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Black Spaces in White Places: Toward Black Educational Imagination

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an emphasis in Educational Leadership and  
Policy Studies.

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Entitled:  
BLACK SPACES IN WHITE PLACES: TOWARD BLACK  
EDUCATIONAL IMAGINATION

Be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to two very important people in my life. The first person I would like to dedicate this to is my husband. You always found a very blunt way to hold me accountable for my work. Whenever you caught me watching television instead of writing, you would always say, “You need to get back to work!” and I would say, “You need to mind your business!” Secretly, I knew you were right. I would do as you said, and get back to work. As a result of following your lead, even though I pretended that I wasn’t, I can sit here today and say that I earned my doctorate. You were there before I started this journey, and I find security in knowing that you will be there for whatever comes next. For you, I am eternally grateful.

To my mother, the most amazing human being on the planet, you have always supported me no matter what. I have looked up to you since I was a little girl. I have always held on to your unconditional love and devotion to your family. You taught me to think highly of myself. From you, I learned how to be kind and develop the capacity to love other people’s children enough to fight for them. You taught me to go for what I wanted and to dream big. To you, nothing is impossible. You showed me how absurd it is to believe that I can’t do something. You also instilled in me the love of God, and taught me that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. You helped me to develop a relationship with Him, and He has directed my path ever since. I could never ask for a better upbringing. Thank you.

I love you both.

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## Abstract

Using a combination of Critical Race Theory, self-determination, and Black radical imagination as a theoretical framework, this dissertation explores how the features of Black educational imagination – liberatory pedagogy, critically conscious acts, and a revitalized Black teaching force – animate Black school space. These spaces facilitate the re-humanization of Black people, the recognition of counter-narratives as valuable, and the consideration of racial trauma in hiring practices. Each space represents a meaningful recognition of Black radical imagination and therefore inform my actions in the workplace. I argue that a possible path towards liberating Black people from racialized oppression is paved by developing and attending to these Black spaces because they are organized acts of resistance against white supremacy. Detailing my experiences as a Black educator working in a large, suburban, prestigious, predominantly white school district, my three anchor stories – A Mole Amongst Us, The Courage to Stand, and The Trauma is Real – narrate the ways in which I seek out and engage in Black space in order to counteract the harmful effects of racism. Because Black spaces are not actually physical space, they are completely controlled by the individual and therefore cannot be given or taken away by someone else. By creating and engaging in spaces that are not fully controlled by white supremacy, Black educational imagination has a chance to develop and flourish despite the inevitable hostility caused by white supremacy. Since Black spaces are a source of power and control, they also become a source of healing from racial trauma.

**Key terms:** Black educational imagination, Black space, liberation, racial trauma, critically conscious acts, liberatory pedagogy, revitalized force of Black educators

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

When we close our eyes at night and indulge in deep slumber, it is our dreams that take us on amazing adventures accessible only through our unconscious minds. But dreams also have an abrasive side – nightmares – that unexpectedly launch us into some of the most horrific experiences until terror and despair yank us out of our sleep and into a panicked grasp for reality. To be honest, nightmares are much more fascinating than the typical, run-of-the-mill dream because the terror that nightmares bring cause them to become a permanent scar in our memories, driving us to desperately seek rationalization for why our souls are so tortured.

My most recent nightmare occurred this summer. I dreamt of my mother, a fifth grader during the 1976-1977 school year, being nominated by her teacher to receive an award for young, gifted writers. Award recipients would go on a trip to Washington, D.C. to meet the President of the United States and accept their nomination. My mother, a girl who could pass, soon joined many other talented, white fifth graders from across the nation at the White House to indulge in the extravagant honor. Adorned in an ethereal white dress, dark, coily pigtails, piercing green eyes, a bashful grin, and skin as fair as her frock, she waited patiently in the audience with her teacher to receive her award, which she accepted with great pride. After the ceremony, all of the children and their chaperones were invited to attend a pool party to celebrate their achievements. As my mother swam, she quickly noticed that she was alone. Where was her teacher? Suddenly, she heard commotion on the pool deck. My mother's teacher was trying to push past two guards that would not allow her to join my mother at the pool party. They intended for her to be the only child left vulnerable to the wiles of racism. Her teacher's privilege

couldn't help her this time, for their actions served a greater, more sinister purpose. Still functioning under Jim Crow (a racial caste system that operated primarily but not exclusively in the Southern and border states and was upheld by the belief that Blacks are inherently inferior and therefore should be condemned to second class citizenship) mentality (Fairclough, 2001), the guards did not think it appropriate for a white teacher to support a little Black girl.

But she would not give up. My mother's teacher fervently attempted to push and thrust through the guards' stronghold with all her might, and then suddenly, BANG! They shot her in the head. The guards scooped up her limp, lifeless body, and with one swift heave forward, they flung her corpse into the pool right next to where my mother swam. She watched the corpse penetrate the water's surface and sink slowly towards the bottom. Strangely, there was no blood, so she thought her teacher was trying to play a game with her. She plunged under water and proceeded to play with the corpse. As the corpse continued to sink, the sound of my mother's muffled laughter began to fade as I slipped back into consciousness. The laughter turned into weeping that grew louder by the second. I opened my eyes and realized that it was me who was crying. Lying on my tear-soaked pillow, I quickly scanned the room for something familiar. I saw my nightstand, lamp, and glasses to my left and realized that I was back in my bedroom. A sharp, throbbing pain radiated in the pit of my stomach. An eerie feeling consumed me and I wondered, "How was that nightmare different from my current reality as an educator?"

Like struggling against the guards, being a Black female teacher in a predominantly white school district is a cyclical and seemingly permanent battle against

the institutional stronghold of white supremacy. The challenges that I face as I attempt to navigate the politics of a white supremacist institution are like déjà vu. Even though the challenges may be new to me, there is something about them that feels unsettlingly familiar. Existing in this twilight zone – an ambiguous area between what is familiar and unfamiliar – is not something that I can necessarily control. I often find myself there unwillingly and without warning. These challenges present themselves at will and are therefore unpredictable. But what I know is that the challenges will always be there to navigate, and I will always be there to navigate them, in some capacity or another.

To me, this dream is a manifestation of the emotions that society has conditioned me to associate with the racialized oppression that I have experienced and continue to experience in my personal and professional life. More specifically, it represents what it means to be a Black educator who battles white supremacy every day in the contemporary integrated context of education. It illuminates my personal desire for something different, better, and new. However, it also represents my skepticism of the possibility of change.

One factor that attracted Black women to the teaching profession, despite the deplorable conditions and unequal pay, was the opportunity for racial uplift that involved educating Black children out of poverty and racialized oppression. Black teachers designed their own curriculum and instructional methods that were directly connected to the oppressive conditions of black life (Charron, 2009). However, school integration eradicated such opportunities for customized learning, and it allowed the same racist attitudes that preferred segregated education for the purpose of maintaining white supremacy to permeate the integrated system that was quite possibly even more racist and

an even more zealous promoter of white supremacy (Charron, 2009; Joyner, 2013; Ramsey, 2008). This in turn forced Black teachers to adjust their pedagogical approaches to ones that became increasingly encrypted in order to conceal their attempts to continue using pedagogy to elevate Black children above their oppressive conditions (Ramsey, 2009). As a result, Black teachers lost the high level of autonomy they had when they were teaching in Black schools, which in turn strained their relationships with Black students. Integration strategically and systematically destroyed bonds between Black students and teachers, and when teachers were eventually forced to discipline a Black student based on rules and procedures created by White administrators, Black students and parents misunderstood Black teachers' efforts and thought that the teacher was trying to teach them to act White (Ramsey, 2009). Here in lies the shift from a Black community united by education to a community divided by education, all because of integration (Charron, 2009; Joyner, 2013; Ramsey, 2008).

One of the main tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) purports that racism is normal in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Black students have always grossly underperformed when compared to their white counterparts. While it is not possible that millions of Black students are less intelligent than white students, it is possible that something else is to blame. The achievement gap – the notable disparity within the distribution of educational results and benefits, especially amongst specific groups of students such as Black and Brown students and white and Asian students – has existed since the conception of compulsory education (Anderson, 1988), and despite the *Brown vs Board of Education (1954)* decision, education remains segregated and inequitable in unique and unforgiving ways (Joyner, 2013; Kozol, 1991). The state of education has not

improved since schools were integrated, and this lack of progress shows that to simply provide everyone with access is insufficient (Anderson, 1988; Bell, 1980; Charron, 2009; Joyner, 2013; Ramsey, 2008). Our focus needs to shift towards ensuring that the outcomes are equitable, too. Proving that racism is normal in schools is no daunting task. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is so.

### **Problem Statement**

After centuries of enslavement, and after Emancipation and ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Blacks were faced with the immense challenge of establishing a life in a country that viewed them as nothing more than property, and incapable of anything other than providing free, back-breaking labor to whites (Anderson, 1988). The foundation of that life they desired to establish was their belief in and the rigorous pursuit of education. Many ex-slaves held literate Blacks in high reverence. They admired them for risking their lives to become literate in a country where Black education was not merely discouraged, but legally forbidden. One ex-slave explained, “There is one sin that slavery committed against me which I will never forgive. It robbed me of my education” (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). Whites were infuriated at the idea of Blacks being free and educated because the Black freedom struggle posed a direct and immediate threat to the pre-existing social order. “The result was a postwar South that was extremely hostile to the idea of universal public education” (Anderson, 1988, p. 4). Driven by opposing sources of motivation, whites were determined to avenge what they believed to be theirs, and Blacks were determined to assert themselves as human beings deserving of dignity, rights, citizenship, and agency. The implications of this assertion illuminated the need to prepare for a long and gruesome battle. The pursuit

of education served as preparation for that fight, and as a means for liberation (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Blacks believed education to be liberating, and they believed that it would help them gain access to knowledge that would equip them for the fight for social equality and racial uplift (Ramsey, 2008).

“Some were armed with little more than confidence and self-respect, but they struggled to keep students from internalizing the larger society’s views of black inferiority” (Ramsey, 2008, p. 2). When Black teachers answered the call to service, they were able to offer the Black community comfort in knowing that “its children had caring and accountable instructors” (Ramsey, 2008, p. 2).

However, education was also a vehicle for the perpetuation of white supremacy. When white teachers taught white students, they felt it their duty to reinforce white privilege (Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). On the other side of the color line, Black teachers worked just as hard, if not harder, to help their students gain the skills and cultural capital necessary to succeed in a world controlled by whites (Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996; Yosso, 2005). Black schools were severely neglected and ignored by the all-white school boards that governed them. They were often dilapidated, one, two, or three-room schoolhouses with no heat, running water, or electricity (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Because school boards refused to build more schools in order to respond to influxes in population, almost all Black schools were severely overcrowded (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Black community members spent tremendous amounts of time petitioning school boards to provide adequate funding for their schools (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996).

They were in constant need of more teachers, improved facilities, new schools to reduce overcrowding, updated resources and supplies for learning (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The white school boards often ignored the pleas of the Black community (Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). They used ridiculous excuses that circumvented their requests and allowed them to route the majority of funding to the improvement of white schools (Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Because Black schools were so neglected, Black teachers had to get creative (Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The Black community relied on and expected its teachers to educate their children in spite of terrible conditions (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). There really was no other choice.

The struggle to gain access to quality education in the segregated Jim Crow South is similar to the educational struggles that Blacks face today. Black students continue to be viewed as inferior when compared to their white counterparts (Delpit, 2012; Kozol, 1991). Over time, this notion of inferiority has become imbedded in the discourse surrounding Black students in k-12 educational settings. Mimicking the nuances of the existing social hierarchies, classrooms – major perpetrators of Black inferiority – often become cesspools of institutionalized racism. Delpit (2012) poses the question, “What happens when we assume that certain children are less than brilliant?” (p. 6). What happens is, teachers teach less to their students because they expect less of their students, and remediate their learning without ever getting to know the students’ true capabilities (Delpit, 2012). These are the behaviors that keep the achievement gap propped wide open as educators nationwide pretend to scramble to remove the prop and close the gap.

When integration presented Black teachers with the seemingly impossible task of changing their definition of racial uplift, they were simultaneously trying to figure out how to navigate a new educational environment that was supposed to be better for Blacks, but wasn't. The problem is the Black community suffered a tremendous loss of autonomy, pride, and community (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). We continue to mourn that loss today.

The Black educational imagination is a collection of specific actions taken by Black educators that leads to the creation of a network of people who are equipped and willing to work together to dismantle racialized oppression (Bromell, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; hooks, 1994; Kelley, 2002; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004). It is necessary because of the current inequitable state of education (Kozol, 1991). Three features figure prominently in a Black educational imagination. These are liberatory pedagogy, critically conscious acts, and a revitalized force of Black educators. Each feature animates Black space. Liberatory pedagogy animates the re-humanization of Black people, critically conscious acts animate the telling of counter-narratives, and a revitalized force of Black educators animates racial trauma-considerate hiring practices. These spaces represent a meaningful recognition of Black radical imagination and therefore inform my actions in the workplace (Kelley, 2002). By engaging in these spaces, Black educators can participate in the creation of a network of people who have a thorough understanding of the inequities that exist in our society and therefore have the courage to resist the perpetuation of inequities created by white supremacy. Furthermore, this network of critically conscious people will understand the purpose of engaging in the Black educational imagination, and that purpose would be to liberate Black people from



racialized oppression, therefore liberating all subordinate groups from oppression. We have suffered a tremendous amount of trauma from racism, and participation in Black educational imagination would give us the strength and power necessary to dismantle the very system that oppresses us (Kelley, 2002).

### **Rationale for Study**

The process of integration significantly diminished Black educational imagination by nearly eliminating Black educators from the nation's teaching force, destroying the bonds between Black teachers, students, and parents, closing Black schools, transferring Black students to white schools, and decentralizing black communities (Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The purpose of this study is to examine the existing opportunities and processes for engaging in Black educational imagination in a contemporary educational setting that struggles with the damaging effects of de facto segregation. This study suggests that Black educators imagine how their actions can resist white supremacy and create Black school space. The features of Black educational imagination include (1) liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004), (2) critically conscious acts (Freire, 1968), and a revitalized force of Black educators. Liberation from racialized oppression is the purpose for engaging in Black educational imagination and engaging in the spaces it animates.

### **Significance of Study**

This study defined three features of Black educational imagination and the specific Black spaces it animates. It told the story of how I engage in Black spaces, and it explained the dangers, dispositions, and decisions associated with engaging in those spaces. It explained how racial trauma could be leveraged as power to minimize

inevitable racial trauma that Black educators will experience, specifically those in predominantly white environments. Adding to the literature that considers education as a means to liberation, this study addressed whether or not education has the potential to open up possibilities for liberation. It explained what Black spaces achieve.

The conclusions of this study resulted in an increased understanding of what Black educational imagination actually is and how Black educators can recognize and take advantage of opportunities to engage in the spaces it creates. The conclusions of this study re-substantiated the greater purpose and necessity for Black educators in America, and called for a revitalization of the Black teaching force. This study will help educators understand the role that Black educational imagination can play in making progress towards a future free of racialized oppression.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question that this study answered is how can Black educational imagination play a role in liberating Black people from racialized oppression? This study also addressed the following sub questions:

1. How are Black spaces created?
2. What is the role of Black spaces when engaging in Black educational imagination?
3. What do Black spaces achieve?

## **Definitions**

Achievement gap- According to The Glossary of Education Reform (2013), the achievement gap refers to the notable disparity within the distribution of educational results and benefits especially amongst specific groups of students, such as Black and Brown students and white and Asian students.

Autoethnography-a qualitative research method that the researcher uses to analyze his or her personal experiences in order to understand a larger cultural context with which he or she identifies (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010)

Black educational imagination-The purpose of Black educational imagination is to establish a means of liberating Black people from all forms of racialized oppression (Bromell, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; hooks, 1994; Kelley, 2002; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004). Consisting of three features – liberatory pedagogy, critically conscious acts, and a revitalized force of Black educators – Black educational imagination animates spaces that exist only within the imaginations of Black educators who desire to resist white supremacy and create Black school space. The spaces include the re-humanization of Black people, the telling of counter-narratives, and the recognition of racial trauma in hiring practices.

Black radical imagination-a collective effort made by Blacks to imagine the conditions for a liberated society and the activism that it would take to achieve it

Black space-the actions that Black educators use to counter racialized oppression

Contemporary-present, modern or current times

Critically Conscious Acts-deliberate actions of bravery that responds to racialized or other forms of oppression, especially when performed by Black people in white space

Liberation-freedom from oppression, specifically racialized oppression

Liberatory pedagogy- an analysis of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination in education that relies mostly on the perceptions, experiences, and counter-hegemonic practices of educators of color (Lynn, 2004). Black educators can engage in liberatory pedagogy by inspiring students to critique all forms of subordination of marginalized groups (hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004).

Microaggressions – unconscious, shocking, and subtle forms of racism (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000)

Oppression-sustained and cruel exercise of power and control with the intent to create significant injustice for a specific group of people

Racism-actions based on the belief that a group of people are inferior and therefore must be controlled through violence, exclusion, and other forms of mistreatment

Revitalized Black teaching force-referring to a combination of current and new Black educators across the nation; it is revitalized because of collective recognition and intentional actions taken towards increasing the number of Black educators in our nation

Self-determination-the ability for the Black community to determine its political relationship to the dominant or white community with interference or influence

White space-the spaces that whites occupy; everyday performances of white privilege through discourse and other practices (Boyd-Fenger, 2012)

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter is organized into several sections and sub-sections that will provide details pertaining to the literature reviewed by the researcher. To provide sufficient context for the study, this chapter will first provide information on the theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Four major tenets of CRT and their connection to the study will be reviewed in great detail in order to provide a thorough analysis of how CRT will be utilized by the researcher to frame the analysis for the purpose of engaging in Black educational imagination. To extend beyond the inherent limitations of CRT, the theory of Black radical imagination (Dawson, 2013; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002) will be utilized to explain how engaging in Black educational imagination could begin to transform the institution of public education, a white space, and those marginalized by it. Furthermore, this chapter will explain how Black educational imagination will provide Black educators with a platform to revitalize opportunities for self-determination (Dawson, 2013; Dixon, 2011; Frazier, 2015), situating us all on a path towards liberation. This chapter will explain how Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor et al., 2009), Black radical imagination (Dawson, 2013; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002) and self-determination (Dawson, 2013; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002) intersect to form a conceptual framework for Black educational imagination. In addition, this chapter will provide a review of the literature that frames each of the anchor stories that will be utilized as data in chapter four. This review of literature will include liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004), a

revitalized Black teaching force, and critically conscious acts (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002). To conclude this chapter, the key points will be summarized followed by an identification of the gaps in the literature that this study will seek to fulfill.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: The Intersection of Critical Race Theory, Radical Imagination, and Self-Determination**

As a Black female educator, I live the vast majority of my life in white space. I teach in a predominantly white school district where I am part of a mere 3% of certified teachers who teach in a massive district that encompasses 29 buildings and serves nearly 17,000 students. I am also a resident of the district, which means that my home is surrounded by white families whose school aged children attend this district. When I have kids someday, they too will be students of this district. Within this racially and socioeconomically segregated space, my greatest personal challenge is figuring out how to navigate this familiar yet increasingly unfamiliar environment. One way that I have made sense of navigating this environment is by reviewing the literature on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and using it as a theoretical framework for this study.

CRT is committed to social justice by working to eliminate all forms of subordination of people. To do this, there must be a persistent challenge to racial hegemony that includes revealing the self-serving power of white privilege and centralizing the experiences of people of color. The tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) have been used by CRT scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998) to analyze and critique the systemic inequities that exist within the institutional behemoths in American society. These institutions include the criminal justice system, wealth

distribution/socioeconomic status, residential patterns/population stratification, and most notoriously, the education system. Each tenet of CRT can be used to analyze the ways in which racism permeates the institution of education, thus causing inequities so unfathomable that for them to exist outside of our nightmares is perplexing yet logical at the same time (Kozol, 1991). Although there are several tenets of CRT, I have included four specific tenets that are relevant to my study. These tenets include (1) racism is a permanent fixture in American society; (2) the recognition of experiential knowledge; (3) liberalism is ineffective at addressing social inequity; and (4) interest convergence – the notion that the interests of Blacks have never been served unless they merged with the interests of whites. In order to explain how CRT is a useful theoretical framework for this study, I will thoroughly explain each of these four tenets.

The first major tenet of Critical Race Theory is the notion that racism is a permanent fixture in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Racism has become so normalized that it is nearly unrecognizable, especially by those who benefit from it (Ladson -Billings, 1998; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). “Toni Morrison calls this the difference between looking at the fish and castles and bubbles in a fishbowl versus suddenly seeing the bowl itself, ‘the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world’” (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 34). On the other hand, those who are regularly impacted by racism are very aware of its debilitating effects because of their first-hand, personal experiences with it (Taylor et al., 2009). The role of CRT scholars is to expose the deeply embedded racism that exists in our institutions, especially those in education.

The biggest perpetrator of racism within the institution of education is whiteness. DiAngelo (2011) explains “whiteness itself refers to the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color” (p. 56). In educational settings, whiteness manifests in several key areas including textbooks and historical memory, teachers, and in the discourse surrounding what is a good school or a bad school, or which students want to learn versus those who don’t (DiAngelo, 2011). Gillborn (2005) points out that “One of the most powerful and dangerous aspects of whiteness is that many (possibly the majority) of white people have no awareness of whiteness as a construction, let alone their own role in sustaining and playing out the inequities at the heart of whiteness” (p. 8). He explains that whiteness is really about the powers and interests associated with being white (Gillborn, 2005). It is the inherited privilege that many whites deny. For example, whites often unknowingly flex their whiteness when they refer to a person of color as being different. Such statements make it seem like being white is normal, and anything other than white is not normal and therefore marginalized. Most whites don’t recognize such statements as being racist or racialized because racism is so engrained in our society, and it is so invisible, yet so invasive that it is difficult to recognize. This process is also called “Othering” (Gillborn, 2005).

The next tenet of CRT is the recognition of the value of experiential knowledge. CRT scholars seek the stories that challenge white hegemony and further expose racism. These counter-stories privilege the knowledge and personal experiences of groups impacted by racism and oppression through the parables, narratives, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of the law, creativity, and first person (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT allows oppressed groups to use their experiential knowledge to



construct their own truths that are in direct opposition to the misinterpretations, misrepresentations, and (convenient) misunderstandings of racial hegemony (Ladson-Billings, 1998). These counter stories help to re-situate the experiences of people of color into a historical context established by people of color, which is often ignored, denied, and discredited by whites. Counter-stories also help to establish a contemporary context with which to situate the experiences of people of color. CRT scholars must keep these stories at the forefront of the research in order to demystify the notion that we are living in a post-racial America.

Carving out space and time for counter-stories in educational settings is quite the challenge, to say the least. There are many risks involved for people of color who decide to speak openly and directly about race and racism relating to their educational experiences (DiAngelo, 2011). Counter-stories provide direct opposition to whiteness, and they make whites uncomfortable because they begin to recentralize the power dynamics from upholding whiteness to empowering the voices of people of color (DiAngelo, 2011). This shifting of power is typically uncharted territory for whites, and the only way for them to restore the comfort of whiteness is through the behaviors associated with “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2011), a defensive state induced by even the scantest but intolerable amounts of racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011). DiAngelo (2011) purports that,

“Whites have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort and thus when racial discomfort arises, whites typically respond as if something is ‘wrong’ and blame the person or event that triggered the discomfort (usually a person of color). This blame results in a socially-sanctioned array of counter-moves against the

perceived source of discomfort including: penalization; retaliation; isolation; ostracization; and refusal to continue engagement” (pp. 60-61).

This racial discomfort is usually a result of people of color sharing their stories of their experiences within a racially hostile context of education. While a white person may cry bloody murder simply because a person of color is challenging racism, a person of color is seriously considering the ramifications of the very act of challenging whiteness.

The third tenet of CRT is that liberalism is ineffective at addressing social inequity. CRT argues that liberalism is not capable of being fast enough to serve as a catalyst for social change (Ladson-Billings, 1998). “...liberal legal practices support the painstakingly slow process of arguing legal precedence to gain citizen rights for people of color” (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In fact, CRT scholars argue that whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. For example, many CRT scholars claim that white women were the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action – not Blacks (Ladson-Billings, 1998). And since their incomes most likely support white households, it is clear to see how affirmative action has benefitted white people more than Blacks (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Liberal agendas will never solely serve the interests of Blacks unless there is some way that the white interests are also served (Bell, 1980).

There are traces of liberalism all over educational policy. Once integration was mandated, many Black schools were closed and thousands of Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs (Charron, 2009; Joyner, 2013; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). The process of integration was slow and laborious, and many school districts flat out refused to follow the orders. When Black students attempted to integrate white schools, white students, teachers, and administrators often did their best to openly

display their hatred and hostility towards the incoming black students (Charron, 2009; Joyner, 2013; Ramsey, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 1996). School quickly became a source of trauma for Black students instead of the source of pride, culture, and community that it once was. Laws do not change racial attitudes. They do not erase hatred, and they do not foster acceptance nor understanding. While they attempt to provide equality, they do not provide equity or justice.

The fourth tenet of CRT centers around Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Bell, 1980 & 1995). His theory explains that the interests of Blacks have never been served unless they merged with the interests of whites. In other words, something must be in it for them. Taylor (2009) provides an explanation of an examination written by Dudziak (1988) of the political context in which *Brown* was argued that provides an example of Bell's (1980) theory of interest convergence:

“...the desegregation ruling was more likely motivated by foreign policy concerns. It was at the height of the Cold War, and technological advances, television and photography had beamed startling images of racial abuses throughout the world. The Soviet Union, China, and India regularly carried stories about the Ku Klux Klan, including vivid pictures of lynchings, the deplorable living conditions of share-croppers, and chain-gangs. This news coverage sparked an international sensation. Just as the U.S. was attempting to position itself as the leading force of anti-communism, this reporting threatened to undermine America's image as the model of democracy. Thus, the U.S. Justice Department

filed an amicus brief asserting that, because of foreign policy concerns, desegregation was in the national interest.” (p. 6)

This example shows how interest convergence typically works (Taylor, 2009). Another task for CRT scholars is to find contemporary evidence of interest convergence in education to help to expose more instances of institutionalized racism.

Interest convergence is another way that white fragility manifests (Bell, 1980; DiAngelo, 2011). In an educational context, interest convergence can be thought of as institutional white fragility (Bell, 1980; DiAngelo, 2011). It is one way that an educational institution behaves defensively when faced with racial discomfort. White hegemony makes it possible for school districts to respond to racial discomfort or pressure with institutional white fragility. Examples of institutional white fragility that take on the form of interest convergence include school desegregation policies, diversity programs, and hiring Black teachers. These are likely to occur only when there is pressure being put on a school district to address their “Negro question” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 21). The institution’s interests are served when the threat of penalization for racial discrimination is dodged, and Black interests are served because they get access to what is perceived to be better schools, better treatment, and better employment.

The aforementioned tenets of CRT provide explanations and examples of how racism has permeated American society. They help us make sense of how racism itself is an institution and therefore cannot be minimized to single incidents of violence, humiliation, and injustice. However, what CRT lacks is an imagination. It lacks a way for us to begin to realize what to do with the awareness that it raises. Utilizing the CRT lens to challenge the many facets of racism is important, but what comes next? How do we

bring about change? Counter narratives are a start, and they are indeed powerful, but what lies beyond them? Awareness of racism will not dismantle inequitable power structures, it will not alter history, and it certainly will not change racist attitudes. We must find a way to co-exist in a headspace that allows us to re-imagine a world free of institutionalized racism and other inequitable power structures that promote hegemony for some and second-class citizenship for others (Fairclough, 2001, p. 22). This would require a complete upheaval of our current way of life and a reconceptualization of freedom.

### **Black Radical Imagination**

Kelley (2002) describes this potential headspace as something like a utopia, which can only exist in our imaginations.

“The idea that we could possibly go somewhere that exists only in our imaginations – that is, ‘nowhere’ – is the classic definition of *utopia*. Call me utopian, but I inherited my mother’s belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us. Now that I look back with hindsight, my writing and the kind of politics to which I’ve been drawn have more to do with imagining a different future than being pissed off about the present.” (p. 2-3)

With so many reasons to be “pissed off about the present” (Kelley, 2002, p. 3), CRT helps to frame those reasons and make them clear to anyone willing to listen and ultimately choose to agree or not. But radical imagination fosters the necessary hope and vision that CRT simply does not essentialize. Radical imagination allows us to escape the trap of trying to fix our current reality and pushes us to dream of a new society in which

freedom is real for everyone (Kelley, 2002, p. 3). This must be a collective effort and there must be safe spaces available for us to engage in Black radical imagination.

How do we create those spaces? How do we ensure that they are free of control and suppression? Kelley (2002) discusses the importance of social movements because of how they generate new thoughts, ideas, theories, and questions. “The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (Kelley, 2002, p. 28). In other words, when we gather together to examine and interrogate what is considered to be normal and the injustices that inherently exist within the norm, new thoughts, ideas, theories, and questions are born. However, this can only occur if the participants of this gathering feel safe, which brings up questions of what exactly is safety in the eyes of radical imaginers and how can that safety be created?

The search for safety is a challenge to say the least, and it is a never-ending search. In the past, Black radicals have often pondered the possibilities of emigration in search of safety and freedom from oppression (Kelley, 2002). If Blacks were to leave America and return to Africa, would they find safety and freedom? If we remained in America, would safety and freedom ever be possible? Truthfully, answers to these questions may never be realized, and despite the critiques of the practicality of the notion of emigration, a safe space would be a space where Blacks could exercise the power to imagine a liberated future (Dawson, 2013; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002). Kelley (2002) discusses the idea of emigrating versus staying in terms of grappling with an exodus. While few scholars or activists take the idea of returning to a homeland seriously, it would be remiss of them and others to ignore this idea. Kelley (2002) posits,

“the desire to leave this place and find a new home misses what these movements might tell us about how Black people have imagined real freedom. The desire to leave Babylon, if you will, and search for a new land tells us a great deal about what people dream about, what they want, how they might reconstruct their lives.” (p. 16)

Microaggressions – unconscious, shocking, and subtle forms of racism – are a large part of the norm for Black educators, especially those teaching in predominantly white environments (Solorzano et al., 2000). Also, they may find themselves isolated from other Black educators, and marginalized in ways that silence their voices and perspectives on issues pertaining to students, specifically Black students. As a result, they may feel compelled to become strategic in how their indignities are expressed, and careful in the battles they choose to fight (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano et al., 2000). This is a part of the inherent racism that exists in the institution of education. It is an inevitability that can only be countered by a complete upheaval of our current system which in turn, necessitates Black radical imagination. However, gaining access to a space and time to engage in this work seems nearly impossible considering the fact that the nature of the job fosters an environment that prevents us from moving beyond being “pissed off about the present” (Kelley, 2002, p. 3).

For example, Black educators must be able to quickly assess the value of a potential battle and decide whether or not they have enough currency available to pay the price for engaging in that battle after it is fought. In other words, they must ask themselves, “Can I afford this sacrifice right now, or do I need to let it go?” This decision-making process occurs internally and routinely, and it requires reflection on a

few things simultaneously: (1) When was the last time I had to “go there” with a white person? (2) Was it the same person as last time? (3) What were the consequences last time? (4) Are they finished punishing you from last time? (5) What will the new punishment be if you decide to engage? (6) Can you endure it, or is the potential impact on you personally and professionally just too much? This process demonstrates the fine line that exists between the defensive expressions of white fragility that may result from Black educators using their voice, and submitting to silence due to the threat of the defensive expressions of white fragility (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Kelley, 2002, p. 3). In addition, there are always potentially negative consequences for these decisions, but the only difference is the aftermath of the latter comes with regret and guilt, while the aftermath of the former comes with worry and sometimes paranoia. Because of the current reality of the institution of education, Black educators will always be spinning their wheels in the present, causing radical imagination to be a serious challenge. Kelley (2002) explains how difficult it becomes to imagine a new world when we spend the majority of our time putting out fires and trying to navigate our crooked rooms (Harris-Perry, 2011).

Although it may be challenging to find a physical space to engage in radical imagination within the system of education, what must also be considered is the notion that radical imagination begins in the mind and is expressed through actions that subvert oppression (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011). Frazier (2015) defines radical imagining as:

“...engendering and nurturing practices of liberation and radical democracy in the face of global injustice and inequality. The imagination describes the interaction



and transformation of hearts, minds, and souls into beings, subjects, and collectivities. It speaks to a person's expressive and inventive capacity to render abstract visions, intentions, and drives into material processes, lifelike renderings, and socially grounded outcomes. Imagining here is thus displayed as a process of ideology that marshals and deploys cognitive faculties, consciousness, and social life for the process of contesting the worlds we inhabit and making and shaping them anew." (p. 7)

Not only should we re-imagine a new world, but within that imagining we must define the role that marginalized groups play in reconstructing this world, which should include challenging the oppression that confines people of color to the margins of society. Floyd-Thomas and Gillman (2002) explain how the very act of challenging oppression carves out a shared political consciousness or space for radical imagination and its subsequent actions.

"Once a person enacts radical Black subjectivity, her life is no longer anonymous or private. Her action of subverting oppression holds in the balance the lives of those who have endured similar oppression and the possibility of subverting it. She represents a courage to come forward and disclose an otherwise silent but nonetheless painful truth, a courage that allows many others to be given voice. At this point, a transformation of life comes about where the person who enacts radical Black subjectivity becomes bound up with others who she might or might not know and to whom she grows exponentially accountable." (p. 550)

The safest place for radical imagination may not actually be physical. It might not have a geographic location. Instead, we must engage in a mindset shift that involves abandoning

the search for a safe space for radical imagination that is physical and pushing ourselves to consider the labyrinths of our souls as the derivative of the purpose and courage necessary to construct spaces that are instead tied to actions that involve challenging oppression.

Some may argue that engaging in radical imagination doesn't actually achieve much since there is no safe, physical space in our society for it, and that it is actually counter-productive to engage in such utopian thinking. Others may argue that radical imagination creates a false sense of hope because it lacks pragmatism and is therefore unrealistic. Dawson (2013) provides a compelling rebuttal to these claims by suggesting pragmatic utopianism – “one that starts where we are, but imagines where we want to be” (p. 194). Radical imagination is larger than life. It is lofty, ambitious, and literally out of this world. To members of oppressed groups, radical imagination is an overwhelming necessity that makes it difficult to be able to see how or where to get started when there are so many layers of injustice that need to be addressed. Complementing the concept of radical imagination, pragmatic utopianism provides a scaffold for radical imaginers that helps us to move beyond being “pissed off about the present” (Kelley, 2002, p. 3), recognize and understand current issues, become aware of what we do not want, and establish what we do want by working towards eradicating injustice and becoming free from subordination (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015).

### **Self-Determination**

Black radical imagination allows us to envision our educational utopia, while pragmatic utopianism helps us to focus our attention on the most lucrative places to start (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002). This

would require a critical examination of the ways in which the current education system fails Black students, and a cultivation of the activism required to either transform or abandon and recreate the system into something that would allow us to fully realize our educational utopia (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002; Kozol, 1991). What must also be considered is the purpose for Black radical imagination and creating the safe spaces for it, which is self-determination. Dawson (2013) defines self-determination as “the ability for Blacks to be able to collectively determine their relationship to the United States” (p. 54). However, self-determination extends beyond just the right for Blacks to determine their political relationship to the United States. Kelley (2002) asserts “It [self-determination] was about promoting and supporting an independent Black radical movement that could lead the way to a revitalized international working-class assault on racial capitalism” (p. 54). Black nationalists believed that self-determination could only be achieved through secession, while Black leftists believed that self-determination could be achieved without secession and in the context of the current integrated society (Dawson, 2013). Despite the divergence in these viewpoints, self-determination was the cornerstone of Black political thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Dawson, 2013).

One distinct and persistent characteristic of the voice of Black political thought, specifically the voices of Black radicals, included making demands for reparations of this nation on the behalf of the Black race. In *Souls of Black Folks*, a collection of compelling essays, DuBois (1903) demands three things of this nation – “the right to vote, civic equality, and the education of youth according to ability” – within the context of his

critique of Booker T. Washington (p. 32). Similarly, the Black Panther Party made a total of ten demands of the United States.

(1) “We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community; (2) We want full employment for our people; (3) We want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our Black community; (4) We want decent housing fit for the shelter of human beings; (5) We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society; (6) We want all Black men to be exempt from military service; (7) We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people; (8) We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails; (9) We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States; (10) We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.” (pp. 137-140).

The Black Manifesto, created by James Forman, leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and activists Mike Hamlin, Ken Cockrel, and John Watson, demanded that white Christian churches and later on Jewish synagogues pay five hundred million dollars in reparations (Kelley, 2002). The purpose of the Black Manifesto, a monetary demand, was to secure funds for increased employment opportunities, higher education, research facilities, increased media control, and control over the education of Black youth. These demands would be achieved through massive

and organized civil disobedience targeted at Christian churches and Jewish synagogues (Kelley, 2002).

There were several issues that prevented many demands for reparations from coming to fruition, such as inadequate planning and lack of financial means. Aside from the flaws, it is important to notice the ways in which Black radicals utilized their voices to express what the Black community required from America in order to become fully liberated from racial subordination. If we look to our past to help us understand our present in order to plan for our future, then it becomes evidently clear that it is time for conversations about what the Black community needs from our country. It is time for new demands for reparations to be made, but the questions of by whom, and for what, remain. How do we know what is needed? How do we spark those conversations? Who will lead? How do demands for reparations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century differ from those in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century? How are they the similar? How do we organize? What does a collective voice sound like, and what would it say?

### **Liberatory Pedagogy**

What if Black educators were the ones to spark and lead conversations about the educational needs of the Black community? If contemporary demands for reparations were made, what would they be? What if a collective, contemporary, Black radical movement originated with educators? How might this process begin? What would it aim to achieve? Is pedagogy – the art of teaching – the most viable place to start a revolution?

We can look to the research on critical pedagogy to begin exploring that question. To begin, critical pedagogy was founded on eight different principles (Darder, 2002). The first principal focuses on creating a culture of schooling that empowers

culturally and economically disenfranchised students, requiring a transformation of practices that perpetuate injustice (Darder, 2002). Challenging the unexamined relationship between schools and society, critical pedagogy seeks to expose and clarify the misconception that education provides equal opportunity and access for all (Darder, 2002). Critical pedagogy also takes into account the historical context in which knowledge is created, asserting that it is our historical context that gives meaning and purpose to our lives (Darder, 2002). Critical pedagogy embraces knowledge that is constructed through tension and conflict, and it challenges the notion of there being such a thing as objective knowledge, asserting that the dominant society and its views, values, and culture associated with it, are not actually the norm (Darder, 2002). Critical pedagogy incorporates the notion of hegemony in order to expose the inequities of power relations and social mobility, and it encourages teachers to recognize their responsibility to critique and transform their classroom practices that promote hegemony and perpetuate economic and cultural marginalization (Darder, 2002). Critical pedagogy incorporates a theory of resistance, which seeks to uncover the degree to which student oppositional behavior is associated with the need to struggle against assaults on dignity, or are simply tied to the perpetuation of their own oppression (Bromell, 2013; Darder, 2002). Critical pedagogy emphasizes question-posing and dialogue as principles as well. This pedagogical approach empowers students to critically examine all theories and truths, challenging the dominant educational discourse, and illuminating the right and freedom of students to become subjects of their world (Darder, 2002). Dialogue and questioning encourages teachers to problematize various aspects of curricula, which leads students through a process of conscientization, or a heightening of students' critical consciousness – a

process by which students achieve a deep awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to re-create them (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1968).

Common critiques of critical pedagogy include whether race and racism is sufficiently included and whether it privileges issues of social class over race or gender. To address this gap, Lynn (2004) connected theories of race to critical pedagogy. Lynn (2004), the creator of critical race pedagogy, defines the term as "an analysis of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination in education that relies mostly on the perceptions, experiences, and counter-hegemonic practices of educators of color" (p. 154). Through conversations with Black critical race pedagogues, Lynn found that they are concerned with the persistence of racial discrimination in schools and in the wider society; the struggle to maintain and develop their own cultural identities, and the ways in which class interacts with race to make the lives of the Black poor even more miserable (Lynn, 2004). They are also committed to understanding how to practice a liberatory pedagogy that involves (1) teaching children about the importance of African culture; (2) dialogical engagement in the classroom; (3) engaging in daily acts of self-affirmation; and (4) resisting and challenging hegemonic administrators (Lynn, 2004).

Liberatory pedagogy aligns with the notion of pragmatic utopianism (Dawson, 2013; Kelley, 2002). Black teachers are aware of the current state of education. They are aware of the injustices that cause the education system to fail Black students. They are aware of the achievement gap. In other words, the context of what we face is probably clearer now than ever before, and we are already "pissed off about the present" (Kelley, 2002, p. 3). Liberatory pedagogy provides us with an entry point into making progress towards a radically imagined future. If we consider pedagogy as an act of resistance,

which in turn is activism, then we acknowledge the tremendous potential for a collective movement towards eradicating oppression in our society. With this in mind, the system of education could be instrumental in destroying the very oppression that it perpetuates.

The most viable spaces for radical imagination aren't actually physical, but instead they exist within the decisions that individual educators make to utilize their pedagogy to resist oppression (Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004). However, just as liberatory pedagogy is needed as a way to access the journey towards a radically imagined future, it is the very same thing that could complicate that journey for several reasons. Ultimately, the largest threat to liberatory pedagogy would be white fragility and institutional white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). Like other types of social justice efforts, liberatory pedagogy involves teaching in a way that helps students understand the oppressive structures and systems that breed inequities in several different capacities (DiAngelo, 2011). This means that conversations about white dominance and privilege and the ways in which it harms people of color must occur at the classroom level. This means that students would be encouraged to question and critique what is considered to be the norm with the intent to envision and enact change. This means that all students, specifically those who are marginalized, would become empowered through a gradual process of self-actualization to challenge injustice (hooks, 1994). It would be remiss to ignore the litany of issues that could be caused by liberatory educators and the liberatory education that students would receive, especially in predominantly white spaces. It is important for liberatory educators to have the courage to persevere through the opposition, no matter how hostile, and never give up (hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015).



Could the threat of white fragility and institutional white fragility be countered with an increased number of critically conscious teachers of color in our nation's teaching force? If there are more teachers of color within a staff who are critically conscious and engage in liberatory pedagogy, then will the opposition be easier to overcome, especially if white teachers decide to be allies? Is there really power in numbers?

### **Summary**

In this section, an overview of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) was provided. These tenets include the notion that racism is a permanent fixture in American society, the recognition of the value of experiential knowledge, a critique of liberalism, and the theory of interest convergence (Bell, 1980, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Taylor et al., 2009). This theory was utilized as a framework to critique issues of racism within the system of education. Following this brief critique, the lack of imagination within Critical Race Theory was identified, and Black radical imagination was explained as a way to fulfill that gap (Dawson, 2013; Frazier, 2015; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012; Kelley, 2002). A thorough explanation of Black radical imagination and its complement, pragmatic utopianism, was provided in order to explain how Black educators can engage in the process of imagining a better future where people of color are no longer subordinate to the dominant culture, but also finding a practical place to start (Dawson, 2013; Frazier, 2015; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012; Kelley, 2002). The issue of finding a safe space to engage in radical imagination was discussed, and I asserted that there is no physical space for radical imagination but instead, the safest space for this lies in the space of activism fueled by the indignities of people of color (Bromell, 2013). The last

section of this literature review questioned whether liberatory pedagogy could be a way to spark Black radical imagination within an educational context. The question of liberatory pedagogy being an act of resistance and activism was raised, and the risks associated with engaging in this type of pedagogy were identified and explained (hooks, 1994; Kalogirou & Malafantis, 2012; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004). Liberatory pedagogy was identified as a safe space for radical imagination, and it specifically aligns with the notion of pragmatic utopianism because it could be considered to be a viable place to revitalize the work of the Black radicals of our past (Lynn, 2004).

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Introduction

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of phenomena that exist in society. Researchers utilize qualitative methods when they wish to seek the answers to what, why, or how questions (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010). The purpose of my study is to engage my readers in a thorough analysis of my experiences as a Black female educator who works in a predominantly white school district. By focusing on the particularly stressful and emotionally draining situations that I endured, I am able to describe my personal decision to re-examine my response to racism. This involves recognizing opportunities to engage in Black educational imagination, which includes the features of liberatory pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015; Lynn, 2004), critically conscious acts (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002), and a revitalized Black teaching force. These features animate Black spaces which specifically include the re-humanization of Black people, the telling of counter-narratives, and the recognition of racial trauma in hiring practices. Black spaces represent a meaningful recognition of Black radical imagination, and they are an important part of my quest for liberation from racialized oppression. Through my stories, I hope to compel Black educators to view a Black educational imagination as an opportunity to participate in a collective effort towards eradicating racialized oppression from our society.

For as long as I can remember, I have always felt a strong calling to become an educator. One day I decided to stop resisting the inevitable and embrace that calling. At the time, I didn't realize that I not only accepted a calling, which involves acknowledging my purpose and obeying its subsequent commands, but I had an obligation to fulfill. This

obligation – my need to be a part of a movement that fights against racialized oppression – has driven me to seek out Black spaces. This realization has had a direct impact on my identity development. The more I engage in the spaces of Black educational imagination, the more capable I become of imagining the moment when my “teacher self” and “home self” can finally merge into one identity (DuBois, 1903). In other words, engaging in Black educational imagination liberates the individual and the group, simultaneously, from the double consciousness that DuBois (1903) explained so eloquently.

“...the Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” (p. 2)

I weave in and out of the American world and the Negro world everyday, often multiple times per day (DuBois, 1903). In the American world, I am a visitor, allowed to be there only because I have paid in one way or another (DuBois, 1903). In the Negro world, I belong, so re-entering that world everyday is very similar to returning home from a long vacation and being anxious to get home to something familiar (DuBois, 1903). However, I realize that this tourism is one-dimensional. I must visit the American world everyday because I am obligated to do so by the calling that I answered years ago, but there is

nothing that compels individuals from the American world to cross the color line into the Negro world (DuBois, 1903). After all, what would be in it for them (Bell, 1980, 1995; DiAngelo, 2011)?

Autoethnography allowed me to interrogate the phenomenon of the marginalization of Black people in the context of education, specifically in predominantly white school districts, and imagine what education would be like if there was imagination to support liberatory pursuits (Denzin, 2003; Kelley, 2002). It is necessary for me to tell my story about my endeavors to engage in Black educational imagination in my own district. My story has added to Critical Race Theory scholarship that asserts that the voices of marginalized groups should be privileged over the dominant narrative in order to begin to re-shape the typical story told about education (Denzin, 2003; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Therefore, using autoethnography and Critical Race Theory as my methodology, I provided counter-stories that demonstrate my experiences with Black spaces in white places. Each counter-story explains in great detail the challenges that I have faced as a Black educator working in a predominantly white, suburban school district, and the ways in which I have worked to interpret, understand, analyze, critique, and overcome my indignities (Bromell, 2013) with white supremacy as they relate to Black spaces. For me, autoethnography is most appropriate because in order to tell my stories, I must engage in an extremely deep and rigorous level of self-reflection in order to understand my cultural experience (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study was to reflect on my experiences with recognizing the need for Black spaces. I reflected on how I came to understand what the spaces are. Furthermore, I reflected on how I engage in Black spaces in my environment in order to

navigate white space everyday, specifically through teacher leadership. I hope that my readers will be able to relate to my experiences and begin to imagine and establish Black spaces in their own environments (Dawson, 2013; Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002; Frazier, 2015; Kelley, 2002). I also hope that this study builds upon language in the academy by providing others with a vocabulary to utilize when discussing their experiences similar to my own.

This chapter will provide a detailed description of the rationale for my research design and its implementation. Then, it will describe the environment in which this study was conducted. Furthermore, I will describe my role in the study, which will provide additional explanation about my decision to take an autoethnographic approach to this study. I will go on to describe how I collected and analyzed my data. Finally, I will explain how and why my study is trustworthy and acknowledge possible ethical issues.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of ethnography is to discover and describe a culture through the centralization of experience (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Both the research process and the product is ethnography. The type of ethnography that I used for my study is autoethnography, a description and an analysis of my personal experiences that allows me to better understand my cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2010). I told stories of my cultural experiences as a Black female educator and the challenges that I've faced with trying to navigate the politically hostile environment of a white space while continuing steadfastly on both a personal and symbolic path towards liberation. The purpose of this autoethnography was to express the degree to which my experiences have been transformative (Ellis et al., 2010). To do this, I described in great detail what has

occurred in my life and career that has caused my transformation and how I will be forever impacted and changed by my experiences. As a result of reading my autoethnography, my readers will hopefully become inspired to seek their own transformation or become transformed as they find ways to relate to my experiences in nuanced ways (Ellis, 2004).

The design of this study is narrative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010). I used the first person point of view to write thick descriptions of my personal experiences (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010). I also used the elements of storytelling, including plot and character development, and positioning myself as the narrator. I was the object of the research, so the details of my story were evocative as I revealed the innermost details of my emotions, thoughts, and opinions (Ellis, 2004). Narrative autoethnography was important for my research design because it was the best way for me to capture the essence of the connection between my experiences and the pursuit of liberation by working to engage in Black spaces in white space (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The stories included a multitude of reflection, which demonstrated the emotions that I experienced as a result of conflicts, indignities, challenges, and victories that helped to define the significance of my experiences. My narratives were my data, and my data analysis consisted of using the narratives as the basis for clearly explaining and defining the Black spaces and how Black educators can go about establishing them in their own environments, following a process similar to my own, but also realizing that the process is ongoing so long as institutionalized racism is pervasive in American society.

The central research question that this study answered is how can Black educational imagination play a role in liberating Black people from racialized oppression? This study will also address the following sub questions:

1. How are Black spaces created?
2. What is the role of Black spaces when engaging in Black educational imagination?
3. What do Black spaces achieve?

I told an anchor story for each Black space. The stories addressed each of my research questions. They revealed my experiences with engaging in Black spaces in my work environment, a white space. The stories also made it clear that the work to establish Black spaces is never complete, but it is an ongoing process because liberation is a goal, or something to strive towards, instead of something that ends (Ellis, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Finally, each story explained what Black spaces contribute to the pursuit of liberation from the perspective of a Black educator (Ellis, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

### **Participants**

I was the only participant in my study. I used autoethnography as my methodology and narrative as my design (Ellis, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The purpose of this study was to examine the occurrences in my career that I have experienced that have caused me to think critically about the injustices that exist in my work environment, which also represent the institutionalized racism that prevents Black people from being able to view and use education as a source of liberation as they once did (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008).



Although there are other people who have played a role in my story, they were written into the plot of my story as characters identified by pseudonyms or pronouns (Ellis, 2004). Combined with the use of pseudonyms and pronouns, I referred to my colleagues according to their race and position within the district. For example, Black teacher, white administrator, or Asian counselor are examples of terms used to describe my colleagues without using their real names. This allowed me to protect the identity of my co-workers, and the institution for which I work. This also helped me to remain hyper-focused on myself as the subject of the research (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010).

### **Setting/Site**

I work in a predominantly white, suburban school district. This school district is located in St. Louis County. It is considered to be a leader in academic excellence, and is highly sought-after by St. Louis County residents. On the surface, this district is highly successful, but like many other districts, it struggles with a multitude of issues that lie underneath that surface. The district's achievement gap and teacher diversity gap are two of its most insidious problems. This is exactly why I chose to conduct my study in this district. Because I am an employee, I have become personally invested in the struggle for liberation that has become a daily battle over the past nine years. Much of my personal growth has occurred as a result of being a teacher there, which is why autoethnography was the best methodology for conducting my study (Ellis, 2004). Being a teacher is not just a job or a career, but it has become a part of my identity, which makes it impossible to separate my work life from my personal life because I see the two as one entity. As a result, my study also served the purpose of the exploration of my identity development as well as telling the stories of my personal pursuit of liberation (Ellis, 2004).

In my study, I sometimes used the acronym PWSD (predominantly white school district) when referring to my district. The building in which I work is a diverse middle school. It is diverse because approximately 30% of the student body consists of students of color, and approximately 60% of the students are white. 20% of the 30% students of color are Black students. The remaining 10% consists of students of Asian and Hispanic descent. In my study, I sometimes used the acronym DMS (diverse middle school) when referring to this building. I also taught at a predominantly white middle school before transferring to my current building. When I referred to this building, I used the acronym PWMS (predominantly white middle school).

### **Researcher's Role**

As previously stated, the racial make up of my district's staff is predominantly white. In the 2012-2013 school year, approximately 95% of certified teachers were white, while approximately 3% were Black. This same pattern is evident in the racial make up of administrators in the district. Approximately 88% of administrators are white, while approximately 8% of administrators are Black. My stories explained the intricate details of my experiences with being part of the 3%, and navigating the inherently racist space in which I work. They also explained how I decided to consciously and unconsciously respond to the overt and covert racial violence that I experienced on a daily basis (Ellis, 2004). My stories described in great detail the epiphany I had when I started to view education as a path for liberation, and when I started to become more intentional about my professional practice due to this realization. Therefore, my role in this study was to reveal what it was and still is like to be a member of the 3% who has interpreted her purpose as someone responsible for making meaningful contributions to carving out a

path towards liberation. Autoethnography was the best way to achieve the goals of telling my story from the perspective of a person who is marginalized both in my personal life and at the onset of my professional life.

Autoethnography as methodology is liberatory in and of itself (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The very act of telling my story was liberating because it allowed me to share my experiences, and as a result, escape the silencing that I have struggled with all of my life. I have always felt that my perspective on education has been ignored and not taken seriously. Autoethnography allowed me to be liberated from this exclusion. I do not believe that I am alone in this struggle to be heard. This autoethnography has inserted my story into the academy so that it can join the multitude of other stories that have contributed to the growing body of research surrounding the experiential knowledge of marginalized groups (Ellis, 2004; D. G. S. a. T. J. Yosso, 2002). My hope is that my story will empower others to tell their stories in order to be liberated and contribute to the process of liberation.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Being a part of the 3% is a double-edged sword because it has completely permeated my perspective as a professional and as an educator. This reminds me that I need to be mindful of my assumptions and biases. I must remember that not all members of the 3% experience that membership in the same way that I do. Not everyone views liberation in the same way, nor does everyone feel that it is necessary or even possible. While I personally think that my story is generalizable, it is not necessarily appropriate to assume that it is. This is why I chose autoethnography so that I could intentionally keep the focus of the study on myself and how I have been shaped by my pursuit of liberation

in the context of a white space. However, I do feel that it is necessary to leave it up to my readers to create their own interpretations of my experiences and relate to my story on a personal level. My readers will need to create their own meaning and decide for themselves the relevancy to their experiences and the level of generalizability.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Because I chose autoethnography, my experiences were my data (Ellis, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Since I am the object of my study, it was not necessary for me to get an Institutional Review Board approval. I was completely comfortable with being the object of my own research. I relied on my memory as my source of data (Ellis, 2004). Experiencing racialized oppression is traumatizing, and I have experienced this trauma throughout my life. Just like nightmares, trauma is easy to remember, despite how uncomfortable such memories might be to revisit. Sometimes different traits of my environment (from my work and personal life) trigger times in my past when I have been harmed by racism (Ellis, 2004). For example, school is the place where I encountered white people regularly, and the first time that I learned that being Black was a problem (DuBois, 1903). I was at recess and wanted to play on the slide. As I climbed the ladder towards the top of the slide, two of my white, male classmates climbed up the ladder behind me, called me a nigger, and pushed me down the slide. Experiences such as this one have happened so frequently in my life, and as a result, have become permanently etched into my memory. Therefore, these memories have impacted my behavior and the ways in which I interpret my surroundings.

My mind stores experiences in the form of stories. Therefore, my memory is a lot like a library of stories, and as I reflect on them, I realize that I could tell several stories

that would show how I recognized and seized opportunities to engage in each of the Black spaces before and after I became conscious enough to realize that they were spaces and that liberation was my personal goal. This means that when selecting anchor stories for my data, I had several options. To me, this made my memory a very reliable data source that held a multitude of information that I can recall effectively and easily in order to support my claim for the need of Black educational imagination.

But this bank of stories wasn't built overnight. It was a slow and steady process that commanded a constant cycle of recalling and processing my experiences. For example, I can vividly remember the first time I wrote about injustice. This occurred when I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. My mother had told me a story about a time when her mother packed her sardines for lunch because it was what was affordable for the family at the time. Upon opening the sardines during lunchtime, she soon became encircled by a group of her peers and ridiculed for her poor man's lunch. My mother has always been everything to me, and as an eight year old I just could not grapple emotionally with such a terrible thing that happened to my mother. I was tormented by the images that played over and over again in my head, and when it was time for school the next day, I was practically inconsolable. My teacher asked me what was bothering me and I shared the story with her. She gave me a notebook and told me it was my journal and I could write in it anytime I wanted, especially if I was feeling sad. She said that I never had to show it to anyone if I didn't want to. Needless to say, I tried journaling like she suggested and indeed felt a lot better.

The next time I remember writing about injustice was in high school. When I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I wrote my first research paper on the achievement gap. I became aware of

the plight of Black students in public schools by experiencing it myself, and I wanted to know why this was so. When I reflect on my life, I realize that I have been voicing my disgust with injustice for a very long time. The expression of my disgust often manifested itself in my writing, whether it was a journal entry, a research paper or some other school assignment. No matter the purpose for the writing, there was always this underlying desire to seek clarity and understanding of what was happening to me and other students who looked like me. Why were we such a problem (DuBois, 1903; Fairclough, 2001)?

### **Anchor Stories and Memory**

As I mentioned before, my stories are my data, and the place where my stories are stored is my memory. Relying heavily upon my memory, I recalled facts, emotions, and specific details about specific experiences that became anchor stories (Ellis, 2004). I refer to them as anchor stories because, in mining through my memories, I intentionally selected the stories that most effectively represented how I participated in Black educational imagination. I told three anchor stories of experiences that pertain to each of the spaces that are animated by the features of Black educational imagination. I also explained how I made strides towards liberation by engaging in these spaces, which include the re-humanization of Black people, the telling of counter-narratives, and the recognition of racial trauma in hiring practices.

I told the story of how I utilized liberatory pedagogy (Ellis, 2004) in my classroom as part of my instructional delivery. My ability to teach students how to examine society through a critical lens has certainly developed tremendously overtime. So much of the how is based on what literature and texts I bring into the classroom to share with my students. The texts target the institutions in which racism runs rampant.

Education is one of those institutions. Another part of how I utilize liberatory pedagogy includes how I interact with adults. I believe that the dignity in education should not only lie within teacher-student interactions, but also within adult interactions. However, this isn't always the case, especially for a teacher who engages in liberatory pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Jennings & Lynn, 2005; Kumashiro, 2015). I have received a fair amount of push back from some of my colleagues for using liberatory pedagogy, and part of this particular anchor story was about how I have navigated conflict with colleagues that resulted from the threat of utilizing liberatory pedagogy (DiAngelo, 2011) by engaging in the space of re-humanizing Black people that is animated by utilizing liberatory pedagogy.

My second anchor story explains my personal experiences with critically conscious acts that animate space for telling counter-narratives. I describe in great detail the obligation that I feel to my race as a Black female educator to advocate for the recognition and inclusion of Black people in white space. I discuss the sacrifices and risks associated with that advocacy. I share how my indignities often drive me to tell my story in order to illuminate the racial trauma that Black educators experience (Bromell, 2013; DeGruy, 2005). Telling my story requires me to be brave and intentional, therefore, this particular anchor story demonstrated how I chose to tell a counter-narrative in one of the whitest spaces possible in my district, both physically and metaphorically.

My third anchor story is about my involvement with hiring more teachers of color, specifically Black teachers, in my district. To have only 3% teachers of color on a staff is very concerning and is symptomatic of institutionalized racism that affects our education system. While the absence of teachers of color on our teaching staff and other

teaching staffs across the nation should be no surprise to me, it is still a feature of Black educational imagination that needs serious attention. In my district, people discuss this topic as if it is some sort of enigma that can never be solved. They wonder why they have a difficult time attracting candidates of color. They also wonder why candidates of color aren't actually hired by building principals even after interviewing for various positions. Building administrators really don't need to be told that there is an absence of teachers of color on their staffs because they can physically see the people who enter their buildings everyday. All administrators should see this as a problem that needs fixing, but the interest convergence simply isn't there (Bell, 1980; DiAngelo, 2011). Instead of examining the institution for inequities and responding accordingly, there is a serious blame game occurring. This story explains how failing to recognize the racial trauma (DeGruy, 2005) experienced by Black candidates causes them to be excluded from being hired by predominantly white school districts, specifically.

The purpose of my anchor stories was to clearly define the features of Black educational imagination and the Black spaces it animates, and to explain what is achieved by engaging in this imagination. I believe that these spaces could help to carve out a path for liberation for Black people. Because I am Black woman and I am situated within the Black culture, I know from personal experience what it feels like to be a part of a marginalized group. But, there are some parts of that experience that I have only an emerging understanding. Autoethnography allowed me to deepen my understanding of my experiences and how they have transformed me. It also allowed me to analyze my experiences through a critical lens, looking for evidence of how pervasive racism is in the institution of the American education (Ellis, 2004).



### **Trustworthiness**

My autoethnography is reliable because I am a member of the culture that I am studying through my personal experiences. Furthermore, I am a Black educator, and my hope is to reach out to other Black educators by telling my story. This is how my readers will be able to enter my subjective world (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor et al., 2009). My study also helped my readers understand what it is like to be in the minority at all times, what it is like to be a part of that 3%, and what it is like to be a Black teacher in a predominantly white school district (Ellis et al., 2010). My readers will gain an understanding of the challenges, nuances, and peculiarities that exist in my environment, and what sacrifices I have to make in order to survive this typically hostile environment. This piece is engaging and written in a provocative way that will saturate my readers in my experiences. I used figurative language such as metaphors and other intriguing craft moves to help convey the deep and true meaning of my experiences (Holt, 2003b).

My narrative also revealed why I am writing this study in the first place (Holt, 2003b). I want to gain an understanding of my experiences in the context of a hostile, white supremacist environment. I also want to understand even more the inherent and prevalent racism in American society. I have always known that racism existed, but I wanted to examine closely what racism looks like in a society that does an excellent job of hiding it and convincing the masses that it is a thing of the past. There are people who believe this to be true, and I see evidence in the classroom the most. Each year I teach my social justice curriculum, there are some students who realize for the first time that there is still racism in our world. It is my hope that my readers understand that this is not true,

but also come to realize what it looks like in the sinister and deceptive environment of contemporary America. Dare I ask what can we do about this? This question lies at the core of my study as well.

### **Ethical Issues**

As I mentioned previously, I used a combination of pseudonyms and pronouns for all names except for my own in this study. I did this because I wanted to ensure that the focus of this study was on me, the subject. Furthermore, I realized that I might implicate some of my colleagues through this study (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2010; Holt, 2003b). I wanted to do my best to protect their identities, even though I do realize that it is fairly easy for someone to find out where I work. Although this will be a persistent worry in the back of my mind as I write, I will make sure that I push forward and strive to maintain the fidelity and authenticity of my narrative (Holt, 2003a). Overtime I have learned that social justice requires tremendous risks and sacrifices (hooks, 1994; Kelley, 2002). I believe that my autoethnography is, at this point in my life, an ultimate sacrifice that must be made in order to begin to change the deplorable condition of education. Therefore, my narrative must be told. It is my contribution to the academy and to the field of education. Knowing this will help me push through the fear associated with wondering what opinions my colleagues *might* form about my research. As the Bible says, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58 King James Version).

## **Chapter 4: Black Spaces – Dangers, Dispositions, and Decisions**

### **A Mole Amongst Us**

#### **Introduction**

I think it is safe to assume that Saturday, August 9, 2014, started off as a pretty typical day for most of us. From what I remember, there was no tension in the air, no particularly abnormal disruptions to the day that I even faintly remember. In other words, there was nothing that could have possibly foreshadowed the life-altering event that occurred on that day. But then again, there was no such foreshadowing on September 11, 2001 either. That's the thing about events that have the power to alter. They come without warning on the most normal days, but that is how it should be because if events that have the power to alter didn't have on their side the element of surprise, then would they have any power at all?

The answer to that question is frankly no, and here's why. If we had knowledge of such events ahead of time, then we would have way too much opportunity to prepare a response. When we are not expecting such an event to occur, then God creates an opportunity to test the content of our character and remind us of who we really are. Some of us are actually proud of our choices, but others feel guilt, regret, or shame. In an attempt to escape these negative feelings, we may blame a less than favorable response on circumstances, and the inevitability and powerlessness that lurks within them.

#### **Equity Theater**

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department (Rogers, 2015). Regardless of what people think about whether or not the shooting was racially motivated, or if excessive force was used,

that shooting was yet another reminder of the flaws in liberalism. Now in the aftermath of Ferguson, it seems as if society might be scrambling just a tad to ensure that any and all potential accusations of racism are avoided. After all, the U.S. Department of Justice made a complete spectacle of the City of Ferguson and its racist rodeo show (United States Department of Education, 2015). Who in their right mind would allow themselves to be next? There isn't a lot of meaningful work around racism being done to really change our society from the inside out, but we sure are doing a great job of making it look like there is. There is a lot of talk in the media and within organizations about diversity in staff make up specifically in law enforcement, education, and technology. Some organizations are actually doing more than hosting and/or participating in diversity recruitment fairs, but they are actually hiring candidates of color. Also, there seems to be an increase in stories about police officers engaging in random acts of kindness, specifically in impoverished neighborhoods. Organizations are implementing diversity programs and trainings and requiring that their employees participate. New laws and policies are being created and implemented to decrease the chances of these issues happening again. We are layering on band aid after band aid after band aid, but ignoring the oozing, gaping wound underneath.

What I describe can easily be associated with the Ferguson effect. The Ferguson effect describes the rise in violent crimes in cities across the country since August 9, 2014, the day that Michael Brown was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson. According to this developing theory, "intense national scrutiny of the use of force by police has made officers less aggressive and emboldened criminals" (Davey & Smith, 2015). However, there is only anecdotal data to support this idea, which is not enough

evidence to support the Ferguson effect being an actual trend. But maybe the Ferguson effect can be used to describe other trends that have surfaced since Michael Brown's death. Maybe the Ferguson effect more appropriately describes the rise in the efforts of institutions to appear to be more equitable in the eyes of the general population. This, in turn, helps institutions to avoid intense public scrutiny for doing the opposite. While there is no guarantee that an institution will be scrutinized if it does not increase its efforts to appear to operate in an equitable manner, institutions sometimes do it anyway in order to avoid the potential threat of devastating scrutiny (Eligon, 2016; Gates, 2014; McGirt, 2016).

Some may argue that these efforts are signs of positive change and social progression, but as a woman of color, I can't help but be skeptical. I keep wondering how long it's going to last. I can't ignore the fact that sometimes people of color benefit from the façade that institutions are attempting to create, but so are the institutions. It is the ultimate interest convergence (Bell, 1980). However, when the coast is clear, society will fall right back to its default position, and that is, whites on one side of the color line, and everybody else on the other side. We know that loving racism is wrong, but I don't think we want to do right.

### **Institutional White Fragility, Interest Convergence, and the Ferguson Effect: A Tricky Trifecta**

What I am suggesting is that we are witnessing the intersection of institutional white fragility, interest convergence, and the Ferguson Effect (Bell, 1980, 1995; Davey & Smith, 2015; DiAngelo, 2011). What I am trying to notice is how institutions respond when they are forced to confront the racism that exists within them. What has been

particularly intriguing to watch is the ways in which educational institutions respond to the implications that our society's struggle with racism has had on them. Where I work, the responses have been mainly reactive. My district is considered to be a powerhouse compared to others in the county and state. It is considered to be a leader in innovation and achievement. It is viewed as fiscally responsible and one of the best places in the area to work. It continues to participate in the area desegregation program, it holds a ceremony every year that celebrates Black student achievement, and it has implemented diversity training and a district committee devoted to ensuring social justice in each school in the district. These efforts have been in place for almost ten years now.

On the surface, it appears that my district has been proactive in its efforts to confront racism, but underneath the surface exists reasons why the training and committee was put in place to begin with. Just over twelve years ago, an older student assaulted the daughter of Demetrious Johnson, a prominent Black community leader and former NFL player, with racial slurs on the bus (Stevens, 2003). This occurred almost twelve years before Ferguson, but now in our post-Ferguson years, our institutional white fragility has manifested through partnerships with local unaccredited and/or struggling school districts, and a more intentional approach to hiring educators of color. In other words, it continues to be in the district's best interest to take the "good whites" approach to confronting racism, before and especially after Ferguson. Pockets of sincerity can be found in even the remotest corners of the district, but we still have a ways to go.

The leaders of my district have tried to manage its institutional white fragility, but it has yet to fully realize that the individual white fragility that exists within it cannot be managed. The individual white fragility at the district's core clashes with the district's

concerted efforts towards social justice. When that is paired with the Ferguson effect occurring in our educational context, we end up with quite the volatile environment where the people are split into two groups: one group consisting of those who want to discuss injustice and do something to change it, and another group that wants silence and nothing to change. The first group is always the smallest.

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
O what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His spirit, washed in His blood.*

*This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior, all the day long;  
this is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior all the day long  
(Crosby & Knapp, 1873).*

Have you ever seen a ghost? I once saw several lurking around Diverse Middle School (DMS) four days after Michael Brown's death, which was Predominantly White School District's (PWSD) first day back to school from summer break. It was almost as if teachers just sent their bodies to work and charged their souls with the task of staying home to try to make sense of what the hell was going on in our community. Simply put, there were a bunch of soul-less bodies roaming about the building, teaching kids. I am in

no way pointing fingers at my colleagues. I too was one of those ghosts. I too engaged in the pretending. I pretended like my students didn't want to talk about it when I knew they did. I pretended like my colleagues weren't affected by the unfortunate events unfolding in Ferguson when I knew they were. I pretended not to be distracted by how much Ferguson was scaring me when I knew I was. I pretended not to obey the assumed expectation of silence when I knew I had surrendered. I pretended like everything was okay when it wasn't. Ferguson had become a massive elephant in the room, and it took everything in me to pretend that it wasn't there.

Because I worked in the PWSB, I had been conditioned to participate in the façade of oblivion (Leigh & Davis, 2015). That was part of the district's culture. It was part of how we responded to controversy. We just didn't. We took a neutral stance, which translates to silence, and by choosing silence, we taught our students that the proper way to respond to injustice was to ignore it, to not respond, to not deal with it (Leigh & Davis, 2015). Controversial topics were taboo, and it was not favorable for teachers to bring them up in class with students. But I think that this is part of what made me want to test the waters of controversy at times throughout my career. I was an English teacher, and I considered my subject to be extremely malleable compared to others. I had brought up racial injustice in my classroom many times before. I searched for articles, literature, and activities that I could incorporate in my classroom regularly to heighten my students' critical consciousness and make them aware of the injustices that we all face and will continue to face in our lives. But something told me that Ferguson was just off limits, and that I shouldn't touch it with a fifty-foot pole, and so I complied. I kept quiet, played nice, succumbed to the pressures of white supremacy, and I shut up.



But then he stopped by my classroom. He, a social studies teacher, wanted to share some of his frustrations with the whole Ferguson situation. But this wasn't anything out of the ordinary. Once I started working in this particular building, he and I almost instantly built a good rapport despite our political differences. I believe that what caused us to connect instead of clash was the willingness on both our parts to communicate with the intent to understand, and because of this, we learned a lot from one another. He and I had had several, what we still call, SJ (social justice) conversations before, so I wasn't surprised that he stopped by my room. In fact, it wasn't just the two of us who engaged in these conversations regularly. There were actually six participants in our lunch bunch. When we wanted to talk about something that was unjust – which was typically racism – we would call it SJ. We had these discussions nearly every time we ate lunch together. For example, when we talked about the underrepresentation of people of color in children's books, we called that SJ. Our sentences would often start with, I have something to tell you guys that's so SJ..." or "This or that is so SJ..." It was a term that we used amongst ourselves in conversation, and we intentionally avoided saying social justice because we wanted to keep part of our conversation a secret specifically when we were in mixed company. When I really think about why we felt the need to keep it a secret, I suppose it's because we were aware of how dangerous race talk could be. Furthermore, the teachers in our grade level were clearly politically split, and although we played very nicely with the others, we avoided conflict by containing our race talk to our group. I would often wonder if they knew what we were talking about and if they thought our conversation was offensive. Then I think that they couldn't have possibly been more offended by our conversation than we were by what we assumed to be theirs.

When he stopped by my room, we began to candidly discuss Ferguson. Towards the end of the conversation, he said that he wanted to somehow incorporate Ferguson into some upcoming lessons. He felt that Ferguson impacted everyone and that it would be remiss of us as teachers to act as if it wasn't happening, and never address it with our students, or at least give them space and opportunity to talk and ask questions. He wanted to do something about Ferguson. He didn't think that we should remain silent and never process this situation with our students, and I didn't disagree. He asked if the English Language Arts (ELA) teachers would be interested in collaborating with the History teachers on writing a series of lessons pertaining to Ferguson. He asked me because I led the ELA team, and it was my responsibility to share the idea with my team to get their thoughts. Of course I wasn't surprised to learn that they were on board, and that they also shared the same feelings as I did and the other History teacher who stopped by my room that day. Almost immediately, we set up a meeting with the History teachers so we could get started planning our lessons.

It was decided that ELA would take the lead on the first lesson and History would write the second lesson as a follow up in their classrooms. We started writing the lesson on Wednesday, August 13, 2014 and reviewed it on the afternoon of Thursday, August 14, 2014. We decided that the lesson would simultaneously introduce our social justice terminology (prejudice, discrimination, and oppression), and teach students how to generate new ideas for reading and writing through photo analysis. We tied in the situation in Ferguson by using photos from the protests. We poured over the lesson, analyzing every sentence, every pedagogical move, every transition, every nook and cranny of the content. We felt confident that this was the appropriate place to start, and

although this approach to introducing our social justice terminology was new and different from previous years, we mustered up the courage to teach it because the alternative simply wasn't an option. In fact, it was negligent.

At the end of the meeting, I volunteered to email the draft of the lesson to the History teachers so that they would have time to review it before our meeting on the following Tuesday, August 19, 2014. When I went home that evening, I looked at the lesson one more time, put some finishing touches on it, and emailed it to the history and ELA teachers at approximately 10:04 PM, right before I went to bed. The next morning, I woke up, got dressed, and went to work. About ten minutes into my first hour class, an administrator entered my classroom and motioned for me to come to the door. I got my students settled and walked over to the door to speak with her. She asked me if I had discussed the situation in Ferguson with my students, and if I had sent a letter home about it. Puzzled and confused, I said no and went back to my students. She moved on to the next ELA classroom, and the next until she spoke with all of the ELA teachers. Every reply she received was a no. No letter was sent home, and only one teacher told her that she discussed it in her classroom to a small extent, but only because a student had brought it up. The rest of us hadn't even mentioned a peep about it, but had planned to next week after our meeting with the History teachers.

Our entire grade level was off third hour every day for interdisciplinary team meetings. Before third hour came, we were instructed via email to gather in my classroom for a quick stand up meeting. We were informed that a group of angry parents, one a police officer's wife, had called our building principal to complain about some teachers in the building who had sent a letter home detailing facts about Michael Brown

and the events in Ferguson that were not true. The parents thought that the teachers should not be discussing the Michael Brown situation at school. Some of these parents didn't even have students who attended our school, but they were community members. At 8:59 AM, the teachers in the ELA department received an email from our evaluating administrator ordering us to not teach, discuss, or facilitate any conversation about Ferguson until we met later that day during 6<sup>th</sup> hour (all ELA teachers had plan time during 6<sup>th</sup> hour). Before 6<sup>th</sup> hour came, our administrators asked the community members to share with them whatever it was that they had that was making them so upset so that they could properly address it with the teachers. They needed to see what it was that these parents were talking about because their investigation so far hadn't been very fruitful. The parents were willing to share what they had. They were also willing to say that it was a teacher in our building who had shared this mysterious document with them. However, they were not willing to share the actual email that they had received from the teacher because they didn't want to get the teacher in trouble. They had decided to protect the teacher.

After the administrators read the document, one of the other ELA teachers and I were called down to the office to take a look at it. They shared that at first glance, they didn't believe that it was real, and they certainly didn't believe that it was written by any of their teachers. One administrator turned the computer screen towards me to take a look for myself. When I read it, I immediately said, "That's our lesson!" The administrator looked at me and asked, "It is?" I said, "Yes, that's the lesson we've been working on all week. That's what we were going to use to introduce our social justice terminology to our students! I don't understand how this got out. I didn't send it until 10:04 PM last night,

and I only sent it to the other ELA teachers and the History teachers because they had been asking about it all week. That is only the second version of the lesson. We planned on meeting with History next Tuesday to discuss it and tweak it.” The administrator went on to explain how the community member only sent the parts of the lesson that she considered to be offensive, and unfortunately, she sent all of the parts that I contributed.

She wasn't upset about the lesson, but she was however concerned about it being biased and not based on fact. She did ask me where I obtained my information. I told her that I had been reading as much as I could from several different media sources since the events unfolded, and that for the most part, everybody had been saying the same thing. I explained that our focus was to re-humanize Michael Brown since he had been so dehumanized throughout the entire ordeal, and that is how I came up with that passage. The administrator pointed out every part of the lesson that showed bias, and she explained how what the passage contains no facts since the police had not released any information on the case because the investigation had not been fully conducted. She said that the situation was just too new to incorporate into the curriculum, and that was substantiated when the community member explained how she felt like the lesson portrayed police officers in a negative way.

Our administrator was extremely forgiving. She explained that she wasn't upset about the lesson because it was in draft form and it was never taught. She was pleased with our intentions to continue working on it and sharing it with colleagues, and that it was even shared with her for feedback. But what she was extremely upset about was the fact that a teacher amongst us, currently in our midst and smiling in all our faces, had committed the ultimate form of betrayal by breaching confidentiality and leaking the

lesson. This person didn't have enough respect for us to discuss their concerns with the lesson like real professionals do. My team would have been open to any feedback to make our lesson better, but instead, this teacher thought it would be a better idea to leak the lesson to a small group of angry parents and community members in order to quickly dismantle our attempts to address Ferguson in our classrooms. What this teacher did was not about creating a great lesson for our students, but it was about hurting us. This Judas, this Benedict Arnold, this shouter of All Lives Matter didn't even have the courage to provide us with honest feedback to our faces. This person's actions are the epitome of the white fragility that our district simply cannot contain.

The rest of the day was an emotional roller coaster for me. I cried. I contemplated going home for the day. I worried about my job security. I prayed to God that He would show me the traitor. I was embarrassed. I was angry. I was anxious. I was remorseful. I was in disbelief. And by the end of the day, I was just numb. I experienced all of these emotions all while trying to teach the rest of the day. The worst part is that at one point, everyone was a suspect. I visited the lonely space of feeling as if I could trust no one even though I knew this was a bit irrational.

That afternoon as I was driving home from work, I received a call from the building principal. She wanted to discuss the incident. I rehashed everything that happened that day and expressed all of my frustrations. She empathized, but agreed that the lesson was biased. She assured me that our team was safe, and that there was no reason to fear being "in trouble" for the incident. She said that things like this happen, that we all make mistakes, and that we should view this as a huge learning experience. "A learning experience indeed," I thought as she went on to express her outrage with the

person who leaked the lesson and her frustration with the district technology department for not being able to trace the email and identify the teacher. She explained that the most disturbing part about this entire situation was the fact that none of our own teachers got upset about the lesson, and instead of giving the team enough respect to just talk to us about it, this person decided to leak the lesson to a community member, which I assume was this teacher's way of thwarting an attempt to carve out space for liberatory pedagogy.

### **Battle of the Biases**

Throughout this whole ordeal, there is something that bothers me, and that is the idea of bias. It is my understanding that bias goes more than one way. People can be biased towards whatever they choose, but that doesn't necessarily mean that one person's bias is better than another's. What really bothers me about this situation is that our lesson was attacked for its bias. It could be gleaned by others that the authors of the lesson were biased towards Michael Brown and the protestors and community members that thought that Officer Darren Wilson used excessive force resulting in Michael Brown's death. But isn't there another bias present here? Didn't the parents, community members, and certainly the mole demonstrate their bias through their decisions to engage in what felt like mob behavior at the time to get what they wanted? In that moment, it felt like the mole's intent was to gather an angry group of parents and community members together to stop a group of rebellious teachers from corrupting their children, which made us feel like they were ganging up on us. If bias is the reason why the lesson was inflammatory and inappropriate to teach, then I'd like to challenge that notion by saying that bias is also the reason why those parents and community members attacked us. It is also the reason

why the teacher leaked the lesson. It is the reason why Ferguson happened in the first place.

### **My Mistakes**

My analysis of this situation would not be complete without pointing out three major mistakes that I made during this situation. There are three things that I should have never expected from my colleagues, including loyalty, understanding, and respect. I should have never expected my colleagues to be loyal to me. I should have never assumed that we all would treat each other with respect and refrain from doing anything to intentionally hurt each other (Tate, 2013). I should have never assumed that everyone understood or was willing to understand how racism impacts Black communities across the nation (Tate, 2013). And I should have never assumed that collaborating on a lesson about Ferguson would suddenly shift their understanding (Tate, 2013). I should have never assumed that people would let down their white supremacist guards just because a tragedy was happening in our own backyards. Instead, I should have expected this white supremacy flare-up. I should have anticipated white fragility to be at its worse at this time. Maybe my principal was right. Maybe Ferguson really was just too raw. How dare I expect the best from others?

The very next day, the ELA teachers and I met to discuss the incident from the day before. We decided to stop teaching our social justice curriculum. We no longer thought it was safe to discuss Ferguson with our students. I remember one teacher saying "...now I won't touch it with a fifty foot pole because I'm afraid that somebody is going to say something to somebody in the community." I echoed this teacher's sentiments. In conversation with the group, I remember saying, "I just don't know how we go on after



this. Is somebody going to tell on us every time we try to discuss something social justice related in our classrooms?” One teacher remained silent. Another teacher remained silent as well, but anxiously twirled the ends of her hair throughout the entire conversation. We decided that allowing the incident from the day before to silence us was much safer than what we originally planned. We didn’t want to lose our jobs. We had families to care for and careers to grow. The cross became much too heavy for any of us to bear, and so we decided to put it down with no plans to ever pick it back up again. This made sense to me in my head, but the guilt was so overwhelming. I had never felt so lost before in my career and this is because by deciding not to move forward with teaching my social justice curriculum, I cut off the source of my imagination. The more time I spent not teaching students about injustice, the dimmer my imagination became, and the dimmer my imagination, the easier it was for me to lose sight of why I was called to be a teacher (Kelley, 2002). If I wasn’t teaching students about the institutionalized racism and other systems of oppression, then what was I doing? What was there to talk about? I was lost and the only person who could find me was me.

As the leader of the group, I was ashamed of myself because I was supposed to be stronger than this. I wasn’t supposed to quit, especially not because of someone else’s poor decision. I was supposed to be better than that, and being a student of Critical Race Theory put the icing on my cake of shame. After that day, I started trying to figure out how to move forward without teaching the curriculum that I knew empowered students to challenge injustice. At the time, I didn’t realize that even today, I would still be sorry for giving up and succumbing to fear. Getting over this would require me to forgive myself,

and I haven't done that yet. I know I deserve forgiveness, but I am not finished punishing myself for making such silly mistakes.

### **Ferguson and Black Space**

Black space can be a teacher's most powerful tool, if the teacher has the sixth sense required to recognize it, harness it, and leverage it. I saw the incidents in Ferguson as the potential for engaging in Black space, because even though the events were still very raw, one thing that could not be debated was how Michael Brown had been so dehumanized. He had been made out to be a monster or a demon, when he was in fact a teenage boy, a recent high school graduate, who had arguably made a mistake or got caught up in a bad situation that cost him his life. As I watched the events unfold live on television, I began thinking about how I could address Ferguson in my classroom. It was the perfect entry point into taking the opportunity to re-humanize this young man, and discuss with our students why Black people are so dehumanized in our society. In retrospect, this is exactly what was happening to me, too. Instead of treating me like a human being and engaging in conversation about the lesson to provide feedback and make revisions collaboratively, I was treated like someone who needed to be lynched. If I were a white teacher, this would have been handled very differently. Therefore, this situation also demonstrates to me even more the importance of utilizing liberatory pedagogy, an important feature of Black educational imagination, to animate the space of re-humanizing Black people. Currently, being seen and treated as a human being is associated with whiteness. It is a privilege that white people have. This will not change unless we are intentional about re-humanizing Black people in order to make steps towards liberation. We cannot wait on other people to do this for us.

Everyone was talking about Ferguson. It was literally ten miles from our school, making it extremely relevant to everyone in different ways. Some students had family members who lived in Ferguson. My grandmother currently lives one block away from the Quick Trip that served as ground zero for the mayhem. She went outside to participate in the protests on many occasions. In addition, the events in Ferguson allowed students to witness an actual movement being assembled in their own community. Furthermore, they got to see the role that young people can serve in a movement. The Ferguson movement, despite whether or not people agreed with it, showed young people all over the world that they do have the power to make a difference and get involved in the facilitation of change. Before Ferguson, our students might not have witnessed many movements in which they could see a reflection of themselves. They had studied movements of our past, but the fact that there was a movement forming right there in front of them of which young people could participate set Ferguson apart. Ferguson presented opportunities that some never thought they would have. It presented opportunities that some have been waiting on for a very long time.

Ferguson forced us all to revisit, relive, and reconsider the very notion of racism. For those who claim that we are living in a post racial America, Ferguson provided an aggressive contradiction to that fallacy. For those of us who lived through and survived the era of Jim Crow and the fight for civil rights, Ferguson provided a disturbingly familiar reminder of that battle. And for those of us who have dealt with racism in the form of microaggressions or in other ways that are real but difficult to explain or comprehend, Ferguson provided confirmation of that (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). Basically, Ferguson showed us all, regardless of race or anything else, that racism is a

very prevalent force in all our lives, and it showed us that racism is much more convoluted than we could ever imagine.

So what do we do with what Ferguson had to throw in our faces? As human beings, we worry, we explore, we ask questions, and some of us use the issue as an entry point into Black spaces that aren't always as obvious without some sort of social trauma. For me, Michael Brown's death reminded educators of the responsibility that we have to our students in times of social trauma. But responsibility always comes with choice. In other words, just because we should do something doesn't always mean that we will, and just because we do something doesn't mean that we should. Ferguson made me, a Black female educator, feel compelled to fulfill my responsibility to my students in the current time of social trauma. If I didn't see Ferguson as an opportunity to incorporate social justice work into the classroom, then I needed to seriously re-evaluate why I decided to become an educator in the first place (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015). I had always believed that teaching was the greatest platform of social activism, and I accepted a calling a long time ago to use that platform to fight injustice. I decided a long time ago to become a teacher so that I could use the same system that perpetuates injustice to dismantle it. To me, this is the most lucrative path towards liberation.

Teachers are presented with a choice everyday to be a part of the problem or part of the solution. Few choose the latter because of the risks associated with that choice. My choice to engage in liberatory pedagogy has not been free of consequences, struggles, criticism, or apprehension, and I have no doubt that others who have also made this choice have experienced the same. This leads me to ponder the risks associated with

engaging in liberatory pedagogy, a feature of Black educational imagination, and the ways in which social justice educators grapple with those risks everyday.

## **The Courage to Stand: Shaking the Web of White Supremacy**

### **Introduction**

My husband and I traveled to New York City for a vacation during the holiday season for eight days. We both had always wanted to travel to the Big Apple for Christmas and New Years. When we finally got the money to book our dream trip, we went. On the first night there, we went on a quest to find a cozy New York City bar just like the ones we saw on television. As we ventured down 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, we spotted a bar across the street at 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and St. Marks called Good Night Sonny. On the outside, it appeared to meet all of our requirements. The lighting was warm, the crowd was moderate, and the décor was simply elegant. It was love at first sight, and like two giddy children, we darted across the street hand in hand, giggling with anticipation of our first of many authentic New York experiences.

The friendliest bar tender ever greeted us immediately. After perusing the cocktail menu for entirely too long, the bartender offered some suggestions. Still indecisive, we ended up agreeing to try his special drink; and it was amazing. As we savored our libations, we engaged in small talk with the friendly bar tender. He eventually asked, “So where are you guys from?”

“St. Louis.”

“Oh. Have things kind of died down there?”

I waited for my husband to respond because he and I actually hadn’t had a post-Ferguson conversation yet and I wondered what he would say. “Things are never calm in St.

Louis,” he says. Then I added, “I mean, the protests have decreased, but there’s still

plenty of racial tension, but then again, that's not anything new. Change takes a long time."

"Ah!" the friendly bartender said in satisfaction with my response. I figured he was looking for something more specific.

This happens often though, when my husband and I are talking to strangers. A stranger poses a question, I let my husband respond first. His response is typically too nuanced for the average stranger to understand what he actually means. Then, I follow up with a more specific response that is like a translation of what he just said. I'm not sure if this translational tethering is a good, bad, or even necessary thing to do. I just chalk it up to he says what he wants and how he wants with little regard for whether or not the other person understands, and I say what I want in my head and scrub it clean before it comes out so that the other person understands. My husband is a photographer/videographer and I'm an educator. He doesn't have to care if people understand him because those who do seek him out and those that don't, don't. I on the other hand, get paid to ensure other people's understanding so I am programmed to keep trying until they do. We are the perfect example of the old adage, opposites attract.

The friendly bar tender didn't stop at the Ferguson question. He wanted to know more. This time, he asked about us specifically. His next question was, "So what do you guys do for a living?" Again, I let my husband respond first. "I own a photography and videography company."

"And what do you do?"

"I'm in education. I taught eight years and now I'm an assistant principal."

"Really?" He asks. "How different is it now compared to when you first got in?"

“It’s remarkably different…”

He interrupts, “I bet there are a lot of issues with social media, right?”

“Yeah, there are so many issues that keep coming up that we don’t have policies for, and we need them to help guide our decision making so that we can be consistent because with an increase in social media has come an increase in some pretty dehumanizing scrutiny of educators that makes our jobs very uncomfortable.”

Wide-eyed, he replied, “That’s crazy!” shook his head, and went to help another customer.

It seems as if being an educator in today’s society is more about avoiding that dehumanizing scrutiny than simply doing what is best for students. Social media definitely exasperates this problematic imbalance. Educators are subject to a litany of complaints from students, parents, and the larger community, and on top of this, there is the ever-present, underlying threat of social media. Social media has empowered individuals to wage a battle outside of the confines of educational laws and policies because the field of education is behind when it comes to protecting the institution of education from social media. Since education has a weak defense against social media, people outside of education use it as a way to attack educators, rendering them defenseless because being too opinionated on social media could cause you to lose your job. In other words, people fight dirty, and often over things that aren’t even worth a fight. Like a contemporary Salem Witch Trials, educators could find their faces plastered on someone’s newsfeed, the news, or even labeled with a meme that satirizes their circumstance. The humanity in education is slowly seeping from its seams.



## **Educating While Black**

But there is another layer of being an educator that not everyone is subjected to, and that is being a Black educator. In addition to the threat of social media, and in addition to the constant complaining from outsiders, there is the layer of educating while Black. Just like driving while Black in Sandra Bland's case, or walking while Black in Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown's case, educating while Black refers to a series of assaults that Black educators endure that white educators don't simply because of the color of their skin (Dumas, 2015). One example of this is when a Black educator's credentials or experience is questioned by a white person (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). One evening at Parent-Teacher conferences last school year, I was visiting with a family and explaining to one of my student's father that his son was a great student. I went on and on about how much fun we had in the classroom and how he had a great sense of humor. I also explained that his son was an excellent writer and that he always put forth a tremendous amount of effort to improve his writing and find new and sophisticated ways of catching his readers' attention. Furthermore, I spoke about how his son had already finished an entire series and how he was a voracious reader. He continued to pursue books that matched his interests and wrote very thoughtful and engaging reader's responses. As I continued to provide very nice feedback about his son, he stopped me in mid sentence to ask, "How long have you been teaching?" He stared back at me awaiting my response. He had nothing to say about all of the positive feedback I had just shared about his son. Shocked and annoyed, I answered, "Eight years" and continued to brag about his son. After all, it wasn't his son's fault that his dad was being rude.

I dealt with a similar situation at Parent-Teacher Conferences during my second year of teaching. I was talking to a parent about his child's progress in my class but this time, the parent listened intently. He waited until the end of the conversation to ask me, "So where'd you go to college? What degrees do you have?" I froze in shock for a split second and let the man know that I earned my bachelor's degree at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. He proceeded to comment about how tough he knew that program was and kudos to me for making it through. If I were white, would these parents wonder if I was qualified enough to teach their child? I would venture to say no, especially in the situation with the father who asked me that question while I was in mid sentence, and the fact that it was totally unrelated to the conversation I was trying to have with him made his intentions even more clear.

Educating while Black also means that not only is your credibility as a professional arrested, so is your identity (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Dumas, 2015). Some white people you work with will take it upon themselves to police your Blackness because they already have an idea of what kind of Black person you're supposed to be, and if you don't match the description, then you just might find yourself under investigation. For example, while walking into the building early in the morning one day, a colleague of mine was also walking in the building right behind me. I waited for her a bit, she caught up to me, and we began to chat as we walked to the door. She asked, "How's the house hunting going?" At this time in my life, I was in the market to buy my first home. I shared a little bit about how things were going for me so far. She went on to say, "You know Shenita, I just don't understand how you can afford all of the things that you have on your salary. You're going to buy a house very soon, you have your student

loan payments and your expensive car. How can you afford all of that?" I was in utter shock and disbelief yet again, but this time I decided to be a little snappy. I asked with a straight face, "You didn't know that I paid for everything with Monopoly money?" and then I walked away.

This teacher wasn't the only one who seemed to be fascinated with the various financial aspects of my life. I once shared with my colleagues that I was planning to buy my very first flat screen television. This was around the time that flat screen televisions were gaining popularity and so they were very pricey. My budget was \$750.00, so I figured out that I could afford a 32-inch television. The one I chose even had a DVD player on the side. I was very excited, and during small talk, shared the news with my colleagues. Then one person asked, "How can you afford that on your salary?" What exactly is the problem with a Black female, owning a home, driving a nice car, and being able to buy a television? Although arbitrary, these material things indicate financial responsibility that is often associated with whiteness. They assume that Black people don't have good enough credit to own a nice car or purchase a home in a well-sought after, predominantly white neighborhood. I wasn't fitting the description of a typical Black person, and so they felt the need to police my Blackness, arrest my identity as if it were false, and find a way to put me back in my place (Dumas, 2015).

Probably the worst side effect of educating while Black is the isolation. There are several ways that Black educators can easily become prisoners of their work environment (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Dumas, 2015; Tate, 2013). In my experiences as a teacher and now as a new administrator, I have been asked into isolation, defaulted into isolation, and harassed into isolation. For example, there have been some instances when one of my

superiors asked me and other Black teachers not to sit together. The first time this happened was at a faculty meeting after school. I and two other Black teachers decided to sit together at the meeting. We were friends and even though we worked in the same building, we rarely saw each other. Of course we weren't on the same team despite our identical certifications probably for the same reason that we were being asked not to sit together.

Right before the meeting, we met each other at a table on the far left and sat down. We soon began to chat until the meeting started. There were six chairs at the table, but at that point no one else had decided to sit with us. A few minutes before the meeting started, an administrator came over to our table, bent down and whispered, "Could you three split up so that it doesn't look like you're trying to separate yourselves from everyone else?" The administrator walked away without waiting for a response from us, so we knew that the request was serious and that we had to move. So, we did as we were told.

Another time this happened was when I was attending a meeting outside of the district. Ironically, it was a meeting with other area school districts to brainstorm ideas on how to remedy the overrepresentation of Black students in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) referrals and discipline data. A similar scenario as the last one played out. A large group of Black teachers including me sat down at a table together. We worked in the same district and some of us worked in the same building, but there were so few of us that we rarely saw each other. We were so happy to finally be crossing paths that we just sat down together. Before the meeting started, an administrator walked over to our table and made a comment about us all sitting together and implied that we should spread out.

We didn't move because this was a comment and not a directive to go sit somewhere else like the previous incident, but we were all very offended because we couldn't understand why there was something wrong, threatening, or discomforting about Black people sitting together at a table. No one was asking white people to separate because there were too many white people at a table. Why were we being denied camaraderie and friendship so that the white people in the room could feel better about having to talk about racism for the day?

Black educators find themselves in isolation by default as well. Oftentimes in predominantly white environments, you find yourself being the only one (Tate, 2013). The only Black teacher in the building, in a meeting, on a committee, on your team. The only Black teacher who doesn't enjoy camping, baseball, hockey, hiking, or soccer. The list goes on and on. I have been a part of countless conversations about the Cardinals that I had to sit through and think, "I wish I could participate but I have no idea what they're talking about. And of course, by me not participating, I look like the angry Black woman. Great." This is not to say that Black people don't enjoy and aren't knowledgeable about baseball, but based on the lack of diversity in the sport, it is pretty safe to say that it is a sport that white people enjoy more than Black people. When I become exhausted with people asking me if my hair is real, asking me what a Black funeral is like, or asking me why the people in Ferguson are destroying their own community, I attempt to isolate myself, but sometimes to no avail. When I choose isolation, my white colleagues feel the need to police that, too. They make up questions to ask me so they can come see what I'm doing, or they question why I'm not eating lunch with the group.

Educating while Black is like being a fly trapped on the tangled web of white supremacy. There isn't a way to get off of this web, and there isn't really a way to avoid getting trapped either. The way that a spider knows that a fly is on its web in the first place is because the fly moves around in an attempt to break free. The spider feels the movement and then attacks its prey. As a Black female educator, I often feel compelled to shake the web on purpose in an attempt to break free (Leigh & Davis, 2015). I want to attract the spider's attention not so that I am intentionally attacked, which can be an unintended yet expected consequence, but so that I can bring attention to the deeply embedded racism in white places, thus creating Black space (Leigh & Davis, 2015). In other words, I intentionally lure the spider. This is risky and the opportunity cost is high. Some may even think that my approach is irresponsible, but to me, the alternative of doing nothing simply is not an option. Lying still on the web means allowing white supremacy to suck the life out of me without a fight. I simply cannot do that.

*Perfect submission, perfect delight,  
visions of rapture now burst on my sight;  
angels descending bring from above,  
echoes of mercy, whispers of love.*

*This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior, all the day long;  
this is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior all the day long*

*(Crosby & Knapp, 1873).*

Up until the 2015-2016 school year, which is when I transitioned into administration, I served on the board of directors for our district's teacher's union. I served in that role for a total of seven school years before becoming an assistant principal. Every year whether we were negotiating a new contract or not, our board of directors, the board of education, and district administrators got together for a day to brainstorm possible solutions or action steps to issues brought to the group's attention by the district or the teacher's union. This event took place at one of the schools in the district and by the time we left the building, we had at the very least discussed each issue. Whether or not we actually came up with any viable solutions is questionable. I saw this event as district – union relationship maintenance, which was actually a point of pride for my district. We spent the entire day not only analyzing issues, but also analyzing each other and exploring the politics of district leadership.

Each side had the opportunity to bring various issues to the table to discuss with the larger group. Before this meeting every year, the members of the board of directors participating in this event would meet several times to prepare. We would decide which issues to bring to the table and each member would volunteer to serve on a small team to prepare a short presentation. The issues that we were allowed to bring to the table were usually framed around district goals. Some of these goals included hiring a highly qualified staff, being fiscally responsible, or ensuring a guaranteed and viable curriculum. I had always been interested in learning about the hiring process, specifically as it

pertains to candidates of color. Obviously I had personal experience with this as a candidate of color, and so it was an issue that meant a lot to me.

When it came time to choose a team to join, of course I joined the team that was going to present about hiring a high quality staff. Our union president, a well-respected and influential Black woman who eventually retired from the district, explained the purpose of the presentation was to provide a compelling story to the group to convince them that there is an issue that needs attention. As I sat down with the two other teachers who joined my group, we started to brainstorm some ideas about how we could create a compelling presentation. I told them about my experiences as a candidate of color trying to find a job back in 2007. I also told them that my interpretation of a high quality staff is one that is diverse culturally and racially because when we are diverse in that respect, then we automatically gain diversity in thoughts, ideas, and approaches to teaching diverse learners. Diversity is one of the greatest assets that an educational institution can have. Not only would a more diverse staff mirror our student population, but it would also allow for our staff members to become better professionals because we would work with individuals who are different but share the same goal of providing a high quality education to all students. In addition, there is something to be said about a student being inspired simply by seeing individuals who look like them as teachers and administrators (Casad & Bryant, 2016). As an adult, I feel inspired when I see First Lady Michelle Obama on television, or when I watch Melissa Harris-Perry's show on the weekends, or when I read in the news about three Black women competing for a superintendency of a local school district, or when I see that a Black woman is the head principal of a school. My goals don't have to be the exact same as theirs to be inspired by their work and their



stories. Knowing that they hold these positions lets me know that it is possible to achieve my own dreams (Casad & Bryant, 2016). It lets me know that there is space for me in places where I have been told that there isn't and never will be. There is a huge opportunity for the field of education to do the same thing by hiring more educators of color (Casad & Bryant, 2016).

Needless to say, my group elected me to share my story for our presentation during the meeting. I agreed, but I also realized that they didn't have to think about how risky this was for me as a Black woman. I was going to stand up in front of all white district level administrators and tell them that they needed to hire more teachers of color because if they didn't then their students would continue to suffer. That moment could have changed the tide of my career. It could have been well received, causing people in the room to reflect superficially or meaningfully, or it could not be received well and I could very quickly become the angry, ungrateful Black woman. I didn't want or need that label in my life because that label didn't describe me. I knew I wanted to become an administrator in my district someday, and I worried that this would not happen if my story wasn't well received. If I did this, I could lose so much, and I could miss out on opportunities in the future. Unfortunately, my white colleagues didn't understand this, and in that moment, I quickly became consumed with worry.

But there is something worse than lost opportunities for advancement or being labeled as the angry, ungrateful Black woman. If I didn't agree to share my story, then I would miss out on a different, more important opportunity. I would miss the chance to enter the portal of Black space and bring awareness to how the lack of diversity impacts our ability as a school district to provide a high quality education to our students. I

needed them to know that continuing our current hiring process meant that we were intentionally excluding candidates of color from our hiring pool. I needed them to know that radical changes needed to be made, and if they weren't then all students would continue to suffer. I also needed them to know that I valued Black teachers and I felt that there was space and need for them in predominantly white school districts. I knew that what I had to say might fall on deaf ears, but I could not let that discourage me from doing what I felt like I needed to do. Entering Black space is always risky. There is always something to lose, but there is always something to gain.

I had a week to finish my story. During that week, I mulled over what I would say over and over and over again in my head. I imagined myself standing at a podium, looking down at my speech, looking up to face my audience, making eye contact as much as I could. I told myself that I wanted to look in their eyes as much as possible because I wanted them to feel like I was talking directly to them. I edited the footage of my speech in my head until the performance was perfect. I didn't end up putting any words on paper until the night before the event. It was a Friday. I went straight home, sat down on my couch, and started to write. It flowed pretty easily because it was my story.

The next morning, I drove to one of the middle schools in the district, which is where our event would be held. The meeting started at 8:00 AM, and I had arrived at approximately 7:50 AM. I walked in, greeted some people I knew, grabbed some breakfast and headed to my seat. I was second in line to present, and I was ready. I sat through the first presentation but it seemed like it went by so fast that I just don't remember much about it. Suddenly I heard the union president call on me. It was my turn to read my story. I took my speech out of my folder, stood up and read it.

“Good morning. I’d like to start by thanking everyone for being willing to listen to me share my story. PWSD gave me my first job when I was fresh out of college, which meant that you all took a risk on a 23-year-old who thought she was ready to face the 21<sup>st</sup> century middle schooler head on. Next to Armageddon, teaching middle school is the scariest thing in the world to me, but fun nonetheless. Just like I stick my neck out for them everyday, you all did the same for me based off of a simple interview process. For that, I am grateful.

I met my first “PWSD person” at the UMSL Teacher job fair back in early January of 2007. With multiple copies of my resume in my hand, I traveled from booth to booth and stood in many lines looking for a district to give me a chance. When I arrived at the PWSD booth, the administrator welcomed me with a smile from ear to ear and asked me about myself and my career aspirations. The brief conversation ended with an invitation to the PWSD job fair.

After the job fair, my friends and I eagerly discussed which booths we visited and who we thought would give us a chance. Some of us visited the same booths, and in hindsight, I realize that we were each other’s competition. I was one of the few of my core group of friends who bothered to visit the PWSD booth. When I shared this information with them, they so bluntly asked me why I would visit this booth when I knew that they didn’t hire Black people. My response to this went something like, “I don’t care, I just want a job. My strategy was to visit as many

booths as I could in the amount of time that I had.” Their facial expressions and side eye stares told me that I was crazy. The doubt inside of me began to fester.

I attended the PWSD job fair, which led to a phone call from HR, which led to a phone interview, which led to an interview with a district level administrator and her interviewing team, which led to an interview with HR, which led to my first teaching job. After sharing this news with my family and friends, I learned that they were ecstatic about my accomplishment, but at the same time, puzzled. They asked, “How did you get a job in PWSD?” My mom said, “It’s nothing but the grace of God that got you that job.” Again, the doubt in me began to fester.

I often wondered what my first days on the job would be like. I knew this district was predominantly white. Would this be like high school all over again, where my AP teachers didn’t acknowledge my existence in their class? Would I once again have trouble making new friends because of my race? Would my colleagues accept me? Will my students respect or trust a young, Black female to teach them how to read and write? Will parents question my worth as a teacher once they got their 6<sup>th</sup> grader’s schedule in the mail and saw the words, “Shenita Luckett”? Will parents transfer their kids out of my class and to another English Language Arts teacher’s class because of my race? Some of these thoughts may sound ridiculous, but these are real questions that bombarded my mind as I anticipated the first day of school.

If I had these anxieties as an adult, then I'm sure that our students of color worry about similar things. Also worth pondering are the questions of if and how these anxieties impact student learning. Is a quality staff one that is diverse? Do we owe it to our students to provide them with a staff full of educated professionals who look like them? What if there was no African American teacher in the building for an African American student to go to when his friend tells him that only Black kids get free lunch? What if there was no Asian teacher to properly confront the jokes about a student's family going back to China to become rice farmers? If her teacher wore a burqa too, would other kids stop calling her a terrorist? Would hiring a more diverse staff help us fulfill our mission?

PWSD has taken some steps in the right direction as far as owning our data no matter how unattractive it is, and having conversations centered on what to do about it. As a community of professionals and learners, we first must determine the characteristics of a quality staff, and commit to that. Then we can move forward with holding each other accountable for hiring a staff that is an exemplar of what we consider to be quality. My hope is that diversity is a part of that.

Thank you.”

When I sat down, the room erupted in applause. I wondered why they were clapping because I thought what I said was pretty depressing. I was, however, proud of myself for having the courage to stand up and give this speech in front of all of these very important, very high-powered white people. Maybe they were clapping for my speech and for the simple fact that they were amazed that a Black female could speak intelligently and

eloquently in front of a large group of white people (Tate, 2013). To me, I was just talking, but to them they were watching me perform. As soon as I sat down, a district administrator whispered in my ear, “May I have a copy of your speech?” I was able to share the copy immediately because I had my computer with me. I thought for a second that maybe this was an indication that what I said, although not very radical to me but probably radical and provocative to them, made an impression on at least one person in the room; some progress is better than none.

### **Witnessing Transformation**

A colleague of mine once shared an article with me about the idea of the Black vote counting for 5/3 of the American vote as reparations instead of cash reparations (Dumas, 2011; Johnson, 2015). I considered this idea for a while, and wondered if having a weighted vote would make me feel like the issue of racism has been reconciled. I came to the conclusion that there is no amount of money that could repair the harm that racism has caused the Black community (Kelley, 2002). A weighted vote would not change racist mindsets or attitudes, and it certainly would not address the widespread mistrust that the Black community has in politics (Bromell, 2013; Dawson, 2013). Furthermore, it doesn't make sense to me to try to fix the racism that liberalism perpetuates with more liberalism. I also think that the oppressed should determine what reparations means to them, not the oppressor (Dawson, 2013; Kelley, 2002). The first step towards determining what reparations should be is listening to those who are owed those reparations and allowing them to make their demands known to their oppressor (Dawson, 2013; Kelley, 2002).

My colleague then asked what would appropriate reparations be to me, if weighted voting isn't the answer. In order to answer this question, I had to think about what happens in my current life that makes me feel like liberation is possible. What makes me feel like there is hope? The answer to this question is witnessing an individual's transformation. I believe that authentic and sustainable social justice happens from the inside out. It starts in a person's soul, radiates outwards, and inspires other people to pursue their own transformation. The best chance we have to make reparations would be to demand that the oppressor, or those who are privileged by their race, seek and experience their transformation, and by transformation I mean to depart from racism and become a new person. It's like a baptism. If the oppressor is transformed, then it would no longer be necessary to convince white people that racism exists and that it is wrong. Nor would we have to convince anyone that Black lives matter because every single person would already believe that to be true. I would never have to wonder if the white lady on the plane didn't want to sit by me because I am black. When traveling to a rural high school to supervise a basketball game, I would not have to send my husband a text message letting him know that I did not kill myself while in police custody if I am arrested. I would not have to be nervous while driving in predominantly white and unfamiliar places. I would not have to worry about losing my life during a routine traffic stop. I would not have to worry every single day if my husband, a young Black male, is going to make it home or not because he became a casualty in the war on Black males. If I could demand transformation as reparations, I would never have to worry about how my skin color impacts my life now and forever.

### **Candy Coated Demands**

I realize that demands don't always go over so well, especially in a situation where you're telling someone that they need to change because they're racist. So, these demands need to be coated in inspiration. There are certain things that I try to do or say in my predominantly white work environment that I hope lights the spark or creates the conditions for the beginning of transformation. I want to try to help others understand why their transformation is necessary. As I said earlier, I intentionally shake the web of white supremacy by engaging in these critically conscious acts. In my speech, I was basically saying to our district level leaders that if we don't hire more teachers of color, then we are acknowledging that the district's idea of a high quality teaching staff is a white one, and that a white teaching staff does the best job of educating white students and students of color. Unfortunately, my district's lack of success with educating Black students tells us that this is not true (Leigh & Davis, 2015). I gave this speech back in January of 2012, and I still hear about it from some of the district level leaders and board of education members who were there that day. They will say to me, "You know, I still remember that speech you gave..." or I may be introduced as, "This is Shenita Lockett (now Mayes). She gave a very memorable speech at our event a few years ago. It was very powerful." When reflecting on this day, I wonder if I inspired anyone to think differently about our staff make up and our hiring practices. I wonder if I inspired anyone to begin their own transformation. Maybe now every time they see me, I remind them of the work that they should be doing to change our current situation to one that does not exclude people of color. If that is the case, and I believe that it is, then my courageous act of sharing my counter-narrative was meaningful.



Obviously it takes more than one critically conscious act to inspire other people. I do understand that to some, it may look like I am just spinning my wheels and getting nowhere. I also realize that liberation will probably never happen in my lifetime, but I do believe that it is possible. As long as I continue to enter the portal of Black space through critically conscious acts, then I can always say that I've done my part. I can always say that I had the courage to stand.

## **The Trauma is Real**

### **Introduction**

I like routine, rules, traditions, and procedures. Yes, I am one of those people. This helps to explain why every year I volunteer to work my district's recruitment fair. The recruitment fair is like our district's kick off event for the approaching hiring season. This event is typically held on the Saturday after winter break, and no matter how tired I am, I wake up, iron my suit, put it on, and head to the fair. I was first introduced to this event during my third year teaching as a member of the board of directors for our teacher's union. Traditionally, our teacher's union always had a presence at all of our district's large events so that we could recruit members or just be involved. The first job I ever had at the recruitment fair was escorting candidates to their interviewers. This was fun because it gave me the opportunity to meet people and try to take the edge off by making small talk with them before they sat down to interview. I did this job for three school years, and then I started helping out with screening interviews. In this role, I was responsible for conducting fifteen minute interviews with candidates, recording their responses along the way, and submitting their responses and information to human resources. I enjoyed this role just as much as I enjoyed escorting candidates to their interviewers because I got the opportunity to listen to candidates' talk about their education and experiences. After doing this long enough, I started to notice patterns of what universities were deciding to teach preservice teachers. I think that they were probably making these decisions based on what they thought prospective employers wanted. Some of the buzz words that I usually hear include professional learning

communities, student engagement, collaboration, and differentiation. Rarely did I hear anything about social justice.

### **Strange things are Happening**

One of my district's goals is to hire a more diverse staff. This goal is closely monitored and discussed every year in several meetings and other forums ranging from the district level down to the building level. The conversations seem to get people motivated to want to do better, but there is a serious disconnect between what happens at the recruitment fair and what happens at new teacher orientation. Each year I notice that a large number of candidates of color, mostly Black, attend the recruitment fair. They certainly do not outnumber the white candidates, but there are several candidates of color available for hire. Something strange happens between the recruitment fair in January and new teacher orientation in July. I have also volunteered to work at new teacher orientation every year since my second year in the district, and each year I notice that the majority, if not all, of the newly hired teachers are white. The exclusion is so obvious that one of my colleagues has nicknamed new teacher orientation our district's annual sorority rush because it is full of blonde haired, blue eyed, young, white women (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Tate, 2013). What happens to all of the candidates of color? How many of them make it past the screening interview and advance to a building level interview? If they don't make it past the screening interview, then why didn't they? If they did make it past the screening interview, then why weren't they hired? Do they get hired by other districts? Is there something wrong with *all* of them?

Just because I ask these questions doesn't mean that I think that every Black candidate who applies for a job must be hired. Of course the candidate needs to be a good

competitor, knowledgeable, and passionate about the field of education in addition to many other qualities that any viable candidate should possess. But I am convinced that there are some other factors that come into play that impact the interview experiences of Black candidates that contribute to if not cause exclusion (Casad & Bryant, 2016). When I was interviewing for administrative positions, I experienced a series of emotions that included worry, doubt, anxiety, and fear that had everything to do with the simple fact that job interviews are just nerve-racking, but these emotions also had something to do with me wondering how my skin color would impact my interview performance and the decision on which candidate to offer the position (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). I am always absolutely ecstatic to hear the news that I would be offered the opportunity to interview for a position. In the days leading up to an interview, I review sample interview questions and make sure that I am as familiar as I possibly can be with the school. When interview day comes, I get so nervous that I lose my appetite, which is why I typically prefer early morning interviews. During the interview I respond to the questions as best as I can even though I feel self-conscious about every single word that comes out of my mouth, even if it's a pretty good answer (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Steele et al., 2002). I question almost everything that happened (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Steele et al., 2002). Did I use any slang? Was my answer to the social justice question too angry-Black-woman-ish? What if my passion for social justice came through too much? Did I seem approachable? Did I smile enough? Is my Blackness too intense? Do they really think that I could be a good candidate for this position, or am I being interviewed to fill a quota? What does, "not the best fit for the team" really mean for a Black woman

like me? What did they say about me after the interview? Was I not offered the job because I am Black?

Logically, I know that I am a good candidate with a tremendous work ethic and a lot to offer any school. I also know that finding a new teacher or administrator is challenging because you need people who will help further the school's vision. I know better than to second-guess myself. However, due to the racial trauma that I have experienced throughout my life and continue to experience, this unhealthy stream of unconsciousness happens every single time I interview for a job (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Steele et al., 2002). The frustrating part is that I haven't yet figured out how to turn it off, and I doubt that I ever can. I would venture to say that other Black educators experience something similar to what I experience, and I wonder whether or not racial trauma puts Black candidates at a disadvantage compared to other candidates (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Steele et al., 2002). As a Black candidate, what I experience is a different type of intensity than the average interview jitters, which makes me wonder how hiring practices could be trauma-considerate (DeGruy, 2005). Trauma-considerate hiring practices would acknowledge the racial trauma that Black candidates have experienced, and prompt interviewers to consider how that trauma poses challenges for Black candidates when competing for a job (Casad & Bryant, 2016; DeGruy, 2005; Steele et al., 2002).

### **#IAmNotMyInterview**

In my experiences with serving on countless interview panels, there is always discussion about each candidate after their interview in order to guide the decision making process. Those discussions can quickly become racialized without the interview panel noticing. For example, I once served on a panel that was interviewing candidates

for a middle school counselor position. We interviewed three white candidates, and two Black males. When it was time to discuss one of the Black candidates' interview, one of the white panel members said, "I just wonder if he will be able to fit in here" (Dumas, 2015; Tate, 2013). I wondered what it was that made her say this. I could see that his performance was impaired because he was so nervous that he flew through a series of ten scenario questions. In addition, he was interviewing for his very first certified counseling position. He had some experience through his practicum. He was also a football coach and led a counseling group for young Black male students at a predominantly Black high school not too far from our school. He was fresh out of college, trying to get his first job, and here we were asking him a bunch of scenario questions that he most likely hadn't experienced yet, but on the other hand, we were talking to a person who had experience as a football coach and counselor in a predominantly Black high school and didn't ask him about how those experiences would help him as a counselor. We didn't search for value in the experiences that he did have (Dumas, 2015). And to smear the icing all over the cake, he was interviewing in front of a very large, majority white interview panel. This young, talented, Black male bombed our interview, and it was partially our fault (Dumas, 2015). And in regards to him not fitting in to our school, I don't think we would have needed to worry about that. Our middle school was the most diverse in the district. It was about 60% white and 40% students of color. 20% of the students of color were Black students. We had only two Black male teachers who taught physical education and choir. We obviously needed another Black male in the building, especially with his type of experience to help reach out to some of the Black male students that the white female teachers were sending to the office in droves (Dumas, 2015). I believe that we had the

resources to support him as he learned the ins and outs of being a counselor. It is just unfortunate that we lost this candidate because of our own folly.

If our interview practices were trauma-considerate, then we would have sought value in his experiences (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Dumas, 2015). Stereotype threat – the fear of inadvertently doing something that would confirm an existing negative stereotype – would not have had the chance to work against him (Steele et al., 2002). We would have asked him more appropriate questions that would have allowed us to discern his potential to be a counselor. We would have noticed that he was a person who was coachable, and would have pulled resources together to support and develop him as he figured out how to exist in his new work environment. We would have known that in order to increase his chances of survival, we would have hooked him up with a network of other strong, Black teachers and counselors in the district so that he was surrounded by support. We would also reflect on the actions and conversations of the interview panel. We would interrogate the reason why someone would think that he would have issues fitting in to our school. We would really think about if his interview performance was indicative of a mediocre skill set, which was heavily implied in our discussion afterwards, or of the conditions of the interview that made it nearly impossible for him to succeed. It took me a little over a year to come to these conclusions.

In the interview, I wasn't against this candidate. I voted for him to be hired even though I knew his interview didn't go as well as the panel expected it to go. The other people who voted the same way I did was our building principal and another counselor. It is not surprising that the three Black women voted in favor of the Black male candidate, while others voted against him because they worried how he would fit in or about his lack

of counseling experience. Needless to say, our three votes didn't stand a chance against the other five white votes, and so this candidate was not hired. Our hiring practices certainly were not trauma-considerate this time, but the next time we had the chance to consider a Black candidate for a position in our building, we responded very differently.

*Perfect submission, all is at rest,  
I in my Savior am happy and blest;  
watching and waiting, looking above,  
filled with His goodness, lost in His love.*

*This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior, all the day long;  
this is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Savior all the day long  
(Crosby & Knapp, 1873).*

During the spring of the 2014-2015 school year, I was blessed with the opportunity to serve as an administrative intern at my school. One of our assistant principals was out on extended maternity leave, and our building principal was gracious enough to give three teachers who held administrative certificates in our building, including me, a chance to receive some on the job training. When it was my turn, I made arrangements for a long-term substitute teacher to cover my classroom for approximately seven weeks, and I became the administrator for the sixth grade. During this time, I was



lucky enough to be the acting sixth grade administrator during the peak of hiring season. We had to hire a nurse, a counselor, a teacher for our English Language Learners, an English Language Arts teacher, a Math teacher, and a Social Studies teacher. I served on the panel for all of these interviews except for the Social Studies position. This is because I had lunch duty on the day and time it was scheduled, and therefore had to miss the panel interview. Luckily, this interview consisted of a panel interview and required the teacher to teach a lesson. Therefore, I only missed half of the interview.

During his panel interview, our building principal told the candidate that she would like for him to teach a lesson in front of students, and that he would be a guest teacher in the Social Studies department leader's classroom. She told him that he would have a week to plan a lesson that fit within the sequence of the unit that our Social Studies department leader was currently teaching in his classroom. The department leader gave him a textbook and a unit plan, told him where he was in his lesson sequence, and told the candidate that we would see him next week. After a week passed, the candidate came back to our school ready to teach his lesson. The building principal, the Social Studies department leader and I observed the candidate teach a 45-minute lesson. When I walked into the room, I saw a classroom of approximately twenty-three students and the teacher candidate setting up his technology in front of the room. It was sort of a nervous set up because the technology was ready however he was testing it to make sure that it would function properly. Once the bell rang, he quieted the class and started teaching his lesson.

The teacher candidate was a young Black male who was currently wrapping up his student teaching at a large predominantly Black high school in the area. This sounds

all too familiar, though. A young, Black male was looking for his first certified teaching position in a predominantly white school district with experiences in a predominantly Black school district. Maybe this was our second chance to do the right thing. Maybe we would think about how we might improve our hiring practices this time around because the last time this opportunity came, we blew it. I applaud our building principal for redesigning our process, though. I'm not exactly sure if she redesigned it because of the last experience we had, or simply because different positions call for different interview processes. No matter the reason, this process was better because it placed less emphasis on the panel interview and allowed us to watch the candidate perform. I could absolutely relate to this. I would always wish that people would just come watch me for a day and let that count as my interview. I always think that I can show a person my skill set better than I can tell you them about it. I thought that this method of competing for a job allowed the candidate to do just that, show us better than he could tell us.

The teacher began teaching his lesson. He followed the typical lesson format. He began with a video clip as his hook to get the students interested. Then, he transitioned into the new information that he wanted the students to know and understand. Afterwards, he used another video clip to provide further explanation and details about what he wanted the students to learn. Then he gave the students time to work in partners on an assignment that reinforced the concepts he taught during the lesson. While the students worked independently, he circulated around the classroom to check on each pair of students to further support their understanding. He gave feedback when necessary to ensure understanding. After about fifteen minutes, he brought the class back together to

review the assignment that they worked on, and he closed the lesson with a quick formative assessment.

To be honest, there wasn't anything memorable about this lesson. It was the typical lecture-style lesson that was too long for seventh grade students. To me, there was plenty of opportunity for growth in the areas of student engagement and instructional delivery. However, there was still something that captivated my attention, and that was his ability to relate to students. Our students had never met this candidate before, and so they had no idea what they were going to get. But this candidate had some sort of magic that you didn't necessarily see in your typical teacher. I noticed it mostly during the independent work time. When students needed help, he knew how to be patient and answer questions until the students understood and could function on their own while feeling confident that they were doing the assignment correctly. I noticed that he felt comfortable with making jokes with students and getting them to laugh and have fun with a not-so-interesting lesson. He kept the atmosphere light and helped students to feel comfortable with the content. I could tell that he had the capacity to love other people's children, and he wasted no time doing that. To me, this was his gift, and it shined so bright that it overshadowed the areas of improvement that I was able to pinpoint in his instructional methodology. He could be coached in those areas, but he could not be coached in the area of building relationships with students.

After the lesson, I introduced myself and apologized for not being able to make his panel interview. I thanked him and shook his hand. Our building principal and Social Studies department leader did the same. He looked relieved that he had made it through the lesson. He was sweating and looked like he needed some water. He said that he

enjoyed working with the students, and that they were a fun group. Our building principal told him that we would be getting back to him soon, and walked him to the front door.

We met in her office to debrief and talk about what we observed. After all, we were down to two candidates. We had a decision to make.

“So, what did you think?” was the first question that our building principal posed. I decided to jump right in. I shared a general outline of the lesson based on what I observed. I was honest, and said that I thought that there was room for improvement in the areas of lesson design, student engagement, and instructional delivery. I said that even though there was room for improvement, I thought that these were areas that all new teachers struggle with at one time or another during their first and second year, and I said that I thought that he was coachable just like any other new teacher that our district hires. Then I started to talk about his strengths. I shared that almost immediately, I noticed that the candidate started building relationships with students. He made them laugh, he was responsive to their needs, and he was personable. He did everything that he could within that short amount of time to show the students, who weren’t even his and never would be, that he cared for them. The students were able to pick up on that, and therefore responded to him as if he had been their teacher all year long. I said that I thought that this was his greatest strength because relationship building is nearly impossible to coach. In other words, this candidate was able to demonstrate that he possessed a highly sought-after skill set in forty-five minutes that some of our veteran teachers haven’t been able to demonstrate throughout their entire career. This is the type of person that we should want teaching our students. We should want someone who has a natural ability to captivate students not from putting on a dog and pony show everyday, but because he truly loves

and cares for kids. They agreed with what I had to say, and after some further conversation, we convened our quick meeting and went on about our daily business. This wasn't a decision-making conversation, but just a time to talk about what we observed.

Later on that day, our Social Studies department leader paid me a visit to my loaner office. He came in and shut the door. Anytime anyone comes into my office unannounced and shuts the door, then I know they want to talk, not chat.

“So I wanted to come talk to you about Mr. X. I want to get your honest opinion on something that I'm struggling with.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“I pretty much agreed with everything you said about the lesson and about his ability to build relationships with kids. But where I'm stuck is the panel interview, and I don't know if I should be putting this much weight on the panel interview, so let me just run this by you.”

“Okay.”

“So in Mr. X's interview, I didn't necessarily feel like I was getting his full story. I kinda felt like he was holding back a little. I could see it in his face. It's like he wanted to say more, but something was holding him back from saying what he really wanted to say. It's hard to describe but I don't think we got the full picture.”

“...which you'll never get from a job interview.”

“I know and that's why I'm glad we asked him to teach a lesson too, but I wanted to hear more about his experiences. And watching him, it seemed like those kind of answers were right on the tip of his tongue, but he wouldn't say it for some reason.”

“So his interview went this way overall or was it specific questions, or how did this all unfold?”

“No, it was on the social justice questions. Like when we asked him what the achievement gap meant to him, or questions like that. I can’t remember much of the wording.”

“Well, I’m sure he wanted to say more, but he might not have felt like he could, or he may not have been comfortable being so candid with people he doesn’t know, especially when he’s competing for a job. That could have gone two ways. The committee really could have embraced his willingness to be open, or they really could have been offended by what he had to say. You know how people are when it comes to sensitive topics like social justice. There’s such a fine line to walk that maybe he didn’t think that risking potential employment was worth it.”

“Well, I think we both can agree that this wasn’t the best performance that he probably could have given, but that the potential is definitely there.”

“Correct.”

“And the other candidate had a mediocre panel interview, taught a great lesson, but wasn’t able to connect to kids right away like Mr. X could.”

“Well, the other candidate used M&Ms that the kids could eat at the end, so I’m sure that helped him win some brownie points with the kids.”

He chuckled a bit. “So here we are, down to the last two and the question is do we hire a Black male who will need coaching in lesson design and instructional methods, but can connect with kids, or a white male who taught a pretty good lesson, but may not be as coachable as Mr. X?”

“Yes, that is the question.”

“Part of me really wants to give Mr. X a chance.”

“All of me wants to give him a chance.”

“And we need more people of color in this building, especially Black males.”

“We sure do.”

And in that moment, the Social Studies department leader and I developed an understanding. Our building principal offered Mr. X the job later on that day, and he gladly accepted. When I reflect on this experience, I often compare it to the previous time we had the opportunity to hire a Black male but didn't. I am more satisfied with our hiring practices the second time around, but I can only speculate why our process changed. Maybe it was a combination of a few factors. It could have been a difference in the positions. One candidate was competing for a counselor position and the other was competing for a teaching position. Different positions could call for different processes. Maybe that's why the first candidate was asked to respond to a series of scenarios while the second candidate was asked to teach a lesson. It could also be that our building principal saw the flaws in the first process too, and made the changes she felt were necessary in order to be fair and thorough. No matter the reason for why the process changed, I definitely learned some dos and don'ts of interviewing. Don't assume that the lack of certain experiences deem a candidate incapable of performing a job effectively. Do seek value in the experiences that the candidate already has. Don't limit an interview process to just the traditional face-to-face panel. Do ask the candidate to demonstrate his or her knowledge and skills. Don't misinterpret a candidate's decision not to bare their

soul in a job interview as underperformance (Dumas, 2015). Do respect the fact that candidates own their story and they can share it when they want to.

White candidates have the privilege of being free of the unfair expectation placed on Black candidates to speak candidly about the racial trauma that they've experienced throughout their lives during a job interview (Dumas, 2015). Trauma-considerate hiring practices would be mindful of this and would prompt interviewers to examine and remove their assumptions of what an answer to a social justice question from a Black candidate should sound like (Leigh & Davis, 2015). Oftentimes, the assumption is that the answer should be deep, meaningful, and riveting. The answer should be so powerful that it should touch the hearts and minds of the members of the panel. Sometimes, this is the case if a Black candidate is comfortable with being open in that way. However, just because a Black candidate sits before us in an interview doesn't mean that the candidate should have to put on a show for the panel in order to be worthy of the job (Dumas, 2015). We don't expect this performance from white candidates, and I guess we can't expect this performance from white candidates in the absence of experiences with racism. Again, our stories are our own, and the intricate details of those stories should be respected and reserved for our most intimate moments when we are surrounded by trustworthy individuals (Leigh & Davis, 2015). Such conditions don't typically exist in a job interview. The choice to share or not to share, and the ways in which Black candidates answer social justice questions, should not be held against them.

### **Fighting for Space**

Sitting on countless interview panels throughout my career has helped me recognize the Black space of considering racial trauma in hiring practices animated by a



renewed force of Black educators, a feature of Black educational imagination. First, the opportunity has to present itself. These opportunities usually pop up during hiring season. Then, I have to be present. This means that I attend the recruitment fair every year. I serve on as many interview panels as I can. I also attend new teacher orientation every year. These things are just part of what I do every interview season. It helps me to see what is really going on. The most important work occurs in the conversations after the interviews when it comes time to make decisions. These moments are the most critical because we are in such a dire need of Black candidates, but our decision-making processes cause us to perpetuate our status quo. We spend more time trying to justify why we should hire a white candidate than we do trying to justify why we shouldn't hire a Black candidate (Dumas, 2015). We are willing to put forth more effort towards convincing ourselves to hire a white candidate that we don't really want, but very little time thinking about if turning down a Black candidate is a good idea. Simply put, it's easier to reject a Black candidate than a white candidate because it is part of the routine (Dumas, 2015). Somehow along the way we've gotten the message that white candidates deserve more consideration than Black candidates (Dumas, 2015). This is the essence of the difference between the recruitment fair and new teacher orientation.

My imagination tells me that someday the need for trauma-considerate hiring practices will no longer be necessary because Black people will be liberated from all forms of racialized oppression, but until then, I will continue to fight. My decision to fight opens up the portal of Black space, and that space consists of participating in the hiring process and considering how racial trauma might impact a candidate's interview performance. My fight requires me to listen for arbitrary and capricious reasons for why a

candidate shouldn't be hired, and it sounds like me challenging those reasons. My fight causes me to see very clearly the reasons why a Black candidate's experiences are valuable. My fight feels risky but necessary, lonely but comforting because of the anticipation of another Black teacher joining our staff. When I fight, I arm myself with indignation and Black radical imagination to remind me of purpose and possibilities (Bromell, 2013; Kelley, 2002). When I fight, I realize that I am fighting a war that can only be won one battle at a time and that progress often seems slow. However, my experiences demonstrate the consequences of not going to war. Why would I want to cause slow progress to be even slower? At the end of the day, I have accepted the fact that I will have to fight until my soul leaves this earth.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### Why Autoethnography?

When I tell someone that I am writing my dissertation, the question that I always get is, “What’s your topic?” or “What is your dissertation about?” I absolutely hate that question, and I have to admit that if a white person that I don’t really know asks me that question it causes me to pause. During that pause, I try to figure out a nice way to say that I am writing an autoethnography about the inherent racism in the education system, specifically in our district, that has caused me to experience significant racial trauma, and what I feel like I can do about it (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Dumas, 2015; Leigh & Davis, 2015). I worry that a white person will judge my decision to write about racism, and in that moment, I will be viewed as yet another angry Black woman complaining about racism (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Dumas, 2015). I worry that they may think, “But you’re a Black administrator in one of the whitest, most prestigious school districts in the state. What more do you have to complain about? Obviously they think you’re good at what you do if they promoted you, right? So how have you experienced racism in this district?” It is easy to think that way without knowing my story. When I get the blank stares and awkward pauses, I follow up with a disclaimer to help rationalize my decision to write about racism (Casad & Bryant, 2016). I explain, “I’m earning a Ph.D. in Education Administration, but my emphasis area is social justice, so that’s why I’m writing about that kind of topic”. A few things are happening here. First, I am apprehensive about sharing my topic with a white person because of the fear of judgment, and second, I fear that a white person would think that my topic and methodology is not Ph.D. – worthy (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Dumas, 2015). Third, I don’t like talking about

my dissertation with white people that I don't know enough to trust because my thought is they won't understand without further explanation, and I usually don't have enough time or trust in the other person to provide a thorough explanation for why I wrote what I did. I wish that I could hand the person a copy of my dissertation and say, "Here. Read this and let's talk afterwards." Since I can't do that, I usually provide a canned response, "I'm writing about my experiences as a Black teacher in a predominantly white school district," and do my absolute best to change the subject (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Dumas, 2015).

These situations represent the very reason why I chose autoethnography as my methodology in the first place. The only reason why people have come to know what they know about racism is because of sharing our experiences (Ellis, 2004). Therefore, I feel like the best way to contribute to the body of knowledge is to share my story. It is harder than it seems to sit down and write all about my trauma and share it with others. In fact, the toughest part is editing and revising because it requires me to re-read and revisit various parts of my work (Ellis, 2004). It makes me want to cry because I can't believe that I have endured so much hate throughout my life and still have the will to go on. Re-reading takes me back to those moments and suddenly I feel the shame and pain all over again. This is what makes autoethnography so hard. It's not the writing, it's the emotions that the writing makes me feel. Writing an autoethnography means exposing myself to those emotions that I said I never wanted to feel again. Autoethnography allowed me to study my culture as an active participant and use my personal experiences as data (Ellis, 2004). Therefore, I am able to contribute to the body of knowledge about the experiences of Black educators in predominantly white environments. During the past year or so, this

autoethnography has been my therapist and confidant (Ellis, 2004; Leigh & Davis, 2015). It has launched me into very deep personal reflection that led to a greater understanding of my place and role in this world. I have learned so much about myself just from sitting down and sifting through my experiences.

### **How are Black Spaces Created?**

In biological DNA, there are four information-storing chemical bases that are joined together by two long strands, or nucleotides, that form a double helix. Similarly, the DNA of Black space consists of four critical components: conditions, obligations, decisions, and actions joined together by two long strands of racial trauma, also forming a double helix. It is important to understand how the critical components and the racial trauma of the DNA of Black space are bonded together. First, conditions in which Black spaces thrive include but are not limited to those of conflict, change, unrest, or tension. Once I recognize that the conditions are right, feelings of obligation begin to surface. These feelings come from multiple places. I'm Black. I'm a woman. I'm an educator. I believe that liberation from racialized oppression is possible, and with that belief comes the obligation to help achieve it. I can't just sit by and let other people do the work. I have to make the conscious decision to engage in some sort of action, and I also have to decide what that action will be. Then, I have to do what I decided to do knowing that the result might be a win or a loss, but not becoming discouraged when the result is a loss. After all, there will be so many other opportunities in the future to win. Like the nucleotides that give energy to the compounds in biological DNA, racial trauma gives identity and specificity to the DNA of Black space (Leigh & Davis, 2015). Those nucleotides are made up of the countless stories of how Black people have been

traumatized by racialized oppression (Leigh & Davis, 2015). This is why I call these spaces Black space, because of the shared experiences with racial trauma (Leigh & Davis, 2015). Black space is like intellectual property. It is not physical, it can't be touched, seen, heard, smelled or tasted, but it exists only within creativity and strategy. Black space can be thought about, conceptualized, remembered, and experienced, but it cannot be given or taken away.

### **What is the role of Black Spaces when Engaging in Black Educational Imagination?**

There are three features of Black educational imagination. These include liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015), critically conscious acts (Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002), and a revitalized force of Black educators (Casad & Bryant, 2016; DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). These features animate Black space. In my experiences, the Black spaces that are animated by the features of Black educational imagination include re-humanizing of Black people, the telling of counter-narratives, and considering racial trauma in hiring practices. When I engage in Black space, I realize that there is always a chance to win or lose that battle. But even that notion raises questions. Is it really possible to lose a battle invoked by Black space? Is engaging in Black space about wins and losses, or is it about something else? I realize that progress is slow, and when I engage in Black space, I most likely will not see any physical result from my actions, but of course there are times that I might. However, I am not exactly sure that instant change is what I'm looking for. Engaging in Black space is more about my healing than the others involved in causing me to experience more trauma in my life (DeGruy, 2005). It is more about how I empower myself in an inherently racially hostile environment. If my work environment is inherently racially hostile, then that means that

trauma is inevitable (DeGruy, 2005; Leigh & Davis, 2015). If the way that I have experienced the world has been punctuated by trauma, then that means that I will never know what a trauma-free life feels like (DeGruy, 2005; Leigh & Davis, 2015). I will never have access to that privilege. However, I did not come to realize how to use trauma as leverage for empowerment before I chose service as a career, or in more plain words, before I had to learn how to protect and serve other traumatized individuals (DeGruy, 2005).

Because of my experiences with racism throughout my life, I learned the same way that other Black people did what racial trauma is. Trauma quickly became a part of my Blackness, and soon I learned that trauma is a part of Blackness (DeGruy, 2005; Dumas, 2015; Leigh & Davis, 2015). I knew what it was before I started my career and realized later on why I preferred liberatory pedagogy, why I was so willing to be courageous in times when others thought I should shut up or lay low or fly under the radar (Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2002), and why I was such an advocate for hiring more Black teachers (Casad & Bryant, 2016). Liberatory pedagogy allowed me to engage students in conversations about injustice (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015). The biggest difference between what I was taught during my k-12 education and what I taught my students in my classroom over the past eight years is that my students had a teacher who deliberately brought exploration of injustice to them instead of waiting on something terrible to happen. Reflecting back on my experiences as a teacher, I wanted to plant in them the seeds of yearning for a world that is better than the one we live in now. I wanted them to want it, and I thought that if the desire were there, then maybe someday they would be inspired to act. Being courageous started with me finding my voice and

pushing myself to speak up in meetings, to addressing district leadership on the racism in our hiring practices, to accepting a leadership role in one of the top rated school districts in the area. My journey to courage wasn't easy, but reflecting on my growth causes me to anticipate my next steps. Being a part of hiring Black candidates stirs up feelings of joy and relief because I see possibility. I believe that racial trauma made me a powerful educator (DeGruy, 2005). Without those experiences, I worry about what kind of educator I would have been. Therefore, I feel blessed to be a Black female educator. I believe this about other Black educators, too. Because of their racial trauma, Black educators have a tremendous amount of power that, when harnessed, has the potential to start a movement towards fundamental change (DeGruy, 2005). Maybe that is the reason why hiring more Black educators is such a challenge for white institutions. The more of us on staff, the bigger the threat we are to the power structure. When I talk about engaging in Black educational imagination, I mean allowing its features to animate Black space so that I can become empowered to continue on the path towards liberation. Without my trauma, I would not know how to recognize Black spaces (DeGruy, 2005; Leigh & Davis, 2015). I would not know the potential or necessity for their existence. Without my trauma, I cannot see Black space, nor do I belong there (DeGruy, 2005).

### **What do Black Spaces Achieve?**

When I reflect on my life, specifically my k-12 experiences, I remember being a silent child. In school, I did not speak unless someone spoke to me. I made friends, but not many, simply because I wouldn't talk to anyone. Part of my schooling was spent in predominantly white school districts, and part of it was spent in predominantly Black school districts. As a little Black girl attending predominantly white schools, I



experienced terrible overt racism. For example, when I was in first grade, I would slide down the sliding board everyday until one day, two white boys decided to violently shove me down instead of letting me slide, shouting “NIGGER!” as I tumbled to the ground. When I was in third grade, a student called me a nigger at lunch. I told my teacher, who told the principal, who decided to describe the entire incident over the intercom for the whole school to hear at the end of the day during announcements. I was mortified because not only had I been called a nigger, I feared that everyone would figure out who the principal was talking about, making me an even bigger target. Incidents like these prompted me to think that there was something wrong with me because I was different. I looked different. I sounded different. I was treated differently. I was the only one being called a nigger, which I realized was negative, so there had to be something wrong with being Black. There had to be something wrong with being me. Therefore, I taught myself the defense mechanism of being quiet. I learned how to make myself invisible so that I wasn’t available to be someone else’s target for ridicule, but secretly I wished that I could be white so that I could be happy again, just like I was before I started going to school. I wished for a swinging blonde ponytail, blue eyes and fair skin so that I could feel safe and free to be me. Since I couldn’t be white, I found safety in silence.

A shift occurred in my life that caused me to start thinking differently about racism. When I grew up and started my first job in the field of education, which was ironically in a predominantly white school district, I started to notice the anti-Black atmosphere in my district (Dumas, 2015). I noticed how Black students grossly underperformed when compared to white students (Steele et al., 2002). I noticed how there were barely any Black teachers and administrators around me. I noticed how some

white teachers would look at Black children in disgust. I noticed how often Black kids were sent to the office, and how white teachers chose not to communicate with their parents because they assumed that their parents didn't care about them or their education. I noticed how Black teachers, including myself, were treated as outcasts, and how we were excluded from social activities. The situation seemed abysmal, and I felt powerless. I became my first grade self all over again, tumbling down the sliding board, seeking safety in silence. But then one day I got sick of standing before my students everyday and not really knowing what I was teaching them. I grew tired of feeling lost in a curriculum that had no substance or meaning to it. I grew tired of whiteness being the center of everything that I did, and I started searching for spaces for Blackness in my anti-Black environment (Dumas, 2015).

One day I ran across the Bluford High series. I read a book from the series called *The Bully*. The characters in the book were all Black, and the stories centered on Black life. The characters were pre-teens and teenagers trying to deal with tough life situations, always prevailing in the end. After I read *The Bully*, I thought that it would be a perfect book to introduce to my sixth graders, especially my Black students. I wanted them to see themselves in literature too. I thought to myself, "Finally they can have access to a book in this school that has black characters." I went to ask my curriculum leader if we could add the book to the district approved book list. I let her borrow my copy, and after she took some time to explore the book, she told me, "...it's just not good literature." I ended up having to go around her to get the book approved through our district curriculum coordinator. From that day on, she and I never got along and I was okay with that.

Black spaces are my antidote to racial trauma because they reverse its harmful effects. The benefits of Black spaces are two fold. First, they help me begin to heal from the trauma from my past because by engaging in them, I find confidence, power, and inner strength (DeGruy, 2005; Leigh & Davis, 2015). Second, they offer sanctuary from the racial trauma that I will experience in the future. As long as I am a Black woman, and as long as racism exists, then I will always be susceptible to racial trauma (DeGruy, 2005; Dumas, 2015; Leigh & Davis, 2015). Black spaces provide me with a strategy for responding to racism that does not involve the unhealthy defense mechanism of being silent (Casad & Bryant, 2016). They are my gateway to healing (Leigh & Davis, 2015). I often wonder what would happen if more Black educators engaged in the spaces created by the features of Black educational imagination. If this were so, then there would be a network of Black educators around the world who regularly engaged in Black spaces to combat racism and to access healing. We would have a very present group of Black educators on our nation's teaching force because their trauma would not be used against them, and they would actually be able to secure teaching positions at much higher rates. They would be able to use their positions as educators for activism towards social change (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015). We would have a network of Black educators who would engage in liberatory pedagogy in order to re-humanize Black people and provide a more truthful and inclusive education to students and other educators (Freire, 1968; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2015). We would also have a network of Black educators whose critically conscious acts could allow them the opportunity to be brave and tell their counter-narratives that reveal the truth about the racism that occurs in our schools and harms Black students.

I once read that our education system was meant to be the great equalizer but my lived experiences tell me that it has achieved the exact opposite. Instead, this message is more like propaganda because it simply is not true. What I have noticed is that our education system is divisive and catapults certain individuals into either power and privilege or disadvantage and disenfranchisement. Black educational imagination can disrupt this. Black educational imagination allows us to disrupt the inequities that plague our system today, and it inspires us to start to imagine how to help humanity and education become acquainted. Creating a trauma-considerate culture would need to be the first step towards bringing humanity to education, and where there is humanity, there is healing (DeGruy, 2005; Leigh & Davis, 2015).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recognizing the features of Black educational imagination wasn't always something that I have been able to see. I always had the desire to learn how to better cope with racial trauma, but I would usually default to my unhealthy way of responding to racism that I taught myself when I was a child. It wasn't until I began to read about legendary Black educators, such as Septima Clark, that I became inspired to think differently about my own response to racial trauma (Anderson, 1988; Charron, 2009; Ramsey, 2008). Through this research, I began to notice similarities between how Black educators in the past and current Black educators, specifically myself, responded to racism. Recognizing these similarities helped me to notice the features of Black educational imagination and how to create and engage in the Black spaces that it animates. My personal experiences with Black space have allowed me to survive and overcome the racial trauma that I face in my work environment, but it has also allowed

me the space and opportunity for my Black radical imagination (Kelley, 2002).

Autoethnography has proven to be an effective way for people of color to express the ways in which they deal with racism in their respective environments (Ellis, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The same is true for this study. Autoethnography provided a means for me, a Black educator, to effectively and meaningfully express my experiences with Black space through my anchor stories (Ellis, 2004).

Through this study I have learned how important it is for people to tell their stories on their own terms. My research has led me to discover a variety of autoethnographies written by people of color who wish to tell their story through that methodology. These stories have demonstrated how people of color deal with racialized oppression in a variety of ways and in a variety of settings. However, there seems to be a need for more autoethnographies specifically written by Black k-12 educators in predominantly white environments on how they respond to racism while at work. When researching, I was able to connect to the stories of people of color, but I desired a stronger connection between my story and the stories of other Black k-12 educators working in predominantly white environments. I believe that the stories exist, and I have some ideas about how my story might be similar to someone else's, but I had a difficult time finding the stories that I needed to feel a stronger connection to other Black k-12 educators. I want to know to what extent other Black k-12 educators recognize the features of Black educational imagination and engage in Black space, whether or not they were aware of or familiar with the terminology that I suggest. Therefore, future research necessitates more autoethnographies written by Black k-12 educators about how they deal with the racism that they experience in their work environments. If more stories

were out there, then it would be easier to apply Black educational imagination and its spaces to the experiences of other Black educators therefore making it more visible and recognizable.

In *The Trauma is Real*, I explore how racial trauma should be considered when hiring Black candidates. This requires those responsible for hiring to be critical of current practices and consider how they might put Black candidates at a disadvantage because of how racial trauma might affect their interview performance (DeGruy, 2005; Steele et al., 2002). But considering racial trauma in hiring practices is just part of the battle of reimagining the system of education. In order to really make significant and fundamental change, we must consider the effects of historical racial trauma on the education system (DeGruy, 2005). Further research might reveal that the consideration of racial trauma, both historical and contemporary, adds another feature to Black educational imagination that I discussed in this study. Considering racial trauma when reimagining the education system would open up other Black spaces.

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