

Waking Up and Dreaming the Future

Reflections on the Art of James Baldwin and Carrie-Mae Weems and the Impossibility of Teacher Education

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SINCE THE MURDER OF GEORGE FLOYD on May 25th, we have witnessed a multi-racial, global movement demanding the end to systemic anti-Black racism and the dismantling of structures of white supremacy and white privilege. That movement, taking place in the midst of a pandemic and economic collapse, has sparked discussions among educators about how to respond to these demands. Presidents of universities, superintendents and chancellors of public school systems, and heads of teacher organizations have expressed outrage and grief over the killing of Mr. Floyd. They have vowed, as Cornell University's president, Martha Pollack (2000) put it, to "do all we can ... to address this scourge of racism and ... address it directly in our educational programs, in our research and in our engagement and related activities." How universities and K-12 schools will "address it" remains to be seen, particularly given current economic and medical constraints, how, in the past, promises have been made and then broken, and how white people seem, so often, to have awoken only to fall back asleep. As James Baldwin (1985a) wrote, "The white people of the country have become, for the most part, sleepwalkers, and their somnambulation is reflected in the caliber of U.S. politics and politicians" (p. 685).

In this essay, we focus on teacher education and argue that, if it is committed to addressing the issues and demands raised by the protests, it must recognize and come to terms with certain disavowals at the heart of its own, as well as the nation's, project of public education. Those disavowals are sustained by what James Baldwin (1984 as quoted in Kenan, 2010) termed "the dream of safety" (p. 137), a dream he defined variously in terms of white supremacy, American exceptionalism, racial innocence, and personal absolution. He also described the dream of safety as one in which people believe they can predict, categorize, and define, human emotions, desires and relationships, thus, limiting and perverting their complexity. Such a belief, as William Pinar and other curriculum scholars have argued, has, for far too long, shaped approaches to teacher

education (see in particular Pinar, 2009, 2012; Ravitch, 2020; Salvio & Boldt, 2009; Taubman, 2010; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2019).

Throughout this essay, we turn to the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal with the aim of augmenting and complicating that concept with Baldwin's call for us to admit the lies we tell ourselves and to awaken from our dreams of safety, a call that is also evident in the work of contemporary photographer and artist Carrie May Weems. Weems' (1995-1996) photo-(auto)biographies offer studies in the relationships between individual life stories and collective historical narratives, particularly those stories that have been relegated to the margins of history. Like Baldwin, Weems envisions the artist as a narrator of history who remembers, in the words of Hertha D. Sweet Wong (2018), "those whose lives have been lost through a colonial education" (p. 192). We bring together psychoanalysis, Baldwin's writings on racial innocence, and Weems' descriptions of her aesthetic process, with a focus on her 1995 installation, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, at a moment when a pandemic also renders the education project suddenly unsecured and, thus, open. With this openness in mind, and in the company of Weems and Baldwin, we present narratives and images that stress the poetic function of language, making room for what is disavowed in teacher education, and opening up our discussions of teacher education's aspirational dream of justice. That dream is contingent upon recognizing teacher education's dreams of safety—dreams that defend against the knowledge that education generally and teacher education specifically, as these are currently conceived and implemented, are impossible.

An Impossible Profession

Following Freud, we understand the impossibility of education in terms of the disruptive nature of the unconscious. The teacher can never be certain of what the student will learn, and as Freud (1917/1955) points out in his discussion of psychoanalysis as a learning process, "the news that reaches your consciousness is incomplete and often not to be relied on" (pp. 142–143). But we also argue that making education impossible has been the way white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and economic disparities continue to shape and be shaped by the school curriculum, institutionalized knowledge, and school policies and practices. Finally, education appears impossible today in the most literal sense, given the presence of the Coronavirus. How will students return to schools, what will classes look like, and how will students, teachers, and families be protected? These pressing questions render education as we've known it impossible in the most concrete sense.

The Unconscious

Because the unconscious constitutes a radical otherness within knowledge, it subverts, as Shoshanna Felman (1982/1997) put it, "any possibility of totalizing what is known or of eradicating one's own ignorance" (p. 25). Its *unheimliche* proximity and intimate alterity, as well as eruptions, resist and disrupt the closure, transparency, and causal narratives that education pursues. Not only do the enigmatic workings of the unconscious create unexpected shifts and unanticipated feelings in the relationships between students and teachers, they also make a

shambles of efforts to predict and to control, two projects that have been imposed on teachers and that serve as priorities in the culture of accountability that dominates teacher education.

At some level, we know that students will not ultimately walk away with whatever we believe we are teaching or, even, what we actually teach. As psychoanalysis suggests, we always mean more than we say and say more than we mean, or as Shoshanna Felman (1982/1997) wrote, “The unconscious . . . is precisely the discovery that human discourse can by definition never be entirely in agreement with itself, entirely identical to its knowledge of itself” (p. 24). The unconscious de-centers us and threatens to disrupt our comprehension of ourselves and others. The unconscious also constitutes the difference between subjectivity and the individual. When historian and psychoanalyst Elizabeth Roudinescu (2001) argued that the “era of subjectivity has given way to the era of individuality” (p. 3), a neoliberal individuality, she was suggesting that the individual today is already a fiction created by neoliberal capitalism and, we would add, white supremacist practices, structures, and ideologies.

Following Badiou (1997/2008) who wrote that Lacan taught him that the “subject is a question,” Roudinescu (2001) suggested that the unconscious is structured in terms of both a question and a surplus. Who am I? What do/should I want? What do you, the Other, want from me? Around these questions, initially inarticulate pulsations, the unconscious coalesces, but the answers landed on never, finally, satisfy. There is always more, always, thankfully, a surplus. To be satisfied with the answer would be to fall into the fixity of the ego or identity or rigid scripts or conceptions of the sovereign individual. Such answers lock us into the prison of a misapprehension, because they discount the force of the unconscious. Subjectivity, understood as an unruly dream-like interplay between an unconscious and an ego, understood as fluid, transgressive, and restless, plays havoc with conventions, the right way to be, and the correct answer.

The unconscious, then, disrupts the certainty that what is learned is what is taught, that we teach what we think we are teaching, and that we can be accurately categorized and reduced to our identities or developmental stages, or rendered predictable. It also complicates the hope of teaching social justice and transforming society through democratic education.

The unaddressed reality of segregated schools, class divisions, and white supremacy implicitly and explicitly shapes the project of education in the U.S. The unacknowledged horrors and consequences of centuries of anti-Black racism and white supremacy, coupled with the hidden disparities in educational opportunities for rich and poor, have subverted educational projects and, in the best cases, reduced them to small victories in an endless and unwinnable war. The knowledge that the United States has been and in many respects remains a criminal state—one whose racial policies served as a model for Nazi Germany (see Whitman, 2017), one which has erected concentration camps on its borders, and one which Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) alludes to as a “police state”—is disavowed by the country and white Americans. As James Baldwin (1979) challenged an audience at the University of Berkeley, “How can you expect a people who can’t educate their own children [about their past, the past of the nation, and today’s reality] to educate anyone else?” Can segregated schools do anything more than perpetuate a segregated society? What does teacher education mean when one disavows the history and reality of a criminal nation and the false narratives that enable it?

As of this writing, in the summer of 2020, universities and K-12 schools are struggling with how to open this fall, and how to prepare for an uncertain and troubling future. Distance learning, home schooling, open-air education, and hybrid curricula have taken on a new urgency, as have questions about how to address the needs of homeless students, food insecure students,

international students, and students without internet access, as well as questions about the financial sustainability of colleges and universities. While these questions are beyond the scope of this essay, we raise them for two reasons. First, we worry that they are being answered in ways that continue the same-old approaches to education as “delivery of the goods” and job preparation and perpetuate the disavowals and lies mentioned above. Second, it seems clear that the pandemic and recent protests have exposed some of those disavowals and lies and that the very uncertainty the virus brings offers us a space or opportunity to fundamentally rethink the project of education by facing the disavowals, lies, and dreams of safety to which we cling.

To explore these disavowals and these dreams, we turn briefly to Freud’s theorization of disavowal and then to Baldwin’s revelatory and prophetic reporting on the lies white Americans tell themselves. We then offer examples of how dreams of safety have misled educators, specifically teacher educators. Finally, we discuss how the work of Carrie Mae Weems offers one example of how art may wake us from these dreams and, paradoxically, make education possible in the light of its impossibility.

Disavowal

In everyday usage, disavowal is generally taken to denote the denial of or refusal to accept responsibility. Psychoanalytic theory, however, offers a more complicated conceptualization of disavowal. Unlike repression, where one forgets and forgets that one has forgotten, the psychoanalytic concept of disavowal suggests one knows or is aware of something but prefers to keep that knowledge out of view, on the periphery of consciousness, and to act as if one did not know it.

According to Freud (1940/1964), disavowals “occur very often” (p. 204), but they always serve as a defense against and response to a profound sense of terror—terror of loss of love, of power, of identity, of innocence. Such disavowals allow individuals to simultaneously maintain contradictory attitudes towards self and others, but they also keep them from forming a view that integrates these attitudes, and thus, they result in a sealing off of imagination, replacing it with fantasy, fetish, or fixations or repetition compulsions.

James Baldwin was no admirer of psychoanalysis, viewing it as a method of forced adjustment—“God no, never got adjusted,” he told an interviewer (as quoted in Standley & Pratt, 1989, p. 247)—but he, nevertheless, practiced a penetrating psycho-social analysis of all varieties of American disavowal: the lies we tell ourselves as individuals and as a nation. “Baldwin fully understood the power of the American lie,” wrote Eddie Glaude, Jr. (2020), “[That lie] transforms facts and events that do not quite fit our self-understanding into the details of American greatness or features of a never-ending journey to perfection” (pp. 27–28). As Baldwin told Studs Terkel in 1961 (as quoted in Standley & Pratt, 1989), “White Americans know the crimes committed against black people and they do not know the crimes, because they do not want to know” (p. 14). Or, as he described to an interviewer in 1962 (as quoted in Standley & Pratt, 1989), “The problem of the American identity has everything to do with all the things that happened in this country but never have been admitted or dealt with” (p. 26). Perhaps, more than any other American writer, James Baldwin explored what disavowal has looked like in America, its repercussions, the terrors behind it, and the dreams that sustain it.

In March of 1987, and shortly before he died, I, Peter, had the opportunity to interview James Baldwin. Among other questions, one I asked him concerned what he would tell an audience

of high school teachers and students, an audience to whom I would soon be presenting a paper about his work. He said, “Tell them: ‘There is no safety.’” This admonition continues to seem apposite, but also deeply pessimistic. Baldwin was no pessimist, though, so how then can we understand his contention or prophesy? What relevance does it have to how we think about teacher education today? Why would Baldwin want students and teachers to know that there is no safety?

In many of his essays and novels, Baldwin reflected on what he described as the dream of safety. At times, he equated that dream with white supremacy, the dream that whiteness will not only guarantee a privileged position on a racial hierarchy, but will also offer a defense against the vicissitudes of life. On one hand, his claim that whiteness is a *dream* of safety seems suspect. After all, being white does offer a great many privileges, including protection from being murdered by police or armed whites, being unjustly jailed, and being shattered by race-based inequities in, for example, access to decent and fair medical, financial, educational, and housing resources. On the other hand, whiteness, at least for poor and increasingly working and middle-class whites, can be dangerous. As Jonathan Metz (2020) and Arlie Hochschild (2016) argued, white people are championing racist, right wing policies that wind up destroying their health, livelihoods, security, and even lives because they see those policies as benefitting Blacks and other “undeserving” groups at the expense of white people. Or as Baldwin (1985a) wrote, “What is happening on the streets of Harlem to black boys and girls is also happening on all American streets to everybody” (p. 400).

Baldwin also equated the dream of safety with a belief in American exceptionalism, a belief that this country is divinely ordained, the fruit of a glorified, although mythic, history, and superior to all other nations. The dream is belied, Baldwin contended, by racism, poverty, and the savagery of white supremacy in the country. Baldwin also equated the dream of safety with the illusion that, somehow, we, ourselves, are absolved of responsibility, innocent of the blame we hurl at others, and not complicit in the world we condemn. “[T]he world ... is not simply a vindictive plot imposed on people,” he wrote, “it is also the world they have helped to make” (Baldwin, 1985a, p. 155). It’s a tough pill to swallow, our own complicity, and it is “something that we don’t want to face” (Baldwin, 1985a, p. 242). Or, as he said elsewhere,

The object of one’s hatred is never, alas, conveniently outside but is seated in one’s lap, stirring in one’s bowels and dictating the best of one’s head. And if one does not know this, one risks becoming an imitation—and, therefore, a continuation—of principles one imagines oneself to despise. (Baldwin, 1985a, p. 686)

Whether he was talking about the pull of passion that explodes our seemingly settled normalcy or about our flawed, idiosyncratic lives that disrupt our taken for granted identities and destabilize what we thought we knew, he insisted that we must look at what is painful in our own lives and the life of our nation and recognize how we are implicated in the problem. The price for saving the country, he would often say, “is to understand oneself” (as quoted in Kenan, 2010, p. 47).

The obstacles to such a fearless search are, for Baldwin, the dreams of safety to which we cling. While all these dreams of safety may offer the *illusion* of protection, they also may, as Baldwin (1985b) suggested, “reach culmination or climax ... in the nightmare orgasm of genocide” (p. 102). But to give up such dreams, to recognize our disavowals, risks not only the identities and selves we have built up, but our very place in the universe. This is a terrifying prospect. What then are the terrors, the disavowals, and the dreams of safety that haunt teacher education? And what would it mean for us to give up those dreams?

Efforts, Terrors, and Dreams of Safety in Teacher Education

In the past, when it came to challenging white supremacy and anti-Black racism, educators and school systems have not, as Baldwin (1985a) urged, gone “for broke” (p. 325). Instead, if any efforts have been made in K-12 schools and teacher education programs, they have been toward adding a bit more history about the African American experience, developing culturally relevant/sensitive teaching approaches and trauma-informed pedagogies, and/or instituting extra-curricular approaches focused on improving race relations. More recently, efforts have consisted of establishing charter schools in poor, predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods and holding teachers and teacher education programs accountable for poor test scores seen as an outcome of the so-called “soft bigotry of low expectations for minority students” (Bush, 2000, n.p.). Institutions of higher learning have focused on recruiting more faculty of color, often with little success and less success in keeping them, offering lukewarm or declining support for various minors or programs in the study of oppressed groups, and providing scholarships to students of color. Efforts apparent in teacher education programs often take the form of instituting standards of cultural competency, “dispositions,” against which are measured the skills and attitudes of student teachers. We argue that, other than what some label liberation studies, these efforts too often fail because those who make them disavow the impossibility of education and cling to dreams of safety. What do we mean?

These efforts disavow the unconscious and sustain a particular version of the individual, one very much entangled with neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy. They also disavow the criminality of the U.S. and how profoundly anti-Black racism structures all aspects of American life. Its disavowal is masked by dreams of safety: dreams of racial innocence, of white heroism, and of the ability to control, predict, and ensure educational outcomes. Such efforts sustain the belief that there exists a knowledge that can be taught and, thus, learned, a knowledge that already knows its own meaning in advance. This approach to education assumes a straightforward, transparent relationship between what is taught and what is learned. Should K-12 students, particularly white students, learn about, for example, the Tulsa massacre, the work of Ida B. Wells, the long history of police violence against Blacks, the Nazi admiration for U.S. eugenics and Jim Crow laws, and the failures of Reconstruction? Of course. Should they read works by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Rita Dove, and Claudine Rankin? Of course. But how these texts and histories will be received, what students come away with, or how they may be taught, often by white teachers, is unknowable and unpredictable. Furthermore, if these texts and histories are taught as vehicles or carriers for particular messages known in advance, then such efforts fly in the face of what Baldwin (1985a), in his talk to teachers, demanded:

to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself (sic), to make his own decisions ... to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions. (p. 326)

Just as the psychoanalyst cannot “tell” the patient what the problem is, just as posting a list of dos and don’ts on the classroom wall doesn’t guarantee good behavior, so the teacher can never be certain of what the student will take from the message delivered.

Such efforts in teacher education to address racism most often focus on the individual and, as sociologist Stephen Steinberg (2007) argued, “elide the issue of power, reducing racism down to the level of attitudes” (p. 17). Historian Leah Gordon (2015) continued the critique of the race

relations model, one she labeled racial individualism. Informing racial individualism, which “suggests racial justice could be attained by changing white minds and protecting African American rights” are “psychological individualism, rights-based individualism, and belief in the socially transformative power of education” (Gordon, 2015, p. 2). Gordon’s (2015) and Steinberg’s (2007) critiques are of those who “educationalize” social problems or, in other words, view education as the way to eradicate racism by changing attitudes. According to Steinberg and Gordon, unless we change social conditions—i.e., unless we dismantle systemic racism and white power structures or unless we overthrow neoliberal capitalism or at the very least rein in its excesses—schools, as part of society, will simply reproduce social inequality and there’s little teacher education can do.

In focusing their critiques on efforts that privilege the neoliberal individual, one always progressing and self-monitoring and one that can be measured, these critics elide the subjectivity of students and teachers, conflating it with individuality. As accurate as they are, the critiques fail to open the way to a different kind of education, one we’ll address in a moment, one that does not know its meaning in advance, one that is impossibly possible.

We believe, following Baldwin (1985a), that “the reality, the depth, and the persistence of the delusion of white supremacy in this country causes any real concept of education to be as remote, and as much to be feared, as change or freedom itself” (p. 652). Indeed, given the unruly disruptiveness of the unconscious and the fact that so many of us are unwilling to accept that we are sleep walking, can education be other than impossible? And yet, we continue to fall into dreams of safety.

Those dreams defend against unbearable terrors: the terror that there is not and never has been a meritocracy in this country, the terror that whites have been the beneficiaries of affirmative action for centuries, that we whites may not deserve our successes, that our comfort, our position, and our security are built on others’ suffering, or as Maya Angelou (1987) put it to the white auditor, in her poem, “The Mask,” “But Sugar, it was our submission that made *your* world go round” (n.p.). There is the terror that the stories we’ve told ourselves about what we know and what we should teach may all be a poisonous tangle of lies. As Baldwin (1985a) wrote, “[White people] have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of history” (p. 137). White liberal teachers are not immune from his criticism. “This liberal sympathy—for I have never met a Northern school teacher who did not claim to be a liberal—is rarely equal to the dry-eyed task of teaching” (Baldwin, 1974, p. xiii). And, “because they think they are white, they believe ... in the dream of safety” (Baldwin, 1985a, p. 77). In his last interview, Baldwin sounded pessimistic.

The whole of American reality is based on the necessity of keeping Black people out of it ... non-existent. Except according to [white people’s] terms. ... Now their kids are deeply lost. ... They’re trapped. And nothing will spring the trap, nothing. (as quoted in Standley & Pratt, pp. 291–292)

Baldwin was, however, not a pessimist. He continued to believe that whites could wake up, that we could relinquish our dreams of safety, and that the world could be changed. “For to dare to hope to become,” he wrote, “is to surrender the dream of safety” (Baldwin, 1985b, p. 101). What will it mean for educators to give up the dream of safety? How might education, given its impossibility, be possible?

The Possibility of an Impossible Profession

While we believe in the importance of making the arts, autobiographical work, and liberation studies—all illuminated by complicated interdisciplinary conversations and organized around particular questions and life experience—central to the curriculum, in this last section, we focus specifically on the arts. Such a move, we believe, speaks to subjectivity rather than individuality. Such a move counters the dominant approach in teacher education that substitutes skills, best practices, and “what works” for the inter-subjective labor required to make what is taught one’s own (Pinar, 2009, pp. 38–39). Such a move offers opportunities for what Prague linguist, Roman Jakobson (1995), understood as the poetic function of language: a means through which to protect “against automation, and against rusting our formulations of love and hate, resistance and reconciliation, belief and denial” (p. 32). Such a move assumes, as James Baldwin wrote in “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity,” that “the artist’s struggle . . . must be considered as a kind of metaphor for the struggle, which is universal and daily, of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings” (as quoted in Kenan, 2010, p. 41). Such a move analogizes the curriculum, itself, not only to art, but to the struggle. It suggests that unlike the fixed curriculum offered at all levels of schooling, one that dismally fails to convey “the unpredictability and the occasional and amazing splendor of the human being” (Baldwin as quoted in Kenan, 2010, p. 141), the curriculum we are advocating insists on finding its poetry in the lives of the people.

To explore what it would mean to conceptualize the curriculum as a medium and a “metaphor for the struggle,” we turn to the work of Carrie Mae Weems, an American artist best known for her photography, who works with a range of symbol systems including text, fabric, audio, digital images, and installation video. We offer Weems’ series not to assign specific or fixed meanings to it, but to suggest how an open work of art, one whose affective knowledge is not known in advance, exemplifies a teacher education curriculum that rouses us from our dreams of safety. Like Baldwin, Weems turns to art to generate complicated dialogues with the long history of racist representations of black people that eclipse, if not entirely erase, their humanity.

Just as psychoanalysis is a process that provides access to knowledge denied to consciousness, Weems’ work proceeds through breakthroughs, leaps, regressions, and deferred action rather than through a conventional linear sequential pathway from ignorance to assumed mastery, mastery wielded, in Lacan’s (1988) words, “as an instrument of power” (p. 91). Weems offers us a means to work through social and personal histories and to dream through a repertoire of poetic strategies. She offers a political art that, as Holland Cotter (2001) wrote, “is about asking questions and not delivering answers” (p. E 85). Such a curriculum, must, we urge, be embedded in students’ experiences, much as Weems’ work is embedded in her experiences.

The central questions driving Weems’ work, much as they do Baldwin’s, concern identity: Who am I? What do I want and what do others want from me? How have I become who I am? How and where do I enter? How am I complicit in my own pain? In relations of power? How can I, we wake up? These are questions around which the unconscious coheres, restless questions that do not find rest in final answers. As Weems has said, “What happens to me, happens to you, me, and us together” (as quoted in Willis, 2012, p. 998). Thus, in exploring our own histories, we must explore the histories that made us, or as Weems (2009) put it, we must “locate the root of self in history, and so must open up history” (n.p.). This strategy resonates with the ways in which *currere* engages students and teachers in a form of study that, as William Pinar (2012) explained, explores “the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 35).

In her work, Weems addresses many of the questions above by merging history, political theory, philosophy, literature, folklore, anthropology, film criticism, with her art to create worlds out of the very mundane rituals of daily life. She often includes herself in her photographic images with the aim of becoming both the subject and photographer, performer and director, blurring distinctions between participant and observer (Weems, 2009). Her work is meant to disrupt the viewer's taken for granted perspectives. As she put it, she wants the viewer to know "they are looking at artifice, that nothing is natural" (Weems, 2009, n.p.). Like Baldwin, Weems (2014) admitted to and struggles with her own flaws: often saying in interviews, "I'm often lost and don't know what I'm doing" (n.p.). She offers us new ways to dream through a repertoire of poetic strategies, that resonate with Jakobson's (1995) theory of the poetic function of language.

The poetic function of language, as understood by Jakobson (1995), is partially constituted in the disruption of normative modes of communication and univocal meanings. The poetic function of language is a means through which to defamiliarize the familiar or to provoke what Freud (1917/1955) understood as the uncanny, a form of alienation that dismantles repressions and disavowals. Weems, like Baldwin, directs her art and politics at the long histories of extreme, traumatic experiences of anti-Black racism. And, like Baldwin's writing, her work pushes her subjects to challenge the conventions that regulate the symbolic order. The force of Jakobson's theory of the poetic function of language pierces through "the symbolic order and constraints of rationality," in part by building on the idea that the term that is present invokes absent terms. Jakobson's (1995) theory recalls Freud's description of the "dream work" where two images might be overlaid as, for example, when the faces appearing in one's dream are both one's mother's and one's teacher's faces (condensation) or where feelings are aroused that have no clear connection to those images (displacement).

In what follows, we discuss Weems' (1995) installation, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, to offer an example of curriculum that suggests how the poetic function of language can work to wake us from our dreams of safety and from our disavowal of the impossibility of education. While the specific exhibit does not include all the qualities Weems is noted for, the series does demonstrate how education might speak to subjectivities, to the unconscious of the nation, and to disavowed histories. Weems' work offers one approach to facing what Stephen Butterfield (1974) in his discussion of African American autobiographies, referred to as the "knowledge of the sins of the fathers," a knowledge that "is a terrible burden for the children of pirates, murderers, kidnappers, rapists, for the children of those who received the benefits of stolen labor and genocide and closed their eyes, perhaps with a humanitarian shudder, to its effects" (p. 232). And it accomplishes this not by telling the viewer what to think, but by stirring us to consider how our lives are entangled in what we see and by layering images that are both ineffable and powerful and raise more questions than they answer.

Weems' (1995) pictorial essay, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, consists of a series of photographs taken of slaves and former slaves living in the American South in the 19th and 20th centuries. Weems found these images in museum and university archives. She used them, she explains, "to give voice to a subject that historically has had no voice" (Weems, 2000, n.p.). Among the photographs she collected were daguerreotypes that were commissioned in 1850 by the Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz. Agassiz traveled throughout the South with a photographer who took portraits of slaves so that Agassiz could use them as visual evidence to support his theory of the racial inferiority of Africans and to render a taxonomy of physical types in the slave population. "When we're looking at these images," Weems (2000) explained, "we're looking at the ways in which ... white America saw itself in relationship to the Black subject" (n.p.), and we

are coming face to face with photography's complicity in racism and the ways in which one image evokes other images. In the series, Weems interrogates the history of Black subjects in photography and the history of anthropology's racial violence against the Black subject. The majority of the photographs are black and white. Many of the subjects are depicted naked or half naked and presented as anthropological specimens. Weems stained the original photographs with a monochrome red and placed a circle around the face of the subjects. Etched into the glass placed over the photographs is text written by Weems, which she used, as she explained in an interview at MOMA, to create a distance between the image and the viewer or remind the viewer that while these photographs were taken from another time, used for other purposes, they speak to us now and force us to question the connections between past and present, who we/they were and who we/they are now (Weems, 2000).

In the text, Weems used repetitive patterns—the simple refrain of “you became, you became, you became” as in “You became a scientific profile,” “You became an anthropological debate,” “You became a Negroid type,” “You became a photographic subject”—as agitation, as improvisation, and as movement within a history of racial violence, loss, rape, and dehumanization. In her discussions of *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, Weems (2000) tells us that she intentionally listened for repetition in order to build complex narratives from singular events. The repetition mirrors that of a blues motif or the call and response of collective agency. It also challenges us to ask who we've become now and how we came to be who we are.

Weems seems to use the presentation of the photographs and the poetic function of language to shift the colonizing gaze. During her interview with Weems, bell hooks (1995) underscored that “it is not only white people who look at the black image with the colonizing gaze. We have all been taught to look at black images with a colonizing eye” (p. 77). Her comments echo Weems' claim (as quoted in Willis, 2012) that “What happens to me, happens to you, me and us together” (p. 998). It's a claim not unfamiliar to James Baldwin.

Conclusion

The poetics of both Weems and Baldwin exemplify the kind of work teacher education could offer: a repertoire of ethical and aesthetic strategies for exploring and perhaps working through the disavowals stitched into the history of the United States. Such work offers teacher educators not the detailed directions, specified purpose, and purportedly predictable products that now constitute teacher education, but rather ways to engage with and think through and beyond the ways the American Dream has always, in Baldwin's words (as quoted in Buccola, 2019), “been achieved at the expense of the American Negro” (p. 379). If public education and teacher education truly commit to reshaping the American nightmare into a dream worth striving for, they must accept their own impossibility. We must provide students with opportunities to explore, express, and struggle with questions that remain fundamentally unanswerable but that provoke further study. We must cull content, that is questions and directions, from the study of the rich legacies of Black artists, philosophers, Black diaspora women, and the long tradition of the Black liberation struggles that have always been committed to decolonizing our minds and imaginations.

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