A Critical Pedagogy of Place

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Autobiographically Rooted in the South

> This is a Southern [narrative]... but it has to be; it is written by a Southern woman. Wherever else my politics and social consciousness may lie, my accent, as well as that of my work is Southern. (Whitlock, 2007, p. 1)

MUCH LIKE WHITLOCK (2007), "I love the South" (p. 1). I unapologetically love the South. With all its complex cultural norms and deep-rooted history of racial tensions and violence, I still love the South. Yet my love of the South often emerges with personal trajectories. I embrace the title of a modified Southern Belle, but I know the term was not meant to describe Black women. I am not bothered by the presence of Confederate flags while others immediately interpret them as racist representations of separatism. I grew up surrounded by the flags and came to understand that the flags, for many, merely represented their heritages while for others they represent blatant racism. And because I have heard them often, I have never been shocked by the use of the words or phrases "colored", "Afro-American", or "nigger," even in the contemporary South. I have listened to older people describe a South that I did not have to endure – the Jim Crow South. It was the South where Black people knew their "place" and if they forgot, even momentarily, there was always a reminder from a Caucasian counterpart. It was the South represented in such movies as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Rosewood* (1997) and *The Help* (2011). Schools were segregated…. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing killed three little girls…. Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway to the University of Alabama to block the entry of the University's first Black student…. This is not a caricature of the South. This was the South. While the South should not be limited by the description in the previous paragraph, *that* South is important background to the curriculum in which many students of color in the South are educated. That South still exists, even if only in the minds of some residents. In commenting on the geography of race in Alabama, Inwood (2011) claimed that the South still feels the impact of Jim Crow segregation and White supremacy that ensured political, social, economic, and educational inequality. Inwood further maintained that, "racism and its historical manifestations are still a fundamental organizing principle in society" (p. 572). That principle often extends to the curriculum of the South that clearly communicates a lack of

belonging to students that do not fit White, middle-class, Christian, male identities. Therefore, the remnants of the Jim Crow South have strong implications for structuring identity. Flynn, Kemp, and Perez (2009) suggested that we could not explore place without exploring its impact on identity as these concepts are interconnected. It is this proposition on which this article rests.

I grew up in West Blocton, a small town in Alabama. I lived in an area of West Blocton called the "Heights" where the majority of the residents were Black. According to the U.S. Census (2010), West Blocton is comprised of approximately 1,240 residents with a racial population of 85.56% White residents and 13.23% Black residents. Sixty-seven percent of the residents over the age of 25 received a high school diploma or higher education, and the median household income was $48,890. In *Blocton: The History of a Coal Mining Town*, Adams (2001) chronicled the history of West Blocton as settlers Truman Aldrich and Cornelius Cadle founded the Cahaba Coal Mining Company and grew the town. Adams indicated that, at one point, West Blocton was a diverse community with various nationalities represented by the residents, including Jewish, Russian, Welsh, and Italian settlers. Contemporary West Blocton does not reflect similar diversity and is segregated along a Black/White colorline.

When I was a student, West Blocton had only one elementary school (grades K-6) and one high school (grades 7-12). Looking back, I consider my elementary school teachers some of the best teachers that I have known to be in the profession. They were very traditional in their teaching strategies. In order to learn multiplication in my third grade teacher's class, we wrote our "times tables" repeatedly. Writing was taught using the manuscript tablets where we had to be sure to stay in the lines and differentiate between the capital and lower case letters. Corporal punishment was legal and accepted by teachers and parents. They were structured. This structure is what contributed to the school selected as a National Blue Ribbon School in 2000-2001. It was not until I entered high school that I started to question my education and how people of color were (and were not) represented in the curriculum. This may have been due to being older and cognizant of some of the factors that shaped social reality – race, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. Or it could have been a reaction to blatantly racist comments and references that came from some of my high school teachers. I was beginning to see the underlying meaning of the comments made by my biology teacher, who often referred to my friends and me as "you people." This same teacher also joked in class one day that Alabama's Black Belt region received its name because of its high population of "poor Black people." My curiosity prompted me to analyze this statement as many of my classmates snickered. To me, this was more than a joke in poor taste. However, to the teacher and the non-Black students it was hilarious. The casual nature some teachers dealt with race pushed Black students further into margins that made a great impact on my identity development. I started "talking back" (hooks, 1989) through my writing and academics. My classmates might not have been aware of it. We were engaged in sort of warfare as I watched their interactions with teachers and compared their achievements to mine.

Although I was raised in a post-Jim Crow era when segregation was not legalized in my daily life, I often experienced the sting of racist epithets and attitudes. In small Southern towns, people always find ways to reenact the past especially when race is involved. We were divided on racial lines. Sometimes it was subtle as we shopped at the local convenience store. Sometimes it was obvious as my mother inquired about purchasing a house on Main Street: "You should have come an hour earlier. We just sold it." Understanding what the condescending comment really meant, my mother did not bother to tell the seller that she was the potential buyer who had called an hour earlier and had been told that the house was available.

Growing up in a town where residents of color were such a small percentage of the population, my exposure to various cultures was limited. While West Blocton offered very little in respect to cultural awareness for people of color, there were many celebrations of the town particularly on patriotism. On each Fourth of July, red, white, and blue flags would be hung from the light posts on Main Street. There was "Wild West Blocton Day" when the town celebrated its establishment. There also was the "Cahaba Lily Festival," a festival to celebrate the blooming of the cahaba lily. During each of these events, town residents could be seen riding around in their pickup trucks with their "Proud to be American" or "I Love Dixie" bumper stickers and Confederate flags plastered on the front. I often thought to myself, "Something is not right here. What about me?" I had some teachers who loved and cared about me; yet, there was something missing in the curriculum. When I sought representations of Black people in the curriculum, I could find them in two places, class discussions on slavery and the Civil War. In my schools, that was the extent of who Blacks were. Something was missing in my communities. We had our own community activities, but that usually meant we watched a game at the baseball field while Ms. Vera fried fish, Ms. Sarah sold "be-bops[i]," and Mr. Rudolph sold pickles and juices out of the trunk of his car. To this day, I still cherish these activities when children did not require the entertainment of video game and other technologically savvy instruments; all we needed was outside, fresh air, and friends. But I wanted more. I wanted to know what the African part of African American meant. I knew I was Black, I knew I was American; but which part of me was African?

Searching for My African Heritage

I always yearned to know more about being African. I wanted to go beyond the images of Black people that the curriculum of the South relegated to me. This yearning became more apparent on Thursday, December 5, 1991. On this day a smoldering to know more about being Black, being African, was ignited. I was 23 days shy of my 16th birthday and still feeling confined in my self-segregated Alabama hometown. I did not know what generated this feeling, but I knew that I had to become free. That day was same as most. I went to school and had basketball practice afterwards. Then I went home around 6:00pm and did my homework before watching my then (and now) favorite sitcom featuring a majority Black cast – *A Different World*[ii] (Carsey, Werner & Allen, 1987). Each week since it first aired in September 1987, the show had provided me with laughter and lessons that helped me address young love and all those other emotions that plague the teenage mind. However, on that night, the episode called "Mammy Dearest" (Berenbeim & Allen, 1991) sparked my curiosity about the diversity of African people of which I had no knowledge. In this episode, several of the characters dealt with issues of race and self-esteem. One of the characters, Kim, struggled with insecurities about her dark complexion. Kim's insecurity had been created by a school costume party where she was awarded Best Costume for her representation of "Mammy," although she said she was dressed as an Egyptian princess. The main character, Whitney Gilbert, also agonized with her identity when she discovered her Black ancestors had owned slaves. The show delved into these issues of self-esteem and self-identity of Blacks, especially Black women, and culminated with an artistic performance that celebrated the diversity of Blacks – Black women in particular.

The performance started a recitation of Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1896) "We Wear the Mask." This introduction was followed by a tribute to Mammy; Freddie, the African-centered

character, dancing in blackface; and an African dance. While some of the characters considered celebrating Mammy and dancing in blackface as degrading, Freddie suggested that by embracing those figures, Blacks were "reappropriating the symbols of our oppressors." Utilizing dance, spiritual songs, and poetry, the cast traced the diversity and strength of Black women and allowed the characters to find closure with their insecurities; and as each character grappled with closure, the closing poetic performance piece had me glued to the television. Accompanied by the rhythm of drums and African dance, Kim recited and embodied the following words:

> I was born in the Congo
> I walked to the fertile crescent and built
> the sphinx
> I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
> that glows every one hundred years falls
> in the center giving divine perfect light
> I am bad
>
> I am a gazelle so swift
> so swift you can't catch me [Ha ha]
>
> For a birthday present when he was three
> I gave my son Hannibal an elephant
> [And] He gave me Rome for mother's day
>
> My son Noah built new/ark and
> I turned myself into myself and was
> Jesus
>
> [Ah] I am so hip even my errors are correct
>
> I mean...I...can fly
> like a bird in the sky...
> (Giovanni, 2003, p. 125)

I sat on the edge of my mother's paisley sofa and felt a surge of energy and pride that started my journey towards finding that mental freedom in my hometown and society in general. I was impressed by the delivery and the uplifting words and was determined to find the title of the poem; and after asking several teachers and scanning literature books looking for key words, I discovered this poem was Nikki Giovanni's (2003) "Ego Tripping (there must be a reason why)". Gay (1985) called this poem Giovanni's "symbolic testimonial…to the power of Black heritage" (p. 47). The characters' performance and the words of Giovanni's poem were my introduction to the power of my African history and identity. This story is important to tell. I realize that this episode that touched on the history of Africans and African Americans was my introduction to my African heritage. This was my introduction to a culture that was absent from my experience of schooling in the South. With *A Different World* (Carsey, Werner, & Allen, 1987), I found a way to begin to situate myself in the world. Feeling of being out of place in my own neighborhood and school was replaced with a feeling of greatness, importance, and strength.

Asante (2003) relates this transformation to "two aspects of consciousness: (1) toward oppression, and (2) toward victory" (p. 64). According to Asante, a person, who is at the "toward oppression" stage of consciousness, is able to verbalize oppression without being able to see the strength propelled Africans on slave ships to victory. With this episode of *A Different World*, I had begun to arrive at the first aspect of consciousness. I was sprinting "toward oppression" by acknowledging there was a history out there of which I knew very little. However, my young mind was not ready to strive "toward victory" because I was just beginning to understand my own oppression. To paraphrase Asante, I was beginning to know what was going on in my neighborhoods, schools, and societies; but I was not cognizant of the steps needed to get out of the predicament (Asante, 2003, p. 64). At that young age, my introduction to African culture was successful in planting the seed of curiosity about Black history, specifically as an African descendent in a racially charged society. However, I could not move toward victory yet because I was still in the realization stage of examining how compatible oppression and naïveté could be. I began to learn to question. I questioned why my mother prevented me from wearing my hair in a natural or locks and why my friends told me that my hair was "too pretty" to wear "like that".

Asante (2003) suggests that consciousness of oppression is not immediately met with victory over oppression. Victory, he asserts, is accomplished when one begins to take control of oppression and defines his or her own destiny. "Our choice is the determining factor; no one can be your master until you play the part of a slave" (p. 65). Therefore, victory of consciousness indicates that the freedom of enslaved people was not a right *given* to people by any president's proclamation, but a right demanded by people. This ideology insists that "we are free because we choose to be *free*" (p. 65). Only through our choices as a people and our refusal to be oppressed, can consciousness of victory be attained. Asante further contends that "the high schooler who wears corn rows or writes stories about black people may exhibit a consciousness of oppression but that is not consciousness of victory; consequently, deliverance is postponed until there is a victorious historical will" (pp. 64-65). I find obvious attempts of my efforts to seek victory while navigating my own existence within the oppressive society that constantly make me question my worth.

I was sliding back and forth between my innate connection to African culture and history and the Eurocentric view of Africans that is imposed upon Black students by much of the curriculum utilized in U.S. schools. In his analysis of the representation of African Americans in states' social studies standards, Journell (2008) finds that states' focus on African Americans is limited to slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement, further limited to "oppression and emancipation [without including information on] culture and contribution" (p. 43). Further, in his specific analysis of nine states, Journell includes several Southern states – Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Georgia's state standards focus on each of the aforementioned areas. However, there is no focus on cultural heritages. Journell points out that Georgia's state standards do not include slavery and human rights, contributions to labor and war efforts, factions of the Civil Rights Movement, or post-Civil Rights contributions (p. 50) while these areas are represented in other states' standards, including California, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia. While Alabama was not one of the states in Journell's detailed analysis, the representations of African Americans in history books were limited to oppression and emancipation. At a younger age, I did not know how to negotiate the contrasting messages I received. My budding connection to African culture urged me to resist the margins; however, my Southern curriculum reiterated that the margin was my place. To borrow Michelle Fine's (1994)

term and use it loosely, I was "working the hyphen" between the Eurocentric and Afrocentric views of the roles and contributions of Africans in the world.

While this may not be true of all Black students' experience in the United States, my consciousness has awakened me to the inherent oppression within the cultures in the United States. The 30 minutes I spent watching that episode of *A Different World* did more for my cultural confidence than four years of history classes at West Blocton High School and, later, two advanced level history courses at the University of West Alabama. As Kim, one of the main characters in *A Different World,* stated, "I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal/I cannot be comprehended/except by my permission" (Giovanni, 2003, p. 127). Yes, that was it! I had to give the world my permission to understand my complexity. I had to stop being defined, being understood, or being categorized on society's terms. To an extent, I have achieved some consciousness of victory by knowing and releasing myself from the "enslavement of the mind" (Asante, 2003, p. 52) and nurturing a level of consciousness that has enabled me to reflect on a critical pedagogy of place.

The work of Asa Grant Hilliard, III that explored African socialization and education was foremost in my development as a critically conscious African. Hilliard (1995) defined socialization as, "the process of assuming responsibilities for one's ethnic group based upon its teachings of its shared culture and destiny" (p. 11). Hilliard consistently encouraged educators to seek and encourage critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1995) in their students. As I was mentored by Dr. Hilliard, I was consistently reminded that in order for Black people to be socialized and educated as Africans, we must first identify ourselves as Africans. In addition to African socialization, education, and identity, Hilliard (1998) recognized the importance of African teachers. "African teachers hold the power of African people in their hands" (p. 107). The teachers to whom Hilliard referred were not only classroom teachers; they were community teachers as well – the barbers, the community elders, the church members. Hilliard's work served as a guideline for my development as an educator (and as a parent). His work promoted my transformation. I was no longer bound by the limiting curriculum of the South or the question of "What about me?" that permeated my thoughts as a K-12 student in small town Alabama. I *am* an African. My African identity transformation and has implications for Black classroom teachers as it calls on them to engage in their own African identity transformation. Hilliard (1998) maintained that for teachers, "Preparation, however, is the key, and before beginning the educational relationship with the students, African teachers must first become whole, productive, and conscious beings. Only then can they transform students" (p. 107). In other words, in order for Black teachers to educate their students for critical consciousness, they must first engage in a process whereby they become whole by embracing their own African identities.

Both Dr. Hilliard and his work have been very instrumental in my transformation. Through his work, I have been forced to reconsider *who* I am and understand how my identity shapes how I view the world and my place in it. Hilliard (1995) argued that, "Some people who are racially and culturally of African descent have been socialized in such a way that they do not have a strong sense of identity with African people" (p. 10). My schooling experiences had socialized me in such a way; nevertheless, I had an intrinsic motivation that encouraged me to want to know what it meant to be culturally African. Dr. Hilliard assisted me with understanding what it meant to be culturally African. He led by example.

Invigorating Possibilities for Positive Curriculum and Social Change

> Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. (Mills, 1959, p. 226 as cited in Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001)

I was born, educated, and nurtured in the South. I have witnessed how race, gender, and class perpetuate hegemonic power to non-marginalized people. In my inquiry I tell counter stories of my educational experience from K-12 to graduate school to demonstrate to readers that if the curriculum of the South can be this challenging to an academically successful student, one can only imagine the challenges that may be faced by students of color that struggle academically. As I compose those counternarratives, I engage in critical reflections on specific experiences in my life that stand out as marginalizing or empowering. I had to go back to where it started – home. In commenting on Casemore's (2008) autobiographical articulation of the interaction of place and curriculum, Whitaker (2010) maintains, "Sometimes we have to return home to remember who we are" (p. 123).

Counternarratives provide the platform for silenced stories to be told. As Journell (2010) suggest, while "no curriculum can be entirely inclusive, the political decisions that perpetuate the traditional cannon in public education too often exclude the voices of marginalized Americans in society" (p. 40). In addition counternarratives "serve as a pedagogical tool that allows educators to better understand the experiences of their students [and research subjects] of color through deliberative and mindful listening techniques" (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). In addition, we have to, as Mills (1959) exclaimed, utilize personal accounts to expound on public issues. Similarly, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) maintained that "for public theory to influence educational practice it must be translated through the personal" (p. 15).

Federal mandates for accountability continue to impose on education with an increasing emphasis on standards, testing, and classroom pedagogies that push to "teach to the test" and "support individualistic and nationalistic competition in the global economy" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 3) while keeping teachers and students isolated from the personal, social, and ecological dimensions of places where they live their lives. To counter such a displaced education, Gruenewald (2003) advocated for a critical pedagogy of place that "challenges all educators to reflect on the relationship between the kind of education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations" (p. 3). For Gruenewald, "A critical pedagogy of place, moreover, proposes two broad and interrelated objectives for the purpose of linking school and place-based experience to the larger landscape of cultural and ecological politics: decolonization and reinhabitation" (p. 9). Dlamini (2002) argued that "Critical pedagogy sees education as essentially political. Developing critical thinking skills is crucial for … transformation" (p. 54). Teachers engaged in such a critical pedagogy of place hold potential to socialize and educate students to be critical thinkers. Ball (2000) called for teachers to utilize critical pedagogy with a strong sense of identity to encourage students "to move beyond considerations for individual life changes toward the consideration of agentic possibilities of African Americans as a group and the consideration of their relationships within that group" (p.

1009). Similarly, Delpit and White-Bradley (2003) maintained that critical pedagogy helps teach critical thinking. Therefore, a critical pedagogy of place that links education to place-based experiences encourages students to evaluate critically all aspects of their social lives. Through this process, students are transformed.

I am enthusiastically answering such a call for a critical pedagogy of place that respects and honors learners with diverse educational, social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. As I reflect on my educational experience in the South, I have recognized that I was fortunate to have a mentor, a scholar of multicultural education and African history who ignited in me, what Freire (1970/1995) referred to as conscientizaca, an awakening experience of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 17). I believe that a critical pedagogy of place would encourage students and educators such as myself in the South to liberate ourselves from all forms of suppression and marginalization and to act upon a liberatory and inclusive curriculum. The South has changed as immigration, industry, and economic opportunities continue to grow in the South with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse populations. If we are to grow as a Southern community, we have to discuss the challenges of the past. We have to advocate for an inclusive critical pedagogy of place. We have to explore the "tension between repeating and transcending the past" (Casemore, 2008, p. 18). Whitaker (2010) reiterates Casemore's contention by suggesting that if educators are to genuinely engage in curriculum reformation, we must embrace these places from which we came. We must embrace all that succeeds and that fails. We must return home. We must remember who we were and how we became who we are.

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[ii] *A Different World* is a spin-off of *The Cosby Show* that aired on NBC for six seasons. The show was based at Hillman College, a fictitious HBCU and initially centered on the life of Denise Huxtable, played by Lisa Bonet. While *The Cosby Show* was somewhat conservative in the issues it addressed, *A Different World* frequently explored issues with race, class, gender, identity, etc.