowed for the Assistant Principal, Mr. Ridore, to drop in, as he always did with a gregarious smile. Only this time I asked him to help me with a history lesson on how hard it has been and still is for Haitian immigrants to come to the U.S. I had a feeling that the Haitian students in the class would be able to connect with a Haitian elder who told oral histories of the Haitian experience more than me, an African-American from Minnesota who wore sweaters and boots in 100 degree weather everyday. It was this thought that rolled across my mind as Mr. Ridore spoke. It was almost as if I was pulled to Miami to be in this type of moment with my Haitian brothers and sisters. Pulled by something I will spend this entire text explaining in different ways. On that day, I sat on a stool to the right of him and smiled. I knew I could use this lesson for the rest of the year. I never imagined I would use it for the rest of my life.

By the time I left Miami I had grown accustomed to being greeted by many names. I would go by "Noah," "Nuhu," "Nuhubabu," "The Babu," "Babu," or "Nuhubabukubwa." I would often tell multiple people in the same room a different name to refer to me as. I would never do it out of malicious or trickster type intent (Ford, 2000). I would do it as a way to show that I am someone who is hard to understand because I can never fully know who I am. This is a product of being a maroon. A maroon is a term used to define people

who have escaped a form of brutal oppression, but do not have the ability to find their homeland and/or return to it (Roberts, 2015). Studying marronage helps me make sense of finding a place called home in a space that will never be home. It offers me strength in my perpetual holding of the contradictions of freedom. The maroon in me welcomes the confusion I am met with when I change my name. I desire to introduce complexity in my interactions and in my writing so that people force themselves to see beyond surface level engagements with me. I am all of these things at the same time, and I wouldn't want to be anything else.

And.

The opening story holds a specific space in the history of my blackness, but more importantly, it is a location in the vast seas of the Afro-Diasporic experience. It is very important to me that the reader knows what they are going to invest their intellectual labor in because this is deeply personal. This work is a work of mapping Afro-diasporic experiences and thinking with theory that guides those journeys while consistently interspersing my own. Because of the scope of my project and personal investment in telling a deeply complex, Afrocentric story, I had to find a way to speak about the past, present, and future at once. I needed and still need to talk about my experiences and my project in ways that defy the notion of a boundary in such a way that can allow me to pull in people, places, stories, poems, moments, and utterings that would stay unearthed if not allowed the ability to breathe in this space. I am calling all of my ancestors forth to help me. And this is why I lean on Janz (2001) to speak to the project of mapping African Philosophy on Western ways of thinking. He notes,

“...we can never fully represent or capture the world. Borges imagines a map that is a 1:1 representation of the territory it is supposed to represent (1998). Of course, if we broaden our conception of a map, we can imagine maps that are much larger than the territory: "maps" of subatomic reactions, the genome, and so forth. These maps define the boundaries, internal interactions, and identity of the territory in question. Maps, at least those common in the modern age, start with abstractions, and fit the "territory" into a numerical or conceptual grid. To suggest that the map is not the territory is to recognize that the territory is more than the abstractions of the map (pg. 2).”

My work shows that Blackness, in all of its forms, can never be fully represented or captured. The intentionality in which I take up many forms of Black existence, socio-political thought, theory, story, and activism is all about demonstrating the vast expanse of Blackness. It is about making a firm point that the only way to feel the many dynamics of blackness is to actually invest in a radical notion of what it means to feel in ways that cannot be comprehended by Western conceptions of humanity.

Furthermore, this dissertation is an intentional mix of story and theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). It is a purposeful interweaving of my lived experiences in education, my life experiences as a Black male, and the multitude of theories I have used to make sense of those experiences. Theory is often used to make sense of an experience or idea. I am mixing theory and story because my project required one to make sense of the other at desperate times. I followed the chronological order of a research project. That project started in ‘17 and ended in ‘19, however the experiences felt in the moments of the project and the reflections afterward caused a distinct break in the linear trajectory of a research

project. I found myself reading texts from the 1800's to understand an experience I had in '18 that I was re-examining in '21. This is part of my method, which I will expand upon later, and it is also how I make sense of the world. I like to think about this as organized chaos. I am using methods and theories that I have been trained in to meet the needs of my project instead of trying to fit my project into the needs of a method or theory.

And.

I have chosen to write this paper in this way of storifying theory that has taken me many years to understand. I make intentional literary moves in this text that reference the African Diaspora. It is deeply personal to me, and I use that purpose with precision. To that end, I will begin each chapter and/or subheading with a story that purposefully ties back to an acknowledgement of my life history and my ancestors in the African Diaspora. This is a move I want the reader to pay attention to as you engage in this text. Furthermore, the text you are about to engage in is one about contradictions. It is about names, faces, bodies, and experiences on a plane of privilege and oppression. This is a story about Blackness, public education, and the simultaneity of oppression within it. It is a complex amalgamation of the history of the African Diaspora and the system of public education through the lens of an urban school district in Minnesota, and me. The story of my cis-heterosexual, Black identity will be weaved in and out of this text. What is more important for this space is an explanation of how I went about thinking and writing this text.

Finally, you will be reading a cartography and historiography of my Blackness, or, a journey through Afro-Diasporic Surrealism (Kelley, 2012). Afro-Surrealism comes out

of the negritude movement begun by Amie Césaire and Leopold Senghor. People who took up negritude as an epistemology and ontology asked themselves three very complicated questions: Who am I? Who are we? And what are we in this white world? (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). The ability to answer those questions meant practicing a revolt against western ways of understanding humanity and human experience. Césaire would go one to describe that revolt as a poetics of knowledge. Its practitioners would describe themselves as surrealists of the black experience—afro-surrealists. (Césaire, 1972; Kelley, 2012)

It is this notion, or strange feeling that has always preceded a space that I am in while being bound to the abstract in which I have come to define my Blackness. This dissertation is a living, abstract map of never knowing, always knowing, and continuously becoming what my Blackness is. I have leaned on philosophers, historians, sociologists, anthropologists, literary critiques, educators, along with my family and friends to demonstrate how routes from one space to another are made. More importantly, I have done this to show what it takes to recognize all of the components of Blackness and how education is just one of the many spaces in which it travels. Essentially, reader, you are about to live in Afro-Surrealism. The following pages will speak to what that means and why it is important for the field of education.

Black Worldliness: That time when Lumina Sophie Burned Down the Plantation

I went to Houston, Texas a few years ago to present a paper at the University of Houston's workshop: (Re)membering Africa: Women's Narratives on the Continent and

Beyond. As an aspiring academic, I would never pass up a chance to present at a conference and possibly get a publication. As an Africanist, I was eager to share some of my dissertation research with fellow Africanists and, possibly, learn how to think about education in ways that are uncommon in the field. In terms of conferences, I tend to be selective about which sessions I attend. I always go to the ones that seem like they shouldn't fit in the conference schedule. It is a "hit or miss" kind of strategy, and Houston proved to be a big "hit," while also being influential to my Afro-diasporic mapping. I happened upon a session about a young, female, slave from Martinique. Her name was Lumina Sophie. As you will come to learn, and consistently be reminded of, the island of Martinique is a special place in the history of the Negritude Movement (Richards, 1996) and, therefore, the history of the world. Before Cesair (1972) and Fanon (1963) spoke of revolution, a young, pregnant slave named Lumina Sophie practiced it.

The most powerful learning I had in the University of Houston's student center was that Lumina was fed up with her bondage to the extent that she decided to lead a slave revolt focused on burning down all of the plantations in Martinique. Eventually, she was caught, imprisoned, and sent to France. But nothing would diminish her spark. She is a constant reminder of the need to set fire to corrosive entities so that healing can begin. Lumina is both a metaphor and symbol of my want to revolutionize society and education. I live, breathe, think, love, dream, and create from an Afro-diasporic lens. This is why the negritude movement and its thinkers are so critical to my research. And why I take inspiration from Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) and his basis for writing about the Black Radical Imagination--Afro-surrealism. He writes,

“The surrealists not only taught me that any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind, but they have also given us some of the most imaginative, expansive, and playful dreams of a new world I have ever known. Contrary to popular belief, surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine but an international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought. According to the Chicago Surrealist Group,

[Surrealism is the exaltation of freedom, revolt, imagination and love. . . . Its basic aim is to lessen and eventually to completely resolve the contradiction between everyday life and our wildest dreams. By definition subversive, surrealist thought and action are intended not only to discredit and destroy the forces of repression, but also to emancipate desire and supply it with new poetic weapons. . . . Beginning with the abolition of imaginative slavery, it advances to the creation of a free society in which everyone will be a poet—a society in which everyone will be able to develop his or her potentialities fully and freely.]” (Pg. 5).

This is a powerful statement and a continuum of Césaire’s theory of a poetics of knowledge because it serves as context and a guide for navigating a world that dehumanizes blackness (Richards, 1996). Some people may wonder what a poetics of knowledge is and how it can be used for emancipatory practices. Kelley (2002) gives us a definition and tells us what a poetics can be used for. He is not dictating what Afro-surrealism is. He is showing us what is possible by using an Afro-surrealist epistemology. This is what Césaire was calling for, and more importantly, this is the method I used to figure out where I appear on this terrain of Afro-Diasporic mapping and my project in public education.

Situating myself in this Afro-Diasporic fashion has shown me that the field of education does not necessarily need another book or article based on how it is failing or has failed BIPOC bodies. I say this is not necessary because if you were to read Hilliard (1997), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Love (2019) then you would read different stories and different theories, but the underlying messages would be the same--one cannot fix a system that is inherently broken to begin with. We need a system of education that holds

consistent dreaming of freedom as its root. One that, for an Afro-Diasporic example, uses Dillard's (2006) 6 assumptions for paradigm creation and proliferation: Assumption 1: Self-definition from one's participation and responsibility to one's community. Assumption 2: Research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose. Assumption 3: Only within the context of community does the individual appear and, through dialogue, continue to become. Assumption 4: Concrete experiences within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the 'matrix of meaning making. Assumption 5: Knowing and research are both historical (extending backwards in time) and outward into the world—to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness. Assumption 6: Power relations, manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. structure gender, race and other identity relations within research. Dillard prefaces her assumptions by first making the case for their existence. She writes,

“So I lean on Richards's (1980) definition of worldview as a way to articulate this view of what a paradigm is: 'The way in which a people make sense of their surroundings; make sense of life and the universe' (p. 4, emphasis added). Here, then, the definition of a research paradigm becomes the way in which scholars, teachers and thinkers articulate their sense of life around them, make sense of and order the universe” (pg.61).

As an academic and a researcher, I am trained to follow prescribed models of thinking and doing research. I also despise most of the training because, similar to Dillard, they don't match the ways in which I view and/or think about the world. We need school systems that are designed for students to challenge and change them if they do not match the ways in which they live and see the world.

And, as demonstrated, the theories of emergent strategy and change already exist (Brown, 2017; Dillard, 2006; Emdin, 2016; Grande, 2004; Love, 2019;). School systems

just need to take moments like the one the Coronavirus offered and abolish all of their old structures, policies, and procedures. And then build radical ones using the geniuses of people that have long been forgotten, or those who are rendered invisible. My story is one of many, and I think it can serve as an informational guide to those who feel perpetually marooned. Those that have never had the ability to find or know what home is--and, therefore, are forced to dream. It is for all of these reasons that I use the phrase “Black Worldliness” to capture my experiences. The phrase is an addition to the legacy of the Black Radical Tradition in the sense that it is one story within the plethora of stories that support Robinson’s and Kelley’s theory. And, selfishly, it allows for me to demonstrate how I came to love Blackness.

Chapter Summary

Each chapter in this dissertation is, in essence, an essay on dreaming of freedom. Chapter 2 is a literature review of the extensive amount of research that has been done on the experiences of people in the African Diaspora. Specifically, I draw on the Afro-surrealist scholars, philosophers, writers, and poets (Kelley, 2002) to paint a picture of how Black folx have navigated, manipulated, and out-smarted white supremacy in order to make sense of their place in the world. I argue that this must be seen through the contextualization of physical and temporal moments in the Diaspora.

Chapter 3 provides a thick description of my ethnographic project in education. I spent two years conducting interviews, writing field notes, and capturing stories while being both the researcher and participant in my study. The uniqueness of my project is that I am critically woven into all aspects of it. I chose to do a critical ethnographic study

because it forced me to critique and examine myself just as much as I would critique and examine others. I spent 6 years with the school district that is the center of my study and the study took place between during my 3rd and 4th years in the district. Whereas this dissertation has been written during the 2 years since I have left the district. My positionality poses unique privileges and challenges. I was extraordinarily privileged because the research director in the school district of this study gave me full access to record notes on everything I saw and interview anybody I wanted to. I had the type of access that is not common and can lead to dangerously lopsided opinions. And thus this was also my biggest challenge. I am both re-reading and interpreting my data with almost 4 years of cushion to think about it in different ways, and I am also hoping that the reader understands the naming of my vulnerability as a researcher and takes that into consideration as you read my work.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are a summation of my findings, however, it is not some sort of scientific recap of my observations throughout the study. What you will find here is a series of stories that blend my research findings with personal histories and tales from the African Diaspora. This helps me in illustrating the contemporary and historical complexity of a Black male educator whose job is to work with predominantly White women and develop them as teachers in the state of Minnesota--a very White state. My research and writing style is all about pulling the past and the future into the present in order to use them as energy to think about the world in an Afro-surrealist way (Richards, 1996). Doing this allows me to dig deep into a transformative experience while staying in tune with the theories I chose to wrap around those experiences.

“Ms. Wells was later forced to leave Memphis for Chicago due to threats on her own life, but she would devote her entire life to documenting and challenging the injustice of lynching through research, writing, speaking, and activism. No one was ever punished for the lynching deaths of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and William “Henry” Stewart. They are among at least 20 African American victims of racial terror lynching killed in Shelby County, Tennessee, between 1877 and 1950” (Equal Justice Initiative, 2021).²

² At the end of each chapter the reader will find a passage from the calendar of racial injustice. I use this as a way to further highlight the complexities of the Black experience. It is another way of calling forth people and voices who may have been silenced or forgotten. It is an ode to Black Worldliness.

Chapter 2: The Theoretical Underpinnings of Black Worldliness

“On the night of the 22nd a tropical storm raged, with lightning and gusts of wind and heavy showers of rain. Carrying torches to light their way, the leaders of the revolt met in an open space in the thick forests of the Morne Rouge, a mountain overlooking Le Cap” (James, pg. 87).

There is a picture that serves as the background to my computer. Detailed in vibrant colors, one can see hundreds of black slaves, machetes in their hands, surrounding a fire. The fire is in the center and three women are simultaneously dancing and slitting the throat of a black pig. A tall black man stands about 10 feet away from a woman and is screaming as he holds his machete high in the air. The picture is an imagining of the beginning of the Haitian revolution. The man in the center is Dutty Boukman (James, 1938). The others represent the Haitians and the spirit of revolt that fuels the people of the African diaspora. I look at this image every day and remind myself that revolutions are slow. They take a lot of sacrifice and most often the people who start them are not remembered. This is the mindset I came into the field of education with.

October 26th, 2012 was my official first day of teaching. I was licensed to teach social studies in the state of Florida, and I had been offered the social studies position during the third week of August, a week before school started, but for some reason I would not begin my position until October. The year of 2012 was hard for me. I had completed my M.A. in historical anthropology, but I did not know what to do with the historical knowledge and anthropological skills I had acquired. I thought to myself, “why not become a history teacher? This seems easy, and I love history.” I was right and I was extraordinarily wrong.

I found out that my deep knowledge of the historical patterns of global settler colonialism and white supremacy had prepared me to teach history in a way that very few social studies folks are prepared to teach. On the other hand, I quickly learned that being a classroom teacher is about centering the stresses, joys, pains, and multi-directional brilliance of students. And, in order to do that the teacher must be willing to place content and procedure as secondary to the complex humans who are in circle with us. This was no easy task for me. I was, and continue to be, an African-American, cisgender, heterosexual, male teacher. I thought my positionality would give me immediate access to a school that was predominantly comprised of black and brown students of Haitian and Cuban descent, respectively.

I was wrong. My blackness did not work for me until I showed the students that I loved the content, but I cared about them more. What interested me most during the process of teaching about “my”³ students were their various cultural heritages. I taught two white students during my 2 years at North Miami Beach Sr. High. They taught me a lot about the processes of marginalization from the vantage point of white racial identity development (Allen, 1997). The Haitian and Cuban students taught me about my limited understanding of Blackness (Appiah & Gates, 1999). Before teaching and living in North Miami, I thought Blackness comprised two parts: 1. The experiences of African-Americans in the U.S. and 2. The experiences of Africans in the African continent.

³ I use the possessive “my” because I have never felt such an immense care and responsibility for people who were not my family or loved ones. Furthermore, I understand that this possessive is used lightly and can easily be lumped into a possessive of whiteness. I honor that I am unintentionally furthering that project of whiteness by using that language, while also pushing that my use of the possessive “my” is more about how the students taught me to be community with them than how I possessed and taught them.

I knew the term Diaspora, but I did not know all of the complexities and power of the African-Diaspora. My journey to the fullness of the African-Diaspora is what has led me here, sharing my stories and putting forth an ontology that can never be lost because it is always present. I call this Afro-Diasporic ontology Black Worldliness. Black Worldliness is an ontology of resistance, revolt, and the navigation of white supremacy while having a keen understanding of what white supremacy is, how it functions, and how it transforms. It is an understanding of oppressive systems and institutions that eludes the people who created them (Mills, 1997). The most worldly experience that I can present to show how this happens is a conversation that took place between Amie Cesaire and Cedric Robinson. It went like this:

[Aime] Cesaire and I were talking one day, and I asked him: "Where do you come from?" He said, "Well I grew up in Martinique [and went to] the Victor Schoelscher school." ...So I said: "What did you do there?" He told me: "Latin and Greek and French literature." And I said: "What next?" He said, "I went to France, and I went to the Ecole Normale Superiore." I said, "Yes I know that school. It is famous for producing scholars and Communists." (Cesaire was one of the first in each department: he was one of the finest scholars and he was a notable Communist.) And I said: "What did you do there?" And he said: "Latin and Greek and French literature." And then I said: "Where did you go from there?" And he said: "I went to the Sorbonne." And I said, "I suppose you did there Latin and Greek and French Literature?" And he said: "Exactly." He said, "But there is one thing more." And I asked: "What is that?" He said, "I went back to teach in Martinique, and I went to the Victor Schoelscher school, and there I taught Latin and Greek and French literature." So when Cesaire wrote his tremendous attack upon Western civilization, In *Return to My Native Land*, and said that Negritude was a statement for some concepts of civilization which the Black people had and which would be important in any development of civilization away from capitalist society, he was able to make this ferocious attack upon Western civilization because he knew it inside out (Robinson, pg. 183).

Cesaire and Robinson are two of the most influential figures of the African Diaspora. They are both from the tiny, but very important, island of Martinique.

Martinique was, and unfortunately, still is a colony of France. During the years of Césaire and Fanon, Martinique was one of the most valuable colonies in the world and produced some of its greatest minds (Richardson, 1996). Césaire (1972) was a teacher, philosopher, and poet. Fanon (1963) was a psycho-therapist, army veteran, and philosopher. They both wrote scathing critiques of colonialism because they had an intimate relationship with it. They demonstrate that Black Worldliness is about a journey through white supremacy and back. And, much like those descendants of slaves who decided to go to Liberia during the age of reconstruction, or how W.E.B. DuBois literally traveled the world in order to understand it (Appiah & Gates, 1999), an ontology of Black Worldliness is differently productive (Ulmer, 2017).

It is a slow ontology that allows for knowing to develop across time. Specifically, it is an ever-evolving ontology that continuously incorporates periods of progress, power, joy, and oppression. Black Worldliness is the name I give to the knowledge system that produces slow revolutions. It is important to note that how I take up the term Black Worldliness is specific to my journey in the African Diaspora. All of the texts, poems, paintings, and documentaries that influence this project speak to the power of Black genius. My hope is that you will come to understand that Black Worldliness is a root that supports the tree of Afro-Diasporic experiences. I weave and intersperse it with other theories and stories because they speak to one another. It is the collective experiences and stories of Black folk that strengthen the Afro-Diasporic resolve. Black Worldliness is an addition to the cannon.

It is the aforementioned Haitian Revolution. It is the convening of the Pan-African congresses ([Adejumobi, 2008](#)), [Queen Nanny and the Maroons \(2011\)](#), the story of

Robert Johnson and the creation of the blues (Rose, [2011](#)). It is Anna Julia Cooper (Grant, C., Brown, K., & Brown, Anthony Lamar, 2016), the Compton Do-nuts riot (Stryker, 2008), the Combahee River Collective (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1986), and millions of other black folk from the African Diaspora that dared to challenge, critique, and transform the apocalypse of settler colonialism and white supremacy. I invoke these names, inventions, and events because they illustrate the brilliance and wonder of the African Diaspora. The Pan-African congress was a group of political leaders and scholars of African descent from around the globe. Their first meeting was held in London in 1900. The purpose of their gatherings was to talk about the Black experience globally and share strategies of resisting white supremacy and uplifting Black bodies around the world. Queen Nanny led a successful revolt against the British and is known as the founder of Jamaica. Robert Johnson is often cited as the founder of the blues due to the way he played his guitar in various bars and clubs in the deep south. Anna Julia Cooper was an activist and teacher. She was one of the few people to get an advanced degree at the end of the civil war. She would consistently argue that educated Black women were necessary for the achievement and advancement of all African-American people. The Compton cafeteria riots was the first riot against police by transexual women of color during LGBTQ civil rights movements in the 60's and 70's. the Stonewall Riots, which was also led by transexual women of color, gets the notoriety while the just as influential Compton cafeteria rights is relegated to the pages of unopened books. Finally, the Combahee River Collective was a group of queer, Black, feminists who felt left out of the 1st wave feminist movements of the 60's and 70's

because they were Black. They argued that everybody deserves a seat at the table and are the true originators of what we know today as intersectionality.

Knowing these people and what they did is one small step in beginning to understand how Black folx have used their knowledge systems to create a world for themselves that did not exist until they made it. I call it “sailing to freedom.” Some did it intellectually, others like Henry Bibb, did it literally.

Henry Bibb was a slave in Louisiana during the 19th century, Steamboats were a world-altering technology. They made the moving of goods and people up and down the Mississippi river so rapid that the bursting slave economy--which formed the foundations of modern capitalism--could not only subsist, but thrive (Johnson, 2013, Woods, 1998). This technology transformed the U.S., but also made it so that enslaved black bodies had to keep up with the ever-changing nature of white-supremacy while being provided none of the advantages it provides. Bibb was one of those men.

Johnson (2013) notes,

“Instead of free papers, Bibb used an empty trunk to secure his passage onto a boat: “Soon a boat came in which was bound to St. Louis, and the passengers started down to get on board. I took up my large trunk, and started after them as if I was their servant. ...The passengers went up into the cabin, and I followed them with the trunk.” Once the boat was underway, Bibb carried his trunk down to the deck, and “insinuated” himself among the passengers there. After standing for several rounds of drinks, Bibb asked one of the men to go up to the clerk’s office, and buy him a ticket. “When they came round to gather the tickets before we got to St. Louis, my ticket was taken with the rest, and no questions were asked me,” he remembered.” (pg. 145)

Bibb didn’t do anything by accident. He utilized an ontology of Black Worldliness to outsmart white supremacy. He played against the machine, and he won because he knew it inside and out. This paper will detail a theoretical framework of Black

Worldliness. I will show how it functions like ground rods in concrete--it stabilizes and accounts for varying amounts of pressure and weight--without these the concrete would break in half.

Amie Cesaire and Afro-Surrealism in Education

“Poetic Knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.” (Cesaire, 1996, pg.134). People of the African Diaspora have always been resilient and resistant. The by-products of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade created different types of knowledge systems--ones that endeavored to keep their indigenous values while adapting to foreign lands and structurally violent systems (Davis, 1984; Haley, 2016; Mills, 1998; Thompson, 1984; Robinson, 1983). I remember the first time I realized that I moved through the world in an entirely different way than anybody who wasn't of African descent. I was conducting an excavation of a palace in northern Tanzania. I had been told multiple times, by white people, that Tanzanians did not operate by the racial projects of the U.S. (Omi & Winant, 1994) and that they would see me as an outsider--an “mzungu.” However, when I walked the streets and interacted with people in Bukoba, Tanzania not once was I referred to as “mzungu.” I was always called “ndugu,” which means brother. It turns out that the only people who are referred to as “mzungu” were white people or people who appear white. I had no idea that I could travel to the other side of the world and be both differentiated from white people and accepted as brother.

Maybe my experience was singular, but it taught me that I was in tune, ontologically, with people of African descent--and they were in tune with me.

In an essay titled *Poetry and Knowledge*, Amie Cesaire (1972) says that scientific knowledge of the cartesian ilk (Mills, 1997) is impersonal and deviates from humanity.

“Through reflection, observation and experience, man finally dominates the facts that bewilder him. Henceforth he knows how to find his way through the forest of phenomena. He knows how to use the world. But that does not mean he is King of the world...Science offers him a perspective on the world. But a summary one. One that is superficial. Physics classifies and explains, but the essence of things eludes it...In short, scientific knowledge enumerates, measures, classifies, and kills. One must add that it is impoverished and undernourished. Man has sacrificed everything to acquire it: desires, fears, feelings, and psychological complexes. To acquire this impersonal knowledge that is scientific knowledge, man has depersonalized and deindividualized himself” (Cesaire, pg. 135).

Cesaire points out that in the quest for finding ways to explain the world, Europeans and people of European descent sacrificed their humanity. Furthermore, they created ways of knowing and knowledge systems that did the exact same thing. Cesaire is not saying that this way of conceiving the world is wrong. He is describing what it does and offering a different knowledge system--a poetics of knowledge. A poetics of knowledge is both an epistemological and philosophical revolution. The revolt is against the cartesian theory of knowledge (Mills, 1998). And because the Western world only acknowledged cartesian logic as the system on which all thought is validated then to think differently is an active practice in revolt.

In public education we have many examples of scholars trying to make sense of how bodies of color navigate and resist traditional structures of education. McCready (2010) helps us understand that people of color, regardless of gender identity or sexual

orientation, perform their identities in ways that cannot be understood by the traditional, white, hetero-sexual, patriarchal underpinnings of public education. McCready takes us on a critical ethnographic (Madison, 2005) journey with Black, queer, highschool students and how they navigate race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. McCready takes on an intersectional approach and presents a theory of lived experiences as a matrix of domination. A matrix of domination treats race, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation differently depending on their social location in the structures therein. He notes that a matrix of domination is particularly useful for public education “because it treats the interaction among multiple systems of oppression as the object of study” (McCready, 2010, p. 8).

McCready provides a unique perspective on what happens in public education. Sojoyner (2019), writes about the concept of educational enclosures. He uses the history of the african-american experience both society and public education to tell contemporary stories of Black bodies who resist structures of public education that actively enclose upon them in an attempt to conform to the norms of public education. And rather than be enclosed upon, they refuse and resist. It often looks like young people of color actively disengaging and leaving public education all together. We could look at this as students of color not caring about their education, or we could do a deeper examination like Sojoyner did and weave their refusal into the historical and contemporary context of surveillance and oppression in education. I argue that McCready and Sojoyner are guided by a poetics of knowledge. In fact, I know Sojoyner is guided by a poetics of knowledge because I know who he was trained by—Cedric Robinson. Sojoyner’s work is yet another offering into the academic registry of the Black

Radical Tradition. He mentions it in his introduction, but my lasting memory is him telling me as I sat next to him at a dinner provided by the University of Minnesota after he came to give a book talk. I have often loathed these types of dinners. They tend to be moments where certain graduate students get invited to in order to connect with a professor or university official. As a graduate student, it always felt like I had no choice but to make a good impression just in case I apply for a job at the scholars department or institution in the future. It is a good thing to make connections if you are a graduate student who will be looking for a job in the future, but the question I always asked myself was if there was something more to gain from these gatherings. Sitting next to Damian Sojoyner gave me that more. I had read his and Sabina Vaught's books ahead of their talk and I had a lot of questions for both of them at the corresponding dinner. I was deeply excited because their work deeply informed my research project, and you will find them consistently cited throughout this text. I found myself almost antsy as I sat next to Damian Sojoyner because I needed to know what it was like to be taught by Cedric Robinson. This paper is the work of spending and taking time. Slowing down and reorienting as to try to find a way to deeply understand something. I find the most meaningful educational experiences come when a person can be with a teacher for an extended period of time and get to ask questions about a text that can lead to hours of discussion. I believe that a scholar must practice trying to embody a theory or idea so that it is not just something that goes from book to paper, but something that takes on new oxygen and transforms. I have done that throughout my graduate studies, and I was intentional about doing that in order to be able to define what Black Worldliness is. And, I have never had the pleasure of meeting Cedric Robinson and I never will. Thus,

when I asked Dr. Sojoyner what it was like to learn from him, I was asking for a magnitude of reasons, and his answer was perfect. He said that it is invaluable to learn from someone who dedicated his life to understanding the brilliance and significance of Blackness on a global scale. A few years after this conversation I would be in the middle of a year-long study immersing myself in Afro-Diasporic epistemologies. I would read Robinson's *Black Marxism* and come across the passage referenced earlier when he is speaking with Cesaire about what it takes to critique white supremacy. The connections, for me, became much clearer about how a poetics of knowledge lives in the multi-generational efforts of Black scholars trying to understand how Black bodies navigate racial capitalism and white supremacy.

From Cesaire to Mills: Non-Cartesian Sums in Education

Ganga Zumba attempted to defy slavery, settler colonialism and, most importantly, the very concept of the racial contract. Ganga Zumba was a slave and became a rebel. He was the first leader of the Palmares (Martins, 2008) in Brazil. He knew that his condition as slave wasn't due to his inhumanity, but a plot of sorts by European capitalists—and so he revolted. I evoke Ganga Zumba because he is a lesson in the poetics of knowledge. The reason why a poetics of knowledge was so necessary was because of the ontology of white supremacy i.e., cartesian logic. Charles Mills (1998) mused about the complexity of how entrenched racism was with the human condition when he wrote about the racial contract. The racial contract is a staunch critique of the Hobbes' and Locke's social contract. Mills says that the social

contract is actually a racial contract because non-white bodies are positioned as inhuman and not considered as a part of society. For Mills, the racial contract rests on an existential, conceptual, and methodological claim. Mills informs us that, existentially, white supremacy exists and has existed in the local and global for many years. Conceptually, white supremacy should be thought of as a political system. And, methodologically, white supremacy can be seen as a contract between people who identify as white. In my view, Mills describes this perfectly in *The Racial Contract*. He differentiates the racial contract as a lived experience from the “racial contract” as a theory. The racial contract as a lived experience are the laws and policies that disadvantage people of color while providing a distinct advantage to white people. “On matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills, 1997, p.18). The products of this inverted epistemology range from the establishment of the FHA to 3 strike laws (Mills, 1997; Sojoyner, 2016).

The “Racial Contract” as theory is a critical examination of the Racial Contract. It accounts for the way things are and how they came to be. Mills is simple and precise in his language. The problem with white people isn't that they are bad people or that they are involved in a broad racial plot to dispossess all non-white folks of all their physical and spiritual possessions. That is not the role of white people in white supremacy. White people, for the most part, are not aware of the system they both benefit from and promote. Their knowledge systems have been inverted.

For me, this is the most critical component of the text. I work as an equity teacher in a school district located in the suburbs of Minneapolis. This place is very similar to the many other school districts around the country—i.e., it is staffed with teachers who are predominantly white women. On a daily basis I interact with these people, and they consistently ask me for help. They do not understand how powerful racism is. They can't fathom why it is a problem to be colorblind. They ask for resources on how to treat non-white people like human beings instead of just treating them like human beings. I searched for years to find a way to understand this utter lack of consciousness. Mills gave me the answer. When white people ask these questions that are laced with mundane racism, they are not just asking questions—they are operating from a way and a habit of thought, an epistemology. However, that kind of epistemology renders people of color both sub-human and invisible. They are asking for answers from people who they do not even know how to see. Their thinking is inverted, and it isn't even their fault—it's systemic. They have been inverted to such an extent that they can look a fully sentient human being in the eye and not recognize them for their humanity. I endeavor to explain how this phenomenon occurs. It is rooted in the annals of European history. It means that we must be very careful in how we peel back the layers of how this inverted epistemology came to be. This brings me to Horne (2017) and his work on settler colonialism.

By almost all academic standards I should be writing about Horne (2017) and his theories of how slavery, white supremacy, and capitalism as the three headed horseman of settler colonialism. However, I want to focus on some individuals who

symbolize, as Gerald Horne emphasizes, the rise of London and the fall of Africa and the Americas. In the 17th century, Anthony Johnson was a man of Angolan descent who found himself as a slave in Virginia and then a freed man on his way to acquiring 800 acres of land. This is not some small endeavor. As has always been the case in this country, if a person can own and till large swaths of land that are stolen from indigenous people then they can acquire wealth and pass it down. Things were looking good for Johnson, and he was not alone. His story is similar to that of many freed Black men in the U.S. in the early 17th century. They arrived as slaves and because slavery was not hereditary for Black bodies at the time, they slowly earned their freedom. The problem was that the institution of brutal racial capitalism was just building its muscle. Men like Anthony Johnson were on the wrong side of the fulcrum. However, white men like Maurice Thompson, a Londoner who became rich off of tobacco plantations and slaving were on the right side of this historical juncture. That fulcrum, the racial contract, would radically shift by 1640 and the establishment of hereditary slavery.

From Mills to Woods: A Backwards Design of Black Worldliness

The Data Thief can travel to the past, present, or future, but cannot stay in one place. The Data Thief can see all that has been, what is, and what is to become. The Last Angel of History introduces its audience to the embodiment of speculative fiction/Afro-Futurism—the Data Thief. The Data Thief wanders the boundaries of science fiction and social reality. The Data Thief is a dark technology. The Data Thief is the Blues. The Data Thief is the feeling and spirit of Blackness. We come to understand

that Blackness as a dark technology is personified in the form of the Blues. Robert Johnson may have sold his soul to the devil for the dark technology, but there is something that lies underneath the stories and figures of Afro-speculative fiction—it is a Blues Epistemology (Akomfrah, [1996](#)). Many people say that Akomfrah’s movie is the premier exhibit in Afro-futurism. Afro-futurism is not just a science fiction exploration of blackness. It is a way of explaining the black experience, and how black folks have used their knowledge systems to push creation and innovation in thought and practice in ways that cartesian logics cannot comprehend. Akomfrah calls this “thing” the Data Thief. Clyde Woods called it the Blues Epistemology. According to Woods (1998),

“Born in a new era of censorship, suppression, and persecution, the blues conveyed the sorrow of the individual and collective tragedy that had befallen African-Americans. It also operated to instill pride in a people facing daily denigration, as well as channeling folk wisdom, descriptions of life and labor, travelogues, hoodoo, and critiques of individuals and institutions. It is often forgotten that the blues are also defined by those songs, music, stories, jokes, dances, and other visual and physical practices that raise the spirit of the audience to unimaginable heights. The men and women who performed the blues were sociologists, reporters, counselors, advocates, and preservers of language and customs, and summoners of life, love, laughter, and much, much, more” (Woods, pg. 17).

There are a plethora of reasons as to why the Black experience is worthy of being examined. What Woods does is help us to truly understand how Black bodies withstood the horrors of the slavery. Slavery in the antebellum south was horrific. Most people will point to the lynching of Black bodies as evidence of the horrors of slavery, but that is the era of reconstruction—that is post slavery (Dubois, 1935). The best way to understand the horrors of slavery is to read the written and transcribed words of slaves. Blassingame (1977) compiled over 200 years of letters, biographies, speeches, and interviews of slaves. When those are paired with work like Muhammads (2011)

Condemnation of Blackness then we get a very clear picture of the massive depths of black suffering and the white architects behind it. So, when Woods presents his theory on a Blues Epistemology his telling us how Black people survived the rape, torture, mutilation, and the violent separation of families that is of both written and oral record.

How in the world did an entire group of people find joy when faced with all that? When I think about the Blues Epistemology. I cannot help, but to think about the Black experience in Minnesota. Woods' theory and words guide me to a neighborhood historically known as Rondo. When I was growing up, my mother would take myself, brother, and sister to as many black events as possible. And she always took us to two festivals. One would happen every June and was held in North Minneapolis. It was called the Juneteenth celebration. I would come to learn in my early 20's the significance of the event in terms of it marking the day that some of the few remaining slaves in Texas were finally told they had been free for some months (Kendi, 2017).

The other celebration would happen each July and was called Rondo Days. Rondo was the name of an all Black community in St. Paul, Minnesota. One aspect of the great migration that is often overlooked is how Black bodies made their way to other midwest cities not named Chicago. St. Paul was one of those cities and Rondo was one of those neighborhoods. It had been an all Black neighborhood from the late 1800's until the 1960's. What happened in the 1960's was another form of community disruption that was intentionally racist in policy, practice, and funding ([Yuen, 2010](#)). Yuen (2010) weaves the past into the present as she details the historical ramifications of highway 94 being built as a national highway and literally splitting the Rondo community in half—one on each side of the new highway. She goes on to show how the metrorail project

was a similar disruption of the already partitioned Rondo community. A disruption that carried weight because once again the community who was harmed was not consulted or considered. And yet, every summer until this day anybody can travel to the St. Paul in early July and find a Rondo Days celebration. My mother would tell me that she took my siblings and I to these events because she wanted us to know what it means to be Black. I wish I could ask her more questions. I wish I could ask her what she was searching for. And how she found so much meaning in bringing us to these spaces of Black resilience, resistance, strength, and awe.

Woods might say that this is the Blues. I say that this is how the Blues epistemology embeds a poetic of knowledge that operates by a non-Cartesian logic. The Blues Epistemology is something that cannot be quantified by Western logics. It is only understandable to those who have experienced the particular horrors of racial capitalism and various forms of settler colonialism (Mills 1997; Cesaire 1972). What I find most fascinating is that people can repeat the Blues, but they cannot re-create the Blues. Each song is different and original. And, like the Poetics of Knowledge, the Blues Epistemology is a new science—a human science. Philosophically, Mills (2008) would describe this as a non-Cartesian sum. In his work, *Blackness Visible*, Mills describes the non-Cartesian sum as,

“The sum here, then—the sum of those seen as sub-persons—will be quite different. From the beginning it will be relational, not monadic; dialogic, not monologic: one is a sub-person precisely because others—persons—have categorized one as such and have the power to enforce their categorization. African-American philosophy is thus inherently, definitionally oppositional the philosophy produced by property that does not remain silent but insists on speaking and contesting its status. So, it will be a sum that is metaphysical not in the Cartesian sense but in the sense of challenging a social ontology; not the consequent of a proof but the beginning of an affirmation of one's self-

worth, one's reality as a person, and one's militant insistence that others recognize it also" (Mills, 2008, pg. 31).

Much like Woods, Mills is offering us the ways in which Black bodies used different knowledge systems in order to understand their lot in the world, but to also critique it, navigate it, and transform it. The non-cartesian sum is the culmination of thought and experience that allowed Black people to make sense of the world. It is almost as if Mills, Woods, Cesaire, Robinson, and Dubois are speaking to each other through time. They are all offering theories on how Black people have experienced incredible violence while also showing how their joy and brilliance was not stifled in the face of the violence. I bring Mills into focus because his works have had some of the most meaningful impact on my research and the analysis of my data. His importance lies in the fact that he allows me to better understand what Fanon (1963) and Memmi (1965) wrote about when they established the difference between the colonizer and colonized. They both explain to the reader the impact of colonization on colonial subjects. Essentially, the colonized were forced to learn the history and cultural ways of the colonizer while giving up their traditional ways of knowing and being. Furthermore, they both stridently demonstrate that no efforts of the colonized to become like the colonizer will ever be fully accepted. There are a lot of novels, essays, and theories on the experiences of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Sembene (1996), in my estimation, makes the best film. In "Black Girl," Sembene weaves the provocative tale of the effect and affect of French colonization on young Black bodies in Senegal. The Senegalese had been under French colonization for scores of years and their entire society was attempting to mirror a French way of life. Sembene brings us the

story of a young Sengalese girl whose only wish is to graduate college and have a high paying job/career in Paris, and maybe even fall in love. She graduates and moves to Paris. The issue is that when she gets to Paris, nobody cares that she is a college educated woman. They only see her as an African immigrant with an illegitimate degree. She is only able to get a job as a nanny. And spends months experiencing racism and poverty in Paris. Her dream of being exactly what the colonizer promised was crushed by the realities of the colonial experience. She doesn't find the job, career, or love. The movie ends with her slitting her wrist and dying in a bath tub. Sembene forces us to deal with the reality of the colonial experience, and it is brutal. This is what Mills means when he says that black people are seen as sub-humans and the cartesian logic system does not allow us access. We must be defiantly oppositional because there are very few alternatives and one of them, as Sembene would offer, is a physical or spiritual death—or both.

Woods and Mills deliver some of the most important [beams](#) of Black Worldliness. Woods, provides a deep contextualization of the Mississippi Delta plantation economy and how it is the roots of racial capitalism (Woods, 1995). The Blues Epistemology is a by-product of that, but only as a form of resistance. Many people forget, or are never taught, that the story of slavery in the Americas is not a story of complete subjugation. It is a story of resistance ([1619 Project](#)). That resistance took many shapes. We can look to the physical revolts and subsequent punishments and then expand our gaze toward the everyday joy of black social life. Williamson (2016) does a magnificent job of highlighting the usefulness and blind spots of Afro-pessimism while explaining the need to appreciate how Black folks create joy out of mundane rituals. She calls for a need to

appreciate that joy making is a central component of the black experience--she names her theory as black social life. I am not talking about afro-pessimism or black social life. These two understandings of the Afro-diasporic experience are not absent from my theory of lack Worldliness. In fact, Black Worldliness does not exist without either of the two. However, Black Worldliness is an ontology of resistance, revolt, and navigation of white supremacy while having a keen understanding of what white supremacy is, how it functions, and how it transforms. It is an understanding of oppressive systems and institutions that eludes the people who created them. In all of these works, the centering of joy is critical. It is the main ingredient in what separates Afro-surrealism and Afro-pessimism. If Afro-pessimism positions black bodies as nothing more than slaves and always oppressed (Dumas, 2015) then afro-surrealism offers black folks to dream and live a different reality. One that acknowledges the pain of the black experience but does not allow them to stay in that pain. It forces Black people to find beauty and joy alongside the pain. In sum, it is the Black Radical Tradition.

From Woods to Robinson: Understanding the Black Radical Tradition

In *Black Marxism*, Robinson (1983) writes about the making of the Black Radical Tradition. He takes great care to illustrate how a process of racialisation enabled Europeans to practice racial dehumanization on feudal European peasants long before they exported those tactics on non-white, european bodies. This is one component of Black Marxism. The other component is Robinson's critique of Marxism itself. Robinson strays away from traditional Marxists by arguing that there was no break between the

feudal period and the industrial period. This process of racialism is the link. He goes further to show how Europe took several hundred years to suppress its relationship and knowledge of the African past and make great attempts to ensure Africans could not remember their own. From there he introduces us to black radicalism. He utilizes three radical, black, marxist thinkers: W.E.B. Dubois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright. He notes, "Their reactions to their confrontation of Black resistance, the very means used for their expression were distinct but related, characterized by circumstance, temperament, and training...In time, events and experience drew them toward Black radicalism and the discovery of a collective Black resistance inspired by an enduring cultural complex of historical apprehension" (Robinson, p.5, 1983). The men that Robinson highlights are Black folk who turned to resistance and radicalism in order to desediment ⁴the particular horrors of racial capitalism and white supremacy. From [Lumina Sophie](#), Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, Angela Davis, and James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Bayard Rustin, and Countee Cullen. All of these black folk, and many more who I do not know or remember, practiced black radicalism and resistance. They were the embodiment of Black worldliness. Some of these names are random because they appear as sparks on the spokes of those who inspire me. Others are mentioned specifically because I draw from them in epistemological and psycho-emotional ways. I name Countee Cullen because he was a queer poet and novelist during the Harlem renaissance who happened to marry W.E.B. Dubois' daughter. Countee Cullen is

⁴ I use the term "desediment" as a way for the reader to visualize what it means to take something out of the ground that has been rooted in the dirt i.e. sediment. White Supremacy is rooted in all of our social-political systems. The only way to ensure that it is extracted is to understand all the ways in which its roots travel and all the places it has infected. In short, to "desidement" means to literally rip the ground out and replace it with new, healthier dirt.

similar figure in the Harlem Renaissance and W.E.B Dubois is the founder of many things—racial identity development being one of them. I have mentioned Lumina Sophie and how she inspires me to continuously practice revolution. Ida B. Wells inspired a generation of journalists and scholars to pay attention to lynchings in the south. Ella Baker is the founder of Freedom Schools ([Children Defense Fund, 2018](#)) of whom I owe a great deal of appreciation to for validating my belief that learning should be fun. Davis, Baldwin, Rustin, and Ellison taught me that radicalism requires deep thought, precision, and a kind of curiosity and love that not many people can hold.

Thus, it is no wonder then that I felt a tingle in my spine as I thumbed through the pages of Malcolm X's autobiography in the library of Eden Prairie Senior High School one morning during my freshman year. I was going to school in a predominantly white institution, to be fair, it was 95% white during the time I attended. I had never known any other school district, or peer group. However, I knew my educational experience was missing something. By that point in time, I had read countless “classic” novels that only told the stories of white people, but their myths, dreams, accomplishments, and exploits. I loved reading European and white scholars like Herodotus, Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain, and so on. I had a deep fondness for Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard. I did not know about any of their xenophobia or racism—I simply enjoyed their stories. However, all of that came to an abrupt stop once I began to read the autobiography of Malcolm X. Malcolm taught me that I was not alone in experiencing all of the nuances of black oppression while being in school with predominantly white folks. Malcolm taught me that coming into my identity and revolting against harmful institutions was not an isolated, but common event.

Malcolm was my first introduction to Black Worldliness. Robinson (2000) writes about how Black Radicals both experienced and trained for the onslaught of white supremacy (Horne, 2017) in a way that allowed them to critique, transform, and maneuver it in critical ways. Malcolm X did that, and it reminds me of others who have done the same. Therefore, when I evoke Black Worldliness, I am talking about the complexities of my identity development and my experiences. I am talking about my specific contribution to the Black Radical Tradition. And when I invoke other scholars of the African Diaspora, I am naming their contributions as well. For instance, Clarkson (2011) conducted a mathematics based research study at Marshall Elementary School, which is an African-centered charter school in Minneapolis, Mn. Clarkson notes,

“Ginwright (2004) described an education that is Afrocentric as one that uses principles based on East and West African philosophy. These principles connect cultural values with classroom practices and "form a common framework that views African culture as a transmitter of values, beliefs, and behaviors that can ultimately translate to educational success" (Ginwright, 2004, p.3). As mentioned, the Nguzo Saba serves as the guiding principles at MES. The overarching curricula are presented from an Afrocentric perspective. On the whole, curricula and practices rooted in Afrocentrism are essential to an African-centered education. An Afrocentric school requires that curriculum, whether it is mathematics, science, reading, or language arts, be relevant and meaningful to students' everyday lived experiences and as described by Akoto (1994), attempts to present accurate portrayals of both the African past and the ongoing struggles (and triumphs) of African peoples throughout the world” (Clarkson, 2011, p.109).

The presence of African-centered pedagogy within the wide spectrum of U.S. public is, in itself, a form of revolution. Clarkson describes a school that came into existence because traditional public schools were failing black students, not just in terms of test scores, but holistically (Green, 2018). MES and all of its interlocutors

should be enveloped into the black radical tradition because, like Césaire told Robinson, they could only critique and transform the system because they knew it inside and out.

Enter: Sylvia Wynter & The Human Praxis of Black Worldliness

Black Worldliness operates like light--in particles and waves ([Stark, 2021](#)). The particles are the people, and the waves are the generational influence of the African Diaspora. Sylvia Wynter understood this--it is why she describes a theory of autopoiesis. Autopoiesis as being hybridly human. Wynter (2015) notes that humans are both storytellers (mythology) and biological (mythoi and bios). European sociological systems are rooted in this concept of humanity but have eagerly worked to position humans as purely biological, and any attempts to separate the two denies a fundamental component of humanness. Wynter is a central figure in the theorizing of Black Worldliness because she knew what Césaire and others did--that poetry is revolution and humans, that have not been contoured by white, western, cartesian logic systems, are the poets. Wynter draws on Césaire in arguing that the study of the hybrid science of the word will lead to a new study of the brain and its different knowledge systems (Wynter, p.32, 2015). Wynter gives us a scientific and philosophical breakdown of Black Worldliness. Her insight is critical because her ability to describe how a non-cartesian logic system operates is much more than an explanation, it is an enactment of the poetics of knowledge.

Wynter goes on to work with how Fanon theorized being hybridly human (both biology and myth) in his revolutionary work, *Black Skin White Masks*. Fanon makes sure the reader knows that he is doing a psycho-analysis and hopes that what he has written will force the reader to look within and see the ways in which they had been consumed by the colonial gaze (Fanon, 1963). The product of that consumption is what Wynter describes as a “second set of instructions,” or the non-genetic codes that allow the myth-making aspect of humans to be made real. She goes further to talk about this phenomena as skins (biology) and masks (storytelling/myth-making). Black Worldliness is an extension of Wynters’ second set of instructions. It is knowing how to wear multiple masks at different points in time so that the gaze of white supremacy and settler colonialism never truly knows what it is looking at.

Conclusion: Black Worldliness and The Black Radical Imagination

In describing the Black Radical Imagination, Kelley (2002) writes about how afro-surrealists and radical feminists endeavored to transform society: new social relationships, greater political and economic power for the minorities, and new attitudes of community, leisure, and work. Kelley notes that he wrote his leftist prose for those who still endeavor to dream--for those who abide by a poetics of knowledge. He writes, “[P]rogressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society” (Kelley, p.9, 2002). This is, in essence, the Black Radical Imagination. He

goes further to note that the Black Radical Imagination is a social movement and social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, and new questions because of a concrete engagement with disenfranchised people against systems of oppression.

This type of radical change was prevalent in Minnesota's public education system. In 2015 the Minneapolis public school district, in partnership with the University of Minnesota's department of African studies, rolled out 5 pilot African-American history courses that were based off of ethnic studies initiatives in California and Arizona (Hinrichs, 2017). The initiative attracted more than 1000 students, and by 2017 the courses had expanded to Latin(X) and Asian-American studies courses. This re-imagining of how social studies is taught in Mpls, MN is central to what Kelley describes as the black radical imagination. There was a social movement in Minneapolis that forced the district to rethink how it normally taught social studies. No longer would justice-leaning social studies teachers be forced to hide in their classrooms and veer off of the agreed upon, district structured, curriculum. They could, if they should choose, take a radical path and teach the histories of decentered and marginalized peoples. The critical piece is the word "choice." Most teachers have a choice and choose to not do the hard work of radically engaging against systems of oppression--the work of justice. Minnesota is interesting because even though the state has a plethora of racial equity initiatives, there is very little progress in terms of its horrendous racial disparities (Magan, 2018). This means that regardless of the state's good intentions, it cannot help but support the project of white supremacy and settler colonialism (Horne, 2018). Each day that white folk persist in making people of color invisible and people of color compete in intersectional oppression, the more they strengthen the levies of white supremacy. If change is to be made then we

need to rethink how oppression is mapped. Oppression cannot be understood as a binary. It must be looked at as something that doesn't fit into an academic understanding of cartography (Janz. 2011). My work has led me to believe that we live on vast plains of privilege and oppression. Each person carries with them a multitude of visible and invisible identities along the lines of race, ethnicity, , gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, religion, language, socio-economic statues etc. The list is long. The most important part is that any one of those identities or a combination of them can be privileged, oppressed, or a combination of the two. If we do not take time to understand how our identities carry these markers of privilege and/or oppression then we severely limit a person's ability to tell their story and have it be heard. It leaves us stuck in a sick and twisted production and reproduction.

And.

This is nothing new to those who have faced the horrors of those particular institutions. Which is exactly why what the Minneapolis school district did was so important because they moved against the system and created something new and meaningful for oppressed people. It is not enough, but revolution is never enough. What happens after the revolution is always of the most importance. One offer is to practice futuring. This is an invitation to embody a future in education that doesn't already exist. Bryant (1995) speaks to a concept called Futuring.

“Futuring is based upon hope. Hope gives not only direction and meaning to our visions and actions, but also confidence in what we can become. Hope reaffirms our existence and connects us to the future. Hope is the force that propels us through life, giving us nourishment, purpose, and energy for our actions. Futuring causes us to question assumptions we make about life. Through the techniques of writing and sharing stories, creating images, and participating in roleplays, we can simulate events as though we are already in the future” (Bryant, 1995, pg.39).

That future, I suggest, could be the utilization of Black Worldliness to create an equity consciousness that does the recursive reimagining of education. In order to be equitable everybody has to speak for and get what they need. The reality is that somebody will always be left wanting. So, how does this play out in daily practice? I ask this question and feel a deep sense of sadness wash over me. The sadness is a direct result of my lived experiences as an equity teacher. The problem is that having an equity consciousness means that a person needs to have an intersectional approach to every situation. It means that everybody is stopping to ask themselves how their identities are privileged and/or oppressed in any given situation. It means not holding racial oppression as the primarily oppressed identity. It means that conventionally oppressed people may find themselves in a space of privilege if their identity in that space happens to be privileged. It means that, as a cis-heterosexual Black male, I need to acknowledge my oppression because of my race, and my privilege because of my heterosexuality and my maleness. These examples I have given are a small part of what it means to practice developing and equity consciousness.

And this is an extraordinarily hard thing to do. Imagine you are in a conversation with a person who has almost all of the privileges that this world can afford, and they bring to your attention the fact they feel marginalized in some way shape or form. What do you do? Do you lambast them for not recognizing how hard life is for people who do not share

their identity intersections? Or do you allow their pain to be valid while offering them other lenses from which they could examine themselves and the world around them? You may agree with the latter, but implementing that type of grace, patience, and questioning is extraordinarily hard. It takes a type of self-sacrifice that most people should never have to experience. Imagine a person of color taking time to hear how hard the job of a police officer is? That is being equitable. Most people do not fully understand that equity is about making sure everybody has a seat at the table and feels like they matter. Equity work is thankless work that most folks do not know how to appreciate. And, unfortunately, the ways in which it tends to play out in schools is as coded language for race work. Instead of viewing the problematics of school as an intersectional issue, most educators have a hard time seeing what's beyond the chaos in front of them.

Educators see behaviors in children and want help addressing them. The behaviors from black and brown children get lumped in with the deeper societal tropes of how Black and Brown communities raise their children. If these folks find meaningful support in their classrooms then they consider it a “win” and consequently think they are being equitable. And some of these people are doing justice to the term. The majority of the rest are solving a race problem, and that is a piece of equity work, but it is not the nature of what equity work needs to be in public education. So, then my call to all educators is to take up an equity consciousness. What are the identities in your school building/classroom? How are they intersecting with forms of privilege and oppression? Are you taking the time to understand the nuances of your identity and how it is in relationship to the humans in the room with you? Are you ready for chaos before calm? Are you ready to sacrifice in order to build a better world for the oppressed? I think these

are some of the foundational recursive practices that sustain and equity consciousness. Moreover, an equity consciousness, among many things, is an embodied understanding of a generative sacrifice.

“On October 8, 1953, in Birmingham, Alabama, Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor announced that a planned All-Star baseball game organized by Jackie Robinson – almost a decade after he integrated Major League Baseball – would not be permitted to play in the city. Robinson, who previously toured the country with an all-Black team, signed notable white players Al Rosen, Ralph Branca, and Gil Hodges to join the interracial All-Stars. Ten days before the game was to take place, Commissioner Connor notified the public the event would be banned if white players were going to play because “there is a city ordinance that forbids mixed athletic events.” (EJI, 2017).

Chapter 3: The Problems, Possibilities, and Future of Autoethnography in Education

“Poetic Knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge- Amie Cesaire.”
(Richards, 1996, p.134)

Setting the Scene

My mother always told me that I would have a story to tell. Therefore, I cannot attempt to write anything that does not begin, intersperse, and end with a story. The story for this article is a story about my experience in school. I often think about the first time I was called a “nigger.” I was one of 5 black children who attended this particular elementary school, and I was in the third grade. At the time, I didn’t know what the word meant. The only thing I knew was that it was bad, and it meant that I was different. I never forgot that day because it seared into my brain that I could never be like my white friends or teachers. I was to be different--forever. To be clear, I am a victim of the destructive racial project that is the U.S. public education (Dumas, 2015; Omi & Winant, 1994; Watkins, 2001;), and I began to realize this at 9 years old. In October of 1997, at the age of 11, my family was evicted from low-income housing in a suburb of Minneapolis, MN. We bounced around multiple homeless shelters for a few months before settling in the heart of North Minneapolis, MN. This part of Minneapolis had become predominantly African-American, drug-ridden, and poor thanks to the great migration and trickle-down economic policies (Bergen, 2011; Bergen, 2019). My mother attempted to raise three children by herself in this environment. She was one of many single mothers raising children without the help of family, and she knew it. She knew that she had to develop a different strategy of survival if her children were to somehow not get caught in the vicious and often violent cycles of system racism and white

supremacy that hovered over and through the city like a thick fog (Muhammad, 2011). Her solution was education. She moved to the suburbs in hopes that my brother and I would have access to a school district that, at the time, was one of the best in the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). When we were pushed out of the suburbs she wanted to continue her plan—so she self-integrated us. I began to ride the South West Metro (SW Metro) transit bus at 11 years old. The SW Metro system consists of many routes that it travels, stops it observes, and barriers that it will not cross (SouthWest Transit, 2019). It moves bodies, predominantly white, from the suburbs into the business hub of downtown Minneapolis and back home again. The need for white folks to get to the city created a way to transport a young black boy to the suburbs and back. Every road and turn on those bus routes is an apt metaphor for the politics of power, privilege, and oppression. The bus routes symbolize what is entrenched and also what is fluid. For example, four years after my mother began self-integrating my brother and I, the state of Minnesota, in partnership with the city of Minneapolis, created the “choice is yours” program (Hinrichs, 2018). This program was an attempt to solve the drastically low and disproportionate achievement levels of students of color in the state of Minnesota (Zdechlik, 2019). The decision they came to, much like my mother did, was to allow students of color who were failing in Minneapolis public schools to integrate the surrounding, predominantly white and high achieving suburban schools. The bussing was not mandated, it was optional, and the flow of dark-skinned bodies began. Sadly, these students, much like myself, meet the same system in a different city. The “choice is yours” program did not work. Test scores did not rise and suspension rates in the suburban, white spaces rose dramatically (Palmer, 2003). Most importantly, those

students of color who were bussed into these white spaces became something that so many African-American students had become after the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision—a casualty of the racist and white supremacist system of U.S. public education (Sojoyner, 2016; Vaught, 2011; Vaught, 2017; Watkins, 2001). Even though I never took part in the “choice is yours” program, I was one of those integrated students who felt the pain of blatant and dysconscious racism (King, 1991). The “choice is yours” program like almost every integration effort in the history of the U.S. failed because people in power did not want to change the system of education.

This story pushes me to ask, “how does a person begin to find answers to the pervasive yet uniqueness of systemic racism and white supremacy in U.S. public education?” There is no one, singular answer for white supremacy’s victims. There are multiple methods that can help folks gain clarity as to which aspect of oppression is affecting them the most. This is one of the reasons why I choose critical ethnography and autoethnography as methods. To be clear, my project is an autoethnographical project that is informed by critical ethnography. This positioning allows me to pull from multiple ethnographic methods to both help me understand what happened to me and also analyze the data from my research. It allows me to do the things that bring me joy while also having a strong tether to the disciplines that are foundational to my research. Furthermore, it helps me answer questions that nobody could help me with during my years in p-12 public education. What you have been and will continue to read are autoethnographic experiences and practice that are informed by and intertwined with a critical ethnographic approach. Thus, when explaining my methodology, it is important to elaborate on both. I choose critical ethnography and autoethnography in hopes to

shed light on oppression in such a way that can help others who have been asking the questions I have asked myself my whole life. Or, hopefully, it will bring questions to mind that people have not thought of yet.

Critical ethnography is a combination of critical pedagogy and ethnography. A practice of critical pedagogy would mean providing well informed and creative answers to questions like,

“What is the relation between classroom practice and issues of justice? How do schools reflect or subvert democratic practices and the larger culture of democracy? How do schools operate to validate or challenge the power dynamics of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, indigenous/aboriginal issues, physical ability-related concerns, etc? How do such processes play out in diverse classrooms located in differing social, cultural, and economic domains? How do the knowledges schools and other social institutions choose to transmit replicate political relationships in the larger society and affect the academic performance of students from dissimilar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds? What roles do diverse media play in the ideological education of societies? What is the pedagogical role of popular culture? What are the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic dimensions of new technologies? How do we use critical methodologies and understandings to tap into the libidinal energy of individuals in a way that will produce joy and happiness as they pursue learning and transformative social action?” (Kinchloe, 2008, p.13).

Taking up critical pedagogy as a method is needed work, but it remains absent of the power of observation and the role that the researcher plays in critiquing and maintaining the system they're enmeshed in. For example, I will never forget the response my guidance counselor gave me when I asked her if I should sign up for advanced and A.P. classes as a high school sophomore. I was a young black man. She was a 25+ aged white woman. She looked at my grades and did not see anything more than that. I felt the sting of racism and white supremacy. As a person of color, I did not know if she was treating me fairly or not, I could only assume that she didn't believe in me because I was

black. I received her message based on my life experiences. She happened to be wrong, I both signed up for and excelled at a high level in all of my advanced and A.P. classes.

My experiences have taught me that there is a way of criticizing the institution of public education for the colorblind teachers it creates, and there is a way of digging deep into the lived experiences of students who experience the systemic racism and white supremacy of public education. This is why educational research that does not include some kind of ethnography is missing an essential ingredient. Ethnography is the work of building deep, intimate relationships with a community and developing a kind of trust with community so that one can relay personal observations and participant observations as data (Davies, 1999). This is an approach to ethnography that consistently recognizes that individuals and groups are tied to oppressive systems and vice-versa. Observations are not bereft of deep introspection on one's positionality and connections to power (Davies, 1999). In order to be a decolonizing method, it must, as Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) notes, be "concerned not so much with the actual technique of selecting a method but much more with the context in which research problems are being conceptualized and designed, and with the implications of research for its participants and their communities. It is also concerned with the institution of research, its claims, its values and practices, and its relationships to power" (Tuhiwai-Smith, p.x).

Thus, when I speak about critical ethnography I am talking about the kind of work that speaks to the combination of critical pedagogy and ethnography that I have just described. Furthermore, I am arguing along the lines of Lather (2017) when she notes that critical ethnography embodies salient components of feminist, post-colonial, and

critical race theories while being in activist collaboration with the oppressed. Madison (2005) completes the combination of combining “critical” and “ethnography” when she states that the first step in doing critical ethnography is recognizing that one has an ethical responsibility to speak to “processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain” (Madison, 2005, p.5). I have a uniquely intimate experience with the domain of education. As a veteran teacher, it is my duty and obligation to address processes of unfairness and injustice in schools. My positionality is sentient because, according to Madison, the three pillars of ethnographic research are positionality, dialogue/otherness, and theory/method. Positionality is important because one cannot critique a system without acknowledging their own power, privilege, and biases within that system. We must be reflexive. When we do that, we examine our methods, intentions, and our impacts/effects. Examining positionality holds the researcher accountable while they critique.

In terms of dialogue/otherness, Madison (2005) writes, “[d]ialogue keeps the meanings between and the conversations with the research and the other open and ongoing. The conversation with the Other that is brought forth through dialogue reveals itself as a lively, changing, ebbing through time and no longer an artifact captured in the ethnographer’s monologue or written transcript” (p.14).

Madison’s last tenet of critical ethnography is theory/method. In this space, critical ethnography becomes the performance of critical theory (Kenchloe, 2008). Critical ethnography is a methodological process that directs and completes the task of critical theory. This notion can be simplified by noting that critical ethnography is a mix of critical

theory and ethnography. It is a mix of theory and method where the methodology, ethnography, completes the task of the theory.

In terms of autoethnography, my work is a combination of reflexive and layered ethnography. The reflexive nature of my work shows up in how I examine my life alongside the lives of people and institutions in my study. Furthermore, you will continuously see how I demonstrate my own struggles and the way this research project has changed me as a human being, a Black male, a scholar, and a teacher. I think this is the most fulfilling part of my project (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011). I am writing what I want to write, but the only thing I want to write about are the stories of myself, my family, and the people who look like me. It pushes me down roads I never would have imagined, but it allows me to situate myself in a damning critique of a system of public education. I am not simply casting stones. I am part of a very complicated and historically nuanced problem.

The other autoethnographic piece of my work is layered ethnography. Layered accounts focus on the author's experiences alongside relevant literature, abstract analysis, and data (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). What is relevant literature? What is abstract analysis? And what is data? What makes my work layered is how I have gone about answering these questions through my writing, but not through answering the questions directly. What I consider as relevant literature is anything that is interesting and helpful to me finding a deeper understanding of myself, the institutions I am a part of, and the world. What I consider to be abstract analysis is the analytical frame in which I view everything. I do not follow a Western model of logic or analysis. So, this work is naturally

abstract—or weird. And I think that the abstract, the weirdness, is the most beautiful part of life and research. Lastly, I view data as all of the things that help me make sense of a situation or story. I lean toward qualitative analysis because it allows me to utilize memories and lived experiences as pieces of information that are just as, if not more important than interviews or ethnographic field notes.

The reflexive and layered ethnographic components show up in the beginning, middle, and end of each chapter. It appears in the histories I tell, the pseudonyms I use, footnotes, and citations. This is an intentional use of calling the abstract forth, or rendering the invisible, visible. I was always going to do an ethnographic project but situating my ethnography in this way was a decision I made in the Fall of 2017. It was my second year of PhD coursework. I had begun to cultivate a wide range of meaningful relationships with people who I respected. We created independent studies together, read and wrote together, laughed, cried, drank, and danced together. I was living a dream that I had begun living during my days as a 22 year old Anthropology graduate student at the University of Florida. Except this time, I was 28 and had a lot of tread on my still young legs. Because of my previous experiences in school combined with my recent experiences making specific choices about what classes I took and who I chose to learn with, I became very focused on not letting anybody or institution dictate how I prepared myself to write my dissertation. I viewed coursework as the priming to do research that prepares someone to write a dissertation. I made a choice to prepare myself in ways that worked best for me, and more importantly, kept my love of learning alive. That Fall I felt as if I had achieved 90% of my dream of going through the process of obtaining a PhD. However, there was still something missing. I found that missing link on a chilly evening

in late October. I completed my undergraduate degree in African Studies at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, so I was very familiar with the campus. And, ever since 2005 I have always favored the West Bank of Campus over the East Bank. The West Bank of Campus is where the Department of African Studies is. And this evening I was walking through West Bank on my way to a cafe to meet one of my friends for happy hour. As I walked past the Social Sciences Building a thought pierced my mind. “Where was Africa?”

I had spent 7 years during my undergraduate training and my Master’s training becoming an Africanist. My research was on East African Slavery, racism in Islam, and gender identity development on the East African Coast. I was an Africanist before I was a teacher. Africana studies were my first love and will always be the most important to me. So then why had I not introduced my wealth of experience in Africana Studies into my research and work in public education? I don’t know, but that doesn’t matter. The most important thing is that I realized my mistake on that night. And from that day forward I vowed that I would not write a dissertation without furthering my knowledge of Africana Studies. I decided that I would minor in African Studies for my PhD and that I would spend a year studying African epistemologies and ontologies so that everything I wrote would reflect that way of thinking, being, believing, and understanding of the world.

So.

This work is autoethnography that is deeply influenced by critical ethnography and written through an afro-diasporic epistemology. It is inherently abstract. This is how I collected data, analyzed data, and went about my writing process. My research project was unique because I had no restrictions. I was given permission to document any and

everything I wanted throughout a 2-year time frame. That type of freedom requires the researcher to be responsible on a different level because it is such a long period of time. Therefore, I decided to write up field notes every Wednesday afternoon and after any phone conversation, or professional development training. I used these landmarks because it allowed me to keep track of any mundane interactions while also giving space for people to show up in different ways. Using Wednesday as my fieldnote taking day gave me space to see how the weekend changed or hardened people and their interactions. I needed to take notes after phone conversations because I wouldn't be able to remember if I didn't. Finally, the professional development days were when some of the most tense equity interactions happened, so I wanted to be able to document the complexity of the events right after they happened. The taking of field notes was/is something that I consider tedious. I do not like doing it. However, because I have over 100 weeks worth of field notes taken I am able to use them to help inform my recollection of events while shaping how I want to situate my research experiences within the stories of the African diaspora. This is what shapes my analysis and guides my writing. I am making a specific choice to analyze my data through story, both my personal history and histories from the African diaspora. I am also using those stories to shape and contextualize every aspect of my research project. It is one of the central ways in which I am practicing and embodying the Black Radical Tradition. I view this as my offering to the field of education and also as a way to radically transform it, to desediment routes that are entrenched and create spaces of equitable empowerment for each person. It is about elucidating how institutions, systems, people, possibilities, and problems work with and against each other; collide and separate; Add and divide; rise up and saturate. It is about

attempting to churn through soil that holds some of the most violent atrocities any society has ever witnessed.

The Problematic Future of a Complex Ethnography

What prevents an ethnographic project from re-appropriating the same systems it is trying to change or dismantle? For one, no researcher should be so arrogant as to think their project will magically undo the violent work of white supremacy. Without a consistent acknowledgement of complicity, the research can easily re-appropriate while doing their so-called justice work. In writing about decolonizing research Tuck & Yang (2012) note that “(d)ecolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation” (Tuck & Yang, p.3). Essentially, ethnographers shouldn’t act like they are doing the decolonizing of a system. There are far too many justice oriented, ethnographic projects that use all of the social justice rhetoric to cement an identity. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) elaborate that “non-racist becomes an identity, even a badge of honor” to show the ethical goodness of being a white ally (p. 156). This type of positioning allows the researcher to not have to take ownership of their complicity in white supremacy. It is not enough to desire to be in allyship with oppressed peoples. The ethnographer must desire to be in coalition with the people they research. Those ways of thinking come with unintended consequences, or what Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) names as the anti-racist alibi. This is an affective, psycho-emotional positioning that excuses white folks from doing the messier work of

coalition building (Keating, 2005)--and it is not just white people who end up using anti-racism, people of color can end up doing the exact same thing.

This is why I argue that intersectionality can be a pathway that can create space for a critical ethnographic to be anti-oppressive. Most scholars note that Crenshaw (2005) was the first to coin the term *intersectionality*. This is true, but she is not the first scholar to write about the intersections of oppression. Most importantly, she is not the first black feminist to write about the intersections of oppression. The Combahee River Collective (CRC) (Combahee River Collective, 1986) wrote about the simultaneity of oppressions. The CRC were radical black, queer feminists who were not being accepted by their white feminist counter-parts regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The CRC knew that in order to be valued in a society dominated by white, male patriarchy they had to be seen in ways that had yet to be imagined—so they created it. For the CRC, embodying a consciousness about the simultaneity of oppressions meant doing the hard work of recognizing that race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation are combined by the strongest forces oppression has to offer. This needs to be the work of critical ethnography, and the way critical ethnography keeps itself from being a tool of colonial oppression. Keating (2005) draws on a CRC like radical feminist consciousness raising practice to demonstrate that process of being in coalition with people who are oppression. She describes three steps to being in coalition with oppressed communities: locating experience, seeing resistance to multiple oppressions, and coalitional risk taking. Keating notes that in order to locate experience groups need to meet regularly in small groups that discuss the context and histories related to a specific theme. The second step requires an examination of those conversations with an eye toward the multiple relations

of oppression and resistance. She goes on to describe coalitional risk-taking as exploring the barriers to and possibilities for coalitional action based on the experiences described.

This type of risk-taking requires an ethic of incommensurability (Tuck & Yang, 2016). An ethic of incommensurability is an understanding that not all justice projects have the same goal(s) or need to be on the same page at all times in order to change a system. In fact, a path to meaningful change is an understanding that justice projects shouldn't be the same and should work towards different goals, intersecting when necessary with an understanding that they will part ways because they are not the same. This kind of ethic creates a special kind of solidarity that doesn't require any group or project to hold the weight of ending oppression. Ethnographers who operate like this will inherently be de-centered and their work will operate as a piece instead the whole. Considering this way of operating, the future of critical ethnography is clear—it must embody the most salient aspects of critical theory and ethnography along with a critical intersectional approach. This is a way that the critical ethnographer can do what Bryant (1995) calls *futuring*.

“Futuring is based upon hope. Hope gives not only direction and meaning to our visions and actions, but also confidence in what we can become. Hope reaffirms our existence and connects us to the future. Hope is the force that propels us through life, giving us nourishment, purpose, and energy for our actions. Futuring causes us to question assumptions we make about life. Through the techniques of writing and sharing stories, creating images, and participating in roleplays, we can simulate events as though we are already in the future” (Bryant, 1995, pg.39).

The complex autoethnography influenced by critical ethnography does the *futuring* that Bryant speaks about. It can employ the various theories and methods that will advance it. However, it is going to take understanding the deep, intersecting complexities

of how educational experiences happen for everybody involved. And, most importantly, understand when the critical ethnography can only provide some of the answers.

“On October 28, 1958, a mob of white men in Monroe, North Carolina stormed the home of a small Black boy named James “Hanover” Thompson, 9 years old, threatening to lynch him after a white girl told her parents that she kissed him on the cheek when they were playing together earlier that day. James and another Black boy named David “Fuzzy” Simpson, 7 years old, who the girl had also kissed on the cheek, were arrested by police, held in jail without contact with their families for days, denied an attorney, and sentenced to indefinite terms, ultimately serving over 3 months.” (<https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/oct/28>)

Chapter 4: The Purpose and Procedure of Equity Professional Development: Contextualizing a 2-year Project

In the summer of 2019, I attended a conference in Minnesota called Free Minds Free People (FMFP). It is a bi-annual conference of teachers, students, and community activists that gather to present strategies on how to transform education for justice and equity. I attended the 2017 conference as well. I specifically go to FMFP because the presentations there help me better understand my praxis as a teacher-educator, and my research project. To that end, I was invited to co-create the Radical Professional Development (RADPD) portion of the 2019 conference. As a PhD candidate, this was an intimidating space because I was working with three of the foremost scholars in teacher development: Bree Picower, Carolina Valdez, and Liza Gesuden. Those scholars taught me about the power and possibilities of teacher education. We had several planning sessions leading up to the conference. We spent hours discussing who should lead the breakout sessions. At one point in the conversation Bree asked me what teachers were like in Minnesota. Essentially, she was asking me what kind of local people would be attending this conference. This question was both simple, profound, and complex.

The simple answer should have been that the state of Minnesota has a large group of white, liberal-leaning educators, of whom a large number would come to the conference eager to learn how to be better educators for the students they claim to love. Overall, this is true about many states in the U.S. for about almost anyone who gets a teaching license. However, Minnesota is an interesting place due to its own historical construction of settler colonialism and white supremacy.

To understand the complexities of the liberal-leaning nature of white educators in Minnesota we need to take a deep dive into how whiteness was created and nurtured. Lensmire (2017) informs us that white people use their racial others. In a sort of metaphorically cannibalistic act, white folks consume the land, space, culture, and identities of their racial others in an effort to secure their own sense of self and position in society (Allen, 1997; Baldwin, 1985; Dubois 2007; Lensmire, 2017; Roediger, 1999; Thandeka, 2000).

This is both a conscious and unconscious act. The process of racialism (Robinson, 1983) used white european bodies to fulfill some of the more violent labor needs of capitalism. Once Indigenous land theft, genocide, and African chattel slavery entered the equation then the need to use and dispose of white bodies turned into a need to create a new societal order where white people were no longer ethnic europeans. They, as Baldwin (1985) notes, paid the price of the ticket. They became white. They became essential to the system of racial capitalism that we continue to benefit from today. The trick played on these folks was that even though they got to become white, they were stripped of their ethnic identities and the plumb lines that could help them build solidarity with other oppressed groups.

When one looks into the broader historical picture of the makings of whiteness in the U.S. it allows for deeper spatial and situational aspects of white racial identity development in places like Minnesota. The Minnesota state flag depicts an image of a white farmer tilling his land. His rifle is close by leaning on the stump of a recently felled tree. As this farmer stares into the distance the image in front of him is a setting sun and an indigenous person on horseback racing toward it. An insignia surrounds the image

and reads “L’ETOILE DU NORD,” or The Star of the North. The year 1858 is inscribed on the top of the flag to show the year that the state was officially established. On the surface the image is seemingly harmless, after all it is only a state flag (Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, 1957).

However, if we do some basic homework then a very violent story will reveal itself. That narrative centers around the Dakota and Ojibwe people who were first on this land and the caretakers of it. The story then begins to include the French and British trappers who needed meaningful relationships with the indigenous groups of Minnesota so that they could navigate the forests, prairies, and harsh winters that Minnesota is known for. The trappers needed the indigenous groups, and many took time to learn the languages of Dakota and Ojibwe. They had to earn the respect of the groups in order to do the type of work they wanted to do. That’s why the Minnesota state flag has French on it instead of Dakota or Ojibwe. It’s one of the first utilizations of symbolic erasure of indigeneity that white Europeans created in Minnesota. The date of 1858 is important because it is four years before the Homestead Act. The Homestead Act allowed the federal government to cease indigenous land for federal and civilian purposes. The land grant act then allowed universities to be established by directly taking indigenous land and using it for the purposes of manufacturing and education. Millions upon millions of acres of land were stolen either outright or by trickery from Indigenous groups from all over the U.S. (Homestead Act, 2009).

This is why the farmer tilling his newly stolen land and the indigenous rider streaking into the sunset is so critical. It is a direct symbol of settler colonialism, and it is a marker for the beginnings of becoming white in Minnesota. Minnesota, as a state,

decided that it needed more European immigrants to farm recently stolen land. The state began to advertise to poor Europeans all over Scandinavia and Western Europe. The promise was that if they came to Minnesota then they would receive hundreds of acres of land as long as they farmed on it. Free land.

I think about this and chuckle. At some point you can't make this kind of stuff up. Europeans stole indigenous land and then gave it to poor European immigrants for free while wondering why the indigenous groups were angry. To this end, thousands of Germans, Norwegians, Swedish, and Finnish families flooded Minnesota under the guise that they were just receiving free land. Most of them didn't know they were the recipients of stolen land, for the most part, they were hard workers who were willing to work hard for a better life. A life they could never have in Europe. Therefore, it's no wonder that, during the heat of the Civil War, in 1862 Henry Sibley authorized the hanging of the Dakota 38 (Biwen, 2017). Sibley had been an ally turned liar, thief, and traitor. The U.S.-Dakota war resulted in the death of hundreds of Dakota peoples. After the 38 warriors were hung, the rest of the Dakota, living just outside of Mankato, were death marched to their sacred site of Bdote. A military fort built directly upon this sacred site was named Fort Snelling. As the Dakota elders, women, and children were marched on foot, in the middle of winter, to the military fort they passed many settlements of recently arrived European immigrant farmers who kicked, cursed, and spit on them (Biwen, 2017)

It was a despicable display, and a decontextualized one. These immigrants did not know that they were in the process of becoming white by using their racial others. Most of them did not know the treaties that had been signed or that the land they were

given was violently taken. What they did know was what they were told by newspapers and government officials--that native folks were savages who would kill you and take your land. Chomsky (1988) names this phenomena as manufacturing consent.

Chomsky saw all forms of media as potentially corrosive. He argued that if a news medium told the public that a person, event, or thing was true over and over again then the mass public would begin to take that narrative as truth regardless of its veracity.

The significance of manufacturing consent here is that ethnic Europeans consented to hate and disparage indigneous groups to protect their own land and newly granted privilege. This is the price of the ticket (Baldwin, 1985). As years would go on immense amounts of racial violence in the forms of lynching, redlining, housing covenants, sundown towns, and minstrel shows (Roediger 1999, Rothstein, 2017, Wells-Barnett, 2014) would serve as protectors of white racial privilege. Further engraving the benefits of whiteness while consistently highlighting inhumanity of non-white people. Throughout this process, the U.S. experienced multiple World Wars that served to further U.S. Imperialism. This sparked a need for people to name themselves as American (Baldwin, 1985). In order to do this many ethnic Europeans had to stop speaking their native language and start speaking english. Many of these ethnic Europeans had to change their last name so that they couldn't be marked as one of the undesirable european groups.

They stopped speaking their language, practicing their culture, and changed their last names. They became "American." They became "White." To be american was to be white and to be white was to be American. The ethnic Europeans had to make a choice to pay the price of the ticket. No other racialized group had the option of making that

choice. Black bodies were seen as biologically inferior to the humanity of white people (Baker, 1998; Muhammad, 2011). Indigenous people were seen as wild savages who could only be saved by boarding schools that meticulously erased any aspect of their culture that was important to them. In many places the LatinX communities were legally “white,” but still segregated because of their brown skin (Barajas, Garcia, & Yosso, 2012). The Asian Immigrants were treated like chattel to build railroads and provide exotic fantasies for white people, while at the same time attempting to take court cases all the way to supreme court so that they could be legally white--it didn't work. The only group of people who maintained the option of becoming white were European immigrants. Any other group of people could only hope to perform aspects of whiteness that could give them a leg up.

It is this complex history that made it so difficult for me to answer Bree when she asked me about the teachers in the state of Minnesota. And my response to the group was the same one that I have written in this chapter. Minnesota is a land of predominantly Dysconscious white folks (King, 1998). They are not just uncritical of the social-political landscape they live in. They are also uncritical of their own racial identities. This creates an environment where white teachers perpetually cause harm but claim themselves victims of racial stereotyping. Leonardo and Zymblyas (2013) name this as the taking up of a non-racist alibi. The non-racist alibi allows white people to perform singular actions of allyship or solidarity and hold those up as badges of honor, or certificates of completion. Their work of interrupting systemic racism and white supremacy is deemed complete. Thus, when the need arises for them to do even more

work they become confused when they are singled out for allowing racially harmful events to take place without speaking up.

The mapping of this white, racial terrain is critical because it shows the depths of what we were up against for RADPD, and what I was up against on a daily basis working with white teachers. RADPD would attract the most liberal of white folks in the Twin-Cities based solely on the nature of the conference. I needed my fellow organizers to understand the particular brand of whiteness we were up against. Furthermore, I needed them to know why I was so familiar with these white teachers. I spent my first 2 years teaching in North Miami Beach, a predominantly Afro-Caribbean community. I then came home and began to teach white teachers and staff for the next 6 years of my career.

You see, I had no choice but to study white people and learn about how they saw themselves because they were my students. I was an equity teacher charged with the professional development of district staff. District staff was over 80% white while the student demographics were over 50% people of color. There would be no refuge from whiteness for me. I was a black male teacher and 90% of my students were 22-60 year old white women. In order to be responsive to their identities and lived experiences, I had to gain an understanding of what those were. RADPD offered an opportunity to do so while breaking the monotony of PD.

Traditional practices of professional development in public education have a peculiar hum. Most school districts dedicate three to five days of the school year to professional development. This usually coincides with state mandated courses that help teachers stay up to date with their licensure. Furthermore, they tend to include sessions

where teachers get strategies and resources to better their practice. PD is a core tenant of the operationality of a school system. The problem is that most of these PD's are not transformative. I was a classroom teacher for 3 years and an instructional coach for 6 years. I have been to so many PD's where I just sit in the back and marvel at how hours are spent on things that could have been sent as links in an email. My amazement, however, is not singular. I observe the facilitators walking math teachers through the new standards or resources. And then I observe the teachers demanding strategies to make them more successful. And...if they are not successful then the district is at fault. It's almost as if all of the interlocutors of the district are looking for a magic lamp and a genie instead of self-agency. I've often wondered why so many teachers were complaining when they could just spend extra time building lessons and gathering resources that could transform their practice. And then it hit me. They were spending extra time. They were trying almost everything they could. The problem wasn't one of agency or ability. It was one of ideology, epistemology, and identity (Picower, 2009).

This is why RADPD was so necessary. We were not out to give teachers strategies and resources. We were trying to get teachers to think in entirely different ways. Ngugi Wa'Thiongo (1986) calls this decolonizing the mind. He writes about a harmony that is broken when one encounters the colonial structures of education. Traditional PD is something that breaks the intellectual harmony of educators. Instead of them operating as jazz musicians testing different notes, they are explicitly and implicitly pushed to operate inside of boxes: state standards, professional learning teams, observations, building expectations, etc. They then reenact these forms of oppression on the students. It all becomes a vicious cycle that ends in administrators

and teachers both questioning each other's practices and the students still failing or succeeding along predictable lines.

They illuminated a route to understanding education in ways in which the evidence of things are not often seen (Baldwin, 1986). This RADPD was everything to me. It symbolized the ecosystem that I thought all teachers lived in. Turns out I wasn't wrong, but I definitely wasn't right.

Creating and sustaining teacher professional development is a continental task. Teachers are normed from the first time they step foot into a licensure program. I am a licensed teacher, and I am one who teaches within an elementary licensure program. Therefore, I know what the requirements are for giving candidates access to a teacher license. I am no authority, but I do have insight into the heuristics of the system of teacher preparation. Thus, when I state that licensure programs are "questionable." I don't use the phrase "questionable" as it's intended use. I have no time to question the intent of teacher prep programs. My use of "questionable" is a turn on what Ngo names as ambivalent. Ngo (2013) writes that "*Ambivalence* is able to signal the continual fluctuations, contradictions, incompleteness, and uncertainty of identity work that, for me, terms such as "hybridity" and "in-between" do not capture as well. (Pg. 28). Teacher preparation programs and traditional educational pd is, inherently, incomplete and filled with contradictions. They are questionable because most programs and most practitioners do not name the flaws in the design. The following findings will illustrate why.

The New Negro Problem

Good, bad, or in between, people of African descent have always been a problem in the United States. During the antebellum period it was easier to dismiss black bodies as important chattel that could never be human like white bodies could be (Baker 2001). After the civil war, white leaders, politicians, theorists, and other sorts of white power brokers had to deal the harsh reality of black bodies no longer being chattel but being citizens. Black humanity was still in question, but citizenship was not. So, lots of physical and intellectual labor went into answering the question, “what do we do with these negroes?” (Baker, 1998; Dubois, 2007; Myrdal, 1944; Waktins, 2001). The most popular refrains were “The American Dilemma,” or “The Negro Problem.” There were myriad responses ranging from transporting the freed slaves back to Africa, keeping them on plantations in the south where they were supposedly more comfortable; putting them on chain gangs as a form of neo-slavery; allow them to migrate to the city and live in squaller with poor european immigrants who were not the right type of white people (Robinson, 1983), and finally, the most daring and dangerous idea--educate them and give them every opportunity that was available to white people (Dubois, 2007; Sojourner, 2016; Waktins, 2001; Ward, 2012). It should come as no surprise to learn that 4 out of the five of these things happened at brutally efficient levels, education and equal access to privilege is something we are dealing with in 2021--a full 156 years after the ending of slavery.

Take a moment to imagine the fear that washed over white people at the mere prospect of a body that was once property having the ability to work the same jobs, or

even have more money, property, or wealth than a white person. Indeed, it was a terrifying reality to face, and certain white people did everything in their power to prevent this possibility from becoming reality. Laws were passed, policies instituted, and plans were put in place to actively, and sometimes violently prevent black bodies from becoming equal members of American society (Baker, 1998; Dubois, 2007; Robinson, 1983; Hinton, 2016; Muhammad, 2011). This is the interesting and terrible history that lived in ISD Basquiat from its inception and became a serious problem in the Fall of 2014.

ISD Basquiat had always been a school system that disproportionately pushed Black and Brown bodies into special education, failed them academically, suspended them, and expelled them. All of this while consistently having disproportionately lower graduation rates than their white peers (MN Department of Education Data Center, 2014; Pro Publica's Miseducation, 2018). The issue, or, I should say that the reason this was not an issue until 2014 was because the district was predominantly white. In fact, it was overwhelmingly white, so white that the failure and mis-treatment of non-white bodies was akin to a drop of rain during a thunderstorm--unnoticeable. Nonetheless, two things happened in 2014 that scared the hell out of district leadership and the predominantly white staff and community of the district: 1. The district flipped from a space was over 50 percent White students to a space that was over 50 percent students of color (MN Department of Education Data Center, 2014). This sudden shift did not correlate with the parents of students of color having more voice in district level decisions, but it did signal a sort of everlasting change. ISD Basquiat had become the permanent home of an overwhelming number of Liberian immigrants and their loved

ones. The state of Minnesota has the most Liberians or people of Liberian heritage in all of the U.S. ISD Basquiat came to hold the largest number of these folks out of the cities in Minnesota. Or, as my uncle would say, “that place got way to Black--way too fast.” Fears of a future that would daily, monthly, and yearly look nothing like the white, quiet, Northwest suburb that it used to be. 2. Unfortunately, fears of permanent racial change from white to BIPOC has only fueled more cruel forms of hate. We have major examples like the Tulsa Race Riots, followed by race riots in Compton, Harlem, Washington D.C., Minneapolis,(Hinton, 2016) and some of the most viscous forms of legalized racial discrimination that multiple horror movies/television shows have been made about it (Peele, 2020; Little, 2021). All of this to say that ecosystems of white supremacy are designed to correct themselves...not change (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Therefore, the second thing that scared district leadership in ISD Basquiat was when it was named as one of the top school districts in the state that had a very large amount of racial disproportionality in its programming and an audit was soon to follow (Pro Publica’s Miseducation, 2018).

It would be foolish to claim that the responses of the school district were revolutionary, they were not. School leadership did what school leaders often do when white supremacy is threatened--they protected whiteness. Allen and Liou (2019) explain how this happens in school leadership training and praxis,

“We posit that the development of school leadership should begin with the idea that White supremacy is a hidden curriculum entrenched within schools (Allen, 2002a) as well as a societal context in which schools operate (Bonilla- Silva, 2001; Sleeter, 2004). White supremacy is not simply about groups of people of European descent but is a social

system that operates to organize humans into groups we call “races” and arranges them into a relational hierarchy where the White race is always in power (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). In describing White supremacy as a social system, we are referring to a larger society that, despite times of what may seem like racial progress (e.g., the Civil Rights Era or Reconstruction), is fundamentally arranged to ensure that Whites remain in control of society, as they work to unjustly and immorally construct a higher social status over people of color (Bell, 1992). Consciously and unconsciously, Whites’ investment in the material and psychic benefits of Whiteness drives their individual and collective efforts to simultaneously construct themselves as positive and people of color as negative (Fanon, 1952/1967). At the institutional level, organizational structures, systemic processes, and ideological formations of schooling reproduce White supremacy by making and marking bodies in racialized ways and surveilling notions of intellectual superiority (i.e., typically White students) and inferiority (i.e., typically students of color) (Allen, 1999 & 2001; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Lewis, 2003; Matias & Liou, 2015). These notions perpetuate how school leaders think of students and the type of education they deserve (Milner, 2010), and the pervasiveness of these beliefs may be further exacerbated by a lack of conscious and diverse school administrators. In 2015, there were approximately 928,000 school administrators in the United States. Of this total, administrators of color made up just 27% (AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees, 2016). (pg. 678).

Allen and Liou’s premise highlights the need for change in how our school leaders are made and, simultaneously, the lack of consciousness that is required of school leadership.

And.

Everything you have read in the beginning of this chapter is what was going through my mind when I went into the Director of Equity’s Office and slyly smiled as I told him, “you have a new negro problem on your hands, and nobody knows what to do.” I continued to chuckle as I clarified that the “you” I was speaking of was the school district, and the “nobody” of whom I was speaking was district leadership. I went on to speak about how excited I was to be facilitating the race training because we were in a moment

to make the type of change that is not possible unless a system is meeting the moment of a paradigm shift (Dillard, 2006). This moment was so critical that the only thing that could come to my mind was that this was like answering the question of the American Dilemma—"What do we do with the Negroe" (Mrydal, 1944).

ISD Basquiat: Solving the Wrong Problem

Racial equity work failed in ISD Basquiat because in multiple failed attempts it tried to convince white people that they were the problem of racism and then tried to convince them that they could be the solution to solving the problematics of racism. I was a major part of the latter and complicit in the former. Once ISD Basquiat took steps to face their new reality of having a predominantly white staff who did not know how to teach or build community with BIPOC students, and that the district had become overwhelmingly BIPOC students of color they went into emergency mode and began to throw money at the "problem." This type of response is common in public education. School systems tend to match their professional development practices with their strategic plan's core values--the issue is that these plans change every three to five years (Picower, 2009; Sims Field notes, 2017). The consistent shifting of these plans leads to a type of turnover that every practicing teacher knows very well. The school year ends, and summer is a welcome reprieve. Soon as summer is over, be it the end of July or the beginning weeks of August, teacher workshop and preparation weeks begin. Usually, teachers are required to attend multiple days of professional development and then have time to set up their classrooms. These opening professional developments are the best times to set a tone for the new

year--even if there is always a contingent of teachers who sit with their arms folded, waiting for the next new initiative to come. In essence, there may not be a better time for a school district to make a statement about what it believes in. And, in the Fall of 2014 ISD Basquiat had decided it needed to fix its racial disproportionality issues by bringing in Pacific Educational Group (P.E.G.). I have detailed the work of P.E.G. in the previous chapters. I bring them back into the conversation here to note that P.E.G. was focused on the wrong problem.

They wanted white educators to name that they were privileged because they were white. Furthermore, these white educators were supposed to learn how to consistently name their racial privilege by admitting that they were always the problem (Courageous Conversations). The reason this process was so flawed was because it betrayed the intersectional ethic (Combahee 1973; Keating 2008) that I have previously written about. The training did not provide a seat at the table of the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression. They were used to position white people as a different kind of "problem." And, in many respects, the foundation of critique from P.E.G. and many of its facilitators was correct. White People have been a different type of problem since the inception of whiteness (Dubois, 2007; Robinson, 1983; Roediger, 1999; Thandeka, 2000). The biggest problem being a dysconscious acceptance of "White," or "American" as a racial moniker that required the dissonance with an ethnic European culture and an acceptance that only a certain racial caste could reap the benefits of whiteness (King, 1994; Dubois, 2007; Roediger, 1999). The issue with P.E.G. is that they weren't doing training on racial identity development. They were conducting trainings that were supposed to help people

“see” race--whatever the objective was, they were using the wrong tools to fix the problem. Therefore, they created an entirely new one--a school district staff that overwhelmingly disapproved of the training.

“On June 14, 1910, Louisiana’s House of Representatives broadened its ban on interracial marriage by passing legislation, by a vote of 93 to 10, prohibiting Black people and white people from living together under any circumstances. Under the new legislation, cohabitation was a felony punishable by imprisonment for up to five years. The bill was signed into the law by Governor Jared Sanders on July 16, 1910” (<https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/jun/14>).

Chapter 5: Synthesizing Stories from ISD Basquiat

My 8th birthday might be the most memorable birthday of my life. It was 1994 and I had very few truths. I knew I was poor; I knew I loved watching cartoons and playing outside, I knew how to ride and fix bikes, and, I didn't think that I was loved by my parents. My mother ran a tight ship, and any mistake or misbehavior was met with physical abuse coupled with my father rarely being around. The combination of these things left my young mind wondering if I ever mattered to anyone. On top of that, my mother worked all day, every day. On top of that, she went to school at nights and on the weekends. My brother and I would spend evenings with her, but those would regularly end before 8pm. We would often spend nights with our bedroom doors cracked ever so slightly in order to hear her conversations, smell the cigarette smoke, and on a Friday night...here the laughter of friends sharing libations and playing cards. Life in 1994 was full of surprises. My little sister was turning 1 year old, and our 2 bedroom apartment was starting to get really small. My mother decided to move us into a 3 bedroom apartment so her two boys could have their own room and she could be in the same room as her daughter.⁵ I can't remember the exact day we moved in, but it was glorious. My father came around to help, and somehow we ended the night with cable tv.

It will always be moments like these that remind me how simple and beautiful life can be. What happened next reminds me of how precious life can be for anyone, and more importantly, how most Black folx live so close to the edge that any kind of hiccup can destroy all they have in the world. The latter was the test my brother, infant sister,

⁵ When and if my sister reads this section, know that I am sorry for telling what may be an unnerving truth—the living arrangement between my mother and sister would not end until 2001. They slept in the same bed for the first 8 years of her life because we could not afford another option.

and myself felt when we found out our mother was being hospitalized for pneumonia. I didn't know what pneumonia was then. All I know is that the week of my 8th birthday my mother was in the hospital with a breathing tube in her throat because she had damn near worked herself to death.

I imagine her friends were terrified. They must have looked at her in the hospital; looked at our faces; and then began to wonder what would happen if this woman doesn't make it. I imagine that because that is what I was thinking as I was ushered out of the hospital and taken back to our new 3 bedroom apartment by one of her friends. I didn't think I would see her again. Which is why I was so shocked when my brother and I were brought back to the hospital to get birthday presents. My brother and I's birthdays are 4 days apart. We tend to celebrate our birthdays together. And this day was no exception. My mother had her friends give us our gifts as she turned and looked at us from her hospital bed. I have no recollection of what my brother got, but she gave me a big, blue boombox with a yellow cassette tape holder—and she gave me a book on tape. The book was about a dinosaur family and its adventures. I was obsessed. It wasn't the book itself. It was the idea of listening to a story that never ends as you go to sleep. I learned the power of a never ending story. And, more importantly, I learned how to use stories to escape, shape, and understand the craziness of the world around me.

What I did not know is how training in feeling and listening to stories would connect so deeply with my theorizing of the Black experience. Therefore, when it came time to figure out a way to present the ethnographical data of my 2-year research project, I chose a writing style that is heavily influenced by vignettes. Research vignettes are commonly

used in multiple academic disciplines in order to present a single case that illustrates complex research findings (Langer, 2016). However, because of the approach I have taken in analyzing my data, I am using the language of vignettes to show how I am storyfying my experiences and data.

My research findings are complex because the world is. I often tell teachers to remember that they never enter the classroom as some sort of neutral entity. They bring all of their experiences into the room with them, and the children do the same. School is not a place where some people teach, and some people learn. Schools are mini mosaics of the world and all of the beauty, strangeness, and chaos that comes with it. And that is intriguing to me. The most interesting thing is trying to figure out to make sense of things that can never be explained. Thus, I do not attempt to make sense. I tell stories. I tell complex stories that are wrapped in personal, local, and global histories. I tell stories in a way that I hope allows the reader to open a door and stare at chaos, strangeness, and beauty all at once.

The following 4 stories are carefully chosen experiences that are a mix of field notes and interviews. They focus on my work with teachers throughout the length of my project. For me, they elucidate my true feelings about public education in the U.S. Which is that it is a facsimile of the British colonial system. When people first learn about colonization they hear terrible things like the taking of land, changing of languages, use and disposal of bodies, destruction of culture, etc. The stories make it seem as if the colonizers were all powerful when this couldn't be further from the truth, especially when talking about the British colonial system (Meischer, 2005). The British practiced something called "in-direct rule." This meant that they would colonize a country and leave

very few British colonial officers in place. Instead, they would empower locals to enforce British rule for them. Basically, the British didn't truly colonize their subjects, the subjects colonized themselves while the British sat back and prayed that the subjects of their poorly funded colonial empire would never realize that if they stopped controlling themselves then they could easily dispatch their colonial overlords.

This is how schools work. District leaders, administrators, and staff are so busy policing themselves and enforcing the "norms" of public education that they forget that they can actually practice a radical future. They just have to shake off the yoke of colonization. The following stories will show how people both adhere to the colonial norms of public education and how some folks actively resisted.

Story #1: 90% of These Folks Don't Want to be Here...And They are all White

I recall a balmy March 2017 morning that was set aside by ISD Basquiat to train every staff member that had not attended the optional Beyond Diversity training. Beyond Diversity was ISD Basquiat's racial equity training. Over a period of 5 years the district placed a mandate that every employee was to be trained in racial equity. This morning was one of the final offerings of the training before the district switched to something else.

I walked into the training room, which held space for 120 people, around 6:30am. The day would not begin until 8am, but I had developed a practice of arriving extremely early to set up the room, make sure all of my materials were in order, decide what order I wanted to present certain slides, what slides I wanted to change, and which slides we would not be going over that day. Most importantly, I needed time to ground myself because I knew I was entering into a 2-day, 16 hour training session in which my entire identity would be used and consumed by white people and BIPOC folks. I always played music loudly--usually a mix of 70's and 80's RnB with a smattering of West African, East African, and Caribbean songs that I had become attached to from my worldly travels. I always wanted participants to feel like they were coming into my home. A Black man's home, but the kind of space they weren't expecting. On this day, I felt special. I wore my favorite boots, Paco-Rabanne 1-million cologne, the tightest jeans I owned, and an A-shirt under one of my beloved duster cardigans. Suffice it to say, I felt ready for anything. As the clock hit 7:45am people began to trickle in. I tended to not pay attention to the people flowing into the room, I always let the music do that for me. I bopped around the room, looking out of the windows and triple checking that the space was set up perfectly for me to manipulate it when and how I saw fit. By the time 8am rolled around, my co-facilitator had joined, and we were chatting behind our table in the front of the room with our opening slide being projected directly to the right of me, but in the center of the room. I smiled and greeted a few people who were signing in and then paused the music. I clicked on my wireless mic, greeted the room and told them we would be starting in 5 minutes. I always start trainings later than they should because I know what it's like to feel

like you are running late and could get in trouble. I had adopted a practice of trying to make people feel like they weren't being punished for being late or being there at all.

I turned the music back on and chatted with my co-facilitator. We mused at how incredibly white the room was. More importantly, we noticed that there was an abnormally large amount of men at the training, and all of these men were white. By the time 8:05am reared its ugly head, I knew we would be in for an intense 2 days--or I thought we would be. I turned the music off and clicked my wireless mic back on and greeted the room again. "Good morning, good morning beautiful people. I said with a big smile." And, if you know me, or have been around me then you will know that I have a very large smile. I wheeled my chair to the front of the room and sat down. I smiled and surveyed the room as I said, "Welcome friends, and thank you all for being here. We have a lot of things to go through in the next two days. Some of them will be fun, hopefully, and some of them will be very difficult. Either way, we will get through everything together, and like Andy Dufranse, come out clean on the other side." (Field Notes, March 22nd, 2017). I have been using the Andy Dufranse reference since I started teaching undergrads in 2009. I bring it up because it has never lost its merit. Andy Dufranse had to crawl through 500 yards of sewer drain filled with feces in order to escape to freedom (Darabont, 1995). So, I tend to equate facing hard things as being willing to crawl through a river of shit in order to come out clean on the other side. I am never shocked that my reference falls flatter as the years progress. However, on this day I had a feeling that it would be one of my tougher sessions. After I spoke my opening words I invited the group to take part in a grounding and breathing activity. As I sat in front of them seated in my swivel chair. I asked them to place two feet on the ground and take three deep breaths. I asked them to breathe in for

four counts and to breathe out for four counts. As they breathed in and out I asked them to get in touch with their bodies and what they were bringing into the room with them today. I asked if they were feeling pain, stress, excitement, irritation, pressure, joy, etc. I then asked them to locate where in their body they felt the most sensation. I then reminded them that they bring their bodies with them everywhere they go and cannot and should not ignore or depress what they are feeling. I thanked them for doing the exercise with me and told them it was time to begin.

Being a trained cultural anthropologist, experienced facilitator, and a decently emotionally intelligent human being, I felt the room was full of anxiety. I didn't know how many people were in attendance, but the room seemed at full capacity. As a teacher and facilitator, I always pace. I can never stand still in the front of a room. I do that because it's hard for me to stand still anywhere and because I believe that an aspect of good teaching is movement. I believe that the facilitator should always be moving and redirecting eyes and attention so that the energy of the space never goes flat. This being the case, I began to move my body to the left side of the room. I spoke as I moved. I began to tell the room about the history of these trainings. I told them that we had failed the staff of the district. I went on to say the original forms of this training did not have the desired effects, and like any good educator we were changing the lesson instead of keeping the same thing and letting it fail over and over again. When I finished explaining the history of the training and its impact on the district, I asked the group raise their hands if they had been forced to come. Over 90% raised their hands, this means that over 100 people raised their hands.

As I saw this I lifted my right foot onto an open chair and chuckled as I shook my head. I told them that this should never be the case. I said that people should want to come to these trainings because they want to learn how to be better people. They should never be forced to come. I then said that I would do my best to make sure everybody's voice is heard and nobody is blamed because they are white. I then reminded them that because we would be talking about the history of racism in the U.S. then we would, without a doubt, be talking about whiteness. I said that it would be very hard for some people to handle and if they ever found that they could not be in the conversation then they should leave. At that point, I walked to the front of the room and told the room that this was the type of training that would only be beneficial if people were vulnerable, reflexive, and able to give their full attention to the moment. If they couldn't do that for any reason whatsoever then they should go. I then said that I would make sure that they got paid for being here. A not so subtle way of saying that I wouldn't tell on them for leaving. This may sound pretty cut and dry, but I gave two important caveats. The first being that the opening of the training and the 1st activity would take us to about 9:30am at which we would take our first break. I told them if they snuck out after the first break then I would assume they were not ready to do the hard work the training required and wouldn't report them or force them to come back. The second caveat was that if they stayed then that meant they were signing up to be committed to the training and everything it entailed. I was deliberate in saying that if health, or family needs came up then they were always welcome to take care of themselves in whatever way they needed. I proceeded to start the 1st activity and then give a 15 minute break...

To those reading this that work in school districts, and/or receive consistent professional development opportunities it will come as no surprise that very few people took me up on my offer. I was being genuine, but being honest in a professional setting tends to cause more harm than good. However, following the rules means one gets to maintain their job and an investment in white mediocrity--regardless of color (Mills, 2008). Every person who raised their hand stayed because they did not know how to think about having another choice. In writing about docile bodies, Foucault (1995) writes about how humans lose themselves and become controlled by a system. He writes,

“These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called ‘disciplines’. Many disciplinary methods had long been in existence--in monasteries, armies, workshops. But in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries these disciplines became general formulas of domination. They were different from slavery because they were not based on a relation of appropriation of bodies; indeed, the elegance of the discipline lay in the fact that it could dispense with this costly and violent relation by obtaining effects of utility at least as great. They were different, too, from ‘service.’ which was a constant, total, massive, non-analytical, unlimited relation of domination, established in the form of the individual will of the master, his ‘caprice’. They were different from vassalage, which was a highly coded, but distant relation of submission, which bore less on the operations of the body than on the products of labour and the ritual marks of allegiance. Again, they were different from asceticism and from ‘disciplines’ of a monastic type. Whose function was to obtain renunciations rather than increase of utility and which, although they involved obedience to others. Had as their principal aim an increase of the mastery of each individual over his own body. The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. (Pgs. 137-138)

If viewed through the lens of Foucault then there is no disputing why nobody left the training. They were trained to stay, trained to be controlled. The individual in power

could use, manipulate, and/or dispose of these folks with little to no consequence. Reflecting on my experiences always leads me to an interesting space. This experience reminds me of what my mentor, Dr. Harold Massey, told me years ago. During a time when I did not know how to write a complete sentence, he saw my brilliance. I was very insecure, and he told me that my insecurities paled in comparison to white mediocrity. He was passing down a wisdom that I would only come to truly respect almost a full decade after he spoke those words. He was speaking to an inherent racial caste system that privileged and promoted people based on the color of their skin, but disguised it in rhetorics of diversity and multiculturalism. He was telling me that I would come to meet white people in power that were mediocre at best. And...mediocrity has proven itself true. My experiences training white folks leads me to think about what keeps these folks in power, or in their regular day jobs. I call this "White Docility." White Docility is a move white people in education make to secure their jobs by following the rules and objectives they are required to abide by. They don't attempt to transform systems, or question authority. They simply desire to not make trouble. The logic serves as a guide to being silent. A guide to being protected.

It may not be a popular opinion, but I wholeheartedly believe that if one pays close attention then they can learn a lot about white people, from white people, on their struggles to be white.

Story #2: Stand in the Center of the Room, Hands By Your Side. Now Wait for them to Quiet Down.

Ota Benga, Sarah Baartman, Josephine Baker, Ruby Bridges, Bernadette Chandler, Emmanuel, Gabriel, Noah, and Sharai Sims. These people, of whom I am included, have one or more things in common—our Blackness was put on display for the approval, disapproval, discipline, and punishment by white folks and white supremacy. The list of names, bodies, faces, and families is in the millions. They are all of African descent, and most of them are dead—many in the railroads made of human bones known as the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. It is this pattern of control that I came face to face with when I entered the cafeteria of an elementary school in ISD Basquiat in the Fall of 2016. Being an Afro-centrist, it is important to always evoke my family and ancestors. And that is exactly what I did in my attempts to analyze the depressing scene in front of me—a school that functioned like a prison (Vaught, 2017).

I was used to teachers being obsessed with control and wanting uniformity in their classrooms and across the school building. I had seen countless examples of students being unnecessarily punished, kicked out of class, suspended, and expelled. I have both witnessed and been complicit in priming students for prison. However, I had never seen a school, an elementary school no less, that was so rigid and cold. My role as an equity teacher for the district required me to travel to almost every school in the district and any building that housed special programming. Furthermore, I tended to meet with administration directly and as soon as I entered the building. In fact, I do not remember a time when I didn't have immediate contact with someone on the administration team as soon as I entered a space. So, when I walked into Carter Elementary I walked straight into the principal's office to introduce myself to the new hire, a Black man, who was charged with turning one of the worst performing schools in the district around. I did not

envy the task ahead of this man. The data I was familiar with was that Carter elementary drifted from 2nd to last in the district per achievement data that is tracked by the state. And these are traditional academic tracking measurements. If you really wanted to know the power, problems, and possibilities of the young people who entered this space then all you had to do was stand outside the front doors of the school and look straight, left, or right. What you would see is section 8 housing complexes in every direction. These spaces are home to some of the poorest people in the state of Minnesota, and the racial demographics are over 95% African-American and African-Immigrant. Thus, Carter Elementary is the primary school for poor black bodies--and the school staff is almost 100% white. The majority of the staff at this building are not your run of the mill white teachers who teach in the hood and think that they can save black bodies if they can just get them to believe in themselves without acknowledging the troubling history of racism in public education (Emdim, 2016). A lot of these white teachers and staff are veterans who chose to work at Carter Elementary and have stayed there. These folks are invested in the community in ways most outsiders don't know how to be. However, they were still employees of a public school system, and therefore relied on the system to help them solve the "problem" of Blackness.

The district obliged in a way that disgusts me to my core. In order to appease the staff, a program called Envoy (Grinder, 1993) was brought in. Envoy is a training on nonverbal communication classroom management. It is designed to help teachers not fight over the loudness of their students, but to train the students to listen to non-verbal commands and gestures so that they are willed into compliance. Does the program have

positive components? Sure, there is always something good to take from any model or framework.

And.

This is a training that was created in the early 90's and based on the false ideologies that students learned best when they are drilled with content and forced to memorize it. Envoy, and any training like it, are the pillars that uphold white supremacy in education. They privilege one kind of learning style and police minds and bodies. Moreover, there have been numerous studies to debunk this type of thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). All of this being true, Envoy is still being used today in many school districts across Minnesota. It is outdated, and proven to be terrible pedagogy and community building. In fact, it is not community building at all--it is control, discipline, and punishment. Which brings me back to introducing myself to the new, Black male, principal. He was happy to see me, a fellow Black man in education. We greeted each other and then he asked me if I would like to see and walk around the school. I eagerly accepted, and we proceeded to walk toward the lunch room. I expected to see all of the vibrant cultural evidence of predominantly Black school--loud voices, laughter, singing, dancing...joy making. Some folks, even some black folks (Ward, 2012), get intimidated by Black joy making. I yearn for it. And whenever I am in predominantly Black spaces I expect to witness Black joy making on both conscious and unconscious levels. The scene I witnessed was antithetical to black joy making. I saw teachers not engaging with the humans in front of them who were pleading for vocal engagement. Teachers were silent,

using their bodies or cards to demonstrate the type of compliance they wanted. The outcome of this behavior was that Black young women and men sighed and shrugged their shoulders. Bereft of joy they followed orders.

All of this was before I entered the lunch room. The lunch room, in its physical appearance, mimicked a barren, desolate wasteland. Lighting in the room was dim because of the dull colors that it was reflecting off of. The black and brown bodies in the space were humming with the distinct energy that comes with the freshness of youth. At first, I began to smile. I saw a group of young people that reminded me of myself, and I wanted to share my Black joy with them. However, before I could begin to engage with the youth in the room, a series of white teachers and support began to move up and down the rows in between the lunch benches with cards held out in front of them in one hand, and using their other hand to silence the children who were talking to one another and/or asking to use the bathroom or throw their food away. As my heart sank, my mind kicked in gear. How could this Envoy program turn so depressing? Why would any school adopt something that flattened the vibrant energy of Black youth? Why are these teachers so proud of themselves? (Field notes, 3/18/17)

Two weeks later I found myself working with two instructional coaches who were tasked with training all of the substitutes in the district. I had been called to assist them embedding equity work into their training program. These women were very nice and experienced educators, which meant they had little to no racial consciousness (Pollock, 2008). We began the training and the woman who was the more vocal of the two told the group of substitutes that she was going to teach them Envoy classroom management

strategies. She picked a spot in the room, put her hands by her side and waited for the room to quiet down. She kept her position for about 45 seconds until the adults in the room turned their attention to her. She then smiled and turned to me saying, “see, it works.” No doubt. It worked. And as all machinations of white supremacy go, it worked perfectly at owning and disposing of Black joy (Harris, 1991) in order to have control. Envoy is a product of white supremacy. More importantly, it is a tool that reifies whiteness. It reifies a process of being and becoming that strips young people of their identities in order to create docile bodies that lack the ability question or critique the world around them (Allen, 1991; Dubois, 2007). The use of Envoy as a pedagogical tool illustrates the limits and contradictions of racial equity work. In ISD Basquiat and other school districts in Minnesota that used Envoy championed it as a culturally responsive way to teach students of color. It was widely praised by schools and school districts as something that could help them close the achievement gap by creating better conditions for learning to happen. Envoy was used to usher in a new era classroom management. What was never addressed were the racially oppressive undertones on which Envoy was operating. The racial context of education in Minnesota meant that over 90% of the teaching and administrative force is white and these folks serve the entire state of Minnesota. Regardless of the area being rural or urban, or the community being predominantly white or predominantly students of color and indigenous students. To be clear Envoy has made a lot of money serving any school community that asks for it to come in. However, the racially violent aspects happen in the Black, Brown, and Indigenous areas because the white teachers who serve those students have an unnamed and unresolved fear of the students and community (Thandeka, 1999; Montrie, 2022). Therefore, these educators

put a supposed equitable strategy in place that only ends up strengthening and entrenching white supremacy. This is a very serious issue in public education. Harris (1991) first warns us of this problem in her seminal piece “Whiteness as Property.” She explains how civil rights success like Brown vs. the Board of Education are hailed as being seminal moments of racial progress in the United States without talking about the continued damage it does to already oppressed communities. Brown v. Board integrated public education in the U.S. and at the same time it destroyed Black schools and left Black teachers without jobs. It continued harm on an already damaged community. It was one of the first big smoke signals that theories of interest convergence do not work because the needs of the oppressed are never met. Radd and Grosland (2018) show how initiatives like Envoy are common practices of school leadership that are named as justice initiatives, but only end up supporting racist structures. This happens by school leaders simply saying that they lead for social justice, but in practice they lead technically, make whiteness desirable, and support existing racist structures instead of changing them. This is the kind of historical and theoretical context that should have happened when Envoy was suggested. More importantly, this is what any school or system should be thinking about when they sign up to do the work of equity and justice. Public education is not designed to allow equity work to be emancipatory and transformative. It is designed to practice interest convergence and appease whiteness. We can never lose sight of that.

Story #3: Don't Give these People a Pat on the Back

Pay close attention to the pseudonyms I use. They are all names or cultural artifacts from the African Diaspora. It is a subtle nod to my grounding in Afro-Diasporic thinking and each name carries another story and message with it, kind of like a russian nesting doll. For Instance, ISD Basquiat is named after Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat was one of the most prolific painters in the history of world. He was of Haitian descent. His star burned bright as the sun. He died from a heroin overdose at 27 years old. In many ways, that is how I frame equity initiatives in the district--full of immense power and dying so early that it is almost incomprehensible.

And.

That is exactly the process that was put in place when the district ended its contract with P.E.G. and asked DOEE to create new training for the district. We couldn't use the intellectual property of P.E.G. anymore and equity-based PD had to happen. We were told in January to have training ready to go by March (Field Notes, 1/5/18). This was a ridiculous demand by any rationale and even further exacerbated by the size of the district and its expectations of the scope and sequence of equity training. This new training was called Equity Foundational Training 1.0 or E.F.T. in its inception was guided by both mine and the Equity Director's vision of what equity work should be. My position was that people need a fundamental understanding of the histories of racially violent people and systems coupled with how those entities have structured the very foundations of education as we know it (Sojoyner, 2016; Watkins, 2001; Vaught, 2017). On the other hand, the Equity Director wanted to ensure that the training encompassed the type of

technical needs that teachers would ask for. In many ways we were both right. And, at the end of the day, the Director, myself, and a group of teachers created a training that could have been transformative. It had all the components that I had decided a PD for educators needed to have--educational strategies and the historical context of oppression (Field Notes, 4/12/18). I had no problem with the content, my only request was that we be very careful about who facilitated the training. I knew from deep experience that facilitating trainings of this scope require people who have the skill set to navigate the potential explanations that can come from it. Suffice it to say, I was scared. And I let my fears be known to upper level leadership. And then I was told that the training would not be led by DOEE, but by the principals at each building. This came at a time when DOEE only had 2-3 capable facilitators and district leadership had the same number of capable facilitators, or less than that.

Theoretically, this is a problem of that lack of racial literacy in school leadership. Radd and Grosland (2018) describe three ways in which school systems go awry in trying to institute educational policy and professional development that focuses on equity. The names these as: leading technically, desirablizing whiteness, and excusing institutional failures. To them, leading technically is about focusing on the technical components of social justice actions while disregarding what the action was intended to achieve or how it would do so. Desirablizing whiteness is defined as using language in policy that normalizes whiteness by never naming white people directly. Not naming the role and presence of whiteness puts it in the advantageous position of needing to be named, while also not having the right people to name it in critical ways. Whiteness then becomes desirable.

Radd and Grosland define the third component, excusing institutional failures, as

“The text of the Rule sets the stage for this excuse making early in the first section by stating, “there are many factors which can impact the ability of school districts to provide racially balanced schools, including housing, jobs, and transportation” (MS 3535.100, C). (pg. 410).

All of these components, leading technically, desirablizing whiteness, and excusing institutional failures are cemented in the culture of education and educational leadership (Vaught, Whiteness in Leadership). They tend to rear their ugly heads when the day to day function of schools come at odds with initiatives of equity and justice. Instead of hearing things like “we would love to make equity a part of everything we do, and will change our system to do so.” One would hear “we would love to make equity a part of everything we do, but...” I leave this last space blank because it could be filled with anything. Instead of doing what justice calls for, consistent repulsions are made in the name of running a “successful” school. Therefore, when it came to ISD Basquiat making the decision to have incredibly unprepared and ill trained facilitators lead their most front-facing educational equity training they decided to lead technically, excuse institutional failures, and make whiteness more desirable than justice. And the training failed. E.F.T. didn’t fail in terms of the creation, flow, or content. It failed because most of the people leading the training had no clue what they were doing. Survey and anecdotal data came flowing in (Field notes, 5/30/19). The teachers thought the training was repetitive and the facilitators were unknowledgeable. These responses weren’t shocking

because that is how most of the district staff felt about a good portion of district level professional development (PD Survey Data). Basically, how well a PD went in terms of participant feedback had no direct impact on the facilitator. This type of leadership created what I call a “float” or swim culture. I use “float” because nobody every faced serious consequences for their bad work. Poor facilitators weren’t fired or replaced--they were just given pep talks and sent right back out. For instance, I showed signs early in career that I was a capable facilitator. That, and my black maleness, caused me to be invited to leadership tables around the district that my colleagues in DOEE were rarely invited to. During this phase of PD, the power invitations we expanded. Equity work was no longer the sole enterprise of DOEE. It became district wide work that each district level department and school was responsible for leading. On one hand, the new model became an opportunity for collective leadership--something that rarely happens in public education. On the other hand, DOEE staff entered into a period where their work was being compared to the people of CIES, and most of the members of CIES showed they could lead equity trainings better than the equity staff (Field Notes, 6/20/19).

I did not have much to worry about, being the lead trainer. However, what I was witnessing spelled doom for the department and predominantly BIPOC staff. My entire educational experience had been based on white people not knowing how to see me for the work I do. What began to unfold in front of me was a group of white staff started to realize they could answer the questions of oppression and the staff who were hired to do so could not. I knew that this would come with a day of reckoning--the dissolving the department, and equity work put in the hands of racially illiterate white folks and people

of color. I left the district in the Summer of 2020. I never got to find out the answer to my fears.⁶

Story #4: “I Haven’t Seen this many White People in a Room in 5 Years”

It was the third week of August during the summer of 2014. I had just accepted the position of equity teacher in ISD Basquiat. 5 years in both Gainesville and Miami, FL had immersed me in Afro-Caribbean culture and racial identities. Basically, I had not spent significant time around white people since I left Minnesota in 2009. I was familiar with predominantly white spaces because of my upbringing in a southwest suburb of Minneapolis. I was so intimate with white people and white spaces that I developed a sort of racial psychosis. I hated the black face that I saw in the mirror, yet I couldn’t change my face or skin color. I adored the wealth and privilege of my white friends, teachers, and peers, yet I would never be able to turn white or have the privileges that come with it. The only things that I could control were my language and affect. I knew that if I wore that type of mask then I might just be able to get white people to see past the condemnation of my Blackness. Fanon (1963) writes about this struggle. He notes,

“The black man who arrives in France changes...Now that we have got him to the dock, let him sail; we shall see him again. For the moment, let us go to welcome

⁶ In June of 2021 I received a phone call from an old colleague at ISD Basquiat. Staff had been called into a meeting with the new Assistant Superintendent, Director of Human Resources, Director of DOEE, and the President of the Teachers Union. News was relayed that the department was being restructured. Any non-tenured teacher would lose their job and have the opportunity to reapply to any of the newly posted positions. What felt like a mortal wound to my body was the fact that teachers in the state of Minnesota tend to start applying for jobs or receiving their firing notices in mid-March to early April--soon after school budgets are set. DOEE staff was notified in June, so they were denied the opportunity to find or compete with the wealth of jobs that open up every year in early Spring. White supremacy had spunt its wheel of misfortune once again.

one of those who are coming home. The “newcomer” reveals himself at once; he answers only in French, and often he no longer understands Creole...There is the newcomer, then. He no longer understands the dialect, he talks about the Opéra, which he may never have seen except from a distance, but above all he adopts a critical attitude toward his compatriots. Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, he becomes an oracle. He is the one who knows. He betrays himself in his speech...[...]On the basis of other studies and my own personal observations, I want to try to show why the Negro adopts such a position, peculiar to him, with respect to European languages. Let me point out once more that the conclusions I have reached pertain to the French Antilles; at the same time, I am not unaware that the same behavior patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonization.” (pgs. 13-15)

Fanon’s words shine like a beacon in the sky for those who are lost, but do not know why or the cause. Once the colonized body begins that journey to find their true self a type of awakening happens that makes the return to white, colonizing spaces feel like an unexpected shock and reminder that times can change, but colonial ideologies and power structures are much sturdier than anyone can ever imagine (Fanon, 1963; Memmi, 1967; Hinton, 2016; Omi & Winant, 2004; Watkins, 2001;). So, on that humid August day I found myself being snatched back into the jaws of settler colonialism. I was asked by my new supervisor to facilitate an activity called “above the line/below the line.” It is a common pedagogical move where the teacher or facilitator writes the name of a person, place, or event in the middle of a large piece of paper and then draws a circle around the name and a line directly through the middle of the paper. The students/participants are then asked to say things they know about the person/place/event and the teacher/facilitator is tasked with writing things that are assumed common knowledge above the line and the things that are not common knowledge below the line. The utility of this exercise grades out high, but it requires the teacher/facilitator to be an expert in something they might not even be that knowledgeable of and it strips agency from the students/participants. The

activity creates a false sense of collective knowledge building while in truth the teacher/facilitator has all of the power in deciding whose knowledge is the most or least valuable (Field Notes, 8/23/2016). This activity is one of many that takes place during the Beyond Diversity training. They create a false sense of consciousness raising and racial identity development. In fact, the entire scope and sequence of the trainings are to inform or remind white people that they are bad, racist, and privileged, and black people, especially black males, are victims of their racism and privilege. There are a certain segment/s of white people who come to these trainings and are in full agreement with the stated and unstated premise of the training. The stated purpose tends to be a “racial diversity training,” or “equity seminar,” or “diversity and inclusion training.” The names of the trainings take some shape or form of what I have written. The names tend to be purposefully manufactured as a way to get buy-in from employees. However, what ends up happening is an event where white people are shamed for being white and people of color are excused for their role in upholding white supremacy. The segment/s of white people who are not receptive to it are turned off immediately. They mentally check out and then refuse to take part in other initiatives that claim to push equity and anti-racist agendas. I was able to observe these bodily and epistemological disturbances both personally and professionally during my 6 years of service to ISD Basquiat, and 5 years of being the lead trainer of these professional developments for the district.

And, The Delta Blues Hymn in the Background.

Given this context it should as no surprise that when I began to lead the “above the line/below the line” activity that the faces in the room of 200 people that looked back

at me were over 95% white women between the ages of 25-60 with a smattering of BIPOC people and white males. As I grappled with my new reality, I was reminded of how I learned, and perfected, how to wear and fix my mask. I gave a lengthy gregarious smile to the room as I introduced myself via wireless microphone. I then began the activity by writing on the paper and speaking as I wrote in the haphazardly drawn circle, “what do you know about Rosa Parks? Now, don’t everybody speak at once, I chuckled. I continued to smile, shifting my gaze from one side of the room to the other.

This was/is a tactic I taught myself early on in my teaching career. I call it “let joy lead the way.” I was voted best laugh in my senior year book, and I have always had a knack for making people smile even if they don’t really want to. This has followed me in every facet of my life and helped me become the teacher that I never expected to be. In the classroom, patience and vulnerability are essential. I always brought my joy to the classroom everyday. I brought joy in every sense that joy can arise, so even if I was upset or sad I would name it and then find joy in the people I was with. I used joy as a connector. And, the day of this training I let joy lead the way. As I continued to smile and gaze, I saw hand after reluctant hand rise into the air. I greeted their participation with gusto and marveled in their brilliance. I would like to think that my marveling, laughing, and smiling is what lead to over 80% of the room engaging in this activity. However, I am not naive. I knew that my gregariousness was serving as a disarmament of my bodily presence as a 240 pound black male with long dreadlocks and broad shoulders. I was simultaneously someone who most of those white women would be afraid of (Baker, 1998) and had found themselves in a position to listen and learn from me. None of this happened by accident. It was all on purpose. The first thing that anybody who engages in equity work needs to

know is that you will never come out of it clean, and the only way to keep engaged is to sacrifice yourself from the beginning.

This, in essence, is one of the primary reasons why I use the term “Black Worldliness.” I use it to evoke the influence, ingenuity, power, and brilliance of the African Diaspora. I am not writing about Ralph Ellison, Charles Mills, Franz Fanon, and Sylvia Wynters because I like them as scholars. I am utilizing them because they are some of the few people who write about the toll it takes on the body and soul to do transformational work, and to live transformationally. It is a non-cartesian sum. It is the invisible man fighting with all their might while no one can actually see how hard they are fighting. It is operating off of the second set of instructions that allow the brilliance of the oppressed to instinctively navigate colonial institutions regardless of how many white faces are looking at and taking from your body. Finally, it is knowing that the brilliance of BIPOC communities shines much brighter than the mechanism of their oppression. And, if we tap into that we will live the Afro-surrealist dream of using poetry as a form of revolution.

“On December 8, 1915, a white mob in New Hope near Columbus, Mississippi, raped and lynched a Black woman named Cordelia Stevenson and left her body hanging for days near a railroad track to terrorize Black residents. No one was ever held responsible for her death. (<https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/dec/8>)”

Chapter 6: Nobody Knows the Trouble I See: More Stories from ISD Basquiat

“1 If you ever find
2 yourself, some where
3 lost and surrounded
4 by enemies
5 who won't let you
6 speak in your own language
7 who destroy your statues
8 & instruments, who ban
9 your oom boom ba boom
10 then you are in trouble
11 deep trouble
12 they ban your
13 oom boom ba boom
14 you in deep deep
15 trouble
16 humph!
17 probably take you several hundred years
18 to get
19 out!” (Baraka, pg.7).

This poem is both an offering and a warning. Baraka (1995) is telling a story about the Afro-diasporic experience. He is showing, through poetry, what it looks like when white supremacy tries to consume someone. I find great value in his words because that

is how I see Black Worldliness operating. Black Worldliness is about showing the complexity of the Black experience. I consistently weave autobiographical stories and/or historical stories/events into my research stories because the layering shows both how white supremacy encloses upon Blackness and how Black folks attempt to get out. Specifically, these stories show how I utilize Black Worldliness to navigate the epistemological violence that white supremacy uses against people of African descent. The following stories comprise my journey to effect systemic change through racial equity work. The first story is about the struggles myself and two white teachers had teaching class on racial identity while asking the ISD Basquiat change their traditional practices for the needs of the course. The second story focuses on my conversation with a Black male principal and his detailing to me how he manipulates the system of education to get what he needs. The chapter ends with my reflections and curiosities on how I utilized Black Worldliness in my research project.

Story #5: “What the F*ck Emily!?”

People speak differently in North Central Florida. Trust me, I have spent the majority of my life either living there or visiting once, more than often, twice a year for periods that were always way too long for my liking. And, I know making a statement like this is something that can be said for many parts of the world. However, North Central Florida holds a special place in my life, so I am isolating the distinct ways in which the southern drawl manipulates the English language in this small piece of the world. The folks of Alachua County (colloquially pronounced “lachowa”) have all sorts of sayings for when people do something that they shouldn’t be doing, or are making a decision that

they do not need to make because they are in charge. My cousin, Randall, taught me most of the Alachua County slang during the countless nights of bunking with him and my older brother Gabriel in Emma Lou's, our grandmother's, shack, or Randall's house--thoroughly owned and operated by Auntie Ann. Randall would probably say, "dat boi gon'." There is no translation for this--just an understanding. My Aunt Lou, who is one of the most caring and loving people I have ever known in my life while also being the wildest person I have ever met, might say "If that b**ch crazy that b**ch." She always speaks in gender neutral terms so you have to be keen on the conversation to be able to figure out if she is referencing someone who is a man, woman, or gender nonconforming. When talking to Aunt Lou, context is everything. My Aunt Cricket, R.I.P., would probably just shake her head. And my Aunt Dawn might utter, "chil' what you talkin bout'." My Uncle Emory, R.I.P., would most likely have a toothpick in his mouth while he said, "that's what it is, bro!" My Mother, who I miss exponentially everyday, would start her response with a low "mmhmm." And follow that up with "baby you know what to do." This series of strange instructions may sound like gibberish to those who have not spent time in North Central Florida, but for those who have it is some of the greatest wisdom you could ever hear. The folks there never speak out of ignorance or pity, they speak out of experience and a connection with the oppressions of white supremacy that can only be known by the people who were shipped out of the African continent and still live in the places that held the plantations of the ante-bellum period. Their language is an amalgamation of the past, present, and future (Vass, 1979). Their words were warnings about the world and how people would respond to me just because of the color of my skin. They were calling forth Black Worldliness. And on a frigid January in 2017 I answered their call.

If you don't know North Central Florida then you don't know me, or how I move through the world. I have stated in earlier chapters how I hold a firm belief that the racially oppressed hold a type of intelligence that is not able to be understood by those who do not hold the same positionality. I invoke my southern roots to symbolize the lack of awareness present as I entered into a meeting with the coordinator of secondary curriculum at ISD Basquiat. The meeting was called to ascertain whether or not a second iteration of the race and culture course would be approved by the district. Given the excitement and planning that went into the original creation of the course I made a false assumption that this would be an easy process. At that point in time, I was in a space of sublime hope. The implementation of equity based professional development showed upward data trends in participant engagement and connectivity (Field Notes, 2017). Essentially, district employees went from giving a 60% approval rating to an 88% approval rating. This is data collected from all district staff, and this district had roughly 27 schools and departments combined. I was happy because my surrealist dance was quantifiably proven to work. I had over 10,000 hours in training on whiteness--I could claim my expertise. And I was wrong. Incredibly wrong. I forgot the first lesson Amie Cesaire's wife told him--people are not content and every single person is different. Surrealist work is a human science, which means you must ride the waves of the unpredictability of humanity.

Omi and Winant describe racial projects as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi & Winant, 2014, pg. 32). Those resources, both physical and emotional, were tantamount in constructing a Black-white racial binary that positioned Blackness as sub-human and whiteness as the standard for

humanity and progress. But, as true as anything has ever been, my thoughts on this subject are not new. I know that the words I string together have been spun before. I honor those who have come before me. They do this theorizing far better than anything I could claim to do. Muhammad (2011) writes that

“The racial project of making blacks the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined,” (pg.11) and created the foundation for the making of modern urban America. Through Muhammad, it becomes clear that both the acceptance of and resistance to the idea of Black criminality was not an easy task. Muhammad dives deep into how scholars used statistical evidence to justify the criminalization and bestialness of the Black body. This evidence was used to keep alive falsehoods of Black inferiority while also being used to say that race was not an affliction of the criminal variety for whites or white European immigrants.

We must remember that the process of racial scripting is a detailed, strategic, and complicated one. It entails the creation of scholarship that supports racists and misguided tropes. For Instance, Hoffman’s (1896) *Race Traits* was a seminal text in shaping social consciousness around Blackness as other and inhumane. He writes of Black criminality in a way that supported dominant white supremacist narratives of the time. The resulting portion? A standardized knowledge of the Black body as inherently criminal. Hoffman may have become a recognized academic, but he was not alone. From Hegel to Nott to Shaler, many white men had assumed the role of authority on matters of the Black body and mind. Their methodologies led them to surmise that the history of chattel slavery made the Black body inherently less than the white body. White men like Shaler and Hoffman

proved to be critical in the crystallization of the notion that Blackness was akin to criminal/vagrant/rapist—with no outlet. Muhammad begins here and then travels to many other realms. He ties the criminalization of the Black body to culture and policing. Through Muhammad, we know that the idea of Black body as criminal was one that was socially constructed by the myopic mental models of racist white men and the blatant docility of their peers, admirers, and followers. Furthermore, and unsurprisingly, some of these men had a direct hand in the building on the public education in the U.S. When I say that racism is in the systemic fibers of public education—I mean it.

“And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture (Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo, 1986). The model of internal colonialism informs us that public schools in the U.S. have not been and will never be (without a complete infrastructural overhaul) safe for non-white bodies (Vaught, 2017). In fact, the colonial educational agenda of the U.S. was never synonymous with the educational agenda of Black peoples. Watkins (2001) pays particular attention to the white architects who funded, founded, and created it. You see there are deep ties between slavery and public education in the U.S. He notes that education performs a critical function in the sociopolitical makings of the U.S. Slave education was born out of unintentionality. Slave owners needed slaves to conduct mundane tasks and thus needed to educate them to be able to do such things. During reconstruction, the idea of mass education lent itself to the Black community because there was a desire for participation of Black bodies in the construction of a different society. Philanthropic organizations became a fulcrum for the values of the dominant social order. Black bodies that could no longer be excluded from participation in American

citizenry became a focus of these philanthropists. The “negro question” had not been answered and public education would serve as a space to solve it. Because of that race philanthropy became prominent in attempts to funnel Black bodies into the grips of heteronormative white supremacy. It worked. The white philanthropists became “idea brokers and cultural makers in world where ideology is constructed” (Watkins, 2001, 14). Schools, operating under the same mental models as those white men mentioned by Muhammad, became sites of control. The industrial machine of the U.S. needed Black bodies to perform mundane tasks in service of nation building.

Therefore, when I sat down at the table with Emily, Angela, and Robin I was caught off guard. Emily, a middle aged white woman, was the coordinator of secondary curriculum for the district. Robin and Angela are two white women that were my co-conspirators in attempting to do race work in the district. They are white women who are well aware that they are white, and by default contribute to white supremacy. They also know that they are and will continue to be critical players in the dismantling of white supremacy. How all three of us came to construct and teach the race course is an important and nuanced tale. I cannot recall exactly when I met Robin, but we shared an immediate connection. We both knew that the public education system was created and maintained on marginalizing non-white bodies under a racial project.

Robin and I, with different literary and historical contexts, knew this. And we both had been working to disrupt this system for quite some time. Thus, it came as no surprise that when she began to wonder what it would take to create a course about racial identity development she came to me in an effort to have a multiracial coalition create a course

about race. And so that is what happened. Over the course of a few weeks in December of 2016 a course proposal was written. In the following months the course was written. It was during that process that Angela came into the picture. Angela was a 2nd year teacher who happened to excel so much in her practice that she was hired to be an equity teacher. By the end of the academic year, Angela had transferred roles to be the on-site equity teacher at Aaron Douglass Senior High—one of the three high schools in ISD Basquiat. Her role there covered many areas, one of which included co-teaching the course on race and culture.

Both Robin and Angela knew the downfalls of teacher preparation and teacher practice—the things that get in the way of racially and culturally responsive education.

Robin: But I think about when we graduated and we did our final presentations like I had Courtney come to mine, Michael came to mine, and Tia came to my presentation and what they all said afterward is like "wow, some of these people don't sound still very conscious" right. So we did a two year program. One year was CRT. Not critical race theory but culturally responsive. And then one year was just kind of regular grad school stuff and so I think about of all the people in the year that were just concentrating on this work and we still are really, really superficial. So I don't....(Interview Excerpts, 11/3/17)

Angela: They teach us to be the expert. I'm in a master's program right now and literally a couple of weeks ago. We were assigned to watch a slide show and it was about classroom management. And one of the bullet points on the slide show said: "assume your students know nothing" well that goes against every culturally responsive....(Pause). (Interview Excerpts, 11/3/17)

They name the dysfunction of teacher prep programs and then locate how it looks in Aaron Douglas High:

Robin: “I think that there can be teachers who can have responsive activities, but aren't necessarily super conscious. And I wouldn't say that they're doing a racial equity work in their classroom”

Angela: “That's why I say philosophy and identity. That's why I don't say strategies because you can have the best strategy... If you have someone that's silencing voices or only hearing the voices they want to hear then that's not culturally responsive and that's not racial equity work. (Interview excerpts with Robin and Angela).

And they seemed to understand their roles as white teachers who attempt to practice anti-racism in a white system:

Angela: “As a white person doing racial equity work, I think it's a huge struggle. It's a huge challenge and a huge struggle sometimes because it doesn't matter how empathetic you are, or how open you are, or how often you seek multiple perspectives. You will never have the lived experiences of a person of color.” (Interview Excerpts, 11/3/17)

It is these recognitions of white supremacy and complicitness that speak more than any culturally responsive handbook can outline. It is not misguided. It is critical reflection followed by praxis. A careful, reflective praxis of racial equity work. This was even further demonstrated during a co-teaching session/observation^[1] I was a part of in early Fall, 2017. Class began in a circle, per usual, with a talking piece moving from right to left. There happened to be 4 licensed teachers in the space that day: Robin, Angela, myself, and an instructional coach named Harvey. The student demographic represented a racial and cultural mosaic of multiple diasporas: African, Asian, Latinx, and European. Student after student along with teachers receive the talking piece and are invited to share how they are feeling using a color (i.e. green is happy, and red is sad. And, per rules of the talking piece, everyone is quiet while the person with the talking piece is speaking). When

the group is done sharing I ask the students whether or not they had seen a recent cypher^[2] by the rapper Eminem at the BET awards in which he viscerally disses U.S. President Donald Trump. They have not. After we watch the video as a class, a raucous discussion ensues. We debate about whether or not the U.S. allows people to earn things based off of merit alone. After we calm the energy down, Angela leads the class in a “vote by foot” exercise where the students decide whether they agree or disagree with the definition of meritocracy. The majority of the students are against, a few are in the middle, and one Black male is in agreement. The performance of the class was like the Critical Race Theory tenet of the myth of meritocracy come to life (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). I acted as facilitator and devil's advocate, probing the students to see if they could back up their claims—one way or the other. As class time dwindled down, a Black female student turned toward me and said, “what side are you on, Nuhu”? I paused for a moment. And then with a spirit full of angst and revolution I proclaimed that I was solely against the definition. And if I had it my way...I would burn the whole system down. It was now time for Robin, Angela, and Harvey to speak. It was a critical moment for me. I am usually weary around white people who claim to do race work, but I came to implicitly trust Robin and Angela. Something inside of me was worried that they would not respond to the students in the messy and complicated way that they should. Turns out they did that and much more. The first words they uttered were connected to their identities as white women and connection to white supremacy that makes them complicit in any notion of meritocracy. They continued by stating they couldn't stand completely against the definition because the history of white supremacy tied them to the system. But, they could acknowledge the atrocities, both past and present, and work against them. Harvey took

it a step further. He acknowledged his positionality as a gay, white, male. He wasn't at the top of heteronormative white supremacy only because he isn't hetero. He stood in the middle because he has non-white adopted children and felt that he could find a way to give them privileges that they would not have if he was not a white man. The class ended and I sat down thinking... This is the work (Field Notes, 10/12/17). The moment was powerful for me because I hold a belief that equity work is successful in moments of vulnerability, and any prolonged moment of vulnerability is transformative. It could be a person admitting that they have a homophobic parent, or it could be a large group of people sharing stories they have never told and using that moment to propel them for a type of activism they never dreamed of. Regardless of the level of vulnerability, sharing in a vulnerable moment and not being shamed is transformative. That moment in October was transformative because the majority of the room was vulnerable in ways they never are. It took the right kind of facilitation and the curation of an environment that allowed that type of freedom to take place. Those moments don't happen often. And I never take them for granted when they do.

[1] I don't know if I will ever be able to simply be an observer and participant-observation does not capture exactly how I go about my research epistemology. I do not just want to be with people, but with, among, for, and held by a community in a reciprocal fashion.

[2] A freestyle rap

My lived experience along with the district data showed that my work transforming the nature of equity work in the district was having an incredible effect. We went from low 70 percentage approval rating to consistently high 80's and 90 percentage approval rating

(Data from 16-18'). I should be clear about what the approval ratings mean. They certainly do not mean that the district's employees were all signed up to be equity leaders. I would be naive to think that. In fact, I don't even know if that is possible in any large institution. In the end, what the approval ratings meant was that white people across the district did not feel threatened by equity work like they were in the past. They felt like equity work was less and less dangerous and are willing to invest more financially, emotionally, and intellectually. Some may read this and name that a predominantly white institution only investing in equity work because they don't feel threatened means that they aren't truly investing in equity work. Anybody who agrees with this would be right. I would co-sign that everyday. The only retort I would have is if that is the case then don't try to do equity work in white systems. Anyone of us who signs up to change the practices of school leadership, teachers, and staff must understand the community in which we work in. If the staff of that community is predominantly white then the students of the equity leader is that staff. And students tend to not engage when they feel threatened. It boils down to responsive pedagogy. Therefore, when I saw the large increase in our approval ratings, I took it as a sign that my students were listening to me and I could now introduce harder and harder material and they would trust that I wouldn't harm them.

A perfect example of this paradox is a conversation that took place between myself, Robin, and Emily when Robin and I were presenting an argument for the second iteration of our course. I wasn't caught off guard by Emily or Robin. These two white women were predictable. One is a well meaning, liberal white woman who knew she had to do more work to support BIPOC staff and students--even though she had no idea how to do it. The latter was a firebrand who did great work, but consistently ran hot or silent

with very little room for space in between. Robin, on the other hand, showed me that she did not have a governor in respect to the kind of politicking that must take place in a colonial system (Memmi, 1968; Robinson, 1980). She could have cared less about the intersections of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1972). She, as a white woman, proudly stood against every facet of white supremacy--regardless of the nuances of how people become and stabilize their complicity in white supremacist systems (Fanon, 1963; Lensmire, 2017; Thandeka, 2001).

On the surface this sounds like a good thing. In praxis, this is another form of what Leonardo and Zembylas (2008) describe as white intellectual alibi's. They derive their influence from Fanon (1967) in their articulations of the "fact of whiteness." The fact of whiteness sets forth the notion that whiteness is the primary motivator in perpetuating race dialogue in both schools and the general public. They theorize that when matters of race and white privilege meet, an evocation of powerful emotions emerges. And digging deep into these emotions is critical for understanding how white people do race work. In terms of technologies, they draw on Foucault (1995) who theorizes that technologies are "any assemblage of knowledges, practices, techniques, and discourses used by human beings on others or on themselves to achieve particular ends" (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). To that end, Robin used her white intellectual alibi to justify a tirade against Emily. Emily sat stunned in her chair with her mouth slightly agape. Robin was mad that she needed to justify a second iteration of the course we had created. So mad, in fact, that at the end of her berating she yelled, "What the F*ck Emily" (Field Notes, January 2018). To Robin's credit, she was right. Everything she was angry about was justified. We were doing something in the district that had never been done before and the class was such

a success that it was adopted district wide by the highschoools. We had proven that teaching students to understand the histories of racial oppression along with developing their own racial identities was a positive thing. The proof came in the class registration records. We started off as an elective that had 3 classes of 20-25 students each. We found ourselves wielding a monster of a course that had to be capped at 6 sections of 35 students each (Field Notes, April 2018). We knew our course had the type of juice that could lead to it becoming a required course. We just had a few obstacles in the way, like Emily. Which further illustrates that Robin was misguided in her approach, but she was on to something. Emily would not use her power to give us an exception, but was telling us that there was a system in place for a “reason.” The reason being that staff who submitted courses should not be able to get any special privileges over anybody else. and we needed to follow the normalized process of how courses were created and accepted by the district.

All in all, my interactions with Robin, Angela, and Emily taught me a great deal about how white people traverse the politics of race in public education. The narratives about them that I have shared are capsules in time and should be read in ways that shed light on how people struggle and succeed in doing equity work. They are not a full examination of their character and do not show how they have changed in the years since my observations. I had high moments with all three and I had low moments. I learned that we all needed each other to achieve our goals. And, at the end of the day, we all were put in a better light because we did something for the district that had never happened during a time when the district deeply desired to improve its racial pedagogy. The main point is that we can all be happy about what we did. And, let these stories be a warning

flare for those who endeavor to follow this path. It is full of identity landmines from people of color and white folks who have not fully examined themselves, but yet have aligned themselves with justice causes. This causes a dissonance which makes it almost impossible to fundamentally transform a broken system. However, it can never be forgotten that revolutions are slow, and fires not only destroy, but clear the ground for new seeds to be planted. Remembering this makes all of the labor worth it.

Story #6: “I’m Playing a Different Game”

It is very important to me to talk about Black resistance, Black militancy, and Black joy. I didn’t grow up seeing beautiful, strong, and intelligent Black people changing their communities and changing the world. I had to read about them. And even when I read it seemed impossible because it is one thing to read about African Queens and Kings. It is quite another thing when the world around you makes their exploits seem like a fantasy more than a reality. In light of this, I diligently set out to find concrete examples of Black resilience and resistance until I could find people that could operate as a mirror. Those people came in the form of the Black Panthers. I remember talking to my Father about the Panthers one evening. He had stopped by my house around 11:30pm looking for a glass of whisky. He would often randomly show up at my house late in the evening because the bars and drug houses he hung out at on the North Side of Minneapolis were just about a mile away from my home. He loved his children deeply, and he would always check (spy) on them. This was his way of checking on me. On this night I was happy to see him because I had just finished reading Clyde Woods’ text on about racial capitalism

and the Mississippi Delta region, *Development Arrested*. I was juiced up on Black Radical thinking and I was also preparing to teach a lesson to some highschools about the Black Panthers and the Civil Rights Movement. My Father appeared at the perfect time because he is from Richmond, California. Richmond, California is a Bay Area city and home to many former members of the Black Panther Party. My father was in his 20's during the height of the civil rights movement, so I asked him if knew or had met any of the panthers. He let out a deep chuckle as if I had asked him a stupid question. He then began to tell me how he was never affiliated with them because he just wanted to smoke dope, whoremonger, and run in the streets. However, his younger brother and his father were. He told me that my uncle was a member of the Black Panthers and that my grandfather worked with them to distribute food to the Richmond community via his church.

I sat with my mouth agape because my father would always come and tell some story about his life that was mesmerizing. He once told my wife and I how he dropped acid with Janis Joplyn and Jimmi Hendrix in an alley behind a popular San Francisco night club. He would often talk about how he grew picking cotton on farms in central California with his mother and other Black folx. He would share this story because he would always get upset that the Black people working the fields lost their jobs to a group of "Mexicans" led by a guy named Chavez. My father was not an historian, so he couldn't give me any citations, but he was never a liar and he lived an absolutely ridiculous life. And before I could fix my mouth to ask him a million questions about my family's connection to the panthers, he opened his phone and showed me a picture of my uncle in his panther beret and black jacket. He then finished sipping his whiskey, got up out of

my living room chair, said goodbye, and went off into the night. I went to bed with a lot to think about and a lot to be inspired by.

You see many people do not know the inner workings of the Black Panthers. They were labeled as a militant terror organization by the FBI, in truth, they were a highly trained group of community activist who valued the health and safety of their community above everything else. These details matter, but I am invoking the panthers in this text for a specific reason—they are a pristine example of Black brilliance and resilience. My favorite story that illustrates this is the Panthers philosophy and practice of monitoring police stops in their community. Huey P. Newton, a leader of the Panthers, was a Berkley-trained lawyer. In fact, to become a Panther each member had to read texts from the “Black Panther Party Book List” in order to better inform themselves on the plight of African peoples locally and globally. Thus, the Panthers were a well studied group who carried shotguns and rifles openly because it was legal to do so in the state of California at the time. And because Huey P. Newton knew the law. He knew that it was legal to stand a certain distance away from police offices while they were performing their duties and monitor them to ensure they were following the law themselves. The police were often stunned at the sight of large groups of armed black men and women reciting judicial codes that permitted their presence. It would, in fact, scare the police, but no stop ever ended in violence. The Panthers obeyed the law and once the police stop was executed properly they would lower their weapons, get in thier cars and drive off. That combination of brilliance and rebellion is what fuels me.

Learning about how the Panther practiced revolutionary justice became the mirror I so desperately needed. More importantly, it allowed me to sit down and interview Bobby, the Black lead principal of Aaron Douglass High, with a kind of respect and diligence that I couldn't have if I didn't know these stories. I was never captured by the stories themselves. I was always captured by how closely my lived experiences related to these stories of revolution. So, when I walked into Bobby's office I smiled big when I saw a chess board in the back of the room. The room was very familiar to me because I had been there before. I worked in the district before Bobby was a lead principal. Bobby is an African-American male. His predecessor was a power obsessed white male who refused to go by any other name than Dr. Bob. He was one the first people to feel the weight of the district going from a predominantly white space to a space that was predominantly people of color. I would never call Dr. Bob a racist, but I would say that he chose the people of color who bestowed his respect and reputation on carefully. Bobby was the future and Dr. Bob knew that and supported that. He knew me before I walked into the school doors because the district was invested in making me its next token negro. Dr. Bob and I shook hands and he invited me to his desk. As i sat down I felt it was strange that he seemed so high above me given that we were roughly the same height.

Years later I would learn that he purposefully put low sinking chairs on the opposite side of his desk so that anybody who sat across from him would know that he was in charge. This is unsurprising. And I wasn't surprised when I felt like I was less than. I expected it. And it was why I never gave him the dignity of calling him Dr. Bob. I didn't even refer to him as "sir." I was kind and obligatory, but it was important to me not to give them the respect that he was so obviously seeking. Bobby was different. Before we sat

down, I had already asked him to participate in an interview for my research project, so he knew I was there for that explicit reason. And, as I would come to find out much later, he directed me to sit at the table with the chess board because he had things he needed to say regardless of what my questions were.

I made a decision in the beginning of my research project to keep my interview questions simple. My thinking was that if my questions were simple then it would allow for complex people to give complex answers and for people who were not as invested in the criticality and depth of the work to give more basic answers. I did this knowing that interviews would be a small part of the picture I was trying to paint. The complexity of the district, its staff members, and myself would bare itself out in the significant time I spent observing and practicing. To that end, my questions were: 1. What does it mean to you to do racial equity work? 2. What does it mean to you to do culturally responsive work? 3. Do you feel like you can be successful in doing racial equity work? 4. What prevents you from being successful in doing racial equity work?

As I sat down across from Bobby, I asked him if it was okay if I began recording. He obliged and then his attention was immediately diverted. He got up from his chair, walked to his window and began knocking on it while gesturing to one of my female colleagues to call him. One on hand, I was surprised that he was seemingly giving me all of his attention and none of it at the same time. On the other hand, I was impressed with his ability to wield his positional authority. He was one of one. He was the first Black male lead secondary principal the district had ever had. He knew it, and he acted like it. He was a Black man in one of the highest positions of power in a public school district.

Furthermore, his behavior towards me wasn't unusual. I had seen him wield his power in many other spaces. Spaces with a lot more political capital at stake than the 30 minute max interview I was doing with him. In fact, it was in a meeting with all district principals and department directors where all district leaders were told to do an equity training created by the equity department on two occasions throughout the year. This message was coming from the mouth of the superintendent—so it was supposed to matter. I was in the room because I was explaining why the training would be useful if it was adapted to the needs of each person's specific building and/or department.

I repeated myself at least three times that the training must be adapted or it was likely to fail and then I sat down and listened to the district leaders ask their questions. It was presumed that everybody would docily comply, and 99 percent of them did. You see power works in a ubiquitous way in public education. Most people do not have the power they think they have, others are too scared of retribution to resist someone who does have actual supervisory authority or someone who has presumed authority. It is an incredibly interesting and infuriating thing to witness. And it is one of the reasons why public education always seems to be so stuck in its efforts to implement reforms of any kind. People without questioning, critiquing, or resisting power. So, it should come as no surprise that my eyes lit up and a huge smile formed on my face when Bobby stood up in the back of the room and raised his hand to speak. When he was called upon he let the whole room know that he was, in fact, not going to do the district mandated training. He was going to create his own training for his building—the largest building in the school district. He then left the meeting. One would think that a demonstration like that would come with some consequences, but months later there was still no word of him being

reprimanded and forced to follow the rules. He did create his own training and district leadership just shrugged their shoulders like there was nothing they could do to stop him.

I will never forget that day and the months that followed because it revealed so much. It showed me how hollow our institutions are. It showed me that when people do exercise their positional power it tends to come from petty, malicious, or vindictive intentions. I hope one day to see a system of public education act differently. I just haven't yet. This is why change takes people who are not scared to actively resist. One that day, Bobby did that and he never forgot it. And, it was probably the reason why he never answered any of my interview questions. In fact, we never got past my first question.

When I asked him what it means to do racial equity work, he simply pointed at the chess board in between us. He said, "I got here because I know how to play games. I found out a long time ago that I was playing a different game than these white people." (Field Notes, Fall, 2017). I laughed audibly because I too had been playing a different game and I knew white people would never have any idea of my intentions and what I wanted from this work because they did not know how to see me. Bobby continued, "Do you see my staff? Do you see who I am hiring? Come on, man. I am the first Black man in a position like this in the history of this school district and I want an all Black admin team. Shit, I wanted you." Every word he spoke rang a loud bell of truth. He was right. He was the only person in the district with an admin team of predominantly Black staff. He had hired the most people of color in the district. And he had recruited me the year prior to join his building as the building equity teacher who only reported to him. At the

time I did not know how to fully see him, so I declined the offer. I do not regret it, but I often wonder what we could have built together.

Bobby would go on for about 20 more minutes laughing and bragging about all the things he was doing in “his” building and how nobody could stop him. He laughed at mediocre white leadership, and emphasized that it was his brilliance as a Black man that made this possible. It was due to his ability to play a game that neither white systems nor people could understand. As our time concluded, I stopped recording and I shook his hand and said thank you. As I left the room, I turned and said...you don’t know how much this means to me. My relationship with Bobby would wane as time went on. We stopped speaking one on one as much, and our exchanges tended to be friendly hellos as I walked through the building or a text here and there congratulating him on his continued achievements. However, the lessons from that interview combined with all of the moments I saw him actively resist will never leave me. I was him as a role model. I loved the way he resisted authority and pursued his own prerogative.

I say this while also being able to note that Bobby was a man who loved getting praise for what he did. He was manipulative and often degrading to women and all staff who were close to him. He desired that everybody follow his lead, and he used his voice to ensure no one broke ranks, or to ensure no one did the things that he would do. My appreciation and skepticism of him would go back and forth for months on end until the Spring of 2019 when the school resource officers (SRO) and building admin forced a Latinx trans student out of the girls bathroom and it was all recorded and posted on social media. The event itself was problematic. The video of police and Black building

administrators escorting a Latinx trans student off of school property for simply using the bathroom was daunting. The more troublesome component was the email Bobby sent out to only his staff in which he told them that they were not to speak about the incident to anyone outside of the building and gave talking points for teachers who had to deal with family concerns. I was saddened that he could use his voice to fight for the things he thought were right, but he couldn't fight for trans-rights. My feelings didn't fully set in until I came into the school to teach a class and the teacher of record in the class refused to discuss the situation with me. I thought to myself, Bobby has this place on lock...what a shame. To that end, Bobby was absolutely playing a different game, but what did he give up to play it? I ask myself that everyday and I am terrified that I will conform to the whispers of white supremacy. I don't have many role models. I considered Bobby one. And then I stayed around long enough to see the full picture—Bobby held true to his message, but he never made systemic change. He shifted the culture of his building. He did things to celebrate Blackness, push teachers to be more critical, and brought in educational reforms regardless of what the district told him to do. He used his power to be openly defiant. He made change where he thought change could be made. After a few years of being the principal he became one of the assistant superintendents of ISD Basqiaut. He started meaningful change at the apex of power. Before January of 2022 he had already submitted his letter of resignation. His work was done. As I continue my work in public education, I hope I never get to that point. Bobby was a force and inspiration for me, but Black folks need more than to see a shooting star. We need a Moon.

Reflections From The Field: The Afro-Surrealist Plight

My mother died during the night and morning of June 14th to June 15th of 2018. I will never forget speeding to the hospital and attempting to force my body through sealed doors. A nice woman asked me why I was at the hospital and opened the mechanically sealed doors for me. My mother had been in the process of dying since the morning of the 13th. She is, was, and forever will be a strong and stubborn woman. Truthfully, I think she had been in the process of passing for months. She was a woman from the deep south. She came to Minnesota when she was 18 years old through a program called "Job Corps." Job Corps was started in the 60's through Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" initiative (Hinton 2016). The thought process was that most young people are successful at matriculating high school, and may need additional training so that they can be productive members of society. Job Corps brought my mother to Minnesota because Minnesota, historically, has been a state that provides incentives for people to come, live, and work (Biwen, 2017).

My mother entered an unknown terrain. She was young, Black, and from North Central Florida. She grew up working in the cotton and watermelon fields. And, All of a sudden she was in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She was 2,000 miles from home and she was all by herself. She quickly learned that the world owed her no favors, and the only way to make the world bend to her will was to equip herself with the tools that would allow her to be seen differently--she knew she needed to be educated, she needed degrees. When she had my brother and I between the years of 1984 and 1986 she was certain that if she could give us anything then it would be a good education.

This paper is dedicated to my mother. It is the product of all of the sacrifices that she made in order to get my brother and I to school. She was wise in her approach; it paid off in many ways. And, critically, she believed in public education. More specifically, she believed in public education in white communities. She trusted that school would take care of my brother and I. She trusted that school would be the great equalizer that could combat our blackness and our poverty. She believed, like many people believe, that if they can just get their children to school then they will be okay. The lesson that most people learn is that the praxis of education is more harmful than helpful (Hooks, 1994). My mother did everything she could to help my siblings and I. What she could never have known is that schools are institutions that thrive on extracting the nutrients out of young people. They are insidious institutions that are designed to do much more harm than good (Emdin, 2016). So, why is this open secret so easy to overlook? Why don't more people lean into the fact that the ecosystem of public education is rotten and violent? The answer to this question is at the heart of my research project.

I began my project with the intent to study the colonial structures of public education. I was deeply inspired by Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Ngugi Wa'Thiongo, post-colonial scholars who studied the impacts of colonization on both the colonized and the colonizer. I learned quickly that the world as we know it was ordered by a colonial super structure (Horne, 2017; Omi and Winant, 1994;). Over time, and during countless days pondering the meaning of life while living in East Africa, the colonial structures of power, discipline, and punishment began to make perfect sense. Everything starts at school--and when the British, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese,

and German colonizers began their conquest of the world they brought an educational orthodoxy with them (Watkins, 2001). School has been and continues to be the most vicious tool of control that a colonizer could ever dream of. School teaches people not only what is possible, but who is able to reach possibility and who isn't. School was the place where young people learned that non-white bodies were in-human (Bell). School was the place that openly segregated black, brown, and indigenous bodies because they were not white (Sojoyner, 2017). Coates (2015) writes,

“The question was never answered. I was a curious boy, but the schools were not concerned with curiosity. They were concerned with compliance. I loved a few of my teachers. But I cannot say that I truly believed any of them. Some years after I'd left school, after I'd dropped out of college, I heard a few lines from Nas that struck me:

Ecstasy, coke, you say it's love, it is poison

Schools where I learn they should be burned, it is poison

That was exactly how I felt back then. I sensed the schools were hiding something, drugging us with false morality so that we would not see, so that we did not ask: Why—for us and only us—is the other side of free will and free spirits an assault upon our bodies? This is not a hyperbolic concern. When our elders presented school to us, they did not present it as a place of high learning but as a means of escape from death and penal warehousing” (pg. 16).

These words should wash over you and make you feel sick, or tremble in ways that you are not used to. I hope that is the case, because if you are experiencing deep emotion that means you know that we are up against an enormous problem in education that forces us to live in an inescapable contradiction. Systems of education are bad, and they won't change until the epistemological and praxical foundations of public education change. Therefore, In honor of my mother, I am going to illustrate what the outcomes of attempting to make the impossible possible in a system of education are.

And.

Like any good story, this one starts with sacrifice. I use the word “good” in reference of sacrifice because of the nature of equity work in public education. I have referenced Lensmire (2017) before in his mentioning that white people use their racial others. Well, one of the things that people forget or are unaware of is that when an individual signs up to be in an equity role in public education then they become an object for consumption. If they are a person of color then they become the token that can answer all the questions well meaning white folks have in their quest for badge of honor for being anti-racist (Leonardo and Zymbylas 2011), or they have to suffer the asks of white staff who are dysconscious (King, 1999) and cannot grasp the magnitude of how their requests perpetuate historically racially oppressive patterns (Baker, 1998; Fanon, 1963; Waktins, 2001). If the equity role is filled by a white person then something else happens. My seven years of experience and two years of active research showed me that my white colleagues were forced to make choices that I did not have to make. They could not be othered racially, but their ticket into whiteness could be revoked (Baldwin, 1985; Roediger, 1999). If they allied themselves with people of color and their calls for transformative justice then they risked being labeled as a race traitor. If they sympathized too much with their white colleagues then they would be seen as not being authentic in the role of equity teacher. I assumed these consequences were in line with the sacrifice that a white person makes when choosing to take a job that can cause so much turbulence. What shocked me and pushed me down the path of coalitional consciousness that vibrates throughout this dissertation is that I witnessed my white colleagues experience the violence of white supremacy in ways that evaded race. I saw them

attacked for their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. I saw them have to face serious questions about their relationships and family that I simply never had to think about once I left the job. I realized a truth about white supremacy that had staring me in the face for years—it doesn't care about race, ethnicity, culture, gender, or sexual orientation. It only cares about consumption and keeping the most nutritious parts of a person/entity/ or system for itself. I learned that white supremacy truly does not care about skin color. It only cares about the people willing to sacrifice any and everything to keep it thriving. Finally, I realized that anybody I knew who had been successful in an equity position was someone who either knew they would be sacrificing a lot or someone who realized that they had no choice but to sacrifice and chose to continue in the work anyway. To this day, I honor the stories of all those who have sacrificed and struggled alongside me. Our collective experiences help me understand the world better. And I think these experiences make for incredible stories which would happen if not for the sacrifice.

Mills (2008) theorizes that the difference between the experiences of people of African descent and white people is that when Western theorists were defining humanity and human logic they intentionally positioned black bodies as non-human and incapable of being human. Mills informs us that if the Cartesian *sum* defines Western and white humanity then the sub-humans were operating off of a non-cartesian *sum*. He writes,

“The *sum* here, then—the *sum* of those seen as subpersons—will be quite different. From the beginning it will be relational, not monadic; dialogic, not monologic: one is a subperson precisely because *others*—persons—have categorized one as such and have the power to enforce their categorization. African-American philosophy is thus inherently, definitionally *oppositional*, the philosophy produced by property that does not remain silent but insists on speaking and contesting its status. So it will be a *sum* that is metaphysical not in the Cartesian sense but in the sense of challenging a *social* ontology;

not the consequent of a proof but the beginning of an affirmation of one's self-worth, one's reality as a person, and one's militant insistence that others recognize it also." (pg. 9).

Mill's larger point is that people, specifically white people, do not have the ability to see the humanity of people of color even if they are literally punching them in the face. This was my experience in ISD Basquiat. I was both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. I realized very early on in my tenure that I had one road to success--rely on the inability of white folks to grasp my true intentions. If they thought I was a jovial cis-heterosexual black male then they would never know how to see my deep desire of decolonizing and revolutionizing education. I had the ability to unveil my true intentions if/when I felt it was the right time. The stories from my ethnographic study depict how I interact with the complexity, power, and--dare I say-- the brilliance of navigating the peaks and valleys of white supremacy in public education--Black Worldliness.

"The federal government's views on educating Native children were rooted in racism and prejudice. While the government believed a white youth's "moral character and habits are already formed and well-defined" when he leaves for school, a Native youth was thought to be "born a savage and raised in an atmosphere of superstition and ignorance... lacks at the outset those advantages which are inherited by his white brother." In the eyes of the government, "if [a Native American child] is to rise from his low estate the germs of a nobler existence must be implanted in him and cultivated. He must be taught to lay aside his savage customs like a garment and take upon himself the habits of civilized life." (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018)

Chapter 7: Stuck Improving

Unofficially, this project began in the Fall of 2013. I had made the choice to leave my job teaching social studies in Miami and come home to be an “equity teacher” for ISD Basquiat. I will never forget the call I received 2 hours after my interview had finished. It was the Director of Equity for the district offering me the job. After I eagerly said yes, he then wanted to know if I wanted to work with students or district staff. I immediately said, “staff”. I have always known where my greatest impact lies, and that is with adults. I love working with youth, but there is something different and more challenging working with adults. Working with youth may be difficult because their behavior tends to coincide with their development stage along with trying to figure out how to live and make friends in the world. Youth seem to always be curious about something—the teacher just has to figure out where that curiosity lies. Adults are more rigid. In education, working with adults means working with people that have already gone through p-12, p-16, or greater levels of education. They have been normed into operating in ways that a system dictates. Also, they tend to be providing for themselves and/or others financially and have a hard time putting that at risk. I learned that it is much harder to get adults to think and act differently, and I have always been intrigued about that. My hypothesis is that if you can get the adults who run the school to think and act differently then school, as an institution, will think and act differently.

I have an unwavering belief that this is the open secret to changing systems of public education, you must change the people who control it. Most teachers leave their school or the profession entirely after 3-5 years because they get burnt out by a combination of student behavior and institutional pressure. If we juxtapose this with the

fact that most school administrators leave schools or the profession in the same time period because of adult behavior and institutional pressure then we can surmise that to work in public education means one has to make an active choice in picking which part of the field you want to operate in. Each comes with a plethora of privileges, responsibilities, and challenges. I chose to work with adults because it was what I had always dreamed of ever since I decided I wanted to pursue a PhD and become a professor of some sort. I don't know if I will ever become a professor who is tied to an institution, but I have figured out how to keep my feet in both worlds of P-12 education and Higher Ed. I adjunct year round and my day job is as the Director of Equity for a school district close to ISD Basquiat. I do all of this because of what I learned from adults while I was teaching in Miami. The teachers in North Miami Beach Senior High did not seem to have a deep intimacy with their craft or the students. New teachers were given overcrowded classrooms while veteran teachers attempted to norm them in the "ways" of education. For instance, my colleagues would consistently tell me to count down the days until the end of the year, or inform me that I would fail if I didn't teach the way they taught. I would be surveilled by veteran teachers and scolded if I didn't teach from bell to bell. During my second year I subbed for one of the AP U.S. History teachers because he was out sick. The next day he came to my room and professed his shock that the students had such a great experience in my class. It took almost two years for him to recognize me as a peer who might have something to offer.

The anthropologist in me took mental notes of all these kinds of interactions. I also watched how the administration worked with staff and students, and I would ask students what they thought about school and what they wanted from it. All of my observances and

experiences guided me back home to Minnesota and fueled my excitement when I was offered a choice of who to work with. If I was ever to make change then it was going to be changing the culture of how teachers teach and their mindsets about young people and how they learn.

This pursuit led me to be iterative in processes of change. I was the leader of the equity professional development for the district. This included large scale and small scale projects. For instance, all schools and departments in ISD Basquiat created an equity team. This team was supposed to guide the equity work for the specific building or department. In terms of district wide training, equity professional development was offered every other month and that coincided with other large scale professional development opportunities that were connected to the Equity Department. In an ideal world the Equity Department would completely transform ISD Basquiat. Each school and department would have equity work weaved into the fabric of its teaching, operations, and community relations. Furthermore, the district wide trainings would shift the consciousness of every district employee while having them better understand their racial and cultural identities and how that impacts the students and staff we work with.

It was an ambitious charge that had significant resources attached to it. And, it wasn't successful. To be clear, I am saying that over a 5 year period (2 of which were during the period of my project) it was not successful because we did not see a district wide shift in teacher praxis, academic measurements, or district climate and culture. More or less, things just stayed the same with the caveat that our internal data showed that once we changed the facilitators and facilitation style of the trainings then our PD approval

rating constantly wavered between the 80th and 90th percentile. We learned that we good produced PD that was well received. We also knew that district leadership and most district employees wanted to see and feel change. I would often sit back and wonder why everybody kept saying how much they agreed and how much they wanted to transform a school system, but nothing was really changing. Why were we stuck? I was in my 6th year as an equity teacher when I had the ability to do the multi-year analysis of the patterns, successes, and failures of racial equity work in ISD Basquiat. Therefore, I needed to find someone who had done similar research on an educational system who could help me understand my project from a different lens. That is when I was told to read Irby (2021). In his work *Stuck Improving*, Irby suggests that schools with predominantly white staff and district leadership need to assess their capacity for racial equity improvement before they start to invest in equity initiatives. In his work with Central Waters High School (CWHS) he noted that the school tried to enact 5 racial equity improvement reforms: 1. Black and Brown People's Influential Presence. 2. Curated White Racial Discomfort. 3. Courageously Confrontational Communication Culture. 4. Collective Awareness of Racial Emotions and Beliefs. 5. Race-Conscious Inquiry Cycles (Irby, 2021).

Irby uses these reform initiatives as the title of each chapter of his book. The 5 chapters tell an intricate story of how race equity work in public schools waxes and wanes between success and failure. In reading his text I found remarkable similarities to my research project and the work I am putting forth in this paper. However, I am not writing a book that will help white educators better understand how to implement race equity initiatives in their schools. I am weaving a tale of my journey through and within a system

that tried to implement race equity reforms. Therefore, I want to take Irby's 5 racial equity improvement reforms and filter them through my experiences in ISD Basquiat. Thus, I will go one by one through Irby's reforms and see how they help me expand my analysis of racial equity work in ISD Basquiat.

Black and Brown People's Influential Presence. The Ojibwe definition of ISD Basquiat is "There is light." This is something that is vitally important to know because of the relationship the state of Minnesota has with indigenous colonization and genocide. It is also critical because many of the place names in the state of Minnesota are part of the Dakota or Ojibwe language systems. They have deep meanings that most people who currently live in the state do not understand. Most folks will go their lives never seeking to understand the meaning behind the city they grew up in, parks they visit, or rivers and lakes they sail and swim in. It is also a reminder of the lack of recognition of that Black and Brown people in ISD Basquiat and the state in general. ISD Basquiat had and most likely continues to have brilliant Black and Brown folks as students and staff, but that doesn't mean that much if that brilliance can't be both acknowledged, respected, and utilized systemically. One of my primary reasons for doing this research project was to demonstrate how far ISD Basquiat had to go in recognizing the influential presence of Black and Brown bodies. I would argue that ISD Basquiat was severely lacking in its capacity to acknowledge and incorporate Black and Brown brilliance. District leadership knew they needed to hire people of color in positions of power. They knew they needed much more racial diversity in their leadership, teaching staff, and in all other positions in the district. They also knew that they were facing the urgent problem of solving their racial

issues because the overall community of the district was non-white. This sense of urgency led to dysconscious decision making. Black and Brown bodies were used to help fix their racial inequities, but nothing truly worked because the decision making process was not critical of the deeper issues at play. In essence, the influential presence of Black and Brown people could not be understood because the system lacked the ability to truly understand what those influences were and are.

Curate White Racial Discomfort. Sometimes, when I am feeling sassy, I do not analyze things in the way that holds true to my core values of an intersectional approach to all people and all things. And when I reflect on how ISD Basquiat curated white racial discomfort the first words to come to my mind are “huh, thats easy.” For historically significant reasons, white people are easily made uncomfortable when forced to engage in conversations about race and racial harm. Most white folks want our world and society to be an egalitarian place where people work hard and receive the fruits of their labor (Baldwin, 1986; Lensmire, 2019; Mills, 1998; Thandeka, 2000). However, like I have pointed out many times in this text, when white people are confronted with the history of becoming white and what that has meant for people of color it challenges not just everything they think they know, but their basic beliefs in what it means to be a good person. And if you mess with a human’s fundamental belief set then you better be ready to help them understand a new way of thinking and being. Otherwise, they will just twist in the wind while being very confused. That confusion will then turn to anger, and when someone is angered or harmed then they tend to point their ire at the person or institution that made them feel the pain and/or rage.

I name this because the easy task is to make white people feel uncomfortable. The hard task is to help them work with and through their discomfort. Most racial equity trainers do not believe it is their job to help white people. ISD Basquiat showed me that if you don't help white people understand and work with their racial discomfort then you cannot do racial equity work in education. The majority of our teaching staff is both female and white. Therefore, when you sign up to be an equity teacher it means you have signed up to teach these white women. The majority of your students, if you are a person of color, are no longer the people who look like you. Your students are these white people who deserve to be cultivated so that they can be the best version of themselves that racial equity reforms require. So then when a person curates white racial discomfort it must come from a place that allows people to grow from the tension. It is akin to how diamonds are made from immense pressure or volcanic eruptions that push them toward the earth's surface. Racial equity work should cause volcanic eruptions in a person's racial and cultural consciousness, but the end product should be some precious material that is pushed to the surface.

What I found in ISD Basquiat was that if white people are made to feel racial discomfort in ways that shame them into doing something different then most of them will walk away, or they will disingenuously participate. This would render the effort to make white people uncomfortable mute because not only are these people feeling attacked, it creates pathways for them to hold stronger to mindsets that must be shifted. This is what happened when ISD Basquiat got stuck in its efforts to implement racial equity reforms. The Equity Department created spaces for white racial discomfort. In fact, all of the trainings were specifically designed to make white people feel uncomfortable about being

white. The problem was once those white folks were made to feel uncomfortable there was very little to no support for them to become something different. They were broken down and never built back up. And racial equity reforms will never work if all they do is break people down.

Courageously Confrontational Communication Culture. ISD Basquiat had some serious believers in racial equity reform. Some of the most ardent defenders were white women who had been through enough training to fully understand the work that is needed from white people to change our school systems. They understood how dangerous white supremacy is and they were ready to fight. All they needed was the right tools, and the district gave it to them. When P.E.G. came to town, they came with a protocol for talking about race. They had 4 agreements and 6 conditions. I will focus on the 4 agreements because these were often utilized to confront colleagues who were doing racially insensitive things, or just to confront anyone who seemed to be doing something wrong. The 4 agreements are: 1. Stay Engaged 2. Speak Your Truth. 3. Experience Discomfort. 4. Expect and Accept Non-Closure (PEG, 2001). The agreements did not have to happen in order, but they were a requirement in any conversation about racial equity. As I have mentioned before, I would always allow my training participants to decide if they can honor the agreements. If they couldn't then I would give them the opportunity to leave. Furthermore, the district said that the entirety of ISD Basquiat would be required to abide by these agreements whether they liked it or not. The end result was multiple people in multiple buildings saying whatever they wanted to say under the guise of "speaking your truth." This was followed by mini-bursts of racialized confrontations that would end abruptly under the guise of "expecting and accepting non-closure."

After this occurred for a number of years, the atmosphere of racial equity reform was bleak to say the least. Instead of creating a confrontational communication culture where people could give and receive critical and meaningful feedback, ISD Basquiat created a toxic culture where white people were shamed for being white; blamed for being racist because they were white; and not given the resources or attention needed to attempt to become anti-racist and/or anti-oppressive. The use of the 4 agreements allowed people to run wild with racial equity work, and it did not end well.

Collective Awareness of Racial Emotions and Beliefs. “Awareness of racial emotions and beliefs is a racial resource that provides people in a school with the opportunity to challenge their own thinking and behaviors. Increasing a school’s capacity to engage in racial equity work requires that people continually become self-aware and collectively aware of the emotions and beliefs that shape day-to-day school life” (Irby, 2021, pg. 4). In my work, I term Irby’s stance as increasing one’s racial and cultural consciousness and literacy. I would say this constantly in my racial equity trainings because I wanted everybody in the room to understand their own racial identity and how their lived experiences have been shaped by their racial identities. Furthermore, if they could have a deeper understanding of their complex lives then they would have greater empathy for someone else’s story when they heard it.

Or so I thought.

What ended up happening baffled me. I would often find myself in rooms where white people and people of color would stand up and scream at one another about what other group didn’t understand about their racialized experiences. People of Color would

claim white people could never understand what they go through and it wasn't worth trying. White people would say that people of color didn't understand what they went through as white people and it was worth asking questions because they would be shut down. At times it seemed as if nobody wanted to come to the table with a genuine curiosity for how humans experience privilege and oppression, while also noting that privilege and oppression happen in multidirectional and intersectional ways. Because of these limitations, ISD Basquiat did not have the ability to create and sustain a collective awareness of racial emotions and beliefs—no side seemed to want to invest in that type of labor. I held out belief that this was something that was possible until I decided to pull myself out of facilitating racial equity training. Although it was my job to lead these trainings, I actively refused because refusal was the only power I had at the moment. Sadly, I found myself weakened by years of a lack of noticeable systemic influence. I was the Black man the district had been wanting to lead their racial equity trainings, but as you have seen via my story I already knew that. I wanted something more. I wanted to have more impact and I began to feel stuck. And I could not shake the feeling because I knew the ISD Basquiat had made financial commitments to racial equity, but they did not know how to make the intellectual and psycho-emotional commitments necessary to ensure racial equity reforms thrive.

Race-Conscious Inquiry Cycles are supposed to combine “principles of leadership for continuous organizational improvement and antiracist leadership” (Irby, pg. 161). ISD Basquiat did not do this. I would surmise that most, if not all of the district's leaders were versed in practices and principles for continuous school improvement. On the surface this is a good thing, yet, during my time in the district I did not see any sign of antiracist

leadership whether it be theory or practice. However, ISD Basquiat did have a system in place to observe how racial equity was happening in its schools. Once the district decided to invest in measures of racial equity reform, they had to adjust their observation patterns to show that they were in full support of the new vision. The most important change happened in how the principals were observed. Principals in ISD Basquiat had many informal observations, but they had one formal observation per year. ISD Basquiat had 3 assistant superintendents to split oversight of the 24 schools in the district. Each a-sup had 8 sites to observe. During this time, the observation became the school's equity team meeting. Keep in mind that these equity team meetings would happen once a month. They tended to be made up of staff members who believed that equity work should not be optional, people who genuinely wanted to change themselves and/or school but just didn't know how. Yet, this was always a very small group of people. They never represented the wants and needs of the entire building. And this was the place where the formal observation of the building principals' equity work took place. But this formal observation was not just about equity work, it was about the principal's work in totality. This small meeting became the basis for whether or not a principal was good at the entirety of their job. The problem wasn't that the meeting had a small group of stakeholders. The problem was the design of the inquiry process. Because the district did not have an intentional race-conscious inquiry cycle it simply folded its old model observation onto its racial equity reforms. And it turned out to be two elements that could not mix together. I wish we could have been intentional about how we reformed our inquiry and observation cycles, but the system did not see those things and products in need of change as we integrate racial equity reforms. On a systemic level racial equity was an

additional component to how schools functioned. The district had a department for all of its major needs: department of curriculum and instruction, department of equity, department of technology, department of student services, department of transportation, etc. The biggest failure was not to see that the department of equity should never have been a department among departments. It should have been the foundation of how the district went about doing its daily praxis. Equity should have been weaved into everything the district did. Instead, it became a footnote—nice to have, but ultimately unnecessary. District leadership thought they could change their system by using the same model of systemic change that they had always used. And, like most of my stories in this text, it didn't end well.

Irby's 5 notions for assessing a school's capacity to institute racial equity reforms is extraordinarily helpful in understanding why ISD Basquiat never achieved what it wanted to—on almost every level it lacked the capacity. Irby (2021) marks the difference between schools that are *stuck improving*, *stuck*, and *supposedly improving*. He describes stuck improvement as "a racial knowledge breakthrough". It emerges when a person or group of people work toward creating a racially equitable school and as a consequence come to understand the deeply entrenched, permanent, and evolutionary character of racism and white supremacy (pg.214). He goes on to note that schools that are *stuck* are ones that do not know how to recognize and leverage their racial resources. The *supposedly improving* schools are ones that achieve outcomes that please white educators who care about inclusion. These would be things like celebrating African-American, Latinx, Indigenous Peoples, and Asian-American Pacific Islander heritage months. Considering this criteria, I find it hard to place ISD Basquiat into one of those

categories. It was all three and none of the three at disparate times depending on the physical location of the school (Urban or Suburban), the school leadership, and the school staff. This is the reason why I can tell you that ISD Basquiat failed in its racial equity reforms, but I also cannot put it into one of Irby's categories of improvement. I know he was examining one school and my research is about an entire school district. A natural response would be to acknowledge that the inability of one of the largest school districts in the state of Minnesota to institute meaningful racial equity reforms is something no one should be surprised by. The sheer magnitude of the task makes failure both realistic and an acceptable outcome. However, I completely disagree.

ISD Basquiat should have been a place that was *Stuck Improving*. I was in the meetings with all district principals and department leads. I facilitated the trainings with support staff, building engineers, and food & nutrition service folks. I listened as the superintendent mandated the need for this work. Organizationally and systemically, the system was ready. All district leadership was in agreement. Overall, the money and the human power was in alignment to take ISD Basquiat over the hump and get them to a place where they could enact meaningful racial equity reform. Instead it was just, blah. Change happened, but only on a surface level. Which leads me to a deeper analysis of Irby's text—if we concentrate on one, individual school then we can name how school leadership creates an environment that supports and cultivates racial equity reform. However, if we expand it to a large school district then we cannot contain the outlier thinking that inherently sabotages this kind of work. And, maybe that is the noticing worth deeper consideration. Racial equity reforms are not about one school or one school district. They are about the people. It takes me back to my original hypothesis for change

in education—the adults in power can make the changes necessary only if they choose to change themselves. So then, will we ever be in the position to get the right people?

My work ends with this question. The answer is yes and I think it will lead to some possibilities of radical change in public education. Educational systems tend to focus on trying to get the best people at the top of the system and then allow their principals and directors to find the best people to work in their buildings and departments. It is a wash, rinse, repeat type of cycle that leads to expected results of being stuck improving. But what if we changed our calculus on how systems were organized and how people were hired? What if we could use that different way of thinking to force open spaces where people could find the type of belonging and engagement that leads to meaningful learning. Public education deserves curious people. It deserves people perpetually willing to try and make it a more justice-centered institution. We know that we need those types of people in every level of power hierarchy in a school district. That way when reforms are suggested they will be considered and be critically adopted. The key factor is time. I do not think school districts can hold radical reforms longer than the people who initiated them stay. Longevity is key, and the begs the question: what will it take for equity workers to stay in the work? In my estimation it takes two simple, but crucial things: 1. Align institutional resources to properly fund equity departments. And 2. Find a way for equity workers to find joy in their work. School administrators must be creative, assertive, and progressive when do their budget allocations. They cannot equity work as secondary to instructional praxis. It must be seen as central the functioning of all aspects of a school district. If that happens then the people in equity positions will feel empowered to make the suggestions and changes that the district needs as opposed to feeling like they could

lose their jobs if they say something school leaders disagree with. Most people in an equity position fear they are going to get fired if they upset the status-quo. They tend to take the position to be an agent of change. They then soon come to find out that most schools districts sign up for equity work because they recognize a need for it. They then post the positions and hope to find qualified people of color to come and fill the spots. However, very few schools have the infrastructure to support the growth and well-being of their equity staff. Without intentional care the positions become spaces where joy is suffocated. My advice and call is a simple one: find the right people, fund them with secure resources, and create spaces for them to heal when they run full speed into storms of intentional and unintentional harm. Lastly, do not say you can do this if you cannot meaningfully commit. And if you cannot then please stop saying that you believe in educational equity—just say that you practice interest convergence and do not believe in transforming the conditions of the oppressed. Be honest, even if it hurts.

“On the evening of June 15, a mob of 5,000 to 10,000 white people gathered at the jail and seized three of the arrested Black men: Isaac McGhie, Elmer Jackson, and Elias Clayton. The mob beat and lynched them all, hanging the men from a light pole in downtown Duluth. The Minnesota National Guard arrived the next morning to secure the area and guard the surviving prisoners, but no one was ever arrested or convicted for the lynchings (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018).

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