

A Love Letter to Black Mothers

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A Prelude.

I STAYED AWAY FROM THE BERGAMO CONFERENCE on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice for nearly twenty years because I have always had a complicated relationship with curriculum theory. For many years, the field has provided me the intellectual space to grapple with the interdisciplinary questions I want to explore about knowledge, power, and identity. Only in curriculum theory is the possibility of my academic career possible. I began writing about the public pedagogies of Black women rappers Missy Elliott, Lil Kim, and Eve in the early 2000s. Then, I took my first tenure-track position and shifted to writing about the plantation politics of predominantly white higher education spaces. Now, twenty years later, my writing is focused primarily on Black mothering. This trajectory is possible because of other Black women curriculum theorists in the space. I want to thank two sister theorists in particular for paving a way for all of us in this field, but especially me. Without Denise Taliaferro-Baszile, my work would not have been published or presented in as many places as it has been. Her work is simultaneously inspirational and aspirational for so many of us because it always manages to prompt us toward new and more complicated thinking. I want to thank also Kirsten Edwards, who has created opportunities for me to publish and present and whose work is as brilliant as it is beautifully written. She represents the Black feminist future of Afro-futurist thinking. I owe both of these women a great debt, and they will always be examples of how to pay forward all that I have been given.

It is because of Black feminist theory ala Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and, lately, Christina Sharpe and Brittney Cooper that I have found a space for my work in curriculum theory. Black women have been the predominant voices in my work, but I want to make clear that my focus on Black women does not erase the significant contributions of my Latina, Asian, and Indigenous sisters to curriculum theory. It has been a generative space to be sure, but there's an ever-present tension that I feel, even after all of these years, that there will always be gaps and misrepresentations about Black women's ways of knowing and being. There will always be a tendency in our field—like every other field—toward theoretical framing that privileges Western, positivist thinking—even as the field critiques it. There will always be a tendency to devalue the distinguishing features of our theorizing—story, experiential knowing,

and doing—even though the field’s discursive traditions have shifted. Our field has yet to acknowledge its foundations—historical and contemporary—in Black women’s theorizing.

Adept at locating ruptures in mainstream discourses and writing through and sometimes against these ruptures, Black women in curriculum theory spend a lot of time not just filling in gaps but also problematizing what already exists. While others are writing eulogies for Black feminism because they say it is no longer relevant (Stallings, 2012), Black women curriculum theorists have been writing to make space for contemporary varieties of Black feminism to flourish. And as of late, we have been writing to justify our very humanity. I honor Black women’s work and theorizing, because without it, our field would not exist. Let me repeat that. As with everything in this country, especially now, our field depends on Black women’s theorizing, but the field’s relationship with Black feminist thought has to change. So, I’m using my temporary privilege in this keynote paper to call on the field to develop a more synergistic relationship with Black women’s theorizing.

As we have seen with Black women’s voting power in elections across this country, we often get little in return for our contributions. Similarly, Black women’s theorizing in our field has not received the credit that it deserves. How often do you cite Black women theorists’ thinking in your own publications? How often do you include Black women’s writing as an anchoring text—not an add-on one—in your courses? How often do you use your professional capital to help search committees see the value of the work of Black women theorists who apply for positions at your institution? How often do you make sure that Black women are given serious consideration for editor-in-chief, associate editor, or editorial board positions for our major journals? These colonial tokens are not markers for measuring the importance of our work, but they do signal a system that maintains inequity around Black women’s labor in the academy. This eat-us-up, get-fat-on-our-thought-and-work, and then turn-around-and-starve-us-approach is not new, but I am calling time’s up on relationships that conjure the enslaver and enslaved, pimps and prostitutes. When will our field become more woke in its intent and effects? Black women matter. And when we call out hatred and propose collective protest against that hatred, do not tell us to be more civilized. We have saved progressives too many times to count, despite the killing of our children by agents of the state who too often are never held accountable. Black mothers everywhere are outraged and scared to death for our children’s lives, especially now. As a mother of an eleven-year-old son, I am outraged. We should all be outraged. And it is this outrage that prompted the following writing, which I hope demonstrates and contemporizes some distinguishing features of Black feminist thought that Collins (2000) conceptualized so many years ago: an emphasis on story, a prioritizing of experiential epistemologies, identifying Black women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals as theorists, and locating new sites of intellectual production by Black women.

Sleepless Nights.

I rarely have a restful night of sleep anymore. I cannot remember the last time I slept through the night waking up feeling rested and ready to take on the day. Nighttime is a battle—a battle to rest my mind, to quiet the cacophony that interferes with the calm of the night. Mostly, I worry over my eleven-year-old son’s future, what he will choose to do with his life, how he will carve a path to joy, how school might get in the way rather than make a way for his dreams, and what dangers he will encounter when we are not around to protect him. I did not have as much trouble sleeping before I became another human’s biological mom. I also did not spend the

majority of my nights time-traveling through my son's future during his first eight years of life, which coincided with the years of the Obama Presidency. I do not mean to suggest that Obama's Presidency offered a magic protective blanket against my nighttime battle for calm. But the trickle back then—rather than the raging river we experience now—of hate-driven, border-closing, rights-reducing policy decisions made mothering a lot less hard and, frankly, a lot less scary.

Since Trump took office, I have been mothering mostly from a defensive position. There is one hate-driven incident after another, so many in fact that I cannot keep up with the many difficult conversations I have had to have with my son about racism, sexism, sexual harassment, immigration, xenophobia, homo- and trans-phobia, and so much else about systemic oppression that, heretofore, had been mostly abstract and theoretical to him. True, I have mothered countless students through difficult times, but mothering your biological child through experiences that will shape his understandings of race for the rest of his life is daunting work. I do not believe that Obama's two term Presidency resulted in white supremacy being muted for eight years, nor do I believe that Obama's policy decisions made Black life any easier or Black futures more promising, especially for Black women and girls. But Trump's Presidency and the Make America Great Again brand of whiteness reaffirms what Black folks know and continue to experience about this country's past and present. White supremacy rages on.

Though I am familiar with white supremacy in its many forms—I grew up in rural Louisiana when David Duke almost won the governor's seat—this newest wave of hatred feels eerily familiar and different at the same time. I cannot logically explain exactly how the hatred manifests every time. But I feel the hatred almost everywhere, and this feeling matters. Where I live in the northern suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, Make America Great Again whiteness has reawakened some folks' confidence to veer out of their lanes in their interactions with me, whether it is to chide me for not holding a door open as they passed me on their way into a fast food restaurant I was exiting, to shoot me the middle finger in the parking lot of a grocery store when I did not stop my car and wait for them to walk across the lot, or for an administrator to describe me as rude in her conversation with one of my students while also accusing me of cursing like a sailor in front of my son. I could tolerate racist folks better when they feared Black people had taken their country away from them, when they cringed at the thought of a Black family “occupying” the White House, when they stayed in their passively racist, micro aggressive lane. Perhaps it's my middle age, but this Make America Great Again brand of whiteness is exhausting. And mothering in resistance to this brand of white supremacy is the most terrifying mothering I have done to date. I say this, however, with my eleven-year-old son still alive and not ripped away from me in the middle of the night. And even though I have restless nights, I still get to sleep knowing that my child is in the next room and that tomorrow we get to make new memories together. Too many other Black mothers have faced the ultimate terror of losing their children to state-sanctioned violence without any justice whatsoever. They will never rest easy again.

Living (and Dying) in the Wake.

Christina Sharpe (2016) conceptualizes the present moment for Black people across the Diaspora as living “in the wake.” Borrowing various connotations of “wake” including “keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness” to conjure what it means for us to live in constant fear of death and dying, Sharpe explains that the present moment for Black people is inextricably linked

to a history of enslavement (pp. 17-18). Even now, she says, Black children carry a “non/status or non/being” marker passed on to them by their mothers, and as such, Black lives will always matter less, if they matter at all (p. 15). The legal end to enslavement did not stop the violent assaults against Black bodies, nor have the justifications for these assaults changed much. An ever-present fear of and rage against the Black body—even if not always visible—looms over our interactions, clouds our judgement, and ruins the possibility for change (Morrison, 1993). Black bodies are terrifying and must be contained, so the justification for oppression against Black bodies goes. We are living in fear for our lives while our very presence evokes fear in others. Sharpe (2016) explains the Catch-22 of Black existence:

Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies, the realities of that terror are erased. Put another way, living in the wake means living in and with terror in that in much of what passes for public discourse *about* terror we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror’s embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror’s multiple enactments; the ground of terror’s possibility globally. (pp. 15-16)

How many times have we heard “I feared for my life” from police officers? It is a familiar narrative: a report of a not-so-serious crime or a routine traffic stop, a search for the culprit that leads to someone who “fits the description,” a failure to comply or, even worse, absolute compliance, and then a tragic ending for an innocent Black child. In those fatal moments, Black mothers’ sons and daughters become dangerous, out-of-control brutes, thugs, or animals who did not comply quickly enough and need to be taken down. This violent reaction to a supposed threat is a predictable plot pattern across time and location. Their narrative is believable because others have internalized that the Black body is dangerous and in need of control by force. Our lives really do not matter because we are not human in the first place. Sharpe (2016) reminds us that, even though enslavement of Black bodies was outlawed years ago, its global power over us remains. She says:

In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movement of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginations of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the forms of the prison, the camp, and the school. (p. 21)

The recently publicized wave of incidents that demonstrate white people’s power to contain Black bodies’ movement through space and to turn the mere presence of Blackness into criminality is not shocking or new. According to Patton and Farley (2018):

What we’re witnessing today is the continuation of a racist American tradition with deep historical roots: Private citizens and police using feckless interpretations of the law to convert Blackness into criminal trespass. This is about repression, projection, the sublime

pleasure of anti-Black racism, and the result, too often, looks like a return to the Jim Crow era. (para. 6)

Most discussions of these instances have focused on the irrational racism and frequency of these occurrences. What we have not focused on enough is what Patton and Farley (2018) refer to as the “sublime pleasure of anti-Black racism” (para. 6). Not only do we need to do more historical contextualizing of the exaggerated hatred and fear that fuel these calls and the complicity of the police to actually show up to answer the calls, but we also need to pay more attention to the sick pleasure white callers derive from the potential results of the call, which could include simple containment of our bodies or the possible lynching of the Black body by the police. Think back to those pictures of white families dressed in their Sunday best in the Jim Crow South enjoying their picnic lunch against a backdrop of a Black body swinging from a tree in the town square. I am always struck by the seeming normalcy—rather than actual horror—represented on white faces in these pictures. That level of horror and the concomitant pleasure derived from it does not disappear from this country’s DNA in fewer than 100 years, so why, exactly, are we shocked by the calls to the police for our alleged crime of what Feminista Jones (2018) calls “Breathing while Black,” for going about our daily lives—for eating in a Waffle House, barbecuing in a park, moving out of an apartment, checking out of an Air BNB, sleeping in a common study area of an Ivy League university dorm, playing golf at a country club, playing a pick-up game of basketball at recreation center, buying prom clothes in a department store, selling water on the sidewalk in front of our home, sitting at a Starbucks waiting on a friend, using a coupon at a CVS, talking in a Chili’s parking lot after dining there, mowing a neighbor’s lawn, swimming in a neighborhood pool, attending a funeral for a family friend. The list will continue, and that continuation signals what we know about Black bodies as they move through/into perceived white spaces.

According to Sharpe (2016), Black bodies are always connected to “danger and disaster” and are always already “weaponized” whether we are walking on the sidewalk eating Skittles, playing outside at a recreation center, listening to music in our cars at a gas station, traveling from “our” neighborhoods into “theirs,” or migrating from the African continent to European countries (p. 16). Marked as a thing designed to inflict harm or damage while also ground zero for fearful/angry others to strike first, the Black body occupies contradictory territory as it moves through the world. If, as Sharpe proposes, Black bodies “are always pushed toward deathliness,” then in what ways might we intervene in the present moment (p. x)?

Sharpe (2016) calls on us to “join the wake with work in order that we might make the wake and *wake work* our analytic” and “continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property” (pp. 17-18). As a response to terror against the Black body, she conceptualizes wake work as both a theory and praxis, as a “mode of [simultaneously] inhabiting and rupturing,” as a mode of simultaneous “subjection and resistance,” where complex tensions in/against Blackness are negotiated (pp. 18, 20). Living through this latest national nightmare in a Black body and raising a son in a young Black body of his own, I feel an urgency to intervene in the present moment. If Black feminist theorists and our allies consider our living through the wake, as Sharpe proposes we do in the multiple senses of the word, what possibilities then does wake work have for our collective (Black) futures? How might we resist death—physical and psychic—and hold each other in the wake? How might we care for ourselves and our children in/against a genocidal culture? How might we define the praxis of our wake work?

I propose that the contours of that praxis have already been traced for us by a select group of Black mothers who, because of the murders of their children, changed how we talk about, think through, and act on state sponsored violence against Black bodies.

August 28, 1955.

When Mamie Till-Mobley decided on an open casket and a public funeral to move the nation's conscience toward justice for the lynching of her 14-year-old son, Emmett, during a summer visit to Money, Mississippi, in 1955, she waged a public fight that would sadly be taken up by far too many Black mothers after her. She fought the state of Mississippi to bury her son in his native Chicago. The open casket, which was viewed by thousands of people, exposed the barbarity of Southern racism. Editorial outrage made its way into newspapers across the world, and because the nation watched as Mamie Till-Mobley grieved, community organizers were able to force an arrest and subsequent trial. Black reporters descended on Mississippi to document the injustice to come. Mamie Till-Mobley sat at the Black press table at the trial, and with/through them, she made sure that we would never forget the panic Emmett must have felt as a 14-year-old boy awakened from sleeping and forcibly removed from his great uncle's house by a group of raging white supremacists in the middle of a terrifying Mississippi night on August 28th. They never let us forget the family's heartbreak in the indelible image they captured at the trial when Emmett's great uncle Mose Wright stood on the witness stand and pointed to the killers who had abducted Emmett from his house in Money. They never let us forget about Willie Reed, the surprise eighteen-year-old witness who risked his life to testify that he had seen Emmett in the last moments of his life in the back of a green and white Chevy pickup truck on a plantation owned by a relative of J. W. Milam, one of the two killers. They never let us forget the outrageous—Mamie Till-Mobley's adjective—testimony of Carolyn Bryant, the wife of one of the killers, Roy Bryant, whose claims triggered the lynching, who said that Emmett grabbed her arm, called her "baby," asked her for a date, grabbed her by the waist, chased her around the store, used foul language, which she was too distraught to repeat in court, and whistled at her. And after a five day trial and a 67-minute deliberation by an all-White jury, where one juror said it would not have taken so long if they had not stopped to "drink pop," and after the not guilty verdicts were read and the killers kissed their wives and lit their cigars for the camera on the steps of the court, Mamie Till-Mobley never let us forget the cold-blooded inhumanity of all involved in the lynching of her son. Mamie Till-Mobley went on to become a teacher, continued her activism by educating the public about her son's death, and for over forty years, she dedicated her life to helping children in poverty.

February 26, 2012.

When Sybrina Fulton agreed to let her son spend time with his father, Tracy Martin, in Sanford, Florida, a city that was not his home, a place we now know had a long history of racial tension, the place where Jackie Robinson was forced to flee twice to escape racist threats while trying to play baseball there, she never imagined that Trayvon's return trip from a convenience store on the evening of February 26, 2012, would lead to his death. Sybrina Fulton decided to travel to Sanford, after she vowed she would never go to the place where her son was murdered, to demand that the city release 911 tapes to her family and to the nation. Thus began her public

fight for justice from law enforcement who refused to even arrest her son's alleged killer, neighborhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman. Centered in Mamie Till-Mobley's lineage and determined not to let her son's case be "swept under [Sandford's law enforcement] rug," Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin worked with/through the news media to get their son's story out of Florida and into the national spotlight. The public sharing of the 911 tapes allowed us to feel Trayvon's terrifying final moments in his desperate screams for help right before Zimmerman shot him dead. Both Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin never let us forget their son's humanity: Trayvon saved his father's life when he dragged his father from a burning kitchen; he loved horses and dreamed of becoming a pilot; he had just turned seventeen and was a typical Miami teenager "eager to do everything all at once" and who loved social activities, music, clothes, and shoes; and he loved his extended family and did odd jobs for them in his spare time. They never let us forget the Sanford Police Department's attempts to criminalize their son, running background, drug, and alcohol checks on Trayvon and not on the person who pulled the trigger. We were public witnesses to a mother's extraordinary love and indescribable pain as she sacrificed a private mourning of her child for public press conferences, protest rallies, and candlelight vigils to make sure the killer of her son was arrested and tried for his crime. Even after a year and a half long fight for justice and a sham of a trial where her son's character was not even defended by the prosecution and police whose job it was to do so, Sybrina Fulton remained steadfast that a not-guilty verdict was not the end of her fight for justice, but just the beginning, if not for Trayvon, but for other people's children. She mothered—and continues to mother—the country through the Trayvon Martin Foundation dedicated to providing both emotional and financial support to families who have lost a child to gun violence and shifting the national conversation from intervention to reform.

Woke Up. Mothering in the Wake.

Most historical accounts of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin end with the widespread public outcry and protest after the not-guilty verdicts in each of their alleged killers' trials, and historians typically evaluate the impact of Till's and Martin's deaths on the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement, respectively. Unsatisfied with the incompleteness of mainstream histories' retelling of their family tragedies, Mamie Till-Mobley (2003) and Sybrina Fulton (2017) tell their versions of the history we know so well in their respective memoirs, *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime That Changed America* and *Rest in Power: A Parents' Story of Love, Injustice, and the Birth of a Movement*. Where other histories end, Till and Fulton continue their stories for readers, coloring in blank spaces and tracing in the contours of their experiences as Emmett's and Trayvon's mothers during the events leading up to and after the killing of their sons.

In their memoirs, Till-Mobley and Fulton challenge what we have been told about their experiences. Their lives (and the renderings of their experiences in their memoirs) are an embodiment of Sharpe's (2016) conception of the wake—or living in the aftermath of a lynching of a black body—in this case, the lynchings of their beloved sons. Notice in the following excerpts how each mother, whose tragedies are separated by almost fifty-seven years but whose words bear striking similarities, explains her experiences. I maintain that these women are theorists and that their memoirs are sites of Black feminist theorizing. I also maintain that Sharpe offers us a most appropriate frame of the wake—using multiple senses of that word—to understand their theorizing.

The first of Sharpe's (2016) definitions of wake applies to the two mothers' memoirs in how they describe the mourning of their sons immediately after their deaths and how they have continued to honor and "keep watch" over their dead sons' legacies. Mamie Till-Mobley (2003) explains her lingering pain and considers other mothers who mourn the loss of their children:

Hardly a moment goes by when I don't think about Emmett and the promise of a lifetime. There are constant reminders. But, then, a mother really doesn't need reminders. Just as you always remember the agony of childbirth, you can never forget the anguish of losing a child. And I quietly pray for the grieving mothers of other missing or murdered children, hoping they will find the peace and meaning that took me so long to find. We are connected, these other mothers and I. (p. xxi)

Though many years later, Sybrina Fulton's (2017) reflections about what it is like to live in the wake of Trayvon's death are similar to Till-Mobley's. The pain that never goes away, the connection to other mothers—both of these themes continue in Fulton's memoir. She says:

I can never forget. Nobody ever "gets over" the death of a child. All I can do is remember, and in remembering I pay homage to my son in the hope that the truths I tell can help others and that maybe, someday, through God's grace, what happened to my son will never happen to another mother's child. (p. x)

Aligned with another definition of wake that Sharpe (2016) conceptualizes, both mothers also reflect on how they have "stirred" the consciousness of a national public and "steered" international conversations about injustice, Blackness, and white supremacy. While Sybrina Fulton and Mamie Till-Mobley never thought this nation would share in the mourning of their children, the deaths of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin prompted the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement (now the Movement for Black Lives), respectively. These mothers' personal tragedies prompted very public national and international protests for justice. Till-Mobley says:

You see, my story is more than the story of a lynching. It is more than the story of how, with God's guidance, I made a commitment to rip the covers off Mississippi, USA—revealing to the world the horrible face of race hatred. It is more than the story of how I took the privacy of my own grief and turned it into a public issue, a political issue, one which set in motion the dynamic force that led ultimately to a generation of social and legal progress for this country. My story is more than all of that. It is the story of how I was able to pull myself back from the brink of desolation, and turn my life around by digging deep within my soul to pull hope from despair, joy from anguish, forgiveness from anger, love from hate. (p. xxii)

Till-Mobley explains not letting her own grief be the only reaction to her son's lynching. In her memoir, she discusses her intentionality in exposing the barbarity of racism in Mississippi, which she says led to a movement that resulted in racial progress in the United States. Years later, Fulton also reflects on how her son's death propelled a movement against racial injustice. She says:

[Trayvon's] is the story of a life cut tragically short, but it's also the story of a boy who in death became a symbol, a beacon, and a mirror in which a whole nation came to see its reflection. It's the story of a young life that at its seeming end was transfigured into something else.... We tell this story in the hope that it will continue the calling that Trayvon left for us to answer and that it might shine a path for others who have lost, or will lose, children to senseless violence. We tell it in the hope for healing, for bridging the divide that separates America, between races and classes, between citizens and the police. Most of all, we tell it for Trayvon, whose young soul and lively spirit guide us every day in everything we do. (pp. x, xiii)

Fulton takes some solace in knowing that her son's death might be instructive for other families who have to go through something similar and that it might be a catalyst for restoring justice in this country.

A final connotation that Sharpe (2016) proposes for wake that these mothers reflect on is how, in their deepest pain, they found a purposeful "trail" forward in advocacy. Mamie Till-Mobley discusses the larger purpose for her life after Emmett's death:

When I am out and about, people recognize me and they want to talk about him, what his death meant to them, what I meant to them still.... It has taken all these years of quiet reflection to recognize the true meaning of my experience, and Emmett's. It took quite a while for me to accept how his murder connected to so many things that make us what we are today. I didn't see right away, but there was an important mission for me, to shape so many other young minds as a teacher, a messenger, and active church member. God told me, "I took away one child, but I will give you thousands." He has. And I have been grateful for that blessing. (pp. xxi-xxii)

Sybrina Fulton, too, talks through the path she traveled that led to the White House not just on behalf of her son and getting justice for his death but her fight for justice for all children who die as a result of senseless gun violence. She says:

From the minute I learned that he had died, I always felt his presence. We buried his shell, but his spirit—who Trayvon was and who he always will be—remains. I believe this with all my heart. That was the one thought on my mind from the moment I heard the news of his death. It's what I wanted, wished, and prayed over, and it came true. Trayvon Martin was soon everywhere: in demonstrations, marches, and rallies; from Miami, the city where he lived, to Sanford, Florida, the small town near Orlando where he was killed, to the Million Hoodie March in New York City, to hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles and millions of tweets and Facebook posts, to endless prayers from untold supporters, and soon all the way to the White House. Whenever a child walks in darkness, danger, and fear, and wherever people honor my son's life and protest his death, his presence lives. (p. xii)

Prompted by injustice surrounding the murders of their sons, Till and Fulton helped to birth national movements on behalf of Blackness. In their darkest hours, they have refocused our attention on the humanity of their children and called on our collective conscience to repair the systemic flaws designed for the destruction of Black bodies. They have called on all of us to be outraged mothers, whether we have biological children or not. Their pedagogy in the wake—literal

and otherwise—reminds us that Black lives do matter, that we are worthy of love, and that Black women continue to be the most consistent and important players in the fight against the destruction of Black bodies.

I end at this moment expecting more of the same in my newsfeed: more raging alcoholic predators being confirmed to judgeships, this time to appellate courts; more suppression of the Black vote by Georgia elections officials to steal more state offices; more white nationalist violence that destroys more innocent lives; more BBQ Beckys, Permit Pattys, and Pool Patrol Paulas calling police to contain Black bodies; and more loss of Black life to state-sanctioned violence without any accountability. I expect something different, however, from all of us. That is the promise of Bergamo, as I remember, that curriculum theorists conceptualize new ways forward. Let's not continue to depend on Black women to do the heavy lifting alone. How might we change the field so that it is less a reflection of this tragic national moment? How might we resist death—physical and psychic—and hold each other in the wake? And how might we use our privilege to protect our children in/against a genocidal culture?

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Collective Turning and Modern-day Persons Unknown

An Ideological Critique of White Supremacy in Public

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I COME FROM A PLACE WITH A LEGACY of a peculiarly southern style of violence regarding symbolic, psychic, and physical attacks on black people. This violence, not unlike the violence we witness today, was cloaked in an historically constructed veil that lent itself to the perceived invisibility and neutrality of whiteness. Ideologies, and the social practices they inform, that historically and uncritically situated my white identity as “good” (Tanner & Berchini, 2017) structured my parents’ racism, their parents’ racism, and my own as I was socialized through a discourse of difference and superiority in the rural Georgia town in which I was raised. There, I learned that my superiority was a given. Sometimes these lessons were explicit, and other times more covert—through codes of conduct that situated segregation and ambivalence (Lensmire, 2017) as simply “normal.” I was never asked “to get smarter about how white people grow into and embody their whiteness, how [I] came to think and feel as I do” (Lensmire, 2008, p. 300); however, since my parents didn’t have the opportunity to attend college, it was important to them that I did, and it was while studying to become a high school English teacher that my whiteness became visible (Marx, 2006) and worthy of interrogation. In a course dedicated to exploring literature of the Civil Rights Movement, I first began learning about whiteness as a referent to histories of oppression and, through that course, “making better sense of becoming white with black materials” (Lensmire, 2017, p. 21). Even still, I was not called upon, as Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) demands, to explicitly examine my own white identity—how learning to be white (Thandeka, 1999) was embodied, enacted, and entrenched in histories of violence or how my ideological investments in whiteness threatened my pedagogy and practices as a white teacher, researcher, and activist with an antiracist agenda.

Educational privilege did make it possible for me to gain a more intimate knowledge of historic and systemic racism in America, to learn from the experiences of those I had been trained to imagine as other, and for my subsequent anger, frustration, and a desire to complicate my own complicity in structural violence to become possible. As a pre-service teacher, I wondered why I

had not received a more robust education concerning the anti-blackness that has been constructed in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of American slavery. I—much like the white pre-service teachers I currently teach—experienced guilt-feelings upon becoming conscious of my whiteness and the legacies of white supremacy in this country. Through educational experiences, my initial feelings of shame (Thandeka, 1999) were contextualized—my guilt transformed into feelings of betrayal by my white community—and the anger produced in this space was generative as it transformed into responsibility and a pedagogical commitment to recognize the violence of whiteness. Grappling with the absences in my education relative to histories of racial violence, I left the South for the Northeast to pursue a master’s degree in African American Studies. My family did not understand or support this pursuit, and the risks of abandonment from my white community became realized (Thandeka, 1999), but the potentiality of abandonment also fueled an exploration of, in the words of James Baldwin (1984), the price of my ticket for becoming white.

My intimate relationship to whiteness, which was born from historically rooted hatred and fear and was concerned with sustaining power and domination on behalf of a white collective that I am inescapably akin to, became articulable and undeniable and even more complex. Thandeka (1999) teaches that learning to be white requires an injury to white children’s sense of self and requires that the child fall into step with racial ideals modeled and policed by her earliest caretakers. The notion of “caretaker” is a rich analytic lens relative to my experience of becoming white, and the following narrative offers insight into the dynamic space of this becoming:

I was seven, and Ms. Adelaide was in her mid-twenties when my parents hired her to care for my siblings and me. What I knew of her was this: she lived in the rural community next to my hometown; she arrived early every morning and began cleaning, drove me to practices, often made dinner, and went home only to return the next day to begin again. My parents worked late at my step-father’s car dealerships, and she was tasked with raising us in their absence. Ms. Adelaide was an exception: the only black person to sit on our couch, at our dinner table, or whose car I was permitted to ride in. My step-father, who raised me, had made it explicitly clear that I was not allowed to have black friends, and my community had made clear that white people who were in relationship with people of color were deserving of shame, ridicule, and alienation. As caretaker, Ms. Adelaide was, of course, different because she was a black woman; however, the ways she was distinguished from my white caretakers were plenty. The truth of my childhood is that care itself was a wounded landscape littered with violence, enforced silence, and fear-based control at the hands of white men, but I was a child then. Ms. Adelaide emerged as the only caretaker who recognized me as a child and offered room enough for my feelings to find language and for me to be tenderly supported and nurtured.

Despite the prevailing “rules” established by my white community, Ms. Adelaide’s gentleness was the only intervention in the pain of violence that my white caretakers facilitated and denied. Thandeka (1999) explores the injury the white child survives relative to the fear of abandonment by her white community, but my white community’s failure juxtaposed with Ms. Adelaide’s style of caretaking incited *a desire to transgress* the controlling parameters of whiteness (and masculinity) out of a responsibility to justice—and, importantly, to her.

I wonder how I might've made sense of care, of loyalty, of my identity within the space of ambiguous and explicit parameters of what being white requires if I had not had the educational experiences I did. These facts of my learning to be white through an inheritance of violence were never addressed, and what became clear is that I was a product of whiteness that forgave itself without ever getting to know itself. Despite the modern packaging in which white supremacy was delivered to me as a child, I knew that not being allowed to hug Ms. Adelaide in public *felt* confusing. Through a combination of educational exposure, interrogations of the emotionality of whiteness, and critical reflection on my earliest relationships—I experienced the dissonance that has motivated me to become more intimately familiar with histories of racism, my unearned privilege, and, eventually, the violence that whiteness itself embodies. My investment in this work is deeply personal, political, and pedagogical and continues to be dedicated to a desire to acknowledge violence, refuse silence, and cultivate accountability for the care that shaped my earliest experiences. Therefore, this project and the conceptual concerns within take root in the violent past it interrogates *and* grow towards the possibility of complicating whiteness through education. This project remains devoted to *possibilities* for racial justice, critical dialogues, and human relation despite the recognition of ideological forces that have socialized us and continue to work towards violence, distance, and difference on behalf of the whiteness it serves.

Specifically, this project thinks through the inheritance of violence by engaging in an ideological critique of white supremacy that examines sites and practices of 20th century spectacle lynching as a public pedagogy of terror. Establishing this site of terror as a foundation, I move into another site of violence—the contemporary classroom—to draw connections between the ways in which educational policies and practices become complicit in sustaining white supremacist ideologies. By first establishing how ideology is conceptualized within this this undertaking, I point out that spectacle lynching—as public pedagogy—functioned in particular ways to crystallize communal identities rooted in racial dominance and violence. I then move into a critique of contemporary classroom contexts in which histories of racial violence are decontextualized and avoided. Connections between historical and present-day educative experiences and ideology illuminate the ways in which the core curriculum of those past learning and teaching moments—white supremacy—is sustained through contemporary (mis)handling of our nation's racially violent past within present educational settings. These analyses make use of a Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) framework (Crowley & Smith, 2015; Jupp, Berry, & Lensmire, 2016; Lipsitz, 1998) that requires a more complex interrogation of the structure of whiteness, the process of becoming white, and the feelings historically and individually aligned with those who believe themselves to be white.

This work makes the connection between historical and contemporary practices of white supremacist violence clear to illuminate the danger in denying the presence of racial violence in our contemporary society and schools. In this project, the personal and pedagogical intersect within a dynamic space of ideological critique with aims to: thoroughly complicate the nature of whiteness as a violent structure; illuminate the ideological groundwork embedded in the process of becoming white; and deny both whiteness and ideology the invisibility that gives them power. It is a calling out of the *structures* that make white supremacy and the denial of it possible so that educators can more critically attune to the ways in which their own complicity in these structures may continue to evade reckoning with justice long-denied.

Ideology Unpacked

Since CWS demands critical interrogations of psycho-emotional processes of becoming white that account for the historical, political, and personal, ideological critique is useful in examining socio-historical and cultural preconditions of beliefs systems that saturate individual and collective consciousness and indiscernibly inform signifying practices (Althusser, 1971) and understandings of power within lived social relations (Eagleton, 1991). CWS recognizes that racism’s insidious lessons begin in childhood and that these norms become “internalized adult ideologies (Sullivan, 2003, 2006) if they are not questioned, challenged and changed” (Miller, 2015, p. 138). The use of personal narratives within this work are meant to explore and expose my own recognition and experiences of internalized racism and to model how interrogating subjectivities constituted in childhood can be examined through the lens of whiteness and violence. Theoretically, I rely on scholars who have considered material implications of ideology and their relationships to our social, racial, and cultural common-sense understandings of the political world(s) we inhabit. That is to say, I am mostly interested in how ideology informs white individual (and group) understandings of themselves in relationship to systems, structures, and their own beliefs/actions.

Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek provide useful conceptions of ideology for this analysis. Reconsidering Marxist articulations of ideology, Althusser points to two mechanisms through which the state ensures ideological production: the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatus [ISA] (Althusser, 1971). He argues that schools, families, and communities function as ISAs to disseminate beliefs that represent our imagined relationships to real conditions of existence. In doing so, he acknowledges that the many ideologies that work to invisibly guide us do, in fact, have material existences and implications. There are many ideologies to which individuals subscribe and which we must constantly navigate, but in accepting an ideology—by nature unconsciously—an individual’s thoughts and actions become governed by it. Ideology, for Althusser, requires culturally- and context-specific decoding precisely because the material social realities it structures are experienced as spontaneous or natural events, thoughts, attitudes, etc., ones which individuals are endlessly at stake in creating (and being created by) within the larger project of making sense of what and how it means to be themselves (Eagleton, 1991, p. 19). Althusser’s emphasis on the ways in which our conception of self is endlessly bound up in ideological structures that we never name, but that we nonetheless help create and sustain, lends itself to better understanding how collective identities, specifically inculcation into white identities, are constituted.

Contributing to Althusser’s argument regarding material realities of ideology, Slavoj Žižek argues that ideology is not merely “false consciousness” or illusion as presented by Marx, because ideologies are inscribed within individuals’ actions (and, therefore, situations) themselves. Situations, within this discussion, refer to a systematic set of problems and constraints (De Lissovoy, 2007). Žižek understands ruling ideologies to function in an anticipatory manner, meaning, in part, that dominant ideologies have already “accommodated for the fact that we might be skeptical” of them (Eagleton, 1991, p. 40) and, in this anticipation, have reorganized their discourses accordingly so that, even if individuals do not consciously invest in ideas or beliefs, their actions of *disinvestment* still lend themselves to the sustenance and strengthening of dominant ideologies. I take up Žižek’s (2008) consideration of ideology, because like Althusser, rather than arguing that ideology works as an illusion to distort reality, he suggests that it is coterminous with reality itself. Not only arguing that it is real insofar as it governs individuals’ thoughts and actions,

he claims that ideologies are inherent in institutions, modes of life, rituals, and group cohesion rather than simply our perspectives on them. Ideology, in other words, is not what we think of a situation, rather it constitutes the situation itself (Žižek, 2008) and is sustained not because of individuals' conscious beliefs, but rather through actions we (individuals in lived situations) take regardless of beliefs we consciously hold. These actions ultimately work in support of dominant ideologies and this consideration of white supremacy.

Racialized Ideologies: What is Whiteness/White Supremacy?

Ideologies that constitute racially based frameworks for justifying the racial status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 9) can be referred to as “racial ideologies.” Racial ideologies have been (and are) active in the process of normalizing whiteness and constructing worldviews that center white as superior. Evidenced by my own lived experiences, the ways in which superiority is taught as unquestionable, the habits of being that white children are taught to abide by become second-nature, become the natural order of thought, relationality, and sociality—in other words, ideology. In order to interrogate racial ideologies and the sites of learning that taught (and continue to teach) power and violence as a part of a larger project of racial domination, it is necessary to illuminate the ways in which whites have created “dominant images of the world” without acknowledging the ways in which they continue to “construct the world in their image” (Dyer, 1997, p. 6). To that end, this argument calls upon a discourse of white supremacy as ideology instead of white privilege (Lensmire, et al., 2013). Discourses of privilege can have the consequences of “masking history, obfuscating agents of domination, and removing the actions that make it clear who is doing what to whom” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 77) and, through a simplification of essentialized whiteness, can work in opposition to the goals of CWS.

Whiteness itself has been theorized as a socio-historically constructed form of consciousness (McLaren 1997), a set of particular power relations (Mills, 1997), a model of cultural and social behavior by which others are judged (Giroux, 1997), and as legal or cultural property (Harris, 1995). These definitions intersect discursively to situate whiteness as subjective, personal, cultural, historical, and structural. Taken together, whiteness exists as a collection of qualities including cultures, histories, experiences, discourses, feelings, and privileges that are shared, but unacknowledged (McLaren, 1997), and persistently enacted and condoned by whites. Through this understanding, an ideological grammar of domination and subordination emerges—white supremacy.

White supremacy, as a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 9), functions to protect unacknowledged privileges of whites and maintain whiteness as status quo, all the while giving “whites greater protections and material advantages” (Lipsitz, 1998, and McIntosh, 1997, as cited in Allen, 2004, p. 124) and protecting, often violent, territorial practices without acknowledging the existence of a territory (Allen, 2004). If the “racial mind...is ideological” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 30) and ideology is integral to and invisibly rooted in the depths of our consciousness, then as an integral part of white consciousness, white supremacy has enabled whites, regardless of class, to maintain a sense of racial superiority—a superiority that extends beyond individual and social formation and that has long been active in shaping legal, political, and national governmental structures (Bell, 1999) that are veiled by equal opportunity mythologies (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1380), which rationalize racial oppression and create “racial blind spots” (Mills, 1997) within a larger neoliberal, colorblind ideology of merit and ahistorical conceptions

of equality. Regardless of context, white supremacist ideology (and every system founded upon it) has reimagined and reconstructed itself in a mythologized understanding of a post-racial America ever since the end of legalized segregation (Wiegman, 1999).

The work of CWS demands an approach to interrogation that complicates whiteness as a recognition of its inherent power that manifests in its invisibility. To take an anti-racist stance and do the work of interrogating white supremacy, we must begin from the recognition that “all actors in a racialized society are affected materially (receive benefits or disadvantages) and ideologically by the racial structure” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, pp. 15-16) and that our racial structure is one that has always enfranchised whiteness at the expense of non-whites. This work first begins with white individuals making a commitment towards deconstructing how they were—how I, as a white woman, was—hailed into simultaneous practices of brutality and alleged innocence.

Teaching Terror: Lynching as Public Pedagogy

Understanding preconditions of contemporary white supremacy requires an examination of historical legacies that shape the present. Slavery provided foundational logic for American racism and in doing so gave rise to the legitimacy of whiteness as a relevant racial category (Lipsitz, 1998)—one that was constructed as socially, biologically, and legally superior.¹ Bringing ideological critique to bear on historically-informed processes of racial formation is best done by locating specific historical situations. Bearing this in mind, this project turns its attention to 20th century lynching practices as a public pedagogy of white supremacy as an opportunity to explore the dynamic space of complicity.

Spectacle lynching, while not isolated to the South, by the end of the 19th century had become a mostly southern phenomenon “as white southerners sought to restore their dominance in the face of emancipation and the threat of black enfranchisement and social autonomy” (Wood, 2009, p. 3). Lynching, as state-sanctioned terrorism, became “public theater, a participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle...for the benefit of the [white] crowd” (Allen, Als, Lewis, & Litwack, 2000, p. 13). Furthermore, the public exhibition of brutality was ideologically crucial and politically strategic in regard to the maintenance of white supremacy. The most recent data on lynching comes from a 2015 report by the Equal Justice Initiative. Their work documents 3,959 lynchings of black people in southern states between 1877 and 1950, documenting the most victims (578) in my home state of Georgia (p. 16), offering another undeniable material reality of my personal inheritance relative to the social and cultural histories that structured my whiteness.

Spectacle lynching became an event for the entire white family to attend, and it was within this situation that lessons were taught as part of an historical curriculum that reconstituted power into the minds, hands, and hearts of whites. Through a violent, public articulation of white cultural identity and social practice, what became widely understood as an ideological grammar of white supremacy was crystallized. Lynching became so embedded within white cultural practice, in fact, that sometimes thousands of people would congregate to witness the torturous events, take victims’ body parts as souvenirs, and pose in photographs that were taken and made into postcards to be distributed (Allen et al., 2000). Ideology inscribed within the social and cultural activity of lynching, for many whites, constructed basic ways of understanding their place within a racially-structured society as superior (Markovitz, 2004), while also serving as a fear-based control tactic to threaten those whites who entertained thoughts of transgressing the larger white collective. Through a Žižekian lens, lynching as spectacle and cultural practice was the situation into which

white supremacy was itself inscribed. Even if participants in attendance didn't necessarily agree with violent torture, their presence and, more pertinently, their *whiteness* itself structured (and was simultaneously structured by) the ideological beliefs that justified the violence that was enacted.

Lynching, “both as white supremacist practice and a form of social control” is not only impressed upon white consciousness and collective memory as a signifier of sanctioned domination, but also upon the consciousness of African Americans (Leonardo, 2009, p. 31). As signifier, the lynch rope itself symbolized a panoptic power of whiteness (Wiegman, 1999)—a power, in true ideological form, that was always present but not visible. Using Althusser's concept of interpellation—the ways in which individuals are hailed into situations inscribed with beliefs and values only to come to understand those values as their own—is useful when considering how lynching as “cultural pedagogy” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) normalized systemic racism and violence against black people in the form of ideology. The event of a lynching “interpellated *every* human individual into a racial order and formation...that directly translated to self-recognition” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 37) within the larger social formation. Thus, the power of whiteness depended on the existence and simultaneous interpellation of the racial other. For members of the violent white majority, the act of witnessing a lynching “lent authority of both divine truth and irrefutable proof to white supremacist ideology and helped produce a sense of superiority and solidarity among otherwise different white southerners” (Wood, 2009, p. 4). In addition to superiority and solidarity, individuals were called forth and offered models of the selves they ought to become (or else) in counter-distinction to those they were meant to recognize as the inferior other.

Considered as a teaching act, spectacle lynching interpellated white children whose conception of self was, from a young age, forever linked to the moment they were hailed into belonging to the powerful white majority, which meant, for them, the right to publicly commit acts of terror against black people as well as the potential threats resulting from *not* aligning with the violent white majority. Understanding complicity as “the state of being involved in an event performed by someone else, but for which we are somehow responsible” (Rushdy, 2012, p. 17), this initiation into the signified embodiment of whiteness itself, if acknowledged as such, marks an historical responsibility of acknowledgment and complicity. Within this historical situation, lynching as pedagogy inscribed whiteness with certain codes of conduct that became crystallized within the white imaginary that “depended on the [domination of the] racial other for its own identity” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 75). As public pedagogy, community-sanctioned white on black violence articulated a fundamental grammar of white supremacy to members of the white collective who were active participants, complicit witnesses, and/or beneficiaries of the property of whiteness (Harris, 1995). Effectively, individuals who were recruited into violence as racialized subjects meant the cohesion of a sense of self (Leonardo, 2009) as well as sense of ideological cohesion from within the white collective. As a collective act, spectacle lynching created a situation for white attendants, both young and old, to be called forth into a larger structural practice of public terror that was normalized and accepted as the unquestioned way of the world, all of whom were complicit in solidifying terror into ideology inherent in political structures of governance, conceptions of racial superiority, and white supremacy as the right and true way of things.

Whitewashed Contemporary Teaching Contexts

Despite being outfitted for a more modern era, I contend that fundamental components of white supremacist ideology, rooted in the legacy of lynching, are inherent—if not in precise form, then certainly in structural function—in contemporary education practices. In fact, though they may no longer take place in a public lawn, the manifestations of white supremacist ideology that protect unacknowledged privileges of whites at the expense of people of color, maintain whiteness as superior and status quo, and offer whites more material advantages than non-whites are foundational to public education.

In an essay on ideology and race relations, Zeus Leonardo (2009) reminds his readers that “racist ideologies are driven by fear of, misinformation about, and distance from the other” (p. 33), and CWS scholars, inspired by black political thought (Ellison, 1986), have pointed out how white fear and white identity formation relies on threatening stereotypes of imagined racial “others” (Lensmire, 2017), which, from a critical education perspective, signals not only concern, but also the potential for education to intervene in crucially important ways. However, national education policies, practices, and official curricula, in habitual practices of avoidance (Apple, 2004), rarely offer instances for critical dialogue that problematizes “one-dimensional renderings of historical people, groups, or events” (Epstein, 2009, and Wineburg, 2000, as cited in King & Womac, 2014, p. 40). Thus, pedagogy regarding racial violence and racism that fails to interrogate stereotypes and how they contribute to sustaining white supremacy contributes to sustaining that fear, misinformation, and distance. This becomes increasingly problematic when considering the ways in which schools contribute to the construction of students’ world-views and identities in relation to histories of disenfranchisement and racial violence in both curriculum and practice.

This is true of my past educational experiences. While I have no recollection of studying texts authored by people of color in primary or secondary schooling, or learning about the complex history of white violence and black resistance, I *can* recall the enactment of violent ideology and the embodiment of ideologically-rooted white innocence on my elementary school playground:

Our playground abutted a cow pasture, and after extended rainfall, manure would trickle, creek-like, into the boundaries of our playing field. Velcro shoes tracked classroom floors with the smell of manure and mud—the common scent rendered our differences from the animals difficult to discern. My white playmates and I would clasp hands, skip with synchronicity in a circle, and sing: *Fight, fight, n- and a white. White don’t win, we all jump in.* Laughter would rise from our eight-year-old animal tongues, and we’d collapse together. Fair skin in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, our filthy becomings, racial violence as child’s play. Today, I hear this song’s melody echoing through the time, and I envision eight-year-olds joining hands with past perpetrators and falling into a historical harmony of innocence imagined. Those shit-stained footprints tracking the classroom floor, footsteps meant to be followed, guiding us carefully into a community of violence.

What this vignette shows is that the work of ideologically-condoned practices in schools is not limited to formal content and that pedagogical moments can also stem from the *absence* of intervention. Acknowledging the ways in which social practices become enmeshed and contribute to institutionalizing racist ideologies, this memory illustrates my experience as a child, a student, learning that white violence was acceptable and that terror itself was literal child’s play.

More formal structures, curricula, and practices also reflect the institutionalized nature of white supremacist ideology within schools. Critical Race Theories emerging from legal scholarship, as well as critical analysis of standards and assessment, offer insight into the ways in which racially inequitable conditions are maintained and legitimized through the school system as Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971).

For instance, policy decisions that disadvantage black students contribute to sustaining a sense of racial superiority in whites (Bell, 1999). Within the realm of education policy, this claim is illuminated through what David Gillborn (2005) names a “tacit intentionality” inherent in the ways in which education policy is conceived of and constructed. Gillborn notes that policy-making aligns with white supremacy precisely because policy-makers don’t set out with the intentional goals of routinely privileging white students, but the implications of policy most often do. In conversation with Bell, the material implications of this tacit intentionality that structures education policy secures in students and teachers who live within these material realities a conception that differences in what are systemically recognized as achievement between white and black students are natural and, therefore, justified.

In addition to the ways in which policy supports white students’ sense of racial superiority, accountability-based education reform and standards function in our contemporary education system to persistently locate, and often publicly announce, students of color at the bottom of achievement scales while also labeling schools whose populations are predominantly non-white as “failing.” Neoliberalism, effectively infused in policy, government, common-sense, and, of course, public education, has rendered these actions nearly unrecognizable by normalizing such practices in the contemporary education climate. More particular implications are, on the one hand, the acceptance of meritocracy—those who achieve highest are most ambitious and, therefore, most-deserving (Apple, 2004; MacLeod, 1995)—which within such a racially-biased political system supports mythologies of blacks as inferior (Crenshaw, 1988) and, on the other hand, legitimizes white supremacist practices of ignoring the ways in which standards persistently disenfranchise students of color. Additionally, assessment practices that ignore routine and systemic socio-historical disenfranchisement of communities of color reaffirm whites’ sense of superiority. The implications of such practices, argues Sleeter (2008), build allegiances among students to fall in line with the existing social order—in this case a racialized social order that privileges whiteness. Beyond assessment, standards reflect official knowledge, or what knowledge states’ standards have deemed legitimate and worthy of teaching. Recognizing the construction of standards as both political and ideological, Vasquez Heilig, Brown, and Brown (2012) have shown how, through an “illusion of inclusion,” the official knowledge of race, racism, and communities of color mandated by standards actually serves to marginalize these knowledges through oversimplification and decontextualized historical narratives. Through an Althusserian analysis, the public and political dictate lived experiences of students and teachers within schools and work to reproduce “submission to the rules of the established order...which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology” (Althusser, 1971 p. 135). Teachers and students are, of course, not without agency but are interpellated into a larger political system undergirded by white supremacist ideologies and rearticulated racist ideologies. Meanwhile, policy and reform do little to confront and uproot entrenched and systemic racism in American schools (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012) despite a language of progress or achievement.

Turning now to a more focused consideration of how curriculum contributes to the project of sustaining white supremacist ideologies, I will focus on how the lessons taught at historical sites of lynching continue to inform contemporary encounters with racial violence—specifically

lynching—from the purview of contemporary classrooms. Critical historians and social studies educators have critiqued approaches to history education for avoiding controversy, representing the past as one-dimensional or “objective, neutral, and authorless” (Segall, 1999, p. 367), rather than as constructions that are partial, political, and subjective (Brown & Brown, 2010; Epstein, 2009; Segall, 1999, 2014). The flattening of historical complexity and critical engagement is especially clear in historical lessons about race in America.

Much of the research on racial knowledge in social education points to the ways in which curriculum knowledge in textbooks is limited in regard to representations of race relations (Brown, 2013; Brown & Brown, 2015) and presents the past as objective facts. Within the popular, post-racial narrative, presenting race or racism as an issue of the past contributes to a denial of privileges granted to whites and resistance to acknowledging that race matters. It is little surprise, then, that in this contemporary climate representations of racial violence in curriculum fail to reflect historical complexities or invite students into dialogue that connects contemporary racial violence with historical conditions that systematically support white supremacist ideology. Specifically, discussions of lynching that support narratives of racism as an historical relic or of lynching as isolated acts of “bad men doing bad things” (Brown & Brown, 2010, p. 60) alongside avoidances or attempts to soften the teaching of “difficult histories” (Britzman, 2000) position white students to effectively distance themselves from the white perpetrators captured in lynching photographs and, thus, from a deeper engagement with the preconditions of contemporary white supremacy.

Generally, when faced with images of lynching, students place themselves at “comfortable distance” (Simon, 2014, p. 3) from the sites of injustice. The dangerous implications of avoidance, which manifest in teaching flattened and decontextualized histories of lynching, are that such practices facilitate seeing racial violence in a way that aids in viewing from a distance. Both the comfort and distance invite a disengagement that fails to recognize historical and contemporary ideological implications or summon a sense of responsibility for contemporary white witnesses. Addressing this dangerous comfort, Dora Apel (2003) suggests that Americans cannot afford to align innocence with these photos, because by refusing to see responsible actors within them, we accept historical understandings that whitewash the crimes of white supremacy. Within this whitewashed understanding, the “comfortable distance” becomes a dangerous comfort that allows for white witnesses to imagine their own innocence when bearing witness to a lynching photograph. This innocence is strengthened by the ways in which history is taught as authorless and decontextualized; whiteness itself as a violent historical structure isn’t complicated, complexified, or examined through lenses of complicity. This, along with the functions of policy, standards, curriculum, and practice culminate in what I will call a “collective turning away.” This practice of turning away from our past, rather than being called forth to witness or examine personal inheritance, is precisely the contemporary condition that sustains the historical form and function of white supremacy.

Ideologies are not fabricated justifications but are widely acknowledged chains of meaning or narratives that we draw from to explain our social existence (Lewis, 2001). By turning away from histories of racial violence, insofar as the turning justifies the terror, we are at once pivoting away from *and* sustaining racist ideologies. What would it mean for a white viewer to look at the photographs of violent, racially-motivated murders and seek familiarity with a member of the murderous crowd? What impact might it have on our collective memory of racial violence and our current understandings of ourselves as racialized beings if we were required to confront ourselves relative to our historical positionalities? Our old stories of white terrorism, and the stories we (fail to) tell about that shameful past today, function to detach socially and institutionally-condoned,

racially-motivated violence from our American identity by conditioning us to habitually turn away. The refusal of our national identity and systemic denial of white supremacy has a long legacy of allowing white murderers to remain innocent as the brutality against black bodies was committed “at the hands of persons unknown.” By not seeing race or finding relation in lynching photographs, when white viewers fail to recognize perpetrators as historical kin, when curricula continuously build upon conceptions of racism and racial violence as isolated events or things of the past, we function within a hauntingly similar, ideologically-situated innocence. Essentially, the failure of today’s witnesses to acknowledge these violent acts and their modern-day contingencies allows for ideological rationalizations of white supremacy to continue to be perpetrated “at the hands of persons unknown.” This innocence, and violence, is carried forward by our institutionally-condoned, collective turning away from images of historical violence.

To more clearly frame processes of collectively turning away as a defining mechanism that sustains white supremacist ideology today, I’ll return to Žižek’s conception of ideology. Understanding that ideology is coextensive with our lived realities, inherent in institutions, behaviors, rituals, and group cohesion rather than simply in our perspectives on them, is not found in what *we think* of a situation but rather is inscribed in the situation itself and, most importantly, in our actions, I will illustrate, through a narrative inspired by a past teaching experience, how the action of “turning away” supports and perpetuates white supremacist ideology.

The Persistence of White Violence

To illuminate how contemporary failures to critically engage with histories of racial violence that are manifest in the action of turning away sustain white supremacist ideology, I’ll offer an example informed by an early experience of teaching American Literature in a mostly white, wealthy, and liberal community in Massachusetts. Contrary to my upbringing in the overtly racist communities I have described, the majority of my students had been trained to understand themselves as “progressive” or “liberal” relative to race and sexuality, expressly in their eagerness to admit that racism was “bad” and that they were not racist. It was during this time that I recognized that the logic of whiteness, regardless of where we fall on the ideological spectrum (from explicit violence to “knowing better”), supports an uncritical relationship to historical inheritances of white supremacist ideology. These connections emerged in a lesson dedicated to exploring histories of racial violence, spectacle lynching, and the history of violent discourses in preparation for reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

In a high school English classroom, without having been introduced to a critical history of lynching practices in the U.S., students were asked to view a photocopy from a history textbook with a photograph of a man named Rubin Stacy who was murdered July 19, 1935 (Allen et al., 2000), by a white mob. In the photo, Mr. Stacy, still in his overalls, has been lynched by the white mob surrounding him. His body hangs suspended from an Oak branch and is surrounded by onlookers—all white. Four of the attendants are young girls under the age of 13. A small blonde-headed girl is smiling and has her arms crossed at the wrists mirroring Mr. Stacy’s arms, which are crossed and bound at his dangling wrists.

Upon seeing this image, white students, not much older than the white children in the photograph, seem to immediately recognize objective brutality and express an

acknowledgment that such brutal and ceremonious murder is grotesque. They openly acknowledge that racism and racial violence are wrong. Some students describe the act as inhumane, some sit quietly covering their mouths in horror or express audible disgust at the brutality in the photograph. The most common response to this decontextualized image, however, is that my students turn their heads to avoid gazing upon the traumatic image.

While I am sensitive to the triggering impact of such images of violence, what strikes me is my students' self-identification as "not racist," as beyond the violent actions of white perpetrators in the photograph. Unlike my students, I wasn't taught to think racism was "bad," but like them, I *was* taught to not think myself a "racist." Our common lesson, despite the different ideological processes of becoming white, was that neither I nor they were required to consider how our whiteness aligns us with the mob rather than with the victim. The lack of contemporary accountability or recognition of complicity has, through adherence to color-blind ideologies, educational practices, and myths of racial equality, been rendered beyond the scope of the lessons we teach. Collectively, we seem to have acknowledged that racism is, in fact, "wrong" and that we, as a nation, have overcome it (Smith & Brown, 2014). We can determine, by looking upon the photograph of smiling women and children standing before the brutalized body of Mr. Stacy, that lynching is unacceptable and *unhuman*. Collectively, our educational institutions, through presenting students with uncritical histories or by excluding these artifacts of American history in our curricula, perform a symbolic and institutionally-condoned turning away. Even if contemporary viewers sustain a visual engagement and critically examine the photo, we often acknowledge, collectively, how awful the situation was.

We say to ourselves and our classmates, "How could *they* do such a thing?" We recognize the photograph as a part of the past and the perpetrators as anonymous and historically distant men engaged in a singular, not a systemic, act. We "know" that racism doesn't exist, because we had a black President, and we have been taught, through narratives of national progress, that we have *come a long way*. It is precisely, however, in these articulations of disgust and utterances of "look at those violent others perpetrating such unspeakable acts," that we return to the basic imaginative investments and values organized at the very site of the event framed within the photograph. The ideological grammar is sustained because we fail to interrogate the *how* and *why* within an historical, political, and systemic context that might offer a space for meaningful, difficult, yet critical relation. In this contemporary practice of looking away (both literally, structurally, and through historical distancing), we sustain white supremacist ideologies by literally failing to ask how white supremacy itself informed that historical act. Despite the fact that our belief about the situation is that "it is wrong," our action of turning away, of refusing to critically ask questions of historical racial kinship and contemporary responsibility, recreates conditions for continued white supremacy.

To further illuminate modern material implications of the ideology at work, I will follow these utterances and actions as a process of understanding how ideology translates outside of the classroom within the white imaginary. "This is not *us*," my students said, as for the sake of progress we often teach our students and children to say. Yet when we return home, we turn on our nightly news and hear that Trayvon Martin was murdered or gaze upon the contemporary spectacle of Eric Garner gasping for breath as he is strangled to death. We hear media correspondents arguing over what is and is not racial violence as we watch a recurring video clip of Tamir Rice being shot down in a playground by the very people who are meant to protect him; in a continued act of spectacle, we see media clips of Diamond Reynold's toddler bearing witness to the brutal murder of Philando

Castille in the passenger seat, and of course, unfortunately, the list goes on. The historically-conditioned practice of “turning away” as distance and denial is manifest in each of these illustrations insofar as the articulation of “this is not us” translates to “this is not racism” without ever interrogating who precisely the “us” we speak of signifies. Our collective memory of ourselves as a nation leaves a blind spot where Emmett Till once lay bludgeoned, shot, and drowned. We turn away and don’t read non-indictments as modern day “persons unknown,” because we have always, always turned away; and the privilege of whiteness, the function of white supremacy as ideology, invites such a disavowal of our own complicity. Our whiteness continues to forgive itself, invite a sense of historically-rooted innocence, without ever intimately getting to know itself. It is precisely in the “compassionate” act of being unable to gaze upon such torture, the turning away, that white supremacy anticipates itself and, through our actions, is sustained.

I suggest that school sanctioned turning away is one example of one institution that, in the very turning and silencing that fails to acknowledge histories of racial violence, perpetuates and sustains contemporary white supremacist ideologies. “Lynching photographs,” writes Shawn Michelle Smith (2007), “do not deliver testimony so much as they call us to it” (p. 41), and if through historical practices of not answering the calls white Americans fail to confront the racially-motivated, systemic, and institutional components of how we ourselves, how *whiteness* itself, is inherent within these situations, then we continue to construct selves that are bound up in ideologies that we never call by name but persistently, through our actions, recreate—ideologies that, as both Althusser and Žižek agree, have material existences. In our contemporary, racial climate, these material existences systemically threaten the very lives of people of color under a newly imagined, side-stepping language of innocence and under a fragile conception of justice that still has blood at its roots.

Notes

1. This simplified description, of course, does not explore complex history, which in fact deemed blacks property and, therefore, not human, but this fact deserves to be acknowledged.

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Passages and Pivot Points

Experience and Education as Rites of Passage

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AS A CURRICULUM THEORIST working in higher education for almost a decade, I regularly see the transformative capacity of educational experience. The human learning process involves a continuous flux from the familiar to the unknown—a transition that relies on inquiry, reflection, and application. This process is integral to the educational journey and deserves more attention from theorists and practitioners. Unpacking the learnings that surface from an educational experience requires a deliberate reflection process. When theorists and practitioners recognize the transformational potential embedded within reflection, a shift of theory and pedagogy can take place. This shift of pedagogy becomes more significant when experience is situated within the framework of a rite of passage. In this paper, I will compose a functional overview of the rite of passage model, compare John Dewey’s educational philosophy with the rite of passage framework, and explore the implications of viewing educational experience as a rite of passage.

Rite of Passage Overview

The rite of passage model contributes to the explication of experience and its integral role in learning. French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep extensively studied rites of passage around the turn of the 20th century. He defines the rite of passage as “a three-stage system of social transformation mediating role changes in a community” (Bell, 2003, p. 41). According to Andrews (1999), a rite of passage is a “universal phenomenon” composed of three phases: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*. The first phase, *separation*, is one in which individuals are removed from the ordinary/established structure of everyday life. The *transition* or *liminal phase* (the second phase) occurs when individuals go through an “intense experience with different norms and characteristics from those accompanying the normal patterns of social organization” (p. 35). The third phase is the *incorporation* or *reintegration* phase in which individuals re-enter the social order in a “different place, status, or state of being” (p. 35). According to Andrews (1999), this is a flexible model, and “the rite of passage engenders a broad application and has become...‘an anthropological commonplace’” (p. 35). Arnold van

Genep (1909/1960) is credited with coining the term “rite of passage” and defined it as “a rite which accompanies any change in social state, age, place, or life cycle stage, such as birth, puberty, marriage or death” (Bell, 2003, p. 41). A rite of passage is a “ritual, event, or experience that marks or constitutes a major milestone or change in a person’s life” (rite of passage, 2019). The rite of passage signifies a significant shift in one’s life journey. Andrews (1999) adds that coming-of-age rites are one “subset of a rite of passage” (p. 41).

The rite of passage is a coming-of-age experience situated in the areas of building and transforming character. Ecologist Carolyn Servid (as quoted in Lopez & Gwartney, 2006) states that, “The word passage evokes images of hallways, secret tunnels, openings between here and there; a sense of moving through, going between, crossing over” (p. 262). Servid’s notion of “crossing over” connects well to the rite of passage and deserves further investigation. As Servid points out, “Passages allow movement. In the landscape they provide routes to get from one open area to another” (as quoted in Lopez & Gwartney, 2006, p. 262). Similarly, educational experiences facilitate a crossing over, a transition into new realms of knowledge and understanding.

In the educational realm, the rite of passage represents the hallway used to transition from one frame of reference to another. The rite of passage provides the initiate with “a renewed insight and a clearer sense of purpose” (Binkley, Decarbo, & Mullen-Kreamer, 2002, n.p.). Turner (1985) identifies the significant role that experience plays within a rite of passage. He states that a rite of passage signifies “a true psychological passage from one way of seeing and understanding to another” (p. 205). This change in understanding is attributed to the union of old ideas with new ideas, which are formulated throughout the liminal stage of the process. The merging of new and old ideas contributes to the formation of a more holistic perspective and ultimately a more balanced worldview.

Ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and graduations typically recognize the completion of a rite of passage. These celebrated events are what most people identify as rites of passage. However, van Genep (1909/1960) believes that there are more rites of passage than typically recognized. He says a person cannot “pass from one [dramatically different life stage] to another without going through an intermediate stage” (p. 1). This suggests that virtually all significant life changes require a rite of passage. Van Genep posits that the life of an individual in virtually any society is composed of several passages from “one age to another and from one occupation to another” (pp. 2-3). The experience of undergoing a rite of passage has many connections to the theory of educational experience outlined by John Dewey. Particularly relevant are Dewey’s theories of experience, inquiry, and reflection.

Dewey’s Perspective on Experience and Reflection

Inquiry plays an important role in the educational process and is launched by encountering uncertainty. Dewey (1938b) defines inquiry as the “directed or controlled transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified one” (p. 117). He believes that the point of departure for initiating the inquiry process is “perplexity, confusion, or doubt” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 12). The uncertainty associated with an indeterminate situation launches thinking and inquiry. Dewey (1910/2005) further articulates this by stating that,

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. As long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to a pause. In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another. (1910/2005, p. 10)

Metaphorically, climbing a tree is what we as curriculum theorists need to do when faced with a practical or theoretical educational “forked road situation.” Ascending a tree allows the climber to gain a new vantage point; similarly, we can seek a new vantage point to enable us to see disciplinary interconnections and engage in pluralistic forms of inquiry and ways of knowing. A secondary benefit of this new perspective is that it facilitates reflective thinking.

According to Dewey, inquiry involves a process of reflective thinking that leads to an enhancement of one’s ability to make decisions. According to Rodgers (2002), Dewey maintains that:

Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual and, ultimately, society. (p. 845)

Dewey believes that reflection creates the possibility of more integrated, thoughtful, and conscientious judgment. However, he recognizes that this advanced judgment does not come easily for the learner; it involves unrest, and it is “always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 13). Enduring the cognitive dissonance (or mental unrest and disturbance) associated with not knowing is a key component to advancing reflection. Reflective thinking can be challenging as it requires “judgment [to be] suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful” (Dewey, 1910/2005, p. 13). Although painful, suspending judgment for further inquiry is at the crux of reflective thinking and increasing intelligence, the latter being what philosopher Michael Eldridge (1998) insists was Dewey’s lifelong goal. Eldridge says that Dewey understood intelligence “to be deliberately transforming” (p. 13). Dewey (1938b) posits that “judgment is the settled outcome of inquiry” (p. 120). When a person settles their inquiry, they are able to transfer their increased judgment aptitude to future situations.

Dewey (1938b) examines the necessity of inquiry. He claims that inquiry is invariably the movement towards intellectual freedom, which is a function of the holistic nature of knowledge. Therefore, according to Dewey, converting an indeterminate situation to a determinate situation is a cornerstone to educational experience. Furthermore, Dewey defines education as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases [one’s] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1916, p. 74). Dewey (1902) argues that an individual’s direct experience grounds conceptual knowledge. He states that, “the connecting bonds of activity...hold together the variety of the student’s

personal experiences” (Dewey, 1902, p. 6). Educational experiences, according to Dewey (1938a, p. 35), develop continuity, meaning that all experiences are carried forward and influence future experiences.

Connecting van Gennep’s Rite of Passage with Dewey’s Conceptualization of Experience

Dewey (2008) states that education’s aim is “not preparation for living, but for noble living” (p. 287). Dewey’s notion of learning through experience complements and extends van Gennep’s notion of a rite of passage. It is helpful to explore and parallel the rite of passage concept with Dewey’s inquiry model because observing these connections illustrates the importance of learning through experience. Dewey’s (1916) argument that education is life is similar to the ideas embedded in the rite of passage. For example, in the inquiry process, new connections force the learner to see the world from a new perspective. Similarly, a rite of passage enables the initiate to see the world from a new viewpoint (Ivory, 2003). Dykhuizen (1973) explains that Dewey’s conceptualization of inquiry occurs when a person starts to pass through, moving from an uncertain situation into a condition of settled adjustment. This process of passing through an uncertain situation into a condition of settled adjustment is similar to the rite of passage. As in Dewey’s conception of inquiry, a rite of passage also concludes in a place of settled adjustment.

Dewey asserts that, in order to find truth, it is essential to return to primary experience for its final adjudication (Garrison, 1997). A portion of Dewey’s work deals with experience and its morphology in relation to education and curriculum (Dewey, 1902, 1938a). From the standpoint of a rite of passage, one of the most notable is Dewey’s experiential learning cycle. In the learning cycle, Dewey (1938a) posits that the

formation of purposes is a rather complex, intellectual operation. It involves: [an indeterminate situation followed by] (1) observation of surrounding conditions (2) knowledge obtained partly by recollection, and (3) judgment, which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. (p. 69)

Dewey’s theory of experience is often simplified to be: action, reflection, and application (Hensley, 2011). This learning cycle is developed from Dewey’s theory of inquiry and serves as a synopsis of his educational philosophy. As mentioned before, Dewey recognizes that the optimal conclusion of a learning cycle is an increase in one’s judgment (Dewey, 1998, p. 174). Judgment can be characterized by the development of a schema that is capable of responding to a diversity of situations (Dewey, 1998).

In Dewey’s theory of inquiry, converting an indeterminate situation into one that is determinate is vital. He states that the “chief function of philosophy is not to find out what difference ready-made formulae make...but to arrive at and to clarify their meaning as programs of behavior for modifying the existent world” (Dewey, 1908, p. 90). In Dewey’s theory, students conceptualize their reflections and subsequently incorporate them into their programs of behavior (Miettinen, 2000). Ideally, a student generates a more compatible schema for solving problems as a result of inquiry. Reflection within the inquiry process can lead to an enhancement and grounding of the student’s problem-solving abilities (Dewey, 1910/2005). Dewey (1933) argues that “one can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and to

undergo the trouble of searching” (p. 16). Thus, Dewey held that inquiry played a significant role in experiential transformation. Accordingly, Dewey suggested that before “an immediate experience [has] any cognitive value, it must play a role within inquiry” (Dykhuizen, 1973, p. 135). Exploring the fundamentals of Dewey’s theory of experience allows one to better understand the rite of passage.

Separation Phase of the Rite of Passage

A closer examination of the three stages of a rite of passage helps to compare Dewey’s theory of experience and van Gennep’s concept of a rite of passage. As previously mentioned, the initial phase of a rite of passage is known as *separation*. This phase is represented by taking a leave from the community and signifies the end of the initiate’s former role. The separation creates cognitive dissonance and disequilibrium. In this first phase, the initiates are in the process of situating themselves for the ambiguities of the upcoming transition. The novelty of the separation requires the initiate to be a beginner, which serves as a virtual renewal of one’s life position. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1993) said, “Resolve to be always beginning—to be a beginner” (p. 25). However, being a beginner is risky and generates disequilibrium. A majority of this disequilibrium is instigated by an incongruity that forces the student to begin building a bridge from the unknown to the well-known. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and, as Maxine Greene (2001) described, there is an “uncoupling” from what was once “known” (p. 67). In a rite of passage, as in education, the separation phase is characterized by the detachment from the old.

The separation phase requires uncertainty represented by an indeterminate situation. As Dewey suggests, the separation is at the “center of the redirection and reconstruction of action” (Dewey as quoted in Garrison, 1997, p. 95). For Dewey, uncertainty initiates the separation phase by converting an indeterminate situation into one that is determinate (Dewey, 1933). The adjustment of one’s thinking and rhythms demands energy and new perspectives (Dewey, 1933).

Separation is the first of several pieces that need to be in place for a complete inquiry cycle to occur. Connecting to the notion of the initial steps of a rite of passage, Greene (2001) suggests that people need to be equipped to “crack the codes, to enter in, to take the risks to uncouple—if only for a while—from ordinary, commonsensible reality” (p. 205). At the outset of inquiry there needs to be disequilibrium. Similarly, uncertainty makes up the very essence of liminality, the second phase of the rite of passage.

Transition Phase of the Rite of Passage

The transition phase of the rite of passage is an intense experience for the initiate, who is between the familiar and the unknown. This phase often conjures feelings of great uncertainty. Shaw (1994) points out that “The ritual passenger is neither here nor there, he is ambiguous” (pp. 17-18). This transition experience is simultaneously a departure from a previous way of living and an entry into a new phase of life. French philosopher and theorist Michel Serres (2000) refers to this transition as a process of moving to the other side. It is a blank middle, which has no direction, and therefore, it is simultaneously composed of all directions.

The transition phase is also called the “liminal” phase. The word liminal means “threshold” in Latin, which is appropriate as, during this phase, the initiate is at the threshold of developing a new homeostasis. Turner (1985) referred to this transitional space as the *liminal habitat, a main place for transformation to take occur*.

Reynolds (2003) states that the transitional phase is similar to being lost, but he believes that “being lost is not a bad place to be” (p. 55). Being lost can embolden our senses and push us to formulate new ways of knowing. Bolen (as quoted in Reynolds, 2003) adds that, when one is “in a liminal place and in between in some major way” (p. 55), one is dealing with the essential life questions.

Andrews (1999) explains that there are three components embedded in a transitional experience—the development of: a *sense of self*, a *sense of community*, and a *sense of place*. Engendered by these components, the liminal process forces learners to reconstruct their role within society. This reconstruction is the transforming energy within a rite of passage. This process of transformation begins at the personal level. The idea of developing a sense of self, a sense of community, and a sense of place is an excellent point of departure for weaving the rite of passage framework together with that of the educational process.

Greene (2001) believes that powerful educational experiences can open up a petrified world, provide new perspectives on the ordinary, and allow individuals to “pose a range of questions that never occurred to them before” (p. 22). This intellectual advancement is transformational. The *educational rite of passage* provides a lens with which to explore the diverse landscapes of educational experience and unites previously fragmented ways of thinking. The educational rite of passage lens offers a transformative perspective in educational research and encourages educators and educational philosophers to embrace self-reflection and critical consideration, which are key players in the educational rite of passage. Self-reflection leads to a more accurate appraisal of one’s sense of self, resulting in the “potentiality of opening multiple worlds” (Greene, 2001, p. 22). Developing a more complete sense of self enables access to multiple worlds because one becomes more grounded and attenuated to what is possible. Attenuated to the nuances of self, one is better positioned to participate in the development of community.

Exploring the *sense of community*, Turner (as quoted in Andrews, 1999) suggests that a rite of passage involves a brief release from the daily exposure connected to “privileges and obligations [and the] many degrees of superordination and subordination” that make up the ordinary social structure (p. 37). Social structure is reconceptualized during a shared liminal experience. The “shared ordeal and common release...lead to a strong sense of connection between participants” (Andrews, 1999, p. 37). When a group is working together, they may experience what Dewey refers to as a democratic learning environment in which all participants’ voices are heard and the group can affect change. For Dewey, the notion of a democratic learning environment is a central theme throughout his work. Accordingly, Dewey urges educators to move away from a dictator-type educational approach and to incorporate a more democratic approach.

Students undergoing a rite of passage become more familiar with their surroundings. This is referred to as the development of a *sense of place* (Andrews, 1999). The state of liminality in a rite of passage removes the “historically constructed, socially maintained, and individuality applied” symbols and allows the student a more organic “earth interaction” (Geertz as quoted in Andrews, 1999, p. 39). A sense of place describes one’s connection to the surrounding ecological and social communities and requires experiential and holistic ways of knowing. A person

strongly connected to the surroundings is more likely to protect it. In the context of a rite of passage, a sense of place is a form of the settled adjustment that comes from being detached from a previous way of knowing while integrating a new location into one's worldview (Hensley, 2011).

Incorporation

The last stage of a rite of passage, *incorporation*, is the stage in which the initiate harvests the fruit of inquiry by setting the new learning into motion. In William James' (1998) words, the incorporation stage involves reestablishing "congruence between the world and the mind" (p. 207). At this stage, students who are going through an educational rite of passage start to integrate their new knowledge into their worldview and begin adjusting their schemata for inquiry. James (1998) posits that knowledge can take a while to permeate our worldview and claims that "new truths are resultants of new experiences and of old truths combined and mutually modifying one another" (p. 83). Developing new skills to undergo inquiry is a heuristic that enables life-long learning. Accordingly, the inquiry skills gained in the rite of passage are skills that the initiate will utilize in day-to-day life because they are incorporated into one's way of being.

For Dewey, reflective judgment and increased interest are crucial outcomes for effective education. Effective educational experiences involve well-guided redirection. An effective outcome of reflection ultimately leads to the conversion of "thoughtless struggle into reflective judgment" (Dewey, 1938b, p. 53). The stabilization following the transition involves the confluence of the old with the new. The transformed self is then ready to begin the process of transforming the world. Greene (2001) suggests that, at this point, "the work may infuse our consciousness, bring new and unexpected patterns [and]...new vantage points" (p. 11). This vision requires that new vantage points are integrated into the previous social structure of the student/initiate.

Ronald Grimes (as quoted in Ivory, 2003) states that, when effective rites of passage are enacted, "they carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one. To enact any kind of rite is to perform, but to enact a rite of passage is also to transform" (p. 345). Dewey (1899, 1902, 1931, 1938a) maintains that education equips students with tools that transform their thinking. In the context of a rite of passage, this thinking involves a metamorphosis in which one's thinking process "is never again the same" (Grimes as quoted in Ivory, 2003, p. 345).

Dewey (1998) suggests that the "end of inquiry is institution of a unified resolved situation" (p. 180). This allows one to secure the unity of the whole. In Dewey's terms, the incorporation stage is the platform on which fragmented ideas become united. Thus, incorporation can prepare a student for more learning. Dewey (1916) uses the word "plasticity" and states that it is essentially "the ability to learn from experience; the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with difficulties of a later situation" (p. 53). A deeper look at experience and its value in a rite of passage helps educators to enhance their epistemological awareness. Turner (1985) states that experience plays a critical role in a rite of passage:

“[E]xperience” equals our “rite de passage.” But this remark is no metaphor; it describes a true psychological passage from one way of seeing and understanding to another, a passage not vouchsafed to those who hold hard to the values, meanings, goals, and beliefs they have grown up to think of as reality. (p. 205)

Thus, lived experience has the capacity to serve as a vehicle of transformation.

Effective Teaching and the Epistemological Implications of a Rite of Passage

Effective teachers furnish the unique opportunities that engage students in the inquiry process. A good teacher recognizes the epistemological points of departure, facilitates the experiential process, and encourages the students to construct their own meaning out of direct experience and reflection. The informed teacher recognizes the importance of primary experience as a pedagogical priority, a notion that encourages the students to become autonomous and not anonymous. Philosopher Martin Buber (1947/1966) states that, “Personality is something which in its growth remains essentially outside the influence of the educator, but to assist in the moulding of character is [the teacher’s] greatest task” (p. 104). In this case, Buber insists that the fundamental aim of education should be the development of character. The rite of passage not only contributes to the development of character but also to the strengthening of identity. An examination of the rite of passage’s epistemological implications reveals that “a rite of passage can provide a useful model for teaching and facilitating transformation under specific conditions” (Bell, 2003, p. 42).

If teachers develop an understanding of the rite of passage framework, they are better equipped to facilitate the learning process. The teacher who is familiar with the educational application of the rite of passage framework understands the importance of creating indeterminate situations that trigger the cycle of inquiry. Utilizing the rite of passage structure can strengthen the transformative capacity of learning experiences for the student. In the rite of passage modality, the educator serves as a crossing guard by encouraging students to navigate liminal terrain from the familiar to the unfamiliar.

Teachers can help students transform by creating a learning environment that encourages students to tackle challenges and overcome adversity while embracing the experiential learning process. Teachers can model the learning characteristics of a liminal traveller and show students what it looks like to navigate through cognitive uncertainties while engaging in the inquiry cycle. Dewey (1899) states that “guidance is not external imposition...it is freeing the life process for its own most adequate fulfilment” (p. 17). This freeing of the life processes contributes to the meaning of experience and “increases [one’s] ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1916, pp. 89-90).

Dewey (1938a) supports the idea that people need challenges and states that problems stimulate thinking and learning. Problems set the epistemological rite of passage into motion. They arouse student interest in seeking out information and become the grounds for further experiences (Dewey, 1938a). They allow one to part ways from old thought structures and contribute to a more vital and energized worldview. As Greene (2001) states,

Surely we can learn to articulate more clearly what it is about making and attending that so often opens up new perspectives, that allows people to perceive new experiential

possibilities, that offers them new symbolic languages through which to express themselves...we can break through the either/or. (p. 20)

It is crucial that educators set up opportunities that will “release our students for live and informed encounters” and make the potential for transformation more likely (Greene, 2001, p. 27). Education towards a rite of passage is a process of guiding the student into a realm of new understanding that emerges from the backdrop of their own experiences. It is a demanding journey that relies on deep reflection and intentional action. The educator is involved in the process of directing students into a state of “wide-awakeness” (Greene, 2001, p. 50). According to Garrison (1997):

A good education brings out the best in us. It holistically unifies our character in judgment, compassion, and practice. It disciplines our desires to serve the greatest good, that is, those persons, things and ideals that are of most value. (p. 2)

Conclusion

John Dewey believed that education is the most effective way to promote positive social change. His educational philosophy is founded upon the notion of transformation through education. The rite of passage framework provides a valuable theoretical lens to view Dewey’s theories and generates important curriculum insight. Viewing education within the framework of a rite of passage offers a new and significant transformational model. Effective teachers can equip students to access various rites of passage in their own lives.

A deeper and more intimate understanding of the relationship between educational experiences and daily life extends the significance of Curriculum Studies. As the interdisciplinary study of educational experience, Curriculum Studies is further complicated by the notion of a rite of passage. Accordingly, a more comprehensive form of inquiry is available through integrating the rite of passage framework into the educational context. This inquiry encourages the quality of “drawing out” found in the etymology of the word *education*.

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Cross-Atlantic Discourses in Celebrity Coming Out Stories

The Neoliberal Cases of Ricky Martin and Tiziano Ferro

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Introduction

The power to narrate, or to block other narrative from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. Most important, the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment mobilized people in the colonial world to rise up and throw off imperial subjection; in the process, many Europeans and Americans were also stirred by these stories and their protagonists, and they too fought for new narratives of equality and human community. (Said, 1993, pp. xii-xiii)

IN THIS TIME OF STUNNING POLITICAL INSTABILITY and unpredictability, the power to examine and critique both dominant and subjugated narratives—their local representations, historical patterns, and relationships to larger dominant discourses—is critical (Said, 1993). The historian Manning Marable (2007) reminds us of the difficulty but necessity of challenging our own and other people's stories in relation to on-going historical narratives; we can begin to reconceptualize the future only by first deeply examining the present in relation to the past (Sawyer, 2017; Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010). As Foucault (1972) has noted, today's social-political discourses are rooted in historically situated, on-going genealogies. That is, we are socialized within discourses that are rooted in historical narratives. Partly framing our work and perceptions, these discourses may predate and even foreshadow political ruptures.

In this inquiry, we surface discourses of sexuality written by two celebrities—Ricky Martin in the United States and Tiziano Ferro in Italy—in their formal coming out letters, which appeared in the popular media. Using conceptual frameworks for sexuality, homonormativity, and neoliberalism/new nationalism, we first delineate these discourses. We then examine resonances to a larger narrative of the on-going, yet changing, political landscape. Specifically, we examine the letters for resonances of both neoliberalism and now, as the world

enters a new political schism, the new nationalism. Furthermore, the identification of local variations within the letters (Gemignani, Brinkman, Benozzo, & Puebla, 2014) provides insight into the regional movement of the broader, transnational patterns of the larger, political discourses. We find these two singers interesting for a couple of reasons. First, as highly gifted singers—both of whom are Latin—who have both achieved exceptional success at different times in their careers, they are privileged, white males. This privilege is evident in the speed with which they achieved commercial success, their control over their own narratives, and their use of the media to legitimate and make significant their images. However, given national difference to ethnicity in general (in Italy, Latin males are dominant, but in the United States they are not) and homosexuality in particular (with the United States supporting marriage equity but Italy not doing so at the time of this writing), they are both positioned somewhat differently to that privilege. Second, as previously mentioned, their letters from two different geographic regions provide an opportunity for us to examine and compare local discourses. That celebrity coming-out announcements have become uncontroversial, almost routine, suggests that their embedded discourses may help norm political change.

We are motivated by the call of Weiss, Fine, and Dimitriadis (2009) for scholars to begin to delineate and map transnational patterns of the movement of neoliberalism (and now its unexpected unraveling into the new nationalism) on both sides of the Atlantic. (We intentionally do not use the term post-neoliberalism, which to us connotes the deconstruction of neoliberalism rather than, as we see, the reconstruction of an equally problematic ideology—the new nationalism.) We first present excerpts from the coming out letters of Tiziano Ferro and Ricky Martin. We then discuss and identify regulatory discourses (Foucault, 1990) and coming out formulas within their letters in relation to the literature on homonormativity and, by extension, neoliberalism and the new nationalism. While the relationship between homonormativity and neoliberalism has recently begun to be studied (e.g., Duggan, 2002; Marzullo, 2011), the relationship between homonormativity and the new nationalism has been less frequently examined. We consider the coming out letters important as cultural artifacts of self-representation within specific geographic locations (Italy and the USA) at a time of increasing tension related to globalization. Puar (2007) reminds us that events tied to large-scale discourses are not isolated and spontaneous; rather, they are complex assemblages of those discourses.

With this analysis, we seek to contribute to the growing body of literature of celebrity coming out narratives in the media (Benozzo, 2013; Brady, 2011; Dow, 2001; Herman, 2003, 2005; Kooijman, 2004; Rivera Santana, Vélez Agosto, Benozzo, & Colón De la Rosa, 2014; Sawyer, 2014; Motschenbacher, 2019), focusing on the discourses of identity, authenticity, liberation, and family, as well as to literature on neoliberalism/new nationalism, especially within a transnational setting. We conclude by discussing how Ferro's and Martin's rhetoric closes the doors of the closet behind an essentializing, new nationalistic discourse. We interpret the two letters neither as the authentic, transparent, and honest experience of the two celebrities, nor as the expression of their generosity of telling us their deep secrets (Benozzo, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2013), but instead as particular discursive regimes. Therefore, what we are interested in is not *if* and *how* Ferro and Martin felt free and liberated, but rather *how* they have produced their coming out as a liberation act that hides some and produces other power dynamics. We also, of course, do not consider them intentional advocates of any political stance.

Method

For our methodology, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 1992) to examine “concrete instances of discourse” as well as “the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is a feature” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, pp. 448-449). Using CDA, we focused on the “linguistic practices that maintain and promote certain social relationships” (Íñiguez & Antaki, 1994, p. 3, as quoted in Rivera Santana et al., 2014, p. 6). This analysis was framed by Foucault’s (1990) perspective that power works through subjectivity. In relation to these letters, we suggest that Ferro and Martin cast themselves as subjects for and of societal and political (governmental) power—especially regulatory and normalizing patterns—within their texts (Peters, 2001).

Although there is a range of approaches to CDA, specifically, we drew from the three dimensions of CDA described by Fairclough (1992). These three dimensions (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, pp. 448-449) included, first, discourse-as-text. As discourse-as-text, we examined “the linguistic features and organization of concrete instances of discourse” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). Here, we blocked the text within the letters, focusing on the printed word and avoiding non-visible discourses (motivations, intensions, hopes, etc.). Doing a close reading, we established discourses within recurring patterns. Second, we considered discourse-as-discursive-practice, which is “discourse as something that is produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in society” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 448). For this aspect of discourse analysis, we examined the letters for aspects of consumerism. And last, we examined the letters for discourse-as-social-practice, which includes “the ideological effects and hegemonic processes in which discourse is a feature” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). With this more critical aspect of discourse analysis, we examined the texts in relation to political meanings.

For our analysis on sexuality, we draw upon the work of Foucault (1990), Butler (1991), and Dow (2001), whose perspectives highlight sexuality as constructed and performative, nesting within an historical genealogy. We integrate the discussion of this framework into our analysis.

The Letters Appear

On March 29, 2010, Ricky Martin, a well-known Puerto Rican/American pop singer—after 19 years in the spotlight and at the age of 39—through his twitter account and a letter on his blog announced his homosexuality, thus, coming out of the closet to his millions of fans. Then, six-months later, on October 6, an Italian pop singer, Tiziano Ferro—popular especially throughout Europe and Central and Latin America, at the age of 30—published his own coming-out letter in *Corriere della Sera*, a right center-wing Italian daily. Almost immediately, websites, TV channels, newspapers, and journals commented on and replayed their words. Shortly after publishing their letters, they both published their autobiographies. Their coming out in 2010 underscored Sedgwick’s (1990) still-critical words about the epistemology of the closet: “to the fine antennae of public attention the freshness of every drama of...gay uncovering seems if anything heightened in surprise and delectability, rather than staled, by the increasingly intense atmosphere of public articulations” (p. 67).

As celebrities and representatives of the popular media, Ferro and Martin are well positioned to contribute to “new” cultural norms found in the media about “changing” gay identity and its legitimate and respectable appearance (i.e., being the “the proper ‘gay subject,’” Roy, 2012, p. 185; see also Shugart, 2003). However, their coming out announcements carry a heavy price if they reify an evolving narrative of cultural stereotypes and narrow, commercial

representations of identity, norming more diverse representations of identity, community resistance, and grass-roots democracy. We now present excerpts from the letters.

Ricky Martin Comes Out¹

A few months ago I decided to write my memoirs, a project I knew was going to bring me closer to an amazing turning point in my life. From the moment I wrote the first phrase I was sure the book was the tool that was going to help me free myself from things I was carrying within me for a long time. Things that were too heavy for me to keep inside. Writing this account of my life, I got very close to my truth....

For many years, there has been only one place where I am in touch with my emotions fearlessly and that's the stage. Being on stage fills my soul in many ways, almost completely. It's my vice. The music, the lights and the roar of the audience are elements that make me feel capable of anything.... But it is serenity that brings me to where I'm at right now. An amazing emotional place of comprehension, reflection and enlightenment. At this moment I'm feeling the same freedom I usually feel only on stage, without a doubt, I need to share. Many people told me: "Ricky it's not important", "it's not worth it", "all the years you've worked and everything you've built will collapse", "many people in the world are not ready to accept your truth, your reality, your nature." Because all this advice came from people who I love dearly, I decided to move on with my life not sharing with the world my entire truth.... Today I take full responsibility for my decisions and my actions.

...[my truth] fills me with strength and courage. This is just what I need especially now that I am the father of two beautiful boys that are so full of light.... To keep living as I did up until today would be to indirectly diminish the glow that my kids were born with. Enough is enough. This has to change. This was not supposed to happen 5 or 10 years ago, it is supposed to happen now. Today is my day, this is my time, and this is my moment.

These years in silence and reflection made me stronger and reminded me that acceptance has to come from within and that this kind of truth gives me the power to conquer emotions I didn't even know existed.

...writing this is a solid step towards my inner peace and vital part of my evolution. I am proud to say that I am a fortunate homosexual man. I am very blessed to be who I am.

Tiziano Ferro Comes Out²

*It was Dad who Persuaded me I Could do It
by Tiziano Ferro*

After so many years marred by attempts, restraint, excruciating expectation, efforts and bereavement, I was ready to stop singing. I was ready to throw away all the sacrifices I had made; my tears of hope, and my tears of joy, no longer meant anything. Even the satisfactions of my job and my dreams were overshadowed. What I heard in my head was: "If I'm homosexual, I can't live in this world." I felt like a child who had fallen to the ground, abandoned by his mother, defeated, who awaits his fate crying in despair. Music has always been the greatest hope for me, yet faced with my inability to find a way out, I was determined to let it go....

At that point I talked about it to my father, who said: "Listen, your life is special, because you are special. Learn to have respect for yourself. Your relief is my relief as well." That

was the final encouragement I needed to go all the way in a final attempt: I set out along a path on which I patiently learned to tackle obstacles, rather than to avoid dangers. I'm grateful to my father...and to all those who have stuck by me to this day.

Then I went to see Giulia Bongiorno, one of Italy's leading lawyers, for an opinion, help, advice, maybe just a word of encouragement. Subconsciously, I had turned to a criminal lawyer! As if my behaviours and thoughts were incriminating. As if my condition were a crime. And such a serious crime that it needed to be punished with the toughest sentence of all: to stop singing. When I got to Ms. Bongiorno's office I was nerve-racked, after a long sleepless night...all of a sudden she opened up a whole new world for me by saying, in a firm tone and with a frank expression on her face: "There's nothing better than to turn to a criminal lawyer when you don't need one"! I smiled at that. But not with my lips, or at least not only. I smiled inside: after so long, I felt a weight had lifted off my shoulders at last. I felt understood, supported. Maybe even protected...after so many years spent alone, in the trenches, trying to fathom where the enemy was hiding, only to reach the conclusion that I myself was my only enemy....

"If I am homosexual"

Rickymartinness and Tizianoferroness: Identity and Authenticity Discourses

Martin's and Ferro's letters articulate identity and authenticity discourses often associated with coming out (Benozzo, Pizzorno, Bell, & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; Dow, 2001; Herman, 2003; Holt & Griffin, 2003). The identity discourse is expressed through Martin's words, "I am proud to say that I am a fortunate homosexual man." It is echoed by Ferro's "If I am homosexual...."³ Through these sentences, Martin and Ferro constitute identity that did not exist before they wrote and published the letters. In naming themselves as "homosexual," they are giving life to themselves (Butler, 1999) and presenting the illusion of the existence of an inherent, deep, and essential homosexual self.

In Martin's letter, the identity discourse is clearly connected to a second well-known regulatory theme: the authenticity discourse. This point is apparent within a repetition when he states: "many people in the world are not ready to accept your truth," and further states, "Writing this account of my life, I got very close to my truth...this kind of truth gives me the power." It is also hinted at by Ferro when he writes, "I set out along a path on which I patiently learned to tackle obstacles." In his subsequent book, he explains this process as his undergoing psychotherapy to help with his journey to find himself. The authenticity discourse appeared in media commentary on Ferro's "confessional" book (Benozzo, 2013, p. 344).

The idea that coming out communicates an authentic, true, and unambiguous identity has been problematized in particular by poststructuralist scholars (Butler, 1991, 1999; Phelan, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). Referring to the work of Judith Butler, Herman (2005) reminds us that that "the 'I am' declaration is not so much a dead-end as a broken record, a performance endlessly repeated, leading nowhere" (p. 17). Identity and authenticity discourses presuppose an essentialist view, described by Fuss (1989) as "a belief in a true essence—that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" (p. 2). To contrast with more fluid, unstable, and uncertain poststructuralist views of identity, we have labeled this essential view as "Tizianoferroness" and "Rickymartinness." Referring to such static views of identity, queer activists and theorists (e.g., Warner, 1993) have criticized the idea of a gay community confined to a prescribed and narrow view of homosexual identity or a commodified "gayness," thus, subjected to a normalizing process.

Following Foucault (1990), we read Martin's and Ferro's texts as confessional rituals through which the tellers produce a "true" discourse on sexuality and identity. The philosopher

argues that “from the Christian penance to the present days, sex was a privileged theme of confession” (p. 61), one that “was, and still remains, the general standard governing the production of the true discourse of sex” (p. 63). Framing coming out as a confessional ritual in Foucault’s terms clarifies how coming out implies a degree of power released to other subjects (sometimes virtual). According to Foucault (1990), confession is a discursive ritual, through which truth displays its authenticity as the subject eliminates resistance; for the confessors (Tiziano and Ricky), it “exonerates, redeems, and purifies...unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (p. 62). This last observation takes us to the liberation discourse, which is always intertwined with identity and authenticity discourses.

“I’m feeling the same freedom”
Liberation Discourses

These letters, their discourses and their plot structures, evoke classic gay narratives that tell the story of a difference that must be recognized, accepted, and then publicly declared. The process results in a resolution: liberation! Indeed, echoing the third classical coming out rhetoric of liberation, Martin writes: “At this moment I’m feeling the same freedom I usually feel only on stage.” Ferro also evokes this excitement when he writes: “I felt a weight had lifted off my shoulders at last.” Zimmerman (1985, as quoted in Dow, 2001), analyzing the liberation function of lesbian coming out narratives, wrote:

speaking, especially naming oneself lesbian, is an act of empowerment. Power, which traditionally is the essence of politics, is connected with the ability to name, to speak, to come out of silence.... Powerlessness, on the other hand, is associated with silence and the “speechlessness” that the powerful impose on those dispossessed of language. (p. 127)

Martin especially described this empowerment as “an amazing emotional place of comprehension, reflection and enlightenment. At this moment I’m feeling the same freedom I usually feel only on stage, without a doubt, I need to share.” This statement is significant in that Martin expands this description by comparing the rush of emotions he experiences on stage with those he experienced as he composed his coming-out letter. But ultimately, this description is individualistic.

In contrast, Ferro’s empowerment came not from a sense of freedom, but rather one of filial encouragement. His father urged him to respect himself for being the *special* person he is and move forward. Ferro, then, decided to talk and tackle the obstacles of his life: “That was the final encouragement I needed to go all the way in a final attempt.... I’m grateful to my father.” Although the details differ, the logic of the two letters seems the same. Both Ferro and Ricky gave themselves a new voice centered on personal identity and freedom.

As we connect the liberation discourse in Martin’s and Ferro’s letters with classic coming out discourses, which evolved (especially in the USA, the UK, and Australia) in the 1960s and 1970s, we note a lack of political ethos in their letters. At that time, coming out was a political action. In 1970, for example, the *New York Times* offered the following “quote of the day” made by one of the organizers of the first Gay Pride March in New York City one-year after the Stonewall uprising:

We’re probably the most harassed, persecuted minority group in history, but we’ll never have the freedom and civil rights we deserve as human beings unless we stop hiding in closets and in the shelter of anonymity. (Gross, 2002, p. 43)

What is interesting in this quote is the explicit understanding that coming out of the closet in 1970 was considered a political event tied to freedom and civil rights, something which is completely removed from Martin's and Ferro's letters.

A Different Mixture in the Same Mold? Merciful Father Discourse and Counter-Criminal Discourse

In view of our previous analysis, we can say that the two letters convey similar mixtures (identity, authenticity, and liberation discourses) in the same mold (the confessional ritual). These normative discourses resonate with discourses found within classic coming out narratives of the last century (Plummer, 1995). We can see that Ferro's case is framed by a *merciful father* discourse and a *counter criminal* discourse (Benozzo, 2013). The first discourse is that of the merciful father who accepts, approves, and protects him. In his letter, he situates and privileges patriarchy within multiple oppositions: between mother and father—"I felt like a child...abandoned by his mother..."—and between himself (the child) and his father (the adult). He assigns his father the role of the powerful parent in contrast to his mother, the evil parent who abandoned him. Ferro is able to talk "about [homosexuality] to" his father, who in turn asserts that Ferro is "special" and needs to "respect himself." It is a powerful father who, with a few choice words, heals a lifetime of anguish and despair. "That was the final encouragement I needed to go all the way in a final attempt." The merciful father discourse recalls the importance of the traditional, patriarchal, Italian family within the context of Italian Catholicism.

The comparative positioning of Martin and Ferro in relation to family connects yet differentiates the two letters. While Ferro reaches out to his father and mentions his mother within his confessional, Martin invokes the presence of his two sons. Referring to family, Ferro seeks protection, while Martin casts himself as protector and "spins" his confession into his powerful act of protecting his family.

Ferro also introduces a lawyer in his letter who gives voice to the counter criminal discourse. When Ferro visits Giulia Bongiorno, he positions himself as a guilty criminal "Subconsciously, I had turned to a criminal lawyer! As if my behaviours and thoughts were incriminating. As if my condition were a crime." This statement, full of behaviors, thoughts, and conditions, evokes the identity discourse (the condition is the one of *being homosexual*). It is interesting that Giulia Bongiorno implicitly cites the Italian law from 1861 that decriminalized sodomy in the north of Italy when she says: "There's nothing better than to turn to a criminal lawyer when you don't need one." She, thus, lightly with a few witty words dismisses any possible interpretation of criminality. But in the end, if the law doesn't condemn homosexuality, then the question of the basis of Ferro's guilt arises. His letter suggests that it is not the legal systems but (Catholic) morality that is responsible for his guilt. And he constructs his letter to oppose to this normative system

in such a way that Tiziano Ferro is not accused of a crime; instead he is shown to be innocent, not guilty. The whole narrative structure...aims to legitimize and to protect him, to decriminalize his homosexuality. On the one hand the letter revokes and tries to oppose Lombroso's (1906) 19th-century idea of homosexual as *homo criminalis* and, on the other, it plays on a reference to the meaning of the opposite of "criminal," i.e. "innocent" (not guilty) that...connect the text to Catholic rhetoric. Innocent is he who has committed no sins and is therefore free from guilt. (Benozzo, 2013, p. 10)

We want to underline here that, by projecting his story through the voice of his father and his lawyer, Ferro allows these actors to define regulatory societal norms, reinforcing an external locus of power. Interweaving these two discourses into the plot of the letter, Tiziano Ferro “can [now] live in this world,” even if he is homosexual. Ironically, this confession leads to confinement and not liberation. This action is clarified by Foucault (1990) who maintained that, instead of liberating, the act of confession releases the confessor to the hands of another power (here, the father and the lawyer).

Ultimately, Ferro’s and Martin’s coming out letters are not positioned to challenge and possibly change societal norms, but to remain regulated by them. Interestingly, both letters are totally removed from a context of desire or sexuality. They do not discuss sex, lovers, or passion in any way except for their love of their art. Lacking desire, their declaration, thus, lacks an anticipated action. The messy, dangerous, and possibly inherently democratizing expression of sexuality, threatening to the design of neoliberalism, is missing. This last observation introduces the next section of our paper: the consistencies between discourses and neoliberalism that can be found from what is absent within their documents.

Coming Out into a Socio-Political World

To understand Martin’s and Ferro’s relationship to the concept of homonormativity, we first quickly review the uneven movement of neoliberalism to the new nationalism. We then discuss the relationship between neoliberalism and (more tentatively) post-neoliberalism to homonormativity.

Bourdieu (1998) described neoliberalism in both actual and symbolic terms: “Neoliberalism is a powerful economic theory *whose strictly economic strength, combined with the effect of theory, redoubles the force of the economic realities it is supposed to express*” (p. 126, emphasis in original). The core tenets of neoliberalism revolve around public and commercial forms of freedom: “deregulation, privatization, ‘openness’ (to foreign investment, to imports), unrestricted movement of capital, and lower taxes” (Finnegan, 2003, pp. 41-42).

Framed by this notion of freedom, neoliberalism itself has become a near universal belief, a sort of gospel. Bourdieu (1998) thought that

This gospel, or rather the soft vulgate which is put forward everywhere under the name of liberalism, is concocted out of a collection of ill-defined words—“globalization,” “flexibility,” deregulation” and so on—which through the liberal or libertarian connotations, may help give the appearance of a message of freedom and liberation to a conservative ideology which thinks itself opposed to all ideology. (p. 126)

The slow growth of the new nationalism—although seemingly exploding into popular awareness—has not so much replaced neoliberalism, but developed alongside it, at times almost in a schizophrenic way. Overnight, both the United Kingdom and the United States appeared to flip from embracing a global, neoliberal perspective to a rough-and-tumble nationalistic, populist perspective. Emerging patterns in the new political landscape contradict and challenge certain tenets of neoliberalism: instead of the free movement of goods and workers, there is discussion of a growth in tariffs and the restriction of immigration; instead of a philosophy of globalism, there is an emphasis on economic nationalism. The new nationalism—also known as populism and nativism—marks the return of class to the political landscape. The dissatisfaction among people increasingly cast into poverty as result of the neoliberal project played a potent role in both Brexit and the U.S. election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Also, there is an explicit goal of reducing taxes (favoring the

wealthy more than the poor). Finally, these negative policies are accompanied by a loud, triumphant nationalism (e.g., “Make America Great Again”). Harris notes that neoliberalism was an open ideology; whereas, post-neoliberalism is a closed ideology (Harris, 2017). Instead of a sense of openness for the hybridity of border crossings, post-neoliberalism emphasizes core nationalism and intolerance of difference. One of the clearest signs of the official failure of neoliberalism may be found in its criticism by leading scholars (Jacques, 2017).

It is important to note that nativist populism is not a new phenomenon, but rather appears periodically in American and European history. An obvious example in Italy was the Mussolini era (currently followed by the Five Star Movement led by Bebbe Grillo). In the United States, Trump governs in the authoritarian tradition of Nixon, Goldwater, and Wallace. The point is, a narrative of nativist populism runs through American and Italian history. Those of us who grew up in the U.S. or Italy are positioned in multiple ways to the discourses running through this history.

The third piece of our discussion is homonormativity. A close relative of neoliberalism, homonormativity has been described as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). Homonormativity emerged from the conflict between neoliberalism and the public expression of LGBTQ rights. Many conservative supporters of neoliberalism were caught in the dilemma of wishing to promote the libertarian aspects of neoliberalism found in unregulated individual rights and freedom of public expression while at the same time seeking to regulate diverse representations of LGBTQ identity, both in the public sphere. A solution to this dilemma was found in the promise of gay marriage, offering, as it did, a new site for privacy found in domesticity.

According to Duggan (2002), the gay marriage discourse allowed conservative gays (almost all men) to shift the focus of freedom from the public sphere to the domestic and the home. This shift is reflected in the watering down of gay pride parades, for example, where corporate sponsorships have replaced rebellious behavior, and marriage equity has placed a new emphasis on family and the home (the “new normal”). This reframing of LGBT freedom as a domestic freedom led to a curious inversion of public/private influence. And from this dynamic, two leading social forces of homonormativity emerged: gay domesticity and consumerism.

Both of these forces of homonormativity are evident in the two letters. Limiting their attention to an “authentic self,” both Ferro and Martin emphasized different yet consistently individualistic aspects of domesticity in their documents. As Martin showcases his children and Ferro follows the wise words of his father, their rhetoric locates their “gay selves” in the home, not in the streets.

As part of this focus on domesticity, they both introduce strong normative statements into their messages. Ferro projects normativity through his father’s words. His father tells him that his [Ferro’s] life and “all life is special,” giving him “the final encouragement [he] needed to go all the way in a final attempt.” He ends his letter by stating, “Silence is precious.” Martin was a little less subtle. Referring to his children, he states, “acceptance has to come from within and that this kind of truth gives me the power to conquer emotions.” While these statements are more normative than moral, their regulative nature is similar to that of moral statements, adding guiding principles to neoliberalism and homonormativity. Consistent with the normative nature of neoliberalism (which appears at times more like normative life than ideology), they co-opt ideology (Robinson, 1996) and facilitate evolution through hegemony, not coercion (Foucault, 1972; McLaren, 1998; Peters, 2001). However, we wonder whether the contained, reactionary normativity of these statements suggest discourses more consistent with an emerging nationalism than with a complex globalism.

An analysis of the second aspect of homonormativity, consumerism, is revealing. As Holt and Griffin (2003) wrote “Advertisers and marketers encourage subjects to discover and ‘be themselves’ through practices of acquisition and consumption” (p. 406). And in the late twentieth century, advertisers specifically targeted lesbians and gay men as consumers (Chasin, 2000; Sender, 2004). Ferro and Martin do not cast themselves as consumers within their letters (except as consumers of ideology), but rather as producers of commodified art. As leading figures of popular culture, they focus their discussion on their art and careers (that is, the production of cultural products). Ferro, for example, discussed how his homosexuality led him to this consideration: “I was ready to stop singing.” This comment implies that, by coming out, he can continue to sing and be a popular artist, benefiting both himself and his record company. Martin, equally concerned about his career, stated in his letter, “Many people told me: ‘Ricky, it’s not important’, ‘it’s not worth it’, ‘all the years you’ve worked and everything you’ve built will collapse.’” At first heeding their advice, Martin remained in the closet: “Because all this advice came from people who I love dearly, I decided to move on with my life not sharing with the world my entire truth.” However, he decided to reveal his “truth,” avowing: “Today I take full responsibility for my decisions and my actions.” As with Ferro, his career was in the foreground. And, in contrast to artists who provide audiences with new perspectives to queer normative spaces and reconstruct society as a more just place, such as Boy George and Sandra Bernhard, they promote a form of homonormativity focused on narrow views of identity and meanings of being “gay.” Instead of offering new views of personal and collective expression, Martin and Ferro use the media to package and sell themselves. Neither of them strongly and unwaveringly takes up a position against homophobia or discrimination, and in particular, Ferro does not criticize the Catholic Italian context. In both letters, coming out is resolved in an individualistic act without a reference, for example, to an LGBTQ world that struggles for the recognition for equal rights.

On a more theoretical level, their letters offer insight about the dilemma between both expanding personal freedom and containing it in the public sphere. Peters (2001) writes that, within the production of neoliberal behavior, one thematic emphasis became a project of self-improvement, an embodied “enterprise form” (p. 60) within neoliberalism, underscored by a sense of morality. Peters references Burchell’s (1996, p. 275) remark “made in the context of a Foucauldian analysis of neo-liberalism that an ‘enterprise form’ is generalized to all forms of conduct” (p. 60). In and through their letters, Ferro and Martin reconceptualize themselves as enterprise zones. Unlike Foucault’s (1972) conception that transformation comes in relation to critique and disruption, Ferro and Martin instead tether specific aspects of their statements to the themes of self-responsibility for personal improvement, domesticity, and consumerism. Peters (2001) states:

A genealogy of the entrepreneurial self reveals that it is the relationship, promoted by neo-liberalism, that *one establishes to oneself* through forms of personal investment (for example, user charges, student loans) and insurance that becomes the central ethical component of a new individualised and privatised consumer welfare economy. (p. 60, emphasis in original)

Indeed, their coming out letters can almost be read as manifestos of lifelong learning.

While at first glance this message of self-improvement appears laudable, it is, we suggest, an elitist message from two privileged, white males that is eminently self-serving. Bourdieu (1998) asks, “How do we...[become] free from all dependence on any of the imperialisms—starting with the imperialism that affects cultural production and...national and nationalist residues?” (p. 129). Adapting and applying this question to Martin’s and Ferro’s texts reveals a genealogy of meritocracy, privilege, and entitlement. This imperialism reifies

art that is centered on essentialism and normativity, a related lack of inherent pluralism, a tacit call to shift from extended public action to private family domesticity. The letters do not promote the diversity of gay life and a queering of society offering the hope of a form of grounded democracy and critique. Instead of critique and deconstruction, there is essentialism and closed statements that exclude others. We tentatively suggest similarities between discourses about essentialism within the letters and those within post-neoliberalism. Such a similarity may be found, for example, between the new nationalism's emphasis of monolithic identity and Martin's announcement of essentialism—his commitment to an inner truth and an authoritative lack of ambiguity. Essentialism is a discourse of chasms, not intersections, bordered spaces, not hybrid ones.

The two letters differ, however, in one key aspect of the new post-neoliberalism: self-reliance/responsibility. While neoliberalism certainly privileged responsibility, it was a more global and trans-border view of responsibility. As evidenced by the Brexit movement and the rhetoric coming from the United States, the notion of responsibility has shifted to a narrow view of personal gain and local (even class-based) agency. There is a pronounced discourse of contained self-responsibility within especially Martin's letter. His missive reads like a 21st century version of the Horatio Alger story. Throughout his letter, he uses words and images that underscore agency and decisiveness. In the first paragraph alone, to paraphrase his words, he decides, frees himself, engages in purposeful action (and tool use), and engages in certainty. Throughout, he juxtaposes his coming out with his being on stage, where, as he states, he is "fearless: the music, the lights and the roar of the audience are elements that make me feel capable of anything. This rush of adrenaline is incredibly addictive." He uses a construction metaphor to describe his actions: he is warned that if he tells the truth, all that he has "built will collapse." And in case he is not clear that these are statements of self-responsibility, he leaves no ambiguity: "Today I take full responsibility for my decisions and my actions." His truth "fills [him] with strength and courage." The new nationalism emphasizes a self-contained form of reliance, as reflected in the island-mentality of people calling for Brexit or of those in the U.S. clambering to build an improved border wall. Ferro, on the other hand, bases in his decision on both legal and familial advice, coming respectively from lawyer and father.

While we have shown that there are strong homonormative elements also in Ferro's letter, there are differences between the two singers' letters and their own positionality to self-reliance. We are not suggesting that Martin's self-reliance indicates that he is anti-immigration (a conclusion not evident within his letter), but rather that his discourse of self-reliance resonates with an individualistic and not a collective view of improvement. We wonder if this contrast between the two singers possibly speaks to the opportunistic nature of political change, which seemingly may adapt to a local context. It is as if the text of their letters creates a slightly different proselytizing context for neoliberalism on both sides of the Atlantic.

In addition to self-responsibility, the use of technology, central to both letters, presents another dimension of the production and dissemination of neoliberalism. Referring to technology and economic growth, Peters (2001) notes the "increasing importance of...technology as the engine of economic growth and the means by which countries can successfully compete in the global economy in years to come" (p. 65). If you substitute the word "individuals" for "countries," this quote becomes an apt characterization of Ferro and, especially, Martin. As they published their letters online (with Ferro uploading an English language version to his website), the electronic, social medium became part of their message. Both project images of new enterprising selves, rooted in a tradition of progress. Intertwining the values of family and religion around their message of self-enterprise, they project the power of neoliberalism through their subjectivity and put a human face on a powerful metanarrative. This metanarrative is based on a vision of the future, one sustained by "excellence," by "technological literacy," by "performance," and by "enterprise" (Peters, 2001, p. 66). As with

neoliberalism, this narrative promises a happy and productive life for some and a disposable future in the new global economy for those on the margins (Bales, 2012).

Again, Ferro's and Martin's positionality as relatively privileged, white men reinforces these dominant discourses. The narrowness of Ferro and Martin's views can be delineated when comparing them to people who consider coming out in relation to complex and multiple intersections of identity. Decena (2008) writes of the complexity of coming out within an American Latino community, where there are "existing and emerging contradictions in the politics of gender and sexuality in immigrant communities" (p. 36). One wonders how Ferro's and Martin's letters might have been different had Ferro or Martin been disabled, or living in poverty, or female, or in their teens and homeless, or transgendered, for example. A second consideration of the normative framing is in their communicative context, that they advertise their reception. Their letters are almost intended to reassure others like themselves—white, privileged, male, early middle-aged—that they are not different but the new normal. Instead of queering a space, they settle and calm it.

By reproducing broader, neoliberal (or new nationalism) discourses, they advertise their own reception within those frameworks. Advertisements of normativity fit neatly into a context of neoliberalism and extend its genealogy. People, however, can resist normativity and disciplinary discourses. Foucault (1972) has acknowledged a tension between determinism and human agency. The diverse LGBTQ "community," has clearly shown that agency does exist. It existed in the riots at Stonewall in the United States, and it existed in the lengthy battles in Italy against the Catholic Church to finally obtain civil partnerships in 2016. Curriculum theorists and related scholars provide a rich scholarship of ways to disrupt authoritative, hegemonic texts and begin to generate self-and-collective reflexivity, praxis, and change.

Final Thoughts

In this paper, we have analyzed two celebrities' coming out documents, developing our discussion along three principal lines: 1) the discourses that characterized these coming out stories (their mixture); 2) their shapes/molds; and 3) their context of neoliberal/new nationalism and (homo)normativity. We unfolded these discourses along different yet intertwined threads: discourses of liberation, discourses of identity/authenticity, and discourses of patriarchal family ties. These discourses function to make acceptable and to justify homosexuality not just in Italy and the United States, but throughout the world. Discourses of identity and authenticity in particular originate from the belief that subjects have a (sexual and psychological) self that, once discovered, can be controlled, managed, and (perhaps) changed. In substance, these discourses derive from the idea that subjectivity is independent from the social/political context, from social pressure, and from those cultural constructions that in the last two centuries have created/fabricated homosexual identity.

We also have suggested that essentializing discourses exist within their letters. Foreclosing more intersectional views of identity, these discourses resonate with the closed ideology of the new nationalism. This is an ideology that first constructs binaries (us/them), reinforcing "*ressentiment*, or the practice in which one defines one's identity through the negation of the other," (Matus & McCarthy, 2003, p. 75). It also resists the hybridity of globalism and the possibility of creating generative third spaces.

A concluding thought is that we cannot interpret Ferro's and Martin's coming out letters without taking into account the power mechanisms that delimit their statements. That is, their coming out of the closet represents their entrance into particular discursive regimes (such as identity, authenticity, liberation, counter-criminal, merciful father, patriarchal family) (Benozzo, Koro-Ljungberg, & Carey, 2016). Embedding their coming out stories within

discourses of authenticity/identity, they present themselves as the main protagonists of their stories if not their lives. Ironically, these discourses themselves operate to mask inherent power regimes that reduce their personal agency. To continue to repeat the identity discourse has two consequences. On the one hand, it depoliticized Ferro's and Marin's action: in the two stories we do not see any connection with gay and lesbian politics. These coming out narratives are self-centered and divorced from any form of advocacy for LGBTQ community rights. On the other hand, the very repetition of the self-narrative diverts the readers' attention from the central heterosexist and heteronormative contexts that produce these stories. For example, in Ferro's case, nothing is said about homosexual discrimination in Italy—the identity discourse removes the heterosexist Italian context from the consideration of the newspaper's gay and straight readers.

In conclusion, the process of coming out of the closet may actually reify many of the normative and normalizing discourses that lead to its construction as a defense mechanism in the first place. When we first read Tiziano Ferro's and Ricky Martin's letters, we applauded on one level the “courage” of these writers who were working in a very public forum. But on closer inspection, as we deconstructed the letters' underlying discourses, we became deeply disturbed. The letters operate on both a local and global level. Because the personal messages of the two documents reflect different national contexts, they increase their local persuasiveness. But, given the international reach of the two artists, the letters also communicate globally. As we have attempted to show in this paper, the global message is consistent with the discourse of neoliberalism and in some instances the new nationalism, as well as homonormativity; as the letters appeared locally, they also communicated political discourses both locally and globally.

Notes

1. Published online on the 29th of March 2010 (Accessed August 25, 2014). It is reproduced with exact wording and grammatical construction as the original.
2. This letter was published the 6th of October 2010 in *Corriere della Sera* (p. 45), and a few days later, this English version appeared on the singer's official website.
3. Some may argue that “If I am homosexual” is not an affirming statement; however, it must be put in connection with the interviews that Ferro gave on the same days (published in *La Repubblica*) or with other comments within the same pages. For space reasons we do not include the text of the interview or other comments because the aim of the paper is to enter into a conversation between the two letters. The interview and comments can be found in Benozzo, 2013, p. 344.

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