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Put Down that Book! Producing Poetry to Center Students as Organic Intellectuals

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University of San Francisco

Put Down that Book!
Producing Poetry to Center Students
as Organic Intellectuals

A Field Project Proposal Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in International and Multicultural Education

By
Jacqueline Elizabeth Boland
May 2023

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Mom, you gave me my ecstatic enthusiasm for life, and it is your love and joy I carry when the world gets heavy. I am always just one memory away from being eight years old in a museum with you again, and then I'm back to being inspired. We miss you every moment of every day. Dad, you are the best example of being a lifelong learner that I have ever met. Thank you for rooting me on every step of the way and reminding me that education is never wasted. Jaren, I feel so lucky to have a sister who supports both my personal and professional goals with equal parts excitement. The love disguised as endless hours you gave your students was my first model of what it means to keep caring, even when it isn't convenient. Justin, you remind me that rest is necessary, and that we humans were meant to be "beings," not "doings." Your advice about balance keeps me well, and you embody someone fully alive and able to appreciate the world around him.

To my classmates, cohort, and colleagues who are always making my brain bigger — Thank you for sharing all of your radical re-imaginings and zealous passion for the work we do. You keep me hopeful and inspired, and there is no greater combination towards a just and loving future. I want to especially thank Dr. Melissa Canlas, who was my first introduction to the IME program, and whose spirit and passion is the reason I wanted to join the community. My ions of gratitude are also owed to Dr. David Donahue, whose words of wisdom about writing are ones I'll keep close for a lifetime. Thank you both for modeling what it looks like to humanize education, while also showing me how fulfilling a life committed to this work can be.

To my students, past, present and future — You break my heart wide open each day and expand my capacity for love without even knowing it; this one is for all of you.

ABSTRACT

Schools are often sites of hegemony, where certain knowledge and voices are prioritized over others. This hierarchy frequently discounts students as producers of their own knowledge, ignoring the wisdom gleaned from their lived experiences, diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and cultural communities. While the study of literature inside a high school English classroom can be fruitful for students to acquire empathy and perspective, it is only effective when it is equitable. Educators must implement diverse representation in narratives, characters, authors and texts to represent students whose identities exist at the margins. Positioning work by Women of Color in the classroom is central to inviting students, especially the historically underrepresented and under researched experiences of Black and brown girls in education, to engage with organic intellectualism, and see themselves as producers of knowledge. This field project offers a curriculum of three lesson plans which elevate the work of Aurora Levins Morales and bell hooks, and eight selected poets (who are also women of color), to model organic intellectualism and its power in personal poetry. These lessons culminate in original, student created poetry, with opportunities for classmates to witness and cherish each others' voices and wisdom.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence.
It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival
and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.
~ Audre Lorde 1985*

Returning to one's high school as an adult is a complicated experience; the "behind the scene" access granted to educators is liberating, mystifying, flattering, and at times, mind boggling. In August of 2018, a few months after completing my undergraduate degree, I returned to my former high school as an alumni volunteer, to serve the community that I held dear for its formation of my social justice education situated within Jesuit ideology. While I had intentionally chosen a college whose demographic of students was vastly diversified from my college prep education, in hopes of experiencing as much of the world as possible, its secularity was jarring and I was excited to re-enter a community of faith with an "adultified" outlook. Most of all, after loving my four years at a large public university I found to be a wonderfully liberal, global citizen minded school, I wanted to see if my high school had adapted its education in the same direction. I hoped to bring the best (most celebratory of diversity, most open minded, most intellectually curious and socially compassionate) parts of my college into the carpeted hallways I once loved, in a mission I jokingly, and then more seriously called, "you gotta be in the system to change the system."

My most memorable time spent working with students was when I was a one on one advisor for a caseload considered academically "at-risk;" students who had below a 2.0 GPA and were either exhibiting a lack of engagement with their academics, and/or operating with learning differences. I wish I had the language of Victor Rios at the time, to instead call this group "at-promise... the potential that every single person has but that only a precious few are given

space and time to express” (as quoted in Benjamin, 2022, p.102). This particular group of students that I tutored and mentored were part of a program that also offered support for students who had any (and often, multiple) of the following identities: first generation students, students traditionally underrepresented in higher education, or students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Rapport building quickly became my priority; it was apparent that without trust and a true investment in their lives, these students weren’t about to depend on an adult (albeit, admittedly very young) who was new to campus. I advocated for them with their teachers and counselors, met parents, stayed late after hours connecting peers and forming makeshift study groups, served as an adult chaperone on a four day long college tour, attended performances and panels and games where my students were featured, and showed up at their Affinity Club spaces when invited. I knew the more I was able to witness these students sharing their strengths, desires and hopes outside of the classroom, the more I would learn what ways to motivate them inside formal academic spaces. I wanted them to unlearn the narrative that “school just wasn't their thing” and know that in addition to being talented dancers, athletes and spoken word artists, theirs could also be a voice who could be depended on to participate in class, too. Largely, it worked. And when I say that, I don’t mean that GPAs skyrocketed or there was never another missing assignment, but the students started telling me about their *real* lives, the ones that existed at home, the challenges they tried to keep under wraps, and what it felt like learning in a place that felt overwhelmingly “white,” especially when you weren’t.

Fast forward to the end of an academic year where I exchanged the hats I wore so quickly even the most fastidious shopper would be envious, and you’ll meet soon to be full time faculty member Ms. Boland, ecstatic at the prestigious position offered her, and operating with a steadfast desire to promise her future students the best of each area of student life possible.

However, right away, I noticed my rapport in the classroom with a similar demographic of students I had mentored and formed strong, supportive relationships with the previous year, did not express the same level of interest or engagement in *this* academic setting. (This was my first indication that classroom teachers can be viewed very differently from academic advisors or support staff.) I couldn't figure out what was blocking my student-teacher connection; surely I was the same type of educator in front of a room of thirty as opposed to with an audience of one, right? When I thought back to the most effective strategies I employed within my previous positions, I remembered that students were most motivated to get work done when their friends were doing the same. There was something about a social support system that was missing in the classroom, and it became strikingly clear what it was – out of thirty students, there were no more than two or three Black or Brown identifying students in the same room at any given time. My same students that spent lunch and after school together, overlapped in extracurriculars and rooted each other on when a study session was accomplished, commiserated over sharing zip codes that had them commuting farther to and from school, and witnessed each others' successes and adversity at an institution not built for them in mind, now had the statistically improbable chance of sitting in a classroom together. How is one supposed to learn in a space that is absent of one's strongest social bonds?

While I knew I couldn't magically change student schedules, nor ignore the fact that there were fruitful friendships between peers of different backgrounds, I knew I wanted to actively resist setting up a classroom that operated like another space which perpetuated whiteness. While I couldn't change my race or my face, I could be intentional about welcoming more voices of color into the room. In hopes of bringing my most reluctant student participants, my Black and

Latina girl students, to the foreground by offering one fragment of familiarity, I decided to center the voices and writings of Women of Color in my literature curriculum.

Statement of the Problem

Often in high school literature courses, there is a focus on studying, celebrating and emulating authors who are no longer living, nor are representative of the multitude of students' identities. While this literature has its place in mainstream society, centering voices outside the room denies the classroom community an opportunity to develop, cherish, and share the perspectives that already exist inside the classroom. Since dominant culture prioritizes the stories of white, cis-het, able-bodied males, there is often a large gap when it comes to honoring other bodies that exist in opposition to those identity markers, specifically Black women. The opportunity for Black girls (and other student identities who exist at the margins) to show off their strengths is predicated upon a teacher's commitment to prioritizing representations of diversity within literature, practicing inclusive writing practices, and demanding that a mindset of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and organic intellectualism (Morales, 2001) is central within our learning communities.

When classrooms operate like conveyor belts, it is made clear that the product outweighs the process. When students are treated like parts of a whole as opposed to whole within and of themselves, we know the neoliberal agenda has capitalized (or capitalism-ified) upon our classroom curricula. The problem with this format of education is that the cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and organic intellectual (Morales, 2001) inside each and every student is not being nurtured. As with rights and labor, those who suffer the most in inequitable times are Black women, as they exist diametrically opposed to the delineations of America's dominant narrators: white and male. Without representative texts, marginalized voices are silenced, and students are

reluctant to engage in a learning environment that does not reflect their needs and desires, honor their identities, nor make an effort to understand their disparate histories and home spaces. Diverse and decolonized curriculum is imperative, especially considering the lack of racial representation from educators in classrooms; in America, white women make up 80% of the teaching workforce (King, 2016).

The recorded experiences of Black school aged girls is minimal when compared to the educational studies conducted on behalf of their white, and/or male, counterparts (Johnson 2015). This gap in knowledge leaves young Black women underrepresented in research, and their needs and desires largely unrecognized in systems of schooling. Phenomena that are overlooked are often at risk of being deprioritized, an injustice that comes at the cost of failing to create inclusive writing practices in the classroom. The body of knowledge that exists about African American girls is limited, since the intersectionality of their identities seems to be overlooked at best, and intentionally ignored at worst in instances of scholarship (Johnson, 2015). The issue of limited research on African American school girls' experiences is not a new discovery. Dating back to 1976, Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot reported "young black girls are an ignored and invisible population" (Johnson, 2015, p.27) whose needs have failed to be recognized by scholars whose areas of focus concentrate solely on African American male youth, or generalizes the experiences of Women of Color in academic settings.

Background and Need: Centering Organic Intellectualism to

Combat Barriers Enacted Against Black Girl Students

The following section offers data which is necessary in order to understand the barriers enacted against Black school aged girls in places of formal education. Many of the statistics are troubling, and it is imperative that the reader does not absorb this information from a deficit

based lens. Situating any community in trauma (especially as an outsider) is problematic, as it can perpetuate myths that are wielded against many communities of color. My purpose in citing the scholarship below is to honor those who have shined a light on an overlooked phenomenon, and to validate the need to center Black high school aged girls' experiences in education. It is within this centering that students will start to see themselves as organic intellectuals (Morales, 2001) who have viable wisdom to share with their communities, based on their lived experience. The nurturing of the organic intellectual in each student, especially those made to feel marginalized in formal school settings, is imperative not only to keep students engaged in their own education, but to affirm that they have power and agency in making their learning meaningful and purposeful.

In her work, "Falling through the Cracks: Black Girls and Education," Shawn Arango Ricks (2014) notes that a majority of the studies which have looked at marginalized groups in education are focused on either white females or Black males. Black girls' strengths and needs have been ignored since "feminist epistemologies tend to be concerned with the education of White girls and women, and race-based epistemologies tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively affecting Black boys" (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p.12). Furthermore, when Black female students are made visible it is for their coping and defense mechanisms from the trauma of being rendered invisible, which are then misinterpreted by those in power as aggressive acts (Ricks, 2014). Black school girls are disproportionately punished by disciplinary systems in schools (Johnson, 2015). The negative outcomes of being suspended from school do more than tarnish one's academic record; suspensions result in a loss of learning, a lack of engagement with school upon return, and can increase the chance of a student experiencing depression (Johnson, 2015). These consequences impact students outside of academic settings.

Girls that experience disciplinary action at their schools are three times more likely to have an encounter with the juvenile justice system within that same year (ACLU, 2004; UCLA Civil Rights Project, 2012, p. 26). While the findings from these studies are important to address institutionalized racism and sexism occurring in schools, and systemic racism existing in the justice system, the data lends a deficit view to the conversation surrounding Black school girls (Howell, Norris, Williams, 2019). Specific, focused and concentrated scholarship that accounts for the intersectionality of being Black, a student, and a person at the age of girlhood is necessary for “use in developing supportive services, policies and best practices for working with Black school girls” (Johnson, 2015, p.27). The following literature review in Chapter II will offer intersectional, strengths based scholarship to illuminate ways educators can better engage students with these identity markers, as well as recognize the assets/gifts Black school aged girls, (and their peers), are already bringing into their learning environments. I draw upon Shawn Ricks’ (2014) CARE model, Tara Yosso’s (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth, and Aurora Levins Morales’ (2001) theory of organic intellectualism as a way to bring strengths based, student centered practices into the classroom that privilege the marginalized identities of students as meaningful producers of knowledge.

Purpose of the Project

My overarching goal is to create a classroom curriculum (and inspire other educators to use it!) that nurtures the organic intellectual in every student, including the most marginalized in traditional classrooms. One way to model this is centering Women of Color writers and positioning their works as homemade theories to decolonize traditional modes of writing and reading in secondary education. The culminating result would be increased engagement across all student backgrounds, particularly from young, Black, women identifying students once an

inclusive curriculum is established to cement their voices as cherished gifts, ones which are valued in learning communities.

The prioritization of Black women writers must be an act of resistance against neoliberalist classroom curricula. The neoliberal agenda to produce looks like a form I've termed the *classroom conveyor belt*, where students are exposed to literature that perpetuates hegemonic values and asked to conduct literary analysis of these works. Instead of English classrooms prioritizing textual analysis as the sole means to evaluate the experience and values of the dominant culture, students from marginalized groups must be empowered to see their personal narrative as worthy of contributing to public scholarship. They must read literature that reflects and represents their own cultural values, as well as be offered the opportunity to write their own truths and have those truths be seen as valuable sources of knowledge.

The goal of student-created homemade theory is to center young people as beings with valuable knowledge gained from their lived experience(s). While the length of homemade theories as written products vary, the process of creating one is no doubt a multistep endeavor. Classroom time is precious, and since many high school literature teachers have limited room for adding new projects into their well crafted curriculum, I wanted to propose an option that honors all the aspects of writing one's own homemade theory, but abbreviates the process by using poetry. I posit that the deeply personal, narrative, descriptive, and raw thematic components of poetry fulfill the truth telling of homemade theory, while empowering students to both produce, and present (perform) pieces that reflect the wisdom of their authentic selves.

Theoretical Framework

This framework draws on two theories: the CARE model (Ricks, 2014) and the concept of "organic intellectuals" (Morales, 2001). While the CARE model teaches educators how to

better support Black girls in education, the idea of being an organic intellectual whose knowledge comes from her own experience, solidifies the mindset of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) in the classroom.

**Using the CARE Model to Center Homemade Theories as an Equitable Writing Practice:
A Teacher's Guide to Supporting Organic Intellectuals**

The CARE (Connection, Awareness, Retraining, and Encouragement) model (Ricks, 2014) provides a framework for educators to provide individual and systemic support to Black girls in education. Educators use its four tenets to protect Black girls in the classroom, and demand that administrators prioritize change from an institutional level as well (Ricks, 2014). Using Ricks' four part framework, I make a case for connecting each step of CARE to a step involved in implementing student creation of *homemade theories* into learning spaces for the purpose of showcasing Black school girls' strengths.

The first tenet, *connection*, must exist between administrators, teachers and students to support Black girls in the classroom. While cultural barriers and misconceptions from all parties involved may pose challenges, concerted efforts must be made by educators to know their students on a deeper level (Ricks, 2014). The initial step in building these relationships is for classroom teachers to create a curriculum which allows students' stories to be seen, validated, and celebrated. Assigning *homemade theories* as one of the first writing activities of the academic year establishes a classroom culture where content is prioritized over form, and gives credit to Women of Color creators as viable sources of knowledge, thus creating a connection between the voices elevated and the students who stand to see themselves represented in scholarship that has formerly excluded their identities. The second tenet, *awareness*, is a

necessary one for educators and administrators to possess in order to understand the unique challenges that Black girls face in education. This type of awareness must be taught by qualified professionals to “begin the dialogue and help demystify” (Ricks, 2014, p.16) implicit or explicit biases that teachers may be operating under. One must also operate with a highly developed sense of awareness when accurately presenting background information about the author(s) the class is studying. For example, it is important that teachers incorporating *homemade theories* into their classrooms properly credit its creators and spend time informing themselves about the Black feminist ideology that Morales (2001) and hooks (1994) were steeped in, before presenting this information to students. The process of gaining awareness for related topics could also be addressed by Ricks’ (2014) third tenet, *retraining*, which calls for educators to actively unlearn their assumptions about Black girls’ academic performances. Educators must also *retrain* their brains by accepting that there are more modes of wisdom available than the scholarship and texts that have been pushed forward by the white, patriarchal and hegemonic agenda. Lastly, Ricks (2014) proposes the fourth tenet of *encouragement and mentorship* to improve the experiences of Black girls in the classroom. *Mentorship* opportunities should include both adult/child and peer to peer (Ricks, 2014). Mentorship between children and adults can look like writing conferences where feedback given is not focused on conventional grammar or sentence structure, but instead uplifting portions of the student’s *homemade theory* that the educator found compelling, and asking the student to elaborate on those key moments. Asking follow up questions shows an educator’s care and investment in centering the student’s experience, while affirming that her story is worth telling. The peer editing of *homemade theories* could be an ideal way for students to get to know each other on a personal level, as long as partnering is intentional and protects the privacy of written material shared. Affirmation, understanding and empathy would be the ideal

outcomes of this peer editing process, not corrections or critiques which could devalue a student's personal story or discourage. *Encouragement* from a teacher can look like offering spaces to share the homemade theories that have been written. Lastly, members of an academic department must *encourage* one another to adopt practices such as students writing *homemade theories*, and other classroom activities which highlight Community Cultural Wealth. Writing *homemade theories* is a very vulnerable practice and personal process which must be treated with the appropriate time and care. The goal of *homemade theories* should be a gentle, restorative and reflective process that develops a student's voice, not finishing a product so teachers can have another assignment in their gradebooks.

Educators should apply each step of the CARE model (**C**onnection, **A**wareness, **R**etraining, **E**ncouragement) (Ricks, 2014) to successfully implement *homemade theories* into the classroom setting. It is imperative that nonBlack educators prioritize *connecting* and building relationships with their Black students, are *aware* of the traumas African American girls have experienced at the hands of the academy, *retrain* their modes of thinking, and *encourage* students to see their personal narratives as valuable contributions to public scholarship. At an institutional level, educators must demand their departments adopt curricula and writing practices which elevate Black school girls' strengths. By elevating Black life through Black school girls' personal narratives, English classrooms can center their own students as protagonists worthy of study, instead of subscribing to the white, patriarchal canon of main characters. *Homemade theories* are one small step in decolonizing our curriculum and creating stories that represent the readers who study them. *Homemade theories* are not just a one time classroom activity; they are a tangible starting place for Black girls and women to publish their own stories and receive the accolades that their experiential knowledge, observations and intuition deserve.

Description of the Field Project

I created this curriculum to invite and empower students to see themselves as people with meaningful things to contribute to the classroom, regardless of their familiarity with “traditional texts” or formal modes of writing. The curriculum I’ve created is informed by my research and will be available for high school literature educators to implement into their classrooms as an independent unit. I designed three interlocking lessons with a two week timeframe in mind, depending on the minutes in each class period (will vary by teacher, school and schedule). My aim in creating this specific curriculum is to invite educators into this work, and create a no-to-low barrier to entry so more students can benefit from the work, wisdom, and inspiration of Women of Color scholars to increase representation and elevate student engagement.

One way this project will offer support to educators interested in equitable writing practices is to provide classroom teachers with an outline of how to nurture the organic intellectual (Morales, 2001) inside each student, by using selected poems as exemplars and guiding students to create their own poems that share students’ experiential knowledge and while utilizing writing as an equitable practice. The creation of student constructed, homemade theories in the classroom setting disrupts pervasive neoliberal productions like punitive writing assignments, an overemphasis on EuroCentric grammar and the valuing of reproduction instead of original, experiential recounts. Homemade theories offer educators an opportunity to lift each student's voice equitably, as only he/she/they are the experts on their experiences. hooks (1994) ascertains that “any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversations cannot be used to educate the public” (hooks, 1994, p.65). Since schooling is an occurrence for most youth most days of most weeks (absence or suspensions not counted) the “everyday conversations” of our

classroom need to reflect the knowledge of our student body. Students who have had limited or no access to formal education settings will not be perceived by the instructor as being at a deficit, but instead have their voices heard, validated and honored. This focus on student created truths decenters the likely white, likely female voice as the “head” of the classroom and instead hands ownership to students over sharing their personal truths and identities with the classroom community. It is a tangible way to elevate Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) in the classroom. Homemade theories, like organic intellectualism, do not require students to have familiarity with any text; the practice of being an organic intellectual is one who creates a homemade theory – a truth about the world based on one’s own lived experiences and perspective. The knowledge produced is valued in itself; it does not need to be rooted in requisites nor assessed for formal grammar or be bound in a specific format. Varying writing skills could be a barrier in this practice, but then an oral (voice recorded) rendition of the homemade theory can be offered to students as an equitable means to craft their narrative. In many communities of color, storytelling is a strength reinforced by familial relationships and identified as a means of *linguistic capital* (Yosso, 2005).

Hopes for the Project

I am hopeful that this project provides its readers both theory to implement into their classroom pedagogies, as well the resources to support the proposed writing practices. This project has the potential to be significant as a guide to high school English educators, especially those seeking creative writing activities for underrepresented voices in literacy learning spaces.

I derived my initial inspiration for this project from my experience in education as a 9th, 10th, and 11th grade English teacher at a private, Jesuit, college preparatory school. However, the ideas I have gathered along the way have also been informed by my collaborative colleagues,

authentic student teacher relationships, and many outside scholars whose works have shaped my inquiries into action.

Writing about an identity one does not belong to is challenging and treacherous. It is my intention to elevate the public scholarship from the authors whose work I have found insightful, informative and integral to my research, namely Tara J. Yosso's (2005) "Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth"; Diamond Howell, Aminah Norris and Krystal L. Williams (2019) for their work "Towards Black Gaze Theory: How Black Female Teachers Make Black Students Visible"; Donna Marie Johnson's (2015) "Disrupting Invisibility: Education Scholarship Meeting the Needs of African American Elementary and Secondary School Girls a Changing World"; and Shawn Ricks' (2014) "Falling Through the Cracks: Black Girls and Education." These texts laid the foundation and gave me the language to look critically at ways educators should support their Black female students. The direction of this paper and practical application to the classroom would not have been possible without bell hooks' (1994) and Aurora Morales Levins' (2001) courageous creations of *homemade theories* and *certified organic intellectuals*, respectively. The majority of the scholarship I will be building upon is from the work of Women of Color, for they are the ones who have been "lifting as (they) climb" (National Association of Colored Women, 1896 as cited in Peterson, 2019) in the work they do to provide readers insight and access while revealing truths. I am filled with gratitude for these contributions to public scholarship, and the opportunity to grow from their knowledge.

Definition of Terms

In order to accurately represent the various scholars' works I cite in this research paper, I am going to use the nomenclature that each author does in his/her/their study. My usage of the

terms “African American” or “Black” will reflect the author’s usage per the reading I am referencing. I am adopting the reasoning explained by Howell, Norris, and Williams (2019) to capitalize Black to take a political stance in decentering whiteness. While I am most focused on the experiences of Black females at the age of adolescence, specifically in high school settings, I will sometimes refer to scholarship which references Black girls (aged five to fourteen) and Black adult women (age unspecified). These delineations of age are important as we’ve seen the harm of adultifying Black youth, specifically the violent assumptions that lead to a higher rate of suspension and juvenile offenses for African American females (Johnson, 2015). I aim to be specific in my analysis, to avoid essentializing the Black female experience. Since naming is never neutral, and language is always evolving to reflect our changing world, I’d like to borrow adrienne maree brown’s (2019) words to conclude this definition of terms: “If this is being read in a future in which this language has evolved, then please know I would be evolving right along with you” (p.18).

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The scholarship from Duncan Andrade and Morrell (2008) offers a lens of critical consciousness for educators to implement with their students in English classrooms to critique and challenge dominant narratives. This critical pedagogy primarily provides tools to deconstruct the systemic norms of schooling already in place; it argues for a reframing of pre-existing texts, as opposed to offering new voices or suggesting substitutions. Morales' (2001) concept of the organic intellectual and bell hooks' (1994) homemade theories are offered as strategies to counter a common classroom occurrence: what Friere (1970) coined the model of "banking." Later parts of the literature review will focus more on strengths based scholarship, such as Yosso's (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth and how classrooms can make space for students to center themselves as organic intellectuals (Morales, 2001). These practices promote the idea that each student has a wealth of wisdom to contribute to the learning community that is derived from the individual's experience, as opposed to knowledge derived solely from texts.

Bringing Down Banking: Positioning Community Cultural Wealth as Critical Pedagogy

In the article, "Critical Pedagogy in an Urban High School English Classroom" Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) theorize that an English classroom which is led by a competent, socially just minded educator, can be a place of opportunity for canonical texts and students' lived experiences to collide in critically conscious ways. With collision there can be friction, but it is also *because* of this close proximity that new thinking emerges. Reconciling the old with the new allows students to be agents of change; they can examine the language of power and study dominant ideology not in an effort to replicate it, but to challenge it. Although "studying canonical texts texts is an important strategy for understanding the values and

ideologies of dominant groups at various points in history” there is a call to “not defer to the authority of the texts” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p.50-51). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) offer critical pedagogy as a lens through which to study canonical texts (traditionally those that privilege white, male, cis-het identities). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) define critical pedagogy as an educational approach which centers the experience of marginalized peoples to critically examine racial, economic and structural oppression. In addition, critical pedagogy advocates for using dialogue as a way to empower individuals to partake in social change, thereby steering the focus away from a transactional, one way distribution of information (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 49). While not explicitly named by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), one can draw connections between the “one way transmission of knowledge” (49) they reference, and Friere’s (1970) banking theory.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) uses the term “banking” to classify a type of education in which “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). Freire’s depiction of knowledge entangles information as a sort of cultural currency; teachers (the oppressors in this case) are able to keep their power over students (the oppressed) by being the sole distributors of information that is valued in a white, patriarchal society. The oppressed are seen as empty vessels to be filled, as opposed to autonomous beings who are able to contribute their own knowledge to the place and process of learning. The usage of “gift” denotes a power imbalance in itself; gifts are given and received, not sites of mutual reciprocity. Furthermore, there is an expectation that one should be grateful for the gift giver and efforts he/she/they have shown to present such a generous offering. This expected gratitude further indebts the oppressed to his/her/their oppressor. Freire critiques the educational model that he’s named banking, as it only

places value on white, middle class culture as normative, and fails to recognize the inherent skills and strengths present in the cultural capital that students of color bring with them. The concept of banking in education is advantageous only to the oppressive class because “the more completely (the students) accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (Freire, 1970, p.73). Not only are these “knowledge deposits” upholding a power structure that only benefits the dominant culture, there is a risk that the oppressed become complacent, disarmed and unmotivated to “develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 1970, p.73). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) could make a case that their notion of critical pedagogy would allow students a framework to enact Friere’s critical consciousness. Intervention could look like students using their observations and experiences of racial, economic and structural oppression to disrupt banking models and encourage one another to bring their own lived wisdoms into the conversation, instead of relying upon a single authority voice to provide knowledge of the world. Whereas *knowledge* elevates the voices of some and silences others, *wisdom* calls individuals into community with one another. It is important to note that the concept of “banking” (Freire, 1970) in education is an antithetical approach to Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) positions families and Communities of Color as viable sources of wisdom that honor perspective, experience, ancestral practices and intuition. This wisdom can be utilized as a means to combat institutionalized racism and rigid schooling structures where the dominant culture is seen as the sole keeper of truth. Scholars on this topic use the term “wisdom” instead of “knowledge” in relation to Community Cultural Wealth since knowledge is traditionally defined as the acquisition of information, whereas wisdom involves

discernment about when to use one's lived experience for the goal of empathetic understanding. The term "knowledge" connotes, for many, information that the dominant culture has been monopolized by a few to sparingly dole out to another privileged few as a means to maintain power. The value placed on "knowledge" acquired in formal academic settings prioritizes pedantic terms and often creates barriers to separate the educational elite from the "uneducated."

When putting these scholars in conversations with each other, Duncan-Andrade's and Morrell's position on denying deference to certain texts echoes Yosso's (2005) identification of resistance as one way to celebrate the cultural wealth that comes from within one's community. Yosso argues that refusing to privilege the dominant narrative above one's own is one of the ways to practice Community Cultural Wealth. *Resistant capital* "refers to the knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Freire, 1970, 1973; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994; Delgado Bernal, 1997; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001)" (as quoted in Yosso, 2005, p.80). To illustrate this, Yosso includes research conducted by Tracy Robinson and Janie Ward in 1991 that highlights Black mothers' usage of verbal and non verbal cues to teach their daughters to become "resistors" to systems that oppress them. In order to combat antiBlackness, the mothers emphasized how important it was for their daughters to "assert themselves as intelligent, beautiful, strong and worthy of respect" (Yosso, 2005, p.81). This positive asserting of self connects to Aurora Levins Morales' (2001) concept of being a *certified organic intellectual*; someone whose wisdom comes from his/her/their own lived experiences. Upholding oneself as an organic intellectual and honoring others' funds of knowledge is a way to resist Freirean banking models that run rampant in school systems; the concept of organic intellectualism opposes the idea that knowledge is only acquired and

disseminated in a traditional learning environment and instead celebrates the individual, community and culture as viable producers of meaningful knowledge.

When resistance is rooted in Freirean (1970) critical consciousness, it can take on a transformative form (Yosso, 2005, p.81). This *transformative form* implies cognition turned into action, similar to how Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) explain practicing critical pedagogy in the classroom as a means to create social change. In order to create social change, it is important to be able to name and identify the topics, phrasing, and terms used in systems that we want to dismantle for the sake of recreating anew. Yosso's piece begins with a question posed by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) and Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998, 2002) that dives into the diction of the problem: Whose knowledge counts and whose knowledge is discounted? To count is to matter, to be quantifiable, recognizable and monetarily valued in our capitalistic country. Dollars and change are "counted" after an economic transaction, and we are told in defense of democracy that "every vote counts." Counting is a colloquial term, and one that is loaded. It can be a verb, a numerical description, or used to signify status and power. Existing as its opposite, is the second framing of Ladson-Billings' and Bernal's question: Whose knowledge is *discounted*? A discount is an adjective used to signify something that is less valuable; its worth is cheapened, unmarketable, outdated or undeserving of its original price. As a verb, to discount something is to not even consider it as part of the conversation; it is dismissed, diminished or forgotten. When these terms "count" and "discounted" are used one cannot help but notice the capitalistic connotations encroaching upon the concept of "knowledge," a term the academy has historically argued is neutral and normative. Education is always personal, always political, and has a "contradictory nature...schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower" (Yosso, 2005, p.74). Educators need to put tangible

actions in place to ensure those with multiple marginalized identities are not discounted in the classroom.

Homemade Theories and Black School Girls: Rewriting the Rules

One method of empowering student voices in the classroom is centering their lived experiences as homemade theories (hooks, 1994), as *homemade theories* come out of recognizing one's self as an *organic intellectual*. In addition to applying a lens of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) to identify student strengths and the knowledge they bring in from their homes and communities, implementing Aurora Levins Morales' (2001) and bell hooks' (1994) concept of *homemade theories* in the classroom could serve to amplify the voices of Students of Color, specifically those of Black girls who are traditionally underrepresented in academic institutions. *Homemade theory* asserts that Women of Color carry wisdom in their bodies, minds, and families, and insists on divorcing knowledge from its captors that reside in the white, male dominated academy. bell hooks (1994) posits that when one feels like one doesn't belong, there is a human tendency to theorize in order to make sense out of what is happening to us, and around us. Hooks ascertains that "personal testimony, personal experience is such fertile ground for the production of liberatory feminist theory" (hooks, 1994, p.70) because it is through our own lives that we begin to truly reach an understanding. hooks rejects erudite, elitist, academic terms and instead favors her everyday experiences to "intervene critically in my life and the lives of others' " (hooks, 1994, p.70). A *homemade theory* is one whose mere creation either acts as a witness account, or invites those socially marginalized into the conversation. The act of using one's home history, cultural knowledge, or bodily intuition instead of finding meaning solely in approved texts is how *homemade theories* are created. The implementation of *homemade theories* as an acknowledged, academic form of writing would

privilege not only the experiential knowledge of Black female students, but also that of their mothers and other defining figures in their lives. It is a way to return the recognition that their mothers' *resistant capital* has given them, and center one's selfhood as a source of power and truth. While writing a full length homemade theory may be daunting to students, the organic intellectualism that is the crux of homemade theories is also deftly displayed in personalized poetry.

Personalizing Poetry as an Act of Nurturing the Organic Intellectual

To avoid essentializing peoples' disparate and diverse experiences of poetry, I am going to focus on the role poetry has played in Black women's lives (Evans 2015), as well as the impact living authors (many of whom are Women of Color) have had on their audiences (Wissman 2009). Both authors, Evans (2015) and Wissman (2009), will be integral in establishing poetry's potential to heal in learning spaces at the high school level, and a way to center student wisdom and voices as meaningful contributions to a classroom's canon. Not only does the whole classroom community benefit from peers' sharing, but elevating poetry in a culturally responsive way allows the "unearthing of African American adolescents' self-definition through a process of naming (to call forth their own names and multiple identities). It involves poetry writing as both individual and collective efforts by and for African American adolescents, a bold and passionate declaration of self-identity" (Bacon, 2011, p. 1 as quoted in Evans, 2015, p.175). Student created poetry that is derived from one's experience as an organic intellectual can also be made into an abbreviated practice of homemade theory.

In "Healing traditions in Black women's writing: Resources for poetry therapy" Stephanie Evans (2015) offers selected works from 54 Black women writers whose poems, memoirs and song lyrics can act as resources for mental health practice. Evans posits that

centering Black women writers and their lived experiences can unveil inequities and harms that impact particular groups, while also providing an outlet for reflection, tools for coping, and a supportive community to process with. Evans provides a close reading of, and analyses of, five Southern Black women's poems (25 pieces in total) which address topics of "healing, hurt and hope" within these shared identity markers. Some of the highlighted poets include the renowned Margaret Walker, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Alice Walker. By using any of the 54 writers Evans promotes, students can study and gain inspiration from poets who may either share overlapping identities with the adolescent audience (race, sexuality and gender being the most prevalent in this example), or introduce the value of a new voice to the melody of narrators present in any literature based class curriculum. Learning to sing others' praises when the world has ignored their songs, is a result of the collective confidence and compassion which stems from uplifting a silenced student's lived experience in both poetry and homemade theory. Evans' article is especially effective since it provides resources to her audience, in hopes of furthering her work to make classrooms more accessible and inclusive spaces. Evans articulates that "writing can assist in expression of emotion" and quotes Bacon's (2011) apt claim that "Poetry is also the venue that enables African-American adolescents to be vulnerable, to express a range of emotions in exploration of their many names, forms, and identities unencumbered" (Bacon, 2011, p. 17 as quoted in Evans, 2015 p. 166). Evans' scholarship itself is an excellent example of a homemade theory used to inspire others, since it is a passionate recounting of how to make the personal political, while centering marginalized identities and uplifting their wisdom. Within her scholarship, Evans shares her experiences as a Black woman who has survived sexual violence, and how her healing process has helped inform the poetry workshops and mental health practices she offers to others.

Evans' voice as a writer is both clear and concise, amplifying her motivation for making knowledge accessible beyond those in the educational elite. She acts as an all access code against academic gatekeeping. Gatekeeping in the academy is a practice that at its worst reserves information for those deemed worthy (read: white, cisnet, upper middle class folks who have access to educational opportunities, and have been welcome in the academy for generations, based on familial lineage or social class), and at its "best," evokes pedantic terms to keep the casual reader out of the conversation while reinforcing ideas of inferiority around mastery of vocabulary. Evans demonstrates a great sense of responsibility in her work, and models the intentions behind her qualitative study by providing examples of the types of poems educators could center in their own classrooms to include more widely representative protagonists. Evans chooses poets whose names reside outside the dominant narrative's canon. She demonstrates her own deep thinking around the connections between a creator's lived experience and her work, which also showcases her selectivity in discerning which voices to center in a learning community. Evans selects examples of poems which make evident **Black** women finding balance between strength and vulnerability to navigate their ways forward to private peace and public voice. These narratives serve to not only share a personal story, but to also provide literary mentorship to a reader throughout her own life journey (Evans, 2015). Evans (2015) paraphrases the power of these pieces from these Southern, Black, woman poets best when she summarizes: "Close reading of work by Southern women poets can show how they seek to expose and dismantle machinery of racism, sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, structural violence, cultural violence, and interpersonal violence—especially that which is rooted in the American South" (Evans, 2015, p.172). Within the exposé Evans mentions, resides an opportunity for the poet to also affirm what he/she/they know best based on their lived experiences. It is within this self

reflection and public claiming that poets give themselves permission to exist as organic intellectuals with viable wisdom to share.

Kelly Wissman (2009) offers a similar, yet more expansive case in her research and accompanying curriculum for how poetry can be utilized by urban high school female students in a classroom setting to reclaim and affirm their identities, many of which have been undermined by traditional texts. Written by a classroom teacher, she explains the “poetry of self definition” and emphasizes the importance of studying living authors, many of whom are women of color, and to treat student created work as central texts to study within the curriculum. Aligned with Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), Wissman proffers that studying English as a literary subject can be a tool to critique and enact social change. Her curriculum focuses on helping students harness their own autonomies, and their voices, as, “The girls' poetry of self-definition offers insights into their perspectives that are often unrecognized, distorted, or devalued in broader public discourses” (Wissman, 2009, p.39). Wissman’s choice to use texts (mostly poetry) that feature living writers who are Women of Color inspired my decision to invoke more contemporary poets into the curriculum I created in Chapter III. This article prompted me to think about my school’s pre-existing curriculum, the majority of which features writers from the past, a reflection which begged the question: How can my students trust voices that are almost exclusively from the past? How would the student experience change in an English classroom if we considered the topics of gender, race and sexuality from more contemporary perspectives?

CHAPTER III: THE PROJECT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Lesson Plans in Nurturing the Organic Intellectual Inside Every Student

This project is close to both my heart and my pedagogy, and one that I hope to continually develop and improve. However, as adrienne maree brown (2019) puts it in her introduction of *Pleasure Activism*, “I know that in writing this...I am creating something instantly dated” (16). My hope is that those who interact with my curriculum find ways to make it better, make it theirs, and make it transformative for the learning spaces they inhabit. This also serves as an open invitation to share the ways in which this work has inspired you, or challenged you, or how you have changed it. You will find a receptive audience member in me, and can contact me at my university affiliated email: jeboland@dons.usfca.edu.

My intentionality around using fresh, not yet widely acclaimed poems and poets to study comes out of my desire to expand the names and voices students are exposed to, and to use more contemporary examples. While select poems of Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou and other well known creatives would have worked well within the context of Lesson 3, I diverged from using these more popular poets because I wanted to offer new material for educators. Part of the originality of my curriculum crafting came in the context of researching poems that resided outside a canon which commonly cites the same poems as the best samples of Black womens’ lived experiences. I also made the choice to include a wider variety of ethnicities from poets who identify as Women of Color, in order to expand the representation of organic intellectuals.

While the foundation of Lesson One (and the crux of this project) resides in the brilliance of Aurora Levins Morales (2001) and bell hooks (1989), the poets I have chosen to elevate in

Lesson Two include Mahogany L. Browne, Ofelia Zepeda, Adrienne Su, Mahtem Shiferraw, Evie Shockley, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange and Toi Derricotte. I name these women here intentionally, to emphasize the importance of crediting the (many; this list is infinitesimal compared to the many artists I researched and wanted to incorporate) Women of Color whose contributions have been used but unacknowledged. I strive to honor the shoulders on which I stand, to name my inspirations, and to be transparent and forthcoming in crediting creators.

A word on these women: In honoring our roots and the generations before us and ancestral wisdom within us, I am including the ethnicities, connection to heritage, and community affiliations that are included in each of these poets' biographies in order to honor that each of these creators are people before they are producers. (The order represents the placement that each poet emerges on the accompanying guide for Lesson Three.) These biographies are sourced from a variety of online sources including author's personal and professional websites, their LinkedIn profiles when available, their public Twitter accounts, other organizations' biographical information and transcripts of interviews. These short summaries are meant to provide a brief introduction to the author and her influence in the world, and can be distributed to students as an aid or substitute for their own personal research in Lesson Two. A note: Giovanni is likely one of the more familiar names on this list, as her poetry collections are numerous and well known. Her work does not live in obscurity, but I chose to include her because her writing spans from the late 1960s to the 2010s, and I believe there is power in students witnessing someone who has been writing most of her life. While introducing educators and students to new voices was a priority in my selection, the list would not feel complete without Giovanni's poem "Ego Tripping." This is the first piece I ever read where a woman unabashedly bragged on her body, its beauty and its glory. When I reread her lines, I still feel her rallying cry of us women

loving our bodies more. She shouts against the ways society tells her that she is unlovable in her Blackness, bodaciousness, boldness, and brazenness until the reader cannot help but be in as much awe of her essence as she is of her own being. She is herself, she is all women, she is history and she is divinity – and she *knows* it. This is the voice I want the young women of color in my classroom to hear resounding in their heads as a forcefield of love against a world of doubt.

Mahogany L. Browne is a Black author, poet and activist born in Oakland, California who currently resides in New York. She unapologetically uses her personal experience with addiction, racism, sexism and oppression to create a work that is deeply authentic. She is also a curator and organizer, and the executive director of JustMedia, which serves to support the work of criminal justice leaders. In recent years, she also coordinated the Women of the World Poetry Slam at New York’s Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. While she has authored several works, her poem-turned-book *Black Girl Magic* is a powerful spoken word piece. [Here is where you can hear Browne perform “Black Girl Magic.”](#)

Ofelia Zepeda grew up in Stanfield, Arizona and is a member of the Tohono O’odham (formerly Papago) Nation. In addition to her multiple degrees in higher education, she earned a MacArthur Fellowship Genius Award in 1999 for preserving Tohono O'odham culture through her work in their linguistics, traditions, poetry and promotion of literacy. Zepeda has been a director of the American Indian Language Development Institute, a professor at the University of Arizona, and is currently an editor of Sun Tracks, which promotes the publication of Native American artists and writers.

Adrienne Su is a Chinese American writer who grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and cites her parents’ homeland in China as a prominent backdrop of her childhood. Her self proclaimed

goal on her professional profile is to create for the benefit of the common good, and to record and reflect on what it means to be a person alive in this time. Su has published many poetry collections, been published in several anthologies, and has earned several awards, including the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2007. Her passion for food and belief in cooking as an art form often appears in the content of her writing. She is currently a professor and Poet-in-Residence at Dickinson College, and has been a director of the Creative Writing Program there.

Mahtem Shiferraw is a writer and visual artist who hails from Ethiopia and Eritrea. In addition to her three, full length poetry collections, she is also the author of a chapbook collection, and serves as an editor for three different literary journals. Shiferraw earned an honorable mention for her short story piece entitled, “The River” from *Glimmer Train’s* open fiction contest. Shiferraw is the founder and director of Anaphora Arts, which is a nonprofit that advocates for writers and artists of color. In 2020, after serving on the Editorial Board for World Literature, she curated the Black Voice Series and the New African Voices portfolio. She recently released (this year!) *Nomenclatures of Invisibility*, a collection of poems which cover the themes of movement and migration, ancestry, and the complications of home from a personal, political and historical lens.

Evie Shockley is Black poet and literary scholar from Nashville, Tennessee who identity as a southern poet is influenced by the sounds and vocabulary that remind her of home. In her work, she interrogates formal writing practices and disrupts them in her poetry; this refusal to conform can be seen in her pieces where she avoids using capitalization. Her creation *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011) is considered a critical volume, and Shockley has a long list of distinguished publications as well.

Shockley earned the Holmes National Poetry Prize in 2012, and has been honored with several fellowships as well. She is currently a professor at Rutgers University and resides in New Jersey.

Nikki Giovanni is a prolific Black American poet who was born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr. in Knoxville, Tennessee. She is one of the founding members of the Black Arts Movement, a group of politically motivated artists and musicians who joined forces in the 1960s to use art as activism in promoting Black Pride. Giovanni has been steeped in this work for over fifty years, and her contributions to the field include over two dozen books, volumes of poetry, eleven children's books and collections of essays. Giovanni's poetic style honors her divergence from the expectations of standardized English; it has been cited as having a conversational style, employing words that, at the time, were reflective of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Two of her early, most notable books are *Black Judgement* (1968) and *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), and her most recent publication is *Make Me Rain: Poems & Prose* (2020). She has received the NAACP Image Award seven times, and earned over twenty honorary degrees. The *Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection* was a Grammy finalist for Best Spoken Word Album in 2004.

Ntozake Shange, born Paulette Williams in New Jersey, grew up in a household where Miles Davis and W.E.B. DuBois were frequent visitors. She changed her name using Bantu language from the Zulus of South Africa to one that means "she who comes with her things" and one "who walks like a lion." Shange's identity as a Black feminist, playwright and poet are intersections that can be seen throughout her work. She was a prolific writer, but is perhaps best known for her Obie Award winning play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / Where the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975), which became adapted into a feature film titled *For Colored Girls* in 2010. Shange has received many honors and accolades for her work, one being the Guggenheim

Foundation fellowship. Shange, like Giovanni, was also integral to the Black Arts Movement and focused on themes like racial uplift, political activism, and celebration of Black success in artistic and literary fields. Ntozake Shange passed away in 2018, but her contributions live on.

Toi Derricotte is an award winning Black American poet, educator and memoirist who began her life in Michigan. Derricotte cites her Roman Catholic schooling and light skin being a frequent contributor to feeling alienated and guilty, and some of her work includes her grappling with being able to “pass” as white in certain spaces. Derricotte’s work is deeply personal, and often includes her inquiries about identity; one of her publications named *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (1997) includes excerpts from her journals spanning a twenty year period. She has won fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and a Macdowell fellowship, as well as more recently earned the 2020 Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America, and the 2021 Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets. Derricotte is a professor emeritus at the University of Pittsburgh.

Purpose and Audience

I designed this curriculum with my own high school students in mind; 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th graders from a private, Jesuit, Catholic, college preparatory school in the Bay Area. While no student experience can be generalized to an entire population of high school students across the U.S., I am hopeful educators will adapt the portions and procedures of these lesson plans that serve their own students best. In doing so, I hope the universal value of students seeing themselves and their peers as organic intellectuals with meaningful contributions of voice, wisdom and knowledge extends to as many adolescents as possible, since these young people are our future.

The following section includes three detailed lesson plans intended to be conducted with high school students, specifically within a classroom space whose focus is on studying literature and developing young writers' voices. This curriculum can be implemented as an independent unit, or integrated into an area of study where the author's voice and purpose is prioritized. Based on classmate readiness with one another, this unit could be positioned at the start of an academic year, to encourage vulnerability and establish norms of celebrating peers' wisdom in the room, or saved for a culminating, high impact activity at end of the year once classroom trust has been established. In my own practice, this is the type of lesson I would position at the beginning of the year to establish community norms, such as honoring the certified organic intellectual inside each of us. Each lesson is organized to be taught within fifty minutes to sixty five minutes, with the exception of Lesson Three, whose culminating piece can be accomplished with an additional day or two. These lesson plans all operate with flexibility around independent work, as well as allot ample time for group discussion and student reflection as each educator sees fit.

Lesson One: Womens' Wisdom: Organic Intellectualism with Morales and hooks

Overview (designed with a 60 minute class period in mind):

This first lesson will introduce students to select excerpts from the works of Aurora Levins Morales and bell hooks, in order to set the context for nurturing the *certified organic intellectual* present in every individual. The purpose of the selected passages is to orient students towards identifying the experiential wisdom that these women of color bring, and to elevate their own lived experiences and identities as sources of knowledge.

Behind the Scenes: Teacher will emphasize the importance of centering BiPOC women writers and scholars as integral to contributing viable wisdom. Teacher will ground these examples by introducing students to Aurora Levins Morales and bell hooks. Both of these visionaries are the inspiration for the following curriculum and it is imperative that they receive credit for their contributions. An important note to emphasize is that a person's background or biography informs their work(s), so the teacher should use the linked resources in step one of "Leading Lesson #1" (below) to provide context for whom [Morales](#) and [hooks](#) are as individuals first, and contributors to the field, second. This order is important to prioritize because we want to humanize our models first, before "using" their contributions to the field. People should be people first, and "producers" second; this is an active stance against neoliberal tendencies in school settings. The goal is to see the person behind the "product." Teacher should familiarize himself/herself/themself with the full length work of Aurora Levins Morales' (2001) *Certified Organic Intellectual* in order to understand the full context before leading students through exercises where they will examine word choice and "closely read" the authors' words to elucidate deeper meanings. Morales' (2001) essay can be accessed online through databases, or

found within the anthology cited (*Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* pages 27–32) in libraries or bookstores.

Student Centered Objectives:

- To gain familiarity with Aurora Levins Morales’ and bell hooks’ works and contributions
- To understand and celebrate how one’s lived experiences, identities (cultural, racial, gender, and geographic background) and interests can be sources of knowledge to share in classroom communities
- To see self and peers as producers of viable wisdom as certified organic intellectuals who are as valuable as the texts they study and curriculum they engage with in traditional classroom settings

A Teacher’s Guide to Leading Lesson #1

1. Introduce background on Aurora Levins Morales and bell hooks as people who have made their public scholarship rooted in the personal. Here is a link to [Aurora Levins Morales homepage in her own words](#). Based on time and access to technology, teacher can summarize key ideas for students, or offer a “webquest” which gives students a chance to explore Morales’ website in groups and come up with a list of five key findings. It is important to emphasize that this webpage is created by the author herself, and is therefore an accurate representation of how she would like to be perceived by the public. Here is a link to a [New York Times article that honors bell hooks’ legacy](#). Since this article was written after hooks’ passing in 2021, it can be an opportunity to emphasize to students how our work and stories have the power to impact others even beyond our time on Earth. The article is wonderfully summative and celebratory, but if one’s school cannot access the *New York Times*, or if recent loss is triggering to students,

[here is an additional online resource to provide context on bell hooks and her acclaimed works.](#)

2. Teacher models how to orient oneself towards a text before beginning to read, starting with Morales' (2001) *Certified Organic Intellectual*. Begin with making predictions about the article's title and what the connotations of each word mean. Ask students: *What does it mean to be "certified"? "Organic"? In our society, what kind of qualities are typically associated with "intellectuals"?* Have students brainstorm a list, keeping in mind that some stereotypical answers around intellectualism ("good grades," "smart," "nerdy") should be challenged later once they are familiar with Morales' work. Before reading the excerpted passages, ask students to keep this question at the center of their minds: *Based on Morales' word choice and subject choice, what is she revealing about her experience and what is she hoping to accomplish by sharing her writing and lived experiences with her readers?*
3. [Use this worksheet of excerpted passages from Morales' and hooks' works](#) and have students practice connecting content to what they predict Morales or hooks "stand for" as activists and intellectuals. The guiding questions provided should help students with their own close reading skills, as well as offer ideas to connect back to this essential question: *How do our experiences as individuals inform our values, beliefs, and the work we want to put forth in the world?* The worksheet of excerpted passages is below:

**Accompanying Worksheet for Lesson 1:
An Interactive Student Guide to Close Reading & Connection**

Excerpted Passages from Aurora Levins Morales' (2001) *Certified Organic Intellectual*

“When I call myself an organic intellectual, I mean that the ideas I carry with me were grown on soil I know” (Morales, 2001, p.27).

“The intellectual traditions I come from create theory out of shared lives instead of sending away for it. My thinking grew directly out of listening to my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened...This is how homemade theory happens” (27).

- What does it mean to “send away” for knowledge?
- What could be a benefit of trusting your own knowledge instead of “sending away” for it?
- How can the things that make us uncomfortable help us understand more about ourselves?
- When is a time you have shared a story and found that your listener had something in common with you? What did that feel like?

“As we told our stories we found validation that our experiences and our reactions to them were common to many of us, that our perceptions, thoughts and feelings made sense” (29).

“My intellectual life and that of other organic intellectuals, many of them women of color, is fully sophisticated enough for use” (29).

“The language in which ideas are expressed is never neutral. The language people use reveals important information about who they identify with, what their intentions are, for whom they are writing or speaking” (30).

- How is the language you use with friends different from the language you use at home with family? How are those words or languages different from the ones you use in the classroom?

Excerpted Passages from bell hooks (1989) *Choosing the Margins*

“Language is also a place of struggle” (hooks, 1989, p.16)

- How is hooks’ message here similar to Morales’ earlier quote about language?
- How do their ideas differ?

“I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate...a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me” (16).

- What is valuable and important about honoring the “multiple voices” inside of us?
- When was a time you knew something based on knowledge you received from a friend, a family member, your culture or your community?

“I have needed to remember, as part of a self critical process where one pauses to reconsider choices, location, tracing my journey from small town southern black life, from folk traditions, and church experiences to cities, to the university, to neighbourhoods that are not racially segregated, to places where I see for the first time independent cinema, where I read critical theory, where I write critical theory” (17).

- Why does hooks emphasize the importance of remembering where one came from?
- Think back upon the places you’ve been before coming to high school. Which ones are the most memorable? Which experiences have shaped you into becoming who you are today?

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4. Bringing the essential question to life: Have students brainstorm a list of topics they feel passionate about and well informed on. Encourage students to think about things that they learned from their lived experience instead of from a book or a classroom. Explain that they may choose to use one of these examples to write about, later in the week. This list should only include things you feel comfortable sharing with the class. *For example, if they got the chance to “guest lecture” or “play teacher” for a day, what wisdom would they want to share with their peers and why? What led them to becoming knowledgeable about this topic? Who was a mentor, source of support, or inspiration when it came to learning more about this area of passion and expertise?* Identifying parts of this individual journey will help students see themselves as “certified organic intellectuals” with meaningful insight to share. Teacher should model his/her/their own experience of

being an organic intellectual. For example, while leading this lesson I would share a story about how I came to know something without having learned it from a book or inside a classroom: *While watching my mom cook as I was growing up, I always paid attention to how her multiple taste tests would stand in the place of ever using a recipe or looking at a cookbook. When the slightly sweet smell of cream of chicken soup and canned hatch chiles filled the kitchen, I knew she was going to make my favorite casserole dish. I'd watch as she'd toss slightly stale chips on top, or rip up shreds of tortillas forgotten in the fridge, each time making a regular dish slightly new with her innovative cooking style. While the list of ingredients doesn't live in any recipe book, this chicken casserole dish became a pillar of organic intellectual truth in my family. I never learned where my mom got her creative cooking wisdom from, but this practice of boldly experimenting with substitute ingredients is something I replicate while cooking on my own, many years later. Although my mom didn't explicitly tell me what she was doing in the kitchen, observing her own practice of organic intellectualism passed her wisdom onto me. Because of this, I have made a homemade theory when it comes to creating new dishes: the best food is the kind that comes from trial and error, tweaked for the tastebuds of the moment and inspired by the palettes of the loved ones sharing the meal with you.*

Lesson Two: Poetry as Power

Investigating Examples of Organic Intellectuals

Overview (designed with a 60 minute class period in mind):

The second lesson allows students to survey a variety of poems I have selected that showcase different examples of organic intellectualism. Each poem ranges in style, and the poems are separated by thematic category and author's identity, so students can have choice in exploring some models/examples. All poets are Women of Color, chosen specifically to amplify the variety of voices, subject matter and knowledge present within the population. Students will explore multiple poems, and read them for pleasure, before choosing one to conduct a "deeper dive" of close reading and analysis. [Here is a list of poems to use in the context of Lesson Two.](#) [Here is a slideshow which includes authors' biographies, their poems, and student prompts.](#)

Behind the Scenes: Teacher should keep in mind that this exercise was created to be a catalyst for students to see how a person can share his/her/their organic intellectual self with the world, and to emphasize that a writer's words can be powerful even when diverging from formal Eurocentric language and grammar. Teacher should emphasize the power of individual "voice."

Student Centered Objectives:

- To exercise student choice and autonomy in learning by choosing a few poems to read and explore from the provided list, based on his/her/their interests.
- To describe biographical information about a chosen poet, to reinforce the idea that poetry is personal, and can be a way to turn lived experiences into sources of knowledge (the praxis of an organic intellectual)

- To analyze the poet’s wisdom, knowledge of self, world or other through her words and practice interpreting word choice and diction within Morales’ and hooks’ excerpts

A Teacher’s Guide to Leading Lesson #2

1. Re-orient students to Lesson One’s objective by asking one or some of the following “refresher questions”:
 - a. *What was the idea that stood out to you most from Morales’ and hooks’ excerpted works? Why?*
 - b. *How did your impression of the quote’s meaning change when you looked more closely at the author’s diction (word choice)?*
 - c. *What advice do Aurora Levins Morales or bell hooks give readers about how to value one’s own experience and produce knowledge from it? What is something you think you know well, that wasn’t something you were taught from a book or inside a classroom?*
 - d. *Now, what do you think it means to be a “certified organic intellectual”?*
2. Explain that students will have the choice of which poems to read and explore, since poetry is deeply personal, and every reader will have a different experience with a poem’s content. Provide students an ample amount of time (suggested: 20 minutes) to explore the variety of poems before choosing one they’d like to dive deeper with. Tell students they may want to choose which poems to focus on based on the author’s biographical information, or based on categories that interest them (heritage/ancestry, self identity/self knowledge, family figures). These poems offer us examples of how to use our status as organic intellectuals to create written art that reaches the hearts and minds of our

audience. As students read, ask them to individually jot down their own notes on the following questions:

- a. *What type of feeling, impression of emotion is this poem giving me?*
 - b. *What words, ideas or images are especially powerful in this poem? What is standing out the most to me?*
 - c. *Based on the poet's content, what is this poet an "expert" on? What does she know well? How did she come to learn these things? Who taught or inspired her along the way? Did she learn despite having an obstacle in the way (society, others, self)?*
3. After providing ample time for students to explore, choose their piece, and spend some analyzing it with the questions above in mind, have students group up based on the poems they chose to look more closely at. Emphasize the importance of each student sharing a contribution, to practice equity of voices. Have students identify where their thinking overlaps or intersects, and where it diverges. Highlight the idea that organic intellectualism is deeply personal, and there is no hierarchy on thoughts; there is value in what each individual shares. Often, what we focus on or choose to illuminate says something about what we hold valuable, or what we can relate to based on our own life experiences. Have students practice seeing themselves as producers of knowledge here, too, by diving into the prompts above. Note: If a singular student is left without a group because he/she/they chose a different poem than others, invite them to join another poem that may be similar in category and look for cross author connections.
4. With the large group or whole classroom, offer each group a chance to share about what stood out to them. Identify similarities across lived experiences, as well as stylistic

differences. Ask students to point out what made a poem particularly captivating, memorable or original, and encourage them to emulate some of those writer's choices in the original poems they'll be creating next class

**Accompanying Reading List for Lesson 2:
Poems that Embody Insight from Organic Intellectuals**

Students will choose which poem(s) he/she/they is interested in reading and exploring. Picking at least 2-3 poems to investigate is a great way to see different techniques and styles, and to inspire students who will eventually be writing poems of their own that showcase their roles as organic intellectuals who contribute their knowledge and wisdom to a classroom community.

Since this is an expansive list of options, poems are divided into the following categories to help guide student choice. Information about the poet is also provided (linked when available) to emphasize that who the poet is as a person, is just as important as the work he/she/they produce!

Poems about Heritage/Ancestry

["Country of Water"](#) by [Mahogany L. Browne](#)

["Carrying Our Words"](#) by [Ofelia Zepeda](#)

["Peaches"](#) by [Adrienne Su](#)

["Nomenclatures of Invisibility"](#) by [Mahtem Shiferraw](#)

Poems about Self Identity/Knowledge of Self

["black love"](#) by [Evie Shockley](#)

["Ego Tripping \(there may be a reason why\)"](#) by [Nikki Giovanni](#)

Poems about Family Figures

["My Father is a Retired Magician"](#) by [Ntozake Shange](#)

[“Christmas Eve: My Mother Dressing”](#) by [Toi Derricotte](#)

Lesson Three: Knowledge Producers - Student Practice of Poetry

Overview (designed to be separated into two or three, 50 minute class periods over a few days):

This third lesson brings the concept of organic intellectualism to life, since students will be creating their own poems to showcase their wisdom and knowledge that has come from places outside of traditional school settings. Each student will create his/her/their own poem that responds to these suggested prompts: *Write a poem about something you know well, and how you came to be a “certified organic intellectual” on this topic. How did you come to know this thing? Who or what was part of your process of acquiring this knowledge? Describe the moment you realized your wisdom could be useful, comforting, or provide new insight to someone else.*

Teachers should absolutely use their own organic intellectualism of knowing what type of prompts or language will be most accessible to their students. There may be other ways for students to share what organic intellectualism looks like for them; it does not have to be in poem form to be a valuable lesson. More specific guidelines around the poetry assignment are provided below in the “Teacher’s Guide.” Culminating classroom share outs can look like the process of peer editing, adding meaningful illustrations to the finalized draft, creating an “open mic” performance space, or forming an artistic exhibition inside the classroom like a micro-museums.

Behind the Scenes: My goal in creating this poetry prompt is to allow students to break from traditional forms of what “academic” writing looks like, and for them to write in a voice that is authentic and representative of the language most true to their identities. For example, the poem “My Father is a Retired Magician” by Ntozake Shange included in Lesson 2’s handout uses abbreviated phrases (“cuz”, “&”) and spelling (“wazn’t”, “yr”) that diverges from Standard English’s grammar, punctuation and word choice. While diverging from the practice of writing in standardized English is not a goal of this assignment, the possibility should be offered to students

if it helps authenticate self expression. This third and final lesson should also include a culminating opportunity for students to share their poetry and witness one another's wisdom. This can look like creating a poetry reading within the classroom (an activity I've termed with my students as an "open mic morning") or displaying final poem pieces around the classroom in a "gallery walk." In order to tie all the objectives together, use the original essential questions from previous lessons, as well as the practice of determining a poet's area of knowledge as displayed in her/his/their poem for students to see their classmates as organic intellectuals.

Student Centered Objectives:

- To create an original piece of poetry that exemplifies the student's existence as a certified organic intellectual and knowledge producer
- To experiment with individualized writer's "voice" and to see poetry as a form of unrestricted self expression
- To share, perform and celebrate one's poem, as well as center classmates as people worthy of having their wisdom acknowledged

A Teacher's Guide to Leading Lesson #3

1. Prompt students look back on their notes, annotations or analysis of the poem and poet they chose to focus on last class. Ask students: *What was your favorite line, image, word or idea presented in the poem?* Have students pair up and share answers with a partner.
2. Re-introduce the idea that we are all certified organic intellectuals with important wisdom to share. It may be helpful here to have students refer back to the worksheet with excerpted passages and analysis prompts from Lesson One, especially these questions from the second page on hooks: *When was a time you knew something based on knowledge you received from a friend, a family member, your culture or your community?*

What is valuable and important about honoring the “multiple voices” inside of us? What is the importance of remembering where one came from? Explain to students that they may want to use some of their responses from the excerpted passages worksheet as brainstorm ideas for the poem they are about to create. Each student will create his/her/their own poem that responds to this prompt: *Write a poem about something you know well, and how you came to be a “certified organic intellectual” on this topic. How did you come to know this thing? Who or what was part of your process of acquiring this knowledge? Describe the moment you realized your wisdom could be useful, comforting, or provide new insight to someone else.* Your poem should be at least 8 lines long, and use intentional and descriptive word choice. It does NOT need to rhyme. Think about the poems you explored last class, and which writer’s style was the most compelling, interesting or effective to read. I encourage you to emulate some of their literary techniques and creative writing choices! Here are some ideas to get you brainstorming:

- What is an important cultural dish or favorite food in your family and how did you come to learn about how to make it?
- What is a useful piece of advice your sibling, family member or friend gave you that has helped you navigate something challenging?
- What is something you are passionate about, or talented at, that you don’t normally get to share with your peers in a school setting?

[Here is a handout version of the poetry assignment for ease of distributing to students.](#)

3. Students will likely need a significant amount of time (30-45 minutes) to brainstorm and start drafting their poems on their own organic intellectualism. Based on your school’s homework policy, I suggest having students submit a draft of their poem by the end of the

period, and then take it home to add details and make edits before hosting a peer feedback session the following class period. Students can read their poetry drafts aloud with partners or small groups to share the first round of their poems and to receive affirming feedback before moving on to the next step of polishing their pieces. A more structured and suggested way to guide each student through giving and receiving feedback on their original writing is provided in the next step.

4. Writing Workshop: The Power of Peer Editing/Writing Workshop

To celebrate the multi draft process of creating original work, students should feel invested in both improving their own work, and being part of the process that helps other students reach their own successes, too. [Use this Peer Editing Worksheet](#) to help guide students with compassionate, affirmative and effective feedback on their partner's rough draft poem.

5. After a successful, in class opportunity for peers to see drafts of each other's work and provide affirming feedback, lead a class discussion and group reflection on the value of having peers support one's work in process. Have students refer back to the information on their peer editing sheet before sharing aloud. Sometimes, it is helpful to make it clear before beginning peer editing that every partner pair will share something they admired in their partner's work, and/or something they appreciate their partner for pointing out. Make this sentence starter visible on the board to remove any barriers for students who are hesitant: *I want to give a shoutout to _____ (classmate's name) for their use of _____ (name something specific and original they did in their poem).*

I want to thank my partner _____ (name) for reminding me that _____ (name a helpful idea, advice or edit your partner gave your work).

Encourage every student to share so everyone has the opportunity to express and receive gratitude. After edits are made and final drafts are polished, I suggest having a “culminating experience” that gives each student a chance to share his/her/their organic intellectualism, read their poem aloud, and experience affirmation from an audience who is witnessing their truths. Steps #6 and #7 below offers two options for sharing student work that my students and I have derived a lot of joy from inside my own classrooms.

6. Spoken Word Poetry: Open Mic Morning

One of my favorite ways to start the day in my classroom after we’ve worked on a creative writing piece or project is to invite students to “take the stage” and show their work. Usually, I leave this option as an open invite and establish the following norms with the class before anyone volunteers to share their work:

- A) Keep the stage “warm,” meaning, you can snap or clap in between audience members to channel good energy for folks who may be considering whether they want to present or not. The goal is to avoid long lapse times in between poetry shares. We will NOT chant someone’s name nor put pressure on them; sharing aloud is a personal choice and we are going to respect everyone in the room to make that decision for themselves. Teacher note: when the stage runs “cold” (or there are several moments of hesitation between presenters,) is when I encourage students to snap, clap, or keep the floor “hot.” This is also a helpful gauge to see how many folks are interested in sharing, or if it is time to move onto the next activity. The movement and noise helps keep students engaged and eager to hear from their peers as well. Occasionally, I’ll offer a second, shorter opportunity for

an Open Mic Morning the next class for students who were reluctant or nervous to share the first time around, but still want their voices heard.

B) After a poem is shared, everyone gets on their feet for a standing ovation. I firmly believe everyone deserves a standing ovation in their lifetime, and this is one way to thank our peers for being brave, vulnerable and authentic with us.

7. Exhibition of Excellence: Gallery Walk

This way to display student work and increase peer engagement is especially effective if a class is short on time, if the community bond is not strong yet, or if the majority of students are reserved or hesitant about sharing aloud. It can also be used in conjunction with the Open Mic Morning, if the class only had a chance to hear from a few people.

Set the scene by asking students about their experiences in museums, and what it feels like to walk around a gallery and observe art or cultural artifacts. After a quick share out, explain that museums can hold the truths of humanity, just like your presence and work in this classroom does, too. Have students create their own “museum label” or placard (index cards work great!) with their name and title of their organic intellectual poem.

Have students set up their desks as a display, and have students walk around with a notebook and read their peers’ poems. Have students jot down notes with this question in mind: *Pretend you are new to this classroom and community. Based on the content of the poems this group of people created, what can you infer that they know well? What kind of lived experiences has this group of people had? What do they care about?*

After students have had ample time to read each poem and make their ways around the room, have students share as a whole class their responses to the questions above.

Conclude by connecting the ideas of Morales and hooks, to studying different styles of

poetry from Women of Color sharing their organic intellectualism, to the process of writing their own poems about their own wisdom and cultural wealth from their communities, as well as appreciating their peers' voices and stories.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Summary of the Curriculum and Why We Need it Now

Implementing this curriculum that upholds the work of Women of Color as literary texts worthy of studying and emulating in a high school English classroom is one tangible way to encourage students to see themselves as organic intellectuals. Increased student engagement and empowerment, especially for those made to feel marginalized by our school systems, society and culture, is imperative in these times when we see education and equity under attack from political institutions. I am writing this at a time when lawmakers and policy holders in the U.S. are wielding attacks against human rights, our freedom of choice, and attempting to eliminate the very organizations that have committed themselves to serving those underrepresented and under-resourced. Amidst the attack on womens' reproductive rights, the banning of books, and the criminalization of any sexuality outside the parameters of "straight," our country is crying out for compassion and human dignity to be restored. In these times, re-imagining our systems and institutions is often perceived as threatening to the powers that be, so we must support now, *more than ever*; those who have been creating, co-conspiring, revolutionizing, practicing radical love, and humanizing education so that the world our youth inherits is better than the one they are coming of age in. One poem, one voice, one lesson; one witnessing of Black and Brown students' strengths; one moment of courage in diverging from what we were taught was "canon"; one conversation with a colleague that offers a loving critique ; all of these can be acts of resistance against injustice and movement towards a more just educational experience.

Recommendations Moving Forward: Who Can Benefit from This?

To put it simply, everyone. While this curriculum was designed for teachers to use with 9-12th grade students in an English course, it has the potential to be instilled outside of traditional classroom spaces, and used to create dialogue and roundtable discussions in any learning environment. I've included notes of love and encouragement to the key groups I think are instrumental in bringing this work to life:

Current Educators: I hope these lesson plans offer you a way to try something new, and cause joy and connection in your classrooms. Thank you for staying open to growth and passionate about education reform. Each student in your room represents a world within themselves, and may we each be more focused on celebrating their personhood over our notions of their “productivity.”

Student-Teachers: Amidst the challenge that is creating your teacher style and perfecting your craft, be kind to yourselves. May you stay responsive to the students in your room and be inspired by what they bring. Stay close to those mentors who uplift you and invite you into becoming better, each day. Perhaps these lesson plans give you a way to start building meaningful relationships with your students and a culture of trust.

School Administrators: We love when you support us. Join your teachers in this work by asking at the next group meeting or professional development initiative: Whose voices are being prioritized? What perspectives are unaccounted for? And then please invite those people in.

Students: You are the future, you hold the power, your presence is a gift. May the people you surround yourself with, always make you feel cherished and loved. You bring life to this work.

Final Thoughts

If there's one main question I've grappled with in my classroom experience, it's been this: How are you truly going to balance the educational standards your school sets while ensuring *every student* that comes into contact with you feels valued, heard, important and integral to the community? While I've worked on rejecting arbitrary measures of the word rigor and the way that neoliberalist language enact barriers against students of color, I've come to the conclusion that the goal is not balance: the goal is prioritizing the living, breathing individuals in the seats in front of you. A "good" education can look like many things; a *great* education is made possible only when those you teach feel empowered in their existence and understand that to be a lifelong learner is to stay curious about their world, their selves, and their communities.

For me, this practice became decentering a large portion of texts that I was exposed to during my schooling, and spending the time centering voices that were new to me, but not new in the larger purveyor of impactful, deeply personal work created by Women of Color. Investigating these works was exhilarating, and at the same time, required more focus, more effort, and more self examination while unlearning the "tried and true" of a typical American English classroom. I am fortunate to have a great many colleagues passionate about equity and social justice education, and I urge you to partner with those who have already been doing the work (often uncredited and unacknowledged). Stay receptive and responsive to the friends, coworkers, colleagues and mentors that offer partnership in creating things anew, as well as recognize that a classroom's dynamics may be continuously shifting, but one thing must remain stable: every individual should feel represented and enthusiastically welcomed into his/her/their own journeys as organic intellectuals.

As a person whose ethnicity and gender is rarely called into question, who can avoid racialization in a teaching workforce where 80% of educators in America are white women (King, 2016), and who is seen as the “universal experience,” it is imperative that I stand with those who have been made to feel the opposite. It is not enough to merely recognize those made to feel marginalized by the institution of schooling; we must go to the margins and stand by our students. Being an excellent educator in the classroom is not enough; we must also be looking for our calls to action which allow us to leverage our privileges to uplift others.

It is also important to form connections with folks in our own communities who are committed to anti-racist work. I believe that white folks have a responsibility to educate other white folks, as much of the learning and unlearning of this work should not be the responsibility nor the burden of communities of color to become our primary educators. Just as white supremacy has reinvented itself over the years, reshaping and disguising its insidiousness, we must increase our inventiveness, our revolutionary revisions, to stay one step ahead of injustice.

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