

My Octopus Teacher, Posthumanism, and Posthuman Education A Pedagogical Conceptualization

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THE INTRODUCTION OF RESEARCH OF THIS KIND—the kind concerned with anthropocentrism, the kind working towards ecojustice, the kind that sees education as a place for a paradigmatic change in decentering the human from the inexhaustible world of beings—is usually the space where the author presents readers with evidence of the precarity of our planet. It might take the form of a list, giving lip service to disasters occurring here and there, in seas and on land, both *to* and *by* humans. Beneath the evidentiary destruction of our ecosystem is a deeply sedimented notion of human separatism and exceptionalism. Pointing to natural disasters as emblematic of the pitfalls of anthropocentrism may draw readers and skeptics into discussions that follow, but the reality of the destruction lies in the very formulation of the human condition and our relation to other forms of life. It emanates from the ways in which we have conceptualized humans as the “pinnacle of evolution,” both distinct from and superior to all other life forms (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 45). In this way, our humanist philosophy becomes the emblem of anthropocentric genocide—specifically the ways in which we construct knowledge and being.

Knowledge, as we have come to know it, is the “result of inserting a bodied perspective into the world in order to generate a system consistent with the position of that body in the world” (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 50). If we accept this explanation of knowledge and consider what it does to our personal conceptions of knowledge (what a theoretical framework essentially asks of us), it follows that everything we have come to know has been in accordance with and in service of human dominion. This humanist approach to knowledge informs every aspect of our being. For a second, even, consider the limitations of knowledge and of being as we have come to know it given this take, and imagine the possibilities that a posthumanist philosophy could offer. It’s marvelous.

If everything we have come to know is grounded in assumptions of human separatism and exceptionalism, then it is reasonable to understand schools as purveyors of humanist logic and anthropocentric tendencies. Maybe this isn’t something shameful, but instead opportunistic. The “crisis,” as Braidotti (2016) so elegantly proposed, “is not necessarily negative, but rather the coming into focus of new conditions for relational encounters, understanding and knowledge production” (p. 28). How limiting the bounds of our knowledge and being are when only

considered from a human perspective—how boundless the possibilities of knowledge and existence become when we move beyond a siloed understanding.

Stemming from a surge in critical studies that swelled alongside the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism around the 1970s, and further galvanized with the posthuman turn of the new millennium, posthumanist discourse has radiated into an impressive multiplicity of disciplines (Braidotti, 2019). Currently, posthumanism exists in a dialectic with various discourses including that of feminism (Ringrose et al., 2020), queer theory (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 1993; MacCormack, 2016), anti/de/post/colonialism, (Escobar, 2019; Snaza & Singh, 2021; Tsing, 2015; Wynter, 2003), quantum mechanics (Barad, 2007), new materialism (Ringrose et al., 2020), multispecies worldbuilding (Haraway, 2013, 2016), and eco/justice/centrism/apocalyptic discourses (Parikka, 2014; Washington et al., 2018) to illustrate a very limited cross section of the field. This work does not claim to capture the breadth of thinking that has been generated with regard to posthumanism throughout this manifold constituency. Instead, I take up the work of a few scholars and propose a way to engage students with their conceptualizations of posthumanism through a documentary film, *My Octopus Teacher*. I have chosen to focus this piece specifically on the work of Braidotti (2016, 2019) and Snaza (Snaza et al., 2014, 2016) and these pieces in particular because of their specific attention to how education is implicated in humanism and anthropocentrism, the potential of posthumanism for education, and also because of their resonance with the film and their readability, as I envisioned this pedagogical conceptualization as taking place with an undergraduate audience.

I developed this pedagogical endeavor as part of a course titled *Representations of Education in Popular Culture*. “Popular culture” in this context refers to school films, school documentaries, and movies that present education (teachers, students, principals, educators, and the everyday processes of schooling) in a particular way. The course is structured around critical theory texts and film studies (here represented by Nichols’s 2019 book, *Engaging Cinema*)—for each seminar, students engage with a few critical texts as well as a documentary or film that fits the texts. Each week students explore how the critical texts are in conversation with the documentary or film and the implications that critical concepts and representations of education pose for education broadly. Accordingly, the pedagogical conceptualization presented here would function as the content and substance for one unit. Following the analysis of each text (*My Octopus Teacher*, Nichols’s, Braidotti’s, and Snaza et al.’s) are discussion questions that could be used to guide student inquiry.

From the place of a concerned citizen, the work of this paper stems from a beyond-urgent need to address mass ecocide and planetary collapse. As a perpetual student, the development of this project stems from a desire to engage with posthumanist philosophy myself. But most ardently from a teaching standpoint, this piece is part of an endeavor to effectively engage others pedagogically with posthumanist philosophy. It has been my experience in efforts to generate discussions among peers and professors that theories of posthumanism present as extraordinarily nebulous and are often met with recoil. On the rare occasion when another will wade into the waters of posthumanism, so to speak, it has been with defenses or critiques with regard to practices of sub- or de-humanizing. The conversation almost always recenters the human. In the few moments where it felt as if participants genuinely entertained posthumanist concepts—remaining in stasis with the undoing and redoing of knowing and being that posthumanism engenders—it has consistently been when the literature was complemented with a film, image, or hands-on experience.

The guiding questions of this exploration are: How does posthumanism complicate the ways in which we have come to understand knowledge and existence, and how can pedagogues engage others with conceptualizations of posthumanism? I work to better understand a pedagogy that incorporates posthumanism because I think it is both enlightening and necessary. The need to reconceptualize who and what matters in education is urgent (Snaza et al., 2016). The following conceptualization hopefully provides a pedagogical entrance into thinking beyond human-centric constructions of knowledge and being and into engaging others in posthuman potentiality.

The Film: *My Octopus Teacher*

This 2020 documentary film sensation directed by Ehrlick and Reed was produced by filmmaker Craig Foster, founder of the Sea Change Project, and follows his year-long forging of a relationship with an octopus. I find this film especially generative for the pedagogical project I take on in this space, as it not only challenges humanist assumptions of teacher, student, and knowledge, but also provides a look into the theoretical expanse that a posthumanist lens offers and speculates on a posthuman education. The viewer is invited into the film with the diegetic sound and accompanying pan of the gentle swell of the sea. The filming takes place in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the Western Cape in South Africa. Humanist constructions of knowledge are breached almost immediately as the film opens with the voiceover of Foster: “a lot of people say that an octopus is like an alien” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). Moments later, Foster reflects on his formative experiences growing up: “my childhood memories are completely dominated by the rocky shores, the intertidal, and the kelp forest” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). In these inaugural moments, Foster sets up the possibility for other-than-human and entangled ways of knowing and being and challenges “longstanding (Western) humanist presumptions about what a human being is and how it relates to the world” (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xvi). The viewer is gently persuaded to concede their human-centric ontological and epistemological assumptions and entertain the possibility of otherwise ways of knowing and being. Ultimately, the film urges a collective ecological response-ability, appealing to viewers through the emergent understandings that unfold as Foster and the octopus co- and re-construct knowledge and experience.

Cinematic Mode

Nichols’s (2010) *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies* is a comprehensive review of approaches, techniques, and structures of documentary filmmaking. It is a seminal text in documentary analysis and instrumental for analyzing documentaries as texts for novice and seasoned critics alike. Nichols likens cinematic modes to tendencies of filmmakers that “help define the shape and feel of the documentary film” (p. 148). He presents six major cinematic modes including poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative and is keen on explaining the fluidity of cinematic modes, as documentaries often employ more than one. Understanding the modes helps us to “identify the different ways in which the voice of documentary manifests itself in cinematic terms” and to understand the intentions of the film (p. 143). Cinematic modes encompass elements such as the nature of visuals and audio, the character of dialogue, and the relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience, to name a few.

The fluidity of cinematic modes is present in *My Octopus Teacher*. In my own reading of the film, I can trace the use of poetic, participatory, and performative modes. Poetic mode elements are evident in the vivid and intimate filming of the octopus in all its complexity, the atmospheric scans of the expanse above and beneath the sea, the diegetic, oceanic, and non-diegetic orchestral sounds accompanying footage, and in the overall visual, tonal, and rhythmic quality. The participatory mode can be traced through the intra-action between Foster and the octopus. *My Octopus Teacher* stresses the “situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter” between Foster and the octopus (p. 187). The audience is very much presented with an articulation of the world “as represented by someone who actively engages with others” (p. 182). A claim for the employment of the performative mode could be made in the emphasis on expressiveness and subjectivity of Foster’s involvement with the octopus—“emphasiz[ing] the expressive quality of the filmmaker’s engagement with the film’s subject ... in a vivid way” (p. 152). A performative mode is also evident in the way the film brings embodied experience and knowledge, emotional intensity, and subjectivity to the fore through the use of “evocative tones and expressive shading that constantly remind us [viewers] that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it” (p. 206). The employment of each of these three modes contributes to our understanding of the film, and understanding the use of cinematic techniques deepens the viewer’s conceptualization of the film. I will expand upon my reading of the film through these cinematic modes in the following text, which also serves as an example response to the discussion questions presented below it.

I consider *My Octopus Teacher* as a challenge to our humanist constructions of being and conceptions of teacher, student, and knowledge and our anthropocentric relationship to non-human others. The poetic, participatory, and performative elements employed in the film contribute to my understanding of its meaning. A poetic mode is “particularly adept at opening up the possibility of alternative forms of knowledge to the straightforward transfer of information” (p. 162), which is complementary to both intentions of challenging humanist assumptions of exceptionality and of teaching and learning. The visual and audio tones entice viewers into a world outside of the familiar with majestic footage of the vast and intricate ocean world, accompanied by the diegetic sonority of both sudden and swift movements, and the non-diegetic undulation of the delicate, ethereal, and reflective orchestral soundtrack. The audience is ineluctably captivated by this otherwise way of knowing and being, priming the ecological mindfulness that the film ultimately urges. A participatory mode “gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result” (p. 181). Foster retraces his experience with the octopus as they co-constructed the spaces they inhabit, their knowledge of each other, and their understandings of existence. The film emphasizes negotiations of power, response/ability, and agency (Nichols, 2010), which speaks to the emphasis on the intra-action between Foster and the octopus but, more broadly—between humans and other life forms. A performative mode rejects objectivity and instead promotes evocation and affect, which is in accordance with the film’s disavowal of a purely humanist ontology and anthropocentric epistemology for a more subjective, embodied, and multitudinous understanding of being and knowing. The illustration of Foster and the octopus’s forging of a relationship speaks to this quality and enhances the audience’s responsiveness to this multi-species involvement. This sort of cinematic mode raises questions about “what knowledge actually amounts ... what counts as understanding and comprehension ... [and] what besides factual information goes into our understanding of the world” as it “sets out to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society” (Nichols, 2010, pp. 199 & p. 201) The subversion of humanist

assumptions regarding who can occupy positions of teacher and student as well as what knowledge is and how it is constructed is illustrated in the situating of octopus as teacher, human as student, and the construction of knowledge as entangled.

Evidently, the use of each of these cinematic modes is strategic and contributes to the intention and overall substance of the documentary. While I have outlined how I understand the use of poetic, participatory, and performative modes in *My Octopus Teacher*, other modes could be viably argued as well (and I imagine they would be). The fluidity of cinematic modes encourages students to cross-examine the nature of each mode and articulate the film through these lenses. In conceptualizing the approaches of filmmakers, viewers become attuned to the filmic decisions and how they contribute to the overall substance. In doing so, students reckon with how they make meaning of the documentary and deepen their understanding of both documentary structures and techniques in general and the meaning they make of *My Octopus Teacher* specifically.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your understanding of the cinematic mode(s) employed in *My Octopus Teacher* [expository, poetic, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative]? Use evidence from the documentary as support.
2. How does this contribute to your understanding of the film?

Posthuman Critical Theory

Rosi Braidotti is a contemporary philosopher of both posthumanism and feminist-theory. Her work is derivative of predecessors Deleuze, Guattari, Spinoza, Foucault, and Haraway, to name a few. Her entrance into the field of posthumanism is a mélange of anti-humanist and anti-anthropocentric literature. I analyze two of Braidotti's pieces: "Posthuman Critical Theory," which is a chapter in the book *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures* (2016), and *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), her latest book. These texts offer reflective and insightful cartographic examinations of the theories that ground her own posthuman critical theory framework. Both are useful texts for readers who are just entering the conversation as well as academics well-read in the field of posthumanism. She outlines concepts essential to critical posthuman theory including anti-humanism, anti-anthropocentrism, critical thinking, ontological relationality, and posthuman knowledge production. These concepts correspond with concepts explored in *My Octopus Teacher* and present a generative opportunity for students to articulate her posthuman philosophy with the unfolding of the narrative. The following will provide a synopsis of concepts in these two texts and then provide an example articulation of the texts with the film.

Anti-Humanism

Indebted to generations of progressive and critical studies since the 1970's, posthumanism most directly emerged out of two fields of research—anti-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism (Braidotti, 2019). Anti-humanism is a critique of the idealist and separatist image of "man" as

representative of the human species, the “center of world history,” and, more specifically, the implicit assumption that “the distinctively human prerogative is ‘reason’” (Braidotti, 2016, p. 14). Braidotti (2019) confronts these claims and instead proffers that “thinking and knowing are *not* the prerogative of humans alone, but take place in the world” (p. 101). The ideal and separate notion of human experience that humanism hinges upon dismisses the complexity of human existence as embedded with other forms of existence. Anti-humanist thinking works against this assumption and is instead grounded in a notion of complexity and the endless process of subject-formation—a “hybridization of the species” (2019, p. 85). The posthuman subject is marked by mutual imbrication, a resulting ensemble of human, nonhuman, organic, and non-organic experience. Anti-humanism proposes the necessity to “acknowledge the multiple and internally contradictory aspects of our own knowledge practices by adopting a diversified materialist approach” (2019, p. 90). This understanding of knowledge-as-collective-praxis invites the possibility of other-than-humanly ways of knowing and reasoning, which is the vital substance of *My Octopus Teacher*. Watchfully attending to the octopus’s engagement with her surroundings, Foster recognizes that “her entire being is thinking, feeling, and exploring” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020).

Anti-Anthropocentrism

Also elemental in the genesis of Braidotti’s critical posthumanism is the work of anti-anthropocentrism. This field of research critiques notions of human supremacy and exceptionality embedded in anthropocentric ways of knowing and being. An anthropocentric onto-epistemology positions *homo sapiens* as the pinnacle of evolution—the most complex, adept, and agentic form of life, granting *Anthropos* the right and access to all other entities. Strategic notions of the supreme and exceptional human species led to the “organizing [of] differences on a hierarchical scale of decreasing worth,” thus, “justif[ying] violent and belligerent exclusions” (2019, p. 105). Braidotti (2019) roots anthropocentrism in capitalism and the resulting market-valuation of all matter. The global economy that is representative of our current reality, then, engenders a “global nature as well as global culture,” which, in turn, “produces differences for the sake of commodification and consumption” (2016, p. 20). In other words, the hierarchy of which humans are supreme and distinct from all other life forms is the result of constructed (and negative) differences for the purposes of profit and consumption. Writ large, a utilitarian understanding of nonhuman matter is symptomatic of anthropocentrism. Nonhuman species, earth forms, and inorganic matter are perceived as resources for human consumption and allocated value, agency, and respect accordingly. The work of anti-anthropocentrism dethrones the human from this hierarchical understanding of our relation to nonhuman others, rejects possessive individualism, and instead proposes an affirmative and “collaborate ethics” in opposition to “the axiom of profit and maximization” (2019, p. 90). Utilitarianism is replaced with multi-species alliance and egalitarianism. This affirmative, collaborative, egalitarian allyship is forged throughout *My Octopus Teacher* not only between the octopus and Foster, but also between the octopus and her surroundings. In reflecting on the relationality between himself and the octopus, Foster recollects: “she’d come out and be very curious ... very interested, very curious ... and then it just happens, I put my hand out just a tiny bit ... something happens when that animal makes contact” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020).

Critical Thinking

Both anti-humanist and anti-anthropocentric theories engage in the critical thinking that is emblematic of Braidotti's posthuman critical theory. Braidotti (2016) conceptualizes critical thinking as a rejection of closed system thought coupled with "taking critical distance from familiar habits of thought" (p. 16). The critical thinking that Braidotti envisions pushes the boundaries of human-demarcated understandings of knowing and being towards ontological and epistemological (hitherto) unknowns. Posthuman critical theory indicates that a "disidentification from established patterns of thought is crucial for an ethics and politics of inquiry that demands respect for the complexities of the real-life world we are living in" (2016, p. 17). Braidotti's framework asks readers to reject sedimented assumptions of humanism and anthropocentrism and experiment with thinking in the liminal space that this posthuman critical theory engenders. "Thinking in posthuman times," she suggests, "is about increasing the capacity to take in the intensity of the world and take on its objectionable aspects" (2019, p. 79). In theorizing the embodied, entangled, and subjective possibilities of posthuman ways of knowing and being, readers complicate their ontological and epistemological assumption and push their understanding of the human and nonhuman condition. Foster exemplifies this critical thinking especially in reckoning with the historicity and "reductive vision of the subject based on brain-network-interface" (2016, p. 17). This can be traced throughout a plethora of moments in the film, including his reckoning with the failure of scientific knowledge to illustrate the complexity of the octopus's faculties.

Ontological Relationality

The critical thinking that transpires from anti-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism (ideally) provokes an ontological relationality characteristic of Braidotti's posthuman critical theory. An ontological relationality emphasizes the "inter-connection between self and others," involves "an act of unfolding the self onto the world, while enfolding the world within," and "empowerment and affirmation of one's interconnections to others in their multiplicity" (2016, pp. 25–26). Humanist and anthropocentric assumptions shelved, alternative ways of knowing and being emerge, specifically a knowing-*with* and being-*with*. The entangled reality of knowledge construction and our human existence comes to the fore, described as an ontological relationality. This multi-layered practice of knowing- and being-with "expresses a grounded form of accountability, based on a sense of collectivity and relationality, which results in a renewed claim to community and belonging" (2016, p. 26). Knowing-with and being-with do not dissolve the visceral differences of matter, but rather position difference as positive and potential in the construction of "visions that have been left untapped," an "increasing [of] our relational capacity" (2016, p. 27; 2019, p. 79). The impact is affective and obliges a new language of ontological relationality. In *My Octopus Teacher*, Foster and the octopus are suspended in this ontological relationality as they mutually construct their ways of knowing and being. Reflecting on the octopus's healing from a shark wound, Foster describes,

the most amazing thing to see ... this tiny little miniature, perfect miniature arm starting to grow back. And it gave me a strange sort of confidence that she can get past this incredible difficulty. And I felt in my life, I was getting past the difficulties I had. In this strange way,

our lives were mirroring each other. My relationship with humans—with people—was changing. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Posthuman Knowledge Production

Posthuman knowledge production stimulates new methods of thinking, new ways of being-*with* in the world, and new social imaginaries (Braidotti, 2019). Complex, dialectic, and critical understandings of knowledge and being—of ontological relationality—invite the prospect for emancipatory, creative, and multi-layered knowledge production. Posthuman knowledge production, as Braidotti (2019) explains, requires “repositioning terrestrial, planetary, cosmic concerns, the naturalized others like animals and plants, and the technological apparatus, as serious agents and co-constructors of transversal thinking and knowing” (p. 111). As Foster details his fascination with the octopus, he begins to ask the questions of posthuman knowledge: “What goes through her mind? What is she thinking? Does she dream? If she does, what does she dream about?” and speculates that “there’s something to learn from her.” Foster’s whole endeavor to be and to learn and to grow *with* the octopus can be articulated as a pursuit in Braidotti’s (2019) posthuman knowledge production.

Articulation with the Film

Braidotti’s (2016, 2019) theorizing in “Posthuman Critical Theory” and *Posthuman Knowledge* can be connected with *My Octopus Teacher* in many generative ways. I find Braidotti’s conception of anti-humanism especially resonant with a number of moments in the film. There is a particular semblance in the critique of “the implicit assumption that the distinctively human prerogative is ‘reason,’” as well as the “reductive vision of the subject based on brain-network-interface” analysis (2016, p. 14; 2016, p. 17). In one example, this is illustrated in Foster’s reckoning with the failure of scientific knowledge to illustrate the complexity of the octopus’s faculties. Returning from hours spent with the octopus, Foster describes mining academic research to further understand phenomena: “So many times I’d go and search through the scientific papers looking for the strange thing I’d seen. And then you’d just come up absolutely blank” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). The humanism that much of our knowledge of other species is grounded in does not account for posthuman ways of knowing or being. It is, thus, indoctrinated by an ornery, human-centric vision and an extremely limited examination. The failure of a strictly humanist epistemology is illustrated again in a playful interaction between the octopus and a school of fish. Foster describes the moment,

Suddenly, she’s reaching up for the surface like that [arm gesture: reaching out]. Initially, I thought “She’s hunting the fish.” But then I was like, “Hold on. When she hunts, she’s strategic, and she’s focused.” ... It took a long time to actually process it. But I couldn’t help thinking, “She’s playing with the fish.” Here’s a *highly antisocial* animal playing with fish. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Foster is challenging the anti-social qualification of the species, with evidence of a playful being-with of the octopus and a shoal of dream fish. The *social* that characterizes a *social being* is

indubitably measured given the human-as-model. *Social behaviors* are, thus, observed only insofar as they resemble human social behavior. Foster suggests that the designation of *highly antisocial* is manifestly misguided, as I imagine, by reason of a humanist tunnel vision. Braidotti's explication of anti-humanism situates my understanding of humanism and contaminates the fixed ways of knowing and being that have rooted in my being. Given Braidotti's overview of anti-humanist research, I can better understand the unfolding of relationship between Foster and the octopus—the pretext, context, the potentiality of their knowing- and becoming-*with* and the magnitude of this sort of ontological relationality. Braidotti articulates a captivating world of knowing and being, further illustrated in *My Octopus Teacher*. In experiencing the text and film in conversation with one another, I am synesthetically engaged with Braidotti's posthuman philosophy and the substance of the documentary.

Articulating Braidotti's posthumanism with moments in the film is a productive practice that enhances understandings of both her theory and the film. Braidotti's "Posthuman Critical Theory" offers a number of entrances and opportunities for articulating posthumanism with *My Octopus Teacher* and presents students a way of verbalizing their idiosyncratic readings of the text and film. Other angles from which students might articulate concepts of Braidotti's theoretical framework with the film could include instances of anti-anthropocentrism, illustrations of embodied, embedded, and entangled ways of knowing and being, ontological relationality, negotiations of power structures and binaries, or the production of posthuman knowledge.

Discussion Question

3. Articulate a passage from Braidotti's (2016) "Posthuman Critical Theory" or (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge* with Ehrlick and Reed's (2020) *My Octopus Teacher*. In other words, how do you understand a component of the text as embedded in the film? How does this contribute to your understanding of the film and your understanding of Braidotti's thinking?

Posthumanism and Education

As aforementioned, I conceptualized this pedagogical endeavor as part of a course titled *Representations of Education in Popular Culture*. In discussions each week throughout the course, students explore how critical texts are in conversation with a documentary/film, as well as the implications that critical concepts and representations of education in the media pose for education in general. Accordingly, the following discussions are centered around how posthuman critical theory implicates education, both as suggested in *My Octopus Teacher*, as well as Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. It is important to note the evolution of language used to denote the thinking embedded in these two texts: posthumanism versus new materialism. New materialisms can be described as a thread within the web of the critical posthumanities (Braidotti, 2019), most closely interwoven with posthumanist, feminist, and queer theories (Snaza et al., 2016). I understand new materialist thinking as a branch within the ever-expanding field of posthumanism, so I use them interchangeably in this forum. I will first present an overview of concepts explored in the Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) texts and how they could be read through the

film and then follow-up with a representation of my own thoughts in response to the proposed discussion questions: Reflect on your experience reading Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. What were your immediate reactions? Are there passages/arguments that have stuck with you? Are there places where you agree or disagree and why? And, how do you envision a posthuman education? Reference possibilities from the film and in the text and explain how they contribute to your vision.

Anthropocentrism

The recently coined geologic era of the *Anthropocene* foregrounds studies in anthropocentrism, which Snaza et al. (2014) describe as the logic that "puts us [humans] at the center of the universe and the center of the conversation" and conceives of the human as the metric of all knowledge and being, so "carefully distinguished from the animal and the machine" (pp. 40 & 42). Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) and Braidotti (2016, 2019) echo each other in their understanding of the humanist and anthropocentric logic of separatism and exceptionality. Snaza et al. (2014) also locate anthropocentric logic within correlationism, or the notion that the world only exists insofar as it exists for humans. This exclusionary conception of existence "keeps us from opening up to unpredictable and indeterminate materializations, to the growing uncertainties of our physical, biological, geopolitical, and socioeconomic structures" (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xvi). In *My Octopus Teacher*, viewers witness Foster reconcile with his anthropocentric instincts as he is presented with ways of knowing- and being-*with* that challenge human-centrism. His experiences of knowing- and being-*with* the octopus complicate human-centric knowledge of this life form and of human existence at large. Foster reflects,

You slowly start to care about all the animals, even the tiniest little animals. You realize that everyone is very important. ... My relationship with the sea forest and its creatures deepens week after month after year after year. You're in touch with this wild place and it's speaking to you. Its language is visible ... what she taught me was to feel that you're a part of this place, not a visitor. That's a huge difference. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Shattering the one-dimensionality of anthropocentric ways of thinking and knowing, Foster begins to engage with unpredictable, indeterminate, ever-expanding, and multi-dimensional ways of thinking and knowing.

Posthumanism

Snaza et al. (2014) describe posthumanism as a rejection of human-centric ontology and epistemology—a philosophy that decries anthropocentric positioning of *homo sapiens* with regard to nonhuman others. Instead, Snaza et al. (2016) emphasize the agency of all matter and the "continuities between the human and the non-human" in both knowing and being (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 42). Snaza et al. (2014) also conceive of posthumanism as opposing notions of dominion and utilitarianism, "which allow humans to view animals and the environment as objects given by God for humans to do with as they wish" (p. 46). Given the authors' expanded understanding of

agency, the inextricable contamination of human existence with nonhuman others, and ultimately the rejection of human supremacy, Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) call for new ontological and epistemological articulations. Snaza et al. (2016) propose that “if agency cannot be restricted to humans but must be seen as an attribute of all matter, then ‘politics’ undergoes a dramatic, even vertiginous expansion” (p. xviii). In these new articulations, resituating humans as co-constructors of existence and, thus, the decentering of humans in the hierarchy of matter is necessary. Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) envision ways of living-*with*, and becoming-*with*. Snaza et al. (2016) find innovation in the blurring of boundaries between human/nonhuman, nature/culture, and organic/inorganic. Incrementally throughout *My Octopus Teacher*, viewers are made explicitly aware of the porosity of these supposed binaries. Physically, intellectually, and emotionally attached, Foster expresses how “the boundaries between her [the octopus] and I seemed to dissolve” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020). In the closing scenes of the documentary, Foster speculates on his becoming-with the octopus: “I slept—dreamt—this animal. I was in my mind thinking like an octopus” (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020).

Knowledge, Humanism, and Education

As Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) indicate, knowledge is overwhelmingly defined in humanist terms. Finding genesis in the enlightenment period, humans and human pursuits have been conceived of as rational, logical, *correct*. Snaza et al. (2014) argue that this assumption—fundamental to all knowledge construction therein—is erroneous, and thus, “the human has been misconceived by nearly every thinker in the Western tradition” (p. 42). Knowledge, in this sense, is framed as “a partisan commitment to humanity and its cultural achievements” (p. 41). Knowledge in humanist terms neglects how nonhumans are “always participating in and shaping ‘human’ learning” and consequently ignores how other-than-human entities are engaged in educational encounters (Snaza et al., 2016, p. xxii). It then follows that knowledge production in the field of education, is steeped in human-centric knowing and being. As Snaza et al. (2016) assert, “most pedagogies have taken it for granted that only human beings can learn or can teach” (p. xxi). Consequently, our assumptions of teacher, student, and knowledge are bound. Posthumanism, as conceptualized in the terms of Snaza et al. (2014, 2016), undoes the ways we have traditionally come to know and to be and proposes alternatives to this fixedness. This conception of posthumanism “forces us to reckon with how resolutely humanist almost all educational philosophy and research is” (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 40). The very title, *My Octopus Teacher*, interrogates these assumptions, as Foster plays the role of student, learning the knowledge of a nonhuman other. His role is fluid, as is the octopus’s, as they co-construct knowledge and experience, not only subverting the roles of teacher, student, and knowledge but also blurring these boundaries and “fabricated borders of the animal, the machine, and the thing” (p. 42). The classic space of education—the school—is also replaced. Knowledge construction in *My Octopus Teacher* largely takes place in wild spaces, where movement is unpredictable, community is ever-changing, and learning is emergent, relational, and marked by uncertainty.

Schools as Civilizing Machines

Snaza et al. (2016) propose that schools are “the spaces in which we learn what it is to be human and what we have to accept without attention in order to secure our identities as human” (p. xix). Not only are students physically contained apart from nonhuman others in spaces designated for “learning,” we are taught that knowledge is constructed by humans and that learning is done by humans, for humans. As Snaza et al. (2016) explain,

existing theories of curriculum tend to presume both the humanness of education—that is, that education concerns humans learning with other humans what it means to be human—and the prevailing disciplinary or subject divisions that have been constructed entirely around a particular conception of the human being. (p. xx)

Ergo, students are indoctrinated at a very early age by “the humanist concepts through which virtually all educational thought has been articulated” (Snaza et al., 2014, p. 40). In this way, Snaza et al. (2014) propose that schooling, as we have come to know it, functions as a method of civilizing:

civilization (which has often been little but a cover for imperialist domination) has sought to erase and tame the human’s animality; the humanist project places civilization at the pinnacle of evolution and thus sees civilization as inherently better than wildness or animality. (p. 45)

Realistically, “schools are connected with the nonhuman world in so many explicit and implicit ways” in both K-12 and higher education (2014, p. 39). A quick *Latour Litany* (Bogost, 2012, as cited in Snaza et al., 2014) exercise reveals an extensive collection of human, nonhuman, organic, and inorganic matter involved in encounters in schools, yet our consciousness often remains at the human-centric level of experience. If, as the authors suppose, knowledge itself is a construct, backed by information that has been claimed by a body and their idiosyncratic analysis of data, then it follows that there are always and already various forms of knowing that subsist in every encounter. In *My Octopus Teacher*, we see Foster transcending into these liminal spaces, enamored of the possibilities for knowledge and existence in a world unconstrained by human embargos on knowledge and existence that do not operate exclusively in service of humans. We also see a glimpse into the possibility of a more posthuman education and the potential it holds as Foster imparts,

One of the most exciting things ever in my life, taking my son, walking along the shore, and just showing him the ... the wonder of nature, and the details, and the intricacies. I was getting so much from the wild that I could actually now give. I had so much energy to give back. He’s like a little marine biologist now; he knows so much. ... To see that develop, a strong sense of himself, an incredible confidence, but the most important thing, a gentleness. And I think that’s the thing that thousands of hours in nature can teach a child. (Ehrlick & Reed, 2020)

Ultimately, humanist and anthropocentric assumptions have restricted education—strained the limits of our imagination and our capacity to learn and exist in collaboration with nonhuman others.

The posthumanism that Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) propose proliferates the possibilities for knowledge, for learning, and also for an existence more attuned to the world around us.

Discussion Question Response

Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) put forth a fascinating and compelling argument for posthuman education. I am especially captivated by the understanding of knowledge as “a result of inserting a bodied perspective into the world in order to generate a system consistent with the position of that body in that world, in other words establishing a dichotomy of domination by that body” (2014, p. 50). This passage in particular, but also the piece in general, complicates how I conceptualize knowledge, schools, learning, and being. I am persuaded that our way of knowing and being is marked by humanist and anthropocentric assumptions and find concern in the narrow-mindedness that this way of thinking and being promotes.

Although engaging in posthuman education by spending a year in an underwater classroom with a group full of students is not practical for all schools (or any school), I do think a larger percentage of time spent “in education” could be outdoors or in intimate interaction with nonhuman others. Recess times and maybe gym classes offer students repose from the walls of the classroom, but likely don’t encourage students to learn with and from nonhuman others. I imagine an element of posthuman education being consistent and inquisitive time in spaces that accentuate our very entangled existence. These spaces are as close as the woods surrounding the school, maybe the swamp down the road, or the community garden—or as omnipresent as the ground beneath our feet and the sky above our head. Yet, a posthuman education isn’t just environmental education; posthuman education necessitates the complication of human-centric ways of knowing and being and experimentation in ways of knowing- and being-with nonhuman others. As illustrated in *My Octopus Teacher*, Foster consults human-derived knowledge of the octopus and mediates this with his lived knowledge as it is co-constructed with and from the octopus *in situ*. Human-centric ways of knowing and being are not lost but redefined in coordination with “cross-species, transversal alliances [and] with the productive and immanent force of *zoe*, or nonhuman life” (Braidotti, 2016, p. 23). I often come back to the example of the Civil War in America—in school, we are presented with the pretext, context, and aftermath of this historical contention, yet we never consider what the unfolding of the war meant for the forests, for the soil, for the flora and fauna, and for the innumerable population of others that exists in simultaneity with the human species. I imagine it was equally as contentious. Snaza et al. (2014, 2016) present a convincing case for both the need and promise of posthumanism and education, yet I am left wondering what it might look like to implement a posthuman education, as the authors in these pieces don’t spend time theorizing what this might look like in praxis. This pedagogical conceptualization represents an effort to do so.

Discussion Questions

4. Reflect on your experience reading Snaza et al.’s (2014) “Toward a Posthuman Education” and Snaza et al.’s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. What were your immediate reactions? Are there

passages/arguments that have stuck with you? Are there places where you agree or disagree and why?

5. How do you envision a posthuman or new materialist education? Reference possibilities from the film and in the text and explain how they contribute to your vision.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined the content and substance of a seminar unit that breaches systemic humanism and anthropocentrism, as they are manifested in general but, more specifically, in relation to knowledge, being, and education. The seminar is centered around an analysis of Ehrlick and Reed's (2020) documentary film, *My Octopus Teacher*, and theories of posthumanism as presented by Braidotti (2016, 2019) and Snaza et al. (2014, 2016). Students orient their understanding of the film using Nichols's (2010) *Engaging Cinema: An Introduction to Film Studies*, with a particular attention to cinematic modes. Discussions of posthumanism are framed with Braidotti's (2016) "Posthuman Critical Theory" and (2019) *Posthuman Knowledge*, as well as Snaza et al.'s (2014) "Toward a Posthuman Education" and Snaza et al.'s (2016) *Pedagogical Matters: New Materialisms and Curriculum Studies*. Students articulate their understandings of these critical texts with their viewing of the film and (ideally) complicate their understandings of knowledge, being, and schools using conceptualizations of posthumanism in the texts. This seminar has room for adaptation in the readings as well as the film. Further readings could include: de Oliveira and Lopes's (2016) "On the Limits of the Human in the Curriculum Field," Barad's (2003) "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," Ringrose et al.'s (2020) *Feminist Posthumanisms, New Materialisms, and Education*, Karkulehto et al.'s (2020) *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, and/or Lloro-Bidart's (2018) "A Feminist Posthumanist Multispecies Ethnography for Educational Studies" to name a few.

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Ma(r)king The Unthinkable

Cultural and Existential Engagements of Extreme Historical Violence

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Culture is a compromise with life that makes life possible. (Becker, 1973, p. 265)

CULTURE IS POSITIONED at the bedrock of social studies education. As evidenced by *Theme 1: Culture* of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) standards, studying culture allows for the examination of “socially transmitted beliefs, values, institutions, behaviors, traditions, and way of life of a group of people” (para. 1). While culture has been predominantly defined (anthropologically) as being an aggregate of routines, customs, and presuppositions that a societal group embraces with consideration being given to past experiences (e.g., Benedict, 1934; Dixon, 1928; Linton, 1936; Mead, 1937; Tylor, 1924; Wissler, 1929), it is common for social studies teachers/students to describe culture in ways that relate to everything people eat, drink, wear, and say (Brophy et al., 2016; Giroux, 2018).

Lines of inquiry into culture also present opportunities to engage with the interplay between human and societal development, as well as the role culture plays in the actualization of individuals’ understandings of the world, self, and others (E. Kashima, 2010). While there is a healthy body of research attending to cultural practices relating to the construction of sustained meanings and practices (e.g., Berry et al., 2002; Cole, 1996; Fiske et al., 1998; Y. Kashima, 2000; Markus & Hamedani, 1991; Triandis, 1994), Anglophone research that confronts how cultural perspectives can be leveraged in a way that engages with (historically) existential concerns (i.e., knowledge that we humans will die and how these understandings have been registered and navigated over time) is sparse. And as history and research has shown, when cultural worldviews are challenged, circumstances are cultivated that lead to violent (inter/intra) actions between people with divergent perspectives (e.g., Greenberg et al., 1986, 1990, 2001, 2007; Reiss & Jonas, 2019; Routledge & Vess, 2018; Schimel et al., 2007).

With this in mind, our inquiry entangles elements of existential psychology with what was auditorily produced by enactors of extreme violence when asked to reflect on cultural practices

associated with(in) a framework of extremely unthinkable violent performativity/ies. To do this task, we (re)turned to the work of Hatzfeld (2003) who interviewed Hutu perpetrators from the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and Gross (2004) who investigated the thoughts of local citizens participating in the massacre of Jewish people in the Polish town of Jedwabne in 1941. In an effort to accentuate the (cross/under)currents of murderousness between/across each of these violent epochs, we ask: Why did these ordinary people commit such atrocities? Although the work of Hannah Arendt (1963/2006), Christopher Browning (1993), and Stanley Milgram (1963) have illuminated how ordinary people can do terrible things to others without necessarily intending or desiring to inflict harm, their work does not account for equally ordinary people who kill and maim with a sort of heroic joy, when murderers were determined to take away their victims' dignity before they took their lives such as "order[ing] them to do some ridiculous gymnastics exercises, singing songs that stated 'the war is because of us, the war is for us'" (Gross, 2004, p. 62). Central to our argument is that these accounts of extreme violence offer (re)new(ed) opportunities to consider the relationship(s) between cultural sensibilities (i.e., shared practices and beliefs that are perpetually shapeshifting) and ways that culture is conceptualized in educational contexts.

After expounding upon *terror management theory* (TMT), we situate this research in a body of literature that (re)traces historical conceptualizations of culture (see Duncan, 1980; Kroeber, 1917; Williams, 1961) and contemporary apprehensions of violence (see Butler, 2020). We then take a post-qualitative look at first-hand accounts of genocide from Rwanda and Jedwabne, Poland, through the lens of TMT (Greenberg et al., 1986, 1990, 2001, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2021; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Routledge & Vess, 2018). By weaving ourselves into the data as well as with our own thinking and feeling(s) in relation to this inquiry, we hope to provide a more complex understanding of the role cultural worldviews played throughout processes of extreme violence and its existential links/implications. Although, of course, this line of inquiry does not absolve willing or coerced perpetrators/witnesses of their responsibility, as authors, we are optimistic that engaging with difficult/violent knowledges will help us imagine/construct a world that hurts less—a world in which people with divergent worldviews and cultural practices can learn to peacefully coexist (Garrett, 2017).

Terror Management Theory

As experimental work based on the work of Ernest Becker (1973), TMT posits that humans, in part, have developed cultural worldviews (i.e., shared conceptualizations of reality and meaning and associated self-esteem) to insulate themselves from the existential terror of mortality (Greenberg et al., 1986, 1990, 2001, 2007; Pyszczynski et al., 2015; Routledge & Vess, 2018). At the heart of Becker's work (and TMT) is the assumption that humans have an evolved mental complexity that has provided survival advantages including anticipating future outcomes, planning, cooperating, and overcoming environmental challenges. This awareness of ourselves in the world around us, however, is a double-edged sword. Because humans are able to project the self forward in time, we can understand that we are subject to the same natural processes as other animals—specifically aging, decay, and ultimately death. Like (most) living organisms, humans generally desire to keep on living, and so any awareness of this inevitable mortality is intensely troubling without an adequate psychological buffer, particularly when put into a state of mortality salience (i.e., when reminded of death). These reminders of death can be direct (e.g., being asked to talk about death), indirect (e.g., seeing a funeral parlor), or even via a subliminal message

(Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Although there is always a psychological need for existential anxiety buffers, there is an increased need for these defenses when in a state of mortality salience.

Existential defenses take a variety of forms, all of which are directly or indirectly related to culture insofar that these psychological structures are informed and built upon shared (cultural) worldviews and performativities. To name a few examples, close personal relationships (Mikulincer et al., 2003), attending to physical health (Courtney et al., 2020), and religious beliefs (Vail et al., 2019) can all have significant effects on anxieties about mortality. Importantly, studies from a TMT perspective have taken place in countries with a variety of cultural belief systems (e.g., Canada, China, Germany, India, Iran, Italy, Israel, Japan, United States, and so on; Pyszczynski et al., 2015), which provides degrees of consistency in terms of existential framing. Yet, the specific forms of anxiety buffering vary based upon the cultural milieu (i.e., what relationships, “good” health practices, and religious beliefs, etc., look like). Accordingly, TMT research to date has deduced that:

1. the stronger the psychological structures that can alleviate our anxieties are, the more effective they are in threatening situations; elevated self-esteem reduces existential anxieties aroused by a reminder of one’s mortality (Greenberg et al., 1990),
2. reminders of death increase the need for close attachments, worldviews, and associated self-esteem (Burke et al., 2010), and
3. a threat to an anxiety buffer increases one’s death-related thoughts (Hayes et al., 2008a).

In relation to education, teachers need to be aware of personal immortality projects such as striving to make a lasting impact on their students (van Kessel & Burke, 2018), but of particular interest to the authors of this paper is how (violent) performativities informed by cultural worldviews function to provide people—in this case evildoers—with a sense of self-esteem and what the consequences of that function may be for (inter/intra)personal and group relations.

Cultural Worldviews and the Threat of Difference

Cultural worldviews are humanly-created, shared, symbolic conceptions of reality that function as a source of immortality. Shared worldviews, whether religious or secular, are potent buffers against existential anxiety and are intimately tied to culture (Greenberg et al., 1990, 1992; Schimel et al., 2007). As Ernest Becker (1973) stated, a cultural worldview “is more than merely an outlook on life: it is an immortality formula” (p. 255). Worldviews provide humans with both literal and symbolic immortality. In a literal sense, worldviews tell us how part of us might live on after the death of our bodies (e.g., afterlife, reincarnation, recycling atoms). Worldviews also help us live on symbolically because of the legacies left to our culture and the world. Our ideologies and symbols will live on long after we are gone: “Societies can be seen as structures of immortality power” (Becker, 1973, p. 63). Our worldviews also teach us what it means to be a “good” person, and, thus, our self-esteem (which is its own buffer for existential anxiety; Greenberg et al., 1986; Tjew-A-Sin & Koole, 2018) is intimately tethered to a particular worldview.

The problem with relying on worldviews to assuage existential concerns is twofold: humans have constructed their varying cultural belief systems, in turn leading people from different belief systems to interact with each other—and each interaction can make us question

(consciously or unconsciously) the validity of our own perspective. A loss of faith in our way of understanding the world and our place in it functions akin to a direct reminder of death (e.g., seeing a corpse or writing about death). Our bodies and minds can respond to a threat to our worldview as we would a threat to our very lives (Schimel et al., 2007): “threats to meaning, certainty, belongingness, self-esteem, and other psychological entities produce fluid compensation effects because they are linked to the problem of death” (Pyszczynski et al., 2006b, p. 332).

This link between worldviews and protection from death anxiety has two (inter/intra)related consequences: a reminder of death makes us more entrenched in our worldview (Rosenblatt et al., 1989), and exposure to divergent worldviews implicitly reminds us of death, therefore, provoking defensive reactions (Schimel et al., 2007; Solomon et al., 2015). When humans are exposed to divergent worldviews in precarious contexts that heighten death anxiety (e.g., dialogues involving death, natural disasters), humans experience a double dose of death apprehension: a direct reminder of death as well as a weakening of our (worldview) defenses that might protect us from that existential anxiety.

Throughout life, people (en)counter reminders and triggers that indicate that their fictionalized assemblage of reality (their cultural worldview) is perhaps arbitrary—including something as simple as the existence of other ways of knowing and being. When this occurs, as theorized by TMT, people retract to their cultural groups in an effort to validate/affirm their worldviews/postures. Further, this repudiation can lead to a sharp decrease in tolerance and empathy for other cultural perspectives/idea(l)s, which can lead to increased proclivities for violence (Greenberg et al., 2001; Pyszczynski et al., 2015). Humans can cling their worldview in ways that e/a-ffect numerous social relations, such as “prejudice, nationalism, social judgments, interpersonal attraction, romantic love, charitable giving, emotional reactions to one’s own creative actions, support for pre-emptive wars and suicide bombing (within different cultures of course), stereotyping ... attributional biases, and other forms of behavior” (Pyszczynski et al., 2006b, p. 329; see also Greenberg et al., 1997, 2007). From a social studies perspective, TMT’s positioning of cultural worldviews and threat of difference offers a way to traverse traditional demarcations of culture and theorize implications of culture on frameworks of unthinkable violence.

(Ordinary) Superorganic Cultural Entities/Fallacies

Modern conceptualizations of culture are steeped in traditional, anthropogenic influences. When considering how, comprehensively/contemporarily, to define culture, one must regard two camps of thought—holistic and individualistic—that attempt to theorize the outcome of cultural manifestations. Kroeber’s (1917) article on “The Superorganic” presents—although opaquely—a statement holistically granting culture as being an entity that holds both an ontological status and causative power (Duncan, 1980). By attempting to reify the notion that culture is beyond man(kind) and that it (re)acts independently of any individual’s actions, Kroeber (1917) posited that culture adheres to its own laws despite the implicit difference between what can be deemed organic—or *vital*—and cultural. From this perspective, channels of culture are “so unmistakably similar to the evolution of plants and animals, that it has been inevitable that there should have been sweeping applications of the principles of organic development to the facts of cultural growth” (p. 164). Despite this (creaturely) ideation of culture reminding us that everyone possesses a predisposed skillset and there are powers/competencies that must be acquired from non-

hereditary agencies, culture, as a concept, is replete with nuances and in many cases is governed by inescapable (non/violent) conditions.

Complexities of Culture

We acknowledge that culture is not a neutral concept and is not only dependent on context but also subjectivities/collectivities. Put another way, there are many complexities to culture that in turn lead to a myriad of uses/definitions within social education(al research). According to Williams (1961), there are three fundamental angles that any conceptualization of culture must include: (1) *culture as the ideal* (i.e., postulation of consummate beliefs/practices/values); (2) *culture as documentary* (i.e., the recording of anthropocentric thoughts, language, inter/intra-actions, and experiences); and (3) *culture as social* (i.e., socially constructed architectures that govern group behaviors and (re)actions). While each of these components are mutually constitutive, perhaps they can be best thought of as coordinates from which *all* humanity navigates in their own distinct ways. Whereas some groups of people consider culture to embody “the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, [and] the characteristic forms through which members for the society communicate” (Williams, 1961, p. 42), others may not. Regardless, central to Williams’s (1961) conceptualization of culture are the (behavioral) patterns that are formed and that continue to manifest within a group. As these imbrications relating to the fundamentals of culture may be defined as “a selection and configuration of interests and activities, and a particular valuation of them” (Williams, 1961, p. 47), they become operationalized/performed as a way of life.

That said, collective cultural practices then become ordinary, despite subjective analysis from outsiders. Reflecting on the importance of recognizing the normalcy of group cultural practices and (modern) influences within the context of (group) identity formation, Willis (1990) said,

It is the extraordinary in the ordinary, which is extraordinary, which makes both into culture, common culture. We are thinking of the extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanise, decorate and invest with meanings in their common and immediate life spaces and social practices—personal styles and choice of clothes; selective and active use of music and TV, magazines, decoration of bedrooms, the rituals of romance and sub-cultural styles; the style, banter and drama of friendship groups; music-making and dance. Nor are these pursuits and activities trivial or inconsequential ... they can be crucial to the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities. (p. 2)

In many cases, due to spatial proximity, individuals possess limited decision-making power(s) and are forced to perpetuate (violent) patterns of behavior due to self-preservation. Within these crosscurrents of cultural commonality and non/compliance lies the notion of privilege. Put another way, some—those who have been historically marginalized (e.g., economically disadvantaged or those with racialized backgrounds)—have no choice but to participate in cultural practices that initiate/sustain fields of violence.

Force(d) Fields of Violence

According to Butler (2020), non/violence is omnipresent and exists at all levels of society. For groups of people who have been historically marginalized, “the consideration of violent action is not a choice, since one is already—and unwillingly—within the force field of violence” (Butler, 2020, p. 7). From this perspective, non/violence is always already embedded into the architecture of cultural practices or ways of be(com)ing with(in) group or spatiality. Although many cultural outsiders may attempt to codify violence as being justifiable, necessary, and understandable under such circumstances, Butler (2020) prompts our thinking about the (lack of) agency some people have with regard to participating in (violent) cultural practices:

Even if violence is circulating all the time and we find ourselves in a force field of violence, do we want to have a say about whether violence continues to circulate? If it circulates all the time, is it therefore inevitable that it circulates? What would it mean to dispute the inevitability of its circulation? (p. 8)

Just as some do not possess the privilege of *not* engaging in cultural practices of violence, violence enacted by/upon humans across cultural intergroups can have rippling emotional effects, further influencing how existentially destructive encounters are processed and reciprocated. According to Bar-Tal (2003), although “group members are deeply and emotionally touched when compatriots are killed and wounded, especially when the loss is sudden,” even when “those killed are not personally known, the personal relevance of the human losses is intensified” (p. 80). When emotional/physical harm is done to humans, those afflicted by violence and those inflicting harm are perceived as compatriots/kin. This effect occurs regardless of the scale of human violence or if the act was done to a single person. In this way, the force(d) fields of violence become culturally interminable, extending beyond the individual act and disseminating (violent) meditations to larger groups. Further, “the physical violence is perceived as a group matter and group members view the losses as group losses, with the victim acquiring a social identity within the group’s perception of the event” (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 81). Thus, mortality salience mushrooms across/within both group settings (enactors and victims) making them “more defensive and less tolerant toward individuals who are not members of their own group” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 450) and further fostering aggressive acts toward those outside a group’s culture.

Responding to Cultures of Violence

When groups experience violence, they are forced to confront a threat to their own (individual/collective) mortality and the truth that “life is finite and that one must die someday” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 451). Moreover, social interactions are impacted as the group contemplates a reaction to the (violent) event. Reiss and Jonas (2019) posited that each group response occurs in phases. As Step 1 considers the group’s perception of tertiary factors relating to future acts of violence, Step 2 unpacks the motivational-affective states of mind that include: (a) behavior inhibition (i.e., becoming aware of violence and ways in which this cognizance mediates (cultural) rigidity); (b) anxiety arousal (i.e., heightened states of potential affect); and (c) attentional vigilance (i.e., increased concern over self-preservation). During Step 3, motivated cognition, group members “can choose whatever cognition provides simple solutions and promises

instant relief” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 456). Previous research delineates that this step is vulnerable to bias and stereotyping, which unveils the relationship between mortality salience and (cultural) rigidity (Jonas et al., 2003), formation of social constructs (Landau et al., 2004), states of (cultural) generalization for outsiders (Kimhi et al., 2009), and unequivocality of cultural beliefs/practices (Vail et al., 2012).

Each of these play an important role in Reiss and Jonas’s (2019) final step, Step 4: motivated behavior. Undergirded by a plethora of empirical research (e.g., Belmi & Pfeffer, 2016; Kugler & Cooper, 2010; McGregor et al., 1998; McPherson & Joireman, 2009; Pyszczynski et al., 2006a), “when confronted with mortality primes, individuals tend to become more defensive of their own ingroup; thus, perceiving people and groups as potential threats to one’s world-view increases the readiness to exert force against those violators” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 458). Alternatively, following mortality salience resulting from engagements/exposures of violence, the likelihood of (aggressive) retaliatory measures and the rejection of accepting/understanding divergent perspectives/backgrounds greatly increases. In sum, violence within the context of culture is often avoidable considering the (forced) conditions and the psychological impact that experiencing violence causes. These implications are not limited to those who suffer from violence and extend to groups that have purposefully enacted harm upon others within/outside their own cultural group.

Research Method(ology)

To (re)create unexpected meaning(s) from previously conducted/recorded reports published in 2001/2003, we (the authors) first used thematic analysis to help us examine the various perspectives and unanticipated insights with(in) each of the two locations selected (Nowell et al., 2017). This fluid and nomadic approach provided us with an accessible method for organizing, describing, and reporting on themes (Braun & Clark, 2006) relating specifically to the construction of cultural practices by perpetrators/witnesses in Poland and Rwanda. Specifically, we analyzed each of the two texts (relating to Poland and Rwanda) for framings that connected occurrences during the genocide to our (working) definition of culture (i.e., a constellation of actions, procedures, and practices that are informed by shared worldviews) and existentially-motivated preservation/defenses. Distilling each several-hundred page text in this way allowed us to foreground reflections and actions of violence that were isolated insofar that they became customary for the perpetrators.

After identifying fragments of text, we created a composite from both collections of interviews, framed specifically around the a priori theme of culturally violent praxis. We acknowledge that, while this approach is malleable, it can lead to inconsistencies and a lack of coherence throughout our thematic development (Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, we embrace the uncertainty that accompanies this approach from the assumption that “fluid and multifaceted methodologies can offer new dimensions of research to better articulate, accommodate, and reflect anticipated conditions and preferred spatial dimensions for qualitative research” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p. 81). More specifically, we were intentional about braiding together accounts from both Poland and Rwanda in an attempt to put both violent epochs into conversation with each other. We acknowledge that each event consists of specific people and conditions relating to culture/violence but argue for their confluence in a way that allows us to think through/across/with cultural factors sustaining/perpetuating accounts of extreme violence.

We next implemented a post-qualitative methodology—thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012)—inoculating our own perspectives, questions, and theoretical underpinnings into what was produced by the perpetrators/witnesses (i.e., fragments of text from both contexts—Poland and Rwanda). Through the implementation of this methodology, we engaged with the data from the middle, which allowed us to “produce something new” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 1). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “every voyage is intensive, and occurs in relation to thresholds of intensity between which it evolves or that it crosses” (p. 5). As such, we understand post-qualitative methodologies to be a journey into the often-overlooked in-between spaces of meaning providing unexpected opportunities to (re/un)make (re)new(ed) assemblages of understanding. We are guided by Jackson and Mazzei’s (2013) notion that an “assemblage isn’t a thing—it is the process of making and unmaking the thing. It is the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together” (p. 262). From this methodological perspective, we argue that knowledge is not a hidden multiplicity waiting to be (un)found or pinned down, but rather a process of deterritorializing, reterritorializing, and conceptual *becoming* from unconventional points of entry (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Our approach, then, was essentially to “begin with the epistemological and ontological commitments of the analysis”—in our case, primarily through terror management theory—and use the theory “to think about” our topic of concern and then “read and wrestle with texts” (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 10).

Our process occurred in different phases and began with each author reading through the composite and making theoretical dis/connections. After sharing these philosophical engagements, we then returned to what was produced and inserted our own dialogue-thoughts, perspectives, and questions-into the composite before arranging the text into consumable and thematic subsections. We argue that this multifaceted intra-action from within the textual threshold allowed us to de/familiarize ourselves “with nuances, complexities, and less dominant aspects” (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p. 67) of (cultural) power and (existential) possibility. To assist us in delineating our intra-actions with(in) the data and perhaps further contributing to the interlaced nature of our analytical w(a/o)nderings—*perpetrators/witnesses’ words are in italics* and [our ongoing questions and comments as researchers are bracketed].

Theoretical Entanglements of Culture/Violence: Rwanda and Poland

Bonding Over Culture

Culture is one of these shared constructions and “gives life meaning, order, and a sense of permanence” (Greenberg et al., 2001). That is, people “use the fabrications of culture, in whatever form, as charms with which to transcend reality” (Becker, 1973, p. 236). Constructing, accepting, and maintaining a shared cultural worldview takes constant work in order to manage this existential terror. To enhance a sense of being and belonging, people have created anxiety buffers to shield themselves from their own mortality and maintain mental equanimity. For example, before performing unthinkable acts of violence, *those who wanted to chat, chatted. Those who wanted to dawdle, dawdled—if they could avoid being noticed. Those who wanted to sing, sang. We didn’t choose special songs to raise our spirits, no patriotic airs like the ones on the radio, no mean or mocking words about the Tutsis. We didn’t need encouraging verses, we just naturally turned to traditional songs we liked* [resulting in a cultural fostering of trust and sense of] “identity and sense of power” (Becker, 1973, p. 3). However, even if this trust is superficial and not

emotional, Becker (1973) warned that “still most of us would struggle to survive with all our [cultural] powers” (p. 2). [Accordingly, when cultural practices are created/enacted, differences in the cultural self are eroded, significantly impacting the development of interpersonal and intergroup attitudes (Greenberg, et al., 1990).] Our culture is distinct from their culture—we are different from them. *It meant nothing to us to think we were busy cutting our neighbours down to the last one. ... They had already stopped being good neighbors of long standing. ... They had become people to throw away, so to speak ... those killings were premeditated, they were rough at the edges, but still they went unpunished.* [Considering that “the maintenance of life is perhaps one of the most sacred and universal values in human culture” (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 79), to what extent do mundane cultural practices, such as singing, conceal/subjugate motivated behaviors (i.e., Step 4)? And, how might the relationship between punishment and ethicality be generative in thinking about human behavior?]

Importantly, bonds that are created within (cultural) groups are registered differently within a community. Reflecting on the atrocities committed in Rwanda, a local Hutu woman noted: *That bunch was famous on the hill for their carousing and tomfoolery. Those fellows did not seem so bad ... but when they had been drinking, they took sport in the speaking of misunderstandings and wicked words.* [This calls attention to the nuanced ways that behaviors—shaped by cultural worldviews—are justified within cultural groups. We understand this reflection as an attempt to see the “good” within the group through a playful (e.g., carousing) classification of behavioral patterns, which in turn makes us think about the conditions in play and place that allow someone to rationalize problematic and violent cultural manifestations (i.e., Step 2).]

Ordinarilizing Evil

To cope with death related stimuli, humans have developed psychological structures: cultural worldviews and self-esteem. To maintain this structure of purpose and order, *we would wake up at six o'clock [and eat] brochettes of grilled meat and nourishing food because of all the running we had to do [before] [w]e sorted ourselves out on a soccer field* [reinforcing Butler’s (2020) notion that violence is multi-faceted and complex, and yet this ordinariness was not due to thoughtlessness, but rather conscientiousness]. *Perhaps man can get used to killing, if he kills on and on* [and is around those who kill over and over again. However, perhaps the socialness of culture and/or the fears of deviating from (new) cultural norms binds humans.]. As Becker (1973) asked, “and what is this fear, but a fear of the reality of creation in relation to our powers and possibilities?” (p. 52). [To what end is this defensive fear “a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves” (Becker, 1973, p. 52)?] *A number of farmers were not brisk at killing, but they turned out to be conscientious. ... Doing it over and over: repetition smoothed out clumsiness.* [Repetition can help maintain “faith in a cultural worldview because doing so serves the vital psychological function of managing existential terror” (Schimmel et al., 2019, p. 5), and in this case, repetition prevented thoughtfulness about the actions of those with a shared culture.] Notwithstanding the ways these patterns unfold, infold, and refold, violence maintains the capacity to cloud moral/ethical judgements. As one Hutu perpetrator noted: *in a way, I forgot I was killing live people.*

Before the war broke out [in Poland], 1600 Jews lived in Jedwabne, and only seven survived, saved by a Polish woman, Wyrzykowska, who lived in the vicinity. On Monday evening, June 23, 1941, Germans entered the town, reminding Polish inhabitants of their mortality salience

and leading to the start of a Polish-led *anti-Jewish pogrom*. It is worth noting that “death reminders need not always lead to ethnocentrism, intergroup conflict, and punishment of moral offenders” (Schimmel et al., 2019, p. 7). As such, if cultural practices are prosocial and innately compassionate, TMT can crystalize people’s perspectives/(re)actions in a positive way. [Perhaps, we should consider the lack of compassionate (cultural) underpinnings/structures that primed groups in both Poland and Rwanda for outbreaks of violence. Further, we argue that this underscores the importance of cultivating empathy across all levels of society, as “reminders of death should increase their motivation to uphold these values” (Schimmel et al., 2019, p. 8).] The pogroms were led by Polish bandits, two of whom *walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams of Jewish women and children*. When threatened, “individuals [tend] to engage in motivated cognitions to regain a sense of belonging, identity, and agency” (Reiss & Jonas, 2019, p. 469). [Are the most banal of activities, singing and playing music, the most expeditious avenue for (re)claiming a sense of belonging, identity, and agency? How does making music while people are being slaughtered lessen the culpability while simultaneously increasing the consent to participate in such violence?]

Fetishizing Evil

Those who threaten someone’s worldview can be constructed as evils that must be eradicated. That said, “the killers never allow themselves to be overwhelmed by anything” (Hatzfeld, 2003, p. 152). One’s own group is “pure and good” and others “are the real animals, are spoiling everything for you, contaminating your purity and bringing disease and weakness into your vitality” (Becker, 1973, p. 93). *We told ourselves that the Tutsis were in the way [and] for us, kind words for Tutsi were more fatal than evil deeds*. Becker talks about fetishizing fear by localizing all of one’s fear and anxiety into a single, manageable source, which is then labelled as evil, making fears concrete and controllable. *We knew full well what had to be done, and we set to doing it without flinching, because it seemed like the perfect solution* [Hinting at motivated cognition (i.e., Step 3)]. Often these scapegoats are construed (and othered) as “racialized” groups, but any group can be fetishized as the embodiment of evil.

People fetishize evil because it is ultimately a way of dealing with a sense of vulnerability and death. Then, by coming against the evil, lashing out against it (and, in some cases, eradicating it), people can assert their status as heroes who will live on within their worldview group. The heroic quest is to annihilate the evil ones. When those who violate our worldview are killed (by us or by others), our worldview threat is buffered (Hayes et al., 2008b).

Rumors spread that the Germans would issue an order that all Jews be destroyed. Such an order was issued by the Germans on July 10, 1941. Even though the Germans gave the order, it was Polish hooligans who took it up and carried it out, using the most horrible methods. [For this to happen, so willingly and at such an accelerated pace (i.e., operationalization of Step 3, motivated cognition), Polish citizens must have felt that acting violently towards their fellow citizens would offer a release from confronting their own mortality salience (Reiss & Jonas, 2019).]

Triumphing Over Death

According to Ernest Becker (1975), “if culture is a lie about the possibilities of victory over death, then that lie must somehow take its toll on life, no matter how colorful and expansive the celebration of joyful victory may seem” (Becker, 1975, p. 121). *I no longer thought about either life or death. But the blood struck terror into me. It stank and dripped. At night I’d tell myself, after all, I am a man full of blood; all this spurting blood will bring catastrophe, a curse. Death did not alarm me, but that overflow of blood, that—yes, a lot.* TMT is underpinned with the concept that humans cultivate and sustain culture as a buffer from the existential terror of their own mortality, and those perceived as Others (especially culturally) are a threat “that” (not “who”) must be eradicated for the good of the group. For perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, *rule number one was to kill. There was no rule number two.* If our enemy dies, we do not.

Ultimately, our narrowed perception brands these fetishized evil Others (and not “us”), and our own survival is linked to their demise. Jozef Chrznowski testified regarding Jedwabne: *When I came to the square, they [Sobuta and Wasilewski (two other perpetrators of violence)] told me to give my barn to burn the Jews. But I started pleading to spare my barn, to which they agreed and left my barn in peace, only told me to help them chase the Jews to Bronioslaw Sleszynski’s barn. We chased the Jews under the barn and we ordered them to enter inside and the Jews had to enter inside.* Because one group has fetishized the other as evil, it is not just that the victims are dehumanized, but the perpetrators have also lost their humanity. *During the killings I no longer considered anything in particular to the Tutsi except that the person had to be done away with. I want to make that clear from the first gentleman I killed to the last, I was not sorry about a single one.* Once you have begun the process of eradicating the evils, what we might consider to be normal or taken-for-granted morals evaporate. *Perhaps patience and forgetting will win out; perhaps not.* Regardless, ordinary people willingly do terrible things; they have lost their humanity as they have sought to conquer their own un/conscious anxieties about impermanence:

The thing that makes man [sic] the most devastating animal that ever stuck his neck up into the sky is that he [sic] wants an earth that is not an earth but a heaven, and the price for this kind of fantastic ambition is to make the earth an even more eager graveyard than it naturally is. (Becker, 1973, p. 96)

Concluding Thoughts

In his poem, “In Tenebris II,” Thomas Hardy (1896/2006) stated, “if a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” (p. 151). While we understand the two genocidal events presented in this article as being unforgivable/unthinkable atrocities, the goal of this project is to persist with troubling lines of thinking in order to understand the role culture played throughout the construction of a framework of enacted violence. As such, we seek to avoid creating simplistic villains that absolve ordinary people and structures of responsibility, but rather a more textured understanding of the role culture played in shaping their actions and perspectives (van Kessel & Crowley, 2017). Social studies education needs to consider multiple examples that might dismantle the possibilities of further atrocities, or at least remove impediments to taking action when they occur (e.g., Castro & Aguayo, 2013; Totten, 2013). Thinking with Becker and TMT allowed us to engage with what was produced by perpetrators of extreme violence and illuminate behavioral,

cognitive, and motivational (in)differences within a cultural/existential context with the intent of teaching in a way that implicates us all in understanding extreme (historical) violence.

In 1999, Sam Wineburg posed the question, “Why study history at all?” (p. 488). Pushing this question further, we ask, “Why study *violent* history at all?” As we, social studies teacher educators and researchers, continue to grapple with identifying (re)new(ed) ways of making the world hurt less, engaging with accounts of extreme violence presents an opportunity to think through the cultivation of *non-violent* ways and processes of knowing and be(com)ing. Just as Butler (2020) noted, “stabilizing a definition of violence depends less on an enumeration of its instances than on a conceptualization that can take account of its oscillations within conflicting political frameworks” (p. 15), we found that complexifying violence led to our intra-personal interrogation of pre-existing cultural practices in both Poland and Rwanda. Each account reminded us of the importance of healthy, sustainable community practices and the criticality of empathy.

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Curricularizing Social Movements

The Election of Chicago's First Black Mayor as Content, Pedagogy, and Futurities

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I hope someday to be remembered by history as the Mayor who cared about people and who was, above all, fair. A Mayor who helped, who really helped, heal our wounds and stood the watch while the City and its people answered the greatest challenge in more than a century. Who saw that City renewed.

—Harold Washington, *Inaugural Address 1983*

HAROLD WASHINGTON, CHICAGO'S FIRST BLACK MAYOR, has been memorialized for his progressive and democratic leadership. Elected to office for the first time in 1983 and again in 1987, Washington, whose nickname was the *People's Mayor*, represented a beacon of hope in a long line of exclusion in Chicago politics. What is important to note about the election of Harold Washington, and other Black mayors voted in office during the 1980s, is that they were elected in large part, if not solely, by the social movement organizing taking place in their cities, what Harold Washington often referred to as coalition building. Without the large-scale social movement organizing that took place in Chicago prior to 1983 (when Washington took office for the first time) Harold Washington would not have been mayor. As Grayson Mitchell, a key member of Washington's campaign team, put it, "It became a movement. ... We weren't running shit. I mean it had a momentum all of its own" (Muwakkil et al., 2007, p. 80). A movement elected Washington, whose election will forever go down in Chicago and global history for its significance. The 1983 mayoral election drew a record number of voters, including over 96 percent of eligible Black voters and nearly 50 percent of all eligible Latinx voters (Preston, 1983). The election represented a long overdue fracture in the business-as-usual politics of the windy city, whose nickname comes from the hot air blown from politicians' mouths, not the Lake Michigan breeze.

By extending previous scholarship on social movements as collective memory (Camp, 2013; Kelley, 2002; Kubal & Becerra, 2014), this paper seeks to highlight the possibilities and potential in transforming social movements of the past into p-20 curriculum for students, what I term *curricularizing social movements*. I use the term curricularizing social movements to

conceptualize the active transformation of social movements into educational experiences for students. As I detail in this paper, social movements contain content-rich curricular and liberatory pedagogical insights. They can provide content that is relevant to students' lives and communities and that may activate their curiosities, heighten their analyses of their lived experiences, and provide roadmaps into their pasts and futures. Additionally, the interactions of people within social movements—the ways in which they learned from and taught each other—can provide pedagogical examples for educators to be reinvented in contemporary educational settings.

To support this argument, I present a historical narrative of the programming that took place in Operation Breadbasket (Breadbasket), a Chicago Black organizing hub and one of the many influential social movement organizations that led to the election of Chicago's first Black mayor. I reviewed several sources of data for this study. I located 13 surveillance transcripts that were created by the Chicago Police Department between 1969 and 1974, documenting their surveillance of Harold Washington's visits to Breadbasket. Each contained notes from interviews given by confidential informants that helped bring to life Harold Washington's experience at Breadbasket. I also used publicly available accounts from people who attended Breadbasket activities to support the descriptions contained in the surveillance transcripts. Finally, I analyzed a copy of Breadbasket's *Guide for Political Education*—a document containing the structure and processes that Breadbasket used to educate and activate its membership. Together this data unearthed the rich narrative and conceptualization presented here.

Harold Washington's rise to the mayorship and, more importantly, the social movement organizing that made that election run successful can serve as important sources of collective memory (Kubal & Becerra, 2014) to apply in the contemporary world. We live in a world where markets matter more than the people, where racial capitalism is the mechanism of exploitation and historical exclusion (Robinson, 1983). The stories of struggle and triumph are often hidden from the mainstream. As threats to the normalcy of power distribution and authoritarianism, these stories of social movement organizing from the past are dangerous. Discovering the past, particularly stories that are disappearing or have disappeared, may provide us with roadmaps for the future. Here, the future is not so imaginary. It is a (re)contextualization and a (re)building of the work done by those who came before us. The social movement organizing that took place at Breadbasket, that led to the election of Harold Washington, may provide one of many of many of those roadmaps.

The stories of the past, ones that are relevant in geography and culture to students' lived experiences, may better link students to their pasts in ways that other content cannot. Social movement organizations like Breadbasket in Chicago were doing the work of teaching and learning under the framing of political education. As I detail later, a great deal of Breadbasket's programming was about creating inquisitive spaces, bound through the investigation of peoples' experiences and actions, to reduce pain in their lives. Educators may find value in the pedagogical processes used by social movement organizations of the past, especially ones like Breadbasket, that were exceptionally successful at organizing dispossessed peoples (Fanon, 1963) in their original formation.

After detailing the theoretical frameworks that bound this study, I locate the curriculum present at Breadbasket by presenting a historical narrative that situates the social movement organization as an educational endeavor, useful to contemporary educators. I conclude by detailing how curricularizing social movements may support students' healing, can support teaching that moves away from a banking method (Freire, 1970) towards a co-constructed and culturally-sustaining method (Paris & Alim, 2017), and can illuminate the geographies of education.

Breadbasket was one of many spaces where Chicago's dispossessed were able to build political awareness, clarity, and action. And it certainly was not the only space where Black people were organized leading up to Washington's election. I present this story as one of many examples of social movement organizing that could be curricularized, not in a biographical sense, but in relation to praxis. What is very clear to see with the organizing taking place at Breadbasket was a deep commitment to education and action. The leadership of Breadbasket recognized the value in heightening the peoples' analyses while also providing them the tools needed to create positive change in their lives. I hope that this story, and the others existent in the many communities across the world that have resisted oppression, can call other educators and educational stakeholders to create, and demand, more teaching and learning opportunities rooted in the exploration of social movements. Their unveiling may be a pathway to creating more just futures.

Social Movements As Collective Memory

Curriculum can represent many things. The field is more than the content used in learning exchanges. Here, I take an experientialist orientation (Shubert, 1986) to curriculum. The experientialist sees curriculum as “an interchange of experiences and ideas ... centered ... in community ... that realizes ... democracy and education must grow symbiotically, each nourishing and replenishing the other” (Shubert, 1986, p. 17). Learning in this orientation occurs as groups reflect on their experiences.

Freire (1970) writes that teaching and learning is linked to what he calls “revolutionary futurity” (p. 84). Curriculum in this sense

affirms women [sic] and men [sic] as beings who transcend themselves ... for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future. (p. 84)

Here, I present a conceptualization that views historical social movements as curriculum—curriculum to be studied, to be contextualized, and to be utilized as pedagogy. Moving curriculum from a noun to a verb, an action, I advocate for the *curricularizing* of social movements. Curricularizing social movements, transforming them into teaching and learning opportunities, creates connections for people to become readers and writers of their worlds, using memories of the past as conduits to reconstruct their futures.

Kubal and Becerra (2014) remind us that “collective memories are shared ideas about the past which provide a framework for interpreting the present” (p. 865). They make important connections to the ways in which social movements shape and construct collective memories. To compliment this framing, scholar Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) highlights the importance of remembering social movements, writing “social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (p. 9). I use Kelley's operationalization of social movements as “incubators of knowledge” (p. 8) that “transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society” (p. 9). Kelley calls for more historians to document “these movements that were deliberately suppressed from memory” (Camp, 2013, p. 227). This paper is a contribution to that call.

Chicago: A City on the Make

In 1962, Breadbasket, an organization started by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Council, began to work with Chicago Public School teacher Al Raby, head of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO). The CCCC had been leading much of the organizing against the racist policies of Chicago Public Schools. In September of 1966 King announced that Breadbasket would be moving to Chicago. According to Taylor Branch (2007), “King chose Chicago for the music of Mahalia Jackson, the transplanted heartland of the Mississippi, and in part because the Al Raby Coalition (CCCCO) pushed hardest for his help” (p. 321). Chicago Theological Seminary student, Jesse Jackson, would be appointed as the head of the Chicago chapter. Jackson went on to build one of the largest multi-racial, intergenerational, and interdisciplinary social movements in Chicago’s history.

Breadbasket centralized economic issues and successfully organized against companies that exploited their community for capital and provided no jobs to the residents. Breadbasket successfully organized Black communities in Chicago (and other working-class communities), bringing in thousands of jobs through their economic campaigns and galvanizing their membership to recognize their collective power to create positive change. Breadbasket was known for its Saturday workshops, which drew thousands to their headquarters on 79th and Halsted in the city’s southside. Celebrities, activists, and politicians joined Harold Washington in engaging the Breadbasket membership. For example, Angela Davis, who visited October 23, 1971, spoke about welfare rights (Chicago Police Department, 1971b). Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and Cannonball Adderley were frequently in attendance, playing music and speaking out against inequities in the Black community (Deppe, 2017). Renault Robinson, who at the time was the head of the Afro-American Patrolman’s league and later Washington’s campaign manager, talked about discrimination within the city police department (Chicago Police Department, 1971a).

While the celebrities and the educational speakers drew the people out, everyone at Breadbasket was a teacher and learner. Donna Walker-Kuhne (2019), who attended the Saturday workshops as a teenager said this about their impact on her, and her family,

I was deeply affected by those three hours of classes and discussion. We learned about economic development; we were exposed to political analysis, and we learned how those issues impacted the Black community. We talked about the civil rights movement, the impact of racism, and the unjust beatings that Black people were experiencing at the hands of the Chicago police. We planned pickets, marches and voter registration drives. And we even got schooled in personal finance management!

Every meeting opened with entertainment, often by celebrity icons, such as Michael Jackson or Roberta Flack. ... In creating this format, Dr. King and presented by Rev. Jesse Jackson utilized the arts, cultural traditions and rituals of both Africa and the African-American church to mobilize and mold us into civil rights warriors.

Every session left me feeling more informed, empowered and proud to be an African-American. I felt hopeful and determined that we could change our destiny. I remember returning home and sharing all my notes with my sisters and mom. I was so passionate about these gatherings that my entire family—my two sisters, my mom and my aunt—soon joined Operation Breadbasket, and we were the first family to take classes. (n.p.)

Breadbasket, as a social movement organization, both in place and practice, was a space where hope was cultivated, where Black life was celebrated, and where Chicago's "civil rights warriors" (Walker-Kuhne, 2019, n.p.) built coalitions across issues and positionalities. When Harold Washington attended Breadbasket meetings, he did so as a politician and comrade. While the 13 available surveillance transcripts all cited Harold Washington's attendance, only a handful detail instances where he spoke. At Breadbasket, among other places, Washington began to develop and expand his reach to people, his unique ability to listen deeply to the needs of people, and activate them to hold him and other politicians accountable. While these events prepared Washington, in part, to become a people's leader, they are also pedagogical examples. Washington, like an educator, listened deeply to the people he served, built connections from their experiences and the work he did, and was bound in a co-constructed and collective vision for a more just world.

In 1969, Breadbasket opened a Division for Political Education, which created and implemented the Political Education Workshop. The Political Education Workshop aimed to "to enable people to better understand the mechanics of power, how it works, what it takes to make it work and how they might empower themselves and others to have some say-so about their own destiny" (S.C.L.C. Operation Breadbasket Political Education Division, 1970, p. 1). It created spaces of praxis (Freire, 1970)—spaces where the participants were both teachers and students, where the curriculum was rooted in their experiences, and where their freedom could be both imagined and actualized. This educative arm of the organization developed its own curriculum and had 15 teachers and two school administrators. Many of the teachers, organizers, and participants of the political education workshops went on to serve in key roles in Washington's 1979, 1983, and 1987 campaigns for mayor and/or key roles in his mayoral administration. These were much more than voting workshops; they were aimed at supporting an oppressed people's self-determination.

The Political Education Workshop consisted of two parts. Part one "consists of current city, state, and national issues. Our discussions of these issues may bring to light a problem of concern ... we then ask what can we do to bring about a change" (S.C.L.C. Operation Breadbasket Political Education Division, 1970, p. 1). Part two consisted of six classes (Campaign Management, Office Management, Public Relations, Research 1, Advanced Research, and Precinct Coordinating) that represented the "basic knowledge necessary for running a political campaign" (S.C.L.C. Operation Breadbasket Political Education Division, 1970, p. 1). Participants of the workshops left with better understandings of the world around them and, more importantly, their power to create change in that world. Black social movement organizing in Chicago was gaining the attention of those in power.

When Washington spoke at Breadbasket events it was often about legislation that he was leading downstate. He shared news about welfare, police brutality, employment, education, and prisoner-rights legislation he was working on. This legislation was in direct response to the issues Washington heard about as he listened to people, which he did more of than speaking at Breadbasket. Washington was politicized at Breadbasket. While he was sitting on stage during the Saturday workshops and other Breadbasket events that drew thousands of attendees from across the city, he heard the stories and struggles of other Black speakers.

In 1971, Jesse Jackson, head of Chicago's Breadbasket, split from the organization and announced the formation of People United to Save Humanity (PUSH). While Breadbasket took a sharp turn toward the advancement of Black capitalism, the Saturday workshops continued, as did the Chicago Police Department surveillance. Surveillance records during this time period

demonstrate a more vocal State Representative Washington, who continued to share updates on legislation he was working on and who began to speak more to the people about their ability to create change. For example, in November of 1973, in front of a crowd of 1800 people, Washington spoke about the power of the people to get legislation passed. He said, “when this pressure is used right, then you have power. The people expect a lot from their representatives, but the representative is only as strong as the people he represents” (Chicago Police Department, 1973, n.p.). Harold’s commitment to the people he served was put on display time and time again at Breadbasket and at PUSH. He was proving that he was committed to creating better conditions for Black people in Chicago.

The groundwork laid at Breadbasket and PUSH over 15 years helped Washington build a large base, build his analysis of the issues, and build his leadership identity. He proved himself, as State Representative and Congressman, to be trustworthy. Furthermore, he demonstrated his ability to respond to the racial inequities so visible in his city by using his political power. Washington’s legislative work wasn’t solely about passing legislation, which he did. It was about making Black life visible to the legislature, responding to the oppression that Black people faced, and celebrating Black culture. Richard J. Daley’s death in 1976 left an opening in Chicago’s political scene, particularly for the rise of Black power. The time following was critical for rupturing the machine politics that had run the city for so long (pre-dating Daley). Chicago’s political forces on the Black left had been preparing for a moment like this one for years. Chicago’s Black residents, whom Washington represented as a state representative and eventually congressman, had been organizing, 15 years before his 1983 election victory, for better municipal and legislative representation. Many of these organizers frequented Breadbasket’s (and later PUSH’s) Saturday service and their political education workshop. The Black left in the city seized the time to put forth a Black candidate with strong ties to community and a history of coalition building. Because of his relationship with social movement organizations, especially the people who frequented Breadbasket and PUSH, Washington emerged as a viable candidate to become Chicago’s first Black mayor. Washington had almost 25 years of legislative experience and was unapologetic in the ways he advocated for Black people and against anti-Black violence. Through vociferous organizing and diligence, Chicago had their candidate for mayor selected by the people.

Curricularizing Social Movements

There is a curriculum within the social movement organizing that led to the election of Chicago’s first Black mayor. It is a curriculum where reading the world is relevant to the reader and one where reading leads to a re-writing of that world. Unlike other politicians, whose victories were won largely due to the support of a select few wealthy financiers, Harold Washington’s 1983 mayoral campaign awoke an entire city. Organizing for the first Black mayor of Chicago started long before Lu Palmer (1989), a well-known Black Chicago radio-show host and community activist, coined the slogan, “We shall see in 83” (n.p.). It started in the churches, it started in the schools, and it started within the events held at organizing bases like Breadbasket and PUSH.

When transformed into curriculum, the social movements that led to Washington’s election dismantle the false narrative of individualized leadership. The People’s Mayor was put forth by people, led on behalf of those people, and was accountable to those people. He entered into spaces as both teacher and student. Washington often attended Breadbasket workshops to learn about how intimately connected the people were to the issues he advocated for as State Representative and

Congressman. Every step in Washington’s campaign to the mayorship involved a deep humanizing commitment to people and to what he often referred to as “coalition building.” The people recognized this commitment and loved him deeply for it.

Sadly, Harold Washington died in 1987, during the first year of his second term as mayor. His legacy lived after his death because his work was so closely bound to the people and to the social movements that supported him in office, but now, the memories of Washington’s legacy are beginning to evaporate (Wilson et al., 2019). Curricularizing the social movements that led to Washington’s election may support the ignition of legacies on the brink of extinguishment. Given the state of the world today, with stark differences in basic human rights along lines of race, class, and other identities, it provides an opportunity to ask how schools, and other formal and informal educational spaces, might better support students in actualizing their potential to change the world around them.

Social movements of the past can be curricularized in many ways. In this article, I articulated, among others, two major curricular contributions—content and pedagogy. Social justice educators in search of more culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) and sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) curriculum may find value in curricularizing social movements of the past. They are rich in their content that, when contextualized within students’ lives and communities, can serve as connective pathways between them and their past. Here, content should stretch beyond the memorization of dates, names, and places. Content can also serve as an analytic. An analysis of the social movements of the past might also illuminate the learning experiences used to heighten peoples’ analysis of the structures of oppression existent in their lives. The workshops at Breadbasket were, in large part, about heightening the ways in which people were able to problematize oppression in their lives, moving the blame away from themselves and towards the structures of oppression. Translated to a classroom setting, this content may serve a parallel purpose. The content of social movements of the past may be useful in supporting students’ movement away from blaming themselves, their families, and their communities for pain in their lives. Instead of this self-blaming, individualized notion of oppression, the content of social movements can support an identification of the systems, policies, and processes that contribute to pain in peoples’ lives.

Social movements of the past also reveal pedagogical practices that center love and justice. When analyzed for their pedagogical contributions, social movements like the one that elected Harold Washington can speak to the sorts of humanizing conditions necessary for learning, the ways in which teachers can facilitate explorations of their students’ lives, and examples of justice-centered interactions that diminish the hierarchy between teachers and students. The Political Education Workshops at Breadbasket were more like families than school classrooms. The community amongst the students became crucial for the transformational aims of the curriculum. The students at Breadbasket were a community of learners who explored their lives and took action in an effort to transform them. Whether they recognized it or not, social movements like Breadbasket had a pedagogy—a pedagogy bound in love and justice; one that viewed the students as fully capable and fully human; a pedagogy that recognized all could be teachers, and all could be learners; a pedagogy bound in the real-world, not standardized numerical outcomes.

In addition to the content and pedagogical practices that may emerge from curricularizing social movements, there are additional insights that I will expand upon here. As I detail, curricularizing social movements, integrating them into educational settings in and out of schools, can support healing, move away from the banking method of teaching towards a more dialogic

interactive education, and illuminate the educational contexts and conditions within social movement organizing.

Healing

Students in schools across the U.S. enter with their experiences from the outside world. The adoption of “mindsets” does little to remove the traumatic structures of harm from society. While some educators have begun to explore the usefulness in relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992) and sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) pedagogical experiences, there is a need to explore the restorative and transformative nature of these interactions more deeply. Educators, and more specifically the milieus they create, can play a role in healing. Freire (1970) reminds us that education can be used as a tool to both read and re-write the world. Education in this sense, then, represents an act of freedom, of humanization. An exploration of the “why of ... pain” (Freire, 2011) can lead to hope. Concrete hope, as Freire (1970, 2011) calls it, in this sense is not only a move away from fatalism, but also a mechanism to heal from the pain in students’ lives.

Dispossessed students of all ages may enter into schools with false notions of their power. The structures of oppression condition their worlds and send them messages that strip them of their humanity. Schools continue this social reproduction when they view students as empty vessels to be filled. When curricularized, social movements create the conditions for education to serve as a mechanism of healing. Operation Breadbasket was a space for people to better understand the “why” (Freire, 2011) of their pain, better locating the mechanisms of oppression existent in their lives. Freire (2011) also reminds us that the recognition of the “situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction” (p. 23). The analysis of the world, and the related action to make it better, all make the world a less harmful place. In the act of healing the world, we heal ourselves.

Curricularizing social movements of the past can support healing. People organizing for a Black mayor in Chicago sought healing. Chicago had been a place of oppression for so long. Electing someone with a commitment to social justice for all oppressed peoples was also about creating the conditions for healing. There are other social movements that represent the same. Social movements of the past, both in content and pedagogy, may illuminate the spaces and interactions of healing—spaces and interactions that can be reborn in and out of schools.

Spatial Conditions of Liberatory Education

The social movement organizing that led to Harold Washington’s election was educative but did not necessarily center schools in that responsibility. How could the community rely on schools, and the machine that controlled them, as the sole spaces of their liberation?

There exists a distinction between education and schooling here that I will elaborate on briefly. Schooling, like the banking method, is a tool of social reproduction and oppression—a tool that sorts society. Education, on the other hand, represents something more freeing, more liberatory, more emancipatory. Education supports a recognition of one’s power to transform the world, where schooling helps one to be complacent with the order of the world. As Freire (1970) put it, education, in the sense that I define it, “identifies with the movement which engages the people as beings aware of their incompleteness” (p. 84).

Curricularizing social movements of the past might illuminate the spatial contexts of education, helping to bring light to the educative potential of all spaces in the community. The social movements that led to the election of the Harold Washington, and more importantly that led to the peoples' recognition of their power to create change in their lives, took place in churches, barbershops, and family rooms, around kitchen tables and in other communal spaces where people felt safe and connected. Spaces where they could share their experiences in the world connected them to structures of oppression and led them to engage in action to fracture those oppressive structures. These were spaces where an education for liberation could be actualized.

I call on other school-based educators to build more alliances with the educative spaces in their school communities. These alliances can help extend the educative capacities of schools while also providing school-based practitioners with real-world, asset-based, examples of education that can be integrated into their classrooms. Curricularizing social movements means understanding the educative capacities and functioning of the spaces and places existent in communities outside of formal schools.

Away from the Banking Method

Schooling often is performed through what Freire (1970) describes as banking methods. In this sense, students are positioned as empty vessels, only to be filled with the knowledge deemed appropriate by the school (and thus the state). These methods seek control and order, cooperation and compliance. A problem-posing education, one that uses lived experience as curriculum much like the workshops at Breadbasket, has different aspirations. Here, education is an act of freedom. As Freire (1970) wrote, “problem-posing education—which accepts neither a ‘well-behaved’ present nor a predetermined future—roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary. Problem-posing education is revolutionary futurity” (p. 84).

Social movements do not organize people through banking methods. As detailed through the examples of Breadbasket workshops, I illuminate problem-posing pedagogies. The relationships at Breadbasket were bound in beloved community, what King described as the inextricable connections between people. People at Breadbasket workshops were able to see that they were not alone in their oppression, but also build a community of revolutionaries to alter those conditions.

Curricularizing social movements offers both content and pedagogies that move teaching and learning away from a banking method and towards a collaborative, relational, and revolutionary methodology that transforms classrooms into spaces of investigation. In these co-constructed educative spaces, students' lives and communities are curriculum to be explored, problematized, and transformed.

Conclusion

As detailed in this paper, social movements hold curricular value in creating the conditions to explore the past, present, and future. When used for the content and their pedagogical practices, social movements as curriculum represent something more freeing, more liberating. I use the social movement organizing that led to the election of Chicago's first Black mayor as one of many examples of social movement organizing that could be used in classroom spaces in and out of

schools. The social movement organizing that led to Harold Washington's mayoral election can be found in other places to illuminate a number of issues and communal responses to said structures of oppression.

Imagine a student in Chicago, reading, or watching, and listening to the stories of the organizing that led up to Washington's victory or a student in any community across the world learning about the social movements that developed their community over time. How many of those stories might that student and their classmates connect to? What legacies might they make contemporary connections to? What futures might be created in that student's imagination, not so distant from the past? What futures might be created if that student's classroom was constructed to foster action to actualize the conditions that they imagine?

I encourage others to locate the social movements local to their spaces and places and consider their curricular usefulness. These movements may be supportive in creating spaces where people can imagine and actualize a more just and equitable world—a world that may not be so futuristic, but a world grounded in real occurrences of the past that make the future. Social movements of the past may provide these critical roadmaps to the future.

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(De)colonizing Critiques

Critical Pedagogy, *Currere*, and the Limits of the Colonial Mentality

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IN A 2020 INTERVIEW leading up to Puerto Rico's general elections, Alexandra Lúgaro, the newly formed party *Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana's* (MVC's) candidate for Governor, stated that her potential defeat could be attributed to a lack of education. MVC represented a progressive challenge to the three-party system dominated by the narratives of Puerto Rico's political status—statehood, commonwealth, and independence. MVC set that debate to the side and focused on promoting policies of economic and social justice, yet Lúgaro insisted that ignorance would be to blame if she did not come out on top. These statements were understandably not well received, yet they moved me to acknowledge my own unchecked possession of truth. In the same way she viewed the Puerto Rican people as incapable of understanding the transformative change only her party could provide, I had also condescendingly deployed critical pedagogical stances through my teaching and activism. Assuming the learner to be an empty vessel that lacks any agency over his or her actions, I consistently framed them as requiring critical intervention that I, apparently free from the shackles of oppressive ideologies, could provide. In the context of colonial Puerto Rico, I had fallen into the trap of labelling others who did not share my liberatory aspirations as ignorant and suffering from the colonized mentality. The allure of Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi's taxonomy was hard to resist as I struggled to cope with why the majority of Puerto Ricans refused to desire what I desired most, political independence for the archipelago. My praxis, as an educator and an activist, stemmed from a selfish thirst for that which I was denying the other, freedom.

In this paper, I explore my ontological topographies through autobiographical writing in hopes of acknowledging the limitations of critical praxis. While postmodernist critiques of critical pedagogy (e.g., Lather, Ellsworth, Pinar) have helped me see the arrogance and oppressive tendencies of my teaching and curriculum theorizing, I argue that the subjective reconstruction of the self in colonial contexts, while important, is ultimately insufficient in “extricating oneself psychologically from interpellation by the colonizing regime” (Pinar, 2011, p. 40). My life experiences as an activist, teacher, and colonized subject have helped me realize that a decolonizing Fanonian mental process is marred by the same messianic and unencumbered mindset that only colonized peoples are aptly equipped to either (un)problematically (de)ploy or

skeptically (de)construct as I intend to do throughout this paper. I argue that, while the colonial condition does arguably exert psychological oppression upon imperial subjects, its enunciated critique deterministically imposes dialogical control through pseudo-scientific discourses that strip the colonized of their agency and divisively disrupt honest engagement between colonized individuals. I believe we should do away with the narcissistic and paternalistic discourse of the “colonial mentality” in order to develop a truly dialogical pedagogy and critical praxis that starts with an honest deconstruction of the self through auto-ethnography in order to move towards a collective decolonial future.

Autobiography as Method

In the summer of 2017, I, along with 6 of my high school students, worked on a grassroots community project called *Enlazarte*. We developed a summer program for underprivileged youth aimed at fostering critical consciousness through the visual arts. The reflections written by my students and co-researchers revealed how much the experience helped them overcome their insecurities, but something was lacking as I read through each of them. Their reflective practice was rooted in what Hongyu Wang (2010) calls external time; we only analyzed a linear period of about 6 months where we directly worked with the project. I realized that this form of reflection is insufficient and myopic; what was missing was an exploration of our internal time, meaning a non-linear approach to our lived experiences (Wang, 2010). Where did our insecurities stem from? Why didn't we value our own ideas previous to the participatory project? According to Wang (2010), *currere* offers an ideal method for reflecting on life experiences as it “encourages participants to confront difficulty in order to loosen its grip” (p. 279), and it “blurs the boundary of past, present and future to encourage an inner experience of time that enables a transformative re-entry into the present” (p. 282). For Wang and her students, writing *currere* “led to a sense of agency and transformed ... daily praxis in both ... personal and professional lives” (p. 282). *Currere* can alter our interpretation and remembrance of past private experiences, which will unavoidably trickle down to our public and professional lives. It can “build bridges between difficult emotions (such as shame, guilt, fear, anger)” (Wang, 2010, p. 280) and provide teachers, activists, and researchers with a method for uncovering the sources of our insecurities and our internalized oppressions.

Currere, which literally means “to run the racecourse,” embraces a lived curriculum rooted in our subjective experiences. It was popularized by Madeleine Grumet and William Pinar (1976) in the 1970s reconceptualization of the field of curriculum studies. According to Patrick Slattery (2017), *currere*

emphasizes the individual's own capacity to reconceptualize his or her autobiography. The individual seeks meaning amid the swirl of present events, moves historically into his or her own past to recover and reconstitute origins, and imagines and creates possible directions of his or her own future. (p. 190)

Currere allows us to trace our life histories by salvaging memories our subconscious minds have refused to forget; we arduously dig for them like precious metals, eventually striking gold as our subjectivity surfaces, abashedly naked and opaque from the dirt within which it was buried. *Currere* strives to “accomplish a critical distancing that is at the same time an engagement with

the self” (Pinar, 1995, p. 12). It is divided into four phases where individuals go back and forth in a non-linear re-construction of a “memory of the memory ... a memory of my own remembering” (Neumann, 1998, p. 425). Wang (2010) concisely summarizes these steps in the following manner:

The regressive step is about the free associative remembrance of the past. The progressive step is the meditative pondering of the future. The analytical step is about the analysis of what one uncovers in the first two steps in relation to one’s present biographic situation. The synthetical step is about pulling oneself towards a higher level of knowing and being. (p. 276)

This “complicated conversation” with oneself reveals moments and experiences we have taken for granted and helps us see why we are the way we are and why we are not who we say we are.

Currere has proven to be a valuable method for prospective pedagogues in teacher education programs. Wang (2010) argued that *currere* allowed his students to revisit memories they had taken for granted, and “as a result of this remembering, (their) worldview was expanded and changed” (p. 277). Like some of my colleagues in *Enlazarte*, one of Wang’s students “gained confidence in herself and grew the courage to challenge authority” (p. 280). *Currere* can be an empowering method for educators, and I believe that activists could benefit in the same way. Emotions run high when we recall and reconstruct painful experiences from the past, but in this process, “the attachment to those emotions is loosened so that moving beyond them is possible” (Wang, 2010, p. 278). Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (2015) draws on *currere* “as a reflexive framework for grappling with our autobiographical-intellectual self-understandings of becoming teachers in and for the world” (p. 123). *Currere* helped Ng-A-Fook confront his own insecurities, as he reflected on the idea of westernizing his name “in order to be accepted within the discursive, intellectual, material, and political regimes of higher education” (p. 131). He goes on to ponder,

what kinds of insights might we provoke in terms of studying our life histories in relation to our academic studies? How might autobiographical research provoke teacher candidates to open up the possibility of transforming their cultural values and ideological orientations in relation to a city of youth? And by attempting to answer each of our autobiographical-intellectual and curricular questions, what are the implications for self-understanding our subject formations as teachers? (p. 132)

Both Wang (2004, 2010) and Ng-A-Fook (2015) echo Pinar (1976, 1994, 2004, 2011) in seeing the potential of *currere* for teachers as “it provides a space to rethink and recompose the private familial dynamics of our subjectivities within and in relation to the public sphere” (Ng-A-Fook, p. 144). There is nothing standing in *currere*’s way except our internal fears and insecurities of what we might look like from a distance. I will now use *currere* to run the racecourse of my own internal time and become a stranger as I hopefully encounter myself on the journey home (Wang, 2004), bare, but not afraid.

Subjective (Re)construction

I recall a summer afternoon in 2016; a comrade had prepared a workshop on Fanon and decolonization. Around 15 people showed up as we gathered at the entrance of the United States

Federal Court in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which we had occupied in the name of political independence and economic justice. My comrade, who we shall call Víctor, shared his reading of Fanon and the ways the colonized, even after achieving political independence, continue to be victims of colonialism. We reflected that, even if our grassroots movement, known as the *Campamento Contra la Junta*, achieved its lofty political and economic goals, we would proceed to reconstruct the world in the fashion of the old—a mirror of the order we had worked so hard to topple. At the end of the lecture, Víctor asked participants to identify ways in which we, the Puerto Rican people, display symptoms of the colonial mindset. A man spoke up; I remember he identified himself as a dock worker, a union man, and he immediately spoke of cabotage laws and the Merchant Marine Act impeding Puerto Rico's commercial growth. The audience applauded his remarks as others spoke of local businesses struggling to compete with U.S. multinational companies. Víctor was clearly frustrated; the conversation could not escape the limits of political and economic liberation. Even after Víctor's clear attempts to redirect the conversation towards psychological decolonization, the participants were simply unable or unwilling to see past the prototypical symbols of colonialism; this was a learning experience. I have never forgotten this moment nor the arrogance with which I perceived its absurdity. Was my supposed clairvoyance indicative of a haughty sense of immunity to colonialism?

During the life of the *Campamento Contra la Junta*, we constantly talked about decolonizing Puerto Rico, but we rarely spoke of decolonizing ourselves. In this thoroughly horizontal participatory setting, we had all entered as individuals but had committed to the collective; I think I stopped being an individual for quite some time. I now wonder how I could have spoken of decolonization when I had never questioned my own montages. Most of my insecurities revolve around my privilege, which is contextualized or framed through colonialism. Colonialism hovers over me like a dark cloud—no—like a spotlight revealing and drawing attention to my privilege for everyone to see. I cannot escape the multiple brandings it has gifted me. During my years as an undergrad in Oberlin, Ohio, and now as a doctoral student in Vancouver, Canada, I have been constantly interrogated over the whereabouts of my accent. Answering this question is never an easy task; it requires a complicated conversation first with myself and then with the interrogator. I never take this question as a compliment; I interpret it as a sign of suspicion. How can this person have possibly grown up in a Spanish speaking country and know English as well or perhaps even better than I do? The interrogation of my accent forces me to confront my own identity and the facets I have chosen to conceal; it reveals the insecurities that I have carried with me throughout my life and that have most probably shaped the teacher and activist I am today.

I never know how to react or what to answer to interrogations about my identity. Maybe it's all the cartoons and video games I played as a child or my education in one of the island's most prestigious private Catholic schools. Another possibility, the one I least like to consider, is rooted in the fact that I was born in Washington D.C. and spent my infancy in the imperial capital. Revealing this to a stranger or a colleague is not something I am usually willing to do. Other times, when I say I am from Puerto Rico, I get asked, but were you born there? This question, like the previous one, usually signals, once again, suspicion; the interlocutor feels they are on to something. Perhaps they suspect I am a fraud, a poser, or a phony. I reluctantly answer this question and feel obligated to explain that my entire family is from Puerto Rico and that I was in fact raised on the island. I even feel that need right now, as I write this regressive text, which perhaps only a handful of people will ever read. I feel the need to clarify my identity and put the reader's suspicions to rest. I have been confronted with these questions my entire life, as I filled out questionnaires and

government and registration forms. Every time, I would scroll down and shamefully click on my origin story, but at least I've never had to explain myself to the computer. When I travel the world, I use my U.S. passport to identify myself; it legitimizes my existence and provides access to strange places while making me a stranger in my own estranged reality.

My colonial badges constantly remind me of the different paths my life's racecourse could have taken and force me to consider what could have been if my father hadn't tragically died that February morning in 1991. We would have probably stayed in D.C. for a longer period, and my formative years would have been spent far away from Puerto Rico. My engagement with my father, for whom I was named, has mostly been limited to the books he left behind. Most of them revolve around his work as a legal aid to then Vice-President of the United States, George Bush, Sr., whose picture, taken alongside Bush's wife Barbara, my mother, and my father in the White House (see Figure 1 below) sits atop a shelf in the library as a constant reminder of what if.

Figure 1

Photo of Parents with President Bush and First Lady



God and Man at Yale, *The Power Game: How Washington Works*, *Who's Who in American Politics*, and *Statehood is for the Poor* are some of the books that have my father's handwritten signature on the inside (a further selection of books from his library have been listed at the end of the References section). He was an ambitious man with lofty political aspirations; his network of Yale graduates, connections to the Republican Party, and presence in D.C. politics would have most likely secured his rise through the ranks of Puerto Rico's pro-statehood party. Holding his books brings me closer to him, but at the same time, they drive us further apart. He was an agent of imperialism and a complicit, proactive collaborator of colonial rule. As a conservative, Republican, pro-statehood, Puerto Rican lawyer and politician, he would have made an interesting subject for Fanon. For me, my father is a man I do not remember, a man who embodies almost everything I stand against. I carry the burden of his memory and the privilege of his life's work everywhere I go.

I once considered becoming a lawyer just like him, my mother, uncles, and every talentless classmate with whom I grew up. I chose history and teaching instead—a purposeful decision in rejection of bourgeois values and an embrace of working-class virtues, which I yearned to embody. I wanted to descend the ladder of social mobility and leave behind my father's legacy, my educational privilege, and my colonial scars of language, birthplace, and citizenship. I wanted to serve my people, and I found teaching to be an honest career where I could labor proudly and not directly serve private interests. I enrolled in a master's program in the History of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean at the Centre for Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean in San Juan. I was determined to reconnect with my culture and embrace the side of history my Catholic school upbringing had purposefully omitted. I was determined to know more than everyone else and overcompensate for my visibly perceivable colonial scars.

My first experience as a public-school teacher came during my practicum at a specialized public school. I remember asking José, my supervisor, hard questions, such as how to approach creationism in the classroom and the sensual decadence of Ancient Greek civilizations. His response was timid, and I remember sensing trepidation. A couple of days after our conversation, he asked me to go to the Principal's office, where I was told that I was a difficult person and sent home. I was visibly angry and enraged that, in the 21st century, my rejection of Catholicism had jeopardized my career. I found another school and finished my program, got certified, and eventually made my way back, ironically, to the same school that had once labeled me as problematic. I worked alongside José, who at one point became the school Principal, the same José who was tasked with nurturing a young critical teacher but who chose to flee instead. We never spoke about the incident as we passed each other every day in the hallways for five years. I wonder if he ever reflects on his actions; I wonder if he felt threatened by my conviction to social justice and secularism; I wonder if I was, in fact, a difficult and problematic person.

There is a common narrative thread connecting the stories I have reconstructed in my regressive writing. My internal time is non-linear and goes beyond my participation in the *Campamento Contra la Junta* and *Enlazarte*. *Currere* reaches deep into my semi-conscious past and traces an intellectual topography of highs and lows, of valleys and mountains, that frame the coloniality of my being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The root of my framework, the sources of my epistemologies, stem directly from the life experiences I have revealed, which have been highly influenced by the coloniality of power (Quijano, 1997). My colonized mind yearns for liberation; it seeks authenticity and sovereignty in spite of imperialism's best efforts to neutralize my identity. The regressive phase forced me to reflect on difficult memories that have left me feeling naked and vulnerable, but this process is meant to be painful, frustrating, yet consequentially rewarding.

I agree with Yatta Kanu and Mark Glor (2006) that “the opening up of ourselves and our professional practice to examination will proverbially shine light into many of the spaces that perhaps educators are uncomfortable to acknowledge need inspection” (p. 111). As I re-read my regressive reflection, I realize that “the autobiographical act is not complete until the writer becomes its reader and the temporal fissure that has opened between the writing and the reading invites negation as well as affirmation” (Grumet, 1991, p. 73). My colonial tattoos, unerasable, remind me and others that my incaltrant *independentismo*, critical pedagogy, participatory mindset, and existentialist approach to life is very much rooted in colonialism; they are badges I bare nakedly as I walk along the racecourse.

The Limits of Critical Pedagogy

Currere and autobiographical writing are not without their critics. Michael Apple (1999, as cited in Smith 2013) “for instance, supports autobiography and the value it has for education but is critical of the potential individualism. He goes as far as to suggest that such a method caters to, ‘the white, middle-class woman’s or man’s need for self-display’” (p. 6). Bryan Smith (2013) agrees and adds that “if autobiography is left uncritically examined, it risks becoming the self-indulgent endeavor alluded to by Apple” (p. 6). Pinar (2004) himself has acknowledged “the dangers of exhibitionism and exposure” (p. 36) in *currere*, and Grumet (1981) recalls the method’s “stigma of narcissism and privatization” (p. 116). Initially, I too thought this method was a self-indulgent form of naval gazing. As a self-proclaimed critical pedagogue and pro-independence activist, I have always believed that individuals need to step outside themselves in order to foster collective action. As a teacher and activist, I strove to build a sense of community consciousness rooted in the common good, which in retrospect rendered individuality and personal experiences irrelevant. I realized, much like Laurie MacGillivray (1997), that in my effort to construct a participatory, critical, and liberatory atmosphere I have resorted to many of the same hierarchical methods I sought to disrupt. MacGillivray (1997) accepts that her “unacknowledged biases/expectations sabotaged” her pedagogy (p. 470), much like my own unacknowledged insecurities/complexes have hindered my praxis.

As Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) learned through her adventures with critical pedagogy, “confronting unknowability” (p. 321) and acknowledging that a multiplicity of these knowledges can and will be contradictory is a necessary and desirable process for any setting. Ellsworth reflects on the experience of teaching an anti-racist course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a critical pedagogical framework. It is worth quoting Ellsworth at length, as she discusses the difficulties she faced while navigating the practical side of critical pedagogy and attempting to empower her students:

The contortions of logic and rhetoric that characterize these attempts to define “empowerment” testify to the failure of critical educators to come to terms with the essentially paternalistic project of traditional education. “Emancipatory authority” is one such contortion, for it implies the presence of or potential for an emancipated teacher. Indeed, it asserts that teachers “can link knowledge to power by bringing to light and teaching the subjugated histories, experiences, stories, and accounts of those who suffer and struggle.” Yet I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism. No

teacher is free of these learned and internalized oppressions. Nor are accounts of one group's suffering and struggle immune from reproducing narratives oppressive to another's—the racism of the Women's Movement in the United States is one example. (pp. 307–308)

Ellsworth is conscious of the assumptions she made before entering the course and her false sense of invulnerability. This protective arrogance led her to realize that Shor and Freire's (1987) conception of “emancipatory authority,” where teacher “knows the object of study ‘better’ than the students,” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 308) is rooted in a false sense of critical consciousness. Ellsworth claims that, given her positionality of “white-skin, middle-class, able-bodied, thin privilege and institutionally granted power” (p. 308), she did not know racism better than her students. Ellsworth believes that critical pedagogy reproduces the same repressive myths it seeks to overcome.

Patti Lather (1998) critiques the field of critical pedagogy for its inclination “toward dominance in spite of liberatory intentions. Concepts of ‘transformative intellectuals,’ ideology-critique, a voluntarist philosophy of consciousness, and pretensions toward ‘emancipating’ or ‘empowering’ some others are marked as an inadequate praxis” (p. 494). Pinar (2011) suggests that critical pedagogues could benefit from *currere*, asserting that, “unaddressed, the interpellated ‘I’ re-enters ‘critical scholarship’ as an unproblematic commonsensical self, an ‘I’ evidently unencumbered by the political forces reproduction and resistance theories depict as omnipresent and determinative” (p. 35). Critical pedagogy's arrogance is revealed as “the split-off ‘I’ asserts itself as a unitary context-free cohesive self, reserving for itself the agency evidently eluding everyone else” (p. 33). Autobiography and *currere* can offer a way to address the incongruence of critical pedagogy and potentially address the “I” of ideology critique, especially if that “I” sees itself as “unencumbered” by the ideology itself. Autobiographical writing can potentially return agency and subjectivity to people alienated by Neoliberalism's standardization of daily life. It can reconnect individuals to their professions and each other by fostering an eclectic collective narrative of exploitation and colonization.

Lather (2017) questioned whether “our very efforts to liberate perpetuate the relations of dominance” (p. 98). She critiques Peter McLaren's messianic impulses and “redemptive agendas as ever deeper places for privilege to hide” (p. 233). For Lather (2001), critical theory is too confident in itself, and she concludes the following:

Implementing critical pedagogy in the field of schooling *is* impossible. That is precisely the task: to situate the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working through aporias. Ellsworth calls this “coming up against stuck place after stuck place” as a way to keep moving within “the impossibility of teaching” in order to produce and learn from ruptures, failures, breaks, and refusals (Ellsworth 1997, xi, 9). This is in contrast with the experience of plenitude that underwrites McLaren's call for a “revolutionary socialist project for education.” (p. 189)

But Lather does not fall into solipsistic relativism; rather, she understands the limits of reflexivity, as it “authorizes itself by confronting its own processes of interpretation as some sort of cure toward better knowing, while deconstruction approaches ‘knowing through not knowing’ (Visweswaran, 1994, as quoted by Lather, 2017, p. 252). Lather and Ellsworth (1996) believe in the importance of “deconstructing moments in classrooms when ‘things go wrong,’ pedagogical

meltdowns are used to foreground the limits, the necessary misfirings of pedagogy” (p. 70). These “meltdowns” and “stuck places” are rarely addressed by critical scholars in their research, especially those who employ participatory and critical pedagogical methodologies. Liberation and decolonization appear to be forgone conclusions, the assumed and unavoidable results of critical praxis that reveal themselves as inevitable consequences of collective action. Unfortunately, in challenging social reproduction, many times these groups fail to address and highlight what oppressive forces they might have reproduced and failed to resist (Brown, 1996).

The “Colonial Mentality”

While Pinar (1994, 2013) is highly critical of critical scholarship, this doesn’t mean he has completely dismissed the field. Pinar (1976) sustains that *currere*

starts with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and with the major themes in that book. The first is that human vocation, ontologically, is humanization; the second is that to pedagogically act in accord with this meaning of the human endeavor is to dialogically encounter one’s students; the third is to so encounter our students as to cultivate thought and action, a sort of *praxis* Freire terms “*Conscientização*.” (p. 8)

Freire (1968/1995) believes the oppressed must first understand their own oppression in order to challenge the structures that facilitate their subjugation, and Pinar, as we shall see in the following section, seems to agree. *Conscientização* and *currere* conceive of action as the goal behind raising consciousness. In other words, a liberatory, dialogical, and critical praxis must start from within, questioning one’s own oppression to gradually manifest into political action.

In *The Character of Curriculum Studies*, Pinar (2013) argues that critical pedagogy strips individuals of their agency, leaving educators “paralyzed by reproduction, left to cry ‘resistance’ without the subjective means to enact it” (p. 35). Critical pedagogues tend to argue that the oppressive class structure along with its bourgeois ideology is reproduced through schooling and that teachers must help students develop strategies of resistance. Pinar (2013, quoting Benjamin, 1998) argues that this “ideology critique established ‘an indissoluble position of identity from which to attack exclusion and unmask power, as if it were free of it’” (p. 38). Critical scholars and pedagogues believe themselves to be strategically positioned at a certain vantage point from which they can unproblematically identify the obstacles faced by, though not yet perceived by, others. The critical pedagogue is a sort of spiritual medium whose clairvoyance enables them to listen to what others cannot hear, observe what others cannot see, and imagine what others cannot yet conceive.

According to Pinar, revolutionary praxis, thus, requires first and foremost a subjective, introspective, and individual reconstruction of the self. Pinar (2013) develops this idea by praising Fanon’s acknowledgement of the perils of the colonial mentality and his “psychoanalytic language of demand and desire” (p. 46). Pinar agrees that “colonialism produced reverberations the colonial powers could not escape,” along with “the violent practices, attitudes, and institutions exported by the colonizing bourgeois ruling classes”(p. 46). Fanon’s psychological framework allows Pinar to emphasize the importance of engaging one’s repressed self before venturing out into collective action.

My critique of Pinar’s reliance on Fanon is two-fold: (1) he assumes that individuals can actually free themselves from colonial ideologies, and (2) it ends up reserving for itself, the subjectively reconstructed individual, a sense of agency not afforded to other “colonized” peoples. This critique uses Pinar’s own critique of critical pedagogy to reveal how subjective reconstruction is, much like critical liberatory praxis, a narcissistic inclination. Pinar might be unaware of this because his own subjectivity is framed within a white-settler society, and although he privileges marginalized voices, he might not be contextually attuned with how the discourse of the “colonial mentality” has, in many of these communities, fueled pseudo-scientific, patriarchal, and condescending jargon that negates the agency of everyone who does not possess the truths of creole intellectual anti-colonial elites and “non-colonized” individuals. In the same way that Pinar critiques critical pedagogues for their arrogant sense of ideological immunity, his belief in the subjective reconstruction of the colonized subject ends up reserving for the subjectively reconstructed individual the agency and freedom not afforded to those who have yet to reconstruct their subjective colonial submission.

Ramón Grosfoguel (2003) wrote about this phenomenon in relation to Puerto Rico where,

nationalist discourses ... fall into the trap of a colonialist underestimation of Puerto Rican agency and subalternity. Puerto Rican nationalist discourses portray the “Puerto Rican masses” as “colonized,” “docile,” and “ignorant” because of their consistent rejection of “independence” for the island and the “ambiguity” of their political and identification strategies. (p. 9)

For Grosfoguel, this elitist discourse contends that “‘people do not know any better’; they are ideologically ‘colonized’ and as such are in need of a nationalist vanguard to enlighten the ‘masses’” (p. 10). Grosfoguel is somewhat of an oddity in that he is a decolonial scholar who favors statehood for Puerto Rico, which though theoretically posing no contradiction, hasn’t been the norm for critical and leftist Puerto Rican scholars who have traditionally supported independence. Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel (2008), together with other scholars, coined the term “radical statehood,” which advocates for a progressive form of statehood imbued with socialist principles and condemns independence as a form of (neo)colonialism without the marginal benefits of colonialism. These scholars argue that independence has always been rejected by the majority of the Puerto Rican people and that economic justice can only be obtained through annexation into the U.S. in order to further the adoption of working-class protections and legislations. Their critique of pro-independence movements is largely focused on their white and elitist intelligentsia who have traditionally viewed the independence-rejecting “masses” as uneducated and colonized victims of U.S. imperialism.

While, as a pro-independence activist, I agree with most of these arguments, I believe they suffer from a misplaced trust in the United States that elicits the imagery of Manifest Destiny. These scholars view the U.S. as the harbinger of progressivism and social justice, yet the recent Trump administration, and previous ones as well, have highlighted how this is far from reality. Radical statehooders are extremely apprehensive of local white elites, whose unfettered capitalist extractive desires, they argue, can only be checked by federal legislation. Their distrust is warranted, yet their faith in Empire is myopic and misplaced. Their arguments and postulates are outdated and in dire need of a recontextualization to take into account recent natural disasters and the federal government’s response, the COVID pandemic, the Trump administration, and yet most important of all, the pro-independence movement’s shift in ideology. Contemporary political

movements that advocate for political independence have shifted the struggle from the political arena and into the streets and have done so through decolonial, feminist, and innovative ideological frameworks. While the breadth of this paper does not allow me to discuss these movements, collectives such as the now defunct and pioneering *Campamento Contra la Junta*, along with active organizations such as *Jornada se Acabaron las Promesas (JSLP)* and *La Colectiva Feminista en Acción*, have changed the narrative behind the struggle. Both of these groups have avoided the pitfalls of cataloguing society as conditioned by colonialism. Instead of constituting a vanguard, *JSLP*, for instance, stresses that alternative methodologies of community building already exist in society and that they, as an organization, do not exist to decide what a decolonial future might look like. Rather their aim is to magnify and aid these already functional projects.

Final Thoughts

In colonized communities, subjective reconstruction is impeded by the perceived effects of psychological dependency through years of imperial domination. Popular pedagogues and critical scholars have frequently labeled detractors as “ignorant” and “disinterested” “masses,” incapable of liberation due to their colonized mentality. Through no fault of their own, these “victims” lack the awareness and agency to act upon the world in “truly” liberating ways. This pathology necessitates the critical intervention of liberated and decolonized entities whose clairvoyance impels them to help others move past the colonial condition. This pseudo-scientific and quasi-psychological discourse has impeded thoughtful and honest dialogue between the different factions of colonized civil societies. It has thwarted conversations around the possible economic and neo-colonial perils of independence as well as the historical amnesia, erasure, and naivety of annexation. Instead of poetically and condescendingly invoking Fanon and Memmi to label everyone who hasn’t reached my pro-independence and socialist conclusions as lamentably conditioned by modernity, I have moved towards a pedagogy of relation, difference, and understanding that respects the other as a legitimate producer of knowledge. Revealing the scars of our colonized bodies through autobiographical writing and auto-ethnographic exploration will hopefully lead to dialogical relationships that allow for honest interactions with ourselves and others. Building these relationships through honesty and respect can potentially foster a decolonial future where political alternatives aren’t myopically and deterministically seen as magic wands capable of solving all of our problems. Acknowledging these limitations could potentially allow teachers, students, activists, researchers, etc. to welcome critiques without renouncing their convictions; to entertain the possibility that their answers and truths aren’t perfectly and completely decolonial or decolonizing; and to acknowledge that nobody is free from the Empire’s gaze.

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Selections from my Father’s Library

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“This Ain’t Hypothetical”

Engaging Black Aesthetics from an Ethic of Care

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IN AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER HUDSON, Katherine McKittrick (2013) suggested that there isn’t such a thing as safe learning or teaching. She suggested that the kind of questions educators ought to wrestle with across disciplines “necessarily attend to violence and sadness and the struggle for life” (p. 237). Black aesthetics insists on these questions, problematizing notions of Blackness and being against histories and institutions that are invested in the non-being of Black bodyminds (Gordon, 2018). In the context of an American schooling project that is inherently anti-Black (Anderson, 1988; Dumas, 2014; Grant et al., 2021), engaging Black aesthetics, as pedagogy and curriculum, represents a potential intervention in the service of life-affirming Black educational spaces. As the field of education is animated with discourse on “safe spaces” within the university, McKittrick’s critique of the classroom as safe a priori is especially salient for Black bodyminds navigating the classroom as educators, students, and researchers. After Schalk (2018), we use the term bodyminds in this manuscript to expand the ways Black people are understood as mental, emotional, spiritual, and spatial beings mediated through history.

Echoing this sentiment, Wynter (1992) urged educators to ask, “What are the societal mechanisms that produce with precise regularity [the] captive population” (p. 258). Influenced largely by curricula laced with white racial frames and discourses of normativity, violence encamps Black students and can arrest their self-defining possibilities (Okello, 2018, 2020). Buttressing this point, Gordon (1993) wrote that the training and socialization that many teachers receive is committed to advancing normative structures. Alternatively, she pointed to the potential of Black aesthetics as an onto-epistemological endeavor and discourse with the potential to name, deconstruct, and undo Black students’ captive status in the classroom (Gordon, 1993).

Black aesthetics is not a passive project; instead, it is deeply invested in curating livable logics to contend with anti-Black racism in and beyond the educational context. Embracing both theory and practice, rigorous and ethical engagement with Black aesthetics ought to be centrally concerned with what it means to exist as Black in an anti-Black world. Failure to attend to both rigor and ethics ignores the histories that created the Black aesthetic canon and undermines the

canon's potential for Black people, specifically, and for society writ large. Thus, this manuscript lifts the insights of one Black man and one Black woman and their relationship to the Black aesthetic canon, asking, how should educators and researchers handle the theory of Black aesthetics while simultaneously caring for the lived experiences of Black bodyminds? Specifically, we were interested in what Black aesthetics required of teaching and inquiry. In response to this question, we collaboratively examined our experiences as a professor and graduate student engaging with Black aesthetics in academe and offer recommendations from our process to ethically inform study on the intimate relationship that is theory and lived experience.

Natasha's Positionality

Paul Taylor (2016) defined Black aesthetics as “the practice of using art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds” (p. 2). He went on to explain that those “life worlds” are reflected in the lives and experiences of those with “dark skin, tightly curled hair, and full lips, or [those] descended from people who look like that, or from a place full of people who look like that [making] certain claims more likely to be true of you” (Taylor, 2016, p. 20). It is with this understanding of Blackness and Black aesthetics, that I enter into this inquiry. As a graduate student who has been introduced to elements of Black Studies throughout my education, it was an altogether different experience to study Black aesthetics in a class with an Italian woman as the instructor and a diverse group of students. Having this instructor for a class on Black aesthetics illuminated the necessary care for teaching Black bodyminds within this context, while also making clear the experience of being Black and studying Black aesthetics.

Wilson's Positionality

Blackness marks that which is extraneous to reason and rationality in society and is summarized in the heaviness of DuBois's (1903) query of what it means to be a problem. As an educator who identifies with the breadth of Black diaspora and the lived, material, realities of Black-being in the United States, teaching and working with the assemblage of Black aesthetics is personal and political. While I am not one who believes that something called Black aesthetics should be exclusively engaged by those who identify with Blackness, I am conscious, and uneasy, about the theoretical treatment of (Black) survival praxis. To this end, I am committed to layered study, and I ask that those with whom I teach or partner assume a similar responsibility, marked by the question, “Why are you here, and what will it mean that you were here (in this place of critical study)?”

Historicizing Black Aesthetics: A Literature Review

Responding to problems of being in the world, historically, Black aesthetics evolved in and against antagonisms of white supremacy that are invested in the non-being (Gordon, 1997, 2018) of Black bodyminds. The notion of Black aesthetics is fluid and unruly in response to attempts to definitely articulate its essence. While imprecise and subject to diverse interpretation, Taylor

(2010), contributing to the discussion, explained that the concept does not rely on a singular vantage, nor endeavor to congeal around an all-inclusive cultural monolith. Instead, he defined it as a collection of theories and ideas about the arts, beauty, and expression of the African diaspora. Casting the net a bit wider, Taylor (2016), linked Black aesthetics to the “philosophic preoccupations that routinely animate and surround the culture work of black peoples” (p. 5). Adding definition to his ruminations, Taylor (2016) wrote that, to do Black aesthetics was to “use art, criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds” (p. 5). The work of Black aesthetics emerged whenever and wherever the critical engagement with expressive modalities was essential to the formation and furtherance of the social phenomena known as Black people. As a way to interrupt the traditional organizing that tends to demarcate some disciplines, Taylor (2016) built on Hall’s (2005) call to conjecture. For these scholars, conjecture represents “a fusion of contradictory forces that nevertheless cohere enough to constitute a definite configuration” (Taylor, 2016, p. 4). Taylor (2016) similarly resisted categorical interpretation and instead situated the term in contextual factors like history and culture; he used the word assembly to describe the dimensionality of Black aesthetics.

Ranging in scope and method, Spillers (in Johnson et al., 1970) noted the importance of curating an archive:

laying out of those methods of knowledge and practice which will reveal to use our source and strength. If we are serious about creating a legacy, then we must get about the heavy task of recording and transmitting our revelation as it comes. The making of the record, then, requires builders and prophets—those who can see and believe—those can work and do. (p. 54)

Black aesthetics marks the expansive, anti-parochial view of critical and creative work that might come to represent a discipline or the realms of Black life. Shockley (2011) discussed the notion of Black aesthetics that emerged during the Black Arts Movement (BAM), calling it a set of characteristics of Black art that “derived organically from African and African diasporic cultures” (p. 2). The characteristics, “such as an emphasis on and celebration of black music, black speech, black heroes, and black history, should and do determine both the form and content of” Black aesthetic production (p. 2). Neal (1968) regarded the emergence of Black aesthetics as “a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology; critique, and iconology,” conceptually representing a desire for Black self-determination and nationhood (p. 29). During the BAM movement, in particular, Black aesthetics sought to establish reference points that could capture the needs and aspirations of Black people, distinct from white framings of perceived Black inferiority.

Gayle (1994) echoed this sentiment asserting that, when and where Black aesthetics longed for the validation of the white gaze, approval from and by touchstones divorced from the culture of origin, Black aesthetics would be found wanting. Rejecting notions of separatism, Gayle (1994) affirmed “the validity of an African American culture that encompasses not only the retentions of the African cultures ... but also the unique culture that the enslaved developed out of the conditions and imperatives of their lives in the U.S.” (p. 207). Beyond a particular site, and fictive essentialism, Taylor (2016) assembled Black aesthetics on philosophical preoccupations that have come to animate the cultural work of Black people.

The “Black” in Black Aesthetics

Attempting to responsibly attend to Black aesthetics, Taylor (2016) sought to address the *Black* in Black aesthetics by framing it as a racial category. Appealing to the term racialism, Taylor (2016) recognized that, in its criticality, the term has political implications and social consequences. Black aesthetics, in this way, has a relationship with political structures and conceptions of citizenship and justice. Accepting this premise has implications for Black aesthetics. Accordingly, the significance of race means that art could not simply be art for art's sake, as the social cost of doing so was too high (Gayle, 1994; Neal, 1968; Taylor, 2016). Second, the weight of race forces Black aesthetics to acknowledge the living and moving body, its somatic and phenomenological essences. Third, racialism as attached to Black aesthetics is grounded in historicity and the dynamism of race across time. Taken together, Black aesthetics centers and concerns those racially positioned as Black (Taylor, 2016).

Reflecting on the tradition, Taylor (2016) made a distinction between the first order and second order of Black aesthetic tradition. The first order “emerged as soon as black people ... began to seek and create beauty and meaning from within the cauldron of racial formation” (Taylor, 2016, p. 23). The second order began when people began to systematically approach their work from a racialized perspective. Endeavoring to map the breadth of Black aesthetics, Taylor located Black aesthetics in pre-modernity, which is to say that African and diaspora practices share similarities and that there are important questions to ask about the constructed role of pre-modern Africa in the social imaginary. Of note, the transatlantic slave trade marked a familiar moment in the racial formation process and development of Black aesthetics as “heterogenous crowds of uprooted Africans made themselves into less heterogenous communities by creating shared practices and expressive cultures” (Mintz & Price, 1992, p. 18). Another development in Black aesthetics pointed to African descendant people wielding performance and aesthetic objects of dominant culture to raise skepticism about whiteness and white supremacy. In this vein, Black aesthetics would morph into a project bent on “removing the Black population from poverty, illiteracy, and degradation” (Baker, 1988, p. 4) by cultivating the infused gifting of Black people instead of an overreliance on Eurocentric rationality. Employing pan-African ideas, Black people during the New Negro and Negritude movements cultivated new approaches to identity and culture. Expounding on their methodology, Taylor (2016) discussed three shared goals these thinkers and creatives accepted: racial vindication, an embrace of Africa's distinctive cultural gift to the world, and a reorientation of African consciousness.

Building on these moments, Black aesthetics developed an explicit commitment to cultural and psychological decolonization. “Unless the Black artist,” according to Neal, (1968), “establishes a ‘Black aesthetic’ [they] will have no future at all” (p. 30). This occurred as artists and thinkers, generally, broke with the belief in respectable self-fashioning as a way to demonstrate one's humanity. Alternatively, they redirected that energy toward the goal of uplift and communicable edification and submitted themselves to expressive authenticity. The call for decolonization is buttressed by a gendered and queer analysis achieved by creatives like Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Audre Lorde. Couching her work in an intersectional refusal of categorization, Lorde (1982), for example, stretched the boundaries and possibilities of the Black aesthetic tradition.

Ethically Attending to the Archive

As shown above, Black aesthetics has labored and survived across time as a way to add texture and meaning to Black existence in and against whiteness and the larger white supremacist, imperialist project. In other words, one can read Black aesthetics as a response to the sociopolitical expectation of Black non-humanness, the normative structure of dominant society designed to question the humanity of Black people. Wynter (1992) argued for a rewriting of the human that would understand the concept as more a “biological, genetically programmed organism” (Gordon, 1993, p. 221). The presumption here is that humanness was programmed, designed, with a particular moral and ethical system and, in this initiation, comes into being simultaneously through representation, meaning, and discourse (Gordon, 1993). Against this backdrop, Wynter (1990, 1991), recognizing teaching as a political practice (Apple, 1992), called on educators to take up a cultural model of instruction that would work to critique and deconstruct intellectual hegemony. Considering what it might mean to reconstruct the classroom, Gordon (1993) asked,

whose knowledge is being represented in schools and what is the function and purpose of the knowledge? How does the curriculum serve various constituent groups? And what are the models of being and meaning found in the language and discourse? (p. 220)

Teaching, thus, for and in the service of Black people, is not only about the content of the archives or infusion of information into the learner, but how close educators are to reconstituting modes of being and knowing. Black aesthetics, inherently, must question bodies of knowledge and should guide pedagogical processes to address the rules that govern knowledge production and behavior (Gordon, 1993).

The challenge for educators, according to Wynter (1990), is a confrontation with canonicity that runs counter and antithetical to Black life and existence. Beyond an intellectual exercise, Wynter understands reinvention, or the rewriting of the curriculum, as high stakes work because of the material consequences of omission. Therein, Black aesthetics is operationalized as an epistemological project and deciphering practice (Wynter, 1992) “to assist educators in understanding the rules of discourse that give lip service to but do not jeopardize the hierarchical status structures” (Gordon, 1993, p. 223). Blackness, and more broadly the Black aesthetic, in this way becomes the lens to question the shape of life and knowledge in and beyond the educational context, as the press of aesthetics “is always a non-dialogue between those who subscribe to the conditioned world order and those who stand to gain from a reconstructed forum” (Taylor, 1989, p. 90). In what follows, we discuss the theoretical framing that guided this critical analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Black aesthetics, as an arm of the larger Black intellectual tradition, has been a generative, self-defining, place-making enterprise for Black bodyminds in a western, United States context. By extension, Black aesthetics functions as an intervention on western, canonical thought and reason by way of the three fundamental departures. According to Marable (2000), the Black intellectual tradition has always been descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive. In its descriptiveness, the intellectual project has represented the realities of Black lives from the perspective and vantage of Black life-worlds. This presumed centrality has made room for

individualized subjectivities and collective experiences to work together in the establishment of historical knowledge (Marable, 2000). Building on its essence as descriptive, the Black intellectual tradition has been corrective in its critique and challenge to racism and its cooperation with other systems of oppression. The tradition has vigorously “disputed theories of Black people’s genetic, biological, and cultural inferiority” (Marable, 2000, p. 17–18). This theoretical corrective has also been richly pragmatic in its prescriptiveness. To theorize from a Blackened experience has meant making connections between social analysis and social transformation. Beyond identity and self-esteem restoration, the tradition uses history and culture as interpretive tools for the “purpose of transforming their actual conditions and the totality of the society” (Marable, 2000, p. 18). Taken together, we use this framework as an organizing principle to theorize on the ethical teaching and engagement of Black aesthetics toward a Black sense of place in the world.

Methodology

Traditionally, autoethnography has been defined as an all-encompassing methodology for researchers whose inquiry explored the intersections of self and society (Adams et al., 2017). More specifically, autoethnography has been described by Adams et al. (2017) as a research method that employs personal experiences to understand practices, beliefs, and cultural texts of a particular social environment. Thus, researchers engage autoethnography in order to “articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience” (p. 3), to challenge harmful narratives written by cultural outsiders, and to address components of lived experiences that are decentralized with other methods of data collection (Adams et al., 2017).

To capture and examine their experiences of the slave dungeons in Ghana, Dillard and Bell (2011) sought to develop a “reflexive autoethnographic” approach that would “shift one’s understanding of personhood ... allowing for the recovery of one’s humanity and one’s spirit” (p. 345). Dillard and Bell (2011) introduced nkwaethnography as an invitation to acknowledge the “sacred or life-affirming” (p. 344) aspects of autoethnography. They lifted Black women’s ways of knowing as an epistemology stemming from the spirituality, wisdom, and reverence of sacred praxis. Nkwaethnography also reflects and honors Black women’s ways of knowing as connected to indigenous African knowledge and communal destiny.

In this analysis, we use nkwaethnography to reflect on our introduction to and entry into Black aesthetics. Examining these experiences, we meditate on the ethics of Black aesthetic theorizing in and beyond the classroom. Nkwaethnography offered ways of speaking to the differences of our experiences while acknowledging the commonalities that we share as Black bodyminds navigating academe with what Dillard and Bell (2011) called “sacred praxis” (p. 344). Within nkwaethnography, there is a life-affirming acknowledgment of embodied knowledge as a piece of this praxis. That is, embodied knowing has something to tell us about teaching as a mode of theorizing that prioritizes and lifts affect as integral to knowing.

Methods

Elsewhere, we used Black aesthetics theorizing to interrogate embodied knowing through the lens of what Tina Campt (2017) called tension and stasis. During that experience, we began to consider how our individual relationships with Black aesthetics came to be shaped by our

introduction to its ideas, language, and theories. In this manuscript, we present vignettes to explicitly discuss our entry into Black aesthetics. Moreover, we examine what it is to be Black and utilize Black aesthetic theorizing as we move between the often *hypothetical* world of theory and our lived experiences. We interrogate these narratives asking the following research questions:

- 1) How should educators and researchers handle the theory of Black aesthetics while simultaneously caring for the lived experiences of Black bodyminds?
- 2) What are the pedagogical and methodological implications of centering Black aesthetics?

To conduct this inquiry, we began by writing short vignettes detailing our introduction to Black aesthetics in and outside academia. These vignettes served as the starting point for our analytical conversations. We used analytical memos (Saldaña, 2009) to notate our reactions using the following tenets of nkwaethnography:

First, nkwaethnography recognizes the fluidity in time and space, spanning the spiritual and the material conditions of its 'subjects.' Second, nkwaethnography fundamentally, systematically, and symbolically shifts one's understanding and experience of personhood: It is sacred because it re-centers, allowing the recovery of one's humanity and one's spirit. Thirdly, nkwaethnography embraces community and the idea of a common destiny. Finally, nkwaethnography recognizes that body, mind, and spirit must all be engaged in the process of research. (Dillard & Bell, 2011, pp. 343–346)

With tenets of nkwaethnography in mind, we read through each other's vignettes and wrote analytical memos reflecting the themes that emerged (Collins & Gallinat, 2010; Saldaña, 2009). Next, we met via Zoom for 60 to discuss the themes that emerged in our reading of each other's vignettes. We recorded this conversation so that we could use it as additional data. When recording, Zoom transcribed the session, making it available for additional analysis. After our conversation, we were each given the transcript and video recording of our Zoom session. With the transcript, we each engaged in line by line coding (Saldaña, 2009), noting salient points about our experiences in relation to the research questions.

Natasha's Encounter with Black Aesthetics

My first introduction to Black aesthetics was *The Black Book* (Harris, 1974), a collage of Black culture curated by Toni Morrison when she was an editor at Random House Publishing Company in 1974. This book illustrated Black culture from the early days of slavery to the year in which it was published. This book was my entree into what it means to be Black and the aesthetics of our lives. When I think back, I am grateful to have my perspective shaped by the beauty that Toni Morrison recognized in us reflected on the pages that I poured over before I could even read. Once I began to read, a new level of that beauty was exposed.

I didn't have the language of Black aesthetics until I began to formally engage with Black Studies as a doctoral student, but it has always been present. If Black Studies was like returning home, Black aesthetics was, in some ways, like returning to myself. Black aesthetics provides a way of engaging with the physicality, creativity, and intellect of Blackness unbound by

temporality. It provides opportunities to explore the interplay between the present, past, and future to imagine through and beyond our current state of being. The importance of this offering is even more apparent as I pursue this line of inquiry in the midst of the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19 that the year 2020 melded together, both disproportionately impacting Black bodyminds.

My formal exploration of Black aesthetics started in a graduate course of the same name. I entered into the course with the hope and expectation of expanding my understanding of Black aesthetics, although admittedly cautious, as I wasn't familiar with the professor of the course. My formal learning of Black aesthetics was taught by a woman who was an Italian native in the Film and Cultural Studies Department. As I walked into the class, I noticed that there were students from the Film and Cultural Studies department and others. I tentatively engaged in the readings and discussions, acclimating myself to this new (to me) language. I began to consider the tension between learning the language of Black scholars (who grounded their work in Black experience, history, culture, and resistance) and being the hypothetically discussed—I felt like both the object and subject in the process. In sum, this didn't feel like my encounter with the “Black Book.” The beauty was missing and the power, to some degree, muted. I expected to not only see myself reflected in the pages, but to feel something. Symbolic, perhaps, of what institutionalization does to Black ideas and creativity, for all that Black aesthetics was to the world, it was being returned to me as an intellectual endeavor, nothing more. How does that experience impact the learning and understanding of Black aesthetics? It felt like a conflict to discuss the tender most parts of me as hypothetical. While I do not expect a shared understanding of my experience by those who have not lived it, I began to consider the ways Black life and Black thought are inextricably linked in theoretical study and pedagogy. Black thought may not be considered exclusive to Black scholars, but if we are sharing in this inquiry called Black aesthetics, what does it mean to be seen and cared for as a Black person in the room?

Wilson's Encounter with Black Aesthetics

Books with Black faces lined the shelves of my childhood home, instructing me on a history of Black contributions to this western, United States and the world. Black people were creatives and are doers of life, and as such, I came to know them as heroes and heroines worthy of celebration and of remembering. What I missed in this review of their accomplishments and, perhaps, the ways my parents and family were choreographing life around me was the praxis of Blackness that was always at work and waiting for me to catch on.

My catching on, my appeal and openness into a world where Blackness was not, and never intended be, was at the sighting and recitation of David Walker's (1829) “Appeal” in undergrad. Relentless. Imprudent. Fierce. Insubordinate. Following slave law, which dictated that the child assumed the status of the mother, Walker was born free, but it was the brand of (un)freedom that made him responsible to those who might never hold the term in their hands, “that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began” (Walker, 1829, para. 1). His writings conveyed a conviction that, perhaps, was always in the faces and names that encamped me but washed over in favor of post-racial discourse emanating from the formal curriculum. The urgency of his tone was unlike anything I had encountered as he demanded that readers unflinchingly see and reckon with the materiality of Blackness. Walker, in line with his contemporaries, forerunners, and legacies,

imagined an alternative future for Black people and, more specifically, was invested in the project of departing from futures that didn't center the fullness of Black life. I read and rehearsed his appeal with curious fascination as I wrapped my mouth around the force of his words. I wondered what it would mean for the spirit of his words to flow through and out of me. Blackness, in these moments of my learning, was more than a celebratory cause, but an active undoing. I read Black writers and essayists, heard Black music and poetry, for "the freedom part" (Bambara, 1996, p. 248), purposely placed to add texture to Black living and survival praxis. I came to understand Walker's appeal, and so forth, the Black creative, intellectual, aesthetic tradition, as part of a breathing archive that could, if taken up in earnest and deep study, inform the shape of resistance and desire, which is to say Black futurity.

Analysis of Vignettes

Analysis of the collected data using the lens of nkwaethnography revealed two critical themes, outlined below as *Black aesthetic fugitivity* and the *ontological reality of Blackness in theorizing*. Woodson (2020) described "Black humanity as an ontological reality" (p. 19) because Black people have survived even while they exist and live with the threat of epistemic, material, and social violence all around them. Thus, we begin by illustrating the first theme.

Black Aesthetic Fugitivity

The act of survival, for Woodson (2020), is a fugitive enactment. This fugitivity is not running away from, but rather running towards aesthetic spaces and conceptions of self that value the ontological nature Blackness. Thus, attending to Black aesthetic fugitivity, Natasha expressed, "I began to consider the tension between learning the language of Black scholars (who grounded their work in Black experience, history, culture, and resistance) and being the hypothetically discussed—I felt like both object and subject in the process." The formal introduction of Natasha to Black aesthetic theorizing and academic study related to the nkwaethnography tenet of recovering personhood (Dillard & Bell, 2011). Natasha detailed her experiences entering into an unfamiliar department and discipline to study Black aesthetics and how that impact shaped not only her formal introduction, but also questions related to embodied knowing with regard to this line of inquiry. Reflecting on her experience, Natasha illuminated the tensions that exist between "learning the language of Black scholars and being the hypothetically discussed." For Natasha, approaching Black aesthetics in a formal setting, in comparison to both researchers' first encounters with the canon in familial settings, shifted her relationship to the concept. In conversation with Natasha, Wilson stated, "It [Black aesthetics] can't fulfill its power through academia, because once it becomes part of white institutions it loses something." This discussion is seemingly borne of Black fugitivity, as it questions the potentialities of teaching Black aesthetics in academic spaces. The indication, thus, is that teaching Black aesthetics in anti-Black spaces can inhibit the fullness of Black fugitivity for Black bodyminds. This is to say that, when Black aesthetics is treated as singularly theoretical, rather than lived, embodied experience, it becomes an extension of anti-Blackness, rather than part of a Black fugitive agenda. Dumas (2018) echoed this point, noting, "everything about the academy militates against" (p. 43) Black personhood and survival as generative and embodied knowing. This may lead those who engage with Black aesthetics within academic spaces to adopt neutral, genderless, and raceless notions of Black

aesthetic theorizing, forfeiting a close examination of Black life and knowing. Said differently, embodied knowing loses value in academic spaces in favor of theorizing a linear narrative of Black existence in the United States and diaspora more broadly. Rejecting this premise, nkwaethnography suggested that lived and, perhaps, living experience is integral toward understanding and theorizing Black aesthetics (Dillard & Bell, 2011).

Living as part of the Black fugitive agenda is expressed in Wilson's meditation of home, particularly the interior spaces that visually championed Black creativity. It was in the living space where Wilson learned that Black people "are doers of life," hearkening to Alexander (2004), who wrote that, "in the spaces we designate and create, the self is made visible" (p. 9). In other words, the conscious arrangement that surrounded Wilson was not only part of a living space; rather, it was an imaginative space, unbound by walls, that opened possibilities for re-presentation in society. Black interiority, and the arrangements thereof, be it physical dwellings, emotionality, or the spirit, become an interstitial space—intermediate, betweenness, situated in but not confined to—that can function as a praxis of Blackness. This praxis suggested that private life, beyond the classroom, could be generative. In this instance, parents, as teachers, seemed to understand that there was a public life that Wilson and his siblings would encounter and that public life was invested in anti-Blackness. The fugitive act, thus, began with the recognition that schools, as extensions of public life, and Black humanity were irreconcilable and could not lead to emancipatory visions or ways of being.

Blackness and Ontology

In both of our vignettes, Blackness as an ontological reality emerged as a second theme. Similar to the proclamations by Black Studies scholars (see Dumas, 2018; Woodson, 2020), Wilson recognized Blackness as something, by virtue of existing, that does not need justification. Further to the point, Blackness is a weighted reality, actively experienced, and not merely theorization. Following Dillard and Bell (2011), by recognizing Blackness as an ontological reality, we re-center ourselves as humans, reclaiming our personhood as sacred and, thereby, indisputable. By recognizing these truths, we also understand that if our bodies, minds, and spirits are an integral part of the research process, we as Black bodyminds have to be accounted for in Black aesthetic pedagogy. Said another way, if we are sharing in this inquiry called Black aesthetics, what does it mean to be seen and cared for as a Black person in the classroom? As we analyzed our reflections and conversation, we considered the implications of accepting Blackness as an ontological reality and how it should inform Black aesthetic pedagogy and theorizing. During the dialogue, Natasha considered the inherent claims made by the materiality of Blackness as that which demands to be seen and heard. That is, Black being recenters not only temporal humanity, but captures the longer reckonings of Black bodyminds to be seen and heard in society.

This claim to ontological recognition competes with origin stories that have produced Black people as nonhuman, uneducable, and deselected in the natural order of society (McKittrick, 2015), which demands that, amid ideological absence, Black people have had to think, create, and write themselves into being. Walker's (1829) "Appeal," as noted by Wilson, is an example of this claim. For Walker, Blackness did not seek reason or permission; rather, Blackness was a forceful claim to personhood amid legal and extralegal entanglements that sought to deny those claims. Wilson continued this thinking, pointing to a common purpose wrapped up in Black aesthetics, stating, "I began to consider the ways black life and black thought are inextricably linked in

theoretical study and pedagogy.” Drawing on McKittrick’s (2015) engagement with Sylvia Wynter, we imagined how *humanity as praxis* could inform Black aesthetic theorizing and pedagogy and discussed being human as praxis in conversation with tenets of nkwaethnography. For Wynter, broadly, the project of being human as praxis was to engage in the unwriting and re-writing of knowledge that emphasized western conceptions of humanness—Man. The praxis purposefully confronts historical fallacies and overrepresentations of Man-as-human (McKittrick, 2015). The conditions, she argued, that made way for this rewriting and epistemic shift rested in creative and political resistance (McKittrick, 2015). Wrestling with the holistic imperatives of both concepts, we understand the mind, body, and spirit as central to a humanizing, Black aesthetic, pedagogical approach. We also likened these notions of personhood and subjectivity to an ancestral call—a call that beckons scholars of Black aesthetics to hold subjectivity as fundamental to theory, practice, and, perhaps most importantly, teaching. As a mode of study stemming from the Black Studies Movement, which was tethered to both Black art and activism (see Biondi, 2012), we agreed that it should be taught in ways that seek to recognize Blackness as an ontological reality in the wake of Black suffering (Dumas, 2018). Black aesthetics theorizing and pedagogy without these considerations and praxis may not be Black aesthetics at all.

Implications

Analysis of the reflexive vignettes above and conversations among authors yielded several critical findings that ought to inform how Black aesthetics are attended to in the service of Black students in schools. Whereas Black being is seen as anathematic to reason, which results in presuppositions of unjustifiability (Gordon, 2018), ethical treatment of Black aesthetics grapples with the flesh and, in particular, actively works to help Black students unseat the white gaze that schooling trains into them (Dillard, 2012). This approach for us signaled a willingness to situate Black bodyminds’ indissoluble relationship to anti-Blackness in teaching, curriculum, and research. Second, the devaluation of Black life, that is anti-Blackness, should not dissuade claims of mattering that seek to love Blackness against spirit murder. Thus, ethical engagement involves the realm of sensory and the symbolic, as Black aesthetics is sutured to Black humanity. Furthermore, an ethical approach tends to that which is beyond the physical body to encompass the affective capacities of Black bodyminds, suggesting that they are deserving of value enriched with a full range of meanings and emotions. This tenet pushes educators and would-be readers of Black aesthetics to consider the potential of Black aesthetics in and against white institutional power and presence. Moreover, readers and doers will need to continually evaluate the goal of Black aesthetics as situated in academia and, if it is possible, to exercise those creative and radical potentialities as part of American education’s formal and hidden curriculum.

Unseating the White Gaze

Decentering whiteness, writ large, functions as a guiding thesis for Black aesthetics. In word and praxis, the ideas that inspired the Black aesthetic canon were attempting to follow Morrison (as cited in Grant, 2015) in her response to editors who accused of her intellectual narrowness: “as if our lives have no meaning and no depth without the white gaze. . . . I have spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of

my books” (para. 1). For Morrison and for us as authors, the recognition of whiteness and effort to decenter it in our lives and work, at its core, was a pursuit of radical subjectivity (hooks, 1990). [Natasha] in the recorded conversation raised questions about how and whether her academic background “precludes” her from stepping into the fullness of Black aesthetic, “being as aggressive as I want to be sometimes,” as an onto-epistemological project. She noted that her background in sociology and psychology, disciplines that rely, broadly, on scientific method of analysis and an objective pursuit of psychological and social conditions, restricted how she might otherwise show up or communicate ideas, saying “I can’t just say it like that.” “It” in this instance referred to what she observed in [Wilson’s] writings, that wielded in her words a “more aggressive” and “affirmative” tone and pattern of thought. As Natasha encountered Black aesthetics in her graduate training, however, she was able to remake the assumptions that whiteness mapped onto her processing and was able to say that, “yes, actually you can [say things like that].” Her processing is instructive as it illustrates the capacities of Black aesthetics as a medium for critiquing whiteness and, in particular, the white gaze. Further to the point, Natasha discussed the notion of Black aesthetics as “inward versus outward facing.” This revelation was revealed as she juxtaposed her expression with Wilson’s writing, saying, “the way you talk about it feels very intimate. And sometimes I feel like the way I talk about it is a little more formal than I want to be sometimes.” This comment pointed to, as the findings above note, the ontology of Blackness and what it means to take on aesthetics as a way of being vis-a-vis subjectivity. Her comments encourage a reading of Blackness as beyond the theoretical or abstract, demanding that one consider the embodied materiality of Black aesthetics as something to be seen, touched, and felt.

Here, educators should consider providing opportunities for Black students to name the presence of the white gaze in their lives and learning. If the white gaze is a fact of society, teaching Black aesthetics is a rescue project that attempts to do what authors like Morrison labored so intently to accomplish and that is to direct one’s attention to the specificity of Black life lived in fullness through a rich and complex viewing of oneself in the learning context. That is, pedagogically, Black aesthetics labors to center Blackness as more than a cursory review of facts and accomplishments; instead, Black aesthetics forwards a pedagogical insistence on the rigorous study of Black ways of knowing and being, and how to use that study to advance the material realities of Black life. Thin, less-than rigorous engagement with Black aesthetics weakens the potentialities of Black intellectual and cultural production, opening it up to questions of relevance in and beyond academe. Purposeful engagement will raise pedagogical questions such as, does one have the subject expertise to do this work? Perhaps, as important as subject expertise, does one have the clarity, discipline, and acute discernment to journey with those under their stewardship as more than intellectual project, but one with felt realities? This latter question, as expressed, has consequences for how Black aesthetics is understood and its import in and for the lives of Black people.

Unfreedom and Passivity

It is possible to situate and teach Black aesthetics as a passive project, which is to say, a non-political, narrowly defined subject devoid of critical foundation. As reflected in Wilson’s vignette, the presence of a Black aesthetic canon, itself, does not mean that Black students will take hold of its words, lyrics, stanzas, or images. Black aesthetics positioned freedom as an ongoing and elusive idea that would not be distributed equitably, if at all. Notions of unfreedom,

or the reality that freedom is illusory for Black life, demand an audience with the idea of fugitivity, as the rapture of anti-Black terror continues to ensnare the schooling context. Though the truth of anti-Blackness is terrifying, it must not debilitate efforts to reach beyond its realities. Following Walker, as noted by Wilson, loving Blackness insists on speaking back to attitudes of power and dominance, whether it be in curriculum or, more broadly, a social context. Can educators, who claim to embrace and teach Black aesthetics, love Black humanity enough to give up their freedoms for the idea of it (Black humanity) without any promises of gain? Love, as expressed in the vignettes, owns past, present, and future orientations. Morrison anticipated the presence of whiteness in Natasha; Wilson's parents understood the importance of cloaking their children with ancestral tones; Walker was not seduced by the uneven distribution of "freedom"; these examples are the artifacts of a fugitive project that worked beneath the surface as much as it did above ground. Black aesthetics as a fugitive project in the education of Black students reckons with the fact that there is no permanent escape from white supremacy. Notwithstanding, Black aesthetics offers an orientation for existing under the looming threat of recapture in educational sites. Pedagogically, Black aesthetics is in the business of charting new geographies in and against shifting terrains. In this way, readings are more than readings; they are drums and stars, canals, swamps, and crawlspaces that should offer students opportunities to site and sight (McKittrick, 2006) possibilities. Moreover, Black aesthetics, re-presented in pedagogy and curriculum, points to a series of modalities that function to prioritize Black spirit and survival.

Conclusion

This manuscript motions for a renewed commitment to ethical engagement in the teaching, study of, and theorizing with Black aesthetics in the service of life-affirming Black educational spaces. Both pedagogically and methodologically, educators and researchers must address the question, where do I fit in? With respect to the former, educators must first recognize that students, broadly, will experience Black aesthetic content differently. This presumes, for example, that some will attempt to enter the conversation from an intellectual perspective, while others approach from their lived experiences. As such, educators should be responsive to the different and shifting needs and rationales that students bring to a learning space. In order to do this, educators will need to be mindful of how they enter as it relates to their positionality. For some educators and students alike, Black aesthetics "ain't hypothetical," it is generative, survival praxis and should be handled in ways that center racialized histories and current realities. Therefore, educators must create the conditions by which Black aesthetics is able to produce in ways that are central to its thesis. Methodologically, the ethical treatment of Black aesthetics necessarily invites interdisciplinarity and criticality throughout the research process. For example, questions for analysis should reach beyond the narrativized story to what is beneath the text. How does putting the data in conversation with history, systems of oppression, one's positionality shift interpretations? Ultimately, ethics engender a conversation about what it means to take up Black aesthetics in the service of life-affirming Black educational spaces (Grant et al., 2021), in its fullness, from the beginning of the research (and teaching) process to the end.

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