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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. Our scope and sequence focuses on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. The main tenets of Black Educology’s educational vision are rooted in critical race theory, with a focus on counter-storytelling, Black critical theory, Afro-pessimism, and Black educational epistemology. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.
Contents

The Cypher 3

“Bad Taste in Movies”: HACKing Films as a Site of Praxis for Black Embodiment 15

“What Do You Suggest that I Do Next?”: The Rival Geographies of Ellen Irene Diggs 33

Black Magic: A Collective of Lived Experience 54

Go Good: Reading, Mapping, and Teaching the Territory through Space and Time 68

Metaphor For a Post-White Horizon 75

Call* For Tracks and Creative Works 112
The Cypher

Producers
Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, Andre Carter, Noah Morton, T. Gertrude Jenkins, Brian Davis

Abstract

The *Black Educology Mixtape* is a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. *Black Educology* goes beyond the scope of academia to recognize the movers and shakers of emancipatory movements. We imagine this mixtape as a vehicle toward revolution. To that extent, this album informs, confers, and collaborates with educational voices across the Black diaspora. Our scope and sequence focuses on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. *Black Educology* is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. Though traditional mixtapes only include songs, we highlight text, audio, images, transcripts, and lyrics. The main tenets of *Black Educology*’s educational vision are rooted in critical race theory, with a focus on counter-storytelling, Black critical theory, Afro-pessimism, and Black educational epistemology. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.
Roll Call... Because These Incidents Be Critical

In our debut, we, as producers, have rooted our mixtape in a place of disruption. We’ve opted to further that disruption by introducing ourselves and our album through the cypher. In hip-hop, a cypher is a communal space whereby hip-hop artists use their voices to take up space and flow together on the same beat to create something new and beautiful (Blackman, 2013). Unlike battle rap—which pits one MC against another—cyphers emphasize the potency of what can be created through collaboration. We have created our own cypher, where each producer, each artist, and each voice becomes a valuable contributor to our act of disruption. Black Educology ain’t no rap battle because our focus isn’t on competing against one another or vying for space atop the ivory tower. Instead, we work to produce a space where Black people can (re)claim their individual voices. The cypher works to create a supportive space where we harness the power of Black collective epistemologies while honoring our voices.

In the BE space, the cypher is a form of roll call for our producers. It’s our welcome to our community of readers as we invite them to come and know our hearts and minds as they relate to our experiences as Black educators and educologists. The topics covered in each mixtape originate from a collective space of pain, struggle, ingenuity, and joy. We cypher to curate collective projects around liberation—The Black Educology Mixtape. The following is a recently recorded “studio session” that shares stories from our lived experiences that led to the formation of our mixtape:

Gertrude: Nah, we don’t needa put it on a podcast, just talk.

Noah: Yeah, bet. All right.

Brian: All right.

Noah: (laughs) All right, welcome to the studio session and today we're here to have a conversation around Black Educology, this new journal—which we call a mixtape—and hear from the editors. It’s a project that we all have been working on for the past two years. We’re super excited to share some of the stories behind it, like why it is called “Black Educology” and why it’s a mixtape and not a journal. It’s just so we can share stories and get to know the producers more.

First, we’re gonna have a round of introductions. I can start real quick. I am Noah Morton, born and raised in Harlem, New York. I love dope conversations. I like questioning, “what is education?” ’Cause I realize that it’s not really asked a lot. And so sometimes, people would do some wild things and call it education when it was really domination—currently, thinking about education and freedom.

That was a real quick introduction. I have a cat named Sandy, the pigeon huntress of Harlem. And, with that, I’ll pass to the next person.

Brian: Yeah, my name is Brian Davis. I’m from hometown Philly—West Philly, born and raised. The playground is definitely where I spent most of my days. We’re not talking about Will Smith, though. I’m a doctoral student at USF. My main work is in equity and inclusion.
And, for me, education has and always will be liberatory, shoutout to bell hooks. I was the subject of educational violence all my life because of the schooling project in the United States. And a part of our work and our duty and our voyage with Black Educology is to dismantle the schooling project. But also to offer an alternative through Black voices, through Black theory, through Black educational experience to—as critical race theory indicates—tell that counter-story. So, that’s what we seek to do.

Noah: Word, word. And the next person, as you feel moved to speak.

Gertrude: Gertrude Jenkins here. What brings me to this space is not just my experience with schooling and feeling overlooked and often under the radar as a student, but also how I’ve experienced those same feelings as a Black teacher. My research specifically focuses on how Black educators have created fugitivity in educational institutions throughout history in the United States. I would love for this mixtape to reflect what that journey has been for us. So I envision this as a space where we can normalize conversations around these experiences in education.

Eghosa: Jumping in, my name is Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton. I am currently focused on Black women educators. Mostly because I think being a Black girl student and being part of this apparatus of education that was mostly dominated by white administrators, white teachers, canonical curriculum, hegemonic lessons, schooling, et cetera, really made it clear to me as I moved up in education how important it is to establish my own humanity as a Black person. To make sure that I’m using my work to continue to humanize the most historically excluded people. Part of my joy in being part of Black Educology is the work we do to make the humanity of Blackness no longer conditional to the white gaze.

Our individual experiences as students have deeply impacted us and where we are right now as doctoral students, as educators, as people, and all that jazz. I’m just really excited to have made a space for us.

Andre: Oh, okay. I’ll jump in. My name is Andre St. LaRece (laughs). I’m really happy to be in this space with members of my Black academic community. This is actually a first for me because you don’t see that many Black faces within higher education. The further you go up, the less people of color you see. It’s really hard when sometimes the faces of color you do see, they’re not about that life in one way or the other or it’s not an instant community, as one would think. So, to be able to have and grow these relationships has been really important to my growth as a scholar.

This is the first time in higher education where I haven’t felt like it was an aspirational chore, but really an exploration of myself and my ideas in a space where, not only I’m held accountable, but I’m respected and actually feel that love. It’s not crabs in a barrel, but, you know, crabs building that mud hut together. I’m also a doctoral student at USF. Right now, my current work focuses on the standardization of American myth-making in textbooks, testing materials, and learning materials as it relates to capitalism.
So, basically, how does capitalism exploit education as a force to dominate people who see education as a way of lifting themselves out of poverty and hopefully better their lives. While in reality, education is weaponized, so Black people go from the classroom to the jail. So, I began to question, how are our aspirations as Americans weaponized against us? And, in order to do that, me and members of this group found it necessary to build a space for other people like us to come together, have a studio session and be productive within it. So we’re not trying to build a place that’s gonna be burnt down by the white educational system, but one that can be uplifted to make sure our work is on equal if not an elevated footin’ and not just worthy of a system, but able to tear down that system and rebuild it in our image.

So, that’s why I’m happy to be here with y’all and happy to be working on this project of growth, both intellectual and emotional, which is also just foundational to Black life.

Noah: Word. And I’ll even say spiritual too. There is a whole spirit within collective liberation existence—whole genealogy. You all were talking about “education,” right? However, the mixtape is not called Black Education, right? It’s Black Educology. And there’s a reason behind that. I gotta say, before this project, I haven’t heard of educology before.

When I hear “educology,” I think of words like biology, with -ology, which means “the study of something.” We say educology instead of education. What is Black educology? How are we seeing Black educology? I’m happy to go first or pass it to another person.

All right, lit. So—

Andre: (laughs)

Noah: (laughs) The way I’m seeing Black educology is in two words—Black and educology. If I look at educology and -ology means the study of, so Black educology is the study of Black education and educational experiences within—within the world? When I say the—the world, it’s multiple. And Andre was talking about how a world is made by capitalism and domination. Eghosa was talking about the world that tries to disappear all culture that doesn’t align with it.

I see Black Educology as a way—as one way among many—to contribute to that whole genealogy of liberation; Black Educology as a possibility to imagine beyond these white gazes and build, while recognizing community in doing that. And so, definitely, it’s a way to contribute and to recognize the genealogy and liberation and to join that within Black education spaces.

Passing to another person, like, you know, what is Black Educology? Or BE, as we call it? And so, what does BE mean to you?

Gertrude: I definitely think what is dope about studying educology in terms of Blackness is the intentional removal of white gaze. I see studies often that talk about Black education in relation to whiteness. However, BE is more about who we are and what we’ve done, and
what our ingenuity has been in the field of education. And I’d like to see more of that work centered, and I would like to see just one place where that’s always seen, and seen it in all of its forms, in oral and written traditions.

Eghosa: And just a simple thing, like, we’re committing to discourse around education with the voices of Black folks. And in a space that is often focused on one dominant narrative, we are forcing space where Black people can discuss education, what that means for us, and how we can utilize our own knowledge and epistemologies to move that discussion forward.

Andre: Like Noah said, the -ology is the study of education, right? So what are the theoretical, the symbolic, you know, all the things that make up education? But of course that would be from a very, let’s just say western point of view. We could’ve easily just called this critical educology, right? The study of the history, the formats, everything. But critical tends to be overused. Critical is also, like, a bucket. We do wanna include the ideas of feminism, of queer history, for example. But also, by saying that it’s Black educology, we focus on what it is to be Black and in relationship to educational institutions.

Black educology is important because it’s really based on some of the tenets of Afro-pessimism. It’s based in a critique of capitalism. It’s based on a lot of things that aren’t available in so-called critical studies. So, like Eghosa says, we are focused on Black people, Black experiences, and, most importantly, Black histories in relationship to education, not only focused here in the US, but globally. So, that’s where we at.

Gertrude: Oh, I’m glad you said that part ’cause I definitely think it’s important that we have a diasporic view of Black education. What does Black life look like in other parts of the world? And how are Black educators, students, and families challenging or how are they engaging with systemic pressures within the context of where they live? Like, how is Afro-pessimism discussed in Black UK spaces, for example? How do Black teachers in Brazil navigate racial injustice in schools and in other parts of the world? And, also, what does that look like across the Continent, as well? Black Educology gives us an opportunity to explore all of that.

Brian: I think you all did it justice. The only thing I would just add is that, as a group, we found it important to be specific about Black because the world has been explicitly not specific about our experience and our people and our history. So, we don’t use critical, as Andre says, we have to start with Black first because this is all for us and about us.

Noah: Word. Why is Black Educology called a mixtape and not a journal? I know a lot of people have been asking me about the “Journal of Black Educology” and I emphasize that “Yo, I'm not working on a journal, I'm working on a mixtape.”

They’ll be like, “Oh.” I continue with, “I’m doing studio sessions.” Shall we talk more about like, why is it called a mixtape and not a journal? Why are we refusing the language of journals and “issues” to express mixtape volumes?
Andre: Noah, Imma pass this one right back to you. I wanna hear your Harlem perspective because you are partially the origins of us using this fugitive language and why we wanted to be firm about “mixtape”. I would just wanna know, like, how these terms came to you and how you had to press upon us why they were important. Instead of asking us, Imma put you on the spot here, tell us about this; tell us about your perspective. And tell us about how being born and raised in Harlem, like, how does that really shift us out of that general, structural journal language?

Noah: Really? Yeah, word. There was certain things about the structure of a journal that just did not make sense to me: What does it mean for a journal to be called an “issue”? What does it mean to create more “issues?” And what are the different ways in which the language of journals can function as limitations?

I remember somebody was talking about how in some educational contexts, professionalism is a code word for “systematic erasure.” So, me coming from Harlem, the sounds that I hear on my walk to school, right—the music you hear that’s blasting outside the cars or whatever. I realized that we really are making a mixtape.

Now, sometimes whatever music that we—Black people—created was not always considered music, right? Well, sometimes people say, “That’s noise,” and that it can’t be musical. And so, thinking about Black Educolonology in relation to the tunes of theory that recognizes that the sounds we are, like, collectively creating resonate not only with the present, but also with the past and the future.

We refuse an “issue” and instead call it “mixtape volumes” to focus more on the sound and to amplify voices that have been systematically and intentionally muted. Valuing perfection limits sounds. Thus, crafting a mixtape resonates with a smooth form of communication. As we create language, new language follows. If the journal is a mixtape, then what are the “articles” called?

Sometimes, articles can refer to the articles of clothing. There exists different garments that try to strap you into a particular way of being. And so, we say if the journal is an album, then, you know, each “article” is a song or a track. Thus, it follows that we are no longer “editors,” but rather producers trying to find different ways to amplify the artists’ voices and to distribute their stories (tracks) to a larger audience. Mixtapes have different forms, right? They’re not always a CD or a cassette; that’s why we have different modalities of engaging, like the coloring book and the magazine edition.

Eghosa: And I just wanna shout out the scholars, the hip-hop pedagogues like Thandi Hicks Harper, Tricia Rose, Chris Emdin, Ruth Nicole Brown. You know, folks like that, who have led the way in this type of pedagogy around hip-hop and thinking about how hip-hop itself and things like cyphers or creating an album are inherently communal. And what we are doing is communal and not gatekeeping, not being an academic looking-down, stealing, or taking, but rather, we’re building. And so, just shout out to the folks who have done the work to build scholarship around hip-hop pedagogy that allowed us to incorporate mixtapes, cyphers, and tracks in our work.
Gertrude: One dope-ass thing about music is its accessibility. So, in what ways is this mixtape gonna be accessible to Black people who don’t engage in university spaces? What y’all think?

Noah: Word

Eghosa: I like what you did there.

Noah: (laughing) I’ll pass it; I’ll pass to Andre for that one.

Andre: So, I mean, just in brief, this is a conversation that we have and we fight over, and we’ll spend 30 minutes going in circles, and it’s usually around the ideas of: What is the best way to access the information in the mixtape? Who is it for? Are we using language that excludes people while trying to dismantle that same language? By having supplemental materials like a coloring book that distills our ideas down to something just very, very simple to have a conversation piece, to build curriculum around some of the tracks in the mixtape, to inspire people to engage with the mixtape via Zoom or talks, inviting community members to actually just participate in the mixtape is a way of providing access.

But most importantly, I mean, I’m pretty sure y’all talk about this mixtape with the same enthusiasm I do with family and friends who are just interested. And so, word of mouth, you know, something we always talk about is our oral tradition. So, for accessibility, we have to think about more than just text and more than just oral, but I think—to build on what Eghosa just said—accessibility comes through community. And if we’re not building our community around the work we’re doing, then it’s just gonna be inaccessible, period. It’s just gonna be something that sort of stands in reference to and exists because of our experiences with the white academic institution, as opposed to how we further our work within our respective communities, however we define them.

Gertrude: To that point, I think about my own journey as a Black teacher; I did not engage with journal articles until I got to the master's and doctoral levels. And that’s simply because we just don’t have time, considering everything we got going on as Black teachers, which is way more than our white counterparts have to do. So when I think about this mixtape, I think about how we can make this information that should be common knowledge to all of us—and by design isn’t—accessible. How do we create pieces or how do we create different modes of information to get these knowledges to these teachers? I think that Black teachers are our most precious commodity. I think we need to be protected at all costs.

And, I think, you know, we can all agree that the education system does not cater to the needs of Black teachers at all. So how do we also provide a space that allows them to access that information and then also contribute their own information? Because, a lot of times, Black research scholars—they’re not the ones with their boots on the ground. So, in terms of who this goes out to and who puts in, I think it’s also important to allow
teachers to access and to share a voice and a perspective and give their own ideas toward how we change things.

Noah: That’s real. Thinking about your schooling, which critical incidents do you remember from growing up in your educational experience that shaped the way you view education?

Brian: I think because this is the quotidian, like, everyday experience for Black people, we have critical incidents every day, you know? For myself, I would say something that I always think about K—college: You are always tested on anti-Blackness, right? All of the standardized testing through schooling, from its inception, is rooted in misinformation about Black people, Black history, and what they identify as American history.

So, throughout my life, I always had to study my own misinformation as a result of passing in school systems. I thought I was smart because I had straight A's all my life, and I skipped two grades, you know, I was in all the gifted programs. I never questioned concepts in school because everything made sense. Things change when the questions are centered around your identity. As soon as you start asking questions about your history or your people, institutions and educators feel offended that you would even ask about who you are because you’re receiving a great education.

You know, you’re doing well, you write great papers, but as soon as you start writing about your experience, writing about whiteness and systems, that’s when they wanna have a dialogue about your paper. But when you are writing shit that augments anti-Blackness as a global project, nobody has anything to say about that. And that’s sort of the standard, that was the standard for me all my life. So.

Noah: Oh, word. One of the key words from what you said, Brian, was the idea of augmentation. White supremacist, capitalist society is segmented in one particular way. And when you start trying to augment it to focus on the distortions that have the potential to create ruptures in the dominant structures, then it is not considered worthy of time, energy, and resources.

For me, one incident I think about involves the idea of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. I remember when my older brother got into a charter school. In order to get into that charter school, he had to win a lottery. And so, I remember in the full auditorium in P.S. 242, everybody was there with their parents and stuff like that. In the center of the stage, there was this golden bingo machine.

And the person on the stage was rolling the bingo machine and pulling out—not numbers, rather names of children. And if the children were part of the first 100 names that were pulled out then they were offered and were afforded the opportunity for this new educational experience. Years later, I questioned, “What does it mean to raffle off educational opportunities?” At the raffle, the system of the lottery was legitimized because we want to give everyone an equal shot—the most equitable way to provide education is through a raffle.
And then I realized like, I just started thinking about what conditions, as Brian was talking about, make certain things make sense? What conditions make a raffle for educational opportunity in a Black community make sense? How can you dismantle those logics? This speaks to how BE is counter-hegemonic, right? And so, thinking about different ways to imagine collective liberation.

Gertrude: I think what’s interesting is how a lot of those moments that we’ve been in as children were considered normal experiences at that age. Like, you had no frame of reference there to question it. And I feel like that ends up being a lot of our experiences where we’re looking back and seeing the things that we thought were okay in the moment. And that reminds me of my own critical incident, which at the time felt very mundane. From kindergarten to second grade, I attended a Montessori school and I remember being one of very few Black students there.

And we were playing this really basic number game where the teacher put a whole bunch of cards with numbers on the floor, and we had to look around the class for them, like a scavenger hunt, to get as many as we could. And I remember the boys had found nearly all of them, but I did manage to find one. And I remember when all the cards had been found, we all went back to the circle, and we sat around. I had to be, like, maybe six, seven years old when this happened. And I had a number card that I think was like, 30. And then there was a white girl sitting next to me, and her card was, like, 15. And she nonchalantly just looked at me and said, “Hey, um, let’s trade cards.” (laughs)

And I went with that; I was just so with it. I was like, “All right, let’s just trade the cards.” I didn’t understand. And then, after the teacher announced who the boy winner was, that girl asked, “Well, who’s the girl winner?” And it was her because she had the highest number—the number that I had pulled! And I remember going back home that day and NOT reporting it to my father as something wrong. I was just reporting what the day was. It was my father who was furious. And I remember not understanding why he was so angry about it. He said to me, “Don’t let them white kids take ANYTHING from you; don’t ever let that happen again.”

And it took a very long time to understand exactly what he meant. I had to conceptualize that in later incidents that happened as an adult for me to understand and recall why he was so upset that I had done that. But I bring that up because just like Brian was saying, there are these very quotidian things that happen and you take them for granted. And it also makes me think of the current state of the students. Like, how often there is no teacher in that situation willing to check children during incidents like this and say, “Hey, you’re stealing someone’s card,” ’cause that’s what was happening. And no reinforcement to me either to say, “Hey, don’t give up what you have.”

And that’s kinda what we learned and we’ve been conditioned into, and it also makes me think as a teacher about moments where I got frustrated with Black students for not putting they chest out in moments where I felt they should have. I’ve had to remind myself, “They’ve been conditioned in the same way you have, so why would they?” So, that kinda shaped me, you know, without me even realizing it at that time, but it
definitely has shaped me as an educator; the curriculum that I write, the way that I teach—and even in recent years, it made me even more hypercritical of when seemingly innocent, invasive things happen and just how damaging they can be in the long run.

And I wanna point out the fact that I was lucky in the sense that I had a father who could point that out to me. That’s not always the case for Black parents because they’ve been indoctrinated in the same way.

Eghosa: What I love about what Gertrude said is also pointing out how schooling serves as a site of teaching Black students to socially reproduce the exact same oppressive systems that are around them, right? And then we become conditioned to that, and then we mirror those experiences through every level of education, K—8, high school, college, and post. Having people in your life to break that mirroring or to show you what you’re doing is key. And part of my work right now is, I’m looking at Black women educators because our experience as Black girl students a hundred percent impacts the way that we then frame our pedagogy and praxis.

Like, we are teaching in a way that is responding to the way that we were taught, what we didn’t learn, what we were lacking, and so we create space in our classrooms to make up for that, to push back against that, to disrupt against the reproduction that we have become so accustomed to in schooling. Which is what makes schooling so dangerous for Black bodies, for Black people, for Black students. The reality is most Black students are gonna have a critical incident, are gonna have multiple critical incidents, are gonna go into careers where they have more critical incidents. You know, part of our work in this mixtape is to not only amplify those, but like, what are we gonna do to disrupt that shit?

What are we gonna do to stop it, to make sure people are aware and make sure we’re not reproducing it? So, I think we’re all seeing similar things around these themes, and my critical incident is along the same lines. It’s just being in school and learning that I need to make myself small, small, small. And the smaller I make myself, the more I’ll be able to navigate this system that wants to make me invisible for the things that I need and highly visible for the things that will punish, that will deter, or that will force me into survival mode.

I don’t know that I need to talk about my specific incident, ’cause I think what we’re all saying is there are so many incidents we could pull from every year of schooling, like the first time you were called the N word. And I’m sure we all have that. (laughs) You know what I mean? Everybody got that story. Even in our careersnow, where our ideas are appropriated or where they try to make it so that we are not seen as intellectually capable according to them. Or what about all the people that be surprised, like, “Damn, you articulate,” you know? “Didn't know you had it in you” type vibe. That’s what I’ll add to this.

So I appreciate that we have all specific incidents, but I think, thematically, it’s really interesting to look at as a whole.
Andre:

I'll pop in. So, I mean, Eghosa’s right. It’s like, where to start? I can think about two incidents. Like, I had so many, but then, you know, as you guys were talking, just the two that stand out all happened in the same time period. It’s when we moved from the Black neighborhood to the white neighborhood, and I think I might’ve been in fifth grade. And I just remember all of my language being wrong. But on top of that, I remember being on a ship—You know, we went on a field trip. I had never been on field trips, and this field trip was whale watching. So we on a boat, and I remember the principal asking me—and I don’t remember him asking anybody else—but he was with an adult colleague and said, you know, “Hey, how do you say it? How do you say either (/ˈiðər/ eether) or either (/ˈaɪðər/ eyether)?” And I remember thinking to myself, “which is correct?” And I remember saying, “It’s either.” And I remember him talking to his colleague, and I didn't think much about it. I just remember sensing a sense of pride, like, it’s either.

And the second incident was, you know, in that same year, we went to camp. We were all shining our piece of wood, and one of the little white kid's stuff went missing. And I got approached, and I was accused of stealing this little piece of manzanita. And I remember being young and saying, “Do you think I would actually take someone’s stick of wood, hide it somewhere, just so I could come back later? It’s wood.” And the camp counselors looked at me and said, “Of course we do.” And I remember in that moment just thinking like, dang, you know? And it blew my mind. And thinking back, I just remember having this distrust from white administrators, white beings, white persons and sources of authority, yet, like Brian said, still this need internally to say “either” when necessary.

And that’s been kinda the forefront of a lot of my educational experiences not having, you know, Black teachers since high school. I mean, and even then, I remember our social studies teacher, she was Black, and she called us sons of Ham. The other one was just like an old auntie who just didn’t care, and the other one was South African. And I could tell he didn’t like Black people. So you all have these experiences that build up over time, that by the time I got to college and had a Black professor who was from the Sahel, it was interesting because I’m thinking, “Wow, he’s speaking to me, yet I don’t feel like he sees me. But he’s going out of his way to educate me, but I really don’t think that he’s there on my side.” It was just such a weird feeling to, you know, feel less-than with someone who’s supposed to be, you know, your color. And that’s when I started to understand that color isn’t shared experience.

But then again, that’s when you come to a language problem where you grow up in the education system and whiteness prevails to teach you that everything is an add-on, it’s an adjective, right? Like, you’re a person that happens to be. And in the system, you strive to be a person who is surrounded by the accolades, the grades, the papers, who happens to be Black. But then there’s a point in your experiences that has always taught you that you’re a Black American. And it’s only in language where you have that adjective—color—come before the place of origin. So, we’re Black Americans. The problem with that is Black is just a color, so color just always comes first. Because in no other race can you be yellow American, red American, but we get to be Black American, which highlights, you know, within the education system that is anti-Black, where that goes.
Certain educational experiences I had were anti-Black American experiences. Which sucks because right now, we’re living in an era that prizes people-first language, so a lot of people in this world are now people who happen to be handicapped, people who happen to face substance addictions, people who happen to face alcoholism. But no matter what, we’re gonna be Black people. And that was part of the realization that we get from Afro-pessimism, that no matter how many certificates I surround my name with, my body won’t block bullets. And that was a hard awakening.

The hard awakening was that I can walk around and say either all I want, I could talk about the order of adjectives all I want, but my tongue isn’t gonna stop the fact that my body is not immune to white violence or to Black crime or to white capitalism or to the brutality that we face every morning just getting up in the world thinking that we’re people. And so that’s why I like this space so much; it’s where we’re trying to create a space through Black Educology where we don’t have to use the word “Black” all the time to define ourselves, and we can eventually be free of it. And what that means—I don’t know what that means. I don’t know what it means to be free of the word but at least we have a space now where we can; we can build that together to where we won’t be accused of stealing sticks that belong to people.

And the funny thing as an adult is that manzanita stick incident, it should’ve taught me at that moment, that same moment that it happened, that stick represents everything good that belongs to someone who is not you. That stick, eventually, would be education, it would be employment, it would be food, it would be access to anything that is traditionally not applied to people who look like me or sound like me. Essentially, that experience in the fifth grade told me anything that you have that looks like ours is stolen from us. And so that’s why, moving forward, just like the Tut languages of our grandmas, Imma steal every stick I can—not to hoard, but to use as kindling to set on fire. And Imma stop there ’cause I have to start using metaphors, and then I just lose my head, but y’all know what I mean.

Gertrude : We was on that journey with you.
“Bad Taste in Movies”: HACKing Films as a Site of Praxis for Black Embodiment

Authors
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Bios

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Abstract

During a time of racial unrest and a hyperfocus on inclusion and representation, three Black scholars from different time zones met on Zoom to discuss recent movies. Initially, our conversation revolved around the role of the representation of Black people in film and contentious arguments about the quality of Marvel’s *Black Panther*. We shifted toward a more analytical trend when we began to interrogate how the world of cinema has attempted to take progressive steps regarding representation, such as moving away from obvious racialized tropes. Essentially, we concluded that the industry has yet to address its deeper and prevailing flaws when it comes to its perception of Blackness. While much of the previous research on film unpacks the tropes and stereotypes that work as limiting factors, our work seeks to understand how Black characterizations in film serve as sites of praxis, whereby audiences learn how to read and understand Blackness. Using frameworks based on Black critical race theory, critical media studies, and critical race theory, as well as aligning that with our focus group study, we have conceptualized the humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledge (HACK). Our findings suggest that HACK will serve as a tool and mechanism to disrupt the patterns in film that act as a generational stagnation in the way we view the Black community on and off the screen.
Three Black scholars from different time zones decided to meet virtually amid multiple pandemics impacting the physical, mental, and spiritual health of the communities we come from. We gathered in the virtual space to heal and have dialogue about the ways in which we—and the Black communities that we grew up in—are represented not only in the news but also in films. At first, we spoke about our favorite films and the reasons behind each choice. We indicated how the complexity of the characters’ humanity combined with the multidimensionality of the plot created some of the conditions for our favorite films. As we began to witness the similarity among our responses, especially with regard to slave films and tropes, we wondered about how frequently Black characters in film are limited in their complexity and their dimensionality is removed to reassert dominant narratives in the form of racialized character tropes. It is no wonder that the late actor Sidney Poitier, who often portrayed nonthreatening characters that served to facilitate a white narrative, stated in a 1967 interview: “If the fabric of the society were different, I would scream to the high heaven to play villains and to deal with different images of Negro life that would be more dimensional. But I’ll be damned if I do that at this stage in the game (Morris, 2022, p. A19).” We still scream for multidimensional representation. We will not be damned.

Months after our initial conversation, we facilitated a focus group on Black characterizations in film. From our critical analysis of the focus group, we created the humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledges (HACK) as a way to disrupt dehumanizing Black characterizations in film to push toward transformative pedagogy and multidimensional portrayals. There are three elements necessary for challenging the way audiences read the Black body in film: (1) recognize and reject the anti-Black gaze, (2) refuse the removal of dimensionality, and (3) reinscribe the narratives using counter-storytelling.

For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the journey and analysis of creating the HACK, which recognizes how racial tropes are intentional inventions that further affirm the superiority of a dominant racial group. This affirmation of superiority occurs while cementing the inferiority of marginalized groups, with a specific focus on the Black community. There is a simultaneity in effect, as the innovations in films are innovations to the continued aesthetic confinement of Black racial tropes. We have added the following list of eight racial tropes below based on Donald Bogle’s (1994) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*: (1) **Buck**: The Black Brute, (2) **Coon**: A Black character depicted as a buffoon and object of amusement, (3) **Magical Negro**: A Black character who comes to the aid of white protagonists in a film, (4) **Mammy**: A large and cantankerous Black woman, (5) **Mulatto**: A tragic, light-skinned Black character, usually female, (6) **Tom**: A socially acceptable “good” Black character, (7) **Sapphire**: The Angry Black Woman, (8) **Jezabel**: A lascivious Black woman. There are additional tropes that extend beyond single characters, including the trauma porn trope, which is rooted in deriving pleasure from the graphic diminution of Black suffering. Trauma porn glorifies and exploits the depictions of systemic pain specific to Black people for the sake of entertainment. Utilizing the frameworks of critical race theory (CRT) Black critical race theory (BlackCrit), and critical media studies (CMS), we observed and analyzed the impact of these common racial tropes within films.
The call to address Black characterizations in film during instances of racial unrest and a hyperfocus on inclusion and representation has frequently been made. However, the call has remained on a dial tone. Director Ava DuVernay, whose focus is on highlighting structural inequalities in film, acknowledged that creating films outside of the dominant culture is difficult. Thus, she is committed to creating her own lane, stating:

There’s a lot of talk about shattering the ceiling and certainly I sit here privileged after decades of women who have done it, but in general, I think a lot less about breaking down his door or shattering his ceiling and more about building my own house. It comes down to who gets to tell the story. If the dominant images that we’ve seen throughout our lifetimes, our mothers’ lifetimes, our grandmothers’ lifetimes, have been dominated by one kind of person, and we take that. We internalize it. We drink it in, as true, as fact, it’s tragic. Because it goes beyond just the film industry. These are the images of ourselves that we consume and it effects the way we see ourselves and the way other people see us (Pollack & Simmons, 2014, 00:1:04).

We agree with DuVernay’s take on the function of dominant images. Often, Black characterizations in film have made incremental changes, and those changes are not enough to show the multidimensionality of Black communities. Scholars have created various approaches that are rooted in CRT and counter-storytelling (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), which interrogates the dominant institutional structures fortified by race and racism, as well as BlackCrit, which defines those structures of domination as anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016). Black communities are negatively impacted by the film industry, which profits from anti-Blackness through the proliferation of one-dimensional narratives and tropes. Films work to contextualize Black experiences within hegemonic consumption. However, that consumption will be disrupted as humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledge are uncovered using the framework of CRT, BlackCrit, and critical media studies (CMS). As Black scholars, we are invested in exploring how certain perceptions of Blackness are legitimized through film.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Counter-Storytelling Within CRT**

CRT recognizes the genealogy of dominant narratives that are produced for the purpose of asserting and maintaining dominance over marginalized racial groups. Black feminist scholar Dr. Whitneé Garrett-Walker (2021) asserts that “ideological lynching takes place to co-opt Black people’s epistemological understanding of themselves and their place in the world and reiterate institutional racism and other oppressions” (p. 32). In this work, we focus on CRT’s tenet of counter-storytelling, which refuses the nooses of ideological lynching to center the experiences of people whose stories are often suppressed. Dominant narratives are produced through film; counter-stories are too. Using CRT as a theoretical framework, we center the lived experiences of those in our focus group as actual knowledge to critically interrogate film while radically imagining humanizing approaches to cinematic knowledge. However, there are limits to CRT for adequately interrogating the “specificity of the Black” (Wynter, 1989). As a result, we look to BlackCrit, which offers an additional framework to investigate Black bodies within film in relation to anti-Blackness as a social construct.
**BlackCrit**

Dumas and Ross (2016) posited that BlackCrit goes beyond CRT and the general theory of racism to analyze the specific impact of anti-Blackness on the spirits of Black students. Warren (2021) defines anti-Blackness as “an invisible cultural logic that urges a deep disdain for Blackness and Black life. It actively shades how one reads Black bodies” (p. 8). The specific focus on Black bodies is key to BlackCrit, as it demands that we explicate the marginalization, silencing, erasure, and institutionalized racism that exist in Black characterizations in film because “antiblackness is not simply racism against Black people. Rather, antiblackness refers to a broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and (the possibility of) humanity” (p. 429).

We wonder about the ways in which films affirm the structures of anti-Blackness. In what ways do films provide the cement for the buildings of anti-Blackness constructed on the stolen lands of the American Dream? Using the lenses of CRT, BlackCrit, and CMS, we conduct media analysis on Black characterizations in film, as well as code the stories from the focus group.

**Critical Media Studies**

Critical media studies matters because media narratives contribute to the stories we live by and are used by parents to help socialize their children. Media are storytellers and are thus one source of the raw materials we draw from when we live our everyday lives and try to figure out who we are and where we are in the culture around us.

— Thomas Johnson, *Media vs. Critical Media Studies*

As we are examining films, we are interested in understanding how film socializes audiences to view Black bodies through the lens of anti-Blackness. It is not enough to recognize the politics, economics, aesthetics, and structures that undergird film. Frank Wilderson (2018) argues that if “we can start to see the policing and the mutilation and the aggressivity towards Blackness not as a form of discrimination, but as being a form of psychic health and well-being for the rest of the world, then we can begin to reformulate the problem and begin to take a more iconoclastic response to it” (p. 7). In that same vein, films teach audiences about Black people in a way that is detrimental to our collective psyche. Essentially, we are arguing that all education is indoctrination, conditioning people to accept and normalize hegemonic ideologies. Our work is about recognizing and changing these structures by drawing attention to the social relationship between a film and its viewer, which highlights the social conditioning with an aim to change it.

By doing this work, we are tacitly making the argument that film has the power to shape relationships between groups and individuals. The salient, though perceived as insignificant, values presented in film can have drastic impacts on policy, economics, policing, anti-Black violence, and other facets that affect Black life. The proliferation of films like *Boyz n the Hood*, *Dead Presidents*, and *Set it off* has contributed to the overt criminalization of Black communities. Black criminality and “thug life” perceptions are reinforced by fictions shown in film and result in real life policies and consequences, such as stop-and-frisk or Hillary Clinton’s 1996 speech, in which the influence of Black criminality elicited the following statement: “They are often the kinds of kids that are called ‘superpredators’—no conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first, we have to bring them to heel” (Gearan & Phillip, 2016). These kids become “superpredators” in the eyes of this white woman because of the consistent narrative perpetuated by films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Native Son*. Of course, we are limiting
our work at this time to popular American films in order to focus on the proliferation of the uniquely American brand of anti-Blackness.

The power of CMS is that it has the potential to open up the passive viewer to connect the 2D life of the film to their own 3D experiences. Once the ideas are embodied, the film is no longer just a projection but an introspective act that can either attract or deflect philosophical propositions previously masked by 24 frames per second. These frames remove the masked projections that are often kept tucked away and instead highlight the viewers’ learned internal depictions of Blackness that are inherently detrimental. We seek to include the viewer in each frame in order to move beyond the screen and into the hidden institutions of power that film ultimately represents. Far from an academic exercise, our work short-circuits a visceral understanding of film tropes to call into question power relations and iconography and stimulate a critical reflective response within and beyond the fourth wall (Auter & Davis, 1991).

Scholars such as Ott and Mack (2020) and Baker-Bell et al. (2017) have completed analyses that we would currently call CMS. Upon reading the film as text, scholars like Bogle, as early as the 1970s, uncovered several tropes of Blackness in film with direct relation to power distributions. Using a CRT and BlackCrit framework, we focus on CMS analysis to observe common Black characterizations in film.

Using CMS, we ask the following questions of the eight common racial tropes:

1. Why do these tropes occur so often in conjunction with Black embodiment?
2. How do these tropes condition the film consumer to conceive of Black existence in an anti-Black way?
3. Is there a way to short-circuit or disrupt the passive comprehension of the messaging around Black embodiment?

To observe the influence of these tropes within Black characterizations in film, we analyze the roles for which Black actors and actresses have received critical accolades in the form of an Oscar nomination and award.

**Praxis**

[Praxis is] an iterative, reflective approach to taking action. It is an ongoing process of moving between practice and theory. Praxis is a synthesis of theory and practice in which each informs the other.

—Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*

We are most familiar with praxis within the discussion of classroom contexts. However, we are making the claim that media, and film in particular, acts as a site of praxis, in the sense that film occupies tangible and intangible spaces simultaneously. Just below the flickering light is the operationalization of multiple theories that converge on a single temporal plane. Both consciously and unconsciously, the viewer is subjected to concepts of gender, economics, and moral behavior. These concepts are given form by the actions of the characters, the angles of the camera, and even wide pans of the cityscape. All of these angles are turned on a single axis.
Through combining the lenses of CRT, BlackCrit, and CMS, we recognize this myopic axis upon which films are created, perpetuating the dominant gaze. As Black scholars, what we are most interested in is how ideas of race are generated, regurgitated, moderated, and disintegrated whenever Black embodiment is portrayed.

As a site of praxis, film promotes various ideas about Black people through flawed audio-visual representations. Through the examination of multiple films with CRT, BlackCrit, and CMS lenses, we observed that films both reflect and stabilize ideas of Blackness or (the aberration of) Black life as lived by Black people. Morris (2022) writes that “in movies, Black characters were jolly statuary—hoisting luggage, serving food, tending children—meant to decorate a white American’s dream” (para. 6). This perception of Black people by society at large is contrasted by “the controlling images developed for middle-class white women, [however] the controlling images applied to Black [people] are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance” (Collins, 2002, p. 100).

The purpose of designating film as a site of praxis is to give weight to the assertion that anti-Blackness is not only a fixed feature in film, represented by the presence of Black characters weighted by deleterious tropes, but it is a cornerstone of modern American society. Concerning representation, we intend to look at films with respect not only to whether Black people are present, but also how they interact with other characters and the instruments in their environments. This allows us, as a collective of Black educators, to unravel the operationalization of the anti-Black gaze, which produces and reproduces real and virtual violence against Black people. In film, this violence takes the form of one-dimensional representations of Black people that exist to venerate the dominant white culture, while simultaneously signifying and justifying the cultural genocide of Black people. We argue that film is a site of praxis, subjecting viewers to tropes that undergird whiteness as the civilized norm.

What we see through our evaluation is a representative spectrum of Blackness delimited by the Good Black Person on one end and the Bad Black Person on the other. It may be more forthright to outline this as civilized/assimilated Black person and savage/unassimilated Black person. For example, consider the acceptability of such characters as Laurence Fishbourne’s Morpheus in *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) versus his portrayal of Bumpy Johnson in *Hoodlum* (Duke, 1997). In *The Matrix*, Fishburne played a Magical Negro, as his sole role was in support of the white characters’ development. In Hoodlum, Fishburne played a Buck, where violence was essential to his role. Whether as a Magical Negro in *The Matrix* or a Buck in *Hoodlum*, both roles were relegated to racial tropes. By approaching film as a site of praxis, our primary goal is to begin the process of questioning, describing, explaining, connecting, case-writing, and bringing values, lived experience, and moral commitment to improving the human condition and imagining new perspectives (Arnold & Mundy, 2020). The importance of our approach is the acknowledgment that film has the power to create real-world implications of how Black people are dehumanized. Audiences are radicalized and inoculated against Black people, and therein art imitates strife.

Through the overuse of damaging tropes, film has a twofold mission: elevating the tales of the dominant culture and marginalizing Black people. The irony is that even when films have a positive view of Black people, such as *Green Mile* (1999), *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *Hidden Figures* (2016), and *The Shape of Water* (2017), it is often the surprising trait of an
individual and not a feature of a community. For example, in the film *Green Mile*, Michael Clarke Duncan is the only Black character in the film, and his character has both literal and figurative elements of a Magical Negro. This film attempted to elicit empathy from film audiences for a character that was falsely imprisoned. Playing a mentally disabled, Black, imprisoned Magical Negro garnered Duncan an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor. It is this type of portrayal that has influenced our decision to focus on Black characterizations in film. The aim of our project is to acknowledge film as a site of praxis and how we can inspire active engagement in the film consumption experience.

**Methodology**

A qualitative study of eight self-identified men, women and gender fluid moviegoers was conducted via Zoom on August 22, 2021. Our original question was:

*What roles played by Black actors/actresses are deemed palatable and worthy of acknowledging, and how do those roles satiate white structures and versions of Blackness?*

To answer this question, we conducted a semi-structured focus group. In addition, we had critical analysis movie nights to reflect upon Black characterizations in film. We utilized Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) constant comparative method of grounded theory. Open and axial coding was used to classify concepts and codes under various categories to extract emergent themes (Creswell, 2014). For the sake of anonymity, all participants are represented using pseudonyms.

The age range of the participants was 20–65. Fifty-seven percent of the participants identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the racial composition of the group, as indicated by self-identification, consisted of two Hispanic or Latinx, one white, four Black, and one Native participants. All participants possessed bachelors, with two having masters, and two with doctoral degrees as their highest level of education. The eight participants were interviewed virtually to explore perceptions of Black people in film, especially films that have been nominated for or won an Academy Award. We prepared seven questions and photographs of every Black winner in the Best Actor/Actress and Best Supporting Actor/Actress categories since the first Academy Awards ceremony in 1929. We conducted a semi-structured focus group interview virtually through Zoom. Our focus group discussion emphasized the perceptions of Black people in film, the limitations and stereotypes of roles that are often publicly lauded, and the challenges of public perception rooted in cinema.

**Summary**

August 22, 2021

More than ten people from different time zones gathered for an intergenerational focus group on Black characterizations in film. Reflecting on our initial conversation from June 29th, we look forward to facilitating a semi-structured focus group around participants’ lived experiences with witnessing Blackness in film. Our questions are grouped in three dimensions to investigate Black characters’ roles and the reasons for its critical awards. We use dimensions to emphasize the need for multilayered characterizations of Black people in film. These dimensions are not comprehensive. Additional dimensions can be included to further investigate Black characterizations in film. For the purpose of this paper, the multidimensionality of the questions
resonate with the multidimensionality of Black characters’ roles to destabilize and refuse dominant ideologies represented in the historical, racial tropes.

1st Dimension: Setting the Scene

*What movies starring Black people do you love and why? What elements of the films resonate with you?*

*What are your favorite Black characters in films? Explain.*

The focus group participants had a variety of professional and personal lived experiences. One participant worked for a software company, while another was a tenured faculty member at a research institution. All participants shared a commonality of regularly watching and appreciating various genres of films. The aim of the Setting the Scene questions was to direct our focus group’s attention to films that starred Black people to encourage critical reflection in this realm. Some participants neither noticed the films with Black people nor intentionally sought out films with a cast of color. Even the idea of not recognizing Black people in the world of a film is significant; the one dimensionality of our roles contributes to the overall invisibilization of multidimensional Black characters.

2nd Dimension: Investigating the Roles

*What do you notice about popular Black films? What do you notice about films with all Black casts?*

*When you think of Black actors/actresses who are recognized for their roles, what commonalities do you see? Who is doing the recognizing?*

*Halle Berry is the only Black actress to win Best Actress in the Oscars’ 93-year history. However, seven Black women have won best supporting actress. What are your thoughts?*

Entering the second dimension, we shift our gaze to focus on the roles that Black characters played in the films that we loved, as well as popular and critically acclaimed ones. We did not brief the participants on any concepts relating to Black tropes in film prior to or during the focus group. Given this, it is noteworthy that multiple participants described the racial historical tropes and named them with the same language used in our theoretical framework. The participants’ theoretical conceptualization of the tropes served as the foundation to respond to the questions. As the links between roles of Black characters and racial tropes were made, the discussion turned to investigating the reasons why an entire film industry is intent on producing films in this dehumanizing manner. Asking the question, “Who is doing the recognizing?” encouraged focus group comments around how a dominant gaze casts limiting roles for Black characters. Within this intentional orchestration of roles from a solitary dominant gaze, the fifth question in this dimension opened a portal to the third dimension.

3rd Dimension: Contextualizing the Ac—claim

*The following are pictures of actors and actresses in the films for which they won their Oscars. *As you look at these photos, why do you think they are the winners?*
What makes a film with Black people critically acclaimed?

Ac—claim is spelled this way to emphasize how critically acclaimed roles actually stake claims on something. Combining the theoretical framework of racial tropes within films with lived experiences, the participants began to describe how the critically ac—claimed roles stake claim within the land of imagination. However, this land comes from the one dimensional imagination mentioned earlier in the context of the white American Dream. Films are acclaimed insomuch as they further construct the master’s house through the incessant affirmation and perpetuation of the racial tropes. We created the HACK to disrupt the dehumanizing Black characterizations in film while pushing toward transformative pedagogy and multidimensional portrayals.

Analysis

The HACK is grounded in our theoretical frameworks. Across our focus group data and discourse, we were able to recognize the importance of film as a site of praxis. Our work seeks to disrupt the limitations of the film industry where Black people are confined to roles that limit our humanity. These limitations force us into boxes that we don’t fit into and were never meant to. So our bodies are bent and broken and contorted and stuffed into unnatural shapes while we are expected to be grateful because we are being “represented.” Meanwhile, the film industry leaves messy brushstrokes depicting Blackness, which are then superimposed over the actuality of Black humanity. We identified three categories that shaped our conceptualization of the HACK: stereotypical tropes, acceptable roles, and colorism.

Stereotypical Tropes

A stereotype is an intentional invention to undermine and eradicate the complexity and multidimensionality of a racialized group of people. These inventions are marketed in films. Participants in our study indicated that a lot of the films that have received Academy Award nominations often affixed negative tropes to the Black body. According to Julio Cammarota (2011), the media plays a significant role in how young people learn about racial prejudice. He argues that the racist expression and exclusion that are often represented in film are often used as tools to strip historically excluded communities of their agency and commodify Black bodies in film. Frustration with this limiting narrative was expressed by our participant Dr. Matty Warren, who stated:

I get sick and tired of any picture that’s going to show our kids, or show them being thrown into jail and misrepresented...That’s not how we talk. That’s not who we are. So I look at it with a critical eye, and I’m saying, “Are you truly representing who we really are in our fullness?”

Here, the participant pushed back against the portrayals of Black bodies in film because they do not resonate with her and how she views her people.

Another participant said:

I remember the 70s, when I was in college, and I took a class called Minorities in the Media. And it talked about the stereotypes. It talked about the Buck, big Buck, the bulky
Black man with the muscles, you know, the kinda guys who will come in and tear things down.

Stereotypical tropes were explicitly named by JD, who stated that “[in films] you still see the Mammy character, and then the tragic Mulatto, the one [who] talks about the person torn between two worlds and not fitting in each, and so some of these things we still see.” Tropes that were witnessed in the 70s, although modified and less overt, still exist today. Another participant articulated how dangerous tropes can be, as they contribute to the dehumanization of Black people:

I thought that this was just something that they were doing to us, and then I was like, it’s just not as dehumanizing when Ben Stiller plays a stereotype, it’s just not dehumanizing to all white people when they have a character just be ignorant or, like, a stereotype or not super fleshed out and so it’s just, like, I feel like just because of the relationship that Black Americans have to being commodified.

The Black body does not get the privilege of individuality but is rather lumped together as one group, making it easier to fetishize and dismiss our humanity. The pervasive trauma porn trope and the sexualization of Black suffering is extended to Blackness and limits our humanity. Our youngest participant argued one consistent trope that people often read as positive is the resilient and extraordinary character. These characters are lauded for overcoming trauma and represent many of the roles that exist for Black performers. The participant asserted, “This is the theme, not all these characters are respectable just people I can admire [who] overcame something [...] They have to have some level of extraordinary.” The stereotypical roles that exist for us are rooted in trauma, historical tropes, and resilience because, as our participant JD argued that “it’s a safe way for [white people] to explore how they really think about us.”

Acceptable Roles

In some ways, the roles deemed acceptable for Black performers have shifted over the years. Hattie McDaniel won Best Supporting Actress for _Gone With The Wind_ for her role as a maid. In 2011, 72 years later, Viola Davis was nominated for her role in _The Help_—for her role as a maid. Even in the name of the awards, Black women are given awards for “support” roles, with Halle Berry being the only Black woman to have ever won the Best Actress award, which she won in 2001. The Mammy trope extends to the very name of the category of the awards that Black women are permitted to win. When going through the list of Black Oscar winners in the Oscars’ 93-year history, we find similar roles nominated over time: Magical Negro à la Mahershala Ali in _Greenbook_ or Morgan Freeman in _Million Dollar Baby_; trauma porn (James, 2021) in films like _12 Years a Slave_ and _Precious_; Halle Berry’s tragic Mulatto in _Monster’s Ball_; the Buck played by Denzel Washington in _Training Day_. Though Washington’s portrayal of a corrupt cop elicited the highest praise, his most memorable work as Malcolm X was not deemed worthy of the Best Actor award, with Al Pacino instead winning for _Scent of a Woman_. Only 20 Black actors have won an Academy Award since 1929, and the roles that receive that recognition continue to solidify which depictions of Blackness are acceptable and deemed worthy.

These acceptable roles shape and reinforce beliefs about race, especially as it pertains to the containment of Black people within the matrices of trauma. Cammarota (2011) argued that cinematic treatments of race provide movie viewers with the understanding that people of color
often lack agency. Michelle Wright (2004) posited, “that Other’s existence is consistently denied any role of importance, and yet its implied inferiority is the crux of Europeans’ arguments for their ostensibly self-evident superiority” (p. 8). Hollywood works to create roles for Black artists that are deemed acceptable because they feed the insidious Otherness that has so often defined Blackness in the United States.

In film, the expansive characterizations given to white characters nurtures their existence in a way that is rooted in Black death, which forms the backdrop for Black characters’ limited existence. One of our participants described this point when discussing the film Lilies in the Field, where Portier played a handyman who helps nuns repair their farm:

I really enjoyed the movie for the superficial reality of it, just a good story and stuff, but in looking at it through a critical lens or looking at it through sociocultural lens, this was the only safe movie for a Black man to be in that centered whiteness.

Essentially, the participant articulated that the roles Black men are allowed to play are rooted in affirming white perceptions and comfortability. They extended on this point of safe roles by discussing Denzel’s Oscar win for Training Day:

And then, for all the other roles that Denzel Washington did now connects everything else, people were saying that one of the reasons that [he] did win for this one was because he portrayed something that they were comfortable seeing, which was a character that was corrupt, violent, and lacked integrity—all of the features of the racial historical trope of the Buck.

As one of our millennial participants stated when discussing acceptable roles that reduce Blackness to pain, resilience, or safe roles, it is usually shown in films “in a way that’s palatable for the masses.” The tastes of the masses comes from the tongues that spout one-dimensional Black characterizations in film. The vitriol that they spew has poisoned the minds of audiences around the world, in that anti-Blackness becomes the bitter pill that limits our humanity, yet we are still forced to swallow, leaving us to slit our throats to retain our very personhood and rendering us voiceless in the process. That palatability does not necessitate the humanization of Black people.

**Colorism**

Colorism in film works to displace the existence, the beauty, and the softness of Black actors and actresses with dark skin. In an interview in Essence magazine, Emmy award-winning actress Zendaya stated, “I am Hollywood’s acceptable version of a Black girl and that has to change. We’re vastly too beautiful and too interesting for me to be the only representation of that” (Danielle, 2020). Casting controversies continue to plague Hollywood. Angie Thomas’s book The Hate U Give has Starr, a dark-skinned Black girl, on the cover, but when the book was turned into a movie, light-skinned Amandla Stenberg was cast as Starr. Too often, dark skin is used to depict danger, brutality, and a lack of beauty inside and out. One of our participants articulated that she:

Pay attention to the shade of the face because sometimes you find that it looks like they want a certain color, a certain shade, and I was a theater major, and I was actually turned down for some roles because I was too light skin or too dark skin to be in some plays, or
“I’m sorry’, New York is saying, ‘but we didn’t write the script for a Black person in mind.”’ So I think I’m very conscious of who you cast.

The shores of the audiences’ imagination are frequently drone-struck and bombarded with images of inferiority and victimization when the actor or actress is Black. Moreover, the messages are deepened when the skin tone is darker, as the Buck and the Sapphire tropes are often reserved for darker skinned artists, à la Jaime Foxx in *Django Unchained* (2012) and Mo’Nique in *Precious* (2009).

Recently, due to the #Oscarssowhite hashtag, spurred on by April Reign (Ugwa, 2020), there has been a push to incorporate better representation in film due to the longstanding and sustaining critiques of the industry, but some of our participants were skeptical of those changes:

I see all these Black movies coming out and I appreciate it, [but] I know they’re going to go away. I know when they feel as though Black folks have calmed down, then they’ll go back to business as usual, and that bothers me.

Ultimately, progress in films needs to be spearheaded by audiences. The audience is key to shifting the narrative and disrupting the current praxis of reading the Black body. For example, Zoe Saldana’s role as Nina Simone in *Nina* (2016) garnered enough backlash to make the whole film a whole flop. Her desire to play the role of a prolific Black woman was rejected by viewers, as her prosthetic nose and darkened skin were a slap in the face to the historical significance of this iconic artist (Sterritt, 2016). The augmenting of Saldana’s face and skin perpetuated messages of anti-Blackness and western beauty standards that exacerbated tropes of Blackness. The dehumanization of Nina Simone was illustrated by the disfiguration of Saldana’s face to play her. The HACK, then, becomes an essential tool for equipping audiences to challenge and disrupt the hegemonic storytelling that encapsulates Black people in a box of tropes and traps them there with their own weighted existence.

**Implications: The HACK**

The implications of the results from our focus group helped us generate and conceptualize what we are calling the HACK. After reviewing the Bechdel Test and the DuVernay Test, we designed the HACK as a device for decoding and disrupting the dehumanizing characterizations of Black people and Blackness in film to push toward transformative pedagogy and multidimensional portrayals. There are three actions necessary for challenging the way audiences read the Black body in film: (1) recognize and reject the anti-Black gaze, (2) refuse the removal of dimensionality, and (3) reinscribe the narratives using counter-storytelling. We define *anti-Black gaze* encoded in film as perceiving Black people as one-dimensional historical tropes and only recognizing the stagnated imagery of Blackness. The anti-Black gaze fully encompasses the insidious nature of these tired old tropes and the intentional but unqualified inaccuracy of these depictions. In addition, the anti-Black gaze is not merely behind the camera; rather it refers to the conditions and tropes that make the scenes harmful to Black bodies and extract profits from them. Anti-Black gaze works to obstruct the critical transformative reading of Blackness. Refusing one dimensionality refers to challenging the often binary space in which Black people are depicted. It is a rejection of the static form of Blackness that doesn’t allow for a nuanced existence. Lastly, Solórzano & Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not
often told” (p. 32). Counter-storytelling is crucial in films, as it can be used to challenge deeply entrenched narratives surrounding Blackness.

The HACK works to create a metric by which audiences can HACK the moviegoing experience and determine if the film is humanizing and meets these three actions. In order for a film to pass it must answer yes to the following questions:

1. Are there multiple shades of Blackness in the film and do they have a multidimensional storyline with full character development?

2. Is there more than one Black character in the film and do they talk to each other about things outside of race and race-based trauma?

3. Do Black people exist safely without the aid of the Magical Negro trope?

4. Do Black characters exist beyond historical and colonial tropes?

We aim to use the HACK to destabilize and refuse the dominant ideology, cultural hegemony, colonial gaze, and white gaze. Grande (2018) argued that “refusal should not be confused with ‘passive withdrawal or retreat’ but rather understood as an active instantiation of ‘a radically different mode-of-being and mode-of-doing’” (p. 58). Thus, the HACKers use the HACK to refuse and imagine possibilities of humanizing cinematic experiences. Films are sites of praxis where audiences learn about the Black body and apply that learning to their interactions with Black people. The HACK will move people away from normalizing dehumanizing depictions and allow them to (1) analyze Black characterizations in film through the lens of CRT, BlackCrit, and critical media studies (2) refuse to engage in dominant imagination rooted in our destruction (3) use language to dialogue about films as a site of praxis and (4) radically experience HACKing.

**Conclusion**

James Baldwin: We are behind the gates of a kingdom, which is determined to destroy us.

Audre Lorde: Yes, exactly so. And I’m interested in seeing that we do not accept terms that will help us destroy each other.

—*Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin*

We view moviegoers, en masse, as utterly zombified in front of a big screen, with this synchronized grab/toss popcorn-eating choreography. However, when watching the light from the screen flash across their faces as the scenes play out, we notice that it isn’t popcorn at all—it’s Mammy, and Jezebel, and the Coon, and the Magical Negro; artificial butter slathered over Bucks and Toms and Sapphires to make the kernels of Black stereotypes go down that much easier. Closer examination reveals that dominant-class audiences are engrossed, eyes fixed on the film and mindlessly consuming anti-Blackness that has been made entirely too palatable, but Black people are painfully lucid at worst or stingly unconscious at best. Black people see what is happening, they see what they are being forced to digest, but they continue to do it because they are acutely aware of the dangers of the alternative. Conditioned to internalize things
they know aren’t real, laugh on cue, gasp on cue, act like they believe that they are just watching a movie and not their own subjugation being endlessly propagated, swallowed by the literal handful.

To unearth the understanding of one’s own subjugation, Wilderson (2018) discussed his analysis of the perception of anti-Blackness by framing it around destroying the world:

What freaks them [read: white people] out about an analysis of anti-Blackness is that this applies to the category of the Human, which means that they have to be destroyed regardless of their performance, or of their morality, and that they occupy a place of power that is completely unethical, regardless of what they do. And they’re not going to do that. Because what are they trying to do? They’re trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We’re trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects (p. 20).

The “better world” enacted through film is one of Black criminality, wherein tropes are used to justify and provide scaffolding for the dominant gaze, whereas the HACK aims to destroy this world by forcing the reimagination of Blackness without being mediated through the white lens in order for Blackness to animate its own humanity.

Our HACK asks four questions of a given film. To pass, all four questions must be answered in the affirmative. The reasons a film passes or not presents the opportunity for dialogue, which the HACK encourages. Through critical dialogue about Black characterizations in film, we transgress the dominant imagination that confines Black people in film to imagine possibilities of healing and humanization. After creating the HACK, we reflected on our initial conversation from June 29th. We realized that some of the films we enjoy may not pass all of the questions. Films not passing our new metric for assessment does not mean that we have “bad taste in movies” or that these movies are not good; rather, it indicates that there needs to be a push for more humanizing characterizations of Blackness in films.

The undercurrent of our work here is the strong assertion that authentic representation in films is essential to imagining possibilities of Black freedom on and off screen. However, films’ historical function of teaching and affirming the one-dimensionality of Black people is encouraged with awards that represent critical ac—claim. As a result, films that pass the HACK are less likely to be critically ac—claimed by Black performers winning Oscars because HACK films refuse to stake claims on dominant white imaginaries. The HACK encourages us to analyze racial and historical tropes to radically imagine new ways to humanize the cinematic experience. The implications of this work posit that additional research should extend the conversation to various forms of media, such as TV shows, animation, and comics. We encourage you, reader, to revisit films featuring Black characters and apply the HACK, our method of critically examining the media we consume. By undertaking this work, you are furthering our collective liberatory practice, so get your intellectual hatchet out and HACK the hell out of the next cinematic release.
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“What Do You Suggest that I Do Next?”: The Rival Geographies of Ellen Irene Diggs

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Bio
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Abstract

This biographical essay tells the story of Dr. Ellen Irene Diggs (1906–1998), a Black woman anthropologist who specialized in African diasporic cultural and historical studies. Best known for her work with the heralded scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, Dr. Diggs was a writer, traveler, and educator who imagined an inclusive, expansive, and representative historical canon that captured the breadth and depth of Black politics and cultures. This essay argues that in so doing, Dr. Diggs charted a “rival geography” that challenged the dominant narratives of the academy. Building on the work of Stephanie Camp in her examination of rival geographies as a theoretical framing for understanding enslaved women’s mobility in the plantation south, this essay applies this concept to the ways in which Irene Diggs researched the African Diaspora across the world. In particular, I argue that her 1946 travels to Uruguay reflected a collision between Dr. Diggs’s visions for Black futures and the lived experiences of African-descended Uruguayans. In her analyses of Black political progress in Uruguay, Diggs revealed the tensions between class, race, and nationality that have informed perceptions and assessments of social realities. This essay invites us to examine the intellectual formations of Dr. Diggs and to question the intimate processes, emotional stakes, and pedagogical outcomes of Black knowledge production. Through the experiences, writings, and relationships of Dr. Diggs, we see the enduring complexities and challenges of researching Black histories that inform the opportunities and limits of academia for Black women educators.
In most professional circles, Dr. Ellen Irene Diggs went by Irene. To friends and family, she signed letters as Nell. The granddaughter of her longtime colleague, sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, referred to her as Aunt Irene. E. Irene Diggs was the name she chose as her moniker for her personalized stationery. Whether referred to as Nell, Aunt Irene, Irene, or E. Irene Diggs, Dr. Diggs was intentional about her self-fashioning, attuned to the ways in which perceptions and expressions of her identities shifted according to the spaces that she occupied (Du Bois, 1946, September 30; 1950, May 19; 1950, June 16). As an educator, anthropologist, traveler, and professor, Dr. Diggs moved through and to places in which she used her name to signal her power, purpose, and profession. She was someone who made clear her degree of connection and relation to her personal and professional community, valuing her name as a sign—an announcement—of who she was, how she wanted to be understood, and how she wanted to be known.¹

Dr. Diggs’ strategic use of names was central to the development of her identity as a scholar in the mid-20th century. Naming was a method through which Dr. Diggs navigated how she perceived herself and how others viewed her, constructing a practice of self-presentation that mediated the class-based racial ideals of respectability and her own visions and desires of how she yearned to show up in the world (see Griffin, 2000; Hornsby-Hutting, 2009).² Naming signaled how Dr. Diggs wanted to be remembered, not unlike the ways in which her scholarship worked to stitch together the threads of Black histories past and present. Her research centered upon remembering Blackness in places where it had been erased, forgotten, or disappeared. This ethos motivated Dr. Diggs to graduate from the University of Havana with a doctoral degree in Anthropology in 1944, secure an international exchange fellowship from the United States Department of State in 1946 to research in Uruguay, and travel to “all continents, and many islands of the Atlantic and Pacific” throughout her career (Bolles, 1992; 1999; Diggs, 1978). Her research outside of the United States grounded her only published book, Black Chronology: From 4000 B.C. to the Abolition of the Slave Trade. A tome that offers a Black retelling of global history, Black Chronology opens with a statement on why the stories of Africans and their descendants matter. She predicted that “revolution in research and scholarship” will only come through a new chronological examination of the past (Diggs, 1983, p. xi). She posited that without a reckoning with how the African-descended past has been studied, chronicled, and analyzed, a changed and transformative future remained fleeting. She writes:

A chronology of Afro-American history is important because there is so widespread a belief that Africa and Africans have no history, have not achieved, have made little or no contribution to culture; that Africa is a dark mysterious continent, isolated and insulated

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² Particularly prior to the well-documented Black Freedom Struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, respectability endured as a politics of survival in the aftermath of emancipation. Dr. Diggs was born 41 years after the end of the Civil War, emerging into this world right at the nexus between the 1st and 2nd generations after slavery. By this time, respectability had formed an essential part of the moralistic discourses that guided the terms of Black inclusion and citizenship in the United States. Black middle-class and elite women especially espoused the “politics of respectability” that promoted the image of the nurturing, calm, and virtuous Black woman who cared for their families. The politics of respectability worked to counter stereotypes of Black violence, sexual lasciviousness, and immorality, all while advocating for Black self-improvement.
from the rest of the world; that what happened in Africa does not matter (Diggs, 1983, p. xi).

For Dr. Diggs, the inclusion of Africans and their descendants in the annals of history functioned as a starting point that remedied the myopic and monolithic narratives that cast Blackness as insignificant to the processes of capitalist, patriarchal, and white supremacist formations. In other words, the historical erasures and distorted visions of Black pasts and presents resulted from concerted processes and systems, of an ideological violence that understood the control of knowledge production as foundational to the operative power of colonization. This violence produced silences in the archive. This violence detracted from the visibility of African-descended people in the world, not just as subordinate subjects, but as actors, agents, and authors of their lives. This violence subsumed Africans and their descendants into a simple story of the conquered and the conquerors, of resistance and assimilation, of labor and death. It is this project of reinserting Africanness and mapping out the meanings of Blackness that anchor Dr. Diggs’s intellectual pursuits, an endeavor that was attentive to historical contingencies and cultural continuities that brought Africa to the forefront of how African-descended people situated themselves in community with each other and within their host nations. She devoted her scholarship to understanding Black experiences across the diaspora, tracing linkages in Black cultural contributions and political mobilization. Simply put, Dr. Diggs was all about trying to figure out what the diaspora looked like in action—what values mattered, how African-descended communities formed, and what pieces of Africa remained as African-diasporic peoples got in formation across the Americas and the world (Beyoncé, 2015).

Dr. Diggs rejected the relegation of Blackness and Black identities to the margins of social formations and national histories. In this effort, centering Black perspectives was essential to the undoing of historical myth-making that marginalized, erased, and invisibilized African-descended people. To bring our stories to the center, to challenge the narratives that rendered us as non-actors, non-subjects, and non-persons, to understand us as we understood ourselves in particular cultural and historical moments meant charting a new path forward in education. To educate differently signified rupturing what we thought we knew and how we thought we knew it. Dr. Diggs’s approach was to write the story anew, in the hope that there would be a new model present for those who intended to learn beyond the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal narratives that resisted Blackness.

Despite Dr. Diggs’s efforts to center Black stories, her own was cast to the periphery. Her place in the intellectual lineage of 20th century Black scholars has been disregarded, mainly occupying the footnotes of texts like Blackness in the White Nation: A History of Afro-Uruguay by George Reid Andrews and Black Marxism by Cedric J. Robinson. She remains primarily known as the research assistant to renowned sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (Reed, 2020). While much of her scholarship reflects on the influence of Du Bois, much of it does not (i.e., Diggs, 1965, pp. 18–19; 1973, pp. 140–182). Dr. Diggs brought her own analyses of the Black political and cultural condition to the pages of Phylon, The Crisis, and The Journal of Negro History. Yet critics often dismissed her work as unoriginal. In 1986, three years after the publication of Black Chronology, one reviewer characterized the tome as “a truly unsatisfactory and misleading work” that provided “disconnected information” (Freeman-Grenville, 1983, pp. 506–507). They went on to say that Dr. Diggs refused to take into account the political specificities of African development and instead perpetuated notions of Africa’s backwardness by emphasizing the uniqueness of its cultural contributions (Freeman-Grenville, 1983, pp. 506–507). A potential editor of a different book project rejected the manuscript, claiming that Diggs solely regurgitated
Du Bois (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1949). These dismissals reveal the ways in which racism and sexism intertwine to form the basis for assaults against Black women’s intellectual integrity. This intersectionality of race and gender informed the extent of Dr. Diggs’s alienation. The structural barriers of academic publishing didn’t help, between the gatekeeping and the time required to research and write while teaching. Dr. Diggs often lamented the teaching load that prevented her from devoting time to her research and scholarship.

Dr. Diggs theorized that her exclusion occurred because “it is generally known that I do not agree with many of the theories and findings in anthropology which have to do with non-white people; that I believe that more studies should be made using the same techniques of whites especially poor whites” (Diggs, 1978, p. 5). Dr. Diggs’s models, frameworks, and theories, as they combined Black cultural and ideological contributions with historical, economic, and social analyses, challenged the then-boundaries of anthropological study (Bolles, 1999, p. 166). Arguably, Dr. Diggs’s scholarship encouraged an integration of class into analyses of structural inequalities. Yet processes of knowing and knowledge formation emerging from non-white men—particularly in the wake of the gains of the Black freedom struggles of the 1960s and 1970s—presented a fundamental challenge to who was in “control” of shaping ideas about culture and politics. Whose ideas were legitimate?

This biographical essay places Dr. Diggs at the center of her own story to understand why she faced exclusion within the academy and within the historical remembrance of “significant” Black scholars. I fully recognize the realities of misogynoir that Black women educators face. I look to the writings that Dr. Diggs produced to find those moments of divergence and to expand upon her thinking to see when her frameworks fell short of reckoning with the complexities and contingencies of Black identity and community formation. In so doing, I resist the temptation to reduce her marginalization as one of sole ideological “disagreement.” In this way, I engage in a liberation work that reaches back in time to think with Dr. Diggs, to hold us both accountable to self and community without assigning blame or condemnation (Love & Jiggetts, 2019, p. xviii).

As Black women will continue to “question, explore, and interrogate ourselves about possibilities for supporting each other in the effort to come to grips with our conditioning into oppression,” I extend grace throughout my analysis when trying to understand Dr. Diggs’s research and intellectual positionings (Love & Jiggetts, 2019, p. xix).

In particular, I retrace her footsteps in Cuba and Uruguay with the interest in exploring what informed her way of thinking and moving through spaces that endorsed a liberal vision of racial progress that silenced slavery’s past and subsumed Blackness into their national identity in similar yet distinctive ways.³ Importantly, her writings suggest that her time in Uruguay marked a moment of professional transitions. Reflecting on her academic path in a speech to the Black Anthropological Association, Dr. Diggs identified 1947, the year that she returned from her research fellowship in Latin America, as the start of her troubles with publishing, teaching, and recognition (Diggs, 1978, p. 5). This essay explores Dr. Diggs’ personal and academic experiences through 1947 and into the early 1950s to understand the conditions that contributed to this major shift in Dr. Diggs’s perception and standing in the anthropological field.

I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs is important because she studied with Du Bois; I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs is significant because of her accomplishments, travels, or degrees. I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs matters because she merits inclusion into the genealogy of Black scholars; I am not interested in foregrounding inclusion as the only antidote to marginalization; I seek not to argue that Dr. Diggs’ experiences and writings are worthy of knowing because I, too, am an aspiring scholar of Afro-Latin America; I do not tell this story just because Dr. Diggs and I share a commitment to the scholarly undertaking of exploring Blackness as a cultural and political identity, of investigating the transnational social transformations that produced similar yet distinctive meanings of “Black” as a racial category, of examining “freedom” as an embodied possibility and lived reality before and after slavery’s abolition.

In remaining true to Dr. Diggs’s desire to carve “an independent career of her own,” I prioritize imagining how Dr. Diggs grappled with both the gendered and the racialized violence of the academy while also piecing together her own intellectual formation (Diggs, 1978, p. 2). For this, Dr. Diggs’s story matters because it provides a blueprint for how Black women scholars think through and heal from rejection, exclusion, and marginalization. Her story reveals guidelines for how to follow threads for research; how to engage in intellectual acts of wandering that lead you to unanticipated ways of knowing, learning, and education. In mapping out her story, we become students of the process of African diasporic study and the intimacies of intellectual growth that shape us as educators. As scholars Stephanie Evans, Andrea D. Domingue, and Tania D. Mitchell outline, in learning the histories of Black women educators we can “appreciate their insights into the ‘processes and goals’ of how to solve social problems” (Evans et al., 2019, p. 9). Detailing Dr. Diggs’s story offers a window into the continuing global systems of oppression and the ways in which Black women undermine and upend them to find their own paths toward collective liberation and inner peace (Evans et al., 2019, 4–5).

Dr. Diggs paved her own “rival geographies” that resisted the constraints of disciplinary parameters, gender prescriptions, and expectations of racial respectability and uplift. “Rival geographies,” as theorized by historian Stephanie Camp (2004), identifies the ideas that enslaved women used to challenge the oppressive confinement and containment of the plantation space in the antebellum south. Camp borrows from decolonial scholar Edward Said (1993), who used “rival geography” to describe the reclamations and repossessions of land that characterized “resistance to colonial occupation” (Camp, 2004). For Camp, enslaved women of African descent confronted the challenge of knowledge dispossession—a spatial and somatic experience that heralded the ideas and demands of white enslavers over those of the enslaved. This form of alienation and constraint required “alternative ways of knowing and using” space that made the ways in which African-descended women harnessed information all the more urgent, necessary, and creative (Camp, 2004, p. 7). The mobility of “bodies, objects, and information within and around plantation space” contributed to the shaping of these alternative and often hidden pathways, allowing enslaved women to access and assert knowledge that challenged the authority of enslavers (Camp, 2004, p. 7). In this way, enslaved women created their own geographies and networks of knowledge based on their modes of seeing, perceiving, and moving that were informed but not determined by dominating hierarchies and ideologies.

Dr. Diggs, through her work in the United States and South America in the mid-20th century and beyond, charted her own rival geography that served her vision for African diasporic scholarship that moved away from the path that had been established, one that had excluded African-descended histories and her own work on people of African descent. Dr. Diggs organized and collected information about how people of African descent in Cuba, Brazil,
Uruguay, and Argentina emerged from slavery, preserved and recreated African-based practices, and articulated their political claims. She used the spaces of the academy in ways that conflicted with the ideals and demands of its elite; creating alternative ways of thinking about Blackness that even challenged the thought of Black activists within and beyond the United States. Her movements in these “elsewheres” were embodied acts of resistance that made visible the various strategies that Black scholars used to recover Black lives and stories. Ellen Irene Diggs was a transformative educator who affirmed and expanded conventions of liberatory pedagogy and Black intellectual thought.

Bringing her story to the fore creates a rival geography that moves the ideas of Black women scholars to the center of Black histories. Moving Black women educators like Dr. Diggs to the center disrupts the traditions of Black intellectual histories that revere Black men and the Black masculine imagination as the sole authors of and pathways to political ideas (e.g., Stephens, 2005). This radical movement allows us not only to see institutional oppression as a totalizing system of domination that influences perceptions, possibilities, promotions, and publications, but encourages us to examine the ways in which Black women scholars grappled with how to take up space, how to self-fashion, and how to advocate for themselves and their community.

As an essay that thinks broadly about the meanings of decolonization, and with a humble interest in trying to understand Dr. Diggs as she understood herself, from this point forward I will refer to Dr. Diggs as Irene. Irene is the name that she used most frequently in published documents, books, and letters, and it is how she signed most documents. I use Irene to disrupt hierarchical notions of relation and to approximate as close of a connection as possible, as a writer, to a scholar whose story has been told in fragments. This choice is decolonial in its aim to cultivate a narrative space where Black women are free to name themselves, to develop a deeper awareness of self and environment, and to have their ways of knowing, observing, and being occupy the center of the story (Love & Jiggetts, p. xiv).

Continuing

Monmouth, a small college town in Warren County, Illinois, is where this story begins. Monmouth had a beginning similar to most towns and cities in mid-19th century United States—one mired in the toils of slavery, warfare, and Indigenous dispossession. The migrations caused by the War of 1812 led to a community of veterans who, as legend has it, established the town in 1831 after a poker dispute. An 1815 treaty had displaced the Sac and Fox Nations, who had lived there for centuries prior to the arrival of any European descendants, so naturally, the veterans perceived the land as empty, available, and worthy of being gambled. John Talbot, a Kentucky slaveholder who allegedly posed as a war veteran to put forth his claim to what would become Monmouth, won the poker game. Talbot planted roots in Monmouth, joined by the families migrating from within and beyond the then-borders of the United States. Perhaps Monmouth was a place of roots and routes, displacement and grounding, birth and rebirth—an epicenter for new chapters.

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4 For instance, she signed her name as “Irene Diggs” on a Cuban customs form. See Cuba, Ministerio de Hacienda. 1944.
5 Interdisciplinary scholar Imani Perry makes a similar argument defending her choice to refer to playwright Lorraine Hansberry as Lorraine throughout her award-winning biography, Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry. See Perry, 2018, p. 2.
Ellen Irene Diggs was born in this industrial and agricultural center on April 13, 1906. Monmouth was majority-white in the early 20th century with a small Black population of about 300 (Bolles, 1992, p. 277). Monmouth was a grid-based city divided by the railroad. The Black community lived on the south side of the tracks (Gamer, 2020). There were two Black churches and two books written by Black authors on Irene’s high school reading list—*Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* by W.E.B. Du Bois. Her parents, Alice and Charles Henry Diggs, who were committed to education as a means and an end to racial uplift and social mobility, exposed Irene to perspectives and practices beyond those she engaged with in Monmouth. Books were her outlet. Charles Henry Diggs worked as a repairman and often brought books back from the local Wirtz Bookstore, along with Chicago-based newspapers (Bolles, 1999; Diggs, 1978). In an interview with anthropologist A. Lynne Bolles, Irene revealed a passion and determination to “visit and see these far distant places and people with my own eyes and for my own self” (Bolles, 1999). Books were her portal to other worlds and her ticket out of household chores; she would often barter with her siblings to relieve herself of her responsibilities so that she would have more time to read. “My world perhaps has always been a world of books and reading,” Irene recalled in a 1978 speech, convinced of the infallibility of books, from which, rightly or wrongly, she could “obtain more satisfying answers from them than from people” (Diggs, 1978, p. 1). Learning was reading, reading was traveling, and traveling was what sustained Irene through her childhood years. In an era that historians consider to be the most uncertain period for Black freedom and citizenship in the wake of the violent overthrow of Reconstruction, and in which, in time, “progressive” politics prioritized reform, social documentation, and economic betterment, Black childhood existed at a nexus of surveillance and possibility. The generations of Black folk emerging from slavery and stepping into citizenship at the turn of the 20th century carved spaces of respectability and in doing so, reinvented pathways for self-expression and self-discovery. For Irene, reading was that avenue that inspired her to access her inner dreamer, her inner wanderer, her inner scholar.

**Learnings**

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6 On the downfall of Reconstruction and the legal, cultural, and political attacks against civil rights, immigration, and reproduction, see Mitchell, 2004. See chapters 5-6 for the meanings of Black childhood in the early twentieth century.
Irene set out on a path toward academic success. Upon graduating from Monmouth High School in 1923, she earned a scholarship to attend Monmouth College that covered her tuition. However, the college in the heart of the town that she had known her entire life mismatched her intellectual interests. She yearned for a different kind of challenge in a new environment—hopefully one that offered a broader array of course offerings. Irene found the academic rigor that she craved at the University of Minnesota. She enrolled in the College of Science, Literature, and Arts, majoring in sociology with a minor in psychology. Yet the defiance of white administrators to counsel Irene—she did not meet with an academic advisor and selected her own courses—presented her with a coded politics of racial exclusion that motivated her to find deeper community with Black people in Black(er) spaces (Diggs, 1978, p. 2). While it was in cold Minnesota that she first found the warmth of Black magazines and newspapers, the university remained a hostile environment that fueled her intellectual thirst to deepen her knowledge about African diasporic cultures, experiences, and histories. In 1928, she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in
Sociology. And she might have rested in the temporary discomfort of not knowing what to do next in her academic career.

And then she wandered. A car ride to Georgia introduced Irene to the intellectual, political, and social energy of early 20th century Black Atlanta. Joining her sister and new brother-in-law on a journey down to Atlanta, Irene visited Black colleges and institutions. Energized, Irene decided to relocate to Atlanta and pursue graduate coursework in sociology at Atlanta University. It was here that she encountered W.E.B. Du Bois, who by 1934 had returned to the professorship after leaving Atlanta University in 1910. By then, Du Bois had resigned from The Crisis magazine, the periodical published by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), due to tensions among the leadership. Du Bois, who Irene had first discovered through her high school coursework, also understood Atlanta as a new beginning. Irene enrolled in one of Du Bois’s courses during her second semester. Du Bois became her mentor and advisor, offering Irene a summer research assistantship. This was the beginning of Du Bois and Irene’s relationship as scholars devoted to the study of the African diaspora throughout the world, which would lead to an intellectually enriching collegial friendship. “He appreciated my class work and reports,” Irene remembered in an interview with Bolles (1999). This appreciation created a mutual trust, leading to Du Bois relying on Irene for notes, proofreading, and fact-checking. In 1933, Irene graduated from Atlanta University with the institution’s first master’s degree in sociology. Irene worked as Du Bois’s research assistant and secretary for 11 years. She remained at Atlanta University between 1933 and 1942, working with Du Bois on foundational texts such as Black Reconstruction in America 1860–1880, Black Folk, Then and Now, Dusk of Dawn, and The Encyclopedia of the Negro. In 1940, they co-founded Phylon, an academic journal that examined race and culture from interdisciplinary perspectives.

Traveling

A year after Phylon’s publication, Irene vacationed in Havana, Cuba. She visited the University of Havana and met scholars who nurtured her interest in studying the African presence and legacies in Cuba. Funded by a Roosevelt Fellowship sponsored by the Institute of International Education, Irene returned to Havana the following year, beginning her studies in Cuba with intensive Spanish language study. At the University of Havana, Irene worked with the renowned ethnologist and anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz studied the cultural legacies, influences, and contributions of Africans and their descendants across the Americas, providing a framework for Irene to situate and emphasize the endurance of African cultures within the daily and national constructions of Cuban lives. Irene traveled across Cuba, studying the music, festivals, rituals, and dances of this realm of the Black Atlantic (Bolles, 1999). She surmised that Cuban racial hierarchies stemmed from the cultural currency ascribed to skin color. She points out that skin color coalesced with notions in class, resulting in the codification of racial disparities through the language of social status. In Irene’s gaze, the visible cultural presence of Africa supported the notion that Cuba had achieved “racelessness”—a perceptibly equal Cuban society without racial hierarchies—which bred the idea that social inequalities stemmed from class differences (Bolles, 1992; see also see Brunson, 2021; Ferrer, 1999). The expansive definitions of whiteness in Cuban society engendered illusions of mobility and a healthier racial climate, especially when compared to the United States, who, by the throes of World War II in the 1940s, had accrued a transnational reputation marred by its Jim Crow regime and violence against people of African
descent in the United States. The entrance into World War II and claims of fighting for the cause of democracy placed the U.S. culture of segregation and exclusion into sharper hemispheric and global relief. Irene, as a scholar from the United States enrolled at the only institution of higher education in Cuba, disrupted the racial and class boundaries of Cuban society. She was an educated, darker-skinned woman from the United States, allowing Cuban perceptions of her social place to situate her as privileged and near-elite.

While Irene’s work in Cuba interrogated the structures and systems that influenced Cuba’s class-based racial order, Irene remained committed to the cultural recovery of Blackness. At a time when historical and anthropological schools of thought focused on integrationist methods that studied top-down patterns of assimilation, racial relations, and cultural retention, Irene’s research understood people of African descent as theorists and intellectuals within their own right. Irene traced the values, perspectives, and practices that sustained the ways in which African-descended people navigated and negotiated their lives. After graduating from the University of Havana in 1944 with a doctorate in anthropology, Irene secured a three-month fellowship from the State Department to conduct research in Uruguay. The Department of State, under their Division of International Exchange, selected Irene out of 49 candidates, becoming one of a nine-person cohort of scholars studying abroad (Du Bois, 1946, July 15). She was one of two women. In a summer 1946 report written by W.E.B. Du Bois to the NAACP, Du Bois characterized Irene’s fellowship as “the first time that a Negro scholar has received such recognition or that the federal government has recognized the right of American Negroses to make direct cultural contact with the millions of persons of Negro descent in South America” (Du Bois, 1946, September 7). Du Bois understood Irene’s work as an ethnographic triumph, an endeavor necessary for the “regeneration of the race” across the hemisphere. Du Bois highlighted the significance of cross-cultural encounter and engagement in research and, in so doing, implied the centrality of federally supported academic work to that process. In this 1946 report detailing the significance of Irene’s fellowship, he affirmed his famous declaration at the turn of the 20th century, first stated at the end of the 1st Pan-African Convention in July 1900 in his To The Nations of the World speech (Du Bois, 1946, September 7). Forty-six years later, he reinforced that the problem of the 20th century was indeed the color line, and that the “race conflict and color line problems are becoming increasingly international, and are demanding investigation, publicity, and action” (Du Bois, 1946, September 7, p. 1). Irene’s research in Uruguay would contribute to “the freedom and progress of the black folk of the world,” which Du Bois registered as the “last great barrier to the realization of the unity of humanity” (Du Bois, 1946, September 7, p. 1). In alluding to the geographic, cultural, and social connectedness of people of African descent in the Americas, Du Bois troubled notions of North American Black exceptionalism (see Seigel, 2009; Karush, 2012). Du Bois valued international community-building as a tenet of scholarly production. His passion for Irene’s studies affirmed his intellectual and political convictions that liberation was a transnational project.

Irene departed for Montevideo, Uruguay in the late summer of 1946. She arrived by August 31 and by early October had achieved what Du Bois categorized as “unusual success.” (Du Bois, 1946, November 26). The September 1946 issue of Nuestra Raza, considered to be the preeminent Black Uruguayan newspaper of the time, dedicated its cover image to a photograph of Irene, who meets the camera directly with a penetrative gaze and cautious smile (Andrews, 7

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7 Du Bois described Irene’s early research in Uruguay as the “study of race relations and the transculturation of Negroses and whites in South America, especially in Uruguay.” See Du Bois, 1946, July 15, p. 2.
2010) Their byline identifies Irene as “Ellene Irene Diggs” a “delegada del Departamento de Estado de E.E.U.U. para estudiar los problemas sociales en el Uruguay.” During a September 12, 1946 press conference with other Uruguayan journalists—which excluded editors and writers from Nuestra Raza—Irene emphasized that there were tides of change occurring in the United States, that public opinion was shifting: “En favor de la raza negra, lo que se ha exteriorizado en el abatimiento de muchas de las reservas que sobre ellos existían, principalmente en los Estados del Sur.” (Nustra Rasa, 1946) According to the U.S. Embassy, this press conference was a huge success, paralleled only by the frenzies that surrounded the visits of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Admiral Halsey, a World War II naval commander (Du Bois, 1946, SEPTEMBER 23). By November, Irene had gone on something of a speaking tour throughout Montevideo. She addressed audiences at the Artigas-Washington Library and the Women’s University of Montevideo. She spoke at the U.S. ambassador’s residence and to the American Woman’s Club during the tenure of Joseph F. McGurk. By November 7, 1946, a Catholic association honored Irene with a banquet. Montevideo embraced Irene. African-descended Uruguayans were excited about Irene’s research and welcomed her into their communities and organizations.

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8 Nuestra Raza published regular monthly issues between 1933-1948. Uruguay, although it had a smaller Black demographic presence, produced the most active Black press in early 20th century Latin America, publishing at least 25 newspapers for Black audiences between 1870–1950.

9 English translation: “Ellene Irene Diggs, delegate of the United States State Department” who would study “Uruguayan social problems.” In Nuestra Raza, September 1946, 1.

10 English translation: “Actually, in the United States, public opinion is largely shifting to be in favor of the Black race, which has quelled much of the reservations that Americans had about them, especially those from the South.” “Miss Ellene Diggs, intelectual Negra estadounidense, visita el Uruguay en gira de estudio,” Nuestra Raza, September 1946, p. 2; Du Bois, 1946, September 23.

Misreadings

Irene, from a vantage point influenced by the “progress” she witnessed and experienced in the United States, tried to compare the perceived lack of political advancement in Montevideo to Black organizing and mobilizing traditions in the United States. The supposed absence of overt, coherent, and consistent movements toward racial equality led Irene to conclude that Uruguay was void of racial discrimination and oppression. Historian George Reid Andrews (2010) has dismissed Irene’s claims, arguing that Black political activism in Uruguay looked differently because of its more subtle forms of exclusion. In 1936, Black Uruguayans had formed a Black political party, the Partido Autóctono Negro (PAN) that infused the struggle for social equality with the struggle against racial oppression. PAN was one of only three Black political
parties formed in Latin America in the early 20th century. If journalistic production is a measure of political culture, then it is noteworthy that Uruguay had the most Black newspapers published in Latin America in 1870–1950, despite having one of the smaller populations in the region. For some reason, the cohesion that Irene experienced in Cuba eluded her in Uruguay. Irene could not see that Black political power and progress looked different in Montevideo, and that the U.S. could not be a reliable comparative framework if it’s understood as the model for both racial exclusion and Black mobilization. Irene, as an anthropologist engaging in comparative historical work in Uruguay, grappled with the problems posed by comparative methodologies. She was not the first scholar to do so, and she was certainly not the last. Many scholars working on comparative questions of race and racism struggle against the ease of fitting cultures and nations into neat boxes. Generalizations lead to misjudgments, and misjudgments lead to disappointment. Perhaps Irene was disappointed. Perhaps she decided to extend her stay in Uruguay to challenge her misconceptions, to deepen her understanding of a place whose history and culture she could not know fully without an openness to intellectual growth and flexibility.

By January 1947, Irene’s research had resulted in conclusions that were unsatisfactory at best for the African-descended Uruguayan community. Irene, in various interviews to Uruguayan and Argentine newspapers, emphasized the absence of political motivation and mobilization among the Black community in Montevideo. She described African-descended Uruguayans as a people with a “visible cultural poverty” (Andrews, 2010). She viewed Uruguay as a place with ideal conditions for social mobility, and therefore it was untenable to her that the Black community had eschewed the creation of a widespread, cohesive, and therefore perceptible political culture (Andrews, 2010). Irene’s misreadings did not map onto the lived realities of African-descended Uruguayans, who faced disenfranchisement across society—in education, politics, and even transportation. Nuestra Raza refuted Irene’s damaging and myopic comments. In a January 1947 article entitled “Al margen de una apreciacion” (Unappreciated), Nuestra Raza writers, who were closely aligned with PAN, denounced Irene as a scholar who relied on her elitism to sustain her arguments. They rejected her statements to a December 1946 Argentine newspaper article Qué! (What!), where Irene lamented that there was only a professional Black medical class in Uruguay—nothing else. The Nuestra Raza writers asked, “¿Conoce el proceso y la sanción de prejuicio racial aplicada al mencionado titulado en ocasión de su último exámen? ¿Sabe que este profesional y artista que tanto podría aportar el la contribución de la elevación cultural de la colectividad, es los atacados en aislamiento?” (Nastra Raza, January 1047, p. 4)12 The writers went on to say that Irene seemed to belong to an elite category of African descendants, one that had produced a blindness and obliviousness to the realities of race and class. They opined that it was fitting that she remain in the United States, in her own bubble, much like that of the Black professional class in Uruguay that she had overlooked (Nuestra Raza, 1947, January, p. 4). Two months later in March 1947, Irene prepared to return to the United States. Black journalist Cleanto Noir bid her adieu, pronouncing:

Nuestra raza que es buena, tiene el derecho de esperar se le ayude a superarse. Y es eso lo que la Dra. Diggs, con todo su bagaje de cultura y todo su gran saber no ha comprendido y le ha negado públicamente la permanente inquietud espiritual y el continuo anhelo de superacion. (Nuestra Raza, 1947, March, p. 4)

They were big mad, and understandably so.

12 English translation: “Do you know about the racial prejudice that Black doctors face in their studies and their profession? Do you know that this artist and professional who supports the cultural uplift of the community, faces exclusion and alienation?”.
Teachings

How did Irene receive this criticism? How did Irene respond? How did Irene engage in metacognitive reflection? Did she journal? Did she dance? Did she pray? Did she ignore their critiques? Did she connect with the *Nuestra Raza* writers to explain her position and learn from their wisdom? The answers to these questions remain to be explored in the archive. Yet Irene returned to the United States by April 1947 and resumed working for W.E.B. Du Bois. She and Du Bois remained in frequent communication during her time abroad. Irene sent Du Bois a postcard from her travels to São Paulo, Brazil, that included mentions of her visit with a colleague from the Smithsonian and details of her nights dancing samba. She identified Brazil as a land of the future (with three exclamation marks; Diggs, 1947). Her disappointment with Uruguay intensified her enthusiasm for Brazil. In Irene’s eyes, these two nations represented opposing ends of the spectrum of racial progress in the Americas—one frozen in the past, another poised for the future. Du Bois sent Irene letters with requests for her to bring back books written by and about African descendants in South America (Du Bois, 1947, January 17). Du Bois frequently communicated with NAACP officials and Schomburg librarians about Irene’s research in Uruguay, giving updates on talks and providing newspaper clippings when available. While most scholarship identifies Du Bois and Irene as colleagues and research associates, their letters reveal a friendship.

Upon her re-entry into the United States, Irene continued to discuss her research in Latin America. She orchestrated intercultural workshops and gave talks at Brooklyn College and the New School. In 1947, she accepted a teaching position at the historically Black institution Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Entering the world of teaching provided a new set of challenges, namely the need to find time to publish. In a 1949 letter to W.E.B. Du Bois—who she addressed as “my dear WEBD”—she described the difficulty of balancing teaching with research. She expressed disdain over the strenuous teaching load and demands of faculty meetings and workshops (Diggs, 1949, October 4). In a March 1950 letter, she expressed anxieties around the possibilities of the publication of a book titled *The Negro in the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata: Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile* with Macmillan Press. She wrote that she was “prepared for a no but will be glad to get a criticism from Macmillan” (Diggs, 1950, March 20, p. 2). A year prior, she had received a “no” for her manuscript on *The Sociology of the American Negro*. Prentice-Hall educators critiqued the text, saying it was a “restatement of Dr. Du Bois’s earlier works [which] therefore makes no particular contribution to a field for which there is, in any case, a decidedly limited market” (Prentice-Hall, 1949, September 27). The realities of rejection certainly weighed on Irene. Around this same time, the Morgan State University deemed her salary of $5,100 ineligible for future raises (Diggs, 1950, March 20). Writing again to W.E.B. Du Bois, Irene questioned why a new salary scale would not affect her salary. She screamed through the page: “All those who should get a raise will except me!!!!!” (Diggs, 1950, February 14). She added that the “comptroller has already asked why” and the frustration remains palpable throughout the page. Irene was angry, disappointed, and annoyed, and, most importantly, she gave herself permission to feel these emotions in correspondence with her friend Du Bois. She felt all the feelings all while reminding herself and Du Bois not “to overwork – even if the pay is good!” at the end of a March letter (Diggs, 1950, March 20).

The summer of 1950 provided an answer to the salary dispute. After writing to the American Association of University Professors, Irene learned that she could not receive a salary increase unless she earned a Ph.D. from a university in the United States. Irene forwarded this
letter to Du Bois with a simple question written atop the page: “What would you suggest that I do next?” Signed Nell (American Association of University Professors, 1950).

**Grace(full) Sojourning**

Irene continued to teach at Morgan State University until 1976. It is unclear whether she received a raise during her tenure. If the institution remained resistant to a salary increase, then Irene challenged their stubbornness by charting a dynamic teaching career characterized by mentorship and dynamic coursework. Students remembered her as a transformative educator who enriched their transnational understandings of Black liberation (Reed, 2020). Irene’s interdisciplinary background enabled her to teach coursework across disciplines, offering courses in sociology and anthropology. Her teaching combined questions of class inequality and the persistence of racial oppression, with an analytic that prioritized the cultural continuities across the African diaspora. She published *Black Chronology: From 4000 B.C. to The Abolition of the Slave Trade* in 1983. Committed to building local and transnational communities, Irene contributed to public radio and televisions, published widely in *The Crisis*, and returned to Cuba as a special visitor to the United Nations International Seminar on the Eradication of Apartheid and in Support of the Struggle for Liberation in Southern Africa (Bolles, 1992). The Association of Black Anthropologists honored Irene in 1978 with the Distinguished Scholar Award. In her acceptance speech, she was open about her exclusion in the academy, tracing the origins of her alienation to 1947. She explained that:

> I have found it difficult to get articles published in anthropological magazines, and when published elsewhere to have them mentioned in bibliographies and footnotes. I have not been invited to give papers at anthropological meetings which I have attended, with four or five exceptions, since 1947, to give papers, write reviews or appear on panels except on rare occasions (Diggs, 1978, pp. 4–5).

Reflecting on her journey, she advised emerging Black anthropologists of their duty:

> Continue with us, and after us to create our own institutional structures wherein we study, work, write and educate students and have our work evaluated… this means we will have our own center and not be on the periphery of others… this means that we have no intention of isolating ourselves and in turn being isolated (Diggs, 1978, p. 5).

As a praxis and pedagogy, Irene affirmed Black autonomy as an ideologically potent strategy for education and liberation. Irene charted multiple rival geographies throughout her career, investing in the creation of her own intellectual identity, as etched by a transgressive and fugitive mobility across global lines (Camp, 2004). In her scholarship, Irene upheld what scholar-activist Angela Davis (1994) encouraged Black women in the academy to do—“to think about linkages between research and activism, about cross-racial and transnational coalitional strategies, about the importance of linking our work to radical social agendas” (Davis, 1994). While Irene’s early research embraced conservative outlooks that dismissed the diasporic complexities and dissimilarities of Black political activism, Irene committed her life to locating threads of connection and unity. Perhaps Irene’s path shows that an overreliance on cultural continuities detracts from the specificities of Black experiences, identity formation, and social structures that informed the parameters of Black mobility and liberation. But Irene’s intellectual and public life
shows that the classroom continued to be the most “radical place of possibility in the academy,” to borrow from theorist bell hooks (1994). Irene’s classrooms were transnational and transgressive, fearless and faithful to a vision of a future where Black women educators were free: Free to teach beyond disciplinary parameters, free to be paid what they deserved, free to travel beyond the borders of the university, and free to engage in public-facing academic scholarship. Yes, Irene’s work is missing from the footnotes of the pages of many texts on race in Latin America, but that is not the only reason to recover and restore her work. Nor is she important only for the purpose of looking to the past to identify “blueprints” for human and civil rights work (Morgan State U, 2020). In looking to Irene’s intellectual trajectory as a scholar-traveler, an anthropologist-sociologist, a mentor-teacher, we discover strategies for self-advocacy and innovation.

We see courage and confidence as crucial for the emotional and intellectual well-being of scholars. We affirm the centrality of community and friendship to sustaining scholarly work. We engage with the necessity of international travel and research to deepen diasporic sensibilities and pedagogy. We visualize the ways in which Irene moved across and with geographical and epistemological “elsewheres” to locate what Black autonomy looked like in spaces beyond Monmouth and Atlanta. We see the need to self-reflect and pivot as educators, to ask new questions, to reframe old ones, and to resist assumptions that paint Black condition(s) and experience(s) as monolithic because of shared legacies of enslavement and exclusion. We understand “misreadings” as a recurring intellectual theme in diasporic “gazes” (see Nurse, 2020). As communities of African descent often measured their progress against the gains of others, Black political cultures formed in part through misinterpretations, missteps, and misreadings of the meanings of freedom (Nurse, 2020). Irene’s misreading of Blackness in Uruguay was in some ways a part of this historical Black activist tradition to reach uncommon ground as they strove to put forth their own visions of freedom and belonging. Irene’s life showed that education is a process of reconstruction and deconstruction, pivoting, and opening. Irene’s studies abroad make visible how Black scholars understood international travel to be central to their projects of study and visions of liberation.

And Irene’s life also demonstrates just how important it is to use grace as an optic for understanding past scholarship—that there are alternative ways of reading, interpreting, and beginning. This is one lesson of the work of Ellen Irene Diggs—that grace is a radical act and practice of education. Misreading and re-reading are transformative elements of the pedagogy of grace. How do scholars apply a grace-based analytic when evaluating misreadings of past literature? What lessons do we derive when we lean into misreadings—in our own work and in the evaluation of scholarship? How can misreadings be new beginnings in thinking through ways of knowing and educating? These are the questions prompted when looking at the life and times of Ellen Irene Diggs. Ellen means light. Irene signifies peace. What shall we do next to work toward light, peace, and justice within ourselves and our fields? What geographies of grace shall we chart?
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Black Magic: A Collective of Lived Experience

Author
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Bio

Janise “Jay” Powell (she/her) is a storyteller and education advocate. Using skills in personal development, spoken word, and stories, she curates events, workshops, and programs that allow people to share their stories through various platforms for personal and professional development, to learn from others, to collectively heal, and to grow together. More information can be found at https://www.janisepowell.com/
Abstract

Anti-Blackness is a pandemic that plagues societies across the world and across histories filled with the murder of Black lives, spirits, and dreams. Yet, throughout it all, Black folx have found strength and been leaders of resistance, radicalization, self-emancipation, and liberation. *Black Magic* is a collection of tracks that Powell has formed in relation to critical race theory and the ways in which Black folx have found solidarity, liberation, freedom, and healing in a world that seeks to destroy them. Utilizing short stories told through spoken-word poetry, Powell shares her experiences and the experiences of those who she has been blessed to be in community with. She endeavors to go beyond sharing about systems that prevent eradication of anti-Blackness, instead highlighting the ways in which Black folx are experiencing anti-Blackness and finding joy despite them. This collection of tracks seeks to name and draw to light that which we know through lived experience: the magic of Blackness.

Each track is named after a Black woman who is the living or lived personification of that story. A real life example of Black magic, specifically a real life example of Black Girl Magic.
This track is named after Linda Goss, sometimes known professionally as Mama Linda. Goss is an American storyteller and performer in the African diasporic oral tradition. She is a co-founder of the National Association of Black Storytellers, which works to preserve folk traditions.

Mama Linda: Critical Race(ism)

Racism
An endemic
Pandemic
Take power; add privilege
Built into every social structure
Makes the world go round
Burn it to the ground
Build the phoenix from its ashes
So we can all be found
And free

Not slaves of whiteness
The head start
Moved closer to the finish line
Got time
Got wealth
Got land
Got stealth
The privilege its system has rewarded
Acknowledging the power of whiteness
A symptom but not the only cure

Cause cures are more than interest
convergence
More than Black getting a step and white a mile
They say we must move at your pace for solidarity
Accept your definition of my humanity
But your interests are not mine
And I don’t have time to wait for them to align
You can shorten the time of the fight for our lives
But with or without you the fight will thrive

We will do more than just survive
We will live our lives
And become storytellers of our joy

The story of our Blackness
The story of our Black men
Our Black women
And their Intersectionality
Tell the story of Black sex
Black religion
Black Mental Health
Black wealth
Black, Black, Black
And the intersections of all that
The story of Black Magic
This track is named after Fannie Lou Townsend Hamer, one of the most important, passionate, and powerful voices of the civil rights, women’s rights, and voting rights movements and a leader in the efforts for greater economic opportunities for African Americans. She is known for her famous words “All my life I’ve been sick and tired. Now I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Fannie: Idea(ology)

I am tired of being tired
No, I am angry
More like, hurt?
Am I afraid?
I have no earthly words
As I sat down to write a piece about all the injustices happening
About how I feel
About the protest
The riots
The news
About America and the world

I wanted to find a way to express that I can’t turn on the TV anymore
I can’t go on social media anymore
I can’t talk to anyone
I can’t tell them that I’m stuck in a nightmare
That I can’t wake up
That I don’t know if I can answer the phone
I don’t have the strength to stand anymore
I don’t have the will to fight anymore
I don’t have anything to offer
Because I am broken

Every murder, a direct hit
Every hashtag, a shattering soul
Every social media, every news station, everything reminding of the trauma
But not the person

Nor the history
Everything a reminder that we were never part of America
Even though it was built with the white bones of our ancestors
Painted red with their blood
And covered in blue bruises
Every star a reminder of my ancestors, lost
But still shining in the night sky

Still shining through the darkness
Still praying for their children
And their children’s children
Until they reach me
And how will I use this moment?
How will I seize this time?
Will I be the answer to their prayers?
And if not, what then?
When will this oppression end?
When will my ancestors be able to dim their lights
And rest
And know that their prayers have been answered
Know that I can turn on the TV
That I can speak
That I won’t be tired anymore
Because we will be truly free
In every sense that that word could mean
This track is named after Harriet Tubman, an American abolitionist and political activist. Born into slavery, Tubman escaped and made multiple missions to rescue enslaved people using the network of antislavery activists and the Underground Railroad.

Harriet: inter(SIN)tric平y of race and racism

Safety
Peace
Freedom
I now know the meaning of these things
It only took my life, until this very moment
It only took a plane and car
A hike and an open mind
I came face to face with the wild
Of mountain lions and bears
Caves and creeks
Off grid is what I had to seek

I saw myself
Face down, hands up, heart empty
My head
That lead the resistance
They destroyed
Tortured and burned
My dreams of freedom
Dreams not for myself but for those who follow
I dream not for myself but for those who follow
So I knew the safety I had found
The peace I had
The freedom I explored would be short lived
I had to return because I do not dream for myself

Why can I not imagine freedom and safety for myself?
For this time, this moment
Why, when I imagine freedom
I am not here, not part of it
I am watching from above
An angel among my ancestors
Because freedom comes with sacrifice, with death
But I won’t be a martyr
Because
I do not choose this death
As I did not choose this life
But I will stand for this life
Celebrate it and turn nightmares into dreams
Dreams into life
Even if it is not a dream for me
Even if it is not a life for me
Even if it is not for my lifetime
This track is named after Ruby Bridges, an American civil rights activist. She is one of the first African American children to desegregate the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in Louisiana during the New Orleans school desegregation crisis on November 14, 1960.

Ruby: Power of the (Counter) Story

My niece told me she was good today
That the teacher said she was the example child
A good girl
It was the first time

I asked my niece
Well what did you do today to make you good?
She said she was quiet
But you are not quiet
She said she did not talk
But how did you share your ideas and your thoughts?
She said she did not share
She said she listened
I asked her what she listened too
She said the teacher

The teacher told her to stop talking
The teacher told her to be quiet
The teacher told her to be still while everyone else moved
The teacher told her it wasn’t allowed while everyone else made the same sound
The teacher told her to be good
To be the example
She must follow directions
Color inside the white lines
She must bleach herself from the inside out
The teacher said she must not: be her

I said but you
You must be you
Who else can you be?
She said I can’t
If I am me, I will not be good
There are no good students that look like me
She told me
I want to be good, Titi

My dear niece
How do I unpack this with you?
How do I tell and convince you
That bleach is deadly
It is corrosive and dangerous
Bleach is damaging to dark clothes

My dear niece
You are more than good
Something they can’t understand
You are the dreams of your ancestors
The result of decades of generational curses broken
You are the beginning of a new life
A miracle

My dear niece
They don’t know you
You have been empowered with every word a Black woman never said
Every eye roll, head roll, and attitude hidden
You are the legacy of brilliance
Education we fought for
You have been prayed for, blessed and dipped in the tears of God
You are the Joy
And the light
And the pride

My dear niece
Everywhere you go you bring truth
They don’t want to hear it
But you say it anyway
You say it unapologetically
Everywhere you go you bring a smile to their face
But they don’t want your happiness
Don’t let them take it
Don’t let them break it
Don’t let them break you
Kill your dreams or imagination
Don’t let them stop you from becoming everything they fear
You!
You are everything they fear a Black woman could be
You are their nightmare
But more importantly, you are our dream
You!
You are so much more
So much more than good
This track is named after Assata Shakur, civil rights activist and leading figure in the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army. She has continued the fight for human rights, from the 1960s to the present.

**Assata: Social Just(is)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Our resistance, like trees</th>
<th>Our resistance like trees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wild trees</td>
<td>We planted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong trees</td>
<td>Cut down trees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing arms toward sky trees</td>
<td>But wood, still strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturally adjusting to barriers trees</td>
<td>We fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things trying to stand in our way</td>
<td>Til it’s wood no more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oops, we fell and broke the barrier trees</td>
<td>Meaning it never dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting life trees</td>
<td>We do more than survive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bearing fruit trees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We planted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Our resistance, like trees                                      |                           |
| Cut down trees                                                   |                           |
| But wood, still strong                                          |                           |
| Igniting flames wood                                             |                           |
| Burning down systems wood                                        |                           |
| Erecting new frames, new foundations wood                       |                           |
| Damming rivers wood                                              |                           |
| Historistic wood                                                 |                           |
| Spears, bows, and arrows wood                                    |                           |
| We fighting                                                      |                           |

| Our resistance, like trees                                      |                           |
| Cut down trees                                                   |                           |
| But wood, still strong                                          |                           |
| Til it’s wood no more                                           |                           |
| Wood, turned to chips, turned to mulch                           |                           |
| Playground cushion, catching fallen children mulch               |                           |
| Catch rain to prevent the flood mulch                            |                           |
| Informal paths guiding new ways mulch                            |                           |
| Enhancing mulch                                                  |                           |
| Composting mulch                                                 |                           |
| Biodegradable mulch                                              |                           |
| Meaning it never dies                                           |                           |
| We do more than survive                                         |                           |
This track is named after Angela Davis, a radical American political activist, philosopher, academic, scholar, and author. She is a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Angela: Social (Construct)ion

Wuz it mean to be Black?
What does it look like?
Feel like?
Move like?
Dress like?
Style like?
Black

Wuz it mean to be Black?
Think Black?
Act Black?
Shop Black?
Hair Black
Be Black
Be you

You decide who you are
How you feel
How you move
How you dress
How you talk
And walk
What you do
It’s up to you

You Black no matter all that
You Black
You Black
And ain’t it great to be Black
And define yourself
Not carry every Black person on your shoulders
So… wuz it mean to be Black… for you?
This track is named after Ellen Armstrong, who is noted as being the first American stage magician of color. She is the only African American woman of the early to mid-twentieth century to run an independent touring magic show.

Ellen: Black Magic Forever

So you want to know about Black magic?
About the collective strength of Blackness?
About how when you walked across the stage at graduation
Every Black person there cheered for you, and you didn’t know why
About when that Black fellow over there smiled, waved, and said, “hey fam”
And you didn’t know who he was but said, “how you doin’ cousin?”
About the times in class or meetings when someone say something crazy
And you instinctively make eye contact with other Black people
Well that’s just the beginning of Black magic
That’s the pull of it
Trying to get you to see what you’ve always had access to
What’s always been in you

Black magic like real-life Wakanda
Think about it
Ain’t Black magic like T’Challa
Ain’t it like Killmonger
Defending and challenging
Putting its people first
Ain’t Black magic like Shuri and the Dora Milaje
It’s brilliant and elite
Relies on its collective strength
Ain’t Black magic like real-life Wakanda Forever
Wakanda Forever
Wakanda Forever

Black magic like the real-life Wakanda
Hidden away only for us
I guess you can call it our superpower
Our Vibranium
Cause we absorb, store, and release large amounts of Black energy
What else can you call it when we’ve taken everything the world threw at us but still found
Black Joy
When we absorb the pain of the mother who lost her son
When we release stored Black rage and make change
What else can you call it, when we do it all in the same moment
What else can you call it, besides Black magic?

You want to know more about Black magic?
Well it’s a little different for everyone
But every sister and brother has their own gifts
And the world don’t always understand them
That’s why Black magic is our secret
Black magic is bigger than you and I
Black magic is not something one of us has
Black magic is ALL of us
Our collective power
Our way of dreaming
Our way of healing deep wounds
Our way of lifting each other up
Our way of celebrating ourselves
Our way of being Black

So if you want to know about Black magic?
There isn’t much I can tell you that you don’t already know
All I can do is open your eyes to what you know without knowing
That Black magic is part of you
Black Magic Forever
This track is named after Maya Angelou and Cicely Tyson. Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist. She is best known for her unique and pioneering autobiographical writing style. Cicely Tyson was an American actress. In a career that spanned more than seven decades, she became known for her portrayals of strong African American women.

Maya and Cicely: The Magic Within

To my dear Black family (because everybody is a cousin or an aunt or an uncle),

They are scared and always have been
When they took our ancestors from Africa they saw something in our melanin
They saw something they could never have

They know they can’t take it so they try to silence it
Bury it,
Cause it to go extinct
But we still rise.
We make ourselves heard.
It is our time, so
Put on your crowns my kings and queens
Grab your cloaks and capes
Tell your story like Mama Linda
Be a voice like Fannie
Walk like Harriet
Learn like Ruby
Fight like Assata
Think like Angela
Pick up your wand like Ellen
Remember like Maya
Live like Cicely
Put on your wings
Soar. Fly. Find your instrument.
Release the magic within

Because you’ve always had exactly what you needed inside
You were born with it.
It grew with you.
A collective power. Our power. Our magic.
Black Magic,
There is nothing stronger
Nothing purer
Nothing that can stop it
Black Magic
Black Magic
It’s just in you
It’s in us
It is us
It is us
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Go Good: Reading, Mapping, and Teaching the Territory through Space and Time

Author
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Bio

Christin Washington (B.A., Amherst College, 2017) is a PhD student in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, and a graduate research assistant with African American Digital and Experimental Humanities (AADHum) at UMD. Focusing on digitality’s place in Black and American life, she explores how digital technologies stretch and remodel the present limits of storytelling and memorialization, warp time, and shrink space. As a former Five College Digital Humanities scholar, she developed the beta for her born-digital undergraduate thesis, Dare to Remember: A Digital Memorial of Black Brooklyn. Her research with AADHum converges with her work in the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture program at UMD.
Abstract

*Go Good* will take the form of a digital memorial, incorporating short stories, voice notes, music, and photographs, among other fragmented artifacts, to honor mythical life, death, and spiritual afterlife. It will borrow from the transnational account of a Guyanese woman who travels with, hides, and passes along her spiritual possessions. Reliant on affect and memory, this digital altar aims to swell the imagination, encounter new worlds, and restructure the frames placed around control, materiality, home, and humanity. This song offers reflections on the beginning of the production process of a forthcoming digital research project. While this song is a meditation on many of Toni Morrison’s writings, it is mainly a site where Washington places lessons learned from the Guyanese elder in conversation with Sylvia Wynter’s piece, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désèbre” and Toni Morrison and Angela Davis’ 2010 conversation at the New York Public Library. This community remains apt for a woman and immigrant who not only navigated multiple territories, but through her teachings, offered a rich map of humanity that extended to a place she could never fully know but could deeply perceive. Produced with the principle of memory as generative, “Go Good: Reading, Mapping, and Teaching the Territory through Space and Time” will provide strong rationale for methodological approaches that explore and showcase different genres of the human.
Try to think what it’s like in the world if you can’t read. What other kinds of things jump out at you. Use everything—EVERYTHING—to become the best human being you can be.

—Toni Morrison, with Angela Davis (2010) at the New York Public Library

A blunt silence followed the earnestness of Toni Morrison’s second “everything” as her eyes panned a hushed audience twice over. Her short chuckle after “human being” loosed air back into the room, and the wind suddenly returning to my airway alerted me that I sat not in the front row of this 2010 New York Public Library unmoderated conversation on literacy, libraries, and liberation between Toni Morrison and Angela Davis, but in my living room, staring into a screen with seized breathe twelve years after the live talk. Morrison had shared this bold truth, incontestably rehearsed through the writing processes of her numerous canonical texts and in response to an attendee who had stood before her and Davis asking questions to these giants. The immediate query that Morrison was responding to came from an anthropologist who was asking about the state of Third World women’s speculative literature. Morrison, however, weaved in two preceding questions: one on film adaptations of books that attempted to appeal to visual literacies and the other on written protest and the role of the storyteller. Announcing that the letter, a beautiful and permanent thing, isn’t going anywhere, Morrison visibly relished the reality that “there’s no one way” (Morrison & Davis, 2010) She announced this to underscore the significance of other art forms, such as theater and portraiture, and the ineffability of life slipping into the skeleton of symbols that stood for sounds and to tap into other sensibilities using the modality most attractive to the creator.

Reading in Lands of Lethal Abundance

Use everything. This advice felt familiar. Not because Morrison had used this phrase before in both Tar Baby and The Bluest Eye—for different reasons, admittedly—and not because science fiction writer and MacArthur Fellow Octavia Butler had used it to describe the approach writers employ, as she referred to the coming of her never-released Parable of the Trickster, though at its core, each assertion implied just how demanding and lethally abundant life could be. Instead, it felt familiar because it fit like the right puzzle piece being neatly pressed in between all the irregular grooves of a life I had faithfully witnessed before (Figueroa-Vasquez, 2020). Morrison’s offering highlighted the importance of resourcefulness for people who do not have access in the form of credit or capital, and therefore have to understand the thing—the tech, the language, the reading—in the most complex ways to survive, often developing their own signs and tools to navigate territories that are new to them. More notably, I could envision the Guyanese elder who I call on and borrow from to develop my forthcoming research project, Go Good, learning multiple territories without formal training to travel with, hide, and pass along her spiritual possessions. I became enamored with the fact that there were precise words to describe the methodological approach to survival and the sharp visual, culinary, and spiritual literacies that sprung from it—varying literacies to read new territories while distanced from hegemonic academic spheres. And I had always been privy to them. In fact, I exist as the corporeal documentation of this knowledge production.

I had found my overarching methodology, and its bend welcomes the decentralized archive of fragmented artifacts—short stories, voice notes, music, recipes, photographs, and their accompanying spirits, memories, and affect—wafting about in minds, in bodies, in bins, in
bookbags, in boxes, in voicemails and voice memos, and in hearts. Morrison had affirmed their abundance, challenging me to cleave the imposed Western codes of paucity and dispossession from my approach to achieve a multisensory and multimodal retelling that is faithful, speculative, and rhizomatic of how these artifacts became evidence of diasporic survival. In essence, as a representation of a life spun from all of these spiritual possessions, *Go Good* jumps out through collage art and speculative fiction.

**A Digital Map to Wynter’s Survival**

Through the study of Sylvia Wynter’s “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre,” it becomes apparent that the guiding methodology bears enormous weight. Wynter informs her readers that the prerequisite of Western rule was the overrepresentation of neoliberal European code onto other (often Indigenous) genres of human in Third World or “underdeveloped” nations under the guise of modernity. Further enacting their overextension of code, Europeans weaponized academic scholarship to justify their devaluation of non-Western epistemologies and implementation of more carceral, possessive, and restrictive ways of knowing and being (i.e., raced, classed, gendered, disabled, or ethnic beings). They produced hierarchies with a narrowly defined *human* at their pinnacle, with everyone relegated to the lower tiers designated as Other, psychically deceived into pursuing the status of Man, an alleged personhood that could never feasibly be reached.

Differing from the practice of defining the human purely by what we are—“we” lightly used in this context where it refers to the exclusive biocentric, religious, and economic characteristics assigned to the Enlightenment-produced *human*—Wynter lays out seeing the human, being the human, and defining the human as the metacognitive process of what we do to understand ourselves in relation to one another. One is the map and the other is the territory. One is what we map, and the other is why we map. Quoting the warnings Einstein issued right after the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, “Everything in the world had changed except the way we think about it… unless mankind could come up with a new mode of thinking we would drift towards unparalleled catastrophe,” Wynter challenges us to “separate discursively as well as institutionally, the notion of the *human* from the notion of *Man*” (Wynter, 2006, pp. 159, 161; emphasis in the original). Only the exclusivity of Man would justify that level of devastation to the Other. The demands of survival and the seduction of psychic emancipation at the level of written and spoken language within numerous societies underscores the imperative to navigate the territory, to disentangle the human from the Man. So evocative is the force of this freedom, it is enough to give dreaming a rest. However, Wynter informs us that we must not luxuriate at the level of genre. Like Morrison’s passionate encouragement to fail restrictive and imposed Western knowledge production and its relentless reproduction of the unattainable Man during her conversation with Angela Davis at the New York Public Library, Wynter’s work demands we understand how things jump out—to survive first but to get free second. What else could she be defending if not the human jumping out of the bondage of the Renaissance and Enlightenment-era Man, a body freeing itself of an unwelcome spiritual possessor to welcome another into its corporeal archive? And what other than a haunting could that be?
Using everything, I plan for *Go Good* to jump in and out of space and time, haunting Man through the design of a digital altar and service. Like the parts that make archival fragments whole, the particularities of the ancestral tradition “would never come back,” but their meanings have survived the journey, for they “had been there all along” (Morrison, 1988). These fragments and the spirits they bring beg questions of historicity and inform rhizomatic stories and cultures Man could not contain. While they could be read through the written word, familiarity with and priority of the letter is not a prerequisite. Using speculative fiction and collage art to exercise a model of abundance, I intend to explore how she surveyed and survived the territory without the disciplining of academia to create a visual, culinary, and spiritual digital text. The digital serves many functions here: First, it informs the creation of the text; second, it creates the text; and third, it houses the text. In other words, the digital is both a tool and a methodology, and through the Black feminist praxis of grounded theory, it is also an epistemological framework for the development of *Go Good*. Through it, I plan to elucidate how this Guyanese elder not only taught her map, but also taught the function of the map in order to see, survive, read, and reimagine the territory for ourselves.

**Teaching Dissemblance, Disassembly, Assembly, Rearrangement, and Revival**

Speculative fiction and collage art are both ways to map genres of human that no one discipline has the capacity to describe, to identify the codes we have created to form relation with one another. They allow you to use everything, even the bits and pieces, to mold the present self in relation to the past and in conscious orientation toward a future. Under Man’s overrepresented rule—the governing language, form, and content—Black and Indigenous folks have used the principles of speculative fiction and collage art—

- resourcefulness
- assemblage
- layering
- multinaarrative and
- multisensoory storytelling
- fragmented and autonomous
- disidentifications
- artifacts
- nonlinearity
- mixed media
- juxtaposition

—as cultural tools to dissemble and disassemble, assemble and rearrange, and revive and make anew their distinct genres (Benyehudah, 2020; Germain, 2020; Hernandez & Taylor, 2020; Muñoz, 1999). Fundamentally, these practices can be taught through these two methods under the overarching instruction to “use everything,” which has also become the defining pedagogical approach (Morrison & Davis, 2001).

Similar to what I hope to convey through this visual, culinary, and spiritual text, and to what Wynter makes abundantly clear, it is not enough to teach my map or even teach the presiding map, my intentions to peel its layers back notwithstanding. Imparting the knowledge of how to map is indispensable; at its heart, it is a navigational exercise on how to read the scale of even unrecognizable territory. This brings it into focus by way of what jumps out for the individual, including fragments and absences of memory, approaching its breadth and its constant change with calm, confidence, and community. It is teaching to understand the

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13 The “letter” refers to the written word as Toni Morrison uses it during her talk with Angela Davis at the New York Public Library in 2010.
unfixed-ness of the human, which is to say embracing the futility of projection and refusing its violence that pledges to transform everyone unlike us under our code or likeness. So while it is possible and even helpful to teach the platforms and methods I intend to use, teaching the territory involves the why, the methodology of dissemblance and disassembly, the methodology of rearrangement and revival.

*Go Good*, then, would become an immersive heuristic that refuses narrow definition as universalizing truth, replication as restrictive practice, and exclusion as prerequisite of the human. It would become a pedagogical tool embracing what La Marr Jurelle Bruce calls parapositivism, a philosophical approach that resists “the hegemony of positivism” which “stipulates that meaningful assertions about the world must come from empirical observation and interpretation to generate veritable truth”; a praxis of deviation so as to engage with “the phenomenal, the spiritual, the aesthetic, the affective, and the mad” (Bruce, 2021, p.10). If parapositivism is a philosophical approach, then teaching more than one way, teaching how to use everything to find one’s own way through speculative fictions and collage art, is a subversive pedagogy. And who better to have taught and passed those lessons along than my elder who maneuvered through a colonial Guyana, lost children and left house, traveled up and down the east coast of the United States, kept home for the unyielding spirits of her corporeal archive, and faithfully fulfilled her role as matriarch to four generations.14 The beginning of the production process has been stirring but deliberate. My intention is to explore visual, culinary, and spiritual literacies to honor the ways things jumped out to my great-grandmother, a woman whose quotidian life was extraordinary, haunting, and magical. My hope is that visitors of the digital altar—or attendees of the intimate ancestral service—encounter new territories, acquaint themselves with unfamiliar maps, engage with the literacies most natural to them, reckon with codes long since forgotten, and become awash with the meaning waiting for them, even through unparalleled catastrophe and collapse. My plea is that you begin. Go good.

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14 Left house is a Guyanese phrase.
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Metaphor For a Post-White Horizon

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Statement of Co-Authorship: Notwithstanding the utter obsession that the traditional neoliberal academy places on authorship order, the authors of this work would like to indicate that we consider this piece co-authored and neither one of us is considered “second” to the other in the production of this project. While a corresponding author has been chosen, this should not indicate that said author has contributed more (or is more responsible) for this work. If this statement could be included somewhere in the publication of this piece, we would greatly appreciate it.
Abstract

This project is a counternarrative, in the tradition of Richard Delgado’s *The Rodrigo Chronicles*, using critical race theory’s storytelling methodology. We present a discussion between a Black scholar and white scholar sharing their experiences as they explore the relationship between Blackness/whiteness and anti-Blackness/white supremacy. The crux of this counternarrative lies in the intersection between the hopelessness one Black scholar feels toward racial progress in America and the desperation of a white scholar as they process the possibilities for a post-white ontological future within the Western academy in the wake of the January 6th Insurrection. The counter-story integrates Afropessimistic thought with the creativity of Afrofuturism to comment on the uses and abuses of Black labor under the white gaze. The conclusion of the counter-story argues for the need of a post-white futurism that imagines a possible future without whiteness and a future that is also not subsistent upon the foundational abuse and overuse of Black labor.
In its most metaphorical form, whiteness is a myth that constructs white people as heroes and non-white people as villains. Phrases such as “white knight” and “black sheep” are examples of the mythical binary of white as right and Black as wrong.

— Sabrina Michelle Hambel

This track seeks to use metaphor and dialogic narrative to investigate the meaning of whiteness in terms of its relationship to anti-Blackness so that we might learn how to imagine beyond it. Indeed, this is a project about ideologies not about any group of people. Following Stewart and Nicolazzo (2018), we see whiteness as distinct from white identity and white supremacy. Whiteness, they note, is a way of knowing and a set of knowledges that drive white supremacy. In other words, whiteness can be defined as the social and cultural methods that mediate systemic manifestations of white supremacy. Whiteness maintains its social power because it creates “invisible” social norms against which all other races are judged (Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021).

Whiteness, though, is fundamentally a myth, a story we tell, that often uses the power of metaphor to explain itself, who we are in relation to its power, and the roles we willingly or unwillingly take up as oppressors and oppressed. Often this myth, this collection of “ways of knowing,” is dependent upon “ignore-ance” and the silencing of further definitions of itself (Williams, 2020). Therefore, to reveal the full danger and damage of the contours of whiteness and white supremacy, we have chosen not to focus on whiteness as a self-sustaining term. Whiteness is an illusion and as a concept often eludes clear definition. Rather than an isolated focus on whiteness, a focus on anti-Blackness highlights and illuminates the centrality of anti-Black racism to patterns of domination too often narrowly referred to only as white supremacy (Espinoza & Harris, 1997).

Scholars have argued that education curricula fail to engage in critical conversations about race, racism, and whiteness (Muñiz et al, 2022). Indeed, it has been noted that traditional texts on education typically tend to ignore questions of anti-Black racism (Mustaffa, 2017). By anti-Black racism, we mean the type of racism directed against Black peoples, as well as anyone who is perceived as Black, specifically because they are Black or seen as Black (Kumsa et al, 2014; Reece, 2019). Anti-Blackness has been described as intentional theorization on the specificity of anti-Black racism and the effect it has on the day-to-day lived experiences of Black

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16 The Journal of Black Educology (BE) is a collective, peer-tuned, open-access, digital journal that is dedicated to the sounds of theory, philosophy, research, and praxis central to the genealogy of Black struggle and liberation with education. BE declares (publishes) “tracks” (articles); “re-sounding commentary” (reviews of media, books, curricula, reports); “notes from the studio” (notes from the field); community-based commentary and artwork from the global sounds of Black education liberation.
17 Following Cabrera, Franklin & Watson (2017) we embrace a conception of Whiteness as a normative structure in society that marginalizes already minoritized individuals and privileges white people. While white people receive material benefits from this normative Whiteness and minoritized individuals lose. Although white people benefit from the discourse of racism, understanding Whiteness as a discourse means that it is possible for minoritized individuals to engage in the very discourse that serves to marginalize them as well.
18 We have chosen not to capitalize the letter “w” in “white” to signify the difference or “slippage” between Whiteness and white people.
people (Dumas, 2016). Ultimately, anti-Black ontologies perpetuate the idea that being Black is “the very antithesis of a Human subject” (Wilderson, 2010, p. 9).

By studying the concept of anti-Blackness, one begins to understand the argument that any theory of racial equity must first confront the ubiquitous nature of anti-Black racism in our society. Anti-Blackness, as a social construct, reflects social suffering and resistance as the primary embodied lived experience of Black people in the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 1997).

Consequently, anti-Blackness has emerged as the central proposition within intellectual projects such as Afropessimism19, BlackCrit (Dumas, 2016), and Black whiteness studies (Matias, 2022). Scholarship on the concept of anti-Blackness is therefore necessarily motivated by the question of Black suffering and seeks to bring attention to the psychic and material assault on Black people. These works aim to force discussion on topics of anti-Blackness into the zeitgeist of social justice (Dumas, 2016; Gillborn, 2018). Because Black ontologies are too often “hidden by white institutions’ singular insistence on denying legitimacy to Black lives” (Gilmore, 2021, p. 120), we interrogate white supremacy through a lens focused on addressing the effects of anti-Blackness, not simply decentering whiteness.

In this experimental20 research project, we attempt to map the dissonances and resonances of the voices of two scholars engaged in a dialogic narrative on the meaning of post-whiteness and the sacrifices that must be made to get to such an auspicious destination. Other scholars have done the work of deconstructing whiteness (powell, 2005; Matias et. al, 2014) and illustrating how it operates in people’s day-to-day lives (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). This project seeks to employ metaphor and narrative, not to hide whiteness in its own myths, but to reveal the truth of its violence and the air it sucks up in the room as distinct from actual anti-racist initiatives and efforts to mitigate anti-Black racism.

This work is the product of hours of conversations and writings between the authors, spread between February 2021 until the initial submission of this manuscript in January 2022. We began with a single question: “What does it take for a person to be capable of moving toward a post-white horizon?” By post-white horizon, we mean to imagine a world, which lies perpetually beyond what we can now see, that is free from whiteness and the perpetuation of anti-Blackness. There is value in journeying toward a post-white horizon. While we might not “know” what is in store for us, the journey there can be as vital as the hoped-for destination.

The answer to our initial question is simple and well-documented yet impossible: live without the violence of white supremacy (Cebulko, 2021). No one in the United States has ever done this (Hannah-Jones, 2019). It is impossible to even imagine what this looks like—and yet this is our task.

We lack the ontological frames and epistemological tools to move beyond whiteness, so we cannot answer the question. But we can consider: What do we need in order to move toward the answer? To explore this question, we engage in a counter-story that examines the promises and pitfalls of cross-race discussions that move away from anti-Blackness and toward anti-racist action. We write this narrative as a metaphor for how Black educators do and can directly challenge whiteness. It is a method of framing how we all can orient toward the post-white horizon.

19 Afropessimism theorizes that Black people exist in a structurally antagonistic relationship with humanity because such a relationship continues to benefit those in power (Dancy et. al, 2018).
20 By calling this project “experimental”, we do not claim that our findings show cause and effect. Rather the use of experimental in this instance is to indicate that what we are trying to accomplish with this project has typically not been attempted under the banner of what might be considered “traditional” scholarship.
In our three-part counter-story, we reveal and interrogate the facade and danger of the “good white liberal” (King, Jr., 1992). The narrative also exemplifies the use and abuse of Black labor to enact such an interrogation (Love et al., 2021). The substance of the narrative dialogue covers whiteness as violence and definitionally opposed to racial justice, the limits and possibilities of Black critique, and the centrality of Black pain in the maintenance of whiteness and anti-Blackness as expressed in “good white liberal” personas and interactions. Because of this, we encourage readers to proceed with both a critical and self-caring eye. Even as we identify and explore how Black labor is central in such cross-race conversations, we also recognize that reading such a narrative is its own kind of labor and potential pain, and it should be treated as such.

Whenever a theory appears to you as the only possible one, take this as a sign that you have neither understood the theory nor the problem which it was intended to solve.

―Karl Popper

Theoretical/Conceptual Frameworks: A Nexus of Theories

With the metaphor of the post-white horizon, we mean to express explicitly that a society without whiteness is “unseeable” and without arrival. Implicitly, what we mean to say is that we are currently incapable of making such a post-white society—and such a life. This is because we are all committed to whiteness and/or impacted by the white gaze. Even when we work to abandon whiteness, we are often responding to it—not living without it. Further, as we attempt to move toward the post-white horizon, it becomes clear that this is a yet untraveled path; it must continually be charted.

In this track, we are attempting to work in the space between present analyses of race in the U.S. and the hoped-for future destruction of whiteness. We acknowledge our incapacity to imagine and create a post-white world, but we wonder what kind of development we need to imagine and create such a world. Put another way, this inquiry seeks to find out what tools would facilitate that development.

Because we see this as a developmental question, in relation to race and racism, we use sociocultural theory as the underlying rhythmic beat for this track (Vygotsky, 1987). Sociocultural theory has been used as a method of analysis to center race and cultural differences within the broader context of social justice (e.g., Cormier & Pandey, 2021), and in this project it serves to organize how to use, make, and extend critical theories of race for the purpose of one’s continued development to construct a post-white world.

We introduce a “nexus of critical theories on race” as our available tools that might facilitate our development and provide future scholars with the resonance necessary to place all the theoretical possibilities in tune with each other. Like other traditional forms of Black ontological expression (i.e., jazz, hip-hop, the blues) we envision this nexus as a response to the call for epistemological improvisation (Gilmore, 2021). Collaborative improvisation, expressed as the blending of critical theories like the harmony of instruments, might make a track that can answer questions that need to be answered but that our theories, our instruments, were not made to answer on their own (Newman & Holzman, 2013).

The counter-story that follows explores a three-part conversation that reveals the developmental incapacity of our society to carry out justice and bring about the destruction of whiteness because of seen and unseen commitments to anti-Blackness (Žižek, 2006). We present a nexus of critical theories on race to unmask and critique these commitments, show both the
power and limitation of these theories, and suggest a way forward that can only be understood when these theories are placed in conversation with each other. To accomplish this, we discuss an array of revisionist, destructivist (Leonardo, 2013), realist, and imaginative theories. These include critical race theory (Bell, 1992b), Afropessimism (Wilderson, 2010), critical whiteness studies (Jupp, 2016), philosophical race readings such as concepts of non-performativity (Ahmed, 2006; Mills, 1997; Yancy, 2015), Afrotuturism (Womack, 2013), and racial melancholy (Cheng, 2001).

In our narrative, we read this collection of theories as expressions of the dialectical interface of individuals and social systems (Ratner, 2015). That is, we see these various theories on racial analysis to be artifacts, sociocultural–materialist expressions of how we understand the history, enactment, and results of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. While these theories are often structurally oriented, they are representations of the reaches of our collective developments—what we are capable of interpreting and knowing (Salis et al., 2019). Therefore, we intertwine a nexus of theories into our narrative as a way of creating resonance between what is known and knowable. The nexus also serves as a complex social mediation so that we might chart what we do not yet know and how we might learn to imagine and develop in the future (Vygotsky, 1987).

The relationship between anti-Blackness and whiteness influences many progressive race scholars to limit their “anti-racism” to non-performatives, which are speech acts in which articulation alone stands in for action (Ahmed, 2006). A theory of non-performative acts explores how institutions “commit” to anti-racism through words and statements without implementing actual anti-racist actions (Ahmed, 2007). Non-performativity explains why, despite the intentions and awareness that racism exists and should be obstructed, institutions never encounter or bring about the social conditions necessary for anti-racist change (Prescha, 2021).

This lack of action is not a failure of speech; rather, it is a revelation of its own meaning. Declarations of a desire for an anti-racist world are typically never meant to be realized, they are only meant as words—never actions (Kimura, 2014; Prescha, 2021). Conversely, the counter-story “speech acts” in this article, expressed in a dialogic narrative, are aimed directly at mediating further social and psychological development toward the dismantling of whiteness and anti-Blackness, which are systemic barriers to the realization of lived humanity.

This is our theoretical project—to take what capacity and artifacts we have and use them to collectively build the tools necessary for us to journey toward the metaphorical post-white horizon (Stetsenko, 2013). These “tools-and-results” work dialectically as contextually made/making process products that might extend our development toward what is not yet known (Newman & Holzman, 2013). Following these sociocultural principles of learning and development and using a nexus of critical theories on race as mediating artifacts for our development, we design a counter-story narrative as a tool-and-result toward an episteme of the post-white horizon.

Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darknesses of other people.

—Carl Jung

Research is a two-way process, search for what you have gained and what you have to lose; what you have lost and what you have to gain.

—P.S. Jagadeesh Kumar
Methodology

Critical race theory (CRT) is a legal, epistemological, and conceptual framework that was developed by BIPOC legal scholars who rejected law as color evasive (Ward, 2022). Following Cabrera (2018), we adopt the research position that CRT was not intended to be solely a theoretical framework, but rather a theorizing counter-space to challenge and transform racial oppression. CRT scholars have asserted that race is a significant factor affecting educational inequity in the United States (Tuitt, 2012). In fact, legal scholar Victor Romero (2002) pointed out that to be a critical race theorist is to reject the idea that racism is perpetuated today by extremist individuals and theorize instead that societal systems are to blame for the continuation of racism. Whiteness is one such societal system (Guess, 2006). Thus, this project adopts a CRT methodology to allow for the production of research that challenges and transforms the racial oppression brought about by the system of whiteness. Such critical research is central to the genealogy of Black struggle and liberation within education (Nicolazzo, 2021).

CRT entered the field of education as a decidedly Black theorization of race (Dumas & Ross, 2016) and is most appropriate to lift up the voices and narratives of Black educators. CRT in education advances the idea that counternarratives are important and central to understanding the nature of reality (Milner & Howard, 2013). Counter-storytelling is defined as a method that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority (Ellison & Solomon, 2019). It is a method of telling the stories of people whose experiences are erased from or dehumanized by dominant stories and modes of storytelling (Dutta et. al, 2021). The ideology of racism, and by analogy the ideologies of white supremacy, the white gaze, and anti-Blackness, creates, maintains, and justifies the use of a “master narrative” in storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

As a rhetorical method, the critical race counter-story is a theoretically grounded research approach. With the express purpose of challenging white privilege, the critical race counter-story draws on interdisciplinary methodologies to reject notions of “neutral” or “objective” research and exposes research that distorts or silences epistemologies of minoritized21 people (Martinez, 2018).

Thus, the choice of counter-story as the method for this experimental project is an intentional one. A counter-story functions as a method for marginalized people to intervene in research methods that would form majoritarian stories based on ignorance and assumptions about minoritized peoples (Martinez, 2018). As an interdisciplinary method, CRT counter-story recognizes that experiential and embodied knowledge is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices (Martinez, 2014). These stories, parables, chronicles, and narratives are powerful means for destroying the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings that form the background for the legal and political discourses that take place (Delgado, 1989).

When producing knowledge utilizing a CRT counter-story methodology, it is important that researchers acknowledge that CRT emerged from law as a response to critical legal studies and civil rights scholarship (Crenshaw, 2001; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Milner & Howard, 2013). As such it should be noted that, at the genesis of CRT, there was no need to distinguish the CRT counter-story from the more general method of narrative inquiry, which emerged at around the

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21 In this project, we use the verb “minoritized” as opposed to the noun “minority” because the verb better describes the process by which certain racial-ethnic groups are assigned minority status through the actions and non-actions of more dominating groups.
same time (Clandinin & Caine, 2013). However, as CRT began to make its way into educational research (López, 2001), it has become necessary to discern the counter-story as a unified interdisciplinary narrative methodology that can result in transformative action for educational equity (Miller et. al, 2020).

Some scholars have categorized the counter-story as a type of narrative research (Berry & Cook, 2018). Others have identified genres of CRT counter-stories, such as personal stories, other people’s stories or narratives, and composite stories (Hunn et. al, 2006). For the purposes of this project, the kind of counter-story that we are engaging in has been described as narrative dialogue, similar to Richard Delgado’s (1995) The Rodrigo Chronicles yet distinct from the allegorical chronicles written by Derrick Bell (Martinez, 2018).

In the verses that follow, the CRT methodology of counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) is juxtaposed against non-performative anti-racism to examine the possibilities of a discussion on white supremacy and, more saliently, on anti-Blackness. A project examining anti-Blackness adopts the claim that there are segments of American society that exist antithetical to manifestations of Black social life, yet paradoxically seem to feed off the commodification and consumption of Blackness for political, erotic, economic, ontological, and epistemological value (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019). Anti-Blackness is reproduced through the extraction of labor from the Black body as property and the mechanisms that societal institutions use to police, control, imprison, and kill Black people (Dancy et. al, 2018).

Using the 2021 United States Capitol attack that occurred on January 6th, this project presents a counternarrative consisting of an intellectual exchange between a white man and Black man within the academy. The characters are not avatars of the authors. Both are composite characters and neither is meant to represent any actual scholar or person. Any resemblance between the characters and any real person is purely coincidental.

In utilizing this method of analysis, we attempt to show how narrative performs an epistemological function as well as a rhetorical one. We see then that the counter-story as a kind of narrative. Narrative provides knowledge about the nature of discrimination from the perspective of those who experience it (Carbado & Gulati, 2002). Narrative also allows us to combat the forms of epistemic violence (Garrett-Walker, 2021) and injustice that some common stories may inflict on people of color, particularly Black people (Dutta et. al, 2021). It should go without question that the physical violence inflicted on Black people living in the afterlife of slavery is immense (Hartman, 1997). This project seeks to highlight that violence inflicted on a person in one’s capacity as a consumer and producer of knowledge “violates an essential value and capacity of what it means to be human” (Dutta et. al, 2021, p. 2; Dotson, 2014; Dortch & Patel, 2017).

To counter this ontological imposition, which can be termed an ontology of white supremacy for the purposes of establishing permanent anti-Black epistemologies, we place two characters in narrative dialogue to both show the uses (and abuses) of Black labor and the possibilities for anti-racist education if more white people were committed to actions that remove, rather than entrench, the white gaze. The counter-story is a method in the destruction of white myths and the building of possible narratives beyond the white gaze.

Metaphors in Narrative Inquiry

While we intend for this counter-story to stand on its own, the experimental method allows for the use of meta-metaphor to tell several counternarratives within one (McLeish, 2020;
Hendry, 2007). Sticking with our sociocultural conceptual framework, we adopt the view that metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason. We use metaphor as a means of ontological mapping across the conceptual domains of our nexus of critical theories on race (Lakoff, 1993). It is a method of knowing.

Scholars have attested to the ability of metaphor to allow for the investigation of complex phenomena within the limited space provided to social science researchers (Schmitt, 2005). One such area in which metaphor has been particularly useful has been in inquiries around and on the topic of whiteness (Leonardo, 2016). Zeus Leonardo (2016) states that “the literary turn in whiteness studies highlights the role not just of language per se, but of rhetoric in setting the parameters or conditions of whiteness’ own intelligibility” (p. 5).

When confronted with the ability of metaphor to deconstruct whiteness, we begin to further conceptualize whiteness as “an ideological and epistemological perspective that consolidates and promotes hegemony and normalization” (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018, p. 134-135). As critical researchers we must acknowledge and give voice to the fact that a major part of metaphor is the “ability to make meaning stick” beyond our typical forms of knowledge production and transmission. Further, because whiteness uses language to make and distort its meanings, the use of metaphor becomes necessary to unveil and reveal its pervasiveness (Leonardo, 2016).

As human beings, we are all not conducting just one narrative but many narratives all at the same time. —David Hare

The purpose of narrative is to present us with complexity and ambiguity. —Scott Turow

PART I

Dr. James Garrison, a recent hire in the College of Education at Neoliberal University, comes by the office of his assigned faculty mentor Dr. Frederick Malcolm Powell a week after the January 6th Insurrection at the U.S. Capitol for a previously scheduled meeting.

Dr. Garrison is a cisgender white male and the college’s most recent tenure track hire. He is a practitioner of critical whiteness studies (CWS) and considers himself a race scholar. This was one of the reasons he was assigned to Dr. Powell as a mentee.

Dr. Powell is a cisgender Black male who was recently awarded tenure at Neoliberal University. As the tenure process was grueling, he had asked for a one-year exemption from having to guide a mentee. However, as no one else in the college was a race scholar, the exemption was denied. In addition, Dr. Powell had raised concerns about Dr. Garrison’s hire as he thought him too “inexperienced” for a tenure track line. Neither has corresponded since the events on January 6th, 2021.

When Dr. Garrison enters the office, Dr. Powell moves to turn off his television. On it was CNN News coverage of the aftermath of January 6th. The conversation proceeds as follows once Dr. Garrison enters Dr. Powell’s office and sits down. Dr. Frederick Malcolm Powell begins, his voice breaking through the static noise:

22 Within the confines of this counterstory, we shift our method of citation to footnotes as a way of honoring the tradition of critical race theorists like Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado. Further, we find that footnotes, rather than in-text citations, maintain a narrative cohesion that is important to the storytelling aspects of our argument.
Dr. Frederick Malcolm Powell (FP): So, Dr. Garrison, how are you? Any reaction to the craziness we saw on the 6th?

Dr. James Garrison (JG): Well, I must tell you Dr. Powell, my initial reaction bothered me. I’m stunned that this could happen. I feel a bit helpless and angry, and I’m not sure how to move on. If it were up to me, I’d wave a magic wand tomorrow and no longer be white. Yes... yes, I think that is my “best” answer... I think that is the right answer... I don’t want to be white.

FP: Helpless? That’s an interesting emotion...

JG: I feel something eating me from the inside out. I’ve always thought that the greatest thing about our American democracy is that we are always moving forward. That, no matter what, progress will keep going, things will keep getting better, and nothing that is wrong with America can’t be cured by what is “right with America.” And, honestly, that people can change. That we could and would change from hatred to love. “Yes, we can” and all that. Today, I don’t know if I believe that anymore. I’m ashamed of my country. And ashamed, frankly, of my whiteness. I don’t know if we’ll ever change. I’m ready to abandon it. I don’t want to be white. I want out.

FP: Well James, that’s a very... interesting response. I’m not sure what you mean by that. You no longer wish to “be” white?

JG: Yes. I’m reminded of the concept of “race traitors.” We should abandon whiteness because it is irredeemable. I don’t want to be white.

FP: Well. What would you be? Black?

JG: Well...

FP: I didn’t think so...

JG: You don’t think I shouldn’t want to be white?

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FP: *I am not sure what I think is very important here.* But *I’m also not sure that “being white” is your choice or under your control.*

JG: *Well then what am I supposed to do, Fred?*

FP: *I do not know, James. But can’t you see the arrogance of your whiteness? It has allowed you to come into my office and put the burden of telling you, a white cisgender straight college professor, an answer to a question you are responsible for on me. Saying you don’t want to be white is still denying your whiteness. You’re not rejecting it; you are just trying to hide it.*

Upon hearing this James is stunned. He immediately gets up, turns around, and begins to head to the door.

JG: *I didn’t mean to make you so angry, Fred.*

FP: *James, you came to me today and decided to talk about your whiteness and my reaction as a Black man makes you walk away and label me “angry”? If you leave now, that might be the whitest thing you could do. Why don’t you stay and do the hard work that’s necessary?*

James sits back down.

JG: *What do you mean?*

FP: *What reaction did you expect me to have today? You, a white man, no longer want to be white in a nation dominated by anti-Blackness. Cute. Now what?*

JG: *I thought I was doing the right thing. I just want to fight against this white supremacy we see on display.*

FP: *Are you familiar with the concept of non-performativity?*

JG: *Vaguely. I have heard it used to describe the whitewashed statements universities send after racial incidents.* But what does that have to do with me?

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FP: Using Austin’s conception of performative utterances, Sarah Ahmed contends that when well-intentioned white people admit to their privilege or their racism, they are not intending to make declarative claims; rather, they believe that their utterance does something at the moment of speaking. To put it another way, non-performativity shows us that when white people say things like, “I no longer want to be white” as an acknowledgment of the violence that whiteness has and is perpetrating on all of us, then they are trying to signal distance between themselves and that violence. The declaration, “I no longer want to be white” stands in for any real action toward defeating, rather than reforming, whiteness and mitigating anti-Blackness. Nothing has changed by the white person admitting they no longer want to be white, except that the white person gets to feel better. This seems like the real goal of most liberal attempts to mitigate white supremacy—making white people feel better about themselves.

JG: Fred, do you think I’m the problem here?

FP: So, when you say, “I don’t want to be white anymore,” all I see is you using another version of whiteness to further anti-Blackness. You don’t seem to understand how that reaction just adds a new version to all the other ways we can be racist. This is why I believe that racism is permanent. Even when people think they are rejecting it, they tend to end up reinforcing it.

JG: Ok. I think I see the connection now, Fred. But I do still think it’s possible to actually, not just in words, reject whiteness. After all, I am the one that just walked into your office and said I do not want to be white. I know I’m not perfect, but why level accusations at me when we have white guys committing the acts of insurrection? We need more collaborations to stop these overt racists. There are deep racial problems everywhere, but shouldn’t we gather together to stop the most dangerous versions?

FP: Well as an Afropessimist I think the best answer I can give you is that every act of whiteness and white violence is overt to me. Some are less dramatic, but none are hidden, except by your own white ignorance.

JG: What do you mean? Are you saying my non-performativity is just as bad as a violent insurrection?

30 Sarah Ahmed is a philosopher and feminist writer who produces scholarship work at the intersection of feminist, queer and race studies. Her research is primarily concerned with how bodies and worlds take shape; and how power is secured and challenged in everyday life worlds as well as institutional cultures.
FP: They are all part of the same problem, James. America has been a society dominated by anti-Blackness since before you were born, and it still will be long after you’ve left this earth. The people attacking the capitol on January 6th actively reinforced that truth. But your statement today, and continued inaction, also ensure the structures of anti-Blackness remain intact. It’s inaction like this that makes another insurrection possible. Without actions to tear down these structures, racism is just perpetuated; it’s permanent.

JG: Well, that is certainly a “hot take.” So, do you believe that I am a racist and there is nothing I can do about it?

FP: You keep coming back to YOU in this conversation, James. Do you think that if I “solved” YOU here, we would solve racism?

JG: No, of course not. I am a CWS scholar, so of course I acknowledge systemic racism. But I also believe that there is a way out of such racism. We could transform our world and what it means to be white. It seems like you believe the opposite.

FP: What you need to understand first is that I am a Black man. I live as a Black man. I conduct research as a Black man. And as a Black man, I have experienced the same things you have in America from a very different context and point of view: A point of view that is always shaped and informed by the truth of our history. We are a country built on and by chattel slavery that has never escaped the afterlife of it. So when you say there’s “a way out.” I don’t know how you could believe that, given all the evidence of what we have lived through as an anti-Black country. When we haven’t even acknowledged the need to repair the damage of the Atlantic Slave Trade and chattel slavery exploiting the Black body for free labor, and white pleasure, but the cost was Black suffering. Where you seem to see progress, I only see reification.

JG: I’ll be honest with you, Fred: I’m feeling a little overwhelmed. I thought I came here ready to accept responsibility for our history—to break the narrative. And you’re telling me that I was simply declaring that readiness. But even as I try to prepare myself for what it would mean to actually take up that responsibility, your last statement made me realize that it’s much heavier than I want to admit. I see that it’s naive to believe I could just “fix” this, or even fix my role in this. I can’t work my way out of historical, structural white supremacist violence. What are we supposed to do with that?

FP: Welcome to my world, Dr. Garrison. The despair that you are feeling right now is a shadow of what was felt by me and my people long before January 6th. It was felt in 1619 when the first Africans were kidnapped, raped, and brutalized for white profit and pleasure. It was felt when our nation, the nation we built, failed to live up to its promise of “40 acres and a mule.” It was felt the night President Obama was inaugurated and so many of my colleagues acted like racism was “over.” And I felt it again today, when a white man full of privilege walked into my office and expected me to give him answers and absolution because he felt a moment of shame in his whiteness.

JG: I’ll admit that I’m only—just now—beginning to see the violence I’ve committed against you today. And how that hurt is not new for you, and how that violence is not new for me. I am the other side of these truths. I’m complicit in ensuring the unbroken narrative of our country’s white supremacy.

FP: And that point of view leads me to question if there is a “solution” to whiteness that can come from whiteness? You mentioned CWS; what has that intervention done to combat anti-Blackness, as opposed to... sanitizing whiteness?

JG: I’ve noticed any time I use white supremacy you substitute anti-Blackness. I’m starting to understand that’s intentional on your part.

FP: Just like many forms of so-called anti-whiteness are just white supremacy up in drag as social justice, many forms of “working toward anti-racism” fail to fully conceptualize and comprehend anti-Blackness. I would argue that this failure is explicit, if not intentional, as many who claim that they want to destroy whiteness only seek to transform it into a more palatable form of anti-Black oppression.

JG: Can I ask how you continue to go on despite the realization that nothing will ever change? I’m feeling desperate. I have been carrying the violence of whiteness, and I don’t know how to put it down.

FP: James, that desperate feeling you have is all too familiar to me and many nonwhite people in the United States. In fact, I think we have lived with and by our desperation so much that it has now devolved into utter despair. This is the “social death” that many Afropessimists reference in

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our work. However, hopelessness doesn’t necessarily mean nihilism.\textsuperscript{48} Speaking truth to power about our current situation is its own form of freedom.

**JG:** You’re describing a form of freedom that only seems available to those that have been enslaved. Are you insinuating that for white people to be free, we must first place ourselves in cages?

**FP:** Don’t you see? You’re already in a cage of your own making.\textsuperscript{49} You are bound up because we are ALL still bound. Whiteness necessitates a type of “spiritual death” for all who draw on it, which then facilitates and perpetuates Black social death. The violence that is inflicted on others by people committed to whiteness is a double-edged sword that cuts down those they oppress, even as it maims their own heart—how else could someone callously reject another person’s humanity?\textsuperscript{50} Even if it is hopeless for us to arrive at spiritual and social resurrections from these dual deaths—it is never wasted time to live for humanity.\textsuperscript{51} But first you have to know and be honest with yourself about where we are. Whiteness has us bound in shared cages of your making. Once you see that, then it should be clear: “We have nothing to lose but our chains.” Hopeless or not, it’s the necessary path.

**JG:** Well Fred, perhaps I’ve believed that my “cage” was never really locked—that I could choose to abandon whiteness. I realize that this is just an attempt to forget, to unsee, the bars that close me in. I do want to “lose these chains.” I know I need to see that the cage of whiteness closes me in; it closes in on all of us.

**FP:** That is a good start...

**JG:** ...But I have to say, now, I want to be careful not to extend my white arrogance here by making you responsible for curing my white ignorance. So, if I can ask: Are you interested in going on this journey with me?

**FP:** James, I have no interest in being your “supernegro.”\textsuperscript{52} I’ve also never really seen an attempt to dismantle whiteness result in anything but other versions of anti-Blackness. However, I must admit that I am intrigued by the possibility of dismantling the cage of whiteness, even if I believe it to be impossible. I don’t have the expectation that I should find that out with you, but I’m interested in the questions it raises.

**JG:** I’m glad to hear you say that. But before we go further down this road, I feel like I need to do some more work on this on my own; I need to understand more of these structural elements and how I am implicated in them. I am starting to see how you described that relationship today,


and I think I understand my role in our historical and present violence. Whether I’m active or passive, I still let the structures of whiteness stand. My question now is how can I work to destroy these structures and not just rely on my words to make things “right”? This means that I first need to look directly at how whiteness is a system of violence\(^{53}\), how these structures work, and how it is a tool of broader anti-Blackness in America.

**FP:** Yes. Go do the work James. And when you are ready to continue the conversation, I will be here. But don’t be surprised if the work itself is not enough or not what you expect. After all, in the move toward an unknown horizon, work is a necessary element, but often not sufficient by itself.

The two men depart on good terms and set an undetermined date to meet in the future to resume the conversation.

**PART II**

James and Fred plan to meet up a month after their initial conversation for another meeting on February 15th, 2021. The university is closed for the President’s Day holiday weekend. The conversation was intended to be a direct follow up to their previous discussion, focusing this time on a CWS manuscript James is drafting. However, upon entering James’s office, Fred notices his television, while on mute, is the announcement by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of the commission to investigate January 6th.\(^{54}\)

The conversation follows from there:

**FP:** Hello Dr. Garrison. What an auspicious day to continue this conversation, wouldn’t you say?

**JG:** Indeed, it is. A month ago, I may have been more hopeful. But now, even with this news, I’m skeptical. We’ve seen these commissions come to nothing time and again. Just two days ago we saw the 45th President swiftly acquitted of inciting the insurrection. If anything, this commission is simply further data for my critical whiteness analysis we’ve come to talk about today.

**FP:** Interesting that you would be so skeptical of the January 6th commission yet so accepting of this field known as critical whiteness studies. Do you see no contradiction in those stances?

**JG:** I think I see your point Fred; perhaps CWS’s earliest iterations might have found value in the commission. The first wave of CWS\(^{55}\) was aiming at an analysis of how we can understand and transform our whiteness on an individual level. In many ways, it was too simplistic and too hopeful. It was a project that some saw as achievable if only we found the right model.

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FP: Umm... and you see the current wave of CWS as different in what way?

JG: This second wave of CWS gives “permission to be confused.”56 It is a more complicated view of how whiteness functions and asks whether we can transform from it.57 First, it better takes the structural elements of whiteness and how it perpetuates white supremacy into account. Then, it reads our individual engagement with whiteness through that lens, being critical of our definitions of self and how we might transform as individuals away from whiteness. Importantly, it critiques the essentializing of earlier works, acknowledging the fluid nature of how whiteness re-creates itself.

FP: It seems you’ve concluded that whiteness is “inescapable” for white people, no?

JG: In many ways, I think that’s true. Our first conversation really made me confront this reality. I have abandoned the common idea of being a “good white person.”58 It is a false and unhelpful frame for trying to accomplish the work of dismantling white supremacy.

FP: Sounds good, James. But, if I may, it seems the “we” and “our” you are referring to are still mostly just white people. And the object of CWS is still this nebulous concept of “white supremacy,” with no mention of anti-Blackness. Maybe we can start there. In your own words, can you tell me what exactly CWS is and what it intends to accomplish?

JG: It’s true that much of this work is focused on the actions and identities of white people. I think that is perhaps not the critique you might think, though. It’s important that white people take responsibility—and take action—for who they choose to be and what they choose to do. The world I have known and the identity I have made is rooted in whiteness. My definition of CWS evolves from earlier definitions, taking on the current approach of second wave theorists.59 CWS is a complex analysis of the structural function of whiteness and how individuals develop because of those structures, and how they develop and act to maintain those structures. Further, CWS attempts to decenter whiteness as a way of transforming ourselves and our structures. I’m interested in your thoughts on this definition, but I also have to ask—how do you define anti-Blackness as different from white supremacy?

FP: Thank you for that. That was very well thought out. That definition sounds like a fancy way of white people saying that the problem and the solution to whiteness is, and will always be,

white people.⁶¹ Think about what you just outlined. Do I fit into that at all?⁶² Now to your latter point, I would argue that no “proper” definition of whiteness can neglect the inclusion of the fact that it serves to create, perpetuate, and keep in place anti-Black racism. By anti-Blackness, I mean that one’s very existence as Black is constructed as a problem—for white people, for the public “good,” for the nation–state, and even as a problem for the celebration of racial difference.⁶³ By anti-Blackness, I mean to say that even the critiques of white supremacy seem to take place under, within, and by the authority of the “white gaze.”⁶⁴ You see this even in the current iteration of what you call CWS. Under the white gaze, CWS serves to reproduce anti-Blackness because it appears to be white people simply being introspective about their own whiteness with no real aim or need to mitigate the anti-Blackness in our society and the academy.⁶⁵

**JG:** Ah, I see your point, I think. You make a good critique of fundamental views within CWS. But I should point out that this is already an ongoing struggle. Zeus Leonardo described two pathways of CWS.⁶⁶ Its founding scholars incisively identified the specific ways that whiteness harms oppressed peoples. Recently, scholars have called for a return to these beginnings by arguing for the destruction of whiteness.⁶⁷ The other side argues that whiteness can be reformed. To be sure, this perspective has taken over much of the field. Am I right in believing you are advocating for CWS that calls for the destruction of whiteness?

**FP:** Ah, Dr. Garrison, you simultaneously understand and misunderstand me. I’m familiar with the split within CWS. However, my critique extends to the destruction branch of CWS as well as the watered down reform branch. While you see differences, I see continuity. Both branches contend they are fighting white supremacy while doing very little to attack the beating heart of whiteness, which I contend is anti-Blackness.⁶⁸ What I see is a branch looking to “destroy” whiteness in rhetoric and name only because they have failed to articulate and illustrate how the destruction of whiteness will result in a world materially free from anti-Black racism. In other words, the “destruction of whiteness” branch of CWS appears to be rather non-performative⁶⁹ and not really about destroying anything at all but preserving whiteness in yet another form.

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⁶⁴ Ignatiev, N. (1997). The point is not to interpret whiteness but to abolish it. *Race Traitor*.
**JG:** I agree that we should aim for the destruction of whiteness. But, Fred, I don’t think I agree that CWS’s work in this vein is only non-performative. Is it not important to first identify, analyze, and describe the functions, contours, and damages of whiteness? How else are we supposed to know what we are living in, what we are a part of, to destroy it, and move beyond it?

**FP:** And how long must the “documentation” of whiteness go on while nonwhite people pay the cost of that with our blood, bodies, and minds? If, as you say, it is important to identify, analyze, and describe the violence that whiteness reaps upon all of us, at what point will it be the time to act and end that violence? Is that what your upcoming article attempts to do? Or is it just more academic “documentation”?

**JG:** So, you are calling for a charting of the full destruction of whiteness as we know it. Fred, I wish I could say my project was answering your call, but I don’t think I am up to that task. You, yourself, have commented on the permanence of racism—and therefore the permanence of whiteness. How could we move forward except in trying to persistently identify and deconstruct the latest versions of whiteness?

**FP:** You have to understand that permanence does not have to result in performative paralysis. Just because the world we live in right now mandates certain outcomes does not mean that we must limit the academic imagination to those outcomes, particularly when we know such outcomes are rooted in anti-Black violence. But I am not a critical whiteness scholar, James; you are. So let me ask you some questions. Why has there been so much effort to “identify and deconstruct whiteness,” but so little effort in the field toward action that would end the material benefits that come from white supremacy, the violence against Blacks, and the preservation of anti-Blackness?

**JG:** Fred, I think CWS is trying to make space for that possibility. I hope that my work reveals the damages of whiteness for people to try to take action. But I do wonder: Do we even know what that action could look like? Have we ever seen it before, in the way you are meaning?

**FP:** No, but that’s the point. This version of CWS seems perpetually stuck waiting for others to act while they continue to identify and document whiteness. This allows for a certain amount of liberal white comfort, working for an anti-racist cause in half-measure while still maintaining white privileges. Such half measures implicitly maintain the space for more complex and fancy forms of anti-Blackness. Rather than constantly analyzing whiteness for what it is, maybe more CWS scholarship should purposefully aim to change the impact that anti-Blackness has on all of our day-to-day lives. If we continuously make ending white supremacy the focus of anti-racist

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efforts, rather than ending anti-Blackness, then we are only focused on reform under the white gaze.  

**JG:** I’m a little confused, Fred; how do you see a focus on the destruction of white supremacy as different from a focus on reducing anti-Blackness?  

**FP:** If the focus remains on anti-Blackness, then we may be able to see that white supremacy is a tool for the continual destruction of Black people and not simply efforts to privilege white people. If we ignore that anti-Blackness shapes the definition and function of white supremacy, then it is easy to “soften” the violence of white supremacy. We must remember that the project of racism is dependent on the destruction of Black bodies. To truly contest anti-Blackness, as opposed to “fighting” white supremacy in a non-performative way, the work must seek to contest the devaluation of Black life and not just the garish elimination of white privilege.

**JG:** I appreciate these critiques of CWS, and I’ll take them to heart as I think about how to revise my article to address anti-Blackness more directly. But I have to say that our conversation today feels at odds with our first conversation in some ways. Today you’ve argued for the transformation of CWS to compel white people to act in the ending of anti-Black violence. Yet, I left our first conversation feeling the weight of the almost nihilistic permanence of racism that you’ve described as Afropessimism. This seems like an intractable contradiction, Don’t you think?

**FP:** As racism and its progeny are illogical, James, many of the thoughts around it are situated in contradiction. I think we both have some work to do in our fields as we continue these conversations. Let me give your response some thought and let’s plan on meeting again to talk about the paper, as it seems we’ve exhausted our time for today.

The two men depart on good terms and set an undetermined date to meet in the future to resume the conversation.

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On April 11th, 2021, an officer was involved in the “accidental” shooting of an unarmed Black man, Daunte Wright, in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota. The shooting took place approximately twelve miles away from the location of and eleven months following the murder of George Floyd. On April 20th, former police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted by a jury of his “peers” for that crime. That same day, Ma’Khia Bryant, a 16-year-old Black girl, was fatally shot by police officer Nicholas Reardon in southeast Columbus, Ohio. The juxtaposition of the killings of Wright and Bryant with the conviction of the murderer of George Floyd causes James and Fred to come together and discuss the contradictions within their fields against the backdrop of these latest injustices.

The two meet via Zoom on April 21st, 2021, for a discussion on these topics:

**JG:** Fred, I want to ask how you feel about the George Floyd verdict. If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand. I just want to make space for you to express anything you think you need to here, considering everything that is occurring around us.

**FP:** There are things I want to but can’t say. There are things I don’t think I should say that maybe you need to hear. But if I had to sum up my emotions, I think the single word I would use is grief.\(^82\) Intellectually, if I had to sum up my thoughts, the single word I would use is used.\(^83\) I honestly don’t expect you to understand either...

**JG:** Thank you for sharing what you have, Fred. I too feel the grief of the moment, but I realize our griefs are different, and much cannot be shared. If you’ll allow me, I do have a question about what you’ve just said. I don’t understand your choice of “used” as an intellectual response.

**FP:** First, please know that if we are going to go down this road, there will be a point at which we get stuck\(^84\) because I do not expect you to fully understand my responses.\(^85\) This is not to attack your intellect but just to say that whiteness can sometimes blunt understanding.\(^86\) I am fine with sharing my ideas in this conversation, but I must be careful with whom I share my pain.\(^87\)

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The two men sit in silence on the Zoom call for about 90 seconds. A capella. Staring at each other staring at each other through a computer screen.

**JG:** ...Sorry for such a long pause. Thank you for sharing that. I’m being confronted by the realizations that anything I could say right now would only focus on my own experience and whiteness.88

**FP:** True enough, James. I have a question for you: What do you think would have happened had the person that lynched George Floyd been found not guilty?

**JG:** I think we’ve already seen what would have happened. We have seen the race riots and protests that came at the tail end of the 1960s civil rights era; we have seen the community responses to the deaths of Michael Brown89, Sandra Bland90, and Freddie Gray.91 There would have been justified protests. And in response to that, the people in power would minimize Black pain to maintain systems of white comfort.92 There might be a few non-performative statements93 before calls to use “the master’s tools”94 to institute reform to the white supremacist system instead of working to destroy it.95 And the cycle would start over again.

**FP:** Justified protest...?96 Who gets to decide whether the protest of the oppressed is justified or not, James?97 The oppressors?98

**JG:** No, you’re right. I’ve again tried to place myself as a “good white” person99 compared to those who might claim protest as an overreaction.

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FP: Understood. We must acknowledge that the minimization of Black pain and Black suffering is a real thing, particularly in the academy. You asked why I used the word “used” when describing my reaction to the Derrick Chauvin verdict...

JG: Yes, I was interested in that word specifically...

FP: I used the word “used” rather intentionally here because I feel that Black bodies and Black pain are oftentimes used to placate white people into accepting unjust systems. Yes, I feel better today than I would have had the verdict come out the other way. But I’m sure I will feel bad tomorrow when yet another unarmed Black child is killed but America’s temporary infatuation with Black loss has moved on. Did you not hear, James, that at almost the same time that yesterday’s verdict was being announced, Ma’Khia Bryant was shot in Ohio?

JG: I did hear, Fred. This week seems particularly full of tragedies. I understand your point on placation and how we can use Black pain to relieve our guilt. And out of that, we let systemic racism continue, unchallenged. I can’t help but wonder if maybe after seeing the serial, systemic violence—multiple cases of police killings in a single week—it might be enough to reveal to white people the systemic nature of white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

FP: I think the best response to that is “LOL,” as the kids say. What evidence do you have to believe that such a “revelation” is even possible, much less probable?

JG: I’m not sure I have the evidence. But it seems as though the Black pain that has always been a part of America is more visible to white Americans now.

FP: James, your response reminds me of why I disagree with the so-called Afrofuturists.

JG: Curious thought, Fred: Why does my response remind you of Afrofuturists?

FP: Well, James, the term “Afrofuturism” was coined in 1993 by a white man, Mark Dery, and can be said to refer to any and all “speculative” fiction that treats African American or Black themes and seemingly addresses Black concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture.¹⁰⁸

JG: That’s a little ambiguous. Do you mean like the movie Black Panther?

FP: Well, maybe.¹⁰⁹ I would say that, more to the point, Afrofuturism can be understood as an incredibly wide-ranging social, political, and artistic movement that seeks to imagine a world where African-descended peoples and their cultures can play a central role in the creation of that world.¹¹⁰ You mentioned a movie, but I would more associate Afrofuturism with the works of novelists Octavia Butler,¹¹¹ and N.K. Jemison,¹¹² the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat,¹¹³ the music videos of Janelle Monae,¹¹⁴ or even the later music of A Tribe Called Quest.¹¹⁵

JG: So why do you disagree with Afrofuturist works? Are they too hopeful in your view?

FP: Well, first let me say I respect and enjoy the work produced under the banner of the genre. I view Afrofuturism and Afropessmism as two sides of the same project within the Black radical imagination.¹¹⁷ However, I think the larger Afrofuturism movement tends to rely on, and perhaps overuse, existing linguistics and semantics to make a claim that we’re out of the realm of absolute abjection and despair that I think we are still in.¹¹⁸ To me, that’s just religious thinking. Faith without the evidence of things seen. I would argue that anyone making such a claim, Afrofuturists or otherwise, moves from analysis to idealism without “showing the move.”¹¹⁹ As an

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
Afropessimist, I find it hard to fathom how one can even imagine “another world” inside of the anti-Black episteme in which we live.\textsuperscript{120}

\textbf{JG}: Are you saying that people can’t imagine “wildly” enough? It seems you tie these narratives back to what already exists.

\textbf{FP}: What I am trying to convey, James, is that our imaginations are captured in the afterlife of slavery as much as anything else is and…. I believe everything is. You must get past that before you imagine a world free from the ontology and epistemology of anti-Blackness, not after.\textsuperscript{121} In other words, the “possibility of being” operates as an abstraction, but the “absence of the possibility of being” is what is truly material.\textsuperscript{122}

\textbf{JG}: We can’t live outside of the world we are a part of. We may have found some common ground here, Fred. This reminds me of sociocultural theories of development\textsuperscript{123} and what we are capable of doing or thinking.\textsuperscript{124} We are made by our world, even as we make our world.\textsuperscript{125} But, to return to the original question—how is my comment on white Americans seeing Black pain reminiscent of Afrofuturism? Are you saying this kind of white double consciousness is not possible to even imagine in our world?\textsuperscript{126}

\textbf{FP}: We may have found common grounds James, but just to be clear; I am not just saying that a form of white double consciousness is just not possible; it’s nonsensical. For one to think otherwise, one must willfully embrace ignorance to obscure the truth.\textsuperscript{127} The work of Black Afrofuturists seems to be trying to reach beyond a world bound by the absence of the possibility of white double consciousness. But this, in my view, means that the work is often still reactionary rather than truly revolutionary—it tends to be so caught up in reacting to a world captured by white gaze\textsuperscript{128}, that the work no longer has much of a gaze of its own.\textsuperscript{129}

\textbf{JG}: That criticism seems awfully pessimistic, Fred. I’ve read some of the creative works you mentioned, and I find many of them prescient and inspired. I think there must be room for creativity that aims at destroying, or at least decentering, whiteness that could cast a vision we can dream toward.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
FP: What you call pessimism, I suspect I would refer to as simple racial realism. But I thought we were having a conversation about Afrofuturism, James? Why does everything always have to come back to whiteness?

JG: I see what I just did there. Let me try and rephrase. Have you seen Afrofuturism that allows for the possibility of a white double consciousness that would aid in the destruction of whiteness? Essentially, I’m asking where can we, as white people, fit in? Should we abandon futurism and come alongside with our own white pessimism?

FP: White pessimism? That is rather amusing. I think the first thing you, or any white person, can do is resist the need to “fit” into all places at all times. Second, I want to point out, now, a consistent tact you’ve taken in our latest conversation. I’ll note that in the last few minutes, you’ve brought up the scholarship of Du Bois with double consciousness, you’ve appropriated Afrofuturism to make “better” white people, and you’re now attempting to appropriate Afropessimism in some attempt to—what? Retrofit our work to answer the question of how to destroy whiteness as a white person for white people? Why should it be up to the minoritized and the marginalized to construct a world free of whiteness from only our imagination? Why can’t you and other CWS scholars do the work of imagining a world that exists after the destruction of whiteness and not just analyze the world that is currently dying from whiteness?

JG: I think we’ve run up against this limitation before. And I’ll call upon sociocultural work again to describe it further. I don’t think there is capacity for that kind of white imagination. We need a “more knowing other” to guide our zone of proximal development. We have learned, so fundamentally, how to be white that to be anything else would be to lose too much of who we are and what we know now.

FP: James, it seems you are saying that being white in this country is “so hard” that you are unable to even imagine bearing the cost that some Black people have had to pay for generations to be rid of whiteness. If that is truly the case, I am not sure what to tell you. What I am sure of is that I can’t be yours, or any white person’s, magical negro on the road to racial redemption. That is neither my job nor my calling.

The sooner white people

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allow themselves to experience the despair of their inhumanity, the sooner we can begin doing the work to correct this.

**JG:** What lies beyond the horizon. That’s a project I can take up. It’s the project I wish I could have named many months ago when I naively demanded not to be white. The path here, it seems, has been laid and paved many times over. I’m reminded, even, of Du Bois, who you seem to echo, who said, “The cost of liberty is less than the price of repression, even though that cost be blood.”

Perhaps a project of creating “what lies beyond the horizon,” of imagining a post-white futurism, might be its own exploration of learning how to pay, finally, the cost of liberty.

**FP:** You know, I never thought about that in that way to be honest, James. But now that you say it, that might be a worthwhile exploration for a critical whiteness scholar. A space for white imagination and development that does not try to impose that white gaze on Black projects, but whose purpose is the intentional thinking of a world free of anti-Black racism. Now, I still think that world would be a fantastic one and might as well be produced by Disney. But that is just me. I do think that is a more positive direction to move the white attention, rather than just constantly analyzing whiteness.

**JG:** I don’t know how much more can be said, Fred. I feel compelled to close our conversation and start my own work based on where we’ve arrived.

**FP:** You’ve finally arrived where I wish we had started James. I am encouraged, but I’m exhausted. I’m glad you got something out of this, truly I am. But just consider for a moment, before we depart, the work that has gone into these discussions. I was already tired from repeatedly seeing the killings of Black youth on our collective screens. And it has now taken three conversations to get to a point where you are almost ready to begin to contribute to “anti-racism” without imposing the white gaze. I just want you to understand the Black labor it takes sometimes to get even the “best” most woke white people to this point.

Given the emotional weight of this conversation the two men decide to give it some time before they reconvene again. They log out of Zoom, turn off their screens, and close their laptops.

#FadetoBlack

The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white.

—James Baldwin

**Outro**

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Wow…. That was A Lot Of Work For Fred

Black labor is often taken for granted. The work needed to prepare, secure, and maintain Black intellectual spaces often goes unrecognized (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019). In this counter-story, Fred leads us to an inevitable conclusion: There is a need for Black spaces that are not surveilled by white faces (Jenkins et. al, 2021; Fiske, 1998). It is clear that both men put in work in this conversation, but what is evident is that the labor was not equally distributed.

We hope that one of the main takeaways from this track is a recognition of the unseen and uncompensated labor that many Black educators, whether race scholars or not, are forced to endure in the academy (Tuitt et al., 2009). While the object of this counter-story may appear to be an explanation of the space that whiteness takes up, the explicit purpose of the counter-story is to illuminate the use and abuse of Black labor to reveal through metaphor the complexities of anti-Blackness, particularly in the academy (Rodriguez, 2012). More broadly, we concentrate on the exploitation of Black labor here to describe two truths; the Black mind is a genesis of racial progress in the U.S. and Black labor is abused and co-opted to recenter whiteness rather than attack anti-Blackness. Thus, Black labor (intellectual, emotional, spiritual, etc.) gets captured into a perpetual cycle (Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014) of use and abuse as creative progress is made and re-made from anti-whiteness into anti-Blackness.

At the start, we endeavored to explore the question: What does it take for a person to be capable of moving toward a post-white horizon? The answer that we found is as painful as it is evident: Black labor is what is always called up, frequently sacrificed, and too easily overused and abused to bring about racial progress. This finding is not new, but rather sits in conversation with such foundational pieces in the canon of race scholars as Derrick Bell’s (1980) interest convergence theory and the late Charles Mills’s (1997) racial contract, and W. E. B. Du Bois’s (2015) seminal The Souls of Black Folk.

What we hope to add to this ongoing conversation is a demonstration that this abuse of Black labor appears in a symbiotic relationship with white complacency and often results in white people distancing themselves from the responsibility of changemaking that all who benefit from whiteness have. Thus, even some so-called progressive scholarship operates under the “afterlife” of slavery and subsumes some of the practices that the master used to subdue the slave.

Through the method of dialogic counternarrative, we hope to speak to an alternative path that points us toward a post-white horizon, rather than the white sanitized lies of racial progress that preserve the privileges of whiteness while changing nothing but its rhetoric (Ray et al., 2017). Through this narrative, we raise the possibility of unpacking the potential power of Black labor once it has been freed from the white gaze and allowed to grow on its own terms. To be clear, Black scholars contribute rich knowledge and have for years. Yet the question remains: What else might be constructed, designed, imagined, and formulated free from the white gaze?

We hope this project illuminates the idea that it is not more Black labor that is required to compel the white imagination into post-whiteness. What is necessary today is for the white imagination to get over its need to control the possibilities of progress, to make space for what might become. Whiteness wants to have its cake and eat it too. The white liberal imagination craves the credit for affirming Black knowledge, but only if that knowledge leads to whitewashed racial progress. It does this while simultaneously seeking to avoid responsibility for the exploitative means used to achieve its hegemonic ends.
Therefore the myth of the “good white person,” particularly but not exclusively in American academia, is often extraordinarily destructive and can lead to the creation and preservation of many anti-Black epistemologies. The mythological “good white person” judges the Black mind not on its own merits but by how quickly that Black mind can become understandable, palatable, and usable for “progressive” whiteness.

**So, What About This Post-White Futurism**

This project seeks to offer the “possibility of possibility,” even within ontologies that see racial progress as impossible (Bell, 1992a). This is not because we believe that “we shall always overcome” (Seamster & Ray, 2018); on the contrary, it stems from the compulsion of a desperation brought on by the inhumanity of racism. This compulsion means that hopefulness is not an inert state. Hopefulness, instead, is found directly in the action of “working toward what could be otherwise” (Anders & Lester, 2019, p. 932).

To be clear, the focus of this track was not on advancing the racial understanding of our white character, Dr. James Garrison. As previously mentioned, it was to reveal the position and labor of Dr. Frederick Malcolm Powell. But Dr. Garrison is not simply a passive foil for Dr. Powell. Rather, what we hope we have shown with Dr. Garrison’s character is what might happen when those who say they are committed to stopping anti-Blackness work to remove, rather than re-impose, the white gaze from the social justice activities of Black people.

We do think that there is a future for study in post-white futurism for the purposes of redirecting the white gaze. By post-white futurism, we mean to offer a challenge to white racial scholars to produce scholarship, art, music, and media that imagines what our world can look like when it is free from anti-Blackness and the role whiteness takes up in that world. Post-white futurism will imagine present impossibilities and demand that post-white futurists decenter whiteness in their efforts to decenter whiteness. Ultimately, the creation of a post-white futurism might redirect the white gaze toward its own means of self-destruction, in which a post-white futurist, from their current position, imagines the worlds that we need to eliminate the power of the white gaze and whiteness.

In this work, white scholars might explore the contours of responsibility they owe to the project of eradicating whiteness while not falling into the pitfalls of internalized white study for mythical white progress. In a post-white futurism, the project is not to map how whiteness works within us, but to imagine beyond, and despite, ourselves for how we might live without whiteness. More to the point, projects that fall under the banner we call post-white futurism will intentionally seek to mitigate the impact that anti-Blackness has on all our lives.

The idea of white race scholars doing the work of imagining what a world that does not subscribe to anti-Blackness would look like seems as compelling as it is necessary. However, what this project has hopefully illustrated is that the cost to produce such a future, should not—cannot—come on the backs of more Black bodies (Cann & McCloskey, 2017) or at the expense of the exhaustion of more Black minds. That is not a future free of white supremacy but one embedded in yet another version of anti-Blackness.

Neither should a post-white futurism project exist as a thinly veiled attempt by white scholars to colonize Afrofuturism or Africanfuturism (Hanchey, 2021). Such an imperialist reclamation (Nishi, 2020) of an anticolonial effort is the norm for much progressive scholarship but would be the antithesis of anything worthy of the label post-white futurism. Rather, what a post-white futurism would be is a space of detox for those who have been so long addicted to the
An intoxicating drug known as whiteness. It would be a kind of rehabilitation for those whose social and cultural identity development was interrupted by whiteness (Thandeka, 1999). Post-white futurism, then, would be the hard work of people creating worlds and lives out of the destruction of whiteness and developing social and cultural identities of shared humanity. What might this look like in practice? We anticipate that is precisely the question that scholars who engage in the work of post-white futurism would attempt to answer.

With this in mind, we cannot fall into the danger of imagining that whiteness can be “undone” or “unlearned,” that there is a “return” to make before whiteness. There is no social, cultural past in the U.S. that does not include whiteness. What questions, rather than immediate answers, can we pose so that we can begin enacting the process of making a world beyond whiteness?

Thus far, CWS has failed to recognize or address a pattern of historical platitudes which have shored up whiteness at times when it might otherwise have been upended (Boyce, 2022). Whiteness takes up space wherever it goes, even when we work to de-center and limit it. In any scholarship or education, whiteness will extract labor, perpetuate suffering, and limit possibility. Imagining a place beyond whiteness and free of anti-Blackness affords us the ability to ask questions geared toward fostering a shared humanity. Importantly, this turn toward post-white futurism might afford space to traditions of scholarship away from the white gaze and begin the foundation for work that is not dependent on the unrecognized expectation of Black labor. In a phrase, it is the possibility of unexplored possibilities.

We hope you read this outro not as the end of our project, but rather as a beginning. This is fundamentally a project that aims to orient ourselves toward a post-white horizon. We do this not to placate whiteness but to open up the space for truly anti-racist ventures that decenter whiteness even in the efforts to destroy it. This is the post-white horizon that is currently limited to metaphor. We acknowledge that arrival at this point is impossible. But, before we even embark on such a journey, we know that there is work to do that points us in the right direction. We hope to work through how to face toward the horizon and begin this journey. Future work will explore the journey itself. We, therefore, conclude with a beginning, an invitation to freely imagine and freely create.
References


University Journal of Law & Policy, 18, 13–45.


Call* For Tracks and Creative Works

The Black Educology Mixtape Vol. II: It’s A Weird Time To Be Black

“Supreme” Rules

Bodily Autonomy — The Supreme Court struck down the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade decision

Miranda Rights — The Supreme Court ruled that suspects may not sue officers who fail to inform them of their right to remain silent for damages.

Gun Laws — The Supreme Court struck down a New York gun law enacted more than a century ago that placed restrictions on carrying a concealed handgun outside the home.

Church and State — The Supreme Court said Maine cannot exclude religious schools from a tuition assistance program that allows parents to use vouchers to send their children to public or private schools.

“That's all anybody can do right now. Live. Hold out. Survive. I don’t know whether good times are coming back again. But I know that won’t matter if we don’t survive these times.”

— Octavia Butler, Parable of the Sower

*Calling all Black Educologists, fugitives, escape artists, educational disruptors, and topographers of the weird.

We don’t need cartographers, we been had the maps...

Our muscled memories have been trained over a millenia of experiences that have kept us on a path towards liberation. After the most recent Supreme Court decisions, we are living in the afterlife of a past that we carry with us, a path that some of us have chosen to escape through Afros, Afro-Pessimism and/or Afrofuturism. Thus, this familiarity is not a dejavu moment; rather a reminder of our past lives in the present. As we “after live,” how do we distill our experiences as educational refugees and fugitives?

On the heels of releasing Volume I of our Black Educology mixtape, we are witnessing the dismantling of mythological america for the sake of consolidating power. Some are drawing analogies to 1984 or The Handmaid’s Tale. Yet these are white narratives wherein whites lose their “god granted” and “inalienable rights” to the pursuit of happiness. Octavia Butler’s (1993) Parable of the Sower is a more accurate depiction of america’s current direction as she shows the loss of humanity in the wake of social and environmental collapse. Christina Sharpe (2016) states, “and while the wake produces Black death and trauma—we, Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake” (p. 11). This call is not about fixing the world at large or uprooting white-centered institutions but rather about how we continue to exist in the constant wake work to repair, restore, and heal as a community.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of possible tracks:

Afro-Pessimism
Are we progressing and/or regressing?
Dehumanization of Black folk and the marketability of Black identities
In this moment, juxtaposed with afrofuturism: who is hope for?
How do historical imprints continue to exist on Black Bodies in the institution of education?
Black ontologies versus constitutional rights
Black Readability
Tensegrity of a global matrix Blackness
Global Matrix of Domination, the folly of diasporic dreaming
Does Blackness exist in a post capitalist society?
Supreme court rulings

Afro-futurism — Speculative Fiction

- What if Brown v. Board was overturned?
- Conceptualization of Black humanity
- What would an episode about Black folks in 2023 look like (e.g. Black Mirror | Insecure | Atlanta)
- Traveling/Living Abroad while Black
- New Black Refugee
- Afrocentricity in Education

Timeline:

- May 1st, 2023 — Full tracks and Abstracts
- June 10th, 2023 — Acceptance of your work will be sent by to assist in your preparation for the complete track.
- September 1st, 2023 — Revised tracks
- September 30th, 2023 — Additional Feedback given. Final revisions are due
- November 1st, 2023 — Final Revisions Due
- December 2023 — The Black Educology Mixtape Vol. II LAUNCH

If you have any questions, please email the producers at blackeducology@gmail.com. In addition, please let us know if you expect any delays. For more information on Black Educology, visit our website at https://blackeducology.org/. Please share this call widely.

Sent with Possibility,

The Producers